

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

The United Church of Christ is beautiful in its people, its theology, and its practices. This is absolutely not to say that other denominations are not beautiful, but simply to affirm that we are. Despite the various things that some might identify as flaws, our beauty still shines through. We are a group of people who have a particular way of experiencing God, faith, and one another. We seek to live out our beliefs in devotion, worship, community, and response to the needs of the world.

In these materials you have an opportunity to explore and celebrate some of the beauty that is our church. Look for ways you can share that beauty. You can help others understand and own their experience of the uniqueness that is our church.

About this Exploration

Experiencing beauty connects us with God in ways beyond our understanding. It grounds us and startles us awake with the reality of the Divine all around and within us. Beauty is not perfection or flawlessness but reality and vulnerability, brokenness and transformation. When we open ourselves to the Holy, we discover beauty everywhere, from the endless reaches of the universe to the intricacy of the atom. We find awe and wonder in all of life—the “Ah!” that takes our breath away and moves us toward connection with the whole of creation—and we grow in our understanding of the ways in which God loves and treasures us.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Genesis 28:10–19a
Matthew 6:24–34

Leader Preparation

Often when we think of beauty and the church, we might think of our worship space, a stained glass window, flowers outside, or wonderful organ music. But if we dip below the surface just a little, other things emerge. We might think of the extravagant welcome we strive for in the United Church of Christ, or a church's decision to become open and affirming. Maybe a commitment to social justice comes to mind.

In this Exploration the emphasis is on Discovery. The hope is that, through the various activities, groups might begin to discover some of the inherent beauty in their own congregations and especially in the identity and history of the United Church of Christ.

Prayer: Adventurous God, as leader of this group, help me guide it in a discovery of the beauty all around us, especially in our church. May we notice the beauty that is obvious and also the beauty that lies beneath the obvious or just around the corner. Stretch our understanding of beauty so that we might celebrate its presence in our lives. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from "Exploring and Engaging," at least one

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Beauty in the Church (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Decide on the focus of this event. Where would you like to have the group meet? (If you want to use different places in the building, be sure your plans meet your group's safe spaces policy.)

Supplies:

- paper, pencils

Invite group members to look around. What do they notice by way of their five senses: sight, touch, hearing, sound, smell? What memories do their surroundings conjure up? Encourage people to stretch their imaginations. For example, they might recall the taste of bread at communion, the smell of wood or burned candles, the sound of music and singing or laughter, the touch of another's hand, or the beauty of flowers. If you wish, distribute paper and pens and invite folks to jot down their observations.

Gather the group, and ask volunteers to share their observations. Did people share common opinions? What intrigued or surprised them about others' thoughts?

2 Expressing Our Denominational Beauty

Leader preparation: Locate a copy of the United Church of Christ symbol (crown and cross) or the "God Is Still Speaking" comma. You may have these around your church, or you can download them from <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/ucc-logo.html>. Choose one or both symbols. Read the description of the crown and cross logo, noted under the activity description.

Supplies:

- 8½" x 11" paper or larger
- pens, pencils, or colored pencils

Show the logos to the group, and pose these or similar questions:

- What do these logos suggest to the group?
- Where do people see beauty, either literally or symbolically, in these logos?
- What might bother them or cause them to have questions?

Remind participants that the comma stands for the quotation from Gracie Allen: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." The companion line is, "God is still speaking." Share the following information regarding the symbolism of the United Church of Christ crown and cross symbol.

The symbol of the United Church of Christ comprises a crown, cross, and orb enclosed within a double oval bearing the name of the church and the prayer of Jesus, "That they may all be one" (John 17:21). It is based on an ancient Christian symbol called the "Cross of Victory" or the "Cross Triumphant." The crown symbolizes the sovereignty of Christ. The cross recalls the suffering of Christ—his arms outstretched on the wood of the cross—for the salvation of humanity. The

Experiencing Beauty

from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

orb, divided into three parts, reminds us of Jesus’ command to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The verse from scripture reflects our historic commitment to the restoration of unity among the separated churches of Jesus Christ (from <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/ucc-logo.html>).

Invite the group to create a new logo for the denomination, either individually (on smaller pieces of paper) or as a group (on a larger sheet). What important values do people want the logo to reflect? How will they make the logo beautiful?



3 Ladder or Staircase?

Leader preparation: Read Genesis 28:10–19a in more than one translation. You can find a variety of translations at <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/>. Explore images, ideas, or questions that intrigue you, using commentaries, Bible dictionaries, or other resources.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Genesis 28:10–19,” Attachment: Activity 3
- (optional) images from Internet on Jacob’s ladder or staircase, preferably at least one of each

Using the attachment, read Genesis 28:10–19 first in one version and then in the other. Invite folks to offer thoughts or queries. Notice the difference between the image of a “ladder” and a “stairway.”

- How might we understand these different images?
- Which image is a better fit with your theology? Why?
- Does one describe the ministry/theology of the United Church of Christ better than the other? Why?

If you have brought images, show those to the group, and revisit the preceding questions above. Share the line “Surely God was in this place, and I did not know it.” Ask when might God have been present in the church, and they did not notice. If group members are not comfortable answering this question, affirm their choice, and simply encourage them to ponder the question.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Beauty in Our Hymns (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: You may well have folks in your group who claim they cannot sing. Gently remind them that most people can, some of us with more melody, pitch, tone, and talent than others. However, for the purposes of this activity you are seeking to discover beauty and to make a joyful noise to God; invite everyone to sing if at all possible. Another helpful technique with newer hymns is to invite folks to listen to the first verse (or more, if needed) and simply join in when they feel comfortable.

Supplies:

- copies of *The New Century Hymnal* and/or *Sing! Prayer and Praise*
- (optional) Companion to *The New Century Hymnal*
- (optional) rhythm instruments

Invite the group to look at some hymns in either songbook. Sing a verse or two of some of their favorites. Choose hymns at random, or focus on ones that specifically speak of beauty. You can find examples of these in the section “God” in *The New Century Hymnal*, numbers 1–39. Then ask these questions:

- Where do people discover beauty in the hymns?
- What phrases might raise questions?

Sing together “For the Beauty of the Earth,” hymn #28 from *The New Century Hymnal*. This is considered by many to be a beautiful hymn in its own right. How might knowing it was written on “a late spring day when flowers were in full bloom and all the earth seemed to rejoice” affect our perception of it?



5 Fresh Air

Leader preparation: Obtain a copy of Andrew Wyeth’s painting “Wind from the Sea.”

Supplies:

- artwork: “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p15524076-sa-i3804653/andrew-wyeth-wind-from-the-sea.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=dfff3132492f45b38c1f69b8ff1b86c1&searchstring=wind+from+the+sea>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Look at the artwork together. Use these questions to explore the image together:

- What intrigues you?
- What do you wonder about?
- Notice that there is substantial wind in the foreground, yet the ocean itself appears to be calm. What might this contrast say?
- When have you experienced beauty in wind and/or ocean?
- If you followed the road to the left, where might it lead you?
- What if you followed it to the right?
- Where do you see “church” in this image?
- Where might you specifically see the United Church of Christ and/or your congregation in this image?
- What question might you take away from this image?

6 Birds of the Air, Flowers of the Field

Leader preparation: Bring some items that say “beauty” to you. These might include a picture, book, piece of jewelry, kaleidoscope, flower, piece of china, knick-knack, and so on. Try to include some that might not, at first glance, say “beauty,” such as a well-worn stuffed animal (well-worn because it has been loved a little too much!) or a “not-so-shiny” muffin tin used to make muffins that offered comfort and hospitality over the years. If you wish, ask folks ahead of time to bring an item to the group that says “beauty” to them.

Supplies:

- items that say beauty to you (see leader preparation section above for ideas)
- (optional) items that participants see as beautiful
- Bibles

Read Matthew 6:24–34. Discuss the passage briefly. How does it offer comfort and encouragement? Does the passage read differently depending on the resources available to you (in other words, if you have food in the cupboards or not)? Are there times you have heard the passage used in judgmental ways, such as to tell someone with legitimate concerns about the future that they should “get over it”? When have you needed to hear this passage?

If people have brought items from home, invite people to describe the beauty in each one. Tell what you consider to be beautiful about these items. Ask people to think of one item they would bring in that they consider beautiful. What is it? Why would they choose it? Encourage discussion.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Passing on Beauty (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Experiment with creating invisible items of beauty. What motions can you use to portray something of beauty? Look around you. What do you notice about your environment—the wind blowing, a book, a soft blanket—that you could depict silently through motions?

Supplies: None

Invite the group to share something beautiful with one another. The only catch is, the item is invisible. The first person uses hand motions to create an item and then passes that item to the person on the left. That person receives it and re-shapes it into something else before passing it along. Encourage people to complete this activity in silence.

Some ideas:

- a flower. Use your hand to make a small, wavy vertical line in front of you, and then draw some leaf shapes on it. Outline flower petals at the top, and then cup your hands underneath, carefully passing the flower to your neighbor.
- a wind instrument. Hold your hands in front of your mouth to form a tube, blow through them, and raise your fingers up and down as if playing a trumpet or clarinet.
- a ball. Simply cup your hands in a round shape. You can hand the ball to your neighbor or bounce it!
- a heart. Make the shape with your two hands facing by curving fingertips toward each other to form a heart shape or ball your fist and move it from your left chest outward

8 Telling Some Beauty of the Church

Leader preparation: This activity does not require preparation. However, if you have copies of one of the UCC brochures—“16 Ways to Say I Love My Church,” “16 Reasons I Love the Holy Spirit,” or “16 Reasons I Love God”—you could distribute these to the group to use in the exercise. Brochures are available from www.ucc.org. Click on “Buy It,” and then enter “16” in “store search” space.

Supplies:

- (optional) copies of one or more of the “16 . . .” brochures, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/838357215?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=12440&store_id=1401

Stand or sit in a circle. Give people a moment to think of something they consider beautiful about the church, such as the UCC emphasis on extravagant welcome, beautiful organ music, passing the peace during worship, a great youth group, or the worship at General Synod. Invite each person to state the thing of beauty in this form “I offer to you all the . . .,” and invite the group to respond “Thank you, God, for the beauty of our church.”

If you brought one or more of the brochures, distribute these to the group and invite people, one at a time, to read one of the lines. Again, the group responds with “Thank you, God, for the beauty of our church.”

9 UCC Firsts

Leader preparation: Prepare to project <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/ucc-firsts.html> for the group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Show the group the timeline from the UCC website. If you click on the phrases at the bottom of the timeline, you can learn more information about each event. As you go through the nineteen events, invite people to choose one that specifically suggests beauty to them. Encourage them to share why.

Reflect

To what extent were folks able to describe, experience, or discover beauty? How were they especially able to connect this beauty with the United Church of Christ? What insights did you gain that can help you prepare and lead future sessions? Recognizing that some folks may be very new to the denomination, what adaptations (such as providing more background information) might be necessary or helpful? Look in the mirror, and thank yourself for helping people discover beauty in the life and work of our church!

Attachment: Activity 3

Genesis 28:10–19

The Message (MSG)

¹⁰⁻¹² Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it.

¹³⁻¹⁵ Then God was right before him, saying, "I am God, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you."

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, "God is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it!" He was terrified. He whispered in awe, "Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven."

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Jacob was up first thing in the morning. He took the stone he had used for his pillow and stood it up as a memorial pillar and poured oil over it. He christened the place Bethel (God's House).

Scripture taken from The Message. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

How we view scripture in the United Church of Christ varies widely. Some people may see the Bible as a book that is largely factual and should be taken, at least as much as possible, at face value. To others it may seem outdated—an interesting book, but locked too much in history and tradition. However, the view of most members of the church probably falls somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum.

Many people in the United Church of Christ may see the Bible—or want to see it—as a book that can greatly influence our lives, and that has wonderful stories that inform and shape us. There is room for conversation. The key is not to try to *prove* one interpretation or another but to open us to wondering and exploring.

About this Exploration

Scripture is infused with beauty, evident in the Bible's rich images, stories, and ideas; its call to justice and right relationship with all creation; and its poetic, grace-filled language. As we interact with scripture, we discover new ways to sense the wonder, beauty, and goodness of God. We experience God's Spirit, and we are moved to worship.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Luke 9:28–36
Nehemiah 8

Leader Preparation

How do you view scripture? Your answer to this question will be key to your leadership of this Exploration. Another closely related question is, “How open are you to different ways of understanding scripture?” Depending on the membership of your group, you may have a good sense of where people are in their understandings, and that may influence how you lead this piece. However, it is important to be prepared for surprises. The following questions for reflection may help you prepare. Read them and spend time reflecting on them.

- What makes the Bible sacred?
- If you had to choose three books (and discard all the others), which would you keep?
- Where do you find beauty in scripture, not so much in an individual piece as in the Bible as a whole?
- What types of literature or periods of writing seem beautiful to you?
- What are some passages you struggle with? Why?
- If you had ten words to describe the Bible (only ten!), what might they be?

Prayer: *God, thank you for the messages we receive in the Bible and for its inherent beauty. For many generations it has inspired, angered, led, empowered, and transformed your people. In the process of*

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 God’s Beautiful Word (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity is simple conversation. If you have a large group (more than five or six people), you might prefer to divide into groups of three or four for the conversations so that each person gets a chance to speak.

Supplies: None

Invite the group into a conversation about the Bible, its inherent beauty, and its use in your United Church of Christ congregation or in wider church settings. You may wish to use all the questions or just some of them. In any event, ask group members to try to respond to each question in one or two minutes if in small groups or in one or two sentences if in the larger group.

- How is scripture used in worship?
- Does scripture speak to you when you read it or hear it? How? Share an example, if you like.
- Where do you find beauty in scripture—not in an individual passage, but overall?

2 Who’s Included?

Leader preparation: This activity helps us recognize the problems in using exclusive translations of the Bible and reminds us that in this day inclusive language for persons and/or God in the Bible can be very helpful, while exclusive language can be very limiting. If at all possible, provide some Bibles that use inclusive translations. For example, the *Inclusive Language Lectionary* is produced by the United Church of Christ, and a fully inclusive translation called *The Inclusive Bible* is produced by Priests for Equality. The Common English Bible has made great strides in its use of inclusive language for persons, although not for God. If inclusive Bibles are not available, the psalms in the back of the *New Century Hymnal* have been adapted to use inclusive language.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles in various translations

Invite the group to brainstorm the names of people in the Bible, and list these on newsprint or a whiteboard. After a moment of doing this, pause and observe the list. Note the male and female names. Note that some translations of the Bible use words such as “man,” “men,” and “mankind” to represent all people. Point out that the United Church of Christ has been a champion of inclusive language for persons in the Bible (such as saying “brothers and sisters” instead of simply “brothers”) and also encourages using a diversity of images for God.

Read Nehemiah 8 in several versions. What differences does the group notice? What about scripture brings you joy? How are the scriptures read in your worship services? In what ways do you relate to the experience of the people in Nehemiah? When have you been moved by hearing scripture?

this Exploration, open us all to reading and experiencing it in ways that celebrate its beauty. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.



3 Bible-Based?

Leader preparation: Make a large copy of this quotation from Answers.com, “What does the United Church of Christ believe?” (and found on Attachment: Activity 3): “The UCC is a scripture-based tradition. Like other mainline Christian denominations, the UCC does not read the Bible literally. From a UCC conference on the authority of scripture for Christians: “The Bible is God’s gift to the church, to be read for our instruction and comfort, but we often use it as a hammer to strike down the arguments of our opponents, or even to exclude each other from the Body of Christ.”

Supplies:

- “The UCC and Scripture,” Attachment: Activity 3

Invite someone to read aloud the statement on the attachment. Use one or more of these questions to lead a discussion:

- What does it mean to you to say that the United Church of Christ is a “scripture-based tradition”?
- Do you agree that the Bible is God’s gift to the church? Why or why not?
- When have you or someone you know experienced the Bible being used like a hammer? (Someone once said, “It’s much easier to hit someone over the head with a book when the book is closed. When we open the Bible—literally and figuratively—it becomes more difficult to want to use it to hit others.”)
- When have you experienced the Bible being used in a beautiful way?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Biblical Visitors (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think of various Bible characters. If you could choose to visit with any one, who would it be?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- sheets of paper
- pens or pencils

Invite volunteers to take roles so they can read Luke 9:28–36 for the group. One person can be the narrator, someone can read the statement by Peter, and someone else can read the voice of God.

Ask each person to choose a character from this text and write the character’s name on a sheet of paper, along with a question for this person. Gather the sheets, and mix them up. Invite each person to take a sheet and write a possible answer to the question on the paper, taking the role of the person named on the sheet. Remind everyone that there are absolutely no “wrong” answers and no “perfect” answers. After a time, invite people to read the names, questions, and answers from their sheets of paper. How did the experience shape their understanding of the text?

5 Scripture in the Church

Leader preparation: Ahead of time, prepare for a journey through the church building and grounds. Assess the accessibility of the facilities in relation to your group, and decide if you will take a tour or simply talk about items that are in the church. You may prefer to bring images. Adapt this activity to your setting and to the availability of biblical quotations on display.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Invite someone to read Nehemiah 8:1–10. Provide background information. This story takes place after the people returned from the exile. It is awesome enough to be back in their homeland, but more awesome still to hear the scripture being proclaimed in their own language. Beyond that, Ezra and the others translate and interpret the scripture so the people can understand. The people weep, no doubt overwhelmed by this holy experience.

What scripture passages figure in the life of your congregation? Tour your building, if possible, and look for scripture quotations. They might be found on a memorial plaque, a cornerstone, or a stained glass window. There may be a biblical quotation on your worship bulletin or other paperwork. As you encounter these quotations, discuss the importance of the passages. What meanings do they hold? If it is not convenient to tour the building and/or grounds, share the scripture verse on the logo of the United Church of Christ: “That they may all be one” (John 17:21). What might this text have meant to the church in 1957 when the United Church of Christ was formed? What might it mean today? If you think the meaning has changed, to what do you attribute the change?



6 Journey of the Magi

Leader preparation: Obtain a copy of the artwork “Journey of the Magi,” or locate an image on the Internet. Spend time with the image yourself, and ponder how it challenges some of your understandings of scripture. Where does this piece of art intersect with your understanding of the journey of the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12? Where does it differ?

In the United Church of Christ we have a wide range of interpretations of the Bible. In this activity, you will explore a biblical story that has had many layers of tradition imposed on it and contrast it with a new image.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Journey of the Magi” by James Tissot, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/238059998?store_id=1401
- Bibles
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Begin by inviting folks to share what they know of the story of the Magi from the beginning of Matthew’s gospel. Note that this is one of many biblical stories that we sometimes believe we know often based more on tradition, legend, and inference than on the biblical text itself. Invite people to share other things they have heard or believe about this story from culture/tradition/greeting cards, and so on. Ask questions such as these:

- How many kings were there? (The Bible does not say they were kings, nor does it tell us how many there were.)
- What were their names? (Again, the Bible does not say.)
- What animals did they ride? (Traditionally we have understood them to be camels, although Matthew does not tell us.)
- When did they arrive at the stable in Bethlehem? (They didn't. They visited Mary and Jesus later on.)

After some discussion, invite someone to read Matthew 2:1–12. What details do you notice that might differ from your preconceptions?

Invite people to look at the image “Journey of the Magi” and describe what they see. You may wish to encourage the conversation with one or more of these questions:

- What impresses you about the image?
- What disturbs you about it?
- How closely does it seem to resonate with the biblical story?
- Notice the group at the back of the image. Is it part of the larger group, even though it appears to have fallen behind? Is it chasing this group? Is it following out of curiosity?
- Place yourself in the picture as an additional character. What are you doing? What are you thinking? What are you feeling? How did you get hooked up with this group?
- Imagine what your senses might be noticing: the “taste” of hunger, perhaps? The smell of the animals? The silence of desert?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 The Transfiguration (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) simple props such as scarves, sandals, or sticks

Read Luke 9:28–36 together. If you have copies of different translations, you could read from two or three of them. Invite group members to imagine they are one of the disciples in the story. They have just experienced this amazing and beautiful event. Ask for volunteers to take the roles of the disciples and mime a conversation with each other about the event. Now ask volunteers to improvise a dialogue; they are describing the Transfiguration to other disciples. Discuss the facial expressions people chose to use. What words and postures did they use to convey their experiences?

8 Over My Head

Leader preparation: Arrange to sing the hymn “Over My Head,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2DLSXYxp6Q&feature=related>, which can be found in *New Century Hymnal*, #514, and also in a variety of other sources. Either arrange for a musician to accompany your group, or plan to sing the song a cappella. If you wish, you may play the song from the Internet.

Supplies:

- hymn: “Over My Head,” #514 in *The New Century Hymnal*
- Bibles
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Distribute copies of the hymn, and invite the group to sing it. Note that the hymn has overtones of the story of the Transfiguration in Luke 9:28–36. Read this passage. What words from the song or biblical text remind you of the other?

What images do you find beautiful in the song and the scripture text? What new words can you add to the song? Replace the words “over my head” with others that reflect your group’s appreciation for beauty or the role of scripture (for example, “In this group, I hear music in the air”).

9 The Beauty of Scripture

Leader preparation: Find a video of biblical quotations set to music. Many are available on the Internet. Going to www.youtube.com and searching for “bible verses” alone can offer hundreds. Some options include: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YcVV3CLP64> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6YioJ1bDyM&feature=related>. Choose a couple of videos that you like or that seem thought-provoking. Arrange to show them to your group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet connection
- projector and screen or other means for group viewing

Watch some videos that feature Bible verses. Discuss the videos afterwards Invite people to choose a favorite. What is it about that verse that speaks to them? Is it one that has long been a favorite, or does it simply speak to something at this time in their lives? What is another favorite verse that each participant would have included in a video? Why?

Reflect

How has your understanding of and appreciation for scripture changed as a result of leading this session? What new insights have you gained? How will you incorporate these into your life?

Attachment: Activity 3

The UCC and Scripture

“The UCC is a scripture-based tradition. Like other mainline Christian denominations, the UCC does not read the Bible literally. From a UCC conference on the authority of scripture for Christians: ‘The Bible is God’s gift to the church, to be read for our instruction and comfort, but we often use it as a hammer to strike down the arguments of our opponents, or even to exclude each other from the Body of Christ.’”

Source: http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_does_the_United_Church_of_Christ_believe

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Setting

The church is a place where we gain the support to live out our discipleship. Some may see belonging to a church community as a duty, but hopefully more often than not we see it as a joy. In the United Church of Christ, we tend not to think of any aspect of our faith as something we **MUST** do, but rather as something we are privileged to do. In response to the love of God we receive unconditionally through the grace of Jesus Christ, we joyfully respond with acts of compassion and justice. This is in turn a thing of beauty. In this setting we explore some of the beauty and wonder and joy of being disciples.

About this Exploration

As disciples, we seek to live as Jesus lived, awake to God's ongoing invitation to sacred relationship. This awareness helps us to discover beauty throughout our journey of discipleship, in both whole and broken places. We open ourselves to the possibility of restoration and renewal, both individually and in community. We connect with God as complete persons—with bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. We learn to trust our physical senses as entry points into boundless worlds of beauty; they are signposts by which we discover the Holy in the ever-changing creation around and within us. As we engage the Spirit through beauty, God opens us to an entire world of sacred opportunity and pulls us gently, powerfully, toward transformation.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Exodus 35:20–29
Acts 9:17–20

Leader Preparation

One dictionary defines “disciple” as “a follower of a teacher.” Interestingly, the second meaning it offers is “an early follower of Jesus.” As Christians, we certainly understand discipleship in both ways. To be a disciple is to follow—to try and align our lives with the teaching and example that Jesus provides and that we read about in scripture. Yet there is another meaning as well. The word translated as “disciple” in the New Testament is, in Greek, *mathetes*, which means “learner.” In order to follow, we must learn. And, when we learn, we find ourselves called to follow.

In the United Church of Christ we tend to understand discipleship as a communal practice. While this attitude, of course, does not preclude us doing acts of discipleship individually, the focus is clearly on what we can do together. As such, the learning in this Exploration will center on what we can—and must—do together to live out our discipleship as part of the church. We need to be conscious of the fact that in the United Church of Christ we participate not only in the life and work of our local congregation, but also in other settings, such as associations, conferences, and the national setting.

Prayer: *Gracious God, we seek to follow Jesus in our world. We dare to travel a different road, seeking out those who are on the margins of society and letting them know they are loved and welcome. We challenge*

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 No Matter What (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In preparation for this activity, think briefly of your personal experience of being welcomed in the church. There may have been times/places when you did not feel welcome, and there will also be, we hope, times when you did feel welcome. What happened during each of these events?

Prepare a large sheet of paper, such as a roll of newsprint, on which you have written the slogan of the UCC: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

Supplies:

- large sheet of paper
- markers
- (optional) other decorative items for the banner
- (optional) old magazines, photos, or church newsletters
- (optional) scissors
- (optional) glue

Share with the group the slogan of the United Church of Christ: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” Ask the group to read it aloud together.

Lead a discussion about the slogan, perhaps using these questions as a guide:

- When have members of the group felt particularly welcomed? Invite them to briefly share their experiences.
- Sometimes in the United Church of Christ we talk about practicing “extravagant welcome.” What might that mean?
- Where do you find beauty in offering welcome to others?
- In what ways does your church offer extravagant welcome to the community?
- Who in your community might not feel welcome in your church? Why?

Invite the group to work together to decorate the large poster with words and/or images of the church providing welcome. These could be either drawn on the poster or created using pictures and/or words from the magazines, photos, or church newsletters.

2 Stories of Welcome

Leader preparation: Part of discipleship is being comfortable with who we are and celebrating that. In the United Church of Christ, as part of our extravagant welcome, we seek to make people feel comfortable being themselves. Make arrangements to view some stories with the group; use them as examples of the beauty of Christian discipleship.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet connection, monitor, or projector to show video

Go to <http://www.ucc.org/changing-lives/> (“Our Church Is Changing Lives;” used by permission) and watch one or more of the videos. After watching the

injustice, and celebrate new life. In all these acts, guide us. Give me the ability to help this group come to a new sense of what it can mean to be in Christian discipleship together. Amen.

videos, invite people to share their responses to the stories. In what ways could they identify with the stories? In what way do the stories bring hope?

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

3 Joining the Procession

Leader preparation: Obtain a copy of “Guatemala: Procession.”

Supplies:

- artwork: “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/56978938?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- images of activities your church is involved in as well as images from your conference and national settings (many of these can be downloaded from www.ucc.org and/or from the website of your conference)
- (optional) photographs of church members (such as from a church directory) or the ability to take and produce the same (such as a digital camera and printer)
- (optional) markers
- (optional) glue
- (optional) scissors
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Look together at the image “Guatemala: Procession.” Ask what people see in it. What do they think various parts of the image might represent, such as the birds, the squiggly figures above Jesus’ head in the center of the picture, and so on? Invite them to tell a story about what is going on in the picture.

After studying the image, point out that the crowd of people around Jesus could be disciples. Ask how we we, in our church today, are disciples of Jesus.

Pass out the images you’ve collected. Ask people to comment on what they notice about the images. How do they speak of discipleship? How are they similar or different from the poster?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Raising Our Voices (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Singing hymns is an important part of the Christian tradition. If people are uncomfortable singing together, suggest that your group read the lyrics instead.

Supplies:

- hymnals

Look at a number of the hymns under the heading “Discipleship,” either from *The New Century Hymnal* or from another hymnal your church uses. Consider dividing into pairs to look through the hymns. Then gather together for a whole-group discussion based on the following questions.

- In what ways do these hymns express beauty?
- What are some ways your church expresses beauty in the work you do as disciples?
- What words particularly stand out?

Invite the group to sing a hymn or hymns of its choice.



5 Money, Money, Money

Leader preparation: For many of us, discussions of money and church can seem intimidating. Yet in today's society, money is a vital part of our lives, like it or not. Thus, it is also a vital aspect of church life.

Congregations in the United Church of Christ collect the bulk of the money for their operating expenses through local sources, primarily offerings and fund-raising. Some receive grants or assistance from their conference. Still others secure loans from the national setting of the United Church of Christ for capital projects and expenses such as building repair.

Supplies:

- "The Cornerstone Fund of the United Church of Christ," Attachment: Activity 5
- Bibles
- copies of other UCC financial resources, such as the brochure about the Cornerstone Fund

Distribute Bibles and invite the group to read Exodus 35:20–29. Discuss with these and/or other questions:

- What is the general focus of the passage?
- Are you surprised/intrigued to learn that such "mundane" activities are described in the Bible?
- How would you describe the fund-raising and money issues in your church—as ministry or simply as business?

If you brought printed materials, distribute them, and invite conversation about some of the funding activities of the national setting of the church. What seems beautiful to the group about these documents or philosophies?



6 Who Is a Disciple?

Leader preparation: If you have time and wish to enhance the conversation, obtain some images (photographs, paintings, prints) of various disciples. These might include famous persons from the past, including biblical and historic figures, as well as famous people who are currently living out their discipleship to Jesus. Try to include some "obscure" folks as well, perhaps members of your own congregation or national leaders of the United Church of Christ. The attachment lists a number of disciples.

Supplies:

- "Disciples," Attachment: Activity 6
- (optional) pictures of a variety of disciples

To be a disciple means to be a follower, or a learner. The definition of "disciple" at www.wikipedia.org is as follows.

The term *disciple* is derived from the New Testament Greek word μαθητης (pronounced “mathetes”), coming to English by way of the Latin *discipulus* meaning “a learner.” A *disciple* is different from an apostle, which instead means a “messenger; one that is sent.” While a *disciple* is one who learns from a teacher, in other words, a student, an *apostle* is one sent to deliver those teachings or a message such as the Great Commission to others.

Invite the group to think of some names of disciples from the Bible. (Be certain to emphasize that the definition not only goes beyond the twelve that Jesus held as his close circle of followers, but also includes women.) Ask the group to share a little about the people they name. After naming some biblical examples, list some more recent ones. Compare the group’s list with the list on the attachment. If you brought some images, display these, and invite each person to hold the picture of a person whom he or she particularly identifies or likes. Ask people to name their chosen disciples and explain what it is about them that makes them a learner and thus a follower of Jesus.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Lighting the Way (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Naming those who have modeled discipleship for us is a valuable practice. Who inspired your faith or encouraged you when your spirit was flagging? Whom have you inspired?

Supplies:

- (optional) candle
- (optional) lighter or matches

Gather in a circle. If possible, light a candle to serve as a focal point. Give people a few moments to think of someone who guided or mentored them in their growth as a disciple. In what ways did that person help make the church (and the world) a more beautiful place? Use a process of mutual invitation. As the leader, you will begin. You will name a person and describe how that person helped you grow in discipleship. When you are finished, invite by name another person in the group. That person has the option of passing or of telling his or her story. When finished, he or she invites by name another person in the group. It is important that each person gets invited to tell a story. After all have shared, invite the group to pray: *Thank you, God, for all your disciples.*

8 Conversion

Leader preparation: The term “conversion” can be a frightening term for many in the United Church of Christ. There are many who simply do not see themselves as “converted” in the way the term might be used in other churches. Accordingly, you may wish to approach this activity with care. At the same time, however, it is well worth exploring.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Conversion,” Attachment: Activity 8

Read Acts 9:1–19. Lead a discussion with the group based on the following questions:

- How familiar is this story to you?
- In Acts 7:57–8:3 we read of the nature of Saul’s early persecution of Christians. How does that information influence your understanding of Acts 9?
- If you were Ananias, what might be your reaction to God’s call? Why?
- Have you ever felt compelled to take an action that you struggled with but felt was morally right?
- Note that Ananias does not argue with God or say “no” but simply enters into conversation with God. What do you make of his response?
- What might the blindness and later removal of scales from Paul’s eyes symbolize?

Distribute copies of the “Conversion,” Attachment: Activity 8. Invite volunteers to read the statements and discuss them. (Note: if you have a large group, you might prefer to divide into smaller groups of perhaps three or four.)

- Which of these statements most closely connects to your experience of entry into a life of faith?
- Is there a different option you might prefer? (Encourage folks to write it on their sheet.)
- Which of the statements do you think might be the most common response for adherents of the United Church of Christ in general and/or for your congregation?

9 Open My Eyes

Leader preparation: Part of the story of Paul’s conversion is that he was blinded and then enabled to see. An important aspect of discipleship is the ability to see—not necessarily with our eyes, but with our hearts. In the United Church of Christ we are frequently called upon to stretch our seeing, to open our eyes to new possibilities, and to look for new manifestations of discipleship in our midst. When our eyes are cleared—literally and/or figuratively—we can see again and are equipped for ministry.

Depending on the option you choose below, either arrange for a computer with Internet access, or find someone to lead the group in singing “Open My Eyes.”

Supplies:

- song: “Song of the Soul” by Cris Williamson, from the album *The Changer and the Changed* (or from *The Essential Cris Williamson*), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-7yjMLNops>
- (optional) hymn: “Open My Eyes” by Clara Scott (tune: Open My Eyes), www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/p/openeyes.htm

View the YouTube video of Cris Williamson’s song “Song of the Soul,” or listen to a recording of it. Invite the group to notice similarities to the story of Paul’s conversion in Acts 9:1–19 and/or to discipleship in general. How do the images in this video and the words of the song suggest renewal, either physically or spiritually?

Option: Sing the hymn “Open My Eyes.” This song speaks of having our eyes opened in order to see what God is doing in our world. Ask:

- How might we use each of the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell) to experience beauty?
- What practices help us keep our spiritual senses keen?

Reflect

How has your own discipleship changed over the years? How did it change in the preparation for and leading of this study? Where, during acts of discipleship, can you pause and experience the beauty of the work? Recognize your leadership of this group as an act of discipleship.

Attachment: Activity 5

The Cornerstone Fund of the United Church of Christ

Imagine doing something good for the church and earning a tangible reward for yourself. Not as surprising as it sounds when you participate in the Cornerstone Fund, a unique financial ministry that benefits both the individuals and churches of the UCC. (This comes from the “about us” section of the Web page.)

This is the Mission Statement of the Cornerstone Fund:

Mission

The Cornerstone Fund works to strengthen local churches in the United Church of Christ by offering real estate–secured loans that help churches repair, renovate, and expand their facilities, improve accessibility; refinance real estate debt; and more. Funding loans with investments from churches, organizations, and individuals throughout the denomination, the Cornerstone Fund enables its clients to expand their stewardship by helping to energize established local churches across the country. Through the work accomplished by the Cornerstone Fund, we celebrate and advance the ministry of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of our faith.

You may wish to contact a local church that has recently undertaken a building project or capital campaign and invite someone to speak to your group. The idea here is not to talk about the nuts and bolts of finances (although those details may well come up) but rather about how the fund-raising and/or building was an aspect of ministry, and how the church might have felt connected to other congregations through the Cornerstone Fund or the United Church Building and Loan Fund (you can learn more about this latter fund by going to <http://www.ucc.org/cblf/>).

If your church’s primary interest might be investment, you can find more information at www.unitedchurchfunds.org.

(Used by permission—www.cornerstonefund.org)

Attachment: Activity 6

Disciples

Many people in the Bible and throughout history are called disciples. Examine the list. What (if anything) do you know about these people?

Jesus' Twelve Disciples (according to the Gospel of Matthew)

Simon Peter
Andrew
James, son of Zebedee
John
Philip
Bartholomew
Thomas
Matthew
James, son of Alphaeus
Thaddaeus
Simon the Zealot
Judas Iscariot

Jesus' Twelve Disciples (according to the Gospel of Luke)

Simon Peter
Andrew
James
John
Philip
Bartholomew
Matthew
Thomas
James, son of Alphaeus
Simon the Zealot
Judas, son of James
Judas Iscariot

Other Biblical Disciples (This is NOT an exhaustive list.)

Mary, mother of Jesus (we know from various gospel references, and Acts 1, that she was a follower, hence a disciple)

Mary Magdalene (she is a follower of Jesus, and Jesus also sends her out as the first apostle after the resurrection)

Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household

Susanna

"many others" (Luke 8:3)—while these women are not named, it is important to note that they are at least mentioned

Dorcas (also called Tabitha), a woman who was known for doing good works

Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae

Some Disciples from History (far from an exhaustive list)

Martin Luther

Thomas Cranmer

John Calvin

John Knox

John, Charles, and Susanna Wesley

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta

millions of people who seek each day to follow Jesus

Attachment: Activity 8

Conversion

Faith journeys are very personal. Most of us relate to a personal God, although for some the concept of God is something we meet in community.

Scripture reminds us that there are a variety of ways to encounter God, and thus to come to faith in Jesus Christ. For example, Peter and Paul had very different experiences. Peter spent time with Jesus while Jesus was on earth and slowly learned the things Jesus taught. Paul, on the other hand, had a rather sudden experience of conversion. He turned from being a persecutor of believers to being a believer himself.

Mary Magdalene seems to have formed a close relationship to Jesus as a friend and someone who spoke to her heart and soul. When she encountered Christ at the empty tomb, she came to believe in an exciting new way. Thomas, on the other hand, was skeptical for some time. Through Thomas' encounter with the risen Christ, Jesus pointed out that some of us come to faith by seeing and believing, and others come to faith without seeing.

All these ways are legitimate.

Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your experience of coming into Christian faith?

1. We become Christian through assent to correct new beliefs.
2. We become Christian through rebirth into the life of Christ.
3. We become Christian by participating in the community of faith (for example, attending Bible study or worship, helping at the food bank, participating in a march for human rights, and so on).
4. We become Christian by being nurtured into Christ-like living—some of us from birth, and others from later in life.
5. If none of the above seems to resonate with you, write here a statement that is more in tune with your own experience:

It has been noted that in the 1950s and early 1960s most Christians joined a faith community/local church based on beliefs and theology. However, in more recent years increasingly people join churches based on a sense of community and welcome, with belief being secondary.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

In 1957 four denominations came together and formed the United Church of Christ. Some people's families date their connection to that time. Others have a history with the UCC that goes back to their involvement in a local church or this denomination. Still others may focus on the founding of a particular congregation. Some think of the beginning of the church as going back to the time of the Reformation; the Reformers sought a church that was not governed from "the top down," but rather where the local congregation governed all its own affairs, yet with counsel and oversight from other congregations. Still others find our tradition and polity date back to the times of the early church in the New Testament.

It has been suggested that over half the members of the United Church of Christ have come into this denomination from other traditions. Accordingly, the tradition they have left may influence them to varying degrees. As well, the very structure of our denomination means that our traditions and practices will vary widely from one congregation to another. In this Exploration we will celebrate and seek to learn from aspects of our tradition as United Church of Christ and, to a lesser extent, Christian tradition as a whole.

About this Exploration

For centuries, followers of Christian tradition have sought ways to connect with God. Layers of song, prayers, spoken word and silent searching have characterized the heart of the community of faith in its longing for this connection. The ways we worship and live out our daily lives reflect these traditions, sometimes without our even knowing it. At times, traditions are

left behind for generations and then rediscovered in new, relevant, and powerful ways. This Exploration seeks to examine, appreciate, and perhaps revive some of our traditions and thereby bless and empower a faith that is rooted in today's world and experience.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 8
John 12:1–8

Leader Preparation

Take a moment to reflect on your understanding of Christian tradition. John Wesley, a major founder of the Methodist movement, is credited with a theological process whereby we reflect on all issues in the context of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. It is only in holding these principles in balance that we can truly form our own theology. Thus, Christian tradition is not merely an interesting notion, but something that shapes and informs us in the present and future.

How much do you think your own tradition influences how you act out your faith today? If you have joined the United Church of Christ from another denomination (or perhaps have even been connected with a variety of Christian traditions over the years), how have those other traditions influenced who you are?

Think about the members of your group. How much do you know about the traditions of their faith backgrounds? How do you think that might influence their involvement in your congregation? And lastly, think about your congregation. What are key aspects of its traditions, and how do those live themselves out in the work of the church today?

Prayer: *God of all time and space, you have been with us since the beginning of time.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Singing Our Faith Tradition (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Few issues can cause as much dissension in any denomination as the changing of hymns. Hymn lyrics tend to become vital ways of sustaining our faith and telling it to future generations. Altering them—even slightly—can cause all manner of controversy. Accordingly, approach this activity with sensitivity and with a little humor! A helpful piece for those who are in panic about the way hymns have been changed can be to note that seekers are increasingly drawn to a church where the hymn language is relevant. On the flip side, it may be helpful to remember—and to share—this quotation from long-term UCC theologian Gabriel Fackre: “It’s time we stopped using the eraser end of the pencil and started using the lead end.”

Supplies:

- copies of *The New Century Hymnal* and, if possible, copies of older hymnals, preferably ones your congregation has used
- “Creating *The New Century Hymnal*,” Attachment: Activity 1

How open is your church to using new hymns? Begin with a brief discussion about how people feel about hymns. How have the hymns changed? How have their feelings about the hymns changed? What is good about old and new hymns?

Distribute copies of the attachment. Invite folks to read portions of it. To the extent that you have time and interest, engage in conversation about language in the United Church of Christ tradition, especially as it pertains to the hymns we sing.

Distribute copies of *The New Century Hymnal* and other hymnals if they are available. Invite people to compare hymns that were written before 1980 with others that were written after. Virtually every one of the older hymns in *The New Century Hymnal* has had some linguistic alteration.



2 Relationships

Leader preparation: Plan to invite the group into an experience of exploring relationships as a key part of our tradition.

Supplies:

- “Psalm 8,” Attachment: Activity 2
- artwork: “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child),” by Mary Stevenson Cassatt, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1698125593?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15627&store_id=1401
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Place the artwork where everyone can see it. Invite all to take a moment simply to be with the painting. After a short period of time, invite someone to read Psalm 8 from *The Message* from the attachment. Invite people to share responses to the following questions:

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You invite us to experience you anew in ancient ways and experience faith traditions in new ways. Speak to me now, as you have spoken to me before and to others long before me. Remind me that I am a part of your long history of ministry in this place. Amen.

UCC IDENTITY & HISTORY

- If the child was saying one thing to the mother about God, what might it be?
- If the mother was saying one thing to the child about God, what might it be?

Invite people to share how relationships have been a key part of their church experience. In what ways has your faith community nurtured significant relationships?

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.



3 Still Speaking

Leader preparation: Read the three focal quotations. Print copies of the attachment and place them around the room.

Supplies:

- “UCC Quotes,” Attachment: Activity 3
- markers, pencil crayons, pastels

Read aloud each of the posters from the attachment: “God is still speaking”; “Never place a period where God has placed a comma” (Gracie Allen); and “There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word” (John Robinson). While the group may be familiar with the first two (they are quite new in the life of the church), you may want to point out that the third one was spoken by John Robinson, one of the founders of the Congregationalist tradition, to the pilgrims who were about to depart on the Mayflower for the “new world.”

Invite people to share their responses to these statements.

- When have you previously made connections among the three slogans?
- How might “God is still speaking” be in some way a newer version of the more traditional quote from John Robinson?
- What might it mean that God is still speaking?
- What are other ways we might convey the same meaning?

Distribute the blank commas (on the attachment) and invite people to create their own slogans that capture the heart of the United Church of Christ (and before that the Congregationalist tradition).

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 What We Have Believed (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity encourages participants to review creedal statements of the larger UCC as well as local ones. It can be as simple as using copies of the hymnal and exploring the statements of faith found there, or more complex by using a wide variety of faith statements.

Some within the UCC tradition may have a negative reaction to the word “creed” because of the connotation that it refers to a statement to which one must subscribe in order to belong. Some congregations have varying statements to which one is expected to subscribe in order to be a member, and others do not.

Supplies:

- copies of a variety of statements of faith used in the United Church of Christ, found in *The New Century Hymnal*, 882–887, or <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/>
- markers and newsprint
- pens
- (optional) creedal statements that are a part of your local heritage and/or are connected with church membership

Note: If you are using “A New Creed” from the United Church of Canada, please note that since the printing of *The New Century Hymnal* the line “to live with respect in creation” was inserted after the line “to seek justice and resist evil.”

Look at a variety of statements of faith. You may wish to note that these are often called “creeds.” Talk about the various statements of faith.

- What do they say?
- How do they differ?
- How major are the differences?

Depending on the size of your group, you may wish to divide into smaller groups or even pairs. Invite group members to fashion a creed. They will choose words, short phrases, or symbols and display these creatively on newsprint. For example, someone may write “welcome,” and another person may sketch a circle of people with interlocking arms. The result will be a collection of the important values people want to uphold. Write these on large sheets of newsprint so they might be shared with the rest of the group later.



5 How Do We Deal with Things?

Leader preparation: You might want to find out about an issue that has divided your church. If there is not such an issue in your congregation’s history, perhaps there is something that has divided your association or conference or an issue that has caused your congregation to be at odds with others in the community.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Display the artwork “Navaro Rapids.” How might it relate to the life of the church? Often we can find ourselves surrounded by proverbial stormy seas. We may feel we are going to sink. On the other hand, there may also be the sense that no matter how stormy the present, somehow we will survive.

Invite someone to read John 12:1–8. On the whiteboard or newsprint, jot down the key elements of the conflict in this passage. For example, Mary pours a huge amount of very expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet, which some thought was wasteful; she wipes his feet with her hair, which was a controversial act. Judas complains about the extravagant waste. Jesus tries to diffuse the situation.

Outline some of the other contextual elements that may contribute to the sense of the passage. This event occurs just prior to Passover, a huge festival in Jewish people's lives, and the timing may have contributed to the tension. According to John's gospel, Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead. Judas is preparing to betray Jesus, and thus may have been overzealous to find a complaint. He also, according to this passage, has a propensity for petty thievery and dishonesty.

- What are some difficult and divisive issues your church has had to deal with?
- Briefly describe a situation where you have seen a turbulent situation handled well or beautifully. What made it beautiful?
- What other processes or attitudes help people resolve differences of opinion?

6 How We Worship

Leader preparation: Has your worship service changed in the past few years? Often we can get in a rut, which does not mean our worship patterns are wrong. Nevertheless, changing them once in a while can open us to new ways of celebrating the presence of God.

In order to explore worship patterns, check out some resources such as the Worship, Music, Arts, and Story resource of *Faith Practices* (any practice) or *Seasons-FUSION*, from *Seasons of the Spirit*, (<http://www.seasonsonline.ca/412/the-seasons-family-of-resources>), and resources from websites such as the United Church of Christ's "Worship Ways" at <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/>. If a computer with Internet access is available, invite the group to explore "Worship Ways" and other worship resources online. Check with your pastor for other resources that she or he may have available.

Supplies:

- copies of your worship bulletins—preferably for several weeks, enough for each person to have one
- Bibles
- hymnals
- "Worship Ways," <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/>
- (optional) other worship resources (see leader preparation section)
- (optional) worship bulletins from other churches

Using copies of your congregation's worship bulletins, look at the pattern of worship. Use these prompts to start discussion:

- What elements of your worship would you define as traditional, and what parts seem more modern?
- What terminology do you use for the various parts of the worship service?

Explore the worship resources together. Probably you will want to choose a portion of the worship service, such as an opening, a way of presenting the scripture reading, or a prayer.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Praying Our Traditions (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The prayer known as the Prayer of Our Savior (or the Lord’s Prayer or the Our Father) is undoubtedly one of the most familiar passages of scripture in the Christian tradition. It has been used in a variety of forms throughout the ages.

Supplies:

- Bibles in various translations
- “Prayer of Our Savior,” *The New Century Hymnal*, pages 56–57

Invite the group to pray the Prayer of Our Savior in the forms you brought: Matthew 6:9–15. Try saying the prayer in a variety of ways: antiphonally with one half of the group reading one line and the rest reading the next line, or antiphonally with each group repeating the same line (like an echo), or alternating lines between men and women, or one half of the group reading one line from one version and then the other half reading the same line from a different version.

Discuss your responses to the texts:

- What differences do you notice between the prayers?
- Do you prefer newer or more traditional versions?
- How does each version hold beauty?

8 Where We’ve Been, Who We Are

Leader preparation: There are a number of ways to explore the history and traditions of your local church: oral history and storytelling, history books, church records, or guest speakers. Choose one or more methods to discover some of the tradition(s) of your church. If you invite a guest, give your guest a clear assignment.

Supplies:

- historical sources (see leader preparation section)

Explore the history of your church using the resource(s) you brought. If you have time, invite the group to join you on a “tour” of the church building, noting items such as plaques and other memorials that help define the history of your congregation. Invite people to share insights and comments about to the church’s history, using these or similar questions.

- Where do you find elements of beauty in your church’s history?
- What people or acts have been beautiful?
- What beauty do you find in the way your church history is presented (such as stained glass windows, writings, and so on)?
- What events of the recent past would you want memorialized for future generations? Why? In what format?

9 Looking for Church

Leader preparation: What does church look like? Often when we hear the word “church,” we think of buildings. Yet church is so much more than that. The Hawaiian language uses two words for church. *Hale pule* (hah-lay poo-lay) refers to the building, and literally means “house of prayer.” *Ekalesia* (eh-ka-lay-see-uh) refers to the gathered community, which comes directly from the same word in Greek and is used to describe the people of a faith community.

Supplies:

- variety of posters, such as those in *Imaging the Word* or those used for this Faith Practice
- computer with Internet access
- (optional) meditative music (a piece about 3–5 minutes long is good) and a means to play it

When you do an Internet search for images of church, what do you find? Explore the UCC website, www.ucc.org, and look for images of church. Display the posters around the meeting space. Invite the group to wander among the pictures, spending a little time with each one. After a few minutes of studying posters and exploring the Internet, ask people to choose an image that connects to their concept of church or tradition. Invite the group members to share their thoughts. *How does connecting the images with the topic of church strengthen or alter their sense of beauty?*

Reflect

How have you understood the history and tradition of the United Church of Christ and your congregation in particular? Were others in the group able to discover and express ways in which they understand the history and how it evokes beauty for them? What new insights have you gained regarding the beauty of your church and its traditions?

Attachment: Activity 1

Creating *The New Century Hymnal*

Note: All quotations are from “The Language of The New Century Hymnal” in *The New Century Hymnal Companion: A Guide to the Hymns*, ed. Kristen L. Forman (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 15–56.

The New Century Hymnal came into being in 1995, and it caused quite a storm. Many (most?) of the hymns had been altered or revised in order to make them more in keeping with modern times and sensitivities. While the United Church of Christ has always been at the forefront of inclusion and sensitivity to wide diversity, for many people hymns over time had taken on a rather sacred nature, and “tampering” with them proved very unpopular. Yet, in the several years the hymnal has been in use, many have come to appreciate the freshness that the new revisions brought. The hymnal has, for the large part, been accepted—with, of course, some notable exceptions.

Theological guidelines

According to “The Making of *The New Century Hymnal*” by James Crawford and Daniel Johnson, the hymnal committee was guided by the following theological guidelines:

- The 1995 hymnal of the United Church of Christ enables praise of the One, Sovereign, Triune God, who in infinite mystery is always more than doctrine can describe and whose being calls forth awe, worship, love, faith, and service (Isaiah 6:1–8).
- We affirm that people of all ages, tongues, races, abilities, and both genders are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26, 5:1–2; United Church of Christ Statement of Faith).
- We testify to God’s call to stewardship of the earth; we are not entitled to hoard, waste, or destroy what God has made, but we are called to glorify God with the earth’s resources.
- We rejoice in providing a rich variety of metaphors for singing of God and inclusive words for singing of people—words that all people can sing.

Inclusive language and *The New Century Hymnal*

The New Century Hymnal is perhaps most famous both in and outside the United Church of Christ for its approach to using “inclusive language.” Arthur Clyde, hymnal editor, writes, “*The New Century Hymnal* is not the first hymnal to deal with the issue of inclusive language. It does, however, represent the most even and consistent approach to language of any hymnal yet published. Rather than choosing to present only new hymns in inclusive language, those responsible for the language of this hymnal took the General Synod request for an inclusive hymnal quite literally. Thus hymns of other ages are presented in ways that seek to maintain the theology and beauty of the original but without some of the biases of the time in which they were written.”

Clyde identifies a number of approaches and concerns implemented in considering hymn text language, which include:

- Translation: some hymns that were written in languages other than English were retranslated to avoid the linguistic biases of the older translation.

Attachment: Activity 1 (*continued*)

- Archaic Language: avoiding “thee,” “thine,” “thou,” “ebenezer,” “betide,” etc., since such language is no longer commonplace in English and is losing its intelligibility to new generations.
- Gender of God: seeking to reduce the solely masculine use of language for God, and/or balancing masculine images with feminine and nongendered images. (A few Trinitarian references to God “the Father” were retained.)
- Gender of Christ: retaining masculine language for Jesus when the context is his historical, earthly life, but attempting to avoid masculine language in reference to “the resurrected Jesus, the Christ, who is our Sovereign.”
- Sensitivity to the use of the word “Lord”: recognizing that “Lord” implies authority/sovereignty, but also a gender (male), the hymnal retains many references to Jesus as “Lord” (particularly in well-known “memorized” hymns), removes them from non-English texts where “Lord” was introduced in translation, and changed language in certain other cases. Furthermore, “Lord” is not employed as a name for God (only Jesus Christ). “The overall result of the entire revision process is that the word ‘Lord’ appears with less frequency than in many other hymns.”
- Kings, Kingdoms, and Masters: noting its gendered status, “King” as a reference for God was avoided as much as possible. Similarly, “Master” is not only masculine, but also evokes the oppressive imagery of master-and-slave. In both cases, various alternatives were implemented, including the use of “Sovereign” as implying the same sovereignty metaphor as king. Similarly, in many places the gendered “Kingdom” was avoided by using words such as “realm” or “dominion.”
- Militaristic Language: as Clyde writes, “It is certain that some will lament the loss of (the militaristic) metaphors, but others cannot sing language of such strong military tendency in a world where violence abounds.” In many cases, the message of struggle, conflict, and fight was retained, but with ‘toned-down’ militarism. For example, in “For All the Saints,” the former words “O may thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold / Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old” become “Still may your people, faithful, true and bold, / live as the saints who nobly fought of old.”
- Trinitarian Language: “The hymnal committee developed a statement concerning the trinitarian formula: “Where a hymn is clearly trinitarian, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit language may be used, but we will consult poets, theologians, and others in order to search for new ways of expressing the Triune God within the orthodox parameters.”
- Gender inclusivity with regard to humanity: language that does not employ male gender-marked words referring to people has been used throughout.
- Use of the Word “dark”: recognizing the racial implications of many traditional uses where “dark” was meant as negative, bad, or evil, the hymnal has sought to find different language to indicate the contrast or show the absence of light. Examples include “shadows” instead of “darkness,” or “drive the storms of doubt away” instead of “drive the dark of doubt away.”
- Language about people’s abilities: “If the hymn indicates that one must walk or see in this life to participate in the faith, then a change is warranted. If the hymn indicates that walking or seeing or hearing are things that happen when one is utterly overwhelmed by finding oneself in the presence of God in the hereafter, then a change is not necessary.”

Attachment: Activity 2

Psalm 8
From *The Message*

A David Psalm

¹ GOD, brilliant Lord, yours is a household name.

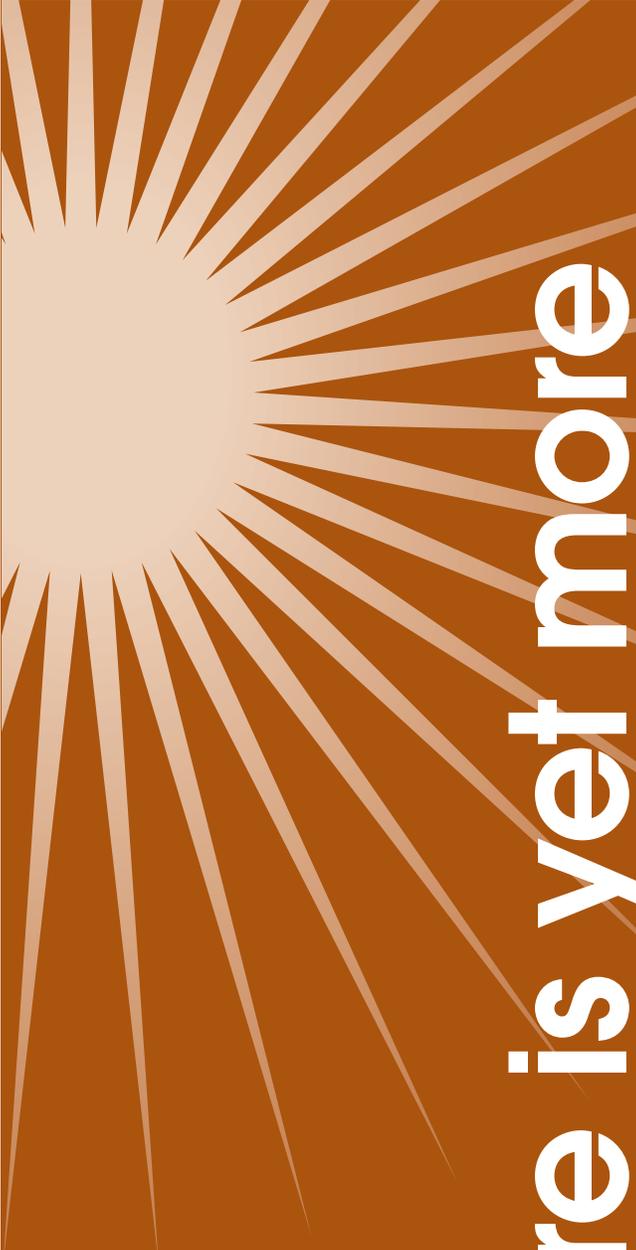
² Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you;
toddlers shout the songs
That drown out enemy talk,
and silence atheist babble.

³⁻⁴ I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous,
your handmade sky-jewelry,
Moon and stars mounted in their settings.
Then I look at my micro-self and wonder,
Why do you bother with us?
Why take a second look our way?

⁵⁻⁸ Yet we've so narrowly missed being gods,
bright with Eden's dawn light.
You put us in charge of your handcrafted world,
repeated to us your Genesis-charge,
Made us lords of sheep and cattle,
even animals out in the wild,
Birds flying and fish swimming,
whales singing in the ocean deeps.

⁹ GOD, brilliant Lord,
your name echoes around the world.

Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.



**“There is yet more
light and truth to
break forth from
God’s holy word”**

(John Robinson, spoken to the pilgrims as they left for the New World.)

Attachment: Activity 3 (continued)

**“Never
place a period
where God
has placed
a comma”**

(Gracie Allen)

Attachment: Activity 3 (continued)

**God
is still
speaking,**



Attachment: Activity 3 *(continued)*



Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

When do we experience beauty in the presence of God? Surely, it is during worship, yet in other places as well: the beauty of forest, a city park, the ocean, a lake, our neighborhood, a mountain, a gathering of friends or family. And where do we participate in mission? The same places would be true again: worship settings, nature, and human interactions. In all of these contexts we are invited to proclaim the presence of God and the beauty of relationship with God.

In the United Church of Christ we are encouraged to experience church in all places and to be in mission in all places. It's been said, "Everything we do is a witness." Surely that is true for our lives as Christians—in all our activities we can proclaim the glory of God.

About this Exploration

The beauty that surrounds us—in our relationships as well as the gifts of creation—points us to God. When we actively engage with our faith, we open ourselves to seeing beauty everywhere, in an ever-widening context. As we awaken to a new appreciation for the Divine, we are better equipped to reflect beauty ourselves and join with others to experience the grace and glory of God.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Ecclesiastes 3:1–13
2 Corinthians 5:16–20

Leader Preparation

Mission can be a scary concept for some. But mission is about proclaiming the goodness and justice of our loving God to a world that needs to hear that message. Conveying this message can mean speaking and preaching, but just as often it means sitting with those who are hurting; telling people that your church is a place where all are welcome; speaking out and standing up for justice, human rights, and human dignity; and working to help people have the basic needs of life met. This is the context in which we live our Christian faith. How do you feel about mission? What does mission look like in your setting?

Prayer: *God who is present everywhere, as we explore what it can mean to be in mission, keep us ever mindful of your beauty and goodness. May we find ways to live out in all the places in which we find ourselves the beauty of your call to practice extravagant welcome in a hurting world. Amen.*

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 1 God Believes in You (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: As you prepare, think about ways you have understood “mission.” How positive—or negative—are the images it provokes? Where do you experience beauty in the ministry of mission as practiced by your church nationally, regionally, and locally?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Share this brief story, and invite discussion with the questions that follow:

A teacher was on a field trip with her class of adolescents. One student noticed the cross around the teacher’s neck and asked her about it. When she stated she wore it because she was a Christian, the youth declared, “I don’t believe in God.” The teacher responded, “Well, I’m glad that God believes in you.”

- What does the teacher’s statement say to you?
- How is her comment an example of Christian mission?
- How is her wearing of the necklace an example of Christian mission?

Invite someone to read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. The Message translates the closing this way: “Become friends with God; he’s already a friend with you.” Invite responses to this reading. What concepts do you find thought-provoking? Challenging? Encouraging? What does it mean to be friends with God?



2 The Flow of Mission

Leader preparation: Obtain a copy of the image “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Look at the image, and invite conversation using these or similar questions:

- What concepts does this image suggest to you?
- Where might you place the Christian church (or the United Church of Christ) in this image? In the whirlpool, about to be swallowed up? In the churning waves—tossed about? In the calmer seas beyond? On the lush, green land beyond the ocean? In the possibly more barren landscape at the back of the image? Flying in the heavens with the birds?
- Do you feel the church is moving away from the shore or toward the shore?

Experiencing Beauty

to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.

Now, think of Christian mission. Notice the in/out movement of the water in this image, and think of mission as a back and forth movement.

- In what ways does this metaphor capture an understanding of mission?
- When have you experienced missionaries coming to you?
- What messages have missionaries brought you?
- What gives you a sense of being in mission as you live out your faith each day?

③ There Is a Time

Leader preparation: If possible, find a recording of the folk song “Turn, Turn, Turn” or “There Is a Time” (by Linnea Good). A quick Internet search can show a number of places where either song can be found; both are also available for individual MP3 download.

Supplies:

- song: “Turn, Turn, Turn,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WB6jhbtdUZE> and/or “There Is a Time” <http://www.slideshare.net/linneagood/there-is-a-time-7810902>
- computer with Internet access
- Bibles

Invite someone to read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13 and then listen to one or both of the musical versions of this text.

- What does this passage/song say to you about what “time” the church is in?
- How does it call us to be in mission?

Listen to the song again. Invite the group to use movement to express their reflections on the song. One way to do this is to “hand dance.” This method of movement requires very little space and is inclusive of a wide range of people. People can sit or stand. As they hear the music, invite them to move one or both hands in response. If people are concerned about “performing” in front of others, invite people to close their eyes.

Encourage people to share their experience on the text. How does it influence their own lives? Invite discussion about how we understand the idea of turning, and how we convert that into action.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ The Perfect Church (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Gather supplies. Spend time contemplating what you imagine a “perfect” church to be. Dare to stretch your understanding outside of the proverbial box. Is there a building? What kinds of people are present? When does the congregation gather for worship, and what form(s) might that take?

Supplies:

- large sheets of newsprint
- markers, pens, pastels, or other writing implements

Invite the group to create a picture of the perfect church. Encourage them to stretch their imaginations when drawing it. What is the setting? Does the church have a building? If so, does it look like your current church or something else? What activities does the building enable? If there is no building, in what sort of places do the people find themselves? Who is there? What are they doing? Think globally. Is your perfect church the same church for everyone? Would your perfect church be appropriate in another setting, or in another community?

Encourage people to draw elements of their ideal church gathering place.

5 The Beginnings of Foreign Mission Work

Leader preparation: In 1806 the Haystack Event in Williamstown, Massachusetts kicked off the start of Protestant Christian overseas mission work. The history of foreign mission work in the United Church of Christ (as well as other Christian churches) has a mixed history. For some, the missionary work was seen as a positive step that brought the gospel to places that needed to hear it. Others viewed their work as key to helping other cultures move forward and become modern nations. Yet others saw this missionary work as negative, bringing unnecessary changes, cultural domination, and foreign diseases to cultures that neither needed nor wanted such intrusions in their daily living. In either case, the work of foreign missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a powerful and long-lasting effect on the cultures of people in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific islands.

Learn about the Haystack Event through an Internet search, your church library, or through articles such as that found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haystack_Prayer_Meeting. Plan to share some of your findings with the group.

Supplies:

- information on the Haystack Event and other early overseas mission work, <http://globalministries.org/resources/mission-study/what-is-haystack/>

Share the information about the Haystack Event with the group. Discussion might include questions such as these.

- What is your general reaction to the work that was done?
- Imagine you were present at the Haystack Event or another early missionary conversation. What might be some questions you would have asked or statements you might have made?
- What is the beauty in the work generated by the Haystack Event?
- How can the church provide healing for some of the difficulties caused by early foreign mission work in order to bring beauty to a difficult history?
- How do you conceive of mission today?

If you were to send a text to the group that met at the Haystack prayer meeting, what advice might you offer them as you look back over the church's history?

 **6 Water**

Leader preparation: Water is a vital part of life. While human beings can go for weeks without food, we can only go a few days without water. Our bodies are made up of 60–70 percent water. The world is made up of far more water than land. Water is also a key component of life in the Christian church, since it is what we use for the practice of baptism. In this activity, the group will be invited to contemplate water’s place within the context of our daily living and the life of the church.

Prior to the gathering, post the image “Navaro Rapids” somewhere in the meeting area. As people gather, invite them to look at the print and simply let it speak to them.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- (optional) water sounds, either from a small indoor fountain or a CD
- (optional) “Order for Baptism,” *The New Century Hymnal*, pages 31–37, or copy of the baptismal liturgy from the *Book of Worship*
- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Invite people to close their eyes. If you have access to water sounds, play them now. Invite group members to imagine themselves beside a body of water that has meaning for them, such as a lake, the ocean, a pool, a river, and so forth. After about a minute, invite them to recall their experiences of water. After about another minute, invite them to recall a time when they were thirsty. *What was it like to drink water?* Ask all to recall a time when they were very hot. *What was it like to finally be able to swim or run through a sprinkler or take a shower?*

Invite group members to open their eyes and briefly share something that came to mind during the meditation.

Look together at the image “Navaro Rapids” by Ando Hiroshige. Ask the following questions:

- What emotions does the image conjure up?
- How do people connect water with spirituality
- How is water used in the practice of baptism in your congregation?
- How is this practice a thing of beauty?

If you have a baptismal liturgy, invite the group to discuss it now. Notice especially the prayer that thanks God for a variety of ways in which we have encountered water in our biblical history.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 How to Tell It (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about how the United Church of Christ is present in your community and how it might be understood by others. Did you come into the church from another denomination? If so, what attracted you to the church? How did you hear of it? Where do you find beauty in this particular denomination?

Supplies:

- (optional) markers and whiteboard or newsprint
- (optional) Still Speaking identity ads: <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/ads/>

It has been said that the United Church of Christ is the world's best kept secret. The message of extravagant welcome and openness to all is often never heard by the world around us. People who feel rejected by other branches of Christianity may not know that there is a place where "no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome."

Imagine that your group is commissioned to design a billboard sign as part of the community's special focus on communities of faith. *What slogan would you use? Aim for a brief, pithy saying. Is it short enough that it could be recited by a nine-year-old child standing on one leg?* While that standard may be a bit extreme, let it inspire you to come up with an easy-to-remember and short catch-phrase. Decide on a slogan and, if you wish, display it creatively on paper.

If available, show the Still Speaking identity ads.

8 New Creations

Leader preparation: In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul declares that "if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation . . ." (NRSV). Some think of this verse as meaning that each individual is recreated upon connecting with Christ. Others see the verse as an acknowledgement that there is, indeed, a new world that God has created, and as we accept Christ into our lives we become a part of that new world.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- tissue paper in various colors
- poster board on which is written "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation."
- markers, crayons, pastels
- decorative items such as glitter, netting, stickers,
- magazines
- scissors
- glue

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20, inviting the group to pay particular attention to verse 17. Share responses to the following questions:

- What might it mean that there is a new creation?
- How can our connection with Christ create a new world?
- How can our connection with Christ make the world a more beautiful place?

Invite the group to fashion items of beauty from the craft supplies. They may create a recognizable symbol of new birth (such as a butterfly) or simply craft an abstract piece. If people like, they may attach their creations to the poster board. Especially encourage expression of ways in which your congregation participates in the new creation and/or helps to bring it about.

9 Singing for Mission

Leader preparation: Choose a hymn to sing with your group, and arrange for someone to lead the song. Look through the topical index of *The New Century Hymnal* (see Church: Mission in the World) and choose a hymn, or try one of these suggestions: #306, “The Church of Christ in Every Age”; #495, “Called As Partners in Christ’s Service”; #504, “You Walk along Our Shoreline.”

Supplies:

- copies of *The New Century Hymnal* or another hymnal that contains hymns on the topic of mission

Invite the group to sing the hymn you have chosen. Ask:

- How do you find this hymn beautiful?
- In what way is its description of mission similar to that of your church?
- How do you understand the sense of mission that the hymn describes?

Encourage people to name contemporary forms of music (or specific pieces of music) that they enjoy. Which hymns might be set to such music? How would it change the way people respond to the hymn? How do they think newcomers to a church service would experience this modern hymn? Why?

Reflect

As you discussed mission with your group in this Exploration, how did your perceptions—and those of your group—change? What are some ways you can encourage your group and congregation to continue exploring what it means to be in mission in your community and, beyond that, to connect with mission work in other places?

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

We are the United Church of Christ—a church that looks toward the future with bright hope. We are a relatively young denomination, having been founded in our current form in 1957. Yet we are also a much older denomination, tracing our roots in the United States to the Mayflower and beyond that to the Reformation. And we are much older still, for we truly believe we exist as an embodiment of the early church. Indeed, we even are a part of the long history of the people of God, a community that has been around for thousands of years. That's a lot of heritage to take into the future!

About this Exploration

As we engage with God, we grow in our capacity to understand God's work. Yet the beauty of God's handiwork is all around us in creation if we open ourselves to experience it. We often move from the traditional understanding of what it means for someone or something to be beautiful to a deeper awareness of the Divine in all that has been created. In Future and Vision, we explore the beauty of the cosmos, the earth beneath our feet, and the sea below. As we marvel at God's handiwork in worship, we dare to imagine the wonders of God's realm, both now and in the future.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Job 38:1-11
Revelation 21:2-5

Leader Preparation

It is important to be sensitive to the ways your congregation and your group experience the future. Some may see the future as something to be embraced with joy or, at the very least, something not to be afraid of. Bear in mind that some people may have a difficult time exploring ways in which the future can be a good thing. More than anything else, help the group to realize that as a church you can always enter the future with hope and, beyond that, you can always have vision.

Prayer: *God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, help me to have a vision of what tomorrow can be in your presence. Enable me to share that vision with others. Amen.*

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Making Plans (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Invite the group to have a conversation around the questions listed below. Do not allow a lot of time for thought. While this activity is not quite “word associations,” people should share their words fairly quickly. Gauge how much time you wish to spend on this activity, and use the appropriate number of questions. You may wish to add some of your own.

Supplies: None

Invite the group to respond to these questions.

- If you were going away on a three-month vacation and could only take three items, what would you take?
- Name one thing you have done purely with an eye to the future? (In other words, it had no immediate effect on you or anyone else.)
- Name a movie you have seen that was set in the future. What was the theme? How did it portray the future? How was the church imagined in the future?
- Think of a movie for which a sequel would be next to impossible, such as *Titanic* or *Thelma and Louise*. Imagine you have been hired to write a sequel. What might it be like?
- When the seasons change, what sorts of beauty do you look forward to?

 **2 Red Canna**

Leader preparation: Arrange to have access to a copy of Georgia O’Keefe’s painting “Red Canna.”

Supplies:

- artwork: “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keeffe, <http://www.art.com/products/p10032683-sa-i674918/georgia-okeeffe-red-canna.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&ui=4FA2E7AB9F664A828CD2028E434AEDC4>

Show the group the painting, and invite people to view it for a few minutes. Share answers to the following questions:

- What images emerge from the painting? (Some have seen faces, folds of fabric, flowers, flames, and smoke.)
- What does this image say about the liturgical season in which we find ourselves? (This really does work in any season!)
- What might you add if you wanted to alter this image to reflect the future?

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities, using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities, using at least one activity from each category.



3 To Build Jerusalem

Leader preparation: If you can locate the hymn “Jerusalem,” prepare to sing it as a group. (You may find it in an older hymnal, a hymnal from the United Kingdom or Canada, or online. Alternatively, you could find a recording and play that for the group to listen to, or you could simply look at the words (available on the attachment).

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Jerusalem,” Attachment: Activity 3
- (optional) recording or sheet music of “Jerusalem,” <http://www.hymnswithoutwords.com/hymns/Category:Jerusalem>

Some view the book of Revelation as a book that predicts the future. Others read it as a critique of the Roman Empire. According to our understanding, the book was written during a time when the church was under considerable persecution. Christians of that time must have been encouraged by the message that there was truly more power and beauty in the risen Christ than there was in Rome with all its power and might. Ultimately, the church would triumph. Invite someone to read Revelation 21:2–5, and engage the group with the following questions:

- What images stand out to you from this text?
- Where do you see beauty within it?
- How does it connect to the beliefs and practices of the United Church of Christ and/or your local congregation?

Distribute copies of “Jerusalem,” Attachment: Activity 3. Read the hymn together. Note that this hymn by William Blake was based on Revelation 21:2; it challenges us to build the New Jerusalem in our time and place. Invite the participants to name one recent news item or personal experience that gives them hope for the future. Building implies a gradual process. Ask what feelings participants experience when you contemplate the future of the church or world. How do they nurture hope?

If you have hymnals or a recording of “Jerusalem,” sing or listen to the hymn together.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Job and the Future (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Job suffers, and his wife and friends tell him to “curse God and die.” Job refuses. He points out that he is “good” and demands an audience with God. Job finally receives the opportunity to speak with God, and complains about his situation. God responds to Job with a poetic statement of his acts as Creator. Job concludes by recognizing his smallness in comparison to God’s greatness.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper
- pens

Read Job 38:1–11. Set the context, using the synopsis in the leader preparation section. Note that the text under consideration is the beginning of God’s response to Job. Lead discussion with these or similar questions.

- What is the tone/sense of this passage?
- If you were Job, how do you think you would feel if you received this response? (You may wish to refer to Job’s response in 42:1–5.)
- Where is the beauty in this passage?
- How does the passage relate to the life and work of the church?
- How does imagery of creation affect you as you ponder the future?
- What helps you keep perspective? Does nature? Does prayer?

5 Visioning

Leader preparation: Locate copies of your congregation’s vision statement, mission statement, five-year plan, or other document(s) that speak of your church in the future. As you read them, ponder what they say about your church. If they have been written some time ago, are they still relevant? If you were present for their creation or revision, what were those conversations like? If you were to revise one or more of these statements today, what might you change?

Supplies:

- copies of church statements (see leader preparation above)

Distribute copies of the documents you brought, read them as a group, and ask these questions:

- What does this statement say about where our church is today?
- What does it say about the future?
- Does it seem up to date, or does it need some changes?
- How does it evoke a sense of beauty and wonder about the future of the church and the world?
- How might you change it?

6 Looking at the Future

Leader preparation: Arrange to have copies of as many of the art pieces for this Exploration as you can locate. For example, your church may have the poster sets from *Imaging the Word*. In that case, locate “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke, “Journey of the Magi” by Tissot, and “Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)” by Mary Cassatt. You may also have obtained from www.art.com one of more of the following: “Navaro Rapids” by Hiroshige, “Red Canna” by Georgia O’Keeffe, and “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth. Spend time with these images, and wonder where you might see glimpses of the future reflected in each of them.

Supplies:

- pieces of art noted above

Spread the images around the room. Mount them on the walls if possible. However, if this is not an option, arrange to look at them on tables or even on the floor. As a last option, if space is confined, stack the images, and invite people to look at them one at a time. Give people time to view the images. Lead a discussion based on the following questions:

- Where do you see the future depicted in these images?
- If you were placing your congregation somewhere in one or more images, where would you place it? Explain why.
- Where might you place the whole United Church of Christ in the images? Again, explain why.
- Is the future in these images beautiful or disturbing?
- What might you change in order to express the future more clearly? (For example, might you add more beyond Wyeth's window or show a place where the Magi might be going?)

Sending & Serving Activities



7 In the Bulb There Is a Flower (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Natalie Sleeth originally wrote the hymn "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" as a choral anthem in response to the death of her husband. She later adapted it to be a hymn. Its appearance in a wide number of modern hymnals has made it a favorite of many congregations, especially at memorial services. Make arrangements for the group to sing the hymn.

Supplies:

- hymn: "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), *The New Century Hymnal* #433, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>

As a group, sing the hymn together. Notice some of the images. Use the following prompts to initiate discussion.

- What about the lyrics suggests connection with the church and its growth?
- How is the future depicted as beautiful?
- Which images are particularly comforting to you?
- Share, if you wish, about certain times you have sung this hymn or heard it sung. How did that context shape your understanding of this hymn?
- What are other hymns that provide insight into or encouragement about the future?

8 Celebrating a Century

Leader preparation: In 2007 the United Church of Christ celebrated its fiftieth anniversary as a denomination. In this activity, your group is going to look ahead and imagine the United Church of Christ fifty years in the future.

Supplies:

- long sheet of paper, preferably a sheet of newsprint from a large roll. (The size will ultimately depend on the size of your group and the amount of time to be devoted to this activity.)
- "UCC@50 Yesterday's Visionaries, Today's Voices," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yst7Ov176I>
- markers, pens

Recall the church's fifty-year anniversary in 2007. Watch the video "UCC@50 Yesterday's Visionaries, Today's Voices." How did your church acknowledge the anniversary?

Brainstorm what the church might look like in the year 2057, the centennial of the United Church of Christ. Use the long sheet of paper to create a timeline of fictitious events that might happen over the next forty to fifty years. Divide the paper into five- or ten year-periods. How do these events portray beauty?

Have fun! Celebrate the wondrous beauty of being the church of Jesus Christ. How might you share that sense of wonder and belonging beyond the group?

Plant a Tree

Leader preparation: Prepare to do some planting as a way to focus on the future! Depending on the time of year in which your group is meeting, you might bring bulbs (for fall planting) or seeds (for spring or summer or for planting indoors in the winter). Those who are really daring might choose to plant a tree! Acquire the appropriate permission for your planting.

Supplies:

- bulbs or seeds for planting (or a small tree)
- trowels, watering can with water, gardening gloves, and anything else needed for planting
- (optional) soil and pots

When asked what he might do if he knew the world were going to end tomorrow, the reformer Martin Luther said, "I would plant a tree." Such hope and faith in the future—even beyond our own living—is a wonderful trait. Ask what participants would do if they knew the world was going to end tomorrow.

Arrange to plant flowers or a tree (or trees) as a wonderful way of beautifying the earth and moving into the future. Invite each person to respond to the following sentence starters.

- I hope that in the future the church will be . . .
- My wish for future generations is . . .
- One way I want to contribute to a future of beauty is . . .

If you are unable to plant together, have group members hold bulbs or seeds as they share their responses.

Reflect

How excited did group members become about the future? Do they have a sense that it is a place of beauty, and do they have a sense that the United Church of Christ (and/or your congregation) will be a part of God's beautiful future? Explore ways you can capture some of that excitement and empower folks to live it out in the weeks and months to come.

Attachment: Activity 3

Jerusalem

(aka “And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times”)

Words by William Blake (1757–1827)

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold;
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England’s green and pleasant Land.

Blake wrote this hymn in 1804. Sir Hubert Perry set it to music in 1916. It is generally considered the most popular of patriotic hymns in the United Kingdom. The hymn is based on the legend that a young Jesus visited England accompanied by his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea.

The hymn is often sung in churches and has also become a sort of anthem for the British Labour Party. It is sung at their conventions. The notion that we are to work with all our being to build a new Jerusalem in our own time and place has resonated with many over the years.