



Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

The United Church of Christ History and Identity setting of *Faith Practices* is for those who seek to deepen their understanding and sense of connection to our denomination. Our church has a rich sense of history and tradition, yet we are a church on the move, believing that God is still speaking to us. These activities will engage you and your group members by introducing you to some relevant and important information about our church. As you discover more about the UCC and the discipline of blessing and letting go, you will encounter activities for people of all ages to deepen their knowledge and sense of relationship to one another. Although some activities are designated for children or youth, all activities are appropriate for use with adults.

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

These activities use some foundational materials about the United Church of Christ. If you do not know much about our tradition, one good place to start is at the church’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>. Many activities in this component refer to this website, because it contains a wealth of information about the UCC. As you think about these activities, reflect on what blessing and letting go means in your life. As a church seeking to revitalize various practices of faith, how may this discipline, which we practice on a daily basis, help us to deepen our sense of what it means to follow Jesus in our journey through life?

Prayer: *Welcoming God, you invite me to journey with you and your people. Empower me spiritually, so that I might learn what it means to let go of things I don’t need to hold on to and, instead, hold on to you. Help me to discover ways our church powerfully guides us on this pilgrimage with you. Amen.*

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Our Statement of Faith (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: When the United Church of Christ adopted its Statement of Faith in 1959, the delegates at the meeting spontaneously sang the Doxology. They praised God because the statement captured so well what they had been trying to say together for many years. Read the attachment “Statement of Faith and a Hymn.” If you wish to provide accompaniment for the hymn, plan for that.

Supplies:

- “Statement of Faith and a Hymn,” Attachment: Activity 1
- writing paper
- pens or pencils

Distribute copies of the attachment along with pens or pencils. Invite participants to read the Statement of Faith in unison or to take turns reading parts of it. Ask them to notice how the statement begins with words about God, followed by words about Jesus and about the Holy Spirit. It then speaks about our call to serve God in the church. It continues by addressing God’s promises to us and concludes with a word of blessing. Then invite participants to read it silently, underlining 8–10 key words. Ask a volunteer to read the statement aloud, with group members joining in on the words they underlined.

Describe how the United Church of Christ views creeds or creedal statements as testimonies rather than tests of faith. Explore with participants how this is different from how they once might have thought about such creeds and statements.

In 1 Samuel 16:14–23, Saul finds that he feels better when David plays music for him. By playing, singing, or listening to music, language that may sound prosaic takes on new life in people’s ears. Ask participants to look at the hymn on the attachment. Then sing it to the tune of “Amazing Grace.” Invite comments about the hymn as tool for helping people recall the Statement of Faith. As time allows, invite participants to write their own hymn lyrics based on the statement.

Ask group members to identify any new ideas or opinions they have about the Statement of Faith after this activity. If they are interested in exploring the statement further, they may wish to consider the book *Christ, Creeds, and Life*, edited by Anne Thayer and Douglas Jacobsen. This book, along with a study guide, is available from United Church Press and may be found at <http://www.united-churchpress.com> (1-800-537-3394).

Close the activity with this or a similar prayer: *We praise you, God, for giving us ways to testify to our faith. Through these, we may share with a common voice what we believe about you. Thank you for filling our hearts with blessings and grace in abundance. Amen.*



3 Art in Cleveland

Age Level: Adults

Leader preparation: Because issues of forgiveness can be very personal, this exercise may work better with a group that has already built a base of trust. Because it also calls for possible engagement with wider church officers, leaders will want to encourage an empathic spirit among participants.

Blessing and Letting Go

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: “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>
- writing paper
- pens
- Bibles
- (optional) information about a trip to Cleveland

Read the following information to the group.

The Cleveland Museum of Art is one of the finest art museums in America. For those of us in the United Church of Christ, the city of Cleveland holds an even deeper meaning. It is the home of our executive offices. In the church we have a great reverence for art. It can help us direct our focus away from ourselves and into places of spiritual awareness. The church, however, must be wary that our taste for art or architecture does not distract us from the mission that God has placed before us. We are called to be hospitals for sinners, not museums for saints.

Distribute Bibles. Ask two volunteers to read aloud 1 Samuel 16:1–13, alternating verses. Wonder together how David was an unlikely candidate for the future king of Israel and about the role of Samuel in designating David as king.

One challenge that the United Church of Christ has faced for years is the perception that there is a lack of connection between people in local churches and leadership in Cleveland. As communications improve, that may change for the better. The reality is that leaders can't be in all places at all times and that our sense of covenant in the United Church of Christ calls us to work together to bridge any gaps of understanding. It is to this end that we must work, especially as cuts in staff in Cleveland have been dramatic in recent years.

View the artwork “Forgiveness.” Ask participants to consider the positions of the persons in the image. Invite comments about how this image may speak to a breakdown in a particular relationship in their lives. A certain level of trust is needed for such a conversation; this is something that should not be forced or hurried. After spending time with this, invite group members to think about this image in terms of their relationship to the United Church of Christ. Together, consider how each might work at the discipline of blessing and letting go in terms of his or her relationship with the national offices in Cleveland. Ask:

- What forces or barriers keep the relationship between the local church and the United Church of Christ national office from being what it ought to be?
- What can we do in to break down these obstacles?

Invite the group to write a letter or send an e-mail message to one of the UCC officers in Cleveland. Identify a concern, and work together as a group to compose this message. Ask someone to serve as a scribe and someone to send it. A message may mailed to 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland OH 44115, or e-mailed to an appropriate address found at <http://www.ucc.org>.

Invite a member of the group to close with this or a similar prayer: *God, in our relationships there are often things that keep us from understanding one another. Leadership is complicated, and we don't have all the answers. Help us to humbly look to you to build bridges of understanding with one another. Be with the leadership of the United Church*

of Christ. Help them to make wise decisions as they love and serve you. Teach us to let go of any sense of alienation that we might have from our brothers and sisters, and give us strength to bless them. Help us to break down the distinction between “us” and “them” and offer our support to those who serve our church. Amen.

If desired, discuss the possibility of taking a trip to Cleveland. The denomination owns a hotel next the offices, and the expenses involved are reasonable. The staff at Cleveland is very gracious in welcoming visitors and inviting people to see firsthand how the work of the church is done there.



③ Looking Back on 1957

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: This activity works well with a group of adults or older youth who have built a level of trust with one another. Study “Christina’s World, 1948.” Consider how it speaks to your memories of the past. How might this painting speak to you about blessing and letting go?

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>
- index cards
- pens
- offering plate or basket

The year was 1957, the place was the United States. Elvis Presley was singing “Jailhouse Rock,” and Dick Clark was hosting *American Bandstand*. On June 25, a historic merger took place, as the Congregational Christian Churches united with the Evangelical and Reformed Church. They came together in a spirit of ecumenical cooperation that reflected the optimism of the day. The new denomination—the United Church of Christ—had over two million members, and it looked as though it was only beginning to grow. Since then, the denomination has developed in many ways. Numerically, however, our church by 2011 had just over one million members. There are many people who have a deep nostalgia for the past. They remember the days when their churches were full, when they did not have to face many of the challenges of modern life that they do now. At times, they may get discouraged, with the church outwardly not appearing to be as alive as it once was. This is a good time to remember the words of the prophet Samuel: “People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7 NIV). Although our outward appearance may not look like what the world considers growth, God knows the growth that has taken place over time in our hearts.

Invite participants to view “Christina’s World, 1948” by Andrew Wyeth. After a moment, distribute index cards and pencils. Invite participants to think of a memory from their lives that this painting calls to mind. Ask them to write this memory on one side of the card. Invite group members who wish to do so to read what they have written.

Ask participants to turn over the index card and write a memory about the church that the artwork inspires. Again, invite group members who wish to do so to read what they have written.

Set out the offering plate, and ask group members to place their cards in it. Offer this or a similar prayer: *God of our yesterdays, today, and tomorrows, thank you for*

precious memories of important passages in our spiritual journey. We thank you for the stories of our lives and of our life together as a church. As we bless these memories and cherish them, may we also discover that we can let go of the past. As much as our stories mold and shape us, we know that we are constantly moving forward. Help us not to be imprisoned by our past, and set us free to be your people today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Local Church Tour (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: According to the UCC Constitution, “The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church” (<http://www.ucc.org>). The local church is vitally important in our tradition. Ask someone (it may be you) who is familiar with your local church to plan to lead a tour of your church. Think about important points of the church’s past, present, and future. Reflect on objects you encounter in the physical structure. Think also about parts of your church’s life that go beyond its physical space.

Supplies:

- writing paper
- pens
- Bibles

Lead the group in a tour of your church facility. Tell stories about its history, and invite group members to do the same. Go to different rooms and explore what is in each of them. As you do, invite group members to lift up things that are going on in the church’s present or that you hope will occur in the future. You may be surprised to discover that participants have varying degrees of knowledge about the church’s story. Invite them to consider ways this experience speaks to their sense of blessing and letting go. Ask them to think about how changes in the building reflect changes in the life of the church over time.

- What have the members of this church been called to let go as they encountered change?
- How have previous generations blessed current members through the facility?

Entertain questions as you tour. Jot them down, and follow up later if they ask something that you have to research.

As the tour progresses, reinforce the idea that the church is not the building, but the people who are in it. Physical objects serve to remind us of our life or faith and of people who have gone before us or are presently with us.

At the end of the tour, distribute Bibles. Form two groups and read aloud Ephesians 3:14–20, alternating verses between groups. Then join hands in a circle and offer a closing prayer: *Thank you, God, for sharing with us the depth and the richness of each other’s stories in the life of this church. Help us to glorify you from generation to generation. Teach us how wide and long and high and deep your love is for us. Amen.*

5 Associations

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, and Children

Leader preparation: For this activity, you need to be familiar with your Association. At <http://www.ucc.org>, there is a list of Associations that may be found by

clicking on “About Us,” then “People Finder,” then “Association Directory.” You may also learn more by contacting your Conference or Regional Office. If you are not actively involved in your Association, find someone who is and seek information from him or her. What committees or groups does the Association have? What do they do, and when do they meet? Locate a list of the churches in your Association and learn where they are physically located. As you obtain the supplies and read the activity description, think about what it means to be part of a group of churches working together in a spirit of community.

Supplies:

- map of the geographic area of your Association (You can make this map on the Internet or use a road map. It will be marked up during the activity.)
- inexpensive stickers (crosses, religious symbols, trees, flowers or other things that could appropriately represent a local church)
- markers or crayons
- (optional) postcards and pens

According to Section 38 of the UCC Constitution, “An Association is that body within a Conference of the United Church of Christ which is composed of all Local Churches in a geographic area, all Ordained Ministers holding standing or ordained ministerial partner standing therein, all Commissioned Ministers of that Association, and those Licensed Ministers who have been granted voting membership in that Association” (<http://www.ucc.org>). Tell the group about the things you learned as a result of your preparation for today. Ask them what they know about your Association.

Place the map on a table. As you read the list of churches in your Association, ask for volunteers to place a sticker in the approximate location of each church building. Ask the group if they know anyone from these churches or anything about them.

Once the map is covered with stickers, invite participants to take turns connecting the churches by drawing lines with markers or crayons to create a beautiful web of church connections. Read aloud Ephesians 3:14 (NRSV): “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.” As participants look at the completed map, ask them to think about what a blessing it is to be a connected family of faith. Ask them to think of a word or phrase that comes to them as they look at the map with all its connections. Once they have these, invite them to join hands in a circle. Tell them that when they hear you say the word “for,” they are invited to shout their word or phrase. Close with this prayer: *God, we thank you that we can be a family of faith together. Thank you for . . . [let the shout happen] and be with our Association! Amen.*

As a follow-up to this activity, obtain addresses for other churches in your Association and have participants write greetings, words of blessing, or prayers on a postcard to send to each one.



6 Conference Bingo

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: As you prepare, use the attachment “Conference Bingo Questions” as a resource sheet to help you learn more about your Conference. If you don’t know the answers to these questions yourself, ask someone who is familiar with the Conference. You may also contact your Conference Office by phone or email. The United Church of Christ website (<http://www.ucc.org>) has

links to conference websites. If there are questions for which you cannot find answers or which you do not like, substitute your own questions.

Make copies of the attachment “Bingo Cards.” Cut the sheets in half. Take one game board and cut it apart; put the pieces in a bowl to use for calling the game.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Conference Bingo Questions,” Attachment: Activity 6a
- “Bingo Cards,” Attachment: Activity 6b
- bowl
- pennies or small pieces of colored paper to use as bingo markers

Introduce the activity by recalling how, in 1 Samuel 16:1–13, Samuel is seeking a new king for Israel and asks Jesse to present his sons. All the sons pass by, but none of them is God’s chosen one. When Jesse brings his youngest son, David, forward, God cries out, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” It is almost as if God shouted, “Bingo!”

Invite the group to join you in a game of Conference Bingo. Distribute copies of the bingo cards and pennies or small pieces of paper to use as Bingo markers. Pick a Bingo number from the bowl, call it out, and ask the corresponding question on the attachment “Conference Bingo Questions.” If participants know the answer, they place a marker on the number on their game cards. Ask them to shout “Bingo!” when they have a row vertically, horizontally or diagonally.

After a person calls “Bingo!” ask her or him to read the numbers back to you. Then read the corresponding questions back to the participant and ask her or him to answer those questions. Be upbeat and flexible—accept answers that are close, if not correct. If the participant cannot do this, keep playing until someone else calls “Bingo!” If you get a tie, pick the person you think shouted first. After the game is over, ask the group the unanswered questions and see how many of them they get.

Close with this or a similar prayer: *God, we remember how you gave Samuel the insight to anoint David king of Israel. Thank you for giving us new insights today into the life of our Conference. Thank you for blessing David so long ago. Bless our Conference this day. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Covenant (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Covenant is a central theme in the United Church of Christ. Although it is traditionally described as an agreement between two or more parties, we often think of it in terms of the relationship between God and us and our relationships with one another. Many of the ministries in the UCC are referred to as “covenanted ministries.” We view different parts of our church body as living in covenant with one another. For example, local churches, Associations, Conferences, and General Synod are in covenant together. Covenant is the way in which we describe our shared connections in our church. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this concept in our tradition. As you look over the attachment “Dramatic Reading,” think about how it speaks to the covenant that God has with God’s people.

Supplies:

- “A Dramatic Reading of 1 Samuel 16:1–13,” Attachment: Activity 7
- small amount of olive oil in small dish

Invite group members to say what comes to mind when they hear the word “covenant.” Summarize the information about covenant from the Leader preparation.

Distribute copies of the attachment “A Dramatic Reading of 1 Samuel 16:1–13.” Ask for volunteers to play the different roles. Before beginning, ask participants to look for ways in which a covenant is made in this situation. Enact the drama, and then ask the group how they witnessed a covenant taking place.

Return to the importance of covenant in the United Church of Christ. Ask: *What covenant do you feel God is making with you today, as an individual and as a church?*

Take the dish of oil and approach each group member, in turn. Ask each one if you may anoint him or her with oil, marking an oil cross either on the person’s forehead or the back of one hand. As you anoint, say: *With this anointing, may you know the blessing of God’s call to be in covenant with God and one another.*

When all have been anointed, invite them to go in peace.



8 “Five for Five” Fair

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, and Children

Leader preparation: Become familiar with the “Five for Five” special offerings in the United Church of Christ. These include our church’s Wider Mission Basic Support, One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, Neighbors in Need, and the Christmas Fund. Descriptions of these special offerings are provided at <http://www.ucc.org>.

Either set up or arrange for group members to set up a series of five fair booths that include information about each of the five special offerings of the United Church of Christ. You may want to set these up in a visible area in or near your worship space, so that others may see and explore them.

In the first booth, provide information about how Basic Support of Our Church’s Wider Mission helps to provide foundational ministries at the Conference and national levels. In the One Great Hour of Sharing booth, offer materials that describe the global outreach work done by the UCC in partnership with other organizations around the world. At the Strengthen the Church booth, present resources that reflect the newness and vitality that the UCC is working to empower. Let the Neighbors in Need booth show tangible ways in which your church is making a difference in ministries of justice and witness in our own backyard. Finally, in the Christmas Fund booth, place materials about how we help retired servants of the church who are in need.

Supplies:

- information about the United Church of Christ’s “Five for Five” special offerings
- “A Litany for ‘Five for Five,’” Attachment: Activity 8

Invite participants to spend a few minutes at each of the five booths. Pair children with youth or adults. After taking a tour of the booths, invite members to stand by the booth about which they feel most passionately. Different members may have different reasons for choosing different booths. Encourage those gathered at each booth to tell why they chose that one.

Gather the group and distribute the attachment “A Litany for ‘Five for Five.’” Join together in this litany as your closing prayer.

- What do such processions represent to you and to those in your congregation?
- What promises kept (or broken) are represented in your procession(s)?

If time allows, plan a procession for an upcoming special occasion in the life of your faith community, and follow up by seeking the support of congregational worship leaders in carrying it out.

9 General Synod

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Do you know much about the United Church of Christ General Synod? Have you ever been to one? It meets once every two years in different cities, and if you have never had the opportunity to visit or serve as a delegate, you may want to consider it. Our polity teaches us that the General Synod does not speak for the church. Instead, it speaks to the church and world in a spirit of covenant. You may learn more about General Synod by speaking to someone who has been to one, by contacting your Regional or Conference Office, or by visiting <http://www.ucc.org> and clicking on the link to it.

To prepare for this activity, go to the UCC website and click on the link to General Synod. Then click on the link to “Archive” to find minutes from previous Synods. Look at these and read a few resolutions that were made in the past. Pay particular attention to their form. Many of them start with statements beginning “Whereas,” in which they list biblical or social rationales for the resolution. They end with statements beginning “Therefore, be it resolved,” in which they state their conclusions and call for action. This exercise may not work well with younger youth.

Supplies:

- writing paper
- pens or pencils
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Provide basic background on General Synod. Ask group members to pretend that they are a working committee of the General Synod. Their job is to come up with a resolution that addresses one of the following problems. If none of these appeal to you, select another issue.

- A prominent industrial plant is firing employees in a town in which many illegal immigrants are suspected to reside. There is evidence that the plant is showing racial bias in the ways the layoffs are being handled. The church is asked to write a resolution outlining the biblical and social rationale for their position. How should the committee respond?
- There is a complaint that some of our church’s ecumenical partnerships are weakening. Concerns with declining membership and institutional survival are taking precedence over interchurch relationships. The General Synod is asked about whether or not it should reaffirm its commitment to ecumenical partnerships. Given the current state of affairs, what should the committee recommend?
- There is a war overseas that is taking the lives of many people. One side appears to be the aggressor, and the other side is quickly losing ground.

There is fear that the situation might become one of genocide. The side that is losing has not always looked favorably on our country, nor have we always looked kindly on them. The Synod is asked to begin a letter-writing campaign to come to the aid of the victims of the slaughter before they are all killed. As a committee, what resolution might you put forward?

After you have chosen the situation on which you will focus, read it to the group several times. Write their insights on the whiteboard or newsprint. See if you can come up with enough rationale to support a conclusion. Strive toward a biblical text on which the group can agree. As you work, consider which aspects of this situation might be occasions for blessing and which might be best let go.

When you are finished, pray for the General Synod, that their resolutions might be blessings to our church and world. Close with the following benediction from Ephesians 3:20–21 (NRSV): *Now to [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Reflect

Think about the ways you experienced these activities to be helpful or unhelpful to your group. To what extent did they provide participants with a sense of active engagement as they discovered new things about blessing and letting go and about the United Church of Christ? If you were to revisit any of these activities and redo them, what would you change? As you use other Explorations for this setting in this faith practice, take what you've learned so that future activities may be fruitful.

Attachment: Activity 1

Statement of Faith and a Hymn

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
and to your deeds we testify;
You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before each one the ways of life and death.
You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.
You judge people and nations by your righteous will
declared through prophets and apostles.
In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior,
you have come to us
and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to yourself.
You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.
You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.
You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
your presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.
Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you. Amen.

A Hymn Based on the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith

In you, we live, our Savior God.
We sing of all you've done.
You've made and judged all earthly things;
You've saved and made us one.
In Jesus Christ, you've come to us
And shared our death and life;
Your Spirit comes to fill our church
And bring an end to strife.
You call us to your church, O God,
To serve and show your love,
To share your goodness, gifts, and cross
And glory from above.
You promise those who trust in you
To be a faithful friend,
And through eternity we'll bless
Our God who knows no end.

Attachment: Activity 6a

Conference Bingo Questions

- B1: What is the name of your Conference?
B2: Who is your Conference Minister?
B3: What are the names of any Associate or Regional Conference Ministers that you know?
B4: Name of someone on your Conference's administrative staff.
B5: If your Conference has an outdoor ministry setting, what is its name?
- I6: If your Conference has an outdoor ministry setting, where is it located?
I7: If your Conference supports a nursing home or personal care facility, what is it called?
I8: If your Conference supports a nursing home or personal care facility, where is it located?
I9: How many Associations are in your Conference?
I10: Where is your Conference Office located?
- N11: Is there more than one state in your Conference?
N12: Where does your Conference have its annual meeting?
N13: Free space!
N14: If your Conference has a Moderator, what is her or his name?
N15: Are the churches in your Conference mainly from an Evangelical & Reformed background, a Congregational Christian background, a fairly even blend, or other?
- G16: Name an Association in your Conference.
G17: Name a seminary that your Conference supports.
G18: If your Conference has a training program for licensed or commissioned ministers, what is it called?
G19: What is the address of your Conference's website?
G20: Name a minister who is new to your Conference.
- O21: Name a minister in your Conference who recently left or passed on.
O22: If there are any youth ministries supported by your Conference, what are they?
O23: If there are ecumenical ministries that your Conference supports, what are they?
O24: If your Conference has a mission partnership with churches from another country, when are they?
O25: If you love your Conference, give yourself a chip!

BINGO CARDS

B1	I6	N11	G16	O21
B2	I7	N12	G17	O22
B3	I8	N13	G18	O23
B4	I9	N14	G19	O24
B5	I10	N15	G20	O25

B1	I6	N11	G16	O21
B2	I7	N12	G17	O22
B3	I8	N13	G18	O23
B4	I9	N14	G19	O24
B5	I10	N15	G20	O25

A Dramatic Reading of 1 Samuel 16:1–13 from *The Message*

Characters: Narrator, God, Samuel, Town Fathers, Jesse, Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah, and David

The Narrator, God and Samuel are on one side of the stage and everyone else is on the other, except David, who is offstage.

God: So how long are you going to mope over Saul? You know I've rejected him as king over Israel. Fill your flask with anointing oil and get going. I'm sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I've spotted the very king I want among his sons.

Samuel: I can't do that. Saul will hear about it and kill me.

God: Take a heifer with you and announce, "I've come to lead you in worship of God, with this heifer as a sacrifice." Make sure Jesse gets invited. I'll let you know what to do next. I'll pint out the one you are to anoint.

Narrator: Samuel did what God told him. (Samuel crosses to the other side of the stage.) When he arrived at Bethlehem, the town fathers greeted him, but apprehensively.

Town Fathers: Is there something wrong?

Samuel: Nothing's wrong. I've come to sacrifice this heifer and lead you in the worship of God. Prepare yourselves, be consecrated, and join me in worship.

Narrator: He made sure Jesse and his sons were also consecrated and called to worship. (Jesse, Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah step forward.) When they arrived, Samuel took one look at Eliab.

Samuel: *(to himself)* Here he is! God's anointed!

God: Looks aren't everything. Don't be impressed with his looks and stature. I've already eliminated him. I judge persons differently than humans do. Men and women look at the face; I look into the heart.

Narrator: Jesse then called up Abinadab and presented him to Samuel.

Samuel: This man isn't God's choice either.

Narrator: Next Jesse presented Shammah.

Samuel: No, this man isn't either.

Narrator: Jesse presented his seven sons to Samuel. Samuel was blunt with Jesse.

Samuel: God hasn't chosen any of these. Is this it? Are there no more sons?

Jesse: Well, yes, there's the runt. But he's out tending the sheep.

Samuel: Go get him. We're not moving from this spot until he's here.

Narrator: Jesse sent for him. (David enters.) He was brought in, the very picture of health—bright eyed, good looking.

God: Up on your feet! Anoint him! This is the one.

Narrator: Samuel took his flask of oil and anointed him, with his brothers standing around watching. (Samuel anoints David.) The Spirit of God entered David like a rush of wind, God vitally empowering him for the rest of his life. Samuel left and went home to Ramah

(All exit.)

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

Attachment: Activity 8

A Litany for “Five for Five”

One: “I pray that, according to the riches of (God’s) glory, (God) may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through (God’s) Spirit” (Ephesians 3:16, NRSV)

All: **Thank you, God for strengthening us.**

One: God, you have blessed us, and we are grateful. Help us to support Our Church’s Wider Mission.

Adults: **Thank you, God, for the basic support this provides to our ministry.**

One: We are glad for the ways we may help One Great Hour of Sharing.

Youth: **Thank you, God, for helping people around the world.**

One: We bless you for all gifts to Strengthen the Church.

Children: **Thank you, God, for making us new.**

One: We rejoice at the work for justice and peace that is done through Neighbors in Need.

Children: **Thank you, God, for helping us at home.**

One: When we think of the Christmas Fund, we are grateful for all who have served in your name.

Youth: **Thank you, God, for caring for older people.**

One: As we think of your gifts, we know there are many ways in which we may respond with gratitude in our hearts. Help us to do so, as we think of our “Five for Five” offerings this day.

Adults: **Thank you, God, for all your gifts.**

One: As we go today, may we truly be blessed and strengthened in our inner beings.

All: **Thank you, God, for blessing and strengthening us! Amen.**

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

The Greek word *aphiemi* is translated in various ways in the Bible. One of its most common translations is "I forgive." Forgiveness in this case does not mean that a wrong committed by a person is okay, but that the person who committed the wrong no longer has power over the one who was wronged. Finding the power to let go of the wrongs done to us by others is often not easy. As we learn more about our denomination through the experiences in this setting, learners of all ages hopefully will be better equipped to practice this spiritual discipline in their daily lives. Although some activities are designated for children or youth, all activities are appropriate for use with adults.

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

When the Bible talks about forgiveness, leaders often struggle with it. On the one hand, we know that blessing and letting go can be an incredibly healing thing. On the other hand, there are some things that are hard, if not downright impossible, for us to forgive. We may feel guilty when we can't bless or let go of certain things. The point of this faith practice is not to promote guilt, but instead to empower both leaders and participants by increasing their understanding of forgiveness and showing how our church encourages us in this practice of faith.

Prayer: God, help me to see that forgiveness is not about condoning abuse, but about finding ways that abusers no longer have power over their victims. Teach me to look to you as the source of my power, so that even when it takes time and work, I might practice the discipline of blessing and letting go as you would have me do. 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 The Congregational Christian Churches (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The Congregational Christian Churches were established in 1929 as a result of a merger of two streams of Christian tradition. Congregationalists arrived in New England from Europe in the early 1600s. Members of the Christian Church came together from a number of locations in the early 1800s. The attachment "Congregational or Christian Church?" relates some helpful information about these movements. Become familiar with them by going over the activity. Here is the answer key to the questions on the attachment.

- | | | |
|-------|--------|--------|
| 1. Co | 8. Ch | 15. Co |
| 2. Ch | 9. Ch | 16. Ch |
| 3. Co | 10. Co | 17. Ch |
| 4. Co | 11. Co | 18. Ch |
| 5. Co | 12. Ch | 19. Ch |
| 6. Co | 13. Ch | 20. Co |
| 7. Co | 14. Ch | |

Supplies:

- Bibles
- "Congregational or Christian Church?" Attachment: Activity 1
- pencils or pens

Distribute Bibles. Form two groups to read aloud Deuteronomy 34:1–12, alternating verses between groups. After the reading, invite group members to discuss the challenges that the Israelites faced at this point.

Explain that the people of Israel mourned for Moses' passing, but they continued on their journey in the hopes of settling in the promised land. This act of letting go and seeking blessing has been repeated countless times in history. In the life of the United Church of Christ, we have had to let go of the past many times in order to move into the future to which we believe God calls us. When the Congregational Christian Churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957, they had to let go of some of their sense of identity from past years. This was also true of the Congregationalists, when they merged with the Christian Churches in 1929, and the Evangelicals when they merged with the Reformed Church in 1934.

Provide participants with copies of the attachment "Congregational or Christian Church?" and pens or pencils. Because this exercise is challenging, feel free to invite group members to work in pairs or small groups. When everyone is finished, go over the answers and discuss them. Ask:

- What challenges you think the Congregational Christian Churches faced when they took the risk of letting go of some of their former identity in order to join with the Evangelical and Reformed Church?
- Have you ever faced the challenge of letting go of some aspect of your identity because of a profound encounter with another person or group? If so, what happened in this situation?

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.

Offer the following or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for moving us forward into your future. Remind us that we are people who believe that resurrection teaches us that death is not an end, but a beginning. As we grow and change as a church, help us to bless and let go of the past when it is necessary in order to follow your lead. Amen.*

If there are questions on the attachment about which your group would like to learn more, follow up with someone in your church or Conference who is familiar with our church's history and bring answers the next time the group meets.

2 La Amistad

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Read the synopsis of the Amistad event provided in the activity description. If there are young children in your group, pause during your reading to explain some of the words or places they may not know.

As you prepare, you might want to watch the Steven Spielberg movie *Amistad* (1997). The film is rated R, so it is not appropriate to use for this activity with youth and children.

Supplies:

- map of the world or globe
- a picture of the ship *La Amistad*, such as the one on Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Amistad#The_ship
- modeling clay or play dough
- blue sheet or tarp (to represent the ocean)

Gather the group on the blue sheet or tarp, and invite them to pretend it is the ocean. Show a picture of the ship *La Amistad* and tell the following story.

In 1839, a Spanish ship called *La Amistad* ("Friendship") sailed from Havana, Cuba, with a group of African slaves. (*Ask a volunteer to show Spain and Cuba on the map.*) These people, who were part of the Mendi tribe from Africa, were faced with the prospect of living the rest of their lives under the brutal conditions of slavery. They decided to revolt against their captors. A man named Sengbe Pieh led them in a mutiny, and they took over the ship. They thought they were sailing back to Africa, but instead they arrived in New Haven, Connecticut. (*Ask a volunteer to show Africa and Connecticut on the map.*)

Some people in the United States wanted to send the people and the ship back to Cuba. Others were convinced that slavery was wrong. They wanted to let the slaves go free. The Congregational side of the United Church of Christ family worked very hard to set them free. They arranged to have a former president of the United States, John Quincy Adams, be their attorney. The case went to the Supreme Court, and the court decided to let the slaves go free. In 1842, these people returned to their homes in Africa.

This story teaches us about how important it is for us as a church to reach out to those who are victims of injustice. It shows us that our church has done good things for people for many years and has worked very hard to help people be free.

Invite the learners to use modeling clay or play dough to make models of the ship *La Amistad*. They may make their own or combine their clay and efforts with others. Return to the blue sheet or tarp and have the young people place their ships at an imaginary port. Then remind participants of Moses and the people of Israel.

A long time ago Moses led the people of Israel from slavery to freedom. Before he died, he led them right to the edge of the land God promised them. The Bible tells us that when he died, the people were sad, but there were times when he was alive that they were mad at him. It is a dangerous thing to lead people to freedom, and some may get mad at us when we try to do the right thing. Some people are too afraid of that anger, and it is as if they stay in a port all their lives. But a ship is made to be sailed. Let's sail our ships out into the ocean. (*Invite young people to place their ships around the "ocean."*) As we think about the Amistad story and how our church helped set slaves free, let's celebrate the good news that God sets us free to love and serve other people and be a blessing to them.

3 Egg Hunt

Age Levels: Youth, Children

Leader preparation: This would be a good activity to use near Easter. It is based on the two-volume *Hidden Histories of the United Church of Christ*, edited by Barbara Brown Zikmund (Pilgrim Press). The books may be ordered by calling United Church Resources at 1-800-537-3394.

Plan a space where children and youth can dye eggs and where eggs can be hidden for an egg hunt. Recruit additional adults to help with the egg dyeing and to hide the eggs.

Supplies:

- hard-boiled eggs
- egg dye
- coverings for work spaces
- aprons or old shirts for participants
- children's story Bible

Invite them participants to dye eggs. As the eggs dry and someone has gone to hide them, gather the group to hear the story of the death of Moses. From a children's story Bible, read Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Invite comments and questions about the story.

When Moses died, the people were sad. Even the people who had argued with Moses when he was alive were sad. Around Easter time, we hear the story about how Jesus died. Discuss:

- How did people react when Jesus died?
- How did people react when God raised Jesus from the dead?

The good news we celebrate at Easter is that Jesus was raised from the dead. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so God raises us from death, too. *How might the eggs we dyed remind us of the new life Jesus gives us?* Relate the following to the group.

Several groups joined together to form the United Church of Christ. It was probably hard for some of them when they did that. They may have felt like a part of them was dying because they were leaving behind what was familiar to join in something new. But just as Easter teaches us about how God brings new life out of death, this was true for them, too. We can celebrate the different groups that came together to form the United Church of Christ. Some groups like the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church were very important in forming our church. But there

were other groups as well. There were Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrant groups from China, Japan, and Hungary, just to name a few. Many women and men came together to work to build a church in which people of all places might be included and welcomed. How might we think of the eggs we dyed as being like the wonderful diversity that our church shares?

Have the participants go on an egg hunt to find the hidden eggs that they dyed.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 The Evangelical and Reformed Church (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The Evangelical and Reformed Church was established in 1934 as a result of a merger of two streams of Christian tradition. Both traditions were of a strong German background. The Reformed tradition was one of the earliest movements in Protestantism. One of its earliest leaders, Ulrich Zwingli, opposed the practices of the Catholic Church of his day and emphasized the symbolic nature of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. The Evangelical stream came into being in 1817, with the merger of Reformed and Lutheran churches in Prussia (Germany). The attachment “Evangelical or Reformed?” relates some helpful information about these movements. Here is the answer key to the questions on the attachment.

1. R	8. R	15. R
2. R	9. E	16. E
3. E	10. E	17. E
4. E	11. R	18. R
5. R	12. E	19. R
6. R	13. E	20. E
7. E	14. R	

Supplies:

- “Evangelical or Reformed?” Attachment: Activity 4
- pencils or pens

Explain that in Deuteronomy 34:1–12 we hear about the death of Moses. The people of Israel mourned for Moses’s passing, but they continued on their journey in the hopes of settling in the promised land. This act of “blessing and letting go” has been repeated countless times in history. In the life of the United Church of Christ, we have had to let go of the past many times in order to move into the future to which we believe God calls us. When the Congregational Christian Churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957, they had to let go of some of their sense of identity from past years. This was also true of the Congregationalists, when they merged with the Christian Churches in 1929 and the Evangelicals when they merged with the Reformed Church in 1934.

Distribute copies of the attachment “Evangelical or Reformed?” and pens or pencils. Because this activity is challenging, invite participants to form pairs of small groups to complete this page. When everyone is finished, go over the answers and discuss them. Ask:

- What challenges do you think the Evangelical and Reformed Church must have faced when they took the risk of letting go of some of their identity and joining with the Congregational Christian Churches?
- Have you ever faced the challenge of letting go of some aspect of your identity because of a profound encounter with another person or group? If so, what happened in this situation?

Close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for moving us forward into your future. Remind us that we are people who believe that resurrection teaches us that death is not an end, but a beginning. As we grow and change as a church, help us to bless and let go of the past as you lead us forward. Amen.*



5 Guided Meditation

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Leadership is one of the most difficult challenges in life. The story of Moses leading the Israelites to the brink of the Promised Land, as it is recorded in Deuteronomy 34, is filled with hardships. Reflect on this as you prepare to lead the guided meditation “Imagining Moses.” As you think about leadership, consider what you know about the United Church of Christ Office of General Ministries. Visit the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on the links to “Church Stuff,” “Covenanted Ministries,” and “Office of General Ministries” to learn more. Pray for our church’s president and all church leaders, being mindful of how we are blessings to one another in life’s journey.

Supplies:

- “Imagining Moses,” Attachment: Activity 5
- (optional) meditative instrumental music and device for playing it

Invite group members to be seated and comfortably center themselves, perhaps closing their eyes. If you wish to play meditative, instrumental music in the background, start the music now. Then read the guided meditation on the attachment “Imagining Moses.” Where it says “pause,” pause for 30–45 seconds of silence before continuing.

At the end of the guided meditation, stop the music and give group members a few moments to bring themselves back into the present time and place. Then invite them to offer comments about this experience of guided meditation.

Explain that Moses was a great leader, but leadership was not an easy calling for him. It often isn’t an easy calling for God’s people today, either. This is why leaders need our prayers. Point out that in the United Church of Christ, the Office for General Ministries is led by our church’s president.

Invite the group to join in prayer: *Gracious God, thank you for teaching us to lead. Thank you for giving us leaders in our journey of life. Help us to follow you on this journey. We pray for our leaders in the United Church of Christ—for our president and for all who work in our Office for General Ministries. Hear us as we pray to you this day. Amen.*

6 Looking at Local Churches

Age Levels: Adults

Leader preparation: You can learn more about the United Church of Christ’s Local Church Ministries by visiting the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and clicking on links to “Church Stuff,” “Covenanted Ministries,” and “Local Church Ministries.” Does your church have a copy of the *United Church of Christ Yearbook*?

If not, obtain a copy of it for this exercise and become familiar with it. It is a resource that is good for all UCC congregations to have, and it may be ordered by calling 1-800-537-3394.

Supplies:

- *United Church of Christ Yearbook*
- Bible

The Office of Local Church Ministries serves congregations in many ways. It produces resources for capital campaigns, congregational vitality, and educational curricula. It works with Conferences in providing ministerial profiles so that candidates for ministerial positions may be matched with churches.

Show the key sections of the *United Church of Christ Yearbook*, including the different Covenanted Ministries in the first section, followed by the directory of Conferences. In the back of the book, show the list of ministers, followed by services and corporations. The big middle section focuses on local churches. Find your church and see what information is listed, paying particular attention to your church's giving to "Our Church's Wider Mission."

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 12:10 and Matthew 5:48. Invite participants to name the challenges offered in these verses. Ask: *On a scale of 1 to 10—with 1 being "Not at All" and 10 being "Excellent"—how well do you think our church is doing in extending Christ's love to others? In what ways do we do that?*

Challenge the group to think about the stewardship of your church. Figure out your per-capita giving. (Although some may want to compare the per-capita giving of your church with that of neighboring churches, try to downplay the sense of competition.) Discuss:

- Does this figure surprise you? Why or why not?
- To what extent is our church a blessing to our community?
- If each member of our church gave an additional \$10 per year, what difference would that make in the mission of our congregation and the mission of the UCC?
- How might we encourage one another to do more with our gifts?

Offer this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for our congregation and for all congregations that serve you. We praise you for all your blessings and ask that we might truly be blessings to one another. Be with the Church's Wider Mission and Local Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Pilgrim Press Painting (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: This exercise gives you an opportunity to become familiar with the Pilgrim Press. As you gather the supplies and read the activity description, think about what kind of a book you would write. Not that you would judge a book by its cover, but what would the outside of it look like?

Supplies:

- watercolor paints, brushes, paper toweling, water in cups
- (optional) markers

- drawing paper
- protective coverings for tables and for participants
- a few books, perhaps from the church library, including books for children, for youth, and for adults

Explain that the Pilgrim Press is the oldest publishing operation in the United States. The Pilgrim Press is part of United Church Resources and publishes materials on a variety of subjects. The Pilgrim Press attempts to produce a diversity of materials in a spirit of outreaching love. Consider visiting the UCC's website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and clicking on the link to "The Pilgrim Press."

Hold up the books you have brought. Ask:

- Would you like to read any of these books? If so, which ones? What attracts you to this book?
- If you were to write a book, what would it be about? What would its cover look like?

Distribute drawing paper and invite group members to use watercolors or markers to create a cover for the book they would like to write. After all have finished, invite each one to "show and tell" the cover he or she created. Ask each person to think of a word or phrase that describes the stories behind their covers.

Form a circle and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the gift of books and reading. Thank you for the Pilgrim Press and for the opportunity that our publishing house gives us to share ideas with people around the world. We thank you for the stories that you have given us to share. Bless the stories we share with one another. (Invite group members to place their covers in the middle of your circle.) Hear our stories, God. Amen.*

Ask the group, in a spirit of blessing and letting go, if you may create a display of these covers for others in the church to see.

8 Prayer Chain

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: The focus of this activity is on Wider Church Ministries in the United Church of Christ. Become familiar with the UCC "Calendar of Prayer/Mission Moments." This collection of mission stories can be found at <http://www.ucc.org/stewardship/mission-moments/>. Download the "Mission Moments" for several different Sundays and bring printed copies, one per participant.

Supplies:

- "Mission Moments" from <http://www.ucc.org/stewardship/mission-moments/>
- clear tape
- scissors
- Bible

Ask group members to tell what they know about the United Church of Christ "Calendar of Prayer." This online collection of stories invites people to pray for our church's ministries around the world. The UCC's Wider Church Ministries is one of the four covenanted ministries of our denomination.

Give a copy of a "Calendar of Prayer/Mission Moments" to each group member. Allow a few quiet moments for group members to skim their handouts, not-

ing the people and places that are described. (If there are young children in the group, pair them with youth or adults for this.) Invite group members to point out what caught their attention in a special way. Discuss: *How might prayer for these people and their ministries be a blessing to us and to them?*

Invite participants to cut their copies of “Mission Moments” into strips of about 2 inches by 11 inches. Show how to make a loop out of a strip, with the printing on the outside, taping the ends together. Work together to create a paper chain. Make this chain long enough so that you can have it in a visible place in your church so that you can call people’s attention to it. When the prayer chain is complete, ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 5:47. Wonder together how your prayers for the people and ministries in your prayer chain are a response to Jesus’ words.

Invite group members to join hands, making another kind of prayer chain. Offer this or a similar prayer: *God, make us bold to love not only our brothers or sisters who are near to us, but also those who are far away. Use our prayer chain to remind us and other members of our church of how we are connected to one another and to you. Be with each one named on the links of this prayer chain and for all who reach out through Wider Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Help our church to be disciplined in prayer for all those who are working for your realm of love both here and far away. Amen.*

Obstacles to Justice

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Visit the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on “Church Stuff,” “Covenanted Ministries,” “Justice and Witness Ministries,” and “Issues.” You will see there a list of justice issues that our church is addressing currently. Become acquainted with these. As you gather supplies and shape the setting for this activity, think of something that keeps you from working for justice in our world.

Supplies:

- modeling clay or play dough
- protective covers for tables
- a cross
- Bible

Place the cross in the center of your table or meeting space. Invite group members to tell what they know about the UCC’s Justice and Witness Ministries. Explain that our church’s website describes a number of issues that our church addresses, including: Civil and Human Rights, Peacemaking, Justice for Women, Sexuality Education and Justice, Racial Justice, Environmental Justice, Economic Justice, and Global Justice. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 5:43–45. Invite comments and questions about the text. Ask:

- In your own words, what is Jesus calling us to do?
- What is the challenge in Jesus’ words? What is the blessing?
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Loving our enemies means joining them in what they are doing.
- What obstacles stand in our way—as individuals and as the church—as we seek to stand against evil and do what is just?

Distribute the modeling clay or play dough. Invite participants to shape the clay to represent one of the obstacles we face in standing against evil and doing what is just. When group members are finished, show the clay you molded and describe how it represents something that keeps you from doing justice in the

world. When you are finished, lay it by the cross in the center of the table. Invite someone else to do the same. If the person does not feel comfortable speaking, she or he may simply place the clay model by the cross.

Offer this or a similar prayer: *God of justice, we lay before you today obstacles that keep us from doing what is just in our world. As we leave them here before your cross, we pray that you would take them from us and set us free to live as people who courageously work for justice. Help us to show your love in this world as we strive to be people who live justly and trust in your grace. Amen.*

Reflect

These exercises were offered to lead your group a little deeper in exploring the history and identity of the United Church of Christ. Think about how your own sense of creativity and engagement with the material deepened as you engaged these activities. How has your own sense of blessing and letting go grown as you have worked with this material? To what activities did participants seem to respond with enthusiasm? Bring these insights with you as you continue to offer activities.

As you send out your group, remind them once more that they have left their obstacles to justice at the cross and that they go forth free to witness anew to God's realm of love.

Attachment: Activity 1

Congregational or Christian Church?

Choose whether the statement most closely represents Congregationalists or members of the Christian Church. Next to each statement, write "Co" for Congregationalists or "Ch" for members of the Christian Church.

- _____ 1. Some were Pilgrims in the Mayflower who landed at Plymouth Rock.
- _____ 2. They emphasized the right of judgment and liberty of conscience.
- _____ 3. Some were Separatists who wanted to separate from the Church of England.
- _____ 4. The Cambridge and Saybrook Platforms were monumental documents for them.
- _____ 5. Jonathan Edwards, part of this group, preached revival sermons during the "Great Awakening."
- _____ 6. They founded Harvard and Yale Colleges.
- _____ 7. They emphasized covenant and local church autonomy in their teachings.
- _____ 8. Some were Methodists led by James O'Kelly in Virginia.
- _____ 9. Some were from a Baptist tradition led by Abner Jones in New England.
- _____ 10. Ann Bradstreet, a member of this group, wrote powerful poetry confronting their established powers.
- _____ 11. John Winthrop described them as a "city on a hill."
- _____ 12. Some were Presbyterians led by Barton Stone in Kentucky.
- _____ 13. Their first claim is that Christ is the only head of the church.
- _____ 14. They wanted to use only the name "Christian" to avoid party distinctions.
- _____ 15. Some were Puritans who wanted to purify the Church of England.
- _____ 16. One of their principles was that the scriptures were the only rule of faith and practice.
- _____ 17. They maintained that Christian character was the only requirement for membership.
- _____ 18. One of their principles was the union of all Christ's followers.
- _____ 19. They were a movement largely led by laity inspired by the Great Awakening.
- _____ 20. They unsuccessfully tried to merge with the Presbyterians in 1801.

Attachment: Activity 4

Evangelical or Reformed?

Choose whether the statement most closely represents the Evangelical or Reformed Church. Next to each statement, write "E" for Evangelical or "R" for Reformed.

- _____ 1. Ulrich Zwingli was one of their earliest influences.
- _____ 2. Michael Schlatter organized their first "Coetus" (gathering) in America.
- _____ 3. They were the product of the 1817 Prussian Union.
- _____ 4. Their motto was "In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity."
- _____ 5. A layperson, John Philip Boehm, led communion for them at Falkner Swamp in 1725.
- _____ 6. They were influenced by a "high church" movement called Mercersburg Theology.
- _____ 7. They founded Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.
- _____ 8. They founded Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
- _____ 9. They were known as the *Kirchenverein* (church union or united church).
- _____ 10. They used the Evangelical Catechism, which was written in 1847.
- _____ 11. They used the Heidelberg Catechism.
- _____ 12. The idea of *Pastorenkirche* (pastor in church) was important to them.
- _____ 13. The theologian Friedrich Scheiermacher was one of them.
- _____ 14. John Nevin and Philip Schaff taught at their seminary which was in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania.
- _____ 15. Kaspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus wrote their catechism in 1563.
- _____ 16. They were strongly influenced by Martin Luther's teachings.
- _____ 17. They were created by an edict of Emperor Frederick William III.
- _____ 18. When they came to America from Europe, many of them settled in Pennsylvania.
- _____ 19. They founded Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
- _____ 20. They established a Deaconess movement that did many important works of ministry.

Attachment: Activity 5

Imagining Moses

A Guided Meditation

Imagine that you have been on a long journey. The journey began with God setting you free from slavery. As you celebrated your freedom, your heart was filled with joy. You wandered over mountains and hills, through rivers and streams. You were going to a land God promised you, a land flowing with milk and honey. You faced dangers and hardships. Companions accompanied you on the journey. You were leading them. At times they whined and complained about your choices. You tried to be patient with them, but sometimes your patience wore thin. Can you think of people like that in your life's journey? Do they make you feel angry, even as you think of them now? What would it be like for you to let go of that anger?

Pause.

As the people quarreled with you, you wandered and wandered. You thought you knew the way, but it seemed to take so long. You started to wonder if God really was leading you. Maybe the people were right all along.

Pause.

But along the way, there were miracles. God did some amazing things that convinced you that God was present. Water flowed from a rock. Bread came down from heaven. When your spirit was troubled, God led you up on a high mountain and talked to you there. You talked as best friends talk with each other. It was a beautiful, healing thing.

Pause.

Now, you have drawn near to the end of your life. Again, you have climbed to the top of a high mountain. God shows you the land of promise. It is there, within your sight, but you know that you cannot go in it. This journey has taken you a lifetime, and you must now let go of this earthly dream. As you do, you entrust yourself to God. You know that your life is in God's hands, and you know that God will take care of you forever. Now, as you slowly open your eyes, think about the beauty and the danger of journeying through life. Think about what a blessing it is to let go of things we cannot control. Think about how good it is to let God lead us.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Setting

The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith speaks of how God calls us “to accept the cost and joy of discipleship.” As disciples of Jesus, we have much joy to celebrate. There is also a cost in terms of our commitment to following Jesus. In our denomination, we seek to follow Jesus in ways that, as our Statement of Faith suggests, “struggle for justice and peace.” These activities invite participants to continue to learn about ways our church advances this struggle in the world. These activities also explore ways the spiritual practice of blessing and letting go is an integral part of the work of promoting the cause of justice and peace on earth. Although some activities are designated for children or youth, all activities are appropriate for use with adults.

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

As you prepare to lead these activities, center yourself in prayer. Think about things that you needlessly hold onto and need to let go. Reflect on what it means to reach out with free hands to Jesus. How many times a day do you need to practice this? Think also about the participants who will join you on this journey of discipleship. Pray for them even as you pray for the work of the United Church of Christ. As you do the advance work for these activities, remember how blessed it is to share this spiritual journey with others.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the privilege of being on a journey of discipleship with you. Teach me what it means to practice letting go, even as I grow in understanding the blessing of living in a community of your followers. Be with me as I lead these activities. 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 Constitution (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: You can read the Constitution and By-Laws of the United Church of Christ at <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/constitution-of-the-ucc.html>. This document was first used in 1961 and has been amended many times since. One of its most important parts is Section 2 in its Preamble. Read this statement as it appears in the attachment “Section 2, Preamble.”

Supplies:

- “Section 2, Preamble,” Attachment: Activity 1
- pencils or pens
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bible

Distribute copies of the attachment “Section 2, Preamble” and pens or pencils. Invite group members to read the Preamble and circle any words that seem especially important to them. After they finish, ask participants to tell what words they circled. List these words on the whiteboard or newsprint. Discuss how church members work together to make decisions, either locally or at a wider level. Ask: *In what ways do the words we listed guide us to make decisions as a community of faith?*

Explain that a constitution is a document that helps people plan how they will organize their life together. In doing so, some local churches rigidly adhere to Roberts Rules of Order. Others are less formal and use a discernment process such as See-Judge-Act. In See-Judge-Act, participants facing a challenge call out possible ways of addressing it, write these down, reflect on them, and decide together how to respond.

- What benefits might churches discover in letting go of ways of decision making in the church that rigidly adhere to voting procedures in which there are winners and losers?
- What blessings might churches discover in considering their constitutions as working, evolving documents?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Colossians 3:15–17. Wonder together how the church might be governed by Christ’s peace in its life together. Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for giving us ways we can live together as a church. Help us to be people who let your peace rule in our hearts. Teach us to work for peace and justice in this world. Amen.*



2 Safety Zone

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Is your church a safe place? Do you have a safety committee? Although the call to discipleship entails certain risks, no church wants to a place where people fear for their physical safety. This activity introduces the work of the Insurance Board, which works with local churches to protect people from harm. While the world of insurance claims and concerns may seem distant from the church, it is vital to the church’s mission that people feel a measure of security when they gather together. As you collect today’s materials, visit the website <http://www.insuranceboard.org> to learn more about our denomination’s

Blessing and Letting Go

UCC IDENTITY & HISTORY

- 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.

insurance program. Think also about how safety is a blessing for us and how important it is for us to let go of any illusions of invincibility when it comes to the well being of people in our community of faith.

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
- drawing paper
- crayons or markers
- masking tape or wall adhesive
- Bible
- your church’s Safe Sanctuary policy

Ask group members to hold up a number of fingers to show how important safety is to them, with one finger being “not at all concerned” and five fingers being “very concerned.” Discuss: *What is the most important thing you do to stay safe? To keep your loved ones from harm?*

View “Christ Among the Children.” Invite volunteers to show where they see Jesus in the image. Discuss:

- Does this image of Jesus make you feel safe or unsafe? How so?
- To what extent do people feel safe in the church because of Jesus’ love?

Read together your church’s Safe Sanctuary policy. *What training is required for people in the church?* If your church does not have such a policy, talk with the pastor about creating one. Most church camps have a Safe Sanctuary policy. Ask your Conference or Association office for a sample copy.

Distribute paper and crayons or markers. Ask each participant to think of a person, place, or thing that makes him or her feel safe and to draw that on the paper. As they draw, tell them about the Insurance Board. The board consists of churches in the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the Presbyterian Church USA. The board’s motto is “Partners in Protection.” Our Insurance Board works to promote the blessings of safety in our congregations. Talk about the ways that your church creates safe spaces for people (such as guarding against slips, trips, and falls and protecting children from abuse). *What more can your church do to raise awareness of safety issues?*

When group members have finished their drawings, ask participants who would like to do so to “show and tell” their drawings. Respect those who wish to remain silent.

Write on newsprint or a whiteboard “Our Church: A Safe Place for All God’s Children.” Post the artwork “Christ Among the Children.” Invite group members to hang their drawings on the wall near the artwork, if they wish.

As the group looks at the display on the wall, read aloud Colossians 3:12–17.



Sisters in the Wind

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The Council for American Indian Ministry is an important work of our denomination. It comprises five ministries with twenty-two congregations in the Midwestern United States. Visit the website <http://www.caimucc.org> to learn more.

While you gather materials for the activity, think about the beauty of being outside and how such moments of enjoyment often direct us to the blessings of poetry or prayer. This activity will be enhanced by being held outdoors. Plan an outdoor area for your group to meet, if possible. Arrange for folding chairs or benches in the space. An important consideration, of course, is weather. If there are other reasons why it is not feasible to meet outdoors, make the best use of the space available to you and ask participants to use their imaginations in adapting this activity.

Supplies:

- 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
- pens or pencils
- “The Woods,” Attachment: Activity 3
- watch
- Bible

Briefly tell the group what you learned about The Council for American Indian Ministry on the website <http://www.caimucc.org>. Gather the artwork “Sisters in the Wind,” copies of the handout “The Woods,” and pens or pencils. Lead the group to your outdoor meeting space. Show “Sisters in the Wind.” Invite participants to say what comes to mind as they look at the image. Distribute copies of the handout and pens or pencils.

Ask how it feels to be outside. Invite participants to close their eyes and slowly breathe in the air as they quiet their thoughts.

The Native American Indians have a great reverence for the outdoors. They know the deep blessing and the spiritually healing power of being rooted and connected with our environment. Many things undoubtedly have gone on in your lives this week, and perhaps you have lost a sense of connection to the world that is around you. Take five minutes to sit here in silence or move to some other area. Read the sonnet on the handout and think about its meaning for you. If you want to write a poem or prayer, do so. If you don’t have a watch, don’t go far away, and look for us as we gather again.

After five minutes, gather the group. Close by reading aloud Colossians 3:12–17.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Make a Group Braid (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Youth and Children

Leader preparation: Visit the website <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/council-for-racial-and-ethnic.html> and read about the different ministries that comprise the “umbrella” group called the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries (COREM). Click on the links to learn more about its members, and be prepared to briefly tell some things about COREM to your group. Reflect on the challenges and opportunities entailed in working for unity in diversity. The activity will work best with at least five participants.

Supplies:

- five balls yarn, each a different color
- Bible
- (optional) artwork board, markers

Share what you learned about the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries, which represents Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries, the Council for Hispanic Ministries, United Black Christians, Ministers for Social, Racial and Economic Justice, and the Council for American Indian Ministry. These groups work together as a strong unit. Invite the group to make a braid from five different strands of yarn. (If you have a large group, bring more balls of yarn and make more than one braid simultaneously.) To create the braid:

1. Give the end from each ball of yarn to five different learners.
2. Ask the five learners to stand next to one another.
3. Have the learners weave the braid by taking turns crossing and going over and under one another's strands of yarn.

Encourage the learners to work as a group so that all strands are included. As they progress, do not be overly concerned if the braiding process is imperfect. Simply coach them to work together to take turns going over and under one another as they discover for themselves how to cooperate in the weaving process. When the braid is finished, gather the group to discuss the experience, asking the following questions.

- What was easy about making this braid? What was challenging?
- How did you figure out how to work together as a team?

Explain that the Council for Racial and Ethnic Ministries strives to weave a braid of justice, working together as a team. Remind the group that it is a joy and a blessing when we are able to come together and weave unity out of diversity. Read aloud Colossians 3:12–14. Close by thanking God for the blessings of unity.

You may want to tie any loose ends of your braid(s) and display it in a visible place in your church. On a piece of artwork board, describe how the group made the braid and what it means.

5 Watercolor Maps

Age Levels: Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Go to the UCC's website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on the links to "Change the World," "Racial and Ethnic Ministries," and "Council for Hispanic Ministries." This Council focuses on issues of justice and peace for people of Hispanic/Latino/Latina identity. As you read this material, pay attention to the geographic areas listed and the Council's mission. If young children will be part of the group, pair them with youth or adults for the painting.

Supplies:

- watercolor paints, brushes, cups of water, paper towels
- newsprint
- markers
- protective covers for tables and clothing protectors for participants
- map of the world or globe
- Bible

Briefly tell three or four things you learned when you visited the website for the Council for Hispanic Ministries (CHM). This council seeks "to promote its work among Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas in the United States of America, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other nations of the Caribbean, Central and South America." Ask volunteers to help you point out these geographic regions on your map or globe.

Distribute sheets of newsprint, and have learners use markers (or pencils first if they like) to draw the outline of North, Central, and South America. Then have them use watercolors to paint their maps. While they are doing this, draw a map yourself and use six different colors to paint the six regions (United States of America, Puerto Rico, Mexico, other nations of the Caribbean, Central America, South America), the areas served by CHM.

When everyone has finished, invite learners to “show and tell” their paintings. Then show the group how you painted the regions different colors to show the working areas of Council for Hispanic Ministries. Point out that although human beings create borders on countries that keep people out or in, God loves and blesses us all. There are no border lines on God’s love and blessings.

As learners look at their maps, read aloud Colossians 3:12–17. If you have space, display their maps next to a map of the world. Make a sign describing the maps as representing the work of the Council for Hispanic Ministries.

6 Tastes of Health

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: This activity requires advance preparation, for you will invite the group to share a meal together. Organize your group so that some members bring a healthy salad or appetizer and others bring a healthy main course. If you decide to have a dessert, have someone make one that is healthy. Arrange for beverages and table settings.

Learn about the UCC Council for Health and Human Service Ministries (CHHSM) at <http://www.chhsm.org>. As you prepare for this meal, think about what it means for you to enjoy the blessings of health and to practice disciplines of healthy eating and exercise.

Supplies:

- food brought by participants
- tableware and serving utensils, as needed
- Bible

As group members arrive, arrange the food on the table and set the places. Invite the group to pause to smell the food and think of a word or phrase that the smell brings to mind. Ask participants to hold onto these thoughts to offer during the opening prayer. Lead this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for the blessings of this food. We praise you for the ways it nourishes and sustains our bodies. Thank you for its marvelous aromas and for the thoughts that come to our minds as we smell it, such as . . .* [Name your thought and gesture for others to do the same.] *Amen.*

As the group eats, encourage conversation about fond memories of past meals. After the meal, invite group members to pitch in to clean up.

Gather the group and ask participants to tell about what memories the taste of the food brought to mind. Point out that you purposefully asked people to bring foods that are good for the health of the body. Discuss:

- Is the food served at church usually healthy? Why do you think that is the case?
- What are good things to keep in mind when sharing food when there may be people in the group who have heart disease, diabetes, or other chronic health conditions?

- What ethical considerations about the origin, production, and distribution of food are important for the church to keep in mind when planning meals?
- What else, besides serving healthy food, might our church do to contribute to the overall health of church members?

Share what you have learned about the UCC Council for Health and Human Service Ministries. The mission of this group is “to sustain and advance the work of healing and service as a ministry of the church of Jesus Christ embodied in its member ministries, the United Church of Christ and the church universal.” Compassionately challenge group members to consider ways they might change their diet and exercise habits to help them in their journey of Christian discipleship.

Read aloud Proverbs 3:5–9. Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the blessing of food. Thank you also for the opportunity to learn about how food nurtures and strengthens our bodies. May we eat and share food in such a way that we truly allow you to bring health to our bodies and nourishment to our bones. Bless our church, especially our Council for Health and Human Service Ministries, in its strengthening and healing work. Amen.* It may be hard for participants to relate to their own experience. Encourage them to explain how and why this may be so. With the understanding that all prayer is good, despite there being different perspectives on prayer and how and why one prays, invite participants to write a prayer based on the perspective that is least dominant for them. Have the group share their prayers as they feel comfortable.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 PAAM Collage (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Youth

Leader preparation: Spend time at the website <http://www.paamonline.org> to learn more about the work of Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries. You might want to do this activity in connection with PAAM Sunday, which is usually celebrated at the end of April. As you prepare, think about the blessing of being part of the rich diversity of the United Church of Christ.

Cut apart the verses on the attachment “Colossians 3:15a (NIV).” If your group is large, make enough copies so that each person will get one verse.

Supplies:

- “Colossians 3:15a (NIV),” Attachment: Activity 7
- newspapers and magazines to cut apart
- scissors
- tape or glue sticks
- world map or globe
- artwork board
- Bible

Give each person one verse cut from attachment “Colossians 3:15a (NIV).” Ask each one to read the verse aloud, emphasizing the word that is in bold on his or her paper. After you’ve heard all the verse readings, invite comments about how the verse may be understood differently depending on which words were emphasized. Ask: *Which reading of the verse was most meaningful to you?*

One blessing of being members of Christ's body, which is called to peace, is that we can celebrate our diversity as well as our unity. Tell the group about PAAM Sunday and the work of Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries and anything else you learned on <http://www.paamonline.org>. Invite participants to visit the site, as well. Tell them that PAAM's vision is "to unite and move forward, at the national, regional, and local levels, as Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans in the United Church of Christ."

Show the map of the world or globe. Ask volunteers to point out the Pacific Islands, Asia, and America. Provide magazines, newspapers, and scissors. Ask the participants to cut out photos or images that remind them, either directly or imaginatively, of these places or Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans. Tape or glue these images on the artwork board and title it "Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries."

If possible, arrange for the participants to lead a "Mission Moment" in your church's worship service on PAAM Sunday. Encourage them to tell some of the things they learned and talk about the collage they made.

When you have finished making preparations for PAAM Sunday, close join hands and recite Colossians 3:15a.

8 Go, My Children, with My Blessing

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Locate the hymn "Go, My Children, with My Blessing" by Jaroslav J. Vajda, hymn 82 in *The New Century Hymnal*, or use the website listed under Supplies. Arrange for an accompanist or song leader, if necessary. Reflect on what it means to be sent forth into the world blessed by God.

Visit the website for the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries, <http://www.uccdm.org>. Plan to share with your group what you learn. As you gather what you need for this activity, reflect on what it means to be commissioned and blessed as people who are differently abled and who care for one another. This activity will work best with an established group whose members have a relatively high level of trust in one another.

Supplies:

- song: "Go, My Children, with My Blessing" by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), hymn 82 in *The New Century Hymnal*, or online at <http://rock-hay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm>
- Bible

Distribute hymnals and invite group members to read aloud together the first stanza of the hymn "Go, My Children, with My Blessing." Invite them to think about what it means to be God's children and offer their ideas to the group.

Tell the group that you visited the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries website, and encourage them to do so later. Tell them about one inspiring thing you read or saw there. Explain that in so many ways life is about learning to live with loss. Time and time again we lose things and have to confront the pain and the grief we feel when we face a loss. Those who live with disabilities must daily confront the realities of their disabilities as well as the inhospitable ways of the world. On the one hand there is pain over exclusion, and on the other hand there is patronization. If we are truly all God's children who are blessed by God, we are called to celebrate one another's giftedness. Invite the participants to close their

eyes and take a moment to think of a time when they or a loved one suffered a loss. *How did you cope with it? Were you able to let it go, or is this something that you may never be able to let go?*

After a few quiet moments, invite group members who would like to do so to tell a personal story of loss. Allow enough time for this, and respond compassionately to all who speak. Read aloud Colossians 3:16. Invite everyone to sing “Go, My Children, with My Blessing.”

Invite the participants to browse the website “20 Ways to Add More Prayers to Your Life.” Share your own experiences of the ones that you tried out already. Invite everyone to pick one or two of these practices to try. Begin your next session with a time of sharing about everyone’s experiences of these practices.



Trust in God

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: This activity introduces United Black Christians (UBC). To learn more about this group, go to the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on the links to “Change the World” and “United Black Christians.” As you read about this group, reflect on the artwork, “The Baptism of Jesus” and on Proverbs 3:5.

Supplies:

- 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
- writing paper
- pencils
- basin of water

Read aloud Proverbs 3:5. Distribute paper and pencils and ask participants to write this verse on their papers. Read it again as needed until all have written the verse. Invite group members to spend a quiet moment reflecting on the verse, circling any words that stand out for them. When the group reconvenes, invite group members to tell their thoughts about the verse and the words they circled.

Introduce the group to United Black Christians. UBC seeks to provide voice for the African American members of the United Church of Christ:

- To strengthen black churches in the UCC
- To train and nurture leaders of our churches for Gospel inspired service to the black community
- To provide relevant ministry for our youth and young adults
- To empower the laity for present-day ministry
- To create ecumenical and worldwide partnership for service and evangelism
- To be active advocates for liberation and racial justice at home and abroad
- To provide spiritual nurture for our members
- To enhance clergy-lay ministry partnership
- To provide support to African American seminarians

Display “The Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West. Begin a conversation by asking the following questions.

- Of what preconceived notions or ideas does this picture challenge you to let go?
- What is the artist saying about trusting in God with all your heart?
- Where do you see blessing depicted? Where do you see letting go depicted?

Gather the group around a basin of water. If your group is small enough, you may ask members to dip a hand in the water all at the same time. If the group is too big for this, say the following or a similar prayer before inviting them to take turns dipping a hand touching the water.

Reflect

How successful were these activities in integrating information about the United Church of Christ, scriptural ideas, and the concept of blessing and letting go? In what way did these activities reflect our church's commitment to being a "multiracial, multicultural church, open and accessible to all"? Think about these things as you plan for future activities.

Help us, God, to trust in you with all our hearts. Teach us not to rely on our own insights. Bless the ministry of United Black Christians. May their work for racial justice break down barriers of misunderstanding and help us to receive new insights into the gifts of all your children. As we reach out and touch this water now, we pray that it might remind us of the water of baptism and of the new life that you give us through it. May it also teach us to let go of things that we don't need to hold onto, even as we hold onto you with our free hands. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Attachment: Activity 1

Section 2, Preamble

The Constitution and By-Laws of the United Church of Christ

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

The Woods

When I was in the woods these moments came
as I laid down in a cathedral of
arborvitae to pray and look above
their leafy hands into the sky. The same
reality that looked one way to me
once now seemed so strange, for choices were made
and things had changed since the last time the shade
of those trees calmed my fears. I've come to see
that's just how life goes, and I don't think that
it needs to be otherwise, because peace
and solitude in many ways may cease
when, as with woods, a line is drawn
at civilization's rising. While I'm there
I thank you for the moments we're in prayer.

Attachment: Activity 7

Colossians 3:15a (NIV)

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Let the **peace** of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of **Christ** rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ **rule** in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in **your** hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your **hearts**, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as **members** of one body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of **one** body you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one **body** you were called to peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were **called** to peace.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

The practice of blessing and letting go runs deep in the heart of Christian tradition. In the United Church of Christ we experience this teaching in many ways and on a variety of levels. The activities for this Exploration engage different settings for ministry in our denomination's life. These ministries of learning, growth, and service are shaped and formed by our traditions. Such traditions, in turn, shape and form us as followers of Jesus in this world. Leaders and participants alike may gain new insights with this material as they experience our traditions through our practice of faith. Although some activities are designated for children or youth, all activities are appropriate for use with adults.

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 148:1-14
Acts 10:1-48

Leader Preparation

Create space to quiet yourself as you prepare for these activities. Let go of the cares that you know you do not need to bring with you to these exercises. Think of the people who nurtured you and led you to this place of leadership in the life of the church. Reflect on how traditions have helped to deepen your faith. Give thanks for our church's heritage. Give thanks also for the group members who will accompany you in this exploration and bless you with their new insights and ideas.

Prayer: Praise you, O God, for the gifts of learning, love, and life. As I mine the depths and riches of tradition, help me to give thanks for the blessings of your church and for the good news of your grace. May the learning space that I create be one of hospitality that invites discovery of the freedom that you give through our Savior, Jesus, in whose name I pray. 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 Dancing to Psalm 148 (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Read Psalm 148 aloud. Think about how it makes you feel inside as the words roll off your tongue. Consider this scripture in conjunction with the United Church of Christ Pension Boards. Visit <http://www.uccpb.org> and learn more about this organization. Be prepared to report something about it to the group.

Plan to meet in an open space where there is room for group members to move around freely.

Supplies:

- "Dancing to Psalm 148," Attachment: Activity 1

Introduce the activity by mentioning that you did a little research on the website of the United Church of Christ Pension Boards and that they may do so as well. Describe two or three things you learned from the website. The Pension Boards help to provide a variety of financial resources for ministers and other United Church of Christ employees. Their faithful stewardship in the work of the church is a cause for joy and celebration.

Distribute copies of the handout "Dancing to Psalm 148." Invite the participants to enact Psalm 148, as it is rendered in *The Message*, through worshipful movement. Have one or more people read and the others to dance. As the readers speak the lines in regular print, the dancers will move to the cues in italics next to each line. Take your time with this, and have fun! Perhaps your group could offer this psalm in worship.

Offer the following or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for the ways the United Church of Christ Pension Boards are a blessing to us, even as you bless us with so many wonderful things in this world. We thank you for the gift of dance and for the ways in which we may speak and embody your praise. Amen.*

2 A Sheet from Heaven

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: This activity introduces group members to United Church Funds and the Cornerstone Fund. Go to their home pages to learn more.

As you prepare, read Acts 10:9-16. Think about Peter's vision of the sheet and how God uses the gifts of creation to speak to us about the blessings of life in the Christian faith.

If you'd like a less expensive option, make the banner from mural paper and the animals from construction paper.

Supplies:

- copies of the home pages for United Church Funds (<http://www.united-churchfunds.org> or <http://www.ucfoundation.org>) and the Cornerstone Fund (<http://www.cornerstonefund.org>), one of each per person
- pens
- large piece of felt, about 60" x 30"

Blessing and Letting Go

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.

- pieces of white or tan felt, about 6" square
- markers
- sharp scissors
- fabric glue or hot glue
- Bible

Introduce the activity by asking a volunteer to read aloud Acts 10:9–16. Ask:

- What does Peter's dream say to you about God's love?
- What does Peter's dream say to you about God's blessing?
- What did Peter have to let go of in this story?

God uses the animals in the sheet to teach Peter that all creation is good, all are clean. People and creatures alike are accepted by God. As the sheet reminds us of the blessings of creation, it also teaches us how important it is to care for one another.

One way our church does this is through the United Church Funds and the Cornerstone Fund. Distribute pens and the copies of the website homepages. Distribute the copies, and invite participants to circle any words or images that speak to them about caring for others in tangible ways. If you have younger youth or children in the group, you may want to skip this and instead just tell them one or two key things that you learned from the websites.

Invite the group to work together to make a banner of Peter's vision. Distribute the white or tan felt squares, and ask participants to use markers to draw outlines of animals and birds and then to color them. Keep animals large—just one per square. Ask participants to cut out the animals. You may want to pair younger children with youth for this. Then have participants plan an arrangement of the animals on the big piece of felt and glue them in place. Leave space on the banner for someone to print this verse (Acts 10:15b): "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Later, you may stitch a pocket across the top, insert a rod, and display the banner in a visible place in your church.

Close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the blessings of United Church Funds and the Cornerstone Fund. Thank you for the ways in which they help us care for one another. Thank you for Peter's vision of the sheet and the way you love and accept each person. May this good news strengthen us to show your love and care to each other. Amen.*



3 Desk Calendar Scavenger Hunt

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The United Church of Christ *Desk Calendar and Plan Book* contains a wealth of information in an attractive, spiral-bound book that can be carried practically anywhere. As you read Psalm 148 and collect the materials for this exercise, think of the blessings of resources that help you on your spiritual journey.

For this activity, locate two copies of the United Church of Christ *Desk Calendar and Plan Book*. Each UCC church receives one free copy each spring. Check to see if your pastor and church office have copies that you might borrow for this activity. You also may order books by calling 1-800-537-3394. There is a cost to order these, but they would be great resources for you and maybe someone else in your group to keep and use.

Ahead of time, go over the items on the attachment “Desk Calendar Scavenger Hunt.” Look through the *Desk Calendar and Plan Book* and note the page numbers on which you find the answers. If you cannot find the answers, come up with new questions. If you want to make the game more challenging, mix up the order.

Supplies:

- “Desk Calendar Scavenger Hunt,” Attachment: Activity 3
- Bibles
- two copies of the United Church of Christ *Desk Calendar and Plan Book*
- two bells, buzzers, or noisemakers

Form two teams and give each one a bell, buzzer, or noisemaker. Introduce the group to the United Church of Christ *Desk Calendar and Plan Book*, pointing out the main types of information found in it, and give a copy to each team.

Invite the teams to go on a scavenger hunt in this book. Encourage team members to work together to find the answers to your questions in the *Desk Calendar and Plan Book*. When a team has an answer, they should sound the bell, buzzer, or noisemaker. The first team to make a noise and give the correct answer gets a point. Celebrate the winning team with a round of applause. After the game, let participants know how to order their own copy of this resource.

A fitting response to the joy of life together is praise. Distribute Bibles. Ask the teams to read aloud Psalm 148, alternating verses between teams.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Cornelius and Peter Drama (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: During this activity you will invite your group to pray for Certified Educators in the UCC. More information about them may be found at the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, by clicking on links to “Church Stuff,” “Education,” and “Certified Educators” or “UCC Educators.” Certified educators seek creative ways to tell God’s good news in various church settings. Give thanks for the blessing of such creative people in our church as you prepare for today’s exercise.

Supplies:

- “Cornelius and Peter,” Attachment: Activity 4

Distribute copies of the handout “Cornelius and Peter,” and enlist volunteers for the various parts. Use it as written, or modify it to suit the needs of your group. It is a fairly long drama; encourage group members to take their time and enjoy it. Although some basic blocking instructions are provided, encourage actors to use their imaginations to elaborate on these.

After the drama, begin a conversation about the story by asking the following questions.

- In what ways was Peter blessed through his experiences? What did Peter learn about God’s blessings?
- In what ways was Cornelius blessed through his experiences? What did Cornelius learn about God’s blessings?

- How were others blessed through this Cornelius and Peter?

The focus of the prayer for this activity will be Certified Educators in the United Church of Christ. These creative people seek to bring scripture to life in various educational ministries. Mention the website that you visited for those who are interested in more information. Offer this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for the witness of Peter and Cornelius. Thank you for opening ways for all people to experience your grace and love in the church. Bless the work of church educators who live and teach your good news in dynamic and creative ways. Amen.*



5 Seminary Word Search

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Some of the seminaries of the United Church of Christ are closely related and others are historically related. Go to the website <http://www.ucc.org/higher-education/school/seminaries.html> to learn more about these seminaries.

Supplies:

- “Seminary Word Search,” Attachment: Activity 5
- pencils or pens
- Bibles

Distribute copies of the handout “Seminary Word Search” and pens or pencils. Tell two or three things you learned about these institutions from the website you visited in preparing for this exercise. Allow quiet time for participants to complete the word search individually or in pairs.

After all have finished, invite group members to tell about any experiences they have had with these seminaries. Then ask:

- In what ways are these seminaries a blessing to our local church?
- What things might seminarians have to let go of in order to follow God’s call to ministry?
- What can we do to nurture the seminaries in our church?

Close by inviting the group to read aloud Psalm 148:11–14 in unison.

6 Houses of Healing

Age Level: Adults

Leader preparation: Does your Conference or region sponsor a nursing home, personal care facility, or hospital? What sort of care does this facility provide? For this activity, do some research on such organizations in your Conference and bring information to share with the group. You may wish to call your Conference office, or if you know of a facility that your congregation supports, contact it directly. Some facilities have DVDs or other interactive material to introduce people to their work.

Recall a time when you experienced healing or a sense of deep personal care for yourself or a loved one.

Supplies:

- printed information about a UCC-sponsored nursing home, personal care facility, or hospital close to your congregation
- DVD player and monitor if a facility provides video information
- Bible

Show the group the information you acquired about a UCC-sponsored nursing home, personal care facility, or hospital in your area. If the facility provided a DVD with information, view it as a group. Invite participants to describe any experiences they have had with this organization.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 10:34–43. Note that this passage is often read in worship on Easter Sunday. Begin a conversation by asking the following questions. (If your group is large, form groups of four or five for discussion.)

- Have you ever been a patient in the hospital? If so, what is your sharpest memory of that time?
- What experiences have you and your family had with nursing homes or assisted living facilities?
- How does Jesus' resurrection shape our lives when we are physically or emotionally broken?

Say a word of thanks for the blessings of physical healing and care. Close with the following or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the blessings of UCC-sponsored facilities that promote wellness and healing. Thank you for Jesus' resurrection, truly good news for us. We rejoice that we share in the life of the resurrection that Jesus promises and gives to us freely. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities

7 **AUCE Puzzle (Easy Preparation)**

Age Level: Children

Leader preparation: Visit the website of the Association of United Church Educators, <http://www.auce-ucc.org>. Although AUCE newsletters are available to members only, there are some things on the website that anyone can explore.

Before the group gathers, cut out the seven different regions from the enlarged copy of the AUCE Regions map. If your group has more than seven participants, copy enough maps so that each person receives one region piece.

Supplies:

- printed copies (preferably enlarged) of the AUCE Regions map, <http://www.auce-ucc.org/AUCEhomepage/Regions.html>
- construction paper
- scissors
- crayons
- glue sticks
- Bible

Tell the group about the Association of United Church Educators, an organization of people in our churches who teach others about Jesus. There are gatherings of educators across the country. Distribute the regions cut from the map, one piece per person, and ask learners to color their pieces. When they are finished coloring, challenge them to work together to assemble the map on a piece of construction paper and then glue the pieces in place. Do not worry if it is not done perfectly.

Explain that the Association of United Church Educators teaches others about how welcoming and loving God is. We hear about this in the Bible. Read aloud Acts 10:9–14. Peter learned that God welcomes and loves all people, and that everyone is free to follow Jesus.

Offer this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for people who teach about Jesus' love. Thank you for blessing our whole church and people everywhere. Amen.*



8 More than Resources

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: This activity invites you to become familiar with United Church Resources by visiting <http://www.ucc.org/ucc-resources> or calling 800-537-3394 to request catalogs to give participants.

Reflect on the artwork “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds.” Think about the blessings of creation and how God calls us to live faithfully as part of it.

Supplies:

- United Church Resources catalogs for participants (If you cannot acquire these, print some pages from <http://www.ucc.org/ucc-resources>, and invite group members to visit this website themselves.)
- artwork: “St. Francis of Assisi 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&sortigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+francis+feeding+the+birds>
- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Distribute United Church Resources catalogs (or the printed pages from the website) and allow a few quiet moments for browsing the material. Ask: *What are some blessings of having access to helpful resources for use in the church?*

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 10:9–15. Ask:

- What did Peter learn about these animals? About God’s people?
- What happens when we view other people as resources to be used? What happens when we view them as beings created by God to be appreciated?

Display “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds” by Giotto di Bondone. Take a quiet moment for viewing, and then ask: *Do you think the artist considers animals more like resources to be used or more like God’s creation to be appreciated? How can you tell?*

On the whiteboard or newsprint, make two columns with these headings:

Resources to be Used (Extrinsic Worth)

Beings Created by God to be Appreciated (Intrinsic Worth)

Ask: *What happens when we consider God’s creatures as resources to be used? What happens when we consider God’s creatures as beings to be appreciated?* Be prepared for a variety of responses, and record them in the appropriate columns. Include comments made earlier as best as you can. When you have finished the conversation, invite group members to try to summarize what you have written.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 148:7–13, and then offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, Creator God, for the blessings of United Church Resources. Help us to grow in knowing that while animals and people may be resources for us, they are much more. Give us wisdom as we strive to be faithful stewards of all your blessings. Amen.*



9 Shalom All Around

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The song “Shalom Chaverim” has a beautiful, haunting melody that lingers when it is sung in the form of a round. Partners in Education in the United Church of Christ also hope to make a lasting influence on the church in terms of their teaching ministry in it. Visit the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on the links to “Church Stuff,” “Education,” and “Partners in Education” to learn more about them.

Supplies:

- copies of the Partners in Education information from <http://www.ucc.org> (click on “Church Stuff,” “Education,” and “Partners in Education”)
- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html> (also found in many hymnals and church songbooks); music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnn>
- “Shalom Chaverim,” Attachment: Activity 9
- (optional) rhythm instruments

Distribute copies of the information about Partners in Education and allow a quiet moment for participants to read it. Suggest that they visit the ministry’s website when they get home to learn more about this ministry. Summarize that the ministry of Partners in Education is intended to promote God’s work of peace and healing (“shalom”) in this world.

Listen to and sing “Shalom Chaverim.” The tune may be familiar to your group members. Distribute copies of the attachment “Shalom Chaverim.” Sing the words in Hebrew. It may be sung in a round, with different groups beginning where the numbers indicate. The Hebrew words may be translated differently, but one translation is: “Peace to you, my friends; peace to you, my friends; peace to you; peace to you. We’ll see you again, we’ll see you again; peace to you; peace to you.”

Encourage the group to try singing the words to Psalm 148:1b–3 to the same tune, as written on the attachment. Add percussion with rhythm instruments or by asking group members to tap the tabletop or anything else that may work as a drum. Encourage some improvisation here, as well. Sing through this several times, and then stop the singing so that only the drumming remains. Offer this or a similar prayer: *God, we praise you for the work of Partners in Education and for the wonders of all creation. Thank you for the gift of shalom: your welcome, justice, and peace. Help us to teach and learn more about the blessings of your shalom each day. Amen.*

Reflect

In what ways do you think these activities increased your group’s sense of the tradition of the United Church of Christ as it works in the world today? Did you sense that group members are growing in understanding of what it means to bless and let go? As you prepare for other Explorations, keep these questions in mind, even as you evaluate the responsiveness of the participants to the activities used.

Copyright ©2012 The Pilgrim Press. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.

Attachment: Activity 1

Dancing to Psalm 148

Text from *The Message*

Hallelujah! (*Stretch arms upward*)

Praise God from heaven, (*Point both arms straight up*)

praise him from the mountaintops; (*Bring fingertips together with arms overhead*)

Praise him, all you his angels, (*Flap arms up and down*)

praise him, all you his warriors, (*Tighten fists and flex arms*)

Praise him, sun and moon, (*Bring arms overhead in a circle*)

praise him, you morning stars; (*Move arms up and down while closing and opening hands*)

Praise him, high heaven, (*Point index fingers up*)

praise him, heavenly rain clouds; (*Stretch arms out and dance fingers downward*)

Praise, oh let them praise the name of God— (*Stretch arms upward*)

he spoke the word, and there they were! (*Extend hands from mouth outward*)

He set them in place from all time to eternity; (*Move arms as though setting something down*)

He gave his orders, and that's it! (*Cross arms over chest*)

Praise God from earth, (*Reach down, then up*)

you sea dragons, you fathomless ocean deeps; (*Pretend to move like a sea dragon*)

Fire and hail, (*Flap arms wildly*)

snow and ice, (*Cross arms over chest and shiver*)

hurricanes obeying his orders; (*Twirl quickly in a circle*)

Mountains and hills, (*Stand tall with hands overhead and fingertips touching*)

apple orchards and cedar forests; (*Extend arms out like a tree*)

Wild beasts (*Get on all fours and run like a wild beast*)

and herds of cattle, (*Stay on all fours and pretend to "moo" like a cow*)

snakes (*Slither on the ground*)

and birds in flight; (*Flap arms*)

Earth's kings and all races, leaders and important people, (*Cross arms and look important*)

Robust men and women in their prime, (*Tighten fists and flex arms*)

and yes, graybeards (*Stroke chin*)

and little children. (*Smile and jump up and down*)

Let them praise the name of God—it's the only Name worth praising. (*Point index fingers up*)

His radiance exceeds anything in earth and sky; (*Extend arms outward*)

he's build a monument—his very own people! (*Extend arms forward*)

Praise from all who love God! (*Extend arms upward*)

Israel's children, intimate friends of God. (*Extend arms forward*)

Hallelujah! (*Stretch arms upward*)

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

Desk Calendar Scavenger Hunt

1. What are the lectionary scripture readings for the Second Sunday of Advent?
2. What is the liturgical color for Maundy Thursday?
3. What is the focus theme for the Sixth Sunday of Easter?
4. The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time this year is which Sunday after Pentecost?
5. The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time is which Proper?
6. Who is the Minister or Team Leader of Financial Development Ministry?
7. What is the address in Berea, Ohio, for our Publishing, Identity & Communication Ministry?
8. What is the phone number for the coordinator of our Still Speaking Ministry?
9. What is the e-mail address for the Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries?
10. In what city is the Division of Overseas Ministries (Disciples of Christ) located?
11. Who is the Program Manager of our Child Sponsorship program?
12. Where are the offices of the Pension Boards and United Church Funds located?
13. Who are the Mission Interpreters of the Cornerstone Fund?
14. What are the seven seminaries of the United Church of Christ?
15. When is the Strengthen the Church offering received?
16. What is the toll-free number for United Church of Christ Resources?
17. Who is the Conference Minister of the Hawaii Conference?
18. Where is the Conference Office of the Maine Conference?
19. What is the phone number of the Penn West Conference?
20. What is the email address for the Southwest Conference?

Attachment: Activity 4

Cornelius and Peter

Acts 10:1–48 (NRSV)

Cast of Characters: Narrator, Voice (“offstage”), Cornelius, Peter, Men, Relatives

Props: A large sheet hanging from ceiling

Narrator: (*Enter Cornelius.*) In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him . . .

Voice: Cornelius.

Narrator: Cornelius stared at him in terror and said . . .

Voice: Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.

Narrator: (*Enter Men.*) When the angel who spoke to him had left, Cornelius called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him. After telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa. (*Cornelius and Men exit and Peter enters.*) About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. (*Peter approaches sheet.*) In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying . . .

Voice: Get up, Peter; kill and eat.

Peter: By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.

Voice: What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Narrator: This happened three times, and the sheet was suddenly taken up to heaven. (*Peter turns away from the sheet as Men enter.*) Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon’s house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him . . .

Voice: Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.

Narrator: So Peter went down to the men and said . . .

Peter: I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?

Attachment: Activity 4 (continued)

- Men:** Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.
- Narrator:** So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. (*Cornelius and Relatives enter.*) On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. (*Cornelius kneels.*) But Peter made him get up.
- Peter:** Stand up; I am only a mortal. (*Cornelius rises.*)
- Narrator:** And as Peter talked with Cornelius, Peter went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them . . .
- Peter:** You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit with a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?
- Cornelius:** Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said . . .
- Voice:** Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying at the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.
- Cornelius:** Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.
- Peter:** I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.
- Narrator:** While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said . . .
- Peter:** Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?
- Narrator:** So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (*Men pretend to baptize Relatives.*) Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Attachment: Activity 5

C	O	D	E	T	I	N	U	C	D	S	U	H	J	N	B	G	V	C	A
D	D	O	O	D	V	B	U	V	E	R	V	Y	I	T	E	B	A	N	N
E	R	G	S	V	Y	P	N	D	G	J	A	O	L	G	F	D	N	B	C
F	O	A	S	R	E	G	I	A	Q	E	Y	V	F	Z	X	V	D	M	A
G	F	C	E	F	G	R	O	G	N	A	B	I	R	V	Y	X	E	W	S
Z	T	I	Z	E	T	U	N	N	B	E	R	U	O	A	W	F	R	B	T
X	R	H	O	W	A	R	D	E	C	E	D	I	L	E	H	N	B	C	E
P	A	C	I	F	I	C	X	Z	W	R	J	E	E	P	Y	B	I	M	R
Q	H	Z	T	Y	U	U	I	P	M	T	C	W	G	F	D	L	L	D	G
I	L	A	N	O	I	T	A	N	I	M	O	N	E	D	R	E	T	N	I
F	R	X	P	I	X	B	E	I	N	O	C	N	M	N	O	T	P	E	J

Seminary Word Search

Closely Related Seminaries:

Historically Related Seminaries:

ANDOVERNEWTON

HARTFORD

BANGOR

HARVARD

CHICAGO

HOWARD

EDEN

INTERDENOMINATIONAL

LANCASTER

SEMINARIEVANGELICAL

PACIFIC

UNION

UNITED

VANDERBILT

YALE

Attachment: Activity 9

Shalom Chaverim

Words to “Shalom Chaverim”

**“Corresponding” words in Psalm 148:1b–3
(NRSV)**

Shalom chaverim

Praise the Lord from the heavens

Shalom chaverim

Praise him in the heights

Shalom, shalom

Praise him, all his angels

Le hit ra ot

Praise him, all his host

Le hit ra ot

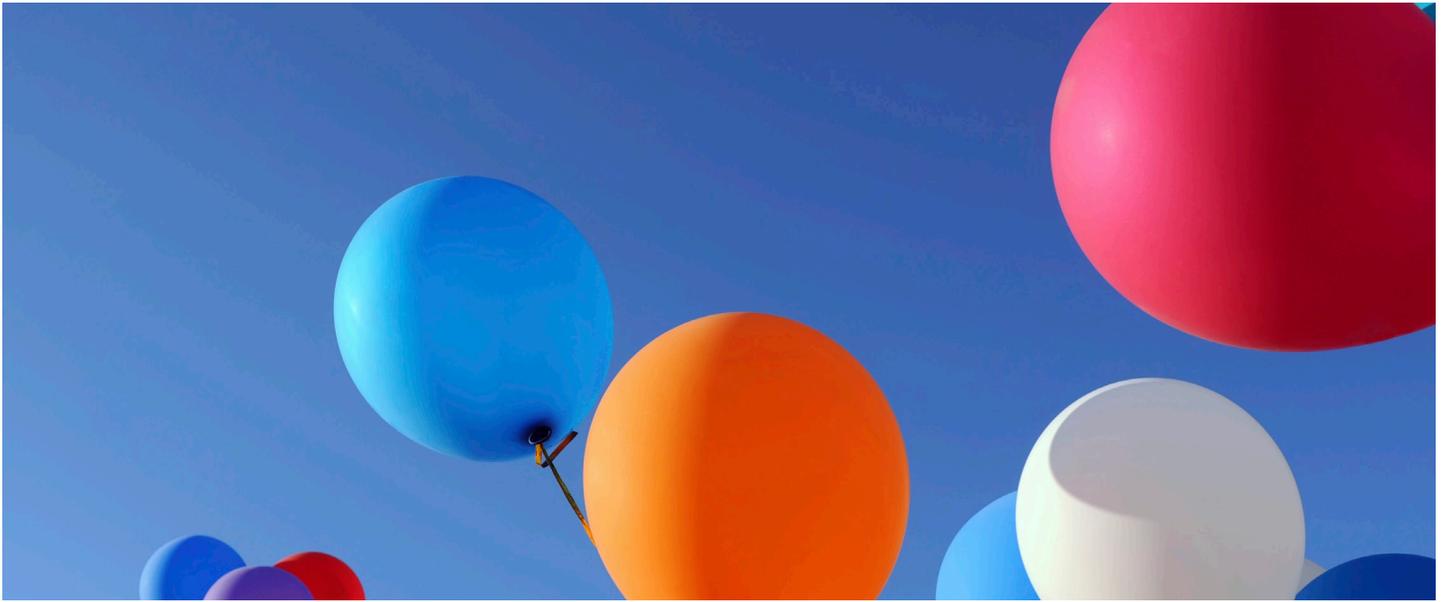
Praise him, sun and moon

Shalom, shalom

Praise him, all you shining stars!

Please note: The words from Psalm 148 are not direct translations of the Hebrew words! This is merely an adaptation of different words to the same tune.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

The faith practice of blessing and letting go is an important part of the church's mission. Jesus' charge to go and make disciples of all nations calls people to leave behind what is familiar and take the risk of stepping out in faith. From Abraham to St. Paul to people in the United Church of Christ today, God calls people to move out of their comfort zones to do the work of living out their faith in the settings into which God leads them. As groups engage these activities, they will encounter blessings that flow out of the risks of such lived faith. Although some activities are designated for children or youth, all activities are appropriate for use with adults.

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 12:1-4
Romans 15:22-29

Leader Preparation

How would you describe the church's mission in the world? How would you describe your mission in life? How similar or different are these two things? Take a moment to write these things down. As you think about your place in life and your mission in the world, reflect on how the faith practice of blessing and letting go fits in with your call to discipleship. What things are you holding onto right now that you would be better off blessing and letting go? Imagine yourself being set free from them to live as God desires.

Prayer: *Merciful God, help me take the risk of stepping out in faith. Strengthen me to bless and let go those things that would keep me from mission in your realm. As I lead others in these activities, inspire the gathering so that each person may live as you call us to live. 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 Church and Ministry Role Play (Easy Preparation)

Age Level: Adults

Leader preparation: If you do not have any experience with your Association Church and Ministry Committee, do you know of anyone in your area that has such experience? If so, talk to him or her about what it is like to serve on this committee. If not, contact your Regional or Conference Office and try to learn some things about what this committee does.

Supplies:

- Bible

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Discuss the passage by asking:

- What concerns do you imagine lie behind Paul's words to the Christians in Rome?
- What are some concerns about ministry with which our congregation and the UCC wrestle today?

Explain that in the United Church of Christ, Associations are charged with issues of authorization and oversight in their participating congregations. (See Activity 5 for more exploration of Associations.) They often delegate authority to their Church and Ministry Committees to act on their behalf. These committees are often small, but have many responsibilities to address. This activity gives an idea of what it is like to serve on this type of committee.

Describe each role play below, in which the group will take the role of an Association committee. Have participants engage in one of these role-plays, in which they will discuss the situation and seek a solution.

1. One person plays the role of someone seeking authorization as a Licensed, Commissioned, or Ordained Minister in the United Church of Christ. How might your Association committee proceed with her or him? What guidelines would you follow? What questions would you ask?
2. Your committee has been asked to conduct a periodic review of ministers in your Association. This type of review allows the committee to stay in touch with the ministers and stay current on how things are with them. How would you go about this? What input would you seek from churches? From ministers? What kind of procedure would you follow?
3. Someone plays the role of a member of a local church who comes to your Association committee with a concern. There are people in that congregation who think that their retired pastor is interfering with the work of their newly called minister. Some other church members support the retired minister and say that the new minister "just isn't the same." Others think the new pastor deserves more of a chance. What is the role of the Association in this situation? How would you handle it?

After the role plays, invite the group to reflect on the experience. Ask:

- How easy or hard was it to respond to these situations?
- How likely are you to want to serve on such a committee?
- In what ways has your appreciation for Association committees grown?

Blessing and Letting Go

- 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.

- What is the blessing of the work such committees do?
- When might these groups need to practice the discipline of letting go?

Close with the following or a similar prayer: *God, the church has struggled from its earliest days to discern how to organize itself so that it might serve you faithfully. We pray for our Church and Ministry Committee and for all Associations of the United Church of Christ. Thank you for the challenging work that they do and for the blessings that they are to our whole church. Amen.*



2 Speaking by Faith

Age Level: Adults

Leader preparation: What does faith mean to you? When have you looked to your faith to help you do something you knew you had to do? This activity focuses on the kind of work United Church of Christ chaplains do. This activity will work best with a group in which members have established a sense of trust in one another.

Supplies:

- Bible
- writing paper
- pens
- “Monday Morning,” Attachment: Activity 2

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 12:1–5. Ask: *What did Abram need in order to go where God called him to go?*

Distribute copies of the handout “Monday Morning.” Take a quiet moment for group members to read the poem, and then ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Ask:

- Why do you think the author of this poem speaks about faith?
- How is this author’s experience different from anyone else’s who might watch the birds eat the seed?
- How might this poem be like a parable about the educational ministry of the church?
- Have you ever had to risk stepping out in faith? What was it like? Did you have to let go of anything in order to do this?

Provide paper and pens and invite participants to write poems about faith. Encourage them to work with a partner, if they like. They may want to form the words of their poems into a shape, like the poem on the handout. They might want to write an acrostic using the letters of the word “faith.” They might want to use the formula for cinquain:

Line 1: A noun
 Line 2: Two adjectives
 Line 3: Three “-ing” words
 Line 4: A phrase
 Line 5: Another word for the noun

Invite group members who would like to do so to read their poems aloud. Invite the group to think of the work of United Church of Christ chaplains. Some chaplains serve in the military while others work in hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, colleges, seminaries, or other institutions. Most have had to take a risk to leave behind what was familiar in order to follow their calling.

Close by offering the following or a similar prayer. *Thank you, God, for the blessings of United Church of Christ chaplains. Thank you for the risks they take for the sake of their faith. As Abram took the risk of leaving his familiar home to go to a land of promise, help us also to listen to your voice and take the risk of following your lead. Help us to do this even when we do not see the external results that we wish we would see. Amen.*

③ Thread Connections

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Global Ministries produced a DVD called *Connecting Threads*. Secure a copy of this DVD by checking with your church office, church library, or calling 1-800-537-3394. Your Regional or Conference Office may have copies to loan, as well. As you preview the DVD, think about the blessings of having connections in ministry throughout the world. Choose some discussion questions from the accompanying study guide.

Supplies:

- video: *Connecting Threads*, produced by Global Ministries
- DVD player and TV
- ball of yarn
- Bible

Read aloud Genesis 12:1–4. As a group, wonder about the risks Abram took in following God’s call.

Tell the group about how the UCC takes a similar risk through its mission work around the world. Introduce your participants to Global Ministries by viewing the video *Connecting Threads*. Discuss a few of the questions from the accompanying study guide.

Gather the group in a circle. Hold the end of the ball of yarn and toss it to someone in the circle. That person will catch the ball of yarn, offer a prayer petition for missions, and hold onto a section of the yarn and toss it to another person (not someone standing next to him or her.) If someone would rather not speak, he or she may say “pass,” hold onto a section of yarn, and toss the ball to another person. Once everyone is holding onto the yarn, challenge the group to work together to untangle themselves so that they will have one long thread, with everyone holding a part of it.

Close with this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for blessing us by connecting us together in your church. Thank you for people who do your mission around the world and take the risk of letting go of what is familiar in order to share your love. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Kick the Can (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Youth, Children

Leader preparation: If you have ever been to prison, you know that prisons are often settings of high anxiety. In the United Church of Christ there are many people who participate in prison ministries and work with prisoners. If you know anyone in your congregation, Association, or Conference who is part of this min-

istry, talk with her or him about the experience or invite her or him to speak to your church, either in conjunction with this activity or on a different occasion.

Choose a space where participants have room to safely run and hide.

Supplies:

- a large, empty tin can

During his lifetime, the apostle Paul was held as a prisoner in a number of places, including Rome. In the United Church of Christ there are a number of people who minister in prisons. They visit, worship, and pray with the prisoners. Today, we give thanks to God for the blessings of prison ministries in our church.

Designate a part of your space as a “prison.” Set the can in the center of an open area. Choose two learners to serve as a team to be “It.” Give the rest of the players 30 seconds to hide somewhere. Set ground rules as to where they are permitted to go, for safety’s sake. The two who are “It” are instructed to find and tag the ones who are hiding. Once players are tagged, they must go to the “prison.” They have to stay there until someone who is not “It” runs out and kicks the can. Then all the “prisoners” are freed to go and hide again. Those who are “It” are not allowed to “guard” the can or the “prison.” Referee this by making sure that they keep several yards away from the can and the “prison.” Be sensitive to any who are physically disabled, and make provisions for them to participate. They may serve as referees or they may be allowed special dispensation to occasionally “kick the can” and set everyone free.

After the game, gather the group, and ask what it felt like when they were in the prison and what it felt like to kick the can and free the prisoners.

- What do you think it would be like to visit someone in prison and tell them of God’s love?
- How does Jesus set us free from all sorts of “prisons” in life?

Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the blessings of prison ministries in the United Church of Christ. Thank you for the ways in which you set us free to care for each other and to love and serve you. Amen.*

5 Over the Rainbow

Age Levels: Adults

Leader preparation: The United Church of Christ offers a variety of resources for Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) Ministries. Since the 25th General Synod adopted the resolution “Equal Marriage Rights for All” in 2005, the UCC has been a pioneer and leader in the struggle for marriage equality. Visit the website <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt> and print out the page for LGBT Ministries (or pages from other helpful links you might find on the subject) and make copies for your group. You may also want to begin envisioning the kind of sign that you want to make with your group. You will want it to represent as authentically as possible where you believe your church is regarding its openness and affirmation toward LGBT people. This activity is best done with a group that is aware of the UCC’s commitment to marriage equality and is supportive of it.

Supplies:

- Bible
- copies of the online LGBT Ministries page, <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt>, or any pages on any of the other links on that page that you think are helpful

- ribbons or streamers of different colors in the rainbow
- poster board
- masking tape, staplers
- markers

Read aloud Genesis 12:1–4. Spend a moment considering how risky it must have been for Abram to leave his home and set out for the land of promise. Affirm that life is filled with risks. Tell participants, as you learned in your preparation for this activity, how the United Church of Christ has been courageous in taking risks in affirming marriage equality for LGBT people. Distribute the copies you made from the website. Invite discussion of the material. (Note that this exercise is not intended to be a debate about homosexuality. As you observed in your preparation, this activity is intended to be constructive and informative.) Invite the group to think about how this relates to the discipline of blessing and letting go. Ask:

- What has the church let go in order to arrive where it is now?
- In what ways are our church and society blessed by this?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 9:8–17. Explain that rainbows are symbols of LGBT welcome. Invite your group to make rainbows using the ribbons or streamers. You may hang them on the doors of your space by carefully taping them to the top of the door frame. Then, make a rainbow by taping or stapling leftover ribbons or streamers on the poster board. Use the markers to write a message or slogan on the poster board that accurately represents your church's commitment to openness and affirmation of LGBT people. This will be fairly direct if your church is an Open and Affirming (ONA) congregation. If it is not, it still may be welcoming, and your poster may speak to a desire within the church to work toward more openness and affirmation. Display the poster in a place where your support of LGBT people may be witnessed.

6 Tradition

Age Level: Adults

Leader preparation: The 26th General Synod of the United Church of Christ issued a resolution titled “Reaffirming our Commitment to Covenantal Relationships.” The resolution states this:

It is our desire that the United Church of Christ continue to reflect theological diversity that includes members and churches who consider themselves to be evangelical, conservative, orthodox, or traditional (ECOT) as well as centrist, progressive, and liberal.

As you think about the theological and ethical diversity in the United Church of Christ, consider what a blessing it is that people with different views may worship God together side by side.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- writing paper
- pens
- hymnals or worship books

One of the popular misconceptions that people outside the church often have is that the church is a group of like-minded people. The truth is that the church is a group of un-like-minded people who come together in the midst of their differences to live out Jesus' call to discipleship. In the midst of our diversity we

discover opportunities to live out our faith and worship God together.

Invite participants to work together to create a brief worship service for your group. The worship service will reflect the diversity of your group, which is itself a microcosm of the United Church of Christ. Form pairs or small groups to plan different parts of the service: call to worship, hymns, litany of confession and forgiveness, sermon. You might want to encourage those who are working on a sermon to offer a brief reflection on Genesis 12:1–5 and Romans 15:22–29. The sermon may speak to the risks of celebrating diversity as well as the blessings of letting go of things to which we do not need to cling. Others may work on prayers of the people and a benediction. They may write their parts of the service or find resources in the hymnal to use. Work together to plan how you want the worship experience to flow.

Gather for worship, led by the people who planned it. You may wish to invite others, if you have the opportunity. After worship, thank group members for their participation, and thank God for the blessings of diversity in the United Church of Christ.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 The Journey (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The United Church of Christ is taking a closer look at the ways in which it authorizes ministers. As people prepare to be ordained, licensed, or commissioned in the church, they will join Association Church and Ministries on a journey of discernment. As “Members in Discernment,” candidates for authorization will work with these committees to consider what the church’s “Ministry Issues Draft 3.1” calls “Marks for Ministry.” As they embark on this journey, we pray that God’s Spirit might lead them. Visit the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on the links to “Church Stuff,” then “Leadership and Ministry,” and then “Ministry Issues Project.” Be prepared to tell one or two things that you learn.

As you read over the guided reflection for this activity, consider the ways the Holy Spirit leads you in life.

Supplies:

- “A Journey of Faith,” Attachment: Activity 7
- Bible

Tell the group one or two things that you learned about the Ministry Issues Project. Ask the group to remember to pray for all who seek to be authorized for ministry in the life of the church. As a prelude to the guided meditation in today’s activity, invite someone to read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Before you begin, invite someone to play the role of Jesus and stand aside for the first part of the meditation. Tell him or her to watch for your cue, and when you nod to him or her, he or she may walk by each group member.

Lead the group in the guided meditation on the attachment “A Journey of Faith.” Read slowly, pausing a moment after each question. You might invite participants to move their chairs to sit side by side and join hands, as though they are making a road.

After the guided meditation, invite group members to exchange a word of Christ's peace with one another as they leave.

8 Rock Drop

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The focus of this activity is outdoor ministries in the United Church of Christ. Does your Association or Conference have an outdoor ministry setting? If so, do your church members visit it or support it? If you are not familiar with outdoor ministries, ask someone on your Conference staff for more information. If you can find some printed materials about this outdoor ministry setting, bring copies of them to give to group members.

If at all possible, plan to gather outdoors for this activity. If this will not work, adapt this activity by inviting participants to imagine they are outdoors. Before the group arrives, pile some rocks in the center of your meeting space.

Supplies:

- Bible
- information about the outdoor ministry setting supported by your Conference
- medium-sized rocks or large stones
- plastic grocery bags

Gather the group and tell about the outdoor ministry setting supported by your Conference. Invite group members to tell about their experiences with outdoor ministry settings.

Read aloud Genesis 12:1–5. Ask group members to identify the worries and anxieties that Abram and Sarai might have carried with them on their journey to the land of promise.

Each of us arrived here today with burdens and problems. These burdens and problems have made a home in us. Think a moment of the different anxieties that you are carrying today. Pick up a rock for each one that comes to mind. Load the rocks into a bag. If you need to double up the bags so they do not break, do so. When you have loaded your bag, follow me.

Lead the group to a place where they may cast down their stones, such as a bed of rocks outside the church, a stone driveway, or a stream that flows near the church. Tell participants to cast down their rocks, one at a time. As they do so, invite them to imagine that they are casting down their burdens. If they cast their rocks into water, encourage them to watch as the ripples flow and to let go of even the ripples when the water has become calm. When all the burdens have been cast, close with the following or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for our church's outdoor ministries. Thank you for strengthening us to bless and let go of anxieties to which we no longer need to cling. Amen.*

9 Child Sponsorship

Age Levels: Adults, Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Global Ministries supports a Child Sponsorship program that provides a way for people to help children in need throughout the world. Contact United Church Resources at 1-800-537-3394 and ask for Child Sponsorship brochures for the members of your group. Or print them from the website listed below.

Look over a map of the world and become familiar with the global regions identified on the Child Sponsorship brochure, as well as the general locations that Paul mentions in Romans 15:22–29. Display the map of the world where group members can reach it.

Supplies:

- world map on which you can put stickers
- 4 small stickers (such as stars, hearts, or smiley faces)
- 5 large stickers
- Bible
- Child Sponsorship brochures, printed from http://globalministries.org/get-involved/child-sponsorship/ChildSponsor_3-9-07.pdf; also available by calling United Church Resources at 1-800-537-3394

Gather near the world map and read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Ask volunteers to point out and put small stickers on these places: Spain, Israel (Jerusalem), Greece (Macedonia and Achaia) and Italy (Rome). Paul wanted to help people who were near and far away, and he wanted to tell them the good news about Jesus' love for them. Point out that Christians today also are blessed to have the opportunity to help those who are near and far away. In fact, we can help people who are farther away from us than the people Paul helped were from him.

Distribute the Child Sponsorship brochures and spend time going over them. When you are finished, identify the five different regions from which people may choose to sponsor children. Ask volunteers to put big stickers on these regions: East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Southern Asia, and the Middle East and Europe. Ask participants to notice how much more of the world we can reach than St. Paul could.

Discuss the possibility of your congregation sponsoring a child in one of these areas. How might the group help to make this happen?

Close with the following or a similar prayer: *Compassionate God, we are glad for the ways in which Paul shared your good news around the world. We thank you for the blessings of children and for being able to reach out to help those who are far away from us. We pray for the ministries of our Global Ministries' Child Sponsorship Program. Bless the program and all the children supported by it. Amen.*

Reflect

What risks did you take in leading these activities? In what ways did this risk taking help you to move closer to carrying out the mission you believe God calls you to do? Taking risks is an important part of faithful living. Think about how your group responded to your leadership. Some may have affirmed your work, and others may have voiced unfair judgments about it. Be aware of the feedback of others, but do not let your leadership become an exercise in popularity. We are called to do what God wants, not what will win human affirmation.

Copyright ©2012 The Pilgrim Press. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.

Attachment: Activity 2

Monday Morning

Monday
morning
birdseed time.
Scoop by
scoop I fill
the trough and
leave. Not once can
I recall a time I stayed to
watch birds trace their angel
outlines in the snow. Maybe I'm
missing something, but deep within my
heart I feel that it's good for me to feed those birds
whom I have never seen. And when
those seeds I've sown grow
in unseen winter
birds, by
faith
I'll
know.

Attachment: Activity 7

A Journey of Faith

A Guided Meditation

Close your eyes, if you like, and think about what the road of life does when it passes through you. What is your section of life's road like? Is it bumpy or smooth? Are there potholes on it that you can swerve and miss? Are there twists and turns that make you hold on for dear life? Are there hills on it? Is there a downhill that causes you to go too fast? Is there an uphill that makes you feel like you are pushing and pushing and going nowhere? Is there much traffic on your road? Does it feel at times like a busy eight-lane highway? Or is it more like a one-lane country road that gets lonely because no one is near? What is the road of life like when it goes through you?

Nod for Jesus to begin walking by the group members.

Now, imagine that Jesus is walking by you. As you feel Christ's presence drawing near, know that you are not alone in your life's journey. Jesus is near you, leading you, helping you through your section of life's road, every step of the way. And there are other companions on your journey—companions whose hands you hold and to whose lives you are linked. Jesus is with them, too. Jesus leads us all over the challenges that life's road brings our way.

Pause as Jesus finishes his journey.

St. Paul was constantly on a journey. He traveled many roads and visited many people. He knew that Jesus was with him, even as Jesus is with us this day. As you slowly open your eyes, be comforted in knowing that Christ guides you along the road of life, so that you may let go of your anxieties as you share your journey with Jesus.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

The journey of discipleship never ends. We are people of the “here and now” and people of eternity. As members of the United Church of Christ we look to the future in a spirit of hope. This hope does not represent a progressive optimism in which circumstances always get better. Instead, it represents a reality that we are people of death and resurrection. In the face of loss and grief, we hear good news that God brings good out of evil, life out of death, and hope out of despair. Because of this, we may practice the discipline of blessing and letting go freely. Ultimately, we have nothing to lose. Although some activities are designated for children or youth, all activities are appropriate for use with adults.

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

What are your hopes and dreams for your future? How about for the future of your church? At times it is easy to look around us and become discouraged. Many of our congregations were flourishing in the 1950s and early 1960s, and we hope that someday we may return to those times. Ecclesiastes 7:10 reads, “Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.” Indeed, the “good old days” were not always as good as they might have seemed. In every generation there is good and evil. As you prepare to lead these activities, invite people to think about the future and reflect on the opportunity that is before each of you to sow seeds of hope for today and tomorrow.

Prayer: *What an opportunity is before me, O God! As I prepare to lead others in an exploration of the future trajectories that their lives may take, I ask your Spirit to prepare the way. Lead me now and always, and give me courage to follow faithfully. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Keeping You e-Posted (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Youth, Children

Leader preparation: “Keeping You e-Posted” is an important way the United Church of Christ communicates with its members around the world. Visit the UCC’s website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click on “News,” then “Keeping You e-Posted.” You can register for this service and look back at previous updates.

For this activity, choose a space where group members may run and hide.

Supplies:

- Bible or children’s Bible
- “Keeping You e-Posted,” Attachment: Activity 1

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 29:1–14. Explain that the prophet Jeremiah was talking to God’s people of Judah, who had been captured during a war and taken away from their homes in Jerusalem to the country of Babylonia. This was a very hard time for God’s people.

To help illustrate this, invite group members to join in playing a game of hide and seek. Choose one person to be “It.” This person closes her or his eyes and slowly counts to 20 while the others hide. When “It” is done counting, she or he begins searching for players. As players are found, “It” tags them, and they join “It” in seeking out and tagging the other players.

After the game, gather the group and discuss it. Ask:

- What did it feel like when you were hiding? What was your main goal?
- What did it feel like to be tagged and become one of the seekers?

Explain that the United Church of Christ tries to seek out people and let them know about the good things that are happening. Distribute copies of the hand-out “Keeping You e-Posted.” Encourage the participants to sign up for this free service. This is one way that families can know what is happening in the wider church. If your church has an e-mail list for communication, offer information about this as well.

Note that even though it is not easy to keep in touch when people are far away, we do not need to hide from one another. All of us can know the blessing of being found by God’s love. Together, wonder about how electronic communications may be used to help people be a blessing to one another.

Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for seeking us and finding us. Amen.*



2 Match the Partners

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Preview the attachment “Match the Partners,” and spend time browsing the websites listed there. Pray for our partners and for the work they do.

Here is the answer key to “Match the Partners.”

1. d 2. i 3. k 4. e 5. f 6. g 7. j 8. a 9. b 10. h 11. c

Blessing and Letting Go

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:

- Bible
- “Match the Partners,” Attachment: Activity 2
- pencils

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 29:11–14. Invite participants to summarize Jeremiah’s message in five or six words.

Explain that the people of Judah were living in exile in Babylon when Jeremiah delivered this prophecy. As followers of Christ, we sometimes may find ourselves feeling isolated, but we are not alone. Point out that in the United Church of Christ we are blessed with amazing partners in mission. We share a very close relationship with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our Formula of Agreement gives us the following full communion partners: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA and the Reformed Church in America. Finally, we have nine partners in Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). Along with 34 other member communions, the United Church of Christ is a member communion of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUA). The UCC also participates in Christian Churches Together (CCT). All these partners in ministry bless us, as together we share God’s good news with faithfulness and compassion.

Distribute pencils and copies of the handout “Match the Partners.” Form pairs to work on this activity, and encourage pairs to work with other pairs, as needed. Tell them not to be concerned about how many they get right, only to give it a try and have some fun. After pairs finish, go over the answers together. Encourage them to look up some these partners online.

Offer this or a similar closing prayer: *We praise you, God, that we are not alone. Thank you for blessing us with ecumenical partners in ministry. Help us to work to live out our church’s motto, “That they may all be one,” by working with our partners in a spirit of love and Christian unity. Amen.*

③ God Is Still Speaking

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: Visit the website of the Stillspeaking Ministry, <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking>, to learn more about the Stillspeaking initiative. Another slogan that the movement uses is this: “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.”

Locate a space that has a high ceiling, where you can release balloons. Purchase six helium-filled red balloons—with ribbons or strings attached—close to the time when the group meets. (Some stores sell “high float,” which keeps balloons in the air for a longer time.)

Supplies:

- Bibles
- slips of paper
- pens
- 6 red, helium-filled balloons with ribbons or strings attached
- clear tape
- permanent markers

Distribute Bibles. Invite group members to turn to Luke 2:22–38 and join in reading this story aloud, taking turns reading one verse at a time. Be sure to tell the group members that it is fine to say “pass” if they do not wish to read aloud. When the reading is finished, ask:

- How was God speaking to Anna and Simeon?
- How does God speak to God's people today?

Distribute slips of paper and pens. Explain that in our church we say that God is still speaking. A slogan that our church often uses is attributed to the comedian Gracie Allen: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." The comma has become a somewhat ubiquitous symbol of our church, and it has also come to represent the "Stillspeaking Initiative."

Explain that the challenge, then, is for us to listen. At times, we may discern obstacles that keep us from really hearing what God has to say to us. *What are some of those obstacles for you?* Invite the participants to write on the slips of paper obstacles that keep them from listening to God.

As they finish writing, ask participants to tape their slips of paper to the ribbons or strings on the balloons. Invite them to carefully draw big commas on the balloons with permanent markers. When this is finished, take the balloons and invite participants to gather in a space where the ceiling is high and release the balloons.

Offer this or a similar prayer: *God, thank you for speaking to the saints of old. Thank you, also, for speaking to us. Help us to listen to you. Take away all obstacles that would prevent us from hearing your voice. As we let go of these balloons today, may we release all such obstacles into your care. Freed from these, we pray that we might listen anew to what you are saying to us. Amen.*

Tell participants about the Stillspeaking Ministry online, and encourage them to explore the Stillspeaking Initiative for themselves. When the balloons come down, gather and dispose of them.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Congregational Vitality (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Youth, Children

Leader preparation: Learn more about the Congregational Vitality Initiative at <http://www.ucc.org/vitality>. From there, click on the link to "Vital-O-Meter," and then click on the link to the survey. The survey also can be accessed at the address in the Supplies list.

Meet in a space where participants have room to run safely.

Supplies:

- Bible
- copies of the survey, http://act.ucc.org/site/Survey?ACTION_REQUIRED=URI_ACTION_USER_REQUESTS&SURVEY_ID=1422

Gather the group and read aloud Jeremiah 29:11–14. Jeremiah is talking to a group of God's people who were captured in a war and taken to live far from their homes. Jeremiah is speaking a word of hope to them. Discuss: *In your own words, what is Jeremiah's message of hope?*

Lead the group in a game of freeze tag. Choose one person to be "It" and count to 20 so the others can run away from him or her. "It" chases the other players. When "It" tags another player, he or she must "freeze" in place and remain "frozen" until another player touches and "frees" him or her. Be aware of those with

physical disabilities and find a way to include them in the fun. After playing, gather the group. Ask: *How did it feel to be frozen? How did it feel to be set free?*

Explain that we want our congregation to be a place that is alive and running, not frozen. Tell participants about the survey for “Congregational Vitality” that helps churches plan ways to stay alive and running. Give them copies of the survey to take home, and encourage them to complete it with their families. They can go to the website to enter their results.

Ask participants to repeat this prayer three times, increasing in volume each time: *Thank you, God, for the blessing of being alive!*

5 In the Bulb There Is a Flower

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The United Church of Christ Musicians Association was founded to provide mutual support for those involved in music in UCC churches. Visit their website at <http://www.uccma.org>. Consider inviting a church musician join your group for this activity.

Supplies:

- *The New Century Hymnal* or hymnals your church uses
- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), *The New Century Hymnal* hymn 433 or http://www.hymnary.org/ext/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- Bibles

Distribute Bibles and invite group members to read aloud in unison Luke 2:29–32. Invite group members to recall any times they may have sung these words in worship. Look in the hymnal to see if there is a musical setting of these words, often called the Nunc Dimmitis. See #77 in *The New Century Hymnal*. If you have a church musician in the group for this activity, ask her or him to sing it or to lead the group in singing it.

Mention that today you want to highlight the work of the United Church of Christ Musicians Association. Their aim is to support ministries of music in UCC settings.

Read the lyrics of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” When Natalie Sleeth wrote this beautiful hymn, she dedicated it to her dying husband. He requested that it be sung at his funeral. The hymn speaks beautifully about the blessings of new life. Ask volunteers to read aloud the stanzas of the hymn. After each stanza, pause and ask group members what words or images stand out for them. Discuss how hymns and songs are a blessing to individual Christians and to the church.

Sing together “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.”

6 National and World Councils of Churches

Age Level: Youth

Leader preparation: The United Church of Christ is a member of both the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Visit their respective websites at <http://www.nccusa.org> and <http://www.oikoumene.org>. Make copies of each home page.

As you prepare, think about the blessings of the connections we share with Christians around the country and the world.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- copies of the home pages of the National Council of Churches, <http://www.nccusa.org>, and the World Council of Churches, <http://www.oumene.org>

Distribute Bibles and invite youth to look up Jeremiah 29:1–14. Move around the group to read the text, with each person reading a verse or two. Be sure that to read verse 3 yourself! Include everyone in reading, though allow anyone who doesn't want to read aloud to pass. Discuss: *What does Jeremiah say about the value of community—about the importance of people sticking together?*

Gather the group in a tight bunch. Ask each person to reach out both hands and grab the hands of others in the bunch. Challenge them not to grab the hands of someone right next to them. You should have a jumbled group with everyone connected by their hands. Now invite them to untangle themselves—while still holding one another's hands—so that they form a circle. Observe how they work together as a team to accomplish this. Assist anyone who has a physical disability. The participants may have to go over or under each other's arms in order to untangle the group.

When you are finished, distribute copies of the home pages for the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Call attention to the different faces and images on the pages, and invite the participants to think about what a blessing it is that Christians who are different can work together and celebrate their connections across the country and around the world. Encourage them to check out the websites of these groups on their home computers.

Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for connecting us together as your people. When we feel like we are far away from home, help us to look to our brothers and sisters in faith and realize that we are not alone. Bless the work of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Litany of Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: This activity focuses on Youth and Family Services in the United Church of Christ. As you prepare, think of occasions in your life when you have had to bless, let go, and move on to something new.

Supplies:

- “Litany of Blessing,” Attachment: Activity 7
- (optional) candle and matches, recording of meditative instrumental music, device for playing music

If you like, light a candle and softly play meditative instrumental music as the group gathers. Distribute copies of the attachment “Litany of Blessing.” Invite the group to join you in a time of prayer, following the directions on the handout. Take your time with this prayer, especially with the part in which hands are laid upon group members.

After the prayer, thank participants for the journey of faith that you share.

8 Find a Church

Age Level: Youth

Leader preparation: Visit the UCC's website, <http://www.ucc.org>, and click "Church Stuff" and then "Find a Church." Try out the search feature on this website.

Practice Jeremiah 29:13 until you can say it from memory.

Supplies:

- cane or stick or something that can serve as a "pointer"

Play the following observation game. Take the pointer in one hand and say the following words with the corresponding motions:

The man in the moon is round. (*Point the stick down and draw an imaginary circle.*)

He has two eyes, (*Point two eyes.*)

a nose, (*Point a nose.*)

and a mouth. (*As you draw out the mouth, extend your index finger on the pointer.*)

Ask participants to try to repeat the verse exactly as you did it. Look for the extension of the index finger as they draw the mouth. If they do not do this, repeat the process, asking them to observe exactly what you are doing. Often, one or two people will see the trick and get it right. If you are out of time, ask someone who has made the observation to show the others how it is done.

Teach the "memory verse," Jeremiah 29:13: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." Break the verse up into parts and include motions with your hands:

When you search for me (*Put your hand above your eyes like you are looking out.*)

You will find me (*Cross your arms over your chest.*)

If you seek me (*Put your hand above your eyes like you are looking out.*)

With all your heart. (*Cross your arms over your chest.*)

Practice the verse until all can say it. Explain that sometimes it takes work and concentration in order to find the answers to life's puzzles. Let them know that the United Church of Christ has a "Find a Church" program to help people find churches in any area of the country. This feature is a blessing that can help Christians find one another.

Repeat the scripture verse with the motions as you close your time together.

9 Youth and Young Adult Ministries

Age Levels: Adults, Youth

Leader preparation: The Council for Youth and Young Adult Ministries in the United Church of Christ promotes youth and young adult ministries in our church. Youth and young adults are not only part of our church's future but also integral in our present reality.

Supplies:

- Bible

Gather the group in a circle. This activity invites the group to honor the work of the Council for Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Ask:

- How might an emphasis on youth and young adult ministry help our congregation and the United Church of Christ here and now?
- How might youth and young adult ministries help make a difference in our church's future?

Invite the group to enjoy a moment of silence. Explain that many of us came here today with many cares on our hearts. God gives to us the gift of being able to bless and let go of so many things to which we do not need to hold. *What are some of these things?* Ask group members to imagine that they are holding these things in their arms. Have them close their eyes as they grasp their arms around them and feel their weight. Then encourage them to lift their burdens up as they raise their arms in the air and release the weight. Ask them to feel the lightness and freedom of not carrying these burdens.

Reflect

In what ways have you and your participants grown in understanding the United Church of Christ? To what extent have you grown in your practice of blessing and letting go? Looking back, what things might you have done differently to enhance your group's experiences of the church and of this faith practice?

Ask group members—now that they have been freed from the things to which they do not need to cling—to remember Simeon's words as he blessed the infant Jesus. Close by reading aloud Luke 2:29–32.

Keeping You e-Posted

To receive regular e-mail updates from the United Church of Christ:

1. Visit www.ucc.org.
2. Click on “News.”
3. Click on “Keeping You e-Posted.”
4. Follow the instructions to sign up!

Attachment: Activity 2

Match the Partners

Match the ecumenical partners of the United Church of Christ with their descriptions by writing the correct letter by each number.

An asterisk by a partner’s name indicates that it is a partner with the UCC through Churches Uniting in Christ. A plus sign signifies that the denomination is a full communion partner through the Formula of Agreement.

Partners	Description
___ 1. African Methodist Episcopal Church* (www.ame-church.com)	a. They are also known as “Unitas Fratrum” (“Unity of Brethren”).
___ 2. African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (www.amez.org)	b. Their slogan is: “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.”
___ 3. Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (www.disciples.org)	c. They are affiliated with Hope College and the Crystal Cathedral.
___ 4. Christian Methodist Episcopal Church* (www.c-m-e.org)	d. Their logo contains a cross and anvil.
___ 5. The Episcopal Church* (www.episcopalchurch.org)	e. They were formerly called the “Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.”
___ 6. International Council of Community Churches* (www.icccusa.com)	f. Their presiding bishop is currently The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori.
___ 7. Presbyterian Church USA*+ (www.pcusa.org)	g. They came together in 1950 in a merger of fellowships in the Community Church movement.
___ 8. Moravian Church in North America* (www.moravian.org)	h. They were directly inspired by the teachings of the great reformer, Martin Luther.
___ 9. The United Methodist Church* (www.umc.org)	i. Their corporate headquarters is in Charlotte, North Carolina.
___ 10. Evangelical Lutheran Church of America+ (www.elca.org)	j. Their name comes from the word “elder,” and they were inspired by the teachings of John Calvin.
___ 11. Reformed Church in America+ (www.rca.org)	k. They are Global Mission Partners with the UCC.

Attachment: Activity 7

Litany of Blessing

Leader: We remember, God, how the Gospel of Luke speaks about a man named Simeon who was at the temple in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen God's Messiah. While he was in the temple courts, he saw Mary and Joseph bringing their child to be presented before God. When Simeon saw the child, he took him in his arms and said,

People: "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-31, NRSV)

Leader: We remember also how the prophet Anna, daughter of Penuel, was also in the temple. She never left it, worshiping night and day, fasting and praying.

People: She came up to Mary and Joseph and gave thanks to God, speaking about the child to everyone who was looking forward to Israel's redemption.

Leader: As we think about how Simeon and Anna blessed Jesus as a child, we give thanks for the ways in which our church reaches out to bless children.

People: We give thanks for the blessing of Hoffman Homes for Youth in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Leader: We give thanks for the blessing of Hoyleton Youth and Family Services in Hoyleton, Illinois.

People: We rejoice in all the ways our church reaches out to youth, children, and families.

Invite the group to gather in a circle. Beginning with the leader, invite the group to take turns laying hands on the person to the left and reading the following prayer of blessing.

God, bless your servant, (Name—ask for the person's name if you do not know it), may she/he reflect your light so that all may see it and give you glory. Amen.

When the circle is complete, invite someone to lead a closing prayer.

Now, God, dismiss your servants in peace. Help us to proclaim with our lives the blessings of your love for all your children. Amen.