

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

As you begin planning ways to help children ages 5–13 discover and reflect on blessing and letting go in their lives, keep in mind that the variety in individual learning styles and skills within this age group suggests a need for a diverse medley of activities. Encourage older, more experienced learners to help younger learners, especially in activities that require reading and writing. Older learners usually enjoy assuming a “mentor” role, and friendships across age lines often develop. During the years of older childhood, children explore many different activities as they discover what they like to do and can do well. Their activities outside the church compete for their time and energy and may involve their parents, too. Often these activities occur on weekends, with attendance required. This means that many children are irregular in their attendance at church school, so it is important to choose activities that can be completed within a given session.

About this Exploration

The concepts of blessing and letting go are not new to us. We see them in the natural world, and we experience them in our lives all the time. How we choose to relate to them, however, makes all the difference. In this Exploration we will discover how others learned to let go, thereby opening space for something new to emerge in their lives, and how they were able to find the blessing in both the challenges and the joys of life. As we explore this faith practice, we will consider the implications of blessing and letting go within our communities, churches, and the world. We may discover the freedom available to us when we are able to both embrace and release in a world of constant transition.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
1 Samuel 16:1–23
Ephesians 3:14–20

Leader Preparation

Think about this: Who helped you discover the blessings in your life as you were growing up? Who supported and comforted you when you had to let go of a loved one, an opportunity, or a goal? Who gave you a voice, a will, and a way to respond to these experiences? What role did the church, and especially church school teachers, play? What more could they have done? Keep your own experiences in mind as you plan activities for your group in this Exploration.

Celtic Christians seem to have blessings for every person, place, and occasion in their lives. Here is a traditional Irish blessing for you as you begin leading your group in this Exploration.

Prayer: *May God give you . . .*
for every storm, a rainbow,
for every tear, a smile,
for every care, a promise,
and a blessing in each trial,
for every problem life sends,
a faithful friend to share,
for every sigh, a sweet song,
and an answer for each prayer.
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 Bible Blessings (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Write these scripture references on index cards, one per card:

1 Samuel 16:11–13
Mark 1:9–11
Mark 10:13–16
Matthew 21:6–9
Matthew 26:26–28

Write these questions on newsprint or a whiteboard:

Who is giving the blessing?
Who is receiving the blessing?
How and why was the blessing given?

As you form teams or pairs for the activity, plan to pair beginning readers with more experienced readers. Be ready to assist beginning readers as needed.

Supplies:

- index cards, with a scripture reference on each
- Bibles
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) pictures from Bible storybooks or old curriculum illustrating-the-verse cards

Begin by telling children that there are many blessings recorded in the Bible. Form teams or pairs, and have each draw one of the index cards prepared with a scripture reference. Ask teams to find and read the Bible verses and then respond to the questions on the newsprint or whiteboard. After teams or pairs have finished their work, ask each one to tell their answers to the entire group. Together discuss: *Which of these blessings do we still use in our church today?*

Children may have sung “Hosanna” in a children’s anthem or waved palm branches in a processional hymn on Palm Sunday. They may connect the story of Jesus’ baptism with the sacrament of baptism, and his blessing of the bread and wine with communion. They may remember that Jesus laid his hands on the children and blessed them, and they may have witnessed the laying on of hands at an installation or ordination. Anointing with oil may be new to them. Explain that this blessing is sometimes used in a healing service.

Close with prayer: *God, thank you for the many ways you bless us. Make us blessings to you and to one another. Amen.*



2 Jesus Blesses the Children: A Picture Study

Leader preparation: Spend time viewing the artwork “Christ Among the Children.” With which character do you identify most? In what ways does your church welcome children? Plan ways to make each learner in your group feel welcome.

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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.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- Bibles

Invite children to look at “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde. After a quiet moment, discuss these questions as a group.

- Who are the people in this picture?
- Who is the man in the middle?
- What is he doing?
- If you were one of these children, how would you be feeling right now? Who are the other adults?
- What do you think they are thinking?

When learners have shared their ideas, explain that this picture tells a story that from the Gospel of Mark. Help them find Mark 10:13–16 in their Bibles. Form two groups. Ask one group to read the narrative part of the story (vv. 13, 14a, 16) and the other group to read the words spoken by Jesus (vv. 14b, 15).

Together wonder about why the disciples might have tried to prevent the children from coming to see Jesus and why Jesus was glad the children had come to see him. Explain that when Jesus blessed the children, he was telling them that they were special because they belonged to God and that God loved them. By blessing the children, Jesus was praying that God would always take care of them. Ask the children: *When have you felt blessed? How do you know that someone is asking God’s blessing on you? What does that person do or say?*

End with prayer: *God, as Jesus blessed the children long ago, bless us with your love here and now. Amen.*

③ Shalom: Learn a Blessing Song

Leader preparation: Be prepared to lead the children in singing “Shalom Chaverim.” If you think your group would like to sing the song in Hebrew, as well as in English, here are the Hebrew words.

Shalom, chaverim, shalom, chaverim, shalom, shalom!
Lehitraot, lehitraot, shalom, shalom.

Note: The Hebrew words are pronounced something like this:

shalom: shah-LOHM
chaverim: kah-vey-REEM
lehitraot: leh-HEET-rah-OHT

Plan to “line out” the words to this traditional Hebrew folk melody to help your group learn the song. That is, sing one line at a time for learners to imitate, then sing the first and second sections, and then the whole song.

Supplies:

- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” Traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnncc>

Introduce the word “shalom” as a Hebrew blessing. Shalom means “peace,” not just the peace that comes when there is no fighting but also health and wholeness. The prayer for shalom is a prayer for the peace the world will know when no one is hungry or homeless, sick or lonely. The word “shalom” is related to the Arabic word *salaam*, which is used as a greeting and blessing in the Islamic community.

Teach the song as suggested above in Leader preparation. Once learners have mastered the song, try singing it as a canon, like a round. Divide the group into two parts, with a strong singer on each part, and have the second group begin singing as the first group begins to sing “Lehitraot.” Sing it twice. Let the song be your benediction prayer at the end of your session.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 God Chooses a New King: Reading and Reflecting (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 16:1–23, and note the narrative and quoted lines in verses 6–13 that you will assign learners to read. Put a little olive oil in a small dish so you can anoint each member of your group.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) small dish of oil (olive, cooking, or baby oil)

Tell the children the background to the Bible story.

Saul was king over Israel. The prophet Samuel had anointed him with oil. This was a sign that he was God’s chosen one and had God’s blessing. But Saul disappointed God. He was a mighty soldier, but not a good king. He failed to trust and obey God, and God said Saul could no longer be king. God told Samuel, “Take a horn of oil and go to Bethlehem. There you will find a man named Jesse who has seven sons. Anoint one of them as the new king.” Samuel did as he was told. He went to Bethlehem and invited Jesse and his sons to worship and eat with him.

Ask: How did Samuel know which son to anoint as king? To answer this question, have learners find 1 Samuel 16:6–13 in their Bibles. Invite good readers to read the words of God (the Lord), Samuel, and Jesse, and the connecting narrative. Have the rest of the group follow along in their Bibles as the volunteers read their parts. After the reading, invite all children to respond to these questions:

- What was God looking for in a new king? (v. 7)
- What do you think of God’s standards for choosing someone? David is described as a handsome young man, but God told Samuel physical appearance wasn’t important. (v. 7)
- Why do you think God chose David to be the new king?
- How does Samuel mark David as the new king? (v. 13)

If available, show learners a dish of oil, and explain that this was like the oil Samuel carried in a sheep’s horn to use in anointing and blessing David. Anoint each learner by rubbing a small amount of oil on his or her forehead or hand.

Conclude with this prayer: *God, as you once looked into David's heart and chose him to be king, look into our hearts, and choose us to do your work of love in our world today. Bless us and anoint us for that task, we pray. Amen.*



5 Different Kinds of Blessings: Playing Charades

Leader preparation: Print this definition on newsprint or a whiteboard: "A blessing is a gift from God that shows God's love for us." Make a copy of the attachment "Blessings," and cut apart the blessing sayings and the examples. Create an index card for each example, gluing the saying and its meaning on one side of the card and the example on the other. Put the cards in a basket. Depending on the number of children in your group, you may want to make more than one set of cards.

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- "Blessings," Attachment: Activity 5
- index cards, scissors, glue stick
- basket

Form teams of two or three learners, mixing ages. In unison, read aloud the definition of blessing on the newsprint or whiteboard. Give this explanation to the teams about what to do.

People use the word "blessing" in many different ways. Each card in this basket has a saying about blessings, with an explanation of what it means on one side and an example on the back. Draw a card for your team, read the saying, and act out the example or one of your own for us to guess. You can use props in your skit, but no words. Before you act out the saying, read it to the group. Then, after the group guesses what you are acting out, read the meaning of the saying.

After teams have shared their skits and the sayings have been explained, end with a prayer: *God, we know that you want what is best for us, and are with us in good times and bad. Help us to recognize the ways you bless us, and be thankful. Amen.*

6 Bless This Food: Saying Grace

Leader preparation: Plan to have learners help you prepare a healthy snack that everyone in your group will enjoy. Be alert to possible food allergies or dietary restrictions. Also, plan for them to set the table with napkins, cups, and small plates, or whatever is needed for serving and eating the snack. Many of today's families rarely sit together for a family meal, and they may not use a table blessing or grace when they do. Be ready with some traditional family mealtime table blessings in case learners do not have one to share. For example:

God is great and God is good.
Bless and thank God for this food. Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest,
and let this food to us be blessed. Amen.

Write this definition of "grace" on newsprint or whiteboard: "Grace is a loving gift that is neither earned nor deserved."

Supplies:

- snack ingredients
- tableware for serving snack
- table and chairs
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite learners to help you prepare the snack and set the table. Be sure they wash their hands first! Before you eat the snack, remind the children that Jesus always blessed the food before it was eaten. His family may have said the table prayer that many Jewish families today still say: *Blessed are you, our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.*

Explain that Christians often call the table blessing a “grace.” The word “grace” means a loving gift that is neither earned nor deserved. When we “say grace,” we thank God for all the gifts we have received, especially the food on the table and our family and friends who share in the meal. We also pray that God will bless us and help us use these gifts to help our neighbor and to honor God. Invite the children to recite any table prayers that their families use. If they don’t have any to share, use one of those given in the Leader preparation above.

After you eat the snack, explain that sometimes Christians say a second table blessing or grace at the end of the meal. This is usually a prayer of thanksgiving, such as this: *Thank you, God, for the good snack we have enjoyed together. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Measuring Love: Doing An Experiment (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Ephesians 3:14–20, focusing on verses 18–19. Be ready to tell about a time when you experienced the love of Jesus.

Supplies:

- Bible
- cardboard carton, closed
- yardstick or measuring tape
- newsprint, markers
- (optional) drawing paper, markers or crayons, tape

Show learners the box. Explain that when you send a box, you have to measure its size to figure how much it will cost for shipping. Ask for volunteers to use the yardstick or measuring tape to measure the box and record the measurements (width, length, and height) on the newsprint or whiteboard.

This is the way we measure things we can see and touch, but how do we measure something like the love of Jesus? Explain that when Paul wrote a letter to the Christians at Ephesus, he said, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18–19). Ask learners to match these dimensions for measuring love with the dimensions of the box on the chart. (They will discover the fourth dimension—breadth. Some of the older learners may have heard of this fourth dimension as “time.”)

Explain that we can't measure the love of Jesus with a measuring tape or yardstick, because the love of Jesus is never in just one place. It has no beginning and no end. It goes on forever. The love of Jesus has to be experienced for us to know how wonderful and great it is.

Tell about a time when you experienced the love of Jesus. Perhaps there was a time when you couldn't drive and friends came to take you to worship, when you worked with a group from church serve a meal at the homeless shelter, or when a child gave you a hug. Encourage learners to tell about times they have experienced the love of Jesus. Perhaps there was a time of being forgiven for a wrong, finding a friend at a new school, cleaning up the park or churchyard, or helping in the garden.

Option: Give learners drawing paper and crayons or markers to draw pictures of their experiences with Jesus' love to tape to the box.

Conclude with prayer: *God, thank you for the many ways we experience the love of Jesus. Help us to find ways to share that love with others, that they may know it too. Amen.*

8 Count Your Blessings: A Prayer Book

Leader preparation: Assemble a collection of pictures from magazines, catalogs, or calendars that illustrate blessings your learners may experience in their lives, such as: food, clothing, friends, family, church, school, sports. Write a note to parents or caregivers, encouraging them to set aside a time and place to pray with their children each day using the prayer books the children have made.

Supplies:

- pictures cut from magazines, catalogs, or calendars
- construction paper
- glue sticks
- pencils or markers
- stapler
- (optional) computer, printer

Explain that when someone gives us a gift or does something special for us, we like to say thank you in some way, perhaps with an e-mail, phone call, card, or text message. God has blessed us in many different ways, and we can thank God, too. One way we do this is in our prayers at church.

Invite the children to make prayer books to help them remember to thank God every day, whether they are at church or at home or at school or at play. Have each learner choose at least three pictures from the ones you gathered, choosing things that make him or her especially glad. Have learners glue each picture to a piece of construction paper and then write a short thank-you prayer for that blessing below the picture. Encourage children to help one another in spelling words needed for the prayers. Show children how to make and decorate a cover for the pages, with the title: "My Prayer Book." Staple the pages together.

Note: If older learners are not interested in using pictures, suggest that they focus on writing prayers to use at different times of day or in different situations, such as for help with school work, for strength and safety when playing sports, offering thanks for a special meal, or asking for forgiveness. They might work as a group, using a computer, and combine their prayers into a book that could be printed for all of them to use.

Close by inviting each learner to read aloud one of his or her prayers.



9 *Ojo de Dios*—A Symbol of God’s Blessing

Leader preparation: *Ojo de Dios* (pronounced OH-hoh day DEE-ohs) is a Spanish phrase meaning “Eye of God.” It is the name of a woven piece of art symbolizing God’s constant presence and care, and God’s ability to see and understand that which is unseen by our eyes. The symbol comes from the *Hichol* (pronounced WET-chol) Indians in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico, the Aymara Indians of Bolivia, and Native Americans in the southwestern part of the United States. The symbol has been adopted by people all over the world as a symbol for God, and it is often given to another with this prayer of blessing: *May the eye of God be upon you.*

Although there are many artistic variations of the *Ojo de Dios*, use the basic four-sided design with your group, following the instructions on the attachment. Before the session, make one yourself as a sample. These websites provide detailed instructions and illustrations.

- “How to Make an Eye of God,” <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-an-Eye-of-God>
- “Stick Weaving: How to Make Ojo de Dios or God’s Eyes” by Jane Lake, <http://www.allfreecrafts.com/nature/ojo-de-dios.shtml>
- video: “Ojos de Dios (God’s eye),” <http://vimeo.com/7777767>

Before learners arrive, print this on newsprint or a whiteboard:

Ojo de Dios (OH-ho day DEE-os) = Eye of God.

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- *Ojo de Dios* = Eye of God,” Attachment: Activity 9
- for each child: two sticks about 6” long (you can use craft sticks or 1/8” dowels)
- white glue
- scissors
- pencil
- yarn in various colors

Show learners the *Ojo de Dios* you have made and explain its origin and meaning (see notes in Leader preparation above). Suggest that learners think of people they would like to bless with the “ojos” they are going to make, perhaps someone who is ill or moving away. Giving away something they have proudly made may be, for some, a “letting go” experience as well as a “blessing.” Some of the learners may have some familiarity with Spanish from classes at school or speaking it at home, and may have made an “ojo” before. Enlist their help in showing others how to do this weaving process. See the attachment for a way to work.

When learners have finished their “ojos,” let them tell who will receive them. Then close with this blessing prayer: *May the eye of God be upon our friends and upon us, too. Amen.*

Reflect

Think about the age range of the learners in your group. How well were they able to participate in the activities you planned for them? How were the younger learners “blessed” with help from the older learners when they needed it? What were some signs that the older learners felt “blessed” to be able to work with them? What kind of activities did learners like best? What does this suggest as you select activities for your next Exploration?

Attachment: Activity 5

Blessings

<p>“A mixed blessing” Something that has good and bad effects.</p>	<p>Example: Rain canceled your ball game, but your garden really needed the moisture.</p>
<p>“A blessing in disguise” Something that seems bad at first but turns out to be good.</p>	<p>Example: You had to go to a different school when your family moved, but you found a cool new friend there who likes to play games as much as you do.</p>
<p>“Count your blessings” When you are unhappy about something, think about all the good things in your life.</p>	<p>Example: Your parents said they can’t afford the new jeans you wanted, but you do have other jeans to wear, plenty to eat, a comfortable bed, and a family that loves you.</p>
<p>“Be thankful for small blessings” When you are in a difficult situation, be thankful for any little thing that makes it easier.</p>	<p>Example: You broke your right arm, but you’re left-handed.</p>
<p>“A blessed event” The birth of a baby</p>	<p>Example: You have a new baby sister.</p>
<p>“You have my blessing” Approval or permission</p>	<p>Example: You have a new baby sister.</p>

Ojo de Dios = Eye of God

Supplies:

- two sticks about 6" long (you can use craft sticks or $\frac{1}{8}$ " dowels)
- white glue
- scissors
- pencil
- yarn in various colors

A Way to Work:

1. Place the two sticks perpendicular to each other to make a cross. Glue them together at the intersection. (They can also be tied, but glue works better for younger children. You may want to have this done ahead of time to give the glue a chance to dry.)
2. Number the ends of the sticks in order (1, 2, 3, 4) counterclockwise. This will make it easier for learners to follow directions.
3. Tie the first color of yarn around the center where the sticks cross. Make the knot on the back of the ojo. Wrap the yarn around the center diagonally several times in both directions to help hold the sticks in place.
4. Start weaving, by bringing the yarn to the front between Sticks #1 and #4. Wrap the yarn around Stick #1, and then take the yarn over to and around Stick #2, and continue around the cross, turning it clockwise as you work. Always lay the yarn next to the yarn already in place, not over it, so the "ojo" will grow outward.
5. Once you have an "eye" in one color, cut the yarn and tie on another color, keeping the knot on the back of the "ojo." Add as many colors as you like.
6. When you are about $\frac{1}{2}$ " from the end of the sticks, cut the yarn, leaving a 6–8" tail. Tie the tail in a knot at the back of the ojo, leaving a loop to use as a hanger. (A drop of glue will hold it in place.)

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Children ages 5 to 13 like to find and read verses from the Bible, especially if they have been given Bibles of their own. Younger children who cannot yet read complete stories from the Bible still like to know where they are found in the Bible and enjoy finding words they do know in the verses. The learning activities in this Exploration will give learners of all ages opportunities to learn and practice skills in using their Bibles.

About this Exploration

The practice of blessing and letting go is integral to human existence, for to be alive is to experience change. The biblical narrative is, in large measure, the story of God's people and their history of leaving behind and journeying toward. Just as the Hebrew people are about to enter a new land, they must say goodbye to Moses and embrace a new leader. The end of one chapter often means the start of something new and completely different. We negotiate these times of transition by grieving the losses, letting go, and moving onto new adventures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his disciples to let go of old understandings and embrace a way of life based on love and grace. As we grapple with the scriptures, we recognize that to live is to let go, to live fully is to bless and be blessed.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Matthew 5:43–48

Leader Preparation

Depending on what learners have heard adults in their families say, some may think of the Bible as an old book that has little relevance in today's world. This Exploration uses a variety of learning activities to show that the Bible is still a blessing to us. Scripture offers us guidance when we face difficult situations that require letting go. It provides the basis for much of what we do in worship and the rituals that celebrate important life experiences. It helps us sense and respond to God's presence. It gives us words to use in praising and blessing God, and receiving God's blessing in return.

Prayer: How blessed I am, God, to have this opportunity to share your Word with this group of learners! May I do so with excitement and joy, that they too may find the scriptures a blessing in their 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 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Learning to Let Go: Role Playing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Imagine what it must have been like for Moses to turn over his role as leader of the Hebrew people to Joshua. Imagine how hard it must have been for the people to let go of their great leader, Moses, and follow a new leader. Be prepared to retell this story in your own words or to read it from a children's story Bible.

On individual index cards, write four "letting go" situations children may face. For example:

- Your teacher is on maternity leave. You don't like the substitute teacher. She makes you color, and you hate coloring!
- Your parents got divorced and you have a new stepfather. He's OK, but you miss your dad.
- Your minister moved to a different church. The new minister doesn't even know your name.
- You voted for your new class president, but she doesn't do the things she said she would.

Supplies:

- index cards
- pen
- Bible

Ask for four volunteers to be part of the role play group. Give the four these instructions: *You are a group of friends getting together after school. You can't wait to tell one another what is making your life miserable. Your problems are described on these cards. Give each member a situation card. Greet one another and then start complaining about your problem.*

Instruct the rest of the group to listen carefully to the conversation and try to figure out the root of these problems. After the volunteers finish the role play, ask:

- What do all these complaints have in common? (They all deal with change. People have a hard time letting go of things the way they were.)
- What are some changes you have found difficult?

Affirm that change is part of life. Moses and the Hebrew people found that out long ago. Tell the story of Deuteronomy 34:1–12 in your own words, or read it from a Bible. Emphasize the experiences of Moses and his people in letting go. Wonder together what might have been worrying Moses, Joshua, and the people as they faced these changes.

End with prayer: *God, when change becomes part of our lives, help us if we have to let go of what is familiar and comfortable and then help us embrace what is new—new people, new places, new ways, new challenges. Amen.*



2 A Challenging Word: Bible Study with Artwork

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 5:43–48. Display the artwork "Forgiveness" by Thierry Ona. To read about the artist and his style and see more of his work, go online to <http://www.easyart.com/art-prints/artists/Ona-5226.html>.

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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.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>
- Bibles

Use these questions to initiate conversation about theft, a frequent problem facing learners in this age group:

- Have you ever had something stolen from you? (They may mention school supplies taken from their desks, clothing from lockers, lunches from backpacks, or even something lost in a break-in at home.)
- How did this make you feel?
- If you got back what was stolen or were able to replace it, did that make you feel any better? Why or why not?
- Have you ever taken something that didn’t belong to you? What happened?
- Why do you think people steal? (Learners may offer some of these reasons: They may really need what they have taken. They may envy what others have, or be angry with someone. They may be bored. They may be bullies who like to hurt others.)
- What attitudes do people have about someone who is a thief? (Learners may comment that it is hard to trust people who steal. We are always suspicious of them. We look upon them as our enemies. We don’t want them as our friends. We often wish we could find a way to get back at them.)

Invite learners to work together to find Matthew 5:43–48 in their Bibles. Read the passage aloud as learners follow along in their Bibles. Then ask: *Why does Jesus say we should love our enemies? How might we love those who steal from us?* Suggest that the children recall the reasons people steal, and think about how they might show love to someone who stole from hunger or other needs related to poverty, or to someone who had anger issues, or was bored, or was a bully.

After learners have shared their ideas, call attention to the artwork “Forgiveness,” and tell them the title of the work. Invite children to tell about what they see happening in the picture. Wonder together why the artist gave this picture the title of “Forgiveness.”

Conclude with prayer: *God, we know you love and care for us all, whether we are the one who steals or the one who suffers a loss. Help us to forgive those who hurt us, and find ways to be their friends. Amen.*



3 Bible Blessings: Sort and Stand Exercise

Leader preparation: Write each of these Bible references on a separate index card:

- 1 Samuel 16:11–13
- Mark 1:9–11
- Mark 10:13–16
- Matthew 21:1–9
- Matthew 26:26–28

Arrange five displays of pictures and/or objects, one for each Bible reference. Find and mark worship rituals based on these blessings in the orders of worship

in your hymnal or book of worship, such as Communion, Baptism, Confirmation, and a healing service with anointing and laying on of hands. If you need help in finding these, consult your pastor.

Supplies:

- index cards, pen
- Bibles
- artwork: “The Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- photos from your church that show baptism, communion, and/or confirmation
- objects your church uses in worship, such as communion ware, the baptismal font or pitcher of water, a palm branch, a minister’s stole
- hymnal or book of worship used in your congregation

Form five small teams, with experienced and beginning readers on each team. Have each team draw a scripture card. Tell teams to find and read the scripture reference on their cards. After reading, they should look at the pictures and objects displayed around your meeting space and stand by the display that best matches what they have read. When the teams have all found their places, ask each team to tell about its Bible reading and how the reading relates to the display. Help teams connect the biblical events to acts of worship in your congregation, as needed.

Explain that these acts of giving and receiving blessings that come to us from the Bible are written in a special book the church’s minister uses in leading us in worship. Show learners where to find rituals based on these five blessings in your book of worship, hymnal, or both.

End with prayer: *In these acts of worship, bless us, God, and help us be a blessing to one another as we share your love. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Laying on of Hands: A Ritual from Bible Times (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Borrow a stole from your minister for learners to try on. Print on newsprint or a whiteboard: “Laying on of hands” and “Ordination.”

Supplies:

- Bible
- a minister’s or pastor’s stole
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Explain that Moses was an old man by the time the Hebrew people were finally ready to cross over the Jordan River into the land God had promised them. Moses

knew his days as a leader were numbered, and he was prepared for Joshua to take over the leadership responsibilities. Moses died and the people mourned, but they had a new leader to follow.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Deuteronomy 34:9. Ask: *What did Moses do to indicate that Joshua was to be the next leader?* Lay your hands on the head of one of the learners to demonstrate this practice. Then have learners pair up and take turns laying their hands on one another.

Explain that the laying on of hands is an old tradition in the church that comes to us from Bible times. It is the way the church recognizes that faithful men and women have received a call from God to lead their people as ministers. It is also a prayer that the Holy Spirit will bless them with the gifts they need for that ministry. In some traditions, the bishop lays hands on the new minister. In other traditions the ministers and people from other congregations in the area who do this. This is part of what we call “ordination.”

Sometimes the new minister is given gifts, such as a robe to wear in leading worship, a stole as a sign that he or she serves the church, or a Bible to use as pastor and teacher. Show learners the stole you borrowed from your minister, and let them take turns trying it on.

End with prayer: *God, we are glad that you have called ministers to lead us, and have planned a way for them to pass on that authority to others who have heard your call and answered it. Amen.*

5 Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow

Leader preparation: On newsprint, print the version of the Doxology used in your congregation. For example:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, you heavenly host:
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

If there are older learners who play a keyboard or melody instrument well enough, ask them ahead of time to play the melody of the Doxology (tune: Old Hundredth). Plan how you can share the completed display with others in the church, perhaps in the fellowship hall or a wall near the sanctuary.

Supplies:

- newsprint or mural paper
- magazines, catalogs, and calendars to cut apart
- drawing paper
- scraps of colored construction paper
- markers
- scissors
- glue sticks
- (optional) keyboard or melody instrument

Invite learners to read aloud the words you printed on newsprint or a whiteboard. Point out that these words are sometimes called a doxology, a song of praise to God, thanking God for all the blessings we have received. Ask when and where they have heard or read these words. Point out that some churches sing these words in worship. Sometimes the words are sung after a reading of a

psalm—the psalms were written before the time of Jesus, and this is a way of saying they belong to us too. Sometimes the words are sung after the offering, which gives the offering another way of praising and thanking God). And sometimes the words are sung as a table blessing, when people share a meal together. Sing the words to the tune your church uses. As an option, invite one of the learners to play the melody.

Invite the learners to surround the words of the Doxology with pictures and words that tell about the blessings we receive from God. Have learners choose pictures and words and arrange them on the board. *Add a word or two, draw a picture, or write some ideas of your own. See what a beautiful display you can make.*

When learners have finished, go as a group to hang the collage where others in the church can see it. Close by singing or reading the Doxology as your prayer.

6 An Empty Chair: Learning a Table Blessing

Leader preparation: Print the words to the following table grace on newsprint or a whiteboard:

Risen Christ, come to our table.
Come as host, and come as guest.
Welcome, welcome to our table.
By your presence we are blessed.

—©2010 Mary Nelson Keithahn. Used by permission.

Practice singing these words to the tune *Servant Song*. (Consult the tune Index in your hymnal. If this tune is not in your hymnal, you may find a source online through the link in the Supplies list below. You may also use the tune *Stuttgart*, often used with the text “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.”) Plan to “line it out” for learners, singing one line at a time for them to repeat. Some learners may be familiar with the tune and could help line it out for the others.

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- hymn tune *Servant Song*, http://www.hymnary.org/tune/the_servant_song_gillard
- Bible

Open the Bible to Luke 24. Explain that the Gospel of Luke tells how two of Jesus’ disciples met a stranger along the road to the village of Emmaus. The disciples were sad because Jesus had died, and they told this stranger what had happened in Jerusalem. They talked together for a long time, and when they reached Emmaus, Jesus’ disciples invited the stranger to stay and eat with them.

Ask a capable reader to read aloud Luke 24:29b–31. Ask: *When did Jesus’ disciples finally realize that their guest was the risen Jesus?*

When Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to the others, he was no longer just their guest. He was their host, blessing the food they would share. As soon as his friends recognized him, Jesus vanished, but they knew they had been blessed by his presence. Think of this story as we read the words of this new blessing for the table.

Read together the table grace printed on the newsprint or whiteboard. Suggest that when learners use this grace, they have an empty chair at their table, as a

sign that the risen Christ is welcome as host and guest. Explain that table blessings, like other blessings are sometimes sung as well as spoken. Sing the words to the tune, line by line, until learners can sing it through together.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Benediction, Another Kind of Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: On newsprint or a white board, print the word “benediction.” Write the word as “bene - dictus” on the next line below. Below that line, write “Good Words.” Also write each of these biblical references on a separate index card:

Numbers 6:24–26
Romans 15:13
2 Corinthians 13:13
Ephesians 3:20–21
2 Thessalonians 2:16–17
Hebrews 13:20–21

If there is a worship resources section in the hymnal your church uses, select several benedictions for the group to read together.

Supplies:

- index cards, pen
- Bibles
- worship bulletins from your church showing a benediction
- several copies of your congregation’s hymnal
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite learners to read in unison the word “benediction.” Tell how this word is formed from two Latin words, *bene*, meaning “good,” and *dictus*, meaning “a saying or a word.” A benediction is a good word, another kind of blessing. It is spoken almost every time that Christians worship together.

Distribute worship bulletins, and look together for where a benediction is included. Explain that many of the benedictions we use in worship come from the Bible. Then ask volunteers to take an index card, look up the reference, and read it aloud to the group. If there are other benedictions in your hymnal, explain that sometimes people write their own benedictions, and we have some of these in our hymnal. Show them the worship resource section, and ask one or more learners to read several of the benedictions aloud. Ask: *What do all these benedictions have in common?* (They send us out of worship with the “good word” that God is always with us wherever we go to do God’s work in the world.)

Invite the group to write its own benediction. Write their ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard and work together on composing the prayer. It may be as simple as “Go. You are not alone. God is always with you.” Let the group’s benediction be your closing prayer



8 Psalm 148: A Choral Reading

Leader preparation: Reading the psalms in worship has been a tradition since the church began. Psalm 148 is one of the most joyful of all the psalms. You might plan a way for your group to perform this choral reading for another group or during worship.

Supplies:

- “Psalm 148:1–5, 7–13a,” Attachment: Activity 8
- Bible
- artwork: “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds” by Giotto di Bondone, <http://www.art.com/products/p11724653-sa-i1350212/giotto-di-bondone-st-francis-of-assisi-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+franc+feeding+the+birds>
- (optional) cymbals or gong

Explain that a long time ago a Christian named Saint Francis of Assisi wrote a joyful poem called “The Canticle of the Sun.” In the poem he called upon everyone and everything in the world to bless and praise God with thankful hearts. Perhaps Psalm 148 inspired Francis to write this poem. As children look at the artwork “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds,” read aloud Psalm 148 from your Bible. Invite their comments about the psalm and the artwork.

Distribute copies of Attachment: Activity 8 with the choral reading. In unison, have children say several times, “Let them praise the name of God!” Then have each learner speak the line and let the rest of the group decide whether his or her voice is high, middle, or low in range. Have each group of voices gather in a different corner of your meeting area. Assign the three solo parts. Tell learners to speak their lines from their positions, but join in with the others when it says “All” or “Boys” or “Girls.”

Practice the reading several times. If you have a cymbal or gong, have someone play it at the beginning and end of the reading, and before each line that begins “Let them praise the name of God.”

Let this choral reading of the psalm be the prayer that ends this activity.

9 A Benediction Hymn: “Go, My Children, with My Blessing”

Leader preparation: Be prepared to offer this background information on the hymn, “Go, My Children, with My Blessing,” in your own words. This hymn is a new text set to the Welsh tune Ar Hyd Y Nos, which you may already know from the evening lullaby “Sleep my child, and peace attend thee, all through the night.” Hymnal editors at Concordia Publishing House wanted to use this tune and asked Lutheran poet/pastor Jaroslav Vajda to write a new text for it that could be sung at any time of day. Vajda felt the soft, contemplative melody would be a good setting for a benediction hymn at the end of worship. In his new text, God is blessing the congregation at the end of worship, reminding them of the events that have blessed them in the service.

Supplies:

- hymn: “Go, My Children, with My Blessing,” by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomchild.htm>, http://www.hymnary.org/text/go_my_children_with_my_blessing;

- music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cDz1ufOSgA>
- copies of a hymnal that includes this hymn
- newsprint or display board, marker
- (optional) piano or melody instrument

Explain that many worship songs are called “hymns.” A hymn has a “text,” or words, and a “tune,” or melody. Some of our hymns are very old, and some of them are brand new. Ask: *When a new hymn is written, which do you think comes first, the text or the tune?* Have the children respond by a show of hands. Explain that more often the words come first, but for the hymn we’re going to learn today, the tune was written first. Point out that the tune has four lines. *Listen to the tune, and tell me which lines are alike and which are different.* Play the tune, pausing after each line. (Lines 1, 2, and 4 are the same, line 3 is different.) Play the tune again, and ask: *How does the tune make you feel?*

Explain that people had sung the words of a bedtime lullaby to this tune for a long time. They liked the tune so much, they wanted to sing it at other times of day. They asked a man named Jaroslav Vajda to write new words for the tune. He listened to the melody and decided it would make a good blessing hymn at the end of worship.

Read the text together from the hymnal. Ask:

- Who is giving the blessing? (God)
- How does it come to us?
- What are some of the blessings we take away from worship?
- What phrase or sentence in the hymn do you like best, and why?

After everyone has had a chance to share their thoughts, sing the hymn together in closing.

Reflect

To what extent did the activities based on the two Bible Focus Passages help learners see the relevance of scripture to issues they face in life? How did learners respond to the artworks used in several activities? How might you use the choral reading based on Psalm 148 (activity 7) in other settings?

Psalm 148:1-5, 7-13a

Arranged for choral reading

All: Praise the Lord!

High: Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise him in the heights!

Middle: Praise him, all his angels. Praise him, all his host!

Solo (Boy): Praise him, sun and moon,

Solo (Girl): Praise him, all you shining stars!

Solo (Girl): Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

All: Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created!

High: Praise the Lord!

Middle: Praise the Lord!

Low: Praise the Lord!

Boys: Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monster and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Middle: Mountains and all hills,

High: Fruit trees and all cedars!

Low: Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

All: Let them praise the name of the Lord!

Boys: Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Girls: Young men and women alike, old and young together!

All: Let them praise the name of the Lord!

High: Praise the Lord!

Middle: Praise the Lord!

Low: Praise the Lord!

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

As children ages 5–13 spend more time outside their immediate families, peers grow in importance to them. Sometimes their peers are friends, sometimes they are rivals, sometimes they are bullies. Getting along with peers is one challenge learners in this age group face as they grow as disciples of Christ. Some learners may be from families where there has been a loss of income and change in lifestyle due to a parent's job loss, divorce, or even death. Others may have parents with substance abuse or mental health problems. Letting go of their embarrassment, anger, and hopelessness may be their challenge as they try to follow Jesus' way of love.

About this Exploration

As followers of Christ, we are on a journey of discovery. In both blessing and letting go, we look to Jesus as our example and trust God for guidance. Jesus shows us how to love and forgive, just as we are forgiven. As Jesus' disciples we are called to let go of our own understandings and open ourselves to new paths filled with compassion, kindness, and thankfulness. God's Spirit dwells with us on this difficult and rewarding adventure, as individuals and as the body of Christ. We are encouraged to discard our own agendas and allow the peace of Christ to inform our thoughts, so we can live in harmony. Christ's message fills our lives so we might bless others through loving, grace-filled words and actions.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Proverbs 3:5–9
Colossians 3:12–17

Leader Preparation

The learning activities in this Exploration offer opportunities for you and the learners to consider how the call to discipleship comes in baptism, and involves you in blessing and praising God not just with words and song, but also with loving actions in your relationships with family, friends, and the natural world.

Prayer: God, you have called me to this ministry of teaching, and blessed me with this group of learners. They are not perfect, God, and neither am I, so if we fail to act as Christ's faithful disciples, help us quickly let go of our frustration and anger. Bless us instead with patience and love, that we may be blessings to one another. 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 Our Baptism Mission (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In some churches, members are asked to remember their baptisms as both a blessing and a call to discipleship from God. If your congregation practices infant baptism, the learners in your group will probably have no memory of their own experience of the sacrament, but they may remember the baptism of younger siblings or friends. Arrange for a visit to the sanctuary so they can see the baptismal font or baptistry and touch the water. Have a green branch that you can dip in the water.

Supplies:

- (optional) artwork: "The Baptism of Jesus" by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- baptismal font or baptistry, or baptism water
- green branch

Remember together how Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. If available, display the artwork "The Baptism of Jesus." Jesus was probably immersed, or laid back under the water. Explain that some churches still baptize people this way, either outdoors in a body of water or in small pool inside the church. It is usually older children or adults who are baptized this way. Other churches baptize babies and younger children by pouring water on their heads, taken from a special baptismal font that is in the sanctuary where they worship. Whether Christians baptize by immersion or pouring, the meaning is the same: We are blessed by God, and accepted into God's family. Like Jesus, we are also given a mission. We are called to follow Jesus and his way of love.

Take the group into the sanctuary so they can see the baptismal font (or pool, if immersion is used) and touch the water. Sometimes in worship, people are asked to remember their baptism and what it means. Sometimes the minister uses a green branch, a sign of new life, to sprinkle everyone with water. Dip the branch in the font, and wave it high above the heads of the children.

In closing, read aloud this hymn stanza.

Each time we gather at the font,
 remember who we are:
 a people charged to love and serve
 our neighbors near and far;
 a people called to be a friend
 to all who are in need,
 to show that love is just and fair
 in every word and deed.

—From the hymn "When Jesus Was Baptized by John" by Mary Nelson Keithahn
 (©2007 Mary Nelson Keithahn. Used by permission.)



2 What Do You See?

Leader preparation: A good piece of art is immediately accessible and becomes more meaningful the longer we look at it. Our appreciation may be enhanced when we know what the artist was thinking in creating it. When Pheoris

- 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.

West was asked what inspired him to paint “The Baptism of Jesus,” he replied, “My relationship with Jesus Christ.” His comments on the images in the painting are the basis for this picture study. Take time to look at the picture carefully with the questions below in mind, so you can help learners “see” his picture through the eyes of his faith.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “The Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- drawing paper, crayons

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Mark 1:9–11. Invite learners to retell the story in their own words. Explain that different people often remember a story in different ways. What we read about Jesus’ baptism in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John is slightly different than the version in Mark. It’s the same thing with artists—each one will paint a picture of the same event in his or her own way.

Look together at the artwork. Ask: *How is it different from others you may have seen?* Learners may first notice that Jesus is a person of color. The artist, Pheoris West, is an African American. He wanted to show that Jesus Christ belonged to his people and the Spirit of Christ could be in them too. Learners may also notice that there are three faces in the picture. The artist was expressing his faith that God comes to us in three ways, as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

Direct the learners to look at the right lower side of the picture. There is a figure there, reaching out his hand toward Jesus. Ask: *Who is this?* (John the Baptist) Have learners notice how his hand and the hand of Jesus look alike. *What does that suggest?* (John the Baptist and Jesus were relatives, and each had special work to do for God.)

Point out how Jesus is coming up out of the water. The artist says this shows we are “born again” when we are baptized. We are given a new life and a new mission. He reminds us that Jesus thought of himself from then on as the “living water,” a blessing to those who believed in him. Ask: *What is the expression on Jesus’ face? What is he feeling?* The artist imagined Jesus as hurting as he thinks of the challenges and suffering ahead of him, the need to let go of life on this earth.

Have learners notice how Jesus’ body in the picture looks like it has been carved from wood. The artist says that this indicates the physical strength of a carpenter. Jesus probably worked with his father before God called him to a new task.

Look together at the background of the picture, and talk about what learners notice. One side is dark, the other light. The artist says that Jesus is bringing the light of God’s love into a dark world.

Tell how this artwork is a reproduction of the original painting and is much smaller in size. Pheoris West wants us to know that the painting is 40 feet by 30 feet—large enough so Jesus appears life size. He wants everyone to know Jesus Christ as a real, live person who came with God’s love for each person.

Take a quiet moment for learners to listen as you read aloud Mark 1:9–11. Ask learners to think about what picture they see in their minds as they listen to the words. Distribute drawing paper and crayons, and invite learners to make their own picture about Jesus’ baptism.

When learners have finished, invite them to show and tell about their pictures. In closing, offer this prayer. *Thank you, God, for all the artists who help us see Jesus with the eyes of faith. Amen.*

③ Sing Hymns

Leader preparation: Read Colossians 3:12–17. In this letter to the followers of Jesus at Colossae, Paul reminds them that welcoming Christ into their lives fills them with such joyful peace and gratitude that they cannot help but sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. This is one of the tasks of discipleship. The song “Come, All You People” is from Zimbabwe in the Shona language. The video listed below provides a good way to learn the words in the Shona language. Learn it well enough to teach it by rote, with or without the keyboard accompaniment. You may want to ask a choir member or other musician to help you. Be prepared to teach the melody line and words to the group first and then add the Shona words. If rhythm instruments are available, gather some for the children to use with the song.

Supplies:

- song: “Come, All you People,” Alexander Gondo, translator (tune: Uyai Mose), http://www.hymnary.org/text/come_all_you_people_come_and_praise; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x94d238Zocg>
- (optional) rhythm Instruments
- Bibles

Teach the song “Come, All You People.” Teach the melody line and words first. Suggest that singers sway slightly to the left and right on beats one and three, in an African style. If available, invite learners to choose a rhythm instrument to play on those beats. If you don’t have rhythm instruments, encourage them to use their bodies to stamp, slap, or snap on these beats.

Explain that in many of the psalms in the Bible, the people blessed God for all the good things God had done for them. Close by reading Paul’s advice to the early Christians: “. . . and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” Ask volunteers to read aloud Psalm 103:1–2 and Psalm 34:1–3. Sing the song one more time. Ask the worship leaders in your church if your group could sing this song as a call to worship in your congregational worship.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Trusting God: Rhythmic Speech (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Proverbs 3:5–9, which is the basis for this rhythmic speech activity. Print each of these lines on a separate piece of newsprint or in separate sections of a whiteboard, keeping the capital letters for emphasis:

1. TRUST in GOD! TRUST in GOD!
2. DON’T be a KNOW-it-all! DON’T be a KNOW-it-all!
3. In EV-ery-thing you DO, and EV-ery-where you GO, LIS-ten for God’s VOICE, FOL-low in God’s WAY.
4. HON-OR GOD with your FIRST AND BEST! HON-OR GOD with your FIRST AND BEST!

Practice speaking each section of the rhythmic speech, so you will be able to model it for learners.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) rhythm instruments, such as drum, triangle or finger cymbals, maracas, tambourine

Hand out Bibles, and work together to locate Proverbs, which comes right after Psalms. Point out that Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings and poems. Find Proverbs 3:5–9 and read it aloud in unison.

Sometimes it's fun to take some ideas out of scripture, put them in words for today, and play with them. Form four groups, and assign each group one section of the rhythm patterns on the newsprint or whiteboard. Let each group practice speaking their lines rhythmically, clapping as they say the capitalized syllables. Have groups say their lines in order. If you have rhythm instruments, add one sound to each section and repeat. Let this rhythmic paraphrase be your closing thought.



5 “I’m Sorry” and “I Forgive You”

Leader preparation: Conflicts arise in relationships among children and youth, and they often do or say unloving things that they regret later with shame, guilt, or both. Use this activity to help them discover that apologizing and forgiving can help God’s people let go of these uncomfortable feelings and help restore relationships. Read John 13:34 and Ephesians 4:32.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>

Together look at the artwork “Forgiveness.” Ask: *What do you think is happening in this picture? Who might be saying “I’m sorry”? Who might be saying “I forgive you”?*

Invite learners to tell about times when they have said “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you.” Be sure to tell a story of your own. Remind the group that Jesus gives us advice about getting along with others. Ask a volunteer to read aloud John 13:34. Review together the feelings they might experience when treating others with love and kindness, and the feelings they might have when they are unkind or do something that hurts others.

Wonder together how feelings of guilt and shame might be a blessing. For example, guilt and shame keep us on the right track; they point out that we have done something wrong; they point out that we need to make things right. Explain that feelings of guilt and shame also can make us feel miserable.

To start a conversation about the importance of apologizing and forgiving in letting go of these feelings, say: *Think of a time when you were ashamed of something you did or felt guilty about the way you treated someone. What did you do to try to make the situation better? What did the other person do?*

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 4:32. Pray aloud: *God, we want to love one another as Jesus loved us, but sometimes we don't. Give us the courage to say, "I'm sorry" when we have been unkind. Give us the love to say "I forgive you" to those who are sorry for hurting us. Amen.*



6 When Promises Are Broken

Leader preparation: As children mature, they grow in their ability to cope with broken promises. They know that broken promises result in broken relationships, unless those involved can let go of anger and forgive one another. Learning how to express their feelings without being judgmental is a first step in this process. On index cards, write five or six examples of broken promises. Examples include:

- A mother misses her son's ball game.
- A girl forgets to return a video on time for a friend.
- A father doesn't show up on "his" Saturday to be with his daughter.
- A boy forgets to take out the garbage in time for it to be picked up.
- A teacher promises a field trip to the zoo, but it never happens.

On newsprint or a whiteboard, write these pairs of open-ended sentences:

When you broke your promise to me, I felt . . .
I hope we can . . .

When I broke my promise to you, I felt . . .
I hope we can . . .

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or a whiteboard
- Bible
- artwork: "Forgiveness" by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>
- index cards, pen

Invite children to remember times that a person made a promise but then broke it. Discuss together: *What are some good reasons for people to break their promises? What are some bad reasons? What happens to relationships when promises are broken?*

Invite them to think of a time they made a promise to someone and then broke it. Ask: *How did that make you feel? What did you do about that feeling? What had to happen before you could feel better?*

After learners have had time to tell their stories, explain that when promises are broken we often react in anger and blame one another. Invite learners to practice a different way of expressing their feelings.

Direct attention to the open-ended sentences on the newsprint or whiteboard. These sentences are "I messages," intended to tell how a broken promise has made you feel. Explain that "I messages" help others understand how their actions affect you, and help you let your feelings go. Give these instructions to learners.

Find a partner. Take a card and read the situation. Decide on the characters each you will be, and how you will finish the sentences in talking with each other. After time for practice, act out the situation for the entire group.

Together, wonder how God can help us in these kinds of situations. Explain that the Bible is full of broken promises, except where God is concerned. God never breaks a promise, and people in the Bible always remembered that, even when they broke their promises to God. God understands how it feels when a promise is broken and can help us heal from our anger and disappointment. Explain that this is what God wants us to do. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Colossians 3:13.

Pray: God, we know you will always love us, no matter what we do. Give us the courage to tell one another how we feel when promises are broken, and the will to let those feelings go, so we may forgive one another as you forgive us. Amen.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Wants and Needs (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Given the high unemployment rate in the United States in recent years, it is likely that some of the learners in your group have a parent who has lost a job or know a family member or friend in that situation. Our culture tends to value adults for the work they do and the money they make. The loss of a job often necessitates changes in lifestyle that are worrisome to children. Make your group a safe place to talk about the loss of family income and how it has affected relationships, necessitated lifestyle changes, and aroused fears about the future.

Supplies:

- paper, pencils

Invite learners to tell you what the word “unemployed” means. Summarize the discussion by asking: *What are some things that happen in a family when a parent loses his or her job?* Responses may include: The other parent has to get a job or work longer hours, sometimes at a second job. The family has to make choices about how to spend less money. They may have to ask for help from others. They may not be able to pay the money they owe on their home. The family has less money to give to the church. They may not be able to see a doctor or dentist.

When a parent loses a job and there isn’t enough money to pay the bills, families have to make choices. They have to think about the difference between “needs” and “wants.” Give several examples, such as: We all *need* food, but some may *want* to eat out instead of at home. We all *need* a warm jacket to wear in winter, but some may *want* a new coat with an expensive brand name.

Distribute paper and pencils. Have learners fold their papers in half lengthwise to form two columns. On the left side, have them write “Things I Need” and on the right side “Things I Want.” Ask learners to list 10 items in each column. (If there are younger children with limited writing skills, pair them with an older child.) When learners have finished, ask for volunteers to read their lists. Wonder together about what it takes to “let go” of wants and focus more on needs. Ask: *What are some ways children can be a blessing to their families when the family is short on money?*

Conclude with prayer: *Loving God, you have always helped our parents provide for our needs, and we thank you. When times are hard and money is scarce, show us ways we can be a part of caring for our family, too. Amen.*

8 Caring for Our World

Leader preparation: As the world's population grows, as the climate changes, and as one natural or humanmade disaster after another occurs somewhere in the world, the words of Genesis 1:27–28 come to mind. God has blessed us with this world and has also given us the responsibility to care for all creation. In a time when many people find reason to be afraid, your group can find hope and courage in helping care for the world. Choose a project type from one of the options suggested below, but tailor it to current needs and situations. Be sure to get permission from the appropriate church board if that is required.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork board, markers, other art supplies (option 1)
- cardboard box, artwork board, markers (option 2)
- ingredients and equipment for a baking project (option 3)

Have learners open their Bibles to Genesis 1:27–28 and read these verses aloud in unison. Comment that blessings come with responsibilities. God blesses us with this world. God also gives us the responsibility to care for everything in it—the water, air, earth, plants, all the animals and fish and birds, and all the people everywhere. When things go wrong—like earthquakes, tsunamis, oil spills, floods, and wildfires—God expects us to help the earth and its creatures recover. Explain the current need and situation you have selected and introduce the project that you selected from the following options.

1. Create art with words from Genesis 1 and an energy conservation message, such as: Turn off the lights when you leave the room. Turn off the tap when you brush your teeth. Recycle your cans and bottles. Post these messages around the church.
2. Check with your pastor or mission board about current needs for things like emergency cleanup buckets after a flood or tornado or clothing and household items for a family after a fire. Learners could set up a collection box, post a list of needed supplies, and ask for contributions from the congregation.
3. Have learners bake rolls, muffins, or cookies for a church fellowship hour at which a free-will offering will be taken and donated to a current need. (Baked goods could be frozen for use at a later date, but involve learners in serving, if possible.)

When your work is finished, close with a prayer: *God, you have blessed us with our world, and expect us to take care of it and one another. We are glad we could help make things better with our project today. Amen.*

9 A Friend Is . . .

Leader preparation: Read John 15:12–17. Think about the difference between being a “servant” and a “friend.” Preview the two video clips at the links given below and plan a way to show them to the children. On newsprint or a whiteboard print the words “A friend is . . .” and leave room to record learners’ responses.

Supplies:

- video: “What Is A Friend?” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZHmsVRshwU&feature=related>
- video: “Anytime You Need A Friend,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNxXyKjiyoQ&feature=related>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- computer and monitor

Call attention to the unfinished sentence on the newsprint. Invite children to take markers and add their endings for this sentence on the newsprint or whiteboard.

Explain that when Jesus had his last supper with his followers, he taught them about what it meant to be one of his disciples. He said something like this:

Do not think of yourselves as servants who have to do what I tell you. You are my friends. I have shared with you everything I know about God’s love. You know how to be a good friend now. Go out and love one another in my name. Be a friend to all you meet.

Ask: *Why do you think Jesus told the disciples to be friends to one another? Play the videos, and invite children to tell what parts they liked best. Ask: What did you learn about being a friend from these videos?*

A church is a community of friends caring for one another, as Jesus said, but also reaching out to care for other people who need friends, both in their community and around the world. Together, name some ways that your church does this. Encourage learners to share what they know about your congregation’s involvement in projects such as Habitat for Humanity, feeding programs, homeless shelters, Big Brother/Big Sister programs, or a mission trip to a church in another country. Note ways children and youth can share in this work.

Close with a prayer: *God, thank you for sending Jesus to show us what it means to be a friend. Help us to care for one another as Jesus cared for us. May all of us in our church family follow his example. May we always be friends to the poor and needy, the lonely and outcast, the sick and disabled in the world beyond our walls. Amen.*

Reflect

How was it helpful to have the artist’s comments when your group looked at Pheoris West’s painting of Jesus’ baptism? What did you see in the painting that you hadn’t noticed before? How did the group enjoy the song and rhythmic speech? In what other settings could they share these activities? What, if any, follow-up actions does the project you chose require? What did learners discover about being disciples in their relationships with friends and family?

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Learners in this age group may not yet have much of a sense of history, but they do know about traditions, especially in their families. They will understand that Peter went against tradition when he baptized Cornelius, and Francis of Assisi abandoned the traditional life of a wealthy family to become a poor friar. They like “hero” stories, so they should like learning about these men. Many children this age will feel blessed to have pets, so the relatively new tradition of a service of blessing the animals will interest them. Most children this age have had experience with computers, and older learners may have skills in using the Internet for research and designing presentations. Some may prefer working on a presentation to show on a computer instead of a more traditional art or craft project.

About this Exploration

As Christians, we are supported in the process of blessing and letting go by rituals that have grown out of the traditions of the church over the centuries, by the pastoral concern expressed by our faith communities in worship and other areas of our common life, and by the many acts of kindness and mercy extended to us in the name of Christ. As new occasions for blessing and letting go arise, we, as faith communities, develop new responses that may become part of our ongoing traditions. Although our behavior may be rooted in and shaped by our traditions, these traditions are not static. They are constantly modified and expanded as we move on in life. This Exploration provides resources for participants as they discern ways in which looking back on our shared tradition propels us forward into the future.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 148
Acts 10:1–48

Leader Preparation

Most of the learning activities in this Exploration are based on stories of two important men in the Christian tradition: Peter, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, and Francis, who lived in Assisi, Italy, about a thousand years later. Both men made decisions that proved to be critical turning points in the history of the church. Peter's decision to baptize the Roman soldier Cornelius meant that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before becoming Christians. Francis's renunciation of his life of wealth and privilege for a life of poverty led to the founding of a new monastic order that helped the church reform. The activities are designed to help learners enter into the stories and have fun with them. Two traditional celebrations are also introduced in activities: (1) the ancient, traditional celebration of All Souls' Day and (2) a newer tradition of the Blessing of the Animals. If you are using this Exploration in Advent, you may want to note also that Francis is said to have been the first to use a "living" Nativity scene, and that led to the Nativity scenes that are in homes and churches each year.

Prayer: God, help me know when to cling to old traditions and when to let go of them. Guide me in developing faithful ways to celebrate the unchanging gift of your love in my life. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Peter and Cornelius: A Stop-and-Start Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 9:43–10:48 and think about the discussion questions listed below. Write each of the following Bible references on a separate index card:

Acts 9:43
Acts 10:1–6
Acts 10:7–8
Acts 10:9–20
Acts 10:21–33
Acts 10:34–35, 43
Acts 10:44–48

Use each index card to mark the place of the passage in a Bible. As learners arrive, recruit seven volunteers to read aloud and give each a marked Bible. Encourage them to locate and read through their passages to make sure they know all the words. Ask a child who is not a skilled reader to sound the bell or buzzer after each reading.

Supplies:

- seven Bibles
- index cards, pen
- buzzer, bell, or hand chime (you might have one on your cell phone)

Invite the children to read the story of Peter and Cornelius from the Book of Acts. Peter was a friend of Jesus. After Jesus died, Peter was a leader in the early church. He was also a Jew, and followed the Jewish laws. Cornelius was a Gentile, not a Jew, and he was a Roman soldier, an officer in the army that had conquered Peter's land. In this story God speaks to each of these men. Explain that when the children hear the buzzer, the group will stop and talk about what Peter or Cornelius did.

Proceed to have the volunteers read the story as indicated. After each reading, sound the bell or buzzer and ask the question.

Reader 1: Acts 9:43

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: A tanner worked with the skins of dead animals to make leather. Because he touched dead animals, he was considered unclean by Jewish laws. Why do you think Peter, who was a Jew, chose to stay with Simon the tanner?

Reader 2: Acts 10:1–6

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: Cornelius was a Roman and a Gentile. Jews avoided all contact with Gentiles and with Roman soldiers. Why do you think God's angel told Cornelius to send for Peter?

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.

Reader 3: Acts 10:7–8

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: What did Cornelius choose to do?

Reader 4: Acts 10:9–20

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: What did Peter see in his vision? What was God telling Peter through this vision?

Reader 5: Acts 10:21–33

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: Where did Peter go? Why did Cornelius want to talk to Peter?

Reader 6: Acts 10:34–35, 43

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: In the beginning, most of Jesus’ followers were Jews like Peter. They thought only those who followed the Jewish laws could become Christians. What made Peter let go of this idea? What did Peter choose to tell Cornelius about Jesus?

Reader 7: Acts 10:44–48

Sound buzzer.

Discussion: What did the Holy Spirit help Peter choose to do? How did Peter and his friends welcome Cornelius and his friends into the church?

Form pairs or small groups to act out their favorite part of this story for the entire group. Encourage children to guess what each scene is.

Pray: God, send your Spirit to work in our hearts, so that we too may welcome all those who believe in Jesus and want to join us in following the way of love. Make us blessings to one another in our church and in the world beyond. Amen.



2 Peter and Cornelius: A Participation Story

Leader preparation: Prepare to read the paraphrase of Acts 10:1–48 on the attachment “Peter and Cornelius.”

Supplies:

- “Peter and Cornelius,” Attachment: Activity 2
- map from a study Bible or Bible atlas showing Joppa and Caesarea in New Testament times

Show the map and ask volunteers to locate Joppa and Caesarea. Use the scale on the map to figure out the distance between these two cities. Challenge learners to figure out how long it would take to walk from one city to the other, assuming a person was walking 8 miles in a day.

Invite learners to help you tell the story of Peter and Cornelius from Acts 10. Form five pairs or groups. Assign the name of one of the persons or places named on the attachment “Peter and Cornelius.” Teach each group the words and gestures to use whenever that name is mentioned in the story.

After the reading, close with a prayer: *God, fill our hearts with your Spirit and help us welcome all people into your family. Amen.*

3 Psalm 148: Illustrating a Psalm

Leader preparation: Read Psalm 148. This may have inspired Francis to write his great poem “Canticle of the Sun.” The psalm is filled with images that lend themselves to artistic expression. Think about the learners in your group. Do they like to draw or paint? Do some learners know how to scan drawings or photographs into a computer? Do some like to develop presentations, working with a program such as PowerPoint? Choose a project option that best suits your group, and gather the necessary supplies and equipment.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- drawing paper
- art supplies for making illustrations, such as crayons, markers, colored pencils, pastels, tempera paints, or watercolors
- display board and push pins or wall space and tape
- (optional) digital camera, computer

Distribute Bibles and ask learners to help one another find Psalm 148. Form two groups and read the psalm aloud with the groups alternating verses. Ask learners what they “see” in the psalm and record their responses on newsprint or a whiteboard. Ask them to choose one or more of these things to illustrate on drawing paper, using the art supplies you have brought. Encourage them to fill the paper with their pictures, so that what they draw can be seen from across the room. When they have finished, ask them to help you arrange the individual drawings like a patchwork quilt on the display board or wall, adding the title “Praise God!”

Option: Have learners use digital cameras to take photos of the kinds of things talked about in the psalm or clip pictures from magazines or calendars and scan them into the computer. Have learners incorporate the photos and scans into a computer presentation of the psalm, using appropriate lines from the psalm as subtitles.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Peter and Cornelius: A Comparison (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be prepared to tell the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48) in your own words or use the paraphrase in Attachment: Activity 2. Think about the decisions each man made. Cornelius had to let go of his Roman gods in order to believe in the God of Jesus Christ. And how would he, a Roman soldier, follow Jesus’ way of love? Peter was a Jewish Christian who had faithfully followed the Jewish laws that prohibited him from having anything to do with Gentiles. He believed that Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus had to become Jews first. Letting go of the idea that all Christians had to obey the Jewish laws changed the church, and that’s what happened when Peter baptized Cornelius.

Supplies:

- paper, pencils
- display board and push pins or wall space and tape
- (optional) children’s story Bible
- (optional) “Peter and Cornelius,” Attachment: Activity 2

Tell the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48), using the scripture paraphrase or read it from a children’s story Bible.

Introduce the project by inviting learners to think about how different Peter and Cornelius were, yet they both were followers of Jesus. Give each learner a sheet of paper. Ask children to fold their papers in half and then in half again, forming four quarters. Show them how to draw a small circle in the middle, where the fold lines intersect. Ask one group of learners to write “Cornelius” inside their circles and another group to write “Peter” inside their circles.

Have the two groups work together as they follow these instructions.

1. In the upper left corner, write a brief description of the man. (For example: Cornelius—Roman soldier, Gentile; Peter—Friend of Jesus, Jew)
2. In the upper right corner, draw a picture of the man or a symbol that tells about him (For example: Cornelius—helmet, shield, and sword; Peter—scroll)
3. In the lower left corner, write what the man had to let go of in order for Cornelius to be baptized (For example: Cornelius—his belief in Roman gods, possibly his life as a soldier; Peter—his idea that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be Christians)
4. In the lower right corner, draw a picture or write a sentence about the blessing that the man received because of their meeting. (For example: Cornelius—baptism, new friends; Peter—freedom to accept all people as fellow Christians, new friends)

When learners have finished their projects, have each “Cornelius” pair up with a “Peter,” show their work to one another, and then post their projects side-by-side on the display board or wall.

Conclude with prayer: *God, Creator of all humankind, you bless us and call us “good.” As you did for Peter and Cornelius, show us how to let go of old ideas and traditions that divide us. Bless us with your love that we may learn to respect one another and treat one another with kindness and mercy. Amen.*



5 Francis Blesses God: Puppet Reading and a Hymn

Leader preparation: Find and listen to the hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King” at the location listed below. Plan to show this video to the children. On newsprint or a whiteboard print these words:

Sun
Moon and Stars
Wind
Clouds
Water
Fire
Earth (fruits, vegetables, animals)
People

Practice making a stick puppet, following the instructions given in the activity.

Supplies:

- song: “All Creatures of Our God and King,” Francis of Assisi (tune: Lasst Uns Erfreuen), <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/a/c/acoogak.htm>; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSb1-9j-fDA&feature=related>

- card stock paper or artwork board, markers or crayons, scissors, craft sticks, masking tape
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- “Canticle of the Sun,” Attachment: Activity 5

Gather the group and sit in a circle. Explain that the Native American people in South Dakota often use the phrase “all my relatives” when speaking of the world around them. They consider all humans their brothers and sisters, and they also include in their family the animals and plants, streams and rivers, the earth and sky—all God’s creation. Explain that a man named Francis, who lived in Italy long ago, agreed with this idea. He, too, spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind and Sister Water, Brother Fire and Mother Earth, and even Sister Death. Francis considered all of God’s creatures as his brothers and sisters, too. He shared his joy in God’s creation in a poem called the “Canticle of the Sun.”

Invite the group to make stick puppets to help them read the poem that Francis wrote. Distribute the attachment “Canticle of the Sun,” and point out the “brothers and sisters” Francis mentions in his poem. Have each child choose one thing from the poem, illustrate it on card stock or artwork board, cut it out, and then tape it to the craft stick.

Look at the attachment again. Have each child find a part to read that matches his or her puppet. Ask learners to arrange themselves in the circle so that they can read the poem in order around the circle, raising their puppets as each is mentioned. If there are nonreaders in the group, have them say “Alleluia” after each speaker. Explain that “Alleluia” means “Praise God.” If you have fewer than ten learners, start around the circle again to finish the reading, or have the group read Parts 1 and 10 in unison.

Francis took great joy in the world God had created, and he also took responsibility for helping to care for everyone and everything in it. Many years after Francis wrote this poem, it was turned into a hymn. It is a long hymn, so sometimes people only sing the first few stanzas. Show the video of “All Creatures of Our God and King” from the link provided in the Supplies list. Encourage children to sing along on the repeating line, “Alleluia.”

Close with prayer: *Most high God, we praise you and sing of your glory. Help us to find joy in the world you have given us and take responsibility for helping to care for it. Amen.*



6 Preaching to the Birds

Leader preparation: Listen to “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds” by Franz Liszt at the link given in the Supplies list below, and plan to play it for the group. If you would like to read a translation of the original “sermon” Francis preached to the birds, go to <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/saintfran.htm>.

Supplies:

- artwork: “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds” by Giotto de Bondone, <http://www.art.com/products/p11724653-sa-i1350212/giotto-di-bondone-st-francis-of-assisi-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+francis+feeding+the+birds>
- (optional) book about Saint Francis: *Saint Francis* by Brian Wildsmith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), <http://www.amazon.com/Saint-Francis-Brian-Wildsmith/dp/0802851231>

- (optional) two books out of print but still found in libraries: *The Story of Brother Francis* by Lene Mayer-Skumanz (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983); *St. Francis of Assisi* by Margaret and Matthew Bunson, “Saints You Should Know Series” (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1992)
- song: “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds,” by Franz Liszt; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO1UFisn1Ko>
- paper, pencils

Show the artwork “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds,” and invite the children to look at it carefully as they listen to the first few minutes of the recording of the musical piece “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds” by Franz Liszt. Explain that the composer of the music was inspired to write this piece of music by the same story that inspired the artist to paint this picture. Discuss the picture.

- Who is in the picture?
- What seems to be happening?
- How do you think the man feels about the birds?

Tell how an artist named Giotto painted this picture on the wall of a church in Assisi, the little town in Italy where Francis lived. If you have a book about Saint Francis, read aloud the section about Francis preaching to the birds.

Francis had a great love for all of God’s creatures. He called them his brothers and sisters. He took special joy in the birds. One day he stopped to talk to them, and they seemed to stop and listen. Francis said something like this: “God loves you, my sisters, the birds! God made you colorful and beautiful. You are free to fly anywhere, drink from streams of water, build your nests in the trees. God takes care of you in every way, and it is your duty to be thankful, and bless and praise our good God.”

Ask: *What do you think Francis would say to your cat, or dog, or horse, or rabbit, or fish, or hamster?* After some discussion, form partners and ask each pair to write a short sermon to a specific pet or animal like one that Francis might have preached to that animal. Make sure that children with beginning writing skills are paired with older learners who can record their ideas for them. Give them a set time to work, and then invite volunteers to “preach” their sermons to the group.

Close with a prayer: *God, you have created us and given us everything we need. Help us remember that it is our duty to be thankful and to sing our praises to you. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Francis Bernadone, Blessed and Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be prepared to read the story of Francis given below.

Supplies:

- drawing paper, crayons or markers

Invite the group to listen to a story about a man named Francis Bernadone who lived in the town of Assisi in Italy almost a thousand years ago. Tell the story below:

What a Change!

Young Francis Bernadone was blessed with a good life. His father was a wealthy merchant who sold expensive cloth in a town in Italy. Francis was able to go to school and spend time with his friends joking, singing, and playing the lute. Francis spent lots of money on parties and clothes.

When a war started, Francis and his friends joined the army and rode into battle with dreams of glory in their heads. However, they lost the battle, and they were captured and put in prison. Francis had plenty of time to think in that cold, damp prison. By the time his father bought his freedom, Francis had decided to change his ways.

Walking near his home one day, Francis noticed a church in ruins, and stopped to pray. He felt God was calling him to rebuild that church, but he had no money of his own. He took cloth from his father's store and sold it to get money for the repairs. His father was furious, hauled him up before the church leaders, and accused him of being a thief.

Right then and there Francis stripped off all his fine clothes and jewelry and laid them at his father's feet. He gave up his wealth, left his family, and became a traveling preacher. He had only one simple robe to wear. When he was hungry, he begged for food from those he met. Francis imagined that this was how Jesus' disciples lived, too. Other men joined Francis. Together they went around caring for people who were sick and poor, even the people with leprosy who had been abandoned by others. Everywhere they went, Francis joyfully preached about the love of God to the people, animals, and birds in God's world.

Ask children to talk about their reactions to Francis and the choices he made:

- Why did Francis let go of the wealth and privileges he had?
- What blessings do you think Francis found in his new way of living?
- What do you think his father thought about the changes that Francis made?

Summarize by suggesting that Francis chose to be a blessing to others, especially those in need. He was trying to follow the way of Jesus.

Pass out drawing paper and crayons or markers and invite learners to illustrate their favorite part of the story about Francis. They might want to draw two pictures, one to show how Francis lived before he went to prison and the other to show how he lived after that. If there is time, invite them to show their pictures to the group.

As learners work, encourage them to name people today who let go of personal things they enjoy in order to be a blessing to others. Be ready with some examples, such as:

- a boy gives up some of his free time each week to help students who just learning English
- a girl who gives up the chance to go to a movie with a friend in order to play her cello for residents in a retirement home
- a boy who gives up getting the cat he wants because his sister is allergic to cats

- a girl who gives up free time on a Saturday afternoon to help a grandparent

Conclude with a prayer: *God, bless us and guide us to be a blessing to others. Amen.*



8 Blessing of the Animals

Leader preparation: By e-mail, phone, newsletter, or announcements in worship, invite learners to bring stuffed animals or pictures of their pets. Be prepared with some extras for children who forget to bring one. Plan to show the picture of the St. Francis statue at the link given below. Arrange to show the 4-minute video about the Blessing of the Animals service at the Church of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Ahead of time talk with your pastor about the feasibility of holding a Blessing of the Animals in your congregation. If this is not possible in your church, end the activity with the video of the service at St. John the Divine. If such a service is possible, be prepared to help the group write a letter to your pastor and/or church board suggesting that the church host this event. For reports of the experiences of others with such a service, go to:

<http://www.webofcreation.org/Worship/services/blessinganimals.htm>;
<http://www.godblesstheanimals.com/tp40/page.asp?id=33522>; or <http://www.americancatholic.org/features/francis/blessing.asp>.

Supplies:

- stuffed animals or pictures of pets
- computer with Internet access, monitor or screen
- “St. Francis Statue,” Attachment: Activity 8
- video: “Blessing of the Animals,” <http://www.meetmeatthecorner.org/episodes/blessing-of-the-animals>

Explain that Francis of Assisi loved all the creatures God created. Francis is remembered in the church for his work with people who were poor or sick, and for trying to bring peace where there was war. Pictures and statues of Francis often show him with the birds and animals he thought of as his sisters and brothers. Show the photo of the St. Francis statue on the attachment.

Explain that some congregations celebrate Francis’s special day, October 4, by inviting people to bring their animals to the church for a blessing. Sometimes the service is held inside the church building, sometimes outside. Show the video about the service of blessing of animals at the Church of St. John the Divine.

Option: If you have approval from your pastor, ask: *Would you like to ask our minister and church board if we could have a Blessing of the Animals service in our church?* Have learners work on writing a letter with that request. Help the children compose their letter and have each one sign it.

Invite learners to tell about the stuffed animals or photos of pets they have brought. Ask: *How are these animals a blessing to you?*

Pray for the pets at home that are represented by these stuffed animals and pictures by having a volunteer offer one of these prayers.

*God Creator, hear and bless
your beasts and singing birds;
and guard with tenderness
small things that have no words. Amen.*

*God, Maker of all living creatures, bless these pets that bring so much joy and comfort
and fun to our lives. Help us to see all animals as gifts from you, and to treat them
with respect as part of your creation. Amen.*

9 All Souls' Day: A Time to Remember

Leader preparation: Read Hebrews 11:1–12:2. Ask your pastor how your church celebrates All Saints' Day (November 1). Cut cloud shapes from white and gray artwork board. The shapes should be large enough for learners to decorate with pictures, words, or symbols representing a deceased loved one, neighbor, or member of the congregation. Make a sample cloud, representing one of your loved ones who has died. Plan how to suspend the cloud shapes from the ceiling of your meeting area.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork board, scissors
- markers
- paper hole punch
- fishing line or nylon thread

One of the days Christians celebrate during the church year is All Saints' Day. Invite the children to tell what they know about this day. (Some may know it as the day after Halloween and that it is a day to remember those who have died.) Recall how Christians have faith in what Jesus taught—when we die, it is not the end of our lives but the beginning of a new life with God, a spiritual life. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Hebrews 12:1. Invite comments and questions about this verse, affirming that even adults do not fully understand this mysterious and wonderful gift of life after death. Explain that God's Spirit connects us with those who have died and gone on before us. We feel their spiritual presence in our church.

Explain that on All Saints' Day, Christians remember men and women of great faith, from Bible times to the present, who served God. We give thanks for their lives and pray we may be as faithful. On the next day, November 2, some Christians celebrate All Souls' Day, a time to remember that this "cloud of witnesses" around us includes many ordinary people who lived as faithful Christians and made this world a better place. Their names are often unknown, except to those who loved them.

The custom of celebrating All Souls' Day began in a church in Cluny, France, around 1000 years ago. Over the next 300 years the custom spread to southern and eastern Europe and to the British Isles. In some communities church members place evergreen wreaths on the graves of loved ones and say prayers of thanks for those who have died. Some families remember their loved ones by cooking their favorite foods, looking at their pictures, reading their favorite stories, singing their favorite songs, playing games they liked, and sharing memories.

Invite the group to pretend that today is All Souls' Day. You are going to remember loved ones who are part of that "cloud of witnesses" surrounding us. Show

the “cloud” you have made for your loved one. Invite the learners to think of a person who has died who was important to them—a family member, neighbor, or friend. *Note:* If there are learners who have not experienced the death of someone close to them, suggest they work with another learner on his or her cloud.

Have each learner choose a cloud shape and write the name of the person they are remembering on it. Encourage them to use words or draw pictures to show the things that person liked: favorite songs, stories, foods, games, places, colors. Have each include a picture of a favorite experience they shared with this person. Help learners punch a hole in the top of each cloud and add a length of fishing line or nylon thread for hanging from the ceiling.

When all have finished, invite learners to show their clouds and tell about one thing on it. Work together to hang up your “cloud of witnesses.”

Close with a prayer: *God, for all those faithful Christians who have died, and for those who are living, we give you thanks. Surround us with their love, and encourage us to follow their example. Amen.*

Reflect

Were you happy with the activities you chose for your learners in this Exploration? Why or why not? What would you do differently another time? How well did learners identify the processes of blessing and letting go in the lives of Peter and Cornelius, and Francis? How could you use the choral reading of the “Canticle of the Sun” in other settings?

Peter and Cornelius

Invite learners to help you tell the story of Peter and Cornelius from Acts 10. Form five pairs or groups. Assign the name of one of the persons or places named below, teaching them the words and gestures to use whenever that name is mentioned in the story:

- Cornelius: Commander of a hundred men in the Roman army—*Salute*
- Peter: One of Jesus' disciples who was a Jew—*Extend both hands, palms up and open*
- Simon the Tanner: A man who makes leather from animal skins, a smelly job—*Hold nose*
- Joppa: A harbor city by the sea—*Wavy motion with hands in front of body*
- Caesarea: A Roman city fit for kings—*Fist on head with forefingers raised to indicate a crown*

Read the paraphrased story below, pausing for the appropriate words and motions after you read the names in capital letters.

CORNELIUS lived in CAESAREA. He and his family and everyone who worked in his household worshiped God, but they were not Jews. CORNELIUS gave money to the poor and prayed to God every day. One afternoon, he had a vision. He saw an angel of God coming to him. The angel said, "CORNELIUS, God has heard your prayers and has seen the kind way you treat people who are poor. Now send your men to JOPPA, and find a man named PETER. He is staying by the sea in the home of SIMON THE TANNER." After the angel left, CORNELIUS sent three of his men to JOPPA to find PETER.

About noon the next day, PETER went up on the roof of SIMON THE TANNER's house to pray before his meal. While PETER was on the rooftop, he had a vision, too. The heavens opened, and something like a large sheet was lowered to the roof by its four corners. In it were all kinds of animals and birds. Jews were not allowed to eat some of these animals, but PETER

heard a voice saying, "Get up, PETER, kill these animals so you will have something to eat!" But PETER said, "These are things that Jews are forbidden by law to eat. I have never eaten anything that was called unclean by the law of Moses." The voice from heaven said, "When God says that something can be eaten, you must not say it can't be eaten!" This happened three times before the sheet was taken up into heaven again.

PETER was wondering what this vision meant. And then the three men sent by CORNELIUS arrived at the house of SIMON THE TANNER. They asked for PETER to come and talk to them. PETER heard the God's Spirit say, "Go talk to these men, for I have sent them." The men told PETER, "An angel told CORNELIUS to send for you so he can hear you tell about Jesus."

PETER invited the men to stay with him at the house of SIMON THE TANNER. The next day they all started out for CAESAREA. CORNELIUS welcomed PETER and other believers who had come with him from JOPPA. PETER said, "You know that Jews aren't supposed to enter the homes of Gentiles, but God has told me a different way. I should not think of anyone as unclean. Why did you send for me?"

CORNELIUS told him about his vision and asked PETER to tell him and everyone in the household about Jesus. PETER told them all about the life of Jesus and about his death and resurrection. He told them that God accepts and forgives everyone who believes in Jesus. While PETER was speaking, the power of the Holy Spirit came and filled the hearts of everyone. PETER baptized CORNELIUS and everyone else in the household and stayed with them for several days.

Canticle of the Sun
by Brother Francis
Adapted for reading in the round

1. Most high, all powerful, good God, to you alone belong praise, glory, honor, and all blessing!
2. Praise to you, our God, for all your creatures, and especially Brother Sun, who brings us the day, and gives us light. How beautiful he is, how bright he shines. He makes us think of you.
3. Praise to you, our God, for Sister Moon and the Stars, which you have set clear and lovely in the heavens.
4. Praise to you, our God, for Brother Wind, and the air and the clouds, and all weather by which you nourish all that you have created.
5. Praise to you, our God, for Sister Water, who is so useful and humble, so precious and pure.
6. Praise to you, our God, for Brother Fire, who lights up our night. How beautiful he is, and mighty and strong.
7. Praise to you, our God, for Mother Earth, who feeds us and produces fruits and vegetables, flowers of many colors, and grass.
8. Praise to you, our God, for all our brothers and sisters who forgive one another for love's sake, who endure sickness and trial, and who live in peace.
9. Praise to you, our God, for Sister Death, which comes to all of us to end our suffering when our bodies are worn and ill.
10. Praise and bless God. Serve God with thanksgiving and humble hearts.

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM A TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH BY MATTHEW ARNOLD.

St. Francis Statue



Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Learners ages 5–13 can understand mission in the context of shalom, God’s blessing of peace and wholeness. They can accept that God calls us to work for a peace that is both personal and communal, a peace that is not just an absence of conflict, but one that blesses all creation with gifts of wholeness and well-being that come when people of good will and Christian character interact responsibly with one another. One developmental task for children is growing into a mature Christian faith. As they do, they can participate more fully in mission. A sampling of opportunities for mission now will whet their appetite for more.

About this Exploration

God’s call to blessing and letting go is a call to action. Those who receive a blessing have a mission to give a blessing. Responding to God’s call requires that we let go of the way things were and boldly set forth in response to the call, an active process that often involves hard work. We receive that call as individuals and also as members of the community of faith. When we let go of habits and comforts that threaten to impede our journey, and to which we cling, we are freed to go forth both as recipients and givers of blessing. In this Exploration we journey with ancestors who have been sent forth and have struggled with fear, promise, grief, and hope. Like them, we are called to lay aside material blessings so that we may open our lives to spiritual blessings in our context and mission.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 12:1-5
Romans 15:22-29

Exploring & Engaging Activities

Leader Preparation

The Bible stories for this Exploration can help children think about the responsibilities that come with God's blessings. Abram and Sarai were blessed by God's call and went where God led so they could be a blessing to others. Paul was blessed by his experience with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and took responsibility for taking that good news to others. Paul taught new congregations that they were responsible for helping to meet the needs of others. Paul also challenged new Christians to develop the character traits that would make them responsible partners in the church's mission. We are all blessed by God's love and are called to share that love in ways that will bring shalom into our families, our church and community, and the world.

Prayer: God, awaken in me gratitude for the blessings I have received and help me respond to the call that comes with each one. Make me eager and willing to share the gifts of your love 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 Serv-



1 What Will You Take? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Genesis 12:1-5.

Supplies:

- Bible

Invite children to sit with you in a circle. Have them imagine that you have just received a message. *We have to leave our homes in one hour, and each one of us can take only five things. What would you take, and why?* After a moment for thought, go around the circle, and give everyone a chance to respond.

Introduce the Bible story. Long ago, in a place called Haran, there lived a man named Abram and his wife Sarai. God spoke to them. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 12:1-5. Discuss the story.

- What did God ask Abram and Sarai to do?
- What did they have to let go or leave behind in order to do this?
- What blessing did God promise them in their new place?
- Why do you think they decided to go?
- Who and what did they take along on their journey? (Note that Abram was a shepherd who followed his flocks, so he would probably have had among his possessions sheep and goats, tents, cooking equipment, clothing.)

Ask for a show of hands to indicate how many think it was hard for Abram and Sarai to say "yes" to God's call and how many think it was hard. Invite learners to explain their opinions.

Close with prayer: *God, you helped Abram and Sarai listen to your voice and follow your command. Give us courage to be ready to hear your call to us and trust your guiding hand. Amen.*

2 Paul Writes a Letter: Mapping a Mission

Leader preparation: Read Romans 15:22-29. Ask your pastor, church educator, or mission board for some stories and/or photos of missionaries currently supported by your congregation or denomination. Locate the mailing address or email address for one missionary.

Supplies:

- map of the Mediterranean area in New Testament times from a study Bible or Bible atlas or a map that shows Paul's missionary journeys
- Bible
- writing paper, pencils or pens

Explain that long ago, when the church was just beginning, Paul traveled from Jerusalem throughout the area north of the Mediterranean Sea, telling the good news about Jesus to everyone who would listen. Sometimes he is called the first missionary. A missionary is a person who tells other people about Jesus in words and in actions. Wherever Paul went, he started new churches. He kept in touch with the members of these churches, sometimes returning for another visit. He also wrote letters to the people in these churches, teaching them how to be Jesus'

ing.” 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.

disciples. In his letter to the church at Rome, he mentions some of his travel plans. Read from his letter, and ask the children to listen for the other places Paul mentions.

Read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Direct attention to the map, and ask a volunteer to find Rome. Explain that Paul was probably writing from Corinth. Ask learners to find the other places named in the letter (Jerusalem, Macedonia, Achaia, Spain). Wonder together about how Paul might have traveled from place to place.

Tell the group that ever since the time of Paul, there have been missionaries who share the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ by what they do and what they say. Tell the stories of some missionaries supported by your congregation or denomination. Explain how your church supports the work of these individuals, such as through offerings of money, prayers for their safety and health, letters of encouragement, sending needed supplies, or in other ways.

Form two groups, mixing ages in each. Have each group choose a recorder. Provide paper and pencils or pens. Ask one group to compose a prayer for one of the missionaries mentioned earlier, asking God to bless this person’s work. Ask the other group to write a letter to support and encourage this person/family and thank them for their service. Check to see if the prayer might be printed in the church newsletter for church members to use at home or offered during worship. The letter could tell how your group had learned about their work and was praying for them and their family. It could be sent by snail mail or as an e-mail. Gather and ask the two groups to read their work.

Close with the prayer that was written. Be sure to send the letter.

③ Paul Writes a Letter: Taking an Offering

Leader preparation: Read Romans 15:22–29 and 1 Corinthians 16:1–4. Invite a member of the stewardship or finance committee or church council to explain about how the offerings taken in your church are used and to answer the children’s questions. Encourage your guest to recognize the importance of all gifts, large and small, and to suggest ways learners can participate in offerings for mission work (such as saving pennies in a jar, making a bank for small change, setting aside a specific amount from their allowances).

Supplies:

- guest
- Bible
- snack, napkins or cups as needed

Explain that sometimes Paul is called the first missionary. He traveled around the area around the Mediterranean Sea, telling the good news about Jesus to everyone who would listen. As Paul started new churches, he collected money offerings to send to the members of the Jerusalem church who were in need of food because of a famine. He wrote about this in a letter to the church at Rome when he was in Corinth.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:25–28. Ask: *Why did Paul ask the new Christians to collect an offering of money to give the Christians in Jerusalem? Why is the offering a part of our worship today?*

Introduce your guest. Ask for volunteers to serve the snack to everyone. Ask the guest to explain how the offerings taken in worship in your church are used and

suggest ways that children can be involved in mission offerings. Encourage the children to ask questions.

End with a prayer: *God, like Christians of long ago, our spirits have been blessed by your love through Jesus Christ. Give us thankful hearts and a willingness to share our material blessings, our money and possessions, with those who are in need. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 New “Clothes” for a New Life (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Colossians 3:12–15. Be prepared to help learners define any words that are not familiar to them (for example, “meek” or “meekness” can mean gentle, thoughtful, polite in dealing with others; “humility” or “humble” means without pride, not conceited or “stuck-up.”)

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- drawing paper
- crayons, markers, colored pencils, or pastels

Have learners help one another to find Colossians 3:12–14 in their Bibles. As you read this passage together, ask them to look for words that describe the character of Christians—the ways that Jesus call his disciples to live. Record their responses on newsprint or a whiteboard. As you record the children’s responses, use variant forms of the words in short sentences, such as: “A Christian has compassion.” “A Christian is kind.”

Distribute drawing paper and art supplies. Ask each learner to think of a situation where someone is showing one of these qualities and illustrate it, adding the appropriate sentence from the newsprint as the title of the picture. Explain that this will be a way of reminding others of what it means to live as Jesus’ disciple. Display the finished drawings for all to see.

Conclude with prayer: *Thank you, God, for letters written long ago and pictures drawn today that remind us of how you would have us live. Help us to be loving people, following the example of your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

5 Self-Control: Skits

Leader preparation: Things happen that embarrass or hurt children’s feelings and make them feel angry or sad. They need help in learning how to live with these uncomfortable feelings. They can learn that, while they cannot control everything that happens, they *can* control how they will respond. Developing self-control is a challenge Christians of all ages face in growing into a mature faith.

Read Colossians 3:12–14 and Galatians 5:22, 23b. Print the following list of situations on newsprint or a whiteboard:

When I eat my favorite pizza, I feel . . .
When I spill ketchup all over my shirt at lunch, I feel . . .
When I meet someone new at church camp, I feel . . .
When I lose my cell phone, I feel . . .
When my parents tell me that I can't do something I really want to do, I feel . . .
When my best friend moves away, I feel . . .
When the coach chooses someone else for the team, I feel . . .
When there is a bad storm during the night, I feel . . .

Write each of these responses on a separate index card:

talk to a grownup friend
punch a pillow
yell in the shower
play the piano
beat on a drum
write in a journal
go for a run or fast walk
mow the lawn
clean my room
pray
listen to music

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- index cards, pen

Gather the group around the list on the newsprint or whiteboard. Read the statements one at a time, inviting learners to complete each one. Accept all comments, and be careful that no one's feelings are mocked or judged.

Summarize the conversation by noting that we can't always change what happens, but we can choose how we will respond. Invite learners to draw an index card and read the response there to the group. For each response, ask learners who have tried it to stand up.

Form pairs. Without telling the others, ask each pair to choose one situation on the newsprint and one response card. The pair can then plan how to act out the situation and the response. After learners have shared their skits, talk together about people they can trust to listen to their feelings without making fun of them.

Conclude with a prayer: *God, you have blessed us with the ability to have feelings of all kinds. Be with us in every situation, guiding our words and our actions. Amen.*

⑥ Thanking Mission Workers: Baking Muffins and Making Cards

Leader preparation: Most adults who volunteer their time on church service projects do so out of a sense of mission without expecting thanks. Learners ages 5–13 may be too young to work on Habitat for Humanity houses, medical missions, or disaster relief kits or quilts, but they can participate by preparing a treat for adult workers to enjoy on a break and by making thank-you cards for them. Arrange to use the church kitchen for this activity. Plan on enough muffins for the workers, with some left for learners to eat. If you will be waiting to deliver the muffins until a group is working on a project, you'll want to plan to freeze them until they are needed.

Supplies:

- one or more boxes of muffin mix and other ingredients as listed on box
- muffin tins, paper baking cups
- mixing bowls, measuring cups, spoons
- construction paper, crayons or markers

Begin by telling learners about the mission project that adults from your church are working on. Suggest that your group can help those adults and thank them by providing muffins to enjoy when they take a break. Have learners wash their hands. Form work groups of mixed ages, and give each group a muffin mix to stir up, spoon into muffin tins lined with paper baking cups, and bake.

While the muffins are baking, provide art supplies to make thank-you cards for the workers. The cards could carry a simple message such as “Thank you for taking time to work on the Habitat house” or “Thank you for making quilts for flood victims.” Have learners sign cards with their names and ages. As they finish the cards, have children help with cleanup in the kitchen.

When the muffins are done and cool enough to remove from the pans, let learners each have one to eat and then package the rest to be delivered with the thank-you cards to the workers. Freeze the muffins for later delivery, if needed.

Close with a prayer: *Thank you, God, for everyone in our church who takes the time to work on projects that help people in need. Give them strength and keep them safe. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Making Mission Posters (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:34–40, especially verses 35, 37, and 40. Hunger and thirst have destroyed many lives in parts of the world, most recently in large areas of the African continent. Learners in your group may have heard stories in the media about African children dying as the result of drought and famine and may want to help. Contact your pastor or church mission board for information about what your church is doing to help, or check out a church website, such as <http://www.ucc.org/disaster/east-africa-drought-famine.html> or Church World Service at <http://www.churchworldservice.org>. Bring information to tell the children. Plan where you can hang posters in the church. Trim poster board to the size of the display space you can use. If there are learners who prefer other kinds of activities, suggest that they use the information to prepare a skit or statement for a “Mission Moment” in worship. Check first with your pastor or worship committee for permission to do these activities, if needed.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- poster board, markers, pictures from mission brochures or websites
- scissors, glue sticks
- Bible

Gather the children and ask volunteers to tell what they ate for breakfast today. After learners have had a chance to respond, ask: *If you could have only one meal a day, what would you eat?*

Print the word *famine* on the newsprint or whiteboard. Ask learners to tell what they know about famine. Explain that when the rains don't come for a long time, crops can't grow and water supplies dry up. Animals die because they don't have food and water. What food and water people can find becomes very expensive. Families survive on one meal a day, if that. Sometimes the situation is made worse by fighting within a country. Famine is declared in an area when 3 out of 10 children do not have enough to eat to survive, people are dying every day of starvation, and people can't get to where there is food or water. Use the situation in East Africa or another place you have information about as an example.

Read aloud Matthew 25:35, 37, 40. Ask: *What does Jesus say about how we can serve him? What do you think Jesus would say about how we can serve him by helping people struggling with the famine in Africa [or another location]?*

Tell how your church and denomination are working together to provide food for people in famine areas. Emphasize that these efforts are paid for by the offerings taken in the churches. Suggest that your group can help by telling people in your congregation about the need and asking them to give money for this work. Together, plan what posters might say and show to encourage people to be generous. Write suggested wording on newsprint for learners to use later. Form pairs to create posters, providing pictures from mission brochures or websites to include on them. As a group, walk around the church and put up the posters.

Close with a prayer: *God, thank you for the food we eat each day. Give us strength and courage to help the children in the world whose plates and cups are empty. Make us bold to answer Jesus' call to provide food for the hungry and water for the thirsty in his name. Amen.*

8 A Special Kind of Love: A Simulation Exercise and a Story

Leader preparation: Children and youth are often involved in the church's ministry with elderly people who are homebound or living in senior living facilities. They may go Christmas caroling or make Easter greeting cards and decorations to take to residents. This brings great joy to the people they visit. For some children, however, these experiences are unnerving because they have had little experience with disabilities, especially dementia. For children in your group who have grandparents or other relatives suffering from dementia, this may be a more personal problem. This twofold activity was suggested by a social worker and lay minister who works with children who visit residents in the Alzheimer facility where she is the activities director.

Read Matthew 25:34–40 as you prepare for this session. Keep in mind that people suffering from dementia are both sick and imprisoned by their illness, and the learners in your group can be part of the church's ministry to them.

Supplies:

- washcloths or scraps of terry cloth (one per child, for sanitation reasons)
- blindfold
- a children's book about dementia, such as:
 - *Hugging Grandma: Loving Those with Memory Disorders* by Zina Kramer, ill. by Dave Messing (Ferne Press, 2009)
 - *Always My Grandpa: A Story for Children about Alzheimer's Disease* by Linda Scacco, ill. by Nicole Wong (Magination Press, 2006)
 - *Still My Grandma* by Véronique Van den Abeele, ill. by Claude K. Dubois (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2006)

- *What's Happening to Grandpa?* By Maria Shriver, ill. by Sandra Speidel (Little, Brown and Warner Books, 2004)
- *When Meme Came to Live at My House* by Mary Janine Langdon, ill. by Adam Padilla (Phoenix Home Life Mutual Insurance Company, 1998)

Invite children to tell about times they have visited someone in a nursing home or other senior living facility.

Sometimes when we visit older people we know who are in a nursing home or still living in their own homes, we may notice that they have changed. Maybe they used to remember our names, but now we have to tell them who we are, not once but many times. Maybe they may tell the same story over and over again. Maybe they can't play games like they used to. Maybe they have trouble hearing what we're saying. We can do some activities to help us understand them better.

Blindfold a learner, and send him or her out of the room while you give another learner a washcloth. Tell the child with the washcloth: *When the blindfolded learner returns, hold this washcloth in front of your face, and speak through it in a whisper, telling about what you did in school last week.* Bring the blindfolded learner back and say: *Listen to the person speaking and tell us who it is.* Repeat the activity with as many learners who would like to give it a try.

Invite learners to tell about their feelings during this activity. For example, if the guess was correct, the blindfolded learner had the joy of remembering a friend, and the second learner felt good about being recognized. If the guess was wrong, both experienced the frustration and embarrassment that older adults with diminished hearing or eyesight or with dementia often feel like when trying to communicate.

Read a children's book about dementia to the group. Invite comments and reactions to the story. Ask: *What can we do to show people with memory loss that we love them and care about them?* Depending on your choice of book, learners might suggest giving them hugs, making a decoration for their rooms, sharing a scrapbook or photo album, coloring pictures with them, playing a simple card game without expecting them to follow the rules, singing a song or playing an instrument for them, telling them that you love them. It takes a special kind of love and lots of patience to be a friend to people with memory loss.

Close with a prayer: *God, when older friends or family members with dementia can't remember us, help us remember them and how much they have always loved us. Give us patience, compassion, and understanding as we love them as they are. Amen.*

Saying Goodbye

Leader preparation: Life is full of goodbyes. A child is left in a babysitter's care for the first time, another goes off to preschool or kindergarten. An older child goes to a sleepover or a week at camp. Youth go on band or choir trips. Family members and friends move away or are lost to accidents, illness, divorce, or death. This activity is designed to help learners find positive ways to say goodbye to someone that they love.

Print this poem on newsprint:

Goodbyes are not forever.
Goodbyes are not the end.
They simply mean I'll miss you
until we meet again!

—Author Unknown

Choose a project that is most appropriate for the needs of your group: writing a poem about saying goodbye or, if you have a group member who is moving, making a goodbye scrapbook. With parents' permission, make a list of the mailing and e-mail addresses of group members to include in the scrapbook.

Supplies:

- lined paper, pencils, markers
- scrapbooking materials; digital camera, photo printer
- song: "Shalom Chaverim," Traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnncc>

Ask a volunteer to read aloud the poem on the newsprint. Invite learners to tell about the times they have said "goodbye" during the past week. Wonder together why sometimes it is harder to say goodbye than other times. Ask: *How do you feel about goodbyes?* Learners who have experienced divorce or military deployments in their family, or have experienced the death of a loved one, may respond in a different way than those who are sad at friend's moving away.

Goodbyes are sad for those who are leaving and those who are staying, but goodbyes do not mean that a relationship is over. We can still keep in touch, even when we are no longer together. And we can say goodbye with a special gift.

Introduce the project you have chosen.

Option 1: Form pairs or work individually to write a poem about saying goodbye. It might be funny or sad. Learners can illustrate the page with the poem with markers.

Option 2: Use scrapbooking materials to create a colorful first page of a farewell scrapbook and then add pages with learners' names and contact information (if parents allow). If this is not possible, have each learner write or draw a special memory on a page to include in the book. Together, write a goodbye prayer and blessing for the last page. Staple the pages together.

Close by singing "Shalom Chaverim."

Reflect

How have learners grown in their understanding of what it means to be a faithful, responsible Christian? What difference will this make in the ways they respond to difficult situations in their lives and in the lives of others?

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Death is no stranger to children and youth in today's world. They know from the news media that we live in a world beset by natural disasters, terrorist acts, drunk driving accidents, terminal illnesses in children and adults, teen suicides, and dire predictions about the end of the world. This environment colors their vision of the future, and they may look to the church to give them hope and a sense of purpose for living in uncertain times. Some in your group may have had to face the loss of a pet to old age or an accident. Dealing with the death of a pet can help prepare children for the inevitable loss of people they love later in life. Others in your group may already have faced the death of grandparents or parents, an older friend, or someone their age. They may want to talk about their loss in your group, giving you an opportunity to help them let go of their feelings about it and move on with hope.

About this Exploration

Experiences of blessing and letting go teach us there will be more change, loss, and grief in the future. Letting go is an essential part of our lives. Our resurrection faith provides us a vision of blessing and being blessed in the midst of letting go. Blessing does not come easily, and the process of letting go can be a painful adventure. Genuine hope is often costly and benefits from the courage of our imagination. The practices in this Exploration open individuals and congregations to the blessings for the journey when we are willing to let go.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Jeremiah 29:1-14
Luke 2:22-38

Leader Preparation

No matter what our age, if we look far enough into the future, we are faced with our own mortality. A three-year-old boy once kept asking about death, perhaps because he heard his father, who was a pastor, talk about funerals or because the mother of the children next door had just died from cancer. His father reassured him, telling him that we know God cares for us in life and that God will continue to care for us after our death. In this era of climate change, growing population numbers, terrorism and wars, catastrophic natural disasters, and family disorganization, it is no wonder that our children and youth face the future with fear, and some do not expect to live very far into adulthood. Our role as a faith community is to give them reason to trust that God is with them in good times and bad. They can face the uncertainties in life and the certainty of death with faith and hope.

Prayer: Sometimes the uncertainties of the future seem overwhelming, God, but I trust in your love. I know you rejoice with me in my happiness, weep with me in my sorrows, and hold me always in your loving arms. Help me share the faith that sustains me with these children and youth that they too may face their future with confidence and hope. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 A Blessing: Dramatizing the Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 2:22–38. Prepare to tell the story in your own words.

Supplies:

- Bible
- (optional) props for dramatizing: baby doll wrapped in a blanket, dish towels to make head coverings, cane or walker
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

The Gospel of Luke has a story about a blessing Jesus received when he was a baby. Read aloud the story in Luke 2:22–38 or tell it in your own words.

When you finish the story, invite children to ask any questions they have about it. Ask learners to name and describe the main characters. Record the list of characters on newsprint or a whiteboard. If it is helpful, read or tell the story a second time. On newsprint or a whiteboard, list the order of the action in the story: Parents bring Jesus. Simeon recognizes and blesses Jesus. Anna praises God for gift of Jesus. Parents leave with Jesus.

Invite the group to act out this story. Encourage suggestions for improvising dialogue that tells something about each character. For example, Simeon could say, “It’s about time he showed up. God has kept me waiting here long enough.” Ask how the children might use the props, if any props are available. Assign parts, with the group’s help. Since there were probably others in the temple watching the action, other learners could be bystanders. Be ready to give each one a name and a character, such as Leah, a mother, with her children. Let learners act out the story in their own words, prompting as necessary. If there is time, try it again with different role assignments.

End with a prayer: *O God, let us go in peace, for we too know Jesus as your Promised One. Amen.*



2 Two Pictures: Alike and Different

Leader preparation: Read about Andrew Wyeth and the painting “Christina’s World, 1948” online at <http://www.andrew-wyeth-prints.com/article-christinas-world.html>. Ethan Hubbard, the artist who created “Sisters in the Wind,” is a writer-photographer who has traveled the world taking pictures of ordinary people, showing their resilience and strength, often in settings of poverty and strife.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christina’s World, 1948” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p10041656-sa-i783641/andrew-wyeth-christinas-world-1948.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=0f6ded272c5f442f8f4b43201f2adbfc&searchstring=christina%27s+world>
- artwork: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401

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.

Display the two works of art side by side. Invite the children to look for ways they are alike and ways they are different. After a few quiet moments, ask them to point out the similarities and differences they have found. For example, the figures in both are female, but the girl in the painting is alone and the photograph is of two sisters; the girl in the painting is white, the sisters are persons of color; the girl has a physical disability, the sisters seem physically whole. In both pictures, the subjects are looking away from the viewer toward another goal, the girl reaching out toward the farm home and the sisters looking to a world unknown. There is an air of determination in both pictures but also of wistfulness and hope.

Explain that when we draw a picture of a person or take his or her photo with a camera, the person is usually looking at us. These pictures are different. The girl in the painting is looking at a farm home in the distance, not at us. Discuss:

- Why do you think the artist showed her that way?
- What do you think the sisters in the photograph are looking at?
- What do you think will happen to this girl?
- What do you think will happen to the two sisters?
- In both of these situations, what might someone say or do to give these girls a sense of hope?

Encourage learners who have been part of your church’s efforts to meet the needs of families in poverty or recovering from disaster to tell about those experiences. Wonder together how words and deeds of love can help a person have hope.

Conclude with prayer: *God, you have blessed us in so many ways, and we are grateful. Help us to be beacons of hope to those in need. Be with all your children, God, and give us hope for a future filled with your blessings. Amen.*

3 A Letter from Jeremiah

Leader preparation: Gather photos of different homes in which you have lived to show the children. If photos are unavailable, draw sketches of the homes. Read Jeremiah 29:1–14. Write Jeremiah 29:5 and Jeremiah 11:14a on separate slips of paper and use each one to mark the location of the passage in a Bible. On newsprint or a whiteboard, print these open-ended phrases:

When you move, remember . . .
 When you move, settle in and . . .
 When you move, be ready to . . .

Supplies:

- photos or drawings of where you have lived
- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Begin by passing around the pictures of places you have lived. Ask:

- How many of you have always lived in the same house?
- How many have moved to a different house? Different town? Different state? Different country?
- What do you leave behind when you move?
- What do you take with you?
- What are some things you have to do when you move to a new home?

After time for discussion, introduce the Bible story from Jeremiah.

Long ago many of God’s people in Israel had to move. It wasn’t their choice. There was a war, and they had been conquered by an army from Babylonia. The Babylonians took the Israelites to live in their country. The Israelites missed their homes in Jerusalem. They were worried that God would never find them in that foreign land. Then God sent them a message through the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Israelites.

Ask a learner to read aloud Jeremiah 29:5, then continue telling the story.

Jeremiah said God wanted them to settle in and be good citizens in their new land. God would not abandon them, God would be there with them.

Ask another learner to read aloud Jeremiah 29:11–14. With the children, imagine that all of you are moving to a new town. *What do you think Jeremiah would tell you about living in the new town?* Have learners think of responses to the open-ended phrases on the newsprint to start your thinking.

When learners are satisfied with the letter, end with this prayer: *God, when we move away we have to let go of much that is familiar and comfortable—our home, friends and teachers at school, our church, and so much more. Thank you for never letting go of us. Keep us always in your care, no matter where we are. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 A Grandmother’s Letter (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be prepared to read Natalie Sleeth’s story “Parable.”

Supplies:

- “Parable,” Attachment: Activity 4
- modeling clay

What would you do if you were a choir director and one of your own children was in the choir, and that child complained, “I don’t like the songs we sing in choir. They are so boring!” Maybe, if you were good at writing words and music, you would try to write some better songs for your choir. That’s just what Natalie Sleeth did. For many years, she wrote songs that children love to sing. As Natalie grew older, she had a disease called multiple sclerosis (MS) that made it hard for her to get around. Then she learned she had cancer that would soon end her life. Natalie knew how hard it would be for her beloved grandchildren to say goodbye when the time came for her to die, so she wrote a story called “Parable” for them.

Read aloud the story “Parable” from the attachment. Upon hearing the story, some children may want to comment on the death or impending death of grandparents or other family members. Assure them that Jesus promises that each one of them will live with God forever, too, just like Natalie. Suggest that they use the modeling clay to create something that reminds them of this promise that Jesus makes.

Conclude with a prayer: *God, give us her faith in the goodness of your plan for us, and help us remember we are always in your care. Amen.*

5 In the Bulb There Is a Flower—Learning about a Hymn

Leader preparation: Read the following information about Natalie Sleeth and choose what may be interesting to tell the children.

Natalie Allyn Wakeley Sleeth was gifted both as a poet and a musician. Born into a musical family in Evanston, Illinois, in 1930, she began taking piano lessons at age four, participated in various choirs and ensembles in school, and graduated from Wellesley College with a B.A. in music theory. She married Ronald A. Sleeth, a United Methodist pastor and professor of homiletics, and served as an organist and children’s choir director in churches in the university communities in which they lived. A line from a poem by T. S. Eliot inspired Natalie Sleeth to write “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” a song whose theme is something like “in our end is our beginning.” At the time Natalie had been contemplating the changing of the seasons, life and death, Good Friday and Easter. It seemed to her that in the apparent opposites in life (death/resurrection, song/silence, seed/tree, winter/spring) one opposite is inherent in the other, though unseen, and will be revealed in God’s own time. She even bought a yellow tulip plant to look at as she pondered the idea of a bulb leading to a flower, though the bulb itself seemed dead.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–58, the text of which she used so carefully in her composition, comparing the mysteries of new life in nature with the mystery of death and resurrection. Plan to show the video of the hymn to the group.

Supplies:

- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- computer, projector or monitor
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- apples, enough for each learner to have one-fourth of an apple
- knife, cutting board, napkins

Gather everyone in a circle. Choose one person to be “It.” “It” stands in the middle of the circle, points to a learner, says a word, and counts quickly from 1 to 10. If the person in the circle says an opposite word (a word that has an entirely different meaning) before “It” finishes counting, he or she becomes “It” for the next round. If this person fails to name an opposite in time, the first “It” has another turn. The game proceeds until all have had a turn. If a younger child needs help, whisper a suggestion in his or her ear. End the game by asking the group to name the opposite of “ending” (“beginning”).

Invite the group to listen to a hymn that uses pairs of opposites. Natalie Sleeth, who wrote both the words and the music, got the idea for her hymn from this line in a poem: “In our end is our beginning.” Encourage children to listen for pairs of opposites in the hymn and raise hands when hearing a pair of opposites mentioned. Play the music video of the hymn.

After listening to the song, list the pairs of opposites learners have identified on newsprint or a whiteboard. Cut the apples in fourths, and give each learner a piece on a napkin. Have the children look at the seeds in their apples. *What will happen if we plant the seeds in good earth and water them?*

Explain that an apple seed looks dead to us, but God knows that the seed is not an end but a beginning. If it is planted and given proper care, it can become an apple tree that will bear more apples some day. Long ago, a follower of Jesus named Paul wrote a letter to his friends at Corinth to help them understand this mystery of death and life. He told them that when we die and are buried, it is not our end but the beginning of a new life with God. We are changed into something new and wonderful, just like a seed that looks dead becomes a beautiful apple tree.

Eat the apples and conclude with a prayer: *Thank you, God, for blessing us with life on earth, and when we die, blessing us with new life with you. Amen.*

6 A Hymn of Promise

Leader preparation: If you have not done so, read about Natalie Sleeth in the Leader preparation of Activity 5 above. Check to see if the hymn “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” is in your hymnal. Arrange for a keyboard and accompanist, if you are going to sing the hymn, or a computer and monitor if you are going to use the video.

To prepare for the art project, protect your work tables with newspapers or plastic drop cloths. Cut the cardstock into pieces for bookmarks, as directed below. Cut shapes of tulip blossoms and leaves from thin kitchen sponges. Catch the very top of each piece in a spring-type clothespin, making a “handle.” Pour small amounts of tempera paint into plastic lids. Practice making a bookmark yourself so you can anticipate any problems learners may have. Dip the sponge shapes in paint and press on the bookmark to make a tulip design. When the paint is dry, use a black marker to accent the shapes as desired.

Supplies:

- a blooming tulip plant (preferably yellow) or a picture of blooming tulips from a calendar or garden catalog.
- a tulip bulb
- Bible
- cardstock (8½" × 11"), cut in strips crosswise, 6 equal strips to a page.
- thin kitchen sponges
- sharp scissors
- yellow and green tempera paint
- plastic lids to hold the paint
- black markers
- newspapers or plastic drop cloths to protect tables
- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- computer, monitor or screen

Gather the group in a circle. Show the blooming tulip plant or picture of tulips. Pass around the tulip bulb so learners can see it and touch it. This bulb looks dead to us, but if we plant it properly, it will grow and change into a living, blooming plant. Explain that long ago a man named Paul wrote a letter to his friends at Corinth about the wonder and mystery of life and death. We have that letter here in our Bible. Paul wanted to help his friends at Corinth understand that when we die and our bodies are buried, it is not the end of our being. Rather, it is the beginning of a new life with God. We are changed into something new and wonderful, just like these bulbs will become beautiful tulip flowers one day.

Tell how the songwriter Natalie Sleeth was thinking of Paul’s words while she was writing a new hymn about life and death, and she kept a pot of yellow tulips

in her house to help her remember his letter to the church at Corinth. The first line of her hymn begins “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.”

If available, distribute hymnals and help learners find “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” When they have found the hymn, play the melody for them to hear and then sing it together with a keyboard accompaniment. If a print version is not available, use the music video and have the children sing along.

Invite the group that to make bookmarks to help them remember Paul’s letter and Natalie Sleeth’s song. Demonstrate these steps in making a bookmark:

1. Write your name on the back of a strip of cardstock.
2. Dip the blossom and leaf shapes into the paint, wipe off extra paint on the edge of the lid or the newspaper, and then press the shapes onto the bookmark to form a tulip plant.
3. When the paint dries, add accents with the black marker.

Encourage children to make several bookmarks, one to keep and some to give away.

Conclude with a prayer: *Thank you, God, for letter writers like Paul and songwriters like Natalie who help us understand the mystery of life and death and new life with you. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Shalom: Dancing a Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Learn the tune and the English words to “Shalom Chaverim.” Practice the movements you will use in teaching the song as a dance, as given below. Find out if learners might teach this dance to a larger group at a church gathering.

Supplies:

- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnC>
- enough space for the circle dance

Invite the group to sing a song that comes from Israel, so it has both Hebrew words and English words. It is called “Shalom Chaverim,” a Hebrew word that means several different things in English: “farewell” or “goodbye,” “stay safe,” “have peace.” It is blessing not just with the peace that comes when there is no fighting but also the peace we know when no one is hungry or homeless, sick or lonely.

Form two groups and have each group form a circle, one inside the other. Have each person face a partner in the other circle. If your group is too small to divide into two circles, form one circle and modify the movement as suggested. Sing the phrases one by one with movement, and ask the group to repeat each phrase, as follows.

Shalom, my friends, (*Right hand over heart and nod to opposite*)
Shalom, my friends, (*Extend hands, palms up, toward partner*)
Shalom, shalom! (*Bring palms of hands together, fingers up, in front of chest, and nod*)
God's peace go with you, (*Join hands within circle*)
God's peace go with you, (*Each circle moves to its left, so that each person faces a new partner*)
Shalom, shalom! (*Shake hands with new partner*)

Note: If you are working with only one circle, have the children move left as they join hands and then back to the right. Have each shake hands with the person on his or her right.

Repeat the song until partners are back to their original places. Let this be your closing prayer.

8 When a Pet Dies

Leader preparation: The death of a pet, even when it is very old, is a difficult experience for children. Many in your group may have lost a pet or have friends who have had that experience. They need to know that it is natural to feel sad when a pet dies, that it is all right to talk about their feelings, and that adults share their sadness and will miss their pets, too. Keep in mind that the way we help children grieve the loss of a beloved pet can prepare them to deal with the grief they will experience in the inevitable loss of family members or friends later in life.

Judith Viorst's story of a little boy who is grieving the death of his cat is a good conversation starter with children who have faced a similar situation. It can provide an opening to help them identify, understand, and cope with their own feelings of grief. Since the story implies that death is part of the life cycle and treats life after death as a mystery yet to be known, it also offers opportunities to reassure learners that the God who has blessed them with life will continue to care for them and love them forever.

Supplies:

- book: *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* by Judith Viorst, ill. by Erik Blegvad (New York: Atheneum, 1987), http://www.amazon.com/Tenth-Good-Thing-About-Barney/product-reviews/0689712030/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1 (check your public or church library for this book)

Begin a conversation about the death of pets by asking:

- Have you ever had a pet that died?
- Have any of your friends lost a pet?
- How did you feel?
- When you wanted to talk about your feelings, who was there to listen?
- What did a listener do to help you stop feeling so sad?

Introduce the book *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*. It's a story about a little boy whose cat has died. He is sad because he really loved that cat. Read the story, and then discuss it. Ask: *How was the little boy feeling after his cat died?* (Sad, lonely, loss of appetite, no interest in usual activities) Explain that these are natural responses to a loss. Anger is also a part of grief. We are angry when someone we

love dies, and sometimes we show that anger to people who are still alive. Anger can be seen in the story when the little boy got mad at his friend. Ask:

- What were they arguing about? (They had a disagreement over where the cat was after he died—in the ground or in heaven.)
- What do you think about that?
- What did the father say to settle the argument? (Like Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, the father treated the change from life to death a “mystery” and reassured the boy that though his cat was changed, he was still in God’s care.)
- How did the boy’s parents and his friend help him deal with his grief? (Talking about his cat, giving hugs, sharing memories, telling him it was all right to feel sad, sharing his feelings, planning the funeral, getting him involved in work)
- What can we do the next time we know someone has lost a pet?

Conclude with a prayer: *God, we are glad that you give us pets to love, even though it hurts when they die. Thank you for blessing us with family and friends who find ways to help us when we are sad. Amen.*



9 When a Friend Dies

Leader preparation: Losing a friend in an accident, in a suicide, or to a terminal or age-related illness is traumatic for children, whether that friend is one of their peers or an adult in the congregation. Such deaths may cause children to ponder their own mortality. They may even wish they had been better friends to the deceased. Children need a chance to celebrate the ways in which their friend had blessed their lives, and a concrete way to offer comfort to the family in their loss. This activity is designed to meet those needs, should the occasion arise when some in your group are dealing with the death of a friend. (If there is no present need for this activity in your group, keep it in mind for future use.) There are three project options that will allow the group to offer comfort to his/her family. Gather the materials you will need for the one you choose.

If you feel a need for guidance in talking with children about death, the resources listed on Attachment: Activity 9 may be helpful.

Supplies:

- candle, matches or electric candle
- Bibles
- scrapbook materials (option 1)
- construction paper, markers, scissors, pipe cleaners, tape (option 2)
- construction paper, markers, pencils (option 3)
- “Resources for Helping Children and Youth through Grief and Loss,” Attachment: Activity 9

Acknowledge the sadness some or all of the group are experiencing in the loss of their friend. Encourage them to express their feelings about the death and ask any questions they might have. Then light the candle and lead the following ritual.

We are all sad that [Name] has died, but we are glad that he/she lived and that we had a chance to be his/her friend. I will always remember . . . [Tell one of your memories of the deceased, and then invite children to tell theirs.]

The words of Jesus and the writings of Paul remind us that in death, as in life, we are always in God’s loving care.

[Have one learner read John 14:1–3, and another read Romans 8:38, 39.]

Let us pray: *Loving God, we give thanks for our dear friend (name). We know you weep with those who mourn his/her death, and we pray you will comfort all who loved her/him and give them hope in the promises made by Jesus. Amen.*

Conclude with one of these projects.

Option 1: Make a scrapbook about the deceased person to give to his or her family. You might include drawings of the person's favorite places or foods, written memories of shared experiences, "thank you" or "I'm sorry that" statements, photocopies of photos from church directories, and or news items from church archives.

Option 2: Use construction paper to make paper flowers with large centers on which learners write on one side "I remember when . . . [tell a memory]" and on the other side "I am praying for you." Attach the flowers to pipe cleaners and tie them together as a bouquet.

Option 3: Make a sympathy card from construction paper or cardstock, decorate the cover, and write a message of encouragement and comfort to the family.

Reflect

How did the two Bible stories help learners look at the future with hope? How did the background information on Natalie Sleeth help you in teaching learners her hymn? What did your group discover about ways to say goodbye in the activities dealing with the death of a pet and the death of a friend? How did dancing the "Shalom Chaverim" song give them a sense of saying goodbye to the past and hello to the future?

Parable

by Natalie Sleeth

Once upon a time—long, long ago—everything was dark and had no shape or form. And God looked around and said: “I want to make a world” and so the world was made. God made day and night and earth and sky and land and sea and trees and mountains and all sorts of creatures that could walk or run or swim or fly. But something was missing, and God sat down on a cloud to think. “I know what my world needs!” God said, “People!” So God created a man and a woman and gave them the power to make more people, and through the years the world became a busy place with all sorts of men and women and children everywhere! And God said, “I will give each of my people special gifts and I will help them use these gifts to make my world the best it can be!” And God looked down and smiled and said, “That’s good! That’s good!”

Now one of the people on God’s earth was a child named Natalie. God gave her the gift of music. As she grew, she learned to use this gift in many ways, and she gave thanks that she could share it with others. Natalie had a family—a husband and children and grandchildren, too, and each one was special and she loved them all. And God looked down and saw Natalie and smiled and said, “That’s good! That’s good!”

But one day Natalie began to realize that she was growing older and that her body was beginning to wear out. And she talked to God about it and asked for help. God heard her and said, “My child, when I made the world and filled it with people, I had a plan. I wanted my people to have life for as long as they could, but not forever because then my world would be too full with no room for anybody. I planned it so that when it was time to leave the earth, my people would come and live with me in heaven where there is no pain or sickness or sadness or anything bad.” And Natalie said softly to God, “Is my time to come and live with getting near?” and God said, “Yes, but be not afraid for I will always be with you and take care of you.” And Natalie said to God, “But I will miss my family and my friends, and they will miss me!” And God said, “I will comfort them and turn their tears to joy, and they will remember you with happiness and be glad for your life among them.” So slowly Natalie began the journey to heaven and day by day drew nearer to God. In the distance she could see light and hear music and feel happiness she had never known before, and as she moved toward the gates and into the household of God, she said to herself, with joy in her heart: “That’s good! That’s good!”

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Resources for Helping Children and Youth through Grief and Loss

Talking about Death: A Dialogue between Parent and Child by Earl A. Grollman. (Beacon Press, 1970)

This classic book is available in a third edition (1990), revised and updated. It includes a read-along story for parent and child, suggestions for answering questions children ask about death, and a comprehensive list of resources and organizations that can help.

http://www.amazon.com/Talking-about-Death-Dialogue-Between/dp/0807023639#reader_0807023639

“Tips for Helping Children and Adolescents in Grief” by Marty Tousley

This online article was written by a hospice bereavement counselor and clinical nurse specialist in adult psychiatric and mental health.

<http://www.griefhealingblog.com/2011/01/tips-for-helping-children-and.html>

“Suggestions for Helping Children”

This online source includes four short articles on helping children through grief, three of which are excerpts from *Bereavement and Support* by Marylou Hughes (Taylor & Francis, 1995).

<http://www.widowed.co.za/helping-children-p-83.html>

“Growing through Grief” by Carol A. Ranney

This online article uses the metaphor of a butterfly to discuss the three phases of grief Marylou Hughes describes in her *Bereavement and Support*. Although the discussion is in reference to the death of a child, it is as relevant to the death of a parent, grandparent, friend, or other loved one. It also brings the hymn “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” to mind.

<http://www.examiner.com/family-grief-bereavement-in-national/growing-through-grief>

Suicide: Coping with the Loss of A Friend or Loved One

This 21-page booklet contains useful information for those who have suffered the loss of a friend or loved one to suicide (survivors of suicide loss). Included in the booklet is advice for survivors from survivors, recommendations for how to deal with grief, anger and other emotions related to loss, questions and answers about suicide, suggestions for how to talk to children and others about suicide loss, and resources for additional information.

http://www.save.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=EFBEDC27-9E50-D3C6-D633315510EBFAE3

“Fierce Goodbye: Explaining Suicide to Children”

This online article is drawn from a faith-based documentary produced by Menonite Media in cooperation with Faith and Values media and shown on the Hallmark Channel.

<http://www.fiercegoodbye.com/?S=7>

“Coping with Suicide Loss: Helping Children”

This online article from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention includes an annotated bibliography of resources and organizations/websites that offer help for working with grieving children.

http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=FEDF6A4B-FA4D-F373-4F864EDAF1F49DC4

“Grief and Loss: Books for Children about Death and the Circle of Life” (2007)

This is an annotated bibliography of books, with an emphasis on helping children face their own terminal illness as well as dealing with the deaths of others.

http://www.dukehealth.org/health_library/care_guides/cancer/treatment_instructions/booksforchildrenaboutdeathandthecircleoflife

“Books about Death and Dying”

This is an annotated bibliography of books for children and their families that looks at death and dying from different ethnic perspectives. It includes books on the loss of a grandparent, a pet, a friend, a parent, and a sibling, as well as general books on help for parents, caregivers, and children.

http://www.champaign.org/parents/preschool_tot_spot/good_books/grief.html