



Giving and Receiving Hospitality

About this Faith Practice

Hospitality begins when we perceive ourselves and others as strangers in a community of welcome. Seeing Christ's presence in the other enables us to welcome Christ into the midst of the community, with all of the costs and joys of discipleship. Gentle, attentive, patient, and consistent care is required to create a community where members are intentional about seeking and welcoming all, especially those whose abilities, experiences, and cultural traditions are different from the mainstream of the current community. A community of hospitality is aware, sensitive, and open to divergent cultural practices. It reaches far beyond the limits of the familiar in a highly mobile world, transforming both the newcomer and the established community.

Let's Begin...

Now that you've downloaded the files for your faith practice and age group or setting, you can get started planning one or multiple sessions:

1 Open the .pdf file for your age group or setting. Choose an Exploration, the approach you think will help your group to best experience the faith practice. Choose any one of the following Explorations to use for one session:



Discovery



Scripture



Discipleship



Christian Tradition



Context and Mission



Future and Vision

Note: If you're planning multiple sessions, you can follow the order suggested above or feel free to use any order that fits the needs of your group. Some groups may choose to start with Scripture and then see where that leads them. Others may be more ready to act in their community and might want to start with Context and Mission.

2 Locate the Exploration you've chosen

3 Look through all 9 activities and select the ones you would like to do with your group.

- If you're planning a 30–45 minute session, choose 3 activities.
- 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.
- For 45 minutes to 1 hour, choose 4 or 5 activities.
- For a 1½ to 2-hour session, you can use all 9 activities.

Tip: Look for this symbol  to find activities designed for Easy Preparation (able to be done with minimal preparation using supplies normally found at the church).

4 Make copies of any handouts () related to your activities. Order posters () if using art (see "Ordering Posters," below).

Use of Art, Music, and Scripture in Faith Practices

Faith Practices activities include many opportunities to grow in faith through the use of scripture, music, and art.

Ordering Posters

If you choose activities that use an art image, you or your church will need to purchase posters of the art by clicking on the link provided in the activity. If you wish to use art, you will need to plan ahead, since it takes 1 to 2 weeks for the posters to arrive after you place your order.

Art

Six posters are used with the faith practice Giving and Receiving Hospitality and may be ordered by clicking on the links provided.

From Imaging the Word Poster Sets:

"The Peaceable Kingdom" by John August Swanson (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

"The Public Fountain" by Manuel Alvarez Bravo (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

"Embrace of Peace" by George Tooker (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

From AllPosters.com:

"Barber Shop" by Jacob Lawrence (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters1>)

"The Luncheon of the Boating Party" by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters2>)

"Vendedora De Pinas" by Diego Rivera (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters3>)

Music

Three music selections are used with Giving and Receiving Hospitality. We have selected music which is easily found in many hymnals. A web link is provided to give more information about each music selection.

Come All You People, Tune: Uyai Mose (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong1>)

Wade in the Water, Tune: African-American Traditional (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong2>)

Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant, Tune: Servant Song (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong3>)

Scripture

Twelve Bible passages are used with Giving and Receiving Hospitality, two with each Exploration.

Discovery	Luke 19: 1–10	Hebrews 13: 1–8, 15–16
Scripture	Genesis 18: 1–15 (21:1–17)	Isaiah 25: 1–9
Discipleship	John 13: 1-17, 31b–35	Acts 2:42–47
Christian Tradition	Mark 14: 22–25	1 Peter 4:1–11
Context and Mission	Romans 12: 9–18	John 6: 1–21
Future and Vision	Luke 14: 15–24	Mark 10: 13–16

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Worship, Music, Arts, and Story
Adults
Seekers and New Church Participants
Young Adults
Older Youth
Youth
Older Children
Young Children
Multiage and Intergenerational
Living Practices in Daily Life
Workshop Rotation
United Church of Christ Identity and History
Editor
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Giving and Receiving Hospitality



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

Seekers and new church participants may come with eagerness, anxiety, trepidation, or defensiveness to their new adventure within a local church community. Some may be able to articulate their reasons for attending and wanting to participate. Others may only feel that this community has a possibility of being a safe or nurturing or educational or empowering place for them to discover themselves and the ways in which God speaks with them. Some might have been hurt by a church, either this particular community or another, and wish to move past the resentments and concerns this painful experience has inflicted upon them.

This is a time of opportunity for new church participants as well as longer-term members. None of us can fully and adequately describe God, or who Jesus was and is, or how the Holy Spirit moves within the body of the church and within the individual believers. Sharing our understandings enriches us all. Each local church has particular habits and practices which may or may not be easily grasped by newer participants. Long-time members should take care not to assume that the words to the Doxology, the Prayer of Our Savior (Lord's Prayer), or other traditional components of worship will be known to newer members. Printing words and hymn numbers in the order of worship is helpful to visitors and new members and can lead to a greater comfort level with church traditions.

This is also a time for active listening for both new and established members. It's a time for deliberately putting aside assumptions about each other, and perhaps about congregations in general. It's a time for discovering together who God is calling us to be as members of God's community.



New participants give the gift of new eyes and ears and hands. We are invited to ask questions together that can enhance and enrich our worship: Why do we do this? Can we try this? Is there a reason for this, or is it just habit? What are the words we all say together each time we gather? Why do we say them? Those who are familiar with the faith community offer the stability of long practice, but remain aware of the dangerous seductiveness of “we’ve always done it this way.” Together the experienced and the beginners can walk the road of faith, learning from each other and from the biblical stories of both testaments. The Holy Spirit guides us through difficulties and awkwardness to trust and interdependence, as we work side by side in the name of Jesus the Christ.

About this Exploration

Hospitality is the intentional and respectful care of both the potential and the gathered community with its diverse and ever-changing hopes, dreams, fears and needs. Extending God’s extravagant welcome requires expansion and adjustment of the physical space and the interior space of individuals. To be truly hospitable, individuals must be personally centered in God’s grace for themselves and others. While respecting boundaries, hospitality requires suspending territories, prejudices and judgment to establish welcome space for all. Hospitality is a radical broadening of individual worldview to welcome people outside of current experience. Receiving hospitality can be more challenging than offering it. Hospitality must be experienced, modeled and practiced as a continuing expression of faith.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Luke 19:1-10
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Leader Preparation

As a leader your job is more to facilitate learning and discovery than to pour information into people’s brains. Some hints about ways to facilitate and encourage learning can be found in “Ten Lessons about being a Learner-Centered Teacher” at the Alban Institute web site: <http://www.tinyurl.com/29uzwtk>.

Ideally, the practice of hospitality for seekers and new church participants includes not only the new folks, but also people who have been a part of this community for longer periods of time. As a leader, your ministry has several parts: introducing brand-new church visitors to the practices and understandings of faith and of this faith community, helping new church participants find a ministry setting within the local church where they can share

Exploring & Engaging Activities

Prayer: Touch us, gracious God, as we come and as we go, as we fear, wonder, explore, discover and learn. Open our hearts and our minds and our spirits to your love and welcome. May we not be afraid to grow. May we reach out joyfully to one another, and to all who seek your face. May we be bold for you, and yet may we also be gentle in our hearing and our caring. May the journey with your beloved, Jesus, lead us into serving in the world. Amen.



1 I Love to Tell a Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Set up the chairs in the gathering room in a circle, so that each person can see all others. Invite each person to prepare to tell the story of his or her first visit to the congregation, including feelings, questions, anxieties, hopes, expectations. You can use yourself as a model for each segment. “I’ll go first” is helpful to allay stage fright and clarify instructions. In the general discussion afterward, underline similar patterns, motives, feelings, and discoveries among new and established members. Because personal or private information may be shared, remind everyone that confidences are to be kept close and not shared outside the circle. Let those in your church who are responsible for pastoral care, worship, and other ministries know what you learned (get permission from all to share their stories), so that pastoral leadership members become aware of positive feedback as well as areas for improvement.

Supplies:

- Bibles with bookmarks in place for the reading: Luke 19:1-10 and Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Invite each person to describe his or her first visit to this congregation. Include feelings, questions, anxieties, hopes, expectations. Another person in the group then retells that story, using a narrative pattern that shows an interaction between God and the visitor, between God and the established community, and between visitor and community. Discuss discoveries, ah-ha moments, areas of comfort, welcome, tension or difficulty. Ask the group for reflection on starter questions: How do the group’s stories reflect the Bible stories? How do the Bible

their gifts and graces, and inviting long-term members to make a place for new members and friends. Determining which of these several tasks is most important to your faith community is best determined by you and your church.

The commitment to participate for a previously agreed-upon time span and to attend the sessions faithfully will help grow a group of church people into a group of friends. Long-term members can be invited to serve as a Church Friend or mentor for new members, committing themselves to an agreed-upon time span to share the faith, traditions, and practices of this local church. People may not be familiar with “the way we do things here” and may not know what various ministry groups, boards or committees do or be able to explain the difference between Pentecost and Easter. Church is a complex organization; friendly, helpful, caring guides are often needed to lead us through the thickets and forests of governance, polity, worship practices, and faithful living in community. If your faith community has a designated leader for the ministry of hospitality and welcome, invite that person (or the whole ministry team) to participate.

A small group of up to ten people provides a comfortable number for conversation and ideas, and enough time for each to share. A larger group can be daunting for some people. In the first session, come to an agreement about the ways in which stories will be told: first person only (I or we), no third person accounts (I heard that ...), confidentiality when requested by the speaker, allowing each to speak before anyone gets a second opportunity, treating all people with respect even if they're not present. For more suggestions, see Gil

stories inform the group's understanding of their own experiences? What parts of the experience of first-time visiting were comfortable and welcoming? What provoked anxiety or feelings of not being welcome?

2 Space Walk

Leader preparation: This activity is a way to introduce the various important places to new people and also to help them learn about the people who are their mentors or Church Friends. If personal or private information is revealed, remind everyone that confidences are to be kept close and not shared outside the circle. Invite long-time members to be prepared to tell a story about their favorite parts of the church. Encourage new church participants to do the same, if they like. Describe the activity before starting your Space Walk.

Supplies: None

Invite the group to take a tour of the church building and grounds. If there are mobility issues, make sure that your path through the church's buildings and grounds is accessible. If some might need to sit during the pauses, place a few chairs at those sites ahead of time, so the flow of movement and contemplation won't be interrupted.

Pause at various places to listen if someone offers a story about that place. What about this particular spot speaks to hospitality or lack of it? Where is each person's favorite place in the church? Go there. Hear that person's story of when and why and how. Where is each person's most uncomfortable (or least visited) place? Go there and listen to the story of when and why and how.

When the Space Walk is completed, return to your usual gathering space. Use starter questions to begin the discussion about how these stories help us practice hospitality for one another and for the larger congregation. Is our building accessible for people who use canes, walkers, wheelchairs, or strollers? Do people with hearing loss have access to audio enhancers or signing? Do leaders remember to say aloud the next part of worship, or is it assumed that everyone can read the order of worship or posted hymns? Are cushions available for those who find wooden pews difficult to sit in for more than a few moments? Did anyone greet me as I came in the door? Did anyone offer to show me around the building, so I knew where to find the restrooms, water fountain, child care, and friendship hall? Did someone invite me to sit with him or her, so I wouldn't be alone?

3 Let There Be ... Space for New Friends

Leader preparation: A persistent difficulty for long-time members is being able to welcome new people into their already-formed group. Churches who think of themselves as friendly are often the ones in which members are friendly only with those they already know. If members are only greeting their own friends, talking to those they know, making an effort for people with whom they are already comfortable, then visitors and new church participants will not perceive that community as welcoming. Members who make a deliberate effort to introduce themselves, to invite visitors to sit with them, to escort new people to the coffee hour are a treasure in your midst. Encourage them, watch them at their welcoming work, imitate their actions! This activity might be used at a gathering of the whole church in fellowship: a potluck supper, coffee hour, picnic, or other opportunity for people gathering to enjoy one another's company and to get to know one another better. In a smaller community, the whole group might participate together. In large communities, this activity might be practiced by table group or by small groups randomly assigned.

Rendle's book *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*, published by Alban Institute.

Prayer: You are here, my God, and I am here in this place and time. You have called upon me to welcome people into this community, to teach and to lead. Your call is also to learn and to grow, to share the abundant life you have given, and to invite others to discover the joys of life among these, your people. May I be as willing to learn as I am to invite others to grow in your Spirit. May your Spirit be among us as we begin this journey together. May we be brave and strong and confident in your presence and your love. As a servant of Jesus, I pray for those whom I teach and touch, and for myself as a student at your feet, being touched by your Holy Spirit and learning by your love. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from 9 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 using supplies normally found at the church). Using all 9 activities could take 90–120 minutes.

* To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose 3 activities using one activity from each category.

* To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose 4 or 5 using at least one activity from each category.

Supplies:

- small pieces of paper labeled: New Visitor, Member, Church Leader, Frequent Visitor, New Church Member, Seeker, Church Pastoral Staff, Church Administrative Staff, Volunteer, and other categories of people who attend your church.
- a bowl or basket to hold the labels

Invite each person to draw a label from the bowl or basket. Don't share your label with others. If you've drawn a label that describes your role in the community, put it back and draw again. The goal is to learn about all the people in your group without their telling you who they are. Think about the person you are assigned to be, and role play as you think that individual might act and respond to others. If you are a new visitor, are you shy? Do you know anything about the building? Are you comfortable with the practices and actions of the established community? How might you express your questions and concerns? If you're a member or leader, how do you approach someone whose face is not familiar to you? As a seeker, you might not know anything about church, or only what you've seen in movies and on television; how do you approach a new group of people who already know what they're doing? If you're assigned the role of pastoral staff (which can include volunteer groups of people who intentionally care for others), how do you welcome and invite people to participate?

Have the group leave the room and then come right back in, but return in the role they have drawn from the basket. Continue this role play for several minutes. Then stop and ask the participants to identify the roles that have been played. When all have been identified, invite the participants to share discoveries and concerns with the whole group.

End with this or a similar prayer: *Welcoming God of our lives, you come to us in many faces and forms. May we be wise enough to discern your presence, blessed enough to make you our friend, welcoming enough so that all your children may gather here in your name. May we learn from each other, and may we see your face in each person we greet in your name. We pray to you in the name of the one whom you sent to welcome and greet each of us, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

Prayer: Our ears are full, good and gracious God, with the sounds of this world. It is too easy to shut out your voice and to ignore your call. May our work help us discern your invitation and welcome. May your invitation and welcome call us out of ourselves into a new life of service to you and to others. May we see ourselves in the circle of your love, and may we learn to invite others to be a part of your great circle of faith and abundant life. As Jesus prayed to you in faith and trust, we also pray. Amen.



4 Calling and Being Called (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: People in church settings often speak about a sense of call associated with the ministry they love. Invite some of the lay leaders in the congregation to share their passions for ministry and to describe how they feel they are being called to serve. Invite the ministerial staff to talk about their own areas of service and the responsibilities and opportunities for hospitality and service within the faith community. Make sure you have a broad sample from education to music and the arts, from kitchen ministry to stewardship, from holy day celebrations to pastoral care and visitation. This might be a good activity for a potluck lunch or dinner, practicing the hospitality of a shared meal.

Supplies:

- Bible for each participant marked at Isaiah 6:1–8, Luke 19:1–10, Psalm 139, Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16
- guests such as lay leaders and ministerial staff

Invite volunteers to read the scriptures. What do these passages have in common? How was God present and active in each passage? Offer your personal understanding of being called by God to act or serve in a particular way.

Invite your guests to talk about their sense of call. Ask for others' definitions, and share the ways in which each person is responding to a call. Talk about ways in which people are called to service in the local church, in the wider church at association, conference, and national levels, and internationally.

5 What's This All About, Anyway?

Leader preparation A local church has a bewildering number of ministries and committees for a new church participant to learn. Speak to the leaders of each ministry group, board, committee, and informal service group within your church. Ask them if your group can visit a meeting to observe, or if a member of your group may shadow their work. This is an opportunity for discernment of a call to serve, and there is no timetable. Each person can be encouraged to take time to briefly engage in various areas of service and to think about where each might serve God and the community well and faithfully. Assure them that they can change their minds and change areas of service, while understanding that their commitment to help a particular service group includes fulfillment of promises made. Perhaps a discussion of the rights and responsibilities of the volunteer will help.

Supplies:

- copy of the church constitution and by-laws for each participant
- description of board, committee, and ministry responsibilities for each participant, or a representative of each board, committee, ministry or service to explain their service to the church

As a group look over the constitution and by-laws or the description of the various program ministries of the congregation. If available, invite a representative of each of those to talk with the group about the work of those ministries. What is the purpose of that ministry? Who is involved? How much time is needed by members? Hands-on participation in a number of different ministry settings over the course of six months or a year will help new church participants find places in which they can best serve. They can be encouraged to visit and shadow people, even in ministries to which they does not feel attracted. This is a time for learning, expanding one's experiences, and discerning where God is inviting each to serve the faith community, the wider world, and God. Use regularly scheduled (ideally, monthly or bi-monthly) gatherings to process the experiences, share ideas and observations, and help move toward a chosen ministry setting for each new church participant.

6 Challenging Our Ideas

Leader preparation: If your congregation includes people trained in counseling, conflict management, or other relationship skills, invite them to provide additional leadership in this activity. This is a topic that can be emotionally charged and generate anxiety. This activity may take more than one session to complete. The first session will begin the conversation and begin to air some of the assumptions about others. Leaders might want to break the ice by collecting a few assumptions about others from the past that now seem strange or peculiar. (For instance, women are poor drivers, men make things and women clean things, national origin determines skills, etc.) Subsequent sessions can be scheduled after completing "homework assignments" that will encourage participants to research their own assumptions: Where do you get your assumptions about others? Did these ideas come from your family, from the media, from friends, from observation of behaviors? Identification of the sources of our ideas about others is the first step toward changing them in favor of a more hospitable attitude.

Supplies: None

Talk within your church community about what challenges your ideas of hospitality: behaviors, characteristics, assumptions about those who are perceived as "other." Ask for ideas about how your community might work on changing behaviors, responses, and tensions. Why do we want to keep negative assumptions from being discarded at the expense of being more hospitable to others? Where do we get our ideas about people we don't know? How do we identify unfounded assumptions before they contribute to the way we treat others? How do we change our behaviors and assumptions? How do we become welcoming hosts to all the children of God, our brothers and sisters in the journey toward the realm of God?

Sending & Serving Activities

Prayer: God of welcome, you are the host to all the world, and we thank you. You invite us in, and we thank you. You call us to invite others, and we sometimes hesitate. But you call us again, and eventually we will hear and answer. Help us to know that you stand with us at the door, opening your arms to all who enter here. Help us to share with others your loving embrace, your delight in our service, and our discovery of joy. As we share, may your beloved community grow in spirit and in truth, in learning and wisdom, so that all may be one in your realm. In Jesus' name, and as he also welcomes us, we pray. Amen.



7 Open the Door

Leader preparation: Prepare for a group discussion of the expectations we have about prayer. Decide whether this is going to be an in-group discussion, or if it will be open to others in the congregation. Many people, whether new to the church community or long-time members, are uncomfortable with praying publicly or spontaneously. You might plan to begin with some printed sample prayers, and use "I'll go first" as a model for allaying any anxieties. As the comfort level increases, invite others to lead the prayers, using either the samples or their own, as they wish.



Supplies

- a Bible for each participant marked for Luke 19:1–10 and Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16
- plain paper cut in quarters
- pencils, perhaps with name, address, phone of the church
- box with slot in lid (and perhaps locked, if confidentiality is a concern)
- sign inviting prayer requests, and promising to include prayer requests in regular prayer times of the group or faith community

Invite the participants into a discussion about prayer. What does prayer do for the person praying, the person or intention prayed for, and for God? Are all prayers intercessory or petitions? What other kinds of prayers are there? What if we prayed for others, even those we don't know or understand? Can we pray for people and situations we don't want to pray for?

Provide samples of prayers. You may find these in the hymnal or your church's book of worship. Have the group read these together.

Suggest that the group adopt a prayer ministry similar to one used by the Open Door Chapel (<http://www.tinyurl.com/2c3olvf>), Fort Wayne IN, and Salem UCC (<http://www.tinyurl.com/2azkqfh>), Harrisburg PA. Place a simple box in a public area of the church or neighborhood, with paper and pencils available, inviting prayer requests. Recruit volunteers to gather the prayer requests regularly and pray for all or to give them to Sunday's worship leader in a timely manner so that they can be included in the prayers of the people at worship. Place church business cards, with name, address, phone and website, with the box for those who wish to know about the faith community offering this hospitality. Expect some experimenting within the prayer group and by the people who use the box to request prayers. The box may need to be moved, checked more or less often, monitored, as the group discerns how best to serve the community.

8 Here I Am — Send Me

Leader preparation: Based on the learners' experiences shadowing in the church's ministry settings, invite each to commit to serving in one ministry for a set period of time (often 6 months or a year). Assure each one that s/he can change places when their allotted time is complete. The expectation of the community is that all members serve through the ministries of the church according to their gifts, graces, and abilities. As leader, you can expect to deal with confusion about the processes of serving in the community, some disappointment if expectations don't match the experience, excitement when a ministry and a participant match well. There may be concern about the amount of time needed to serve; assure them that God can be flexible, and so can we. Each gives according to his or her ability. That gift includes time, and each person can be helped to discern a good gift of time and talent. This exercise also helps new church participants understand how decisions are made in the local church.

Supplies: None

Singly or in small groups, invite the members of the group to commit to serve in one of the church's ministry settings for an agreed-upon period of time. As a group decide on the length of the service: Is it reasonable to expect people to serve a single ministry for a quarter-year? Six months? A full year? Talk about changing one's mind and how one might deal with a ministry for which one feels no call. Use part of your session time to process the experiences, and to help with questions, discernment of gifts, and plans for future service.

9 How Do We Get There From Here? Practice, Practice, Practice!

Leader preparation: Anyone who has served as a greeter at the church door has had the experience of assuming that a person must be a visitor if we don't recognize the face. We feel embarrassed and somehow lacking if, in response to our welcoming introduction, the response is, "I've been a member here for 25 years." The greeter's embarrassment translates into a reluctance to feel that way again, and therefore they hesitate to greet another unfamiliar person. Finding new ways to begin the conversation will help both the greeter and the "new" person to get past the initial awkwardness. This activity helps established members and new church participants to practice hospitality with less anxiety.

Supplies:

- white board or newsprint on and markers
- a sign-up sheet for serving as greeters

Open the discussion with the group reminiscing about the greeting practices of your community. Established members will be able to remember the ways they were greeted when they first arrived, and new church participants can offer stories of how they were treated and how their experience helped or hindered their impressions of welcome and hospitality here. If people have visited other communities, invite their stories and their responses to the experience. Which ways of greeting and follow-up were helpful, and which ways were not helpful? Established members can determine their answers based on visitor response and return; seekers and new church participants' reactions may be more based on their intuitive feelings about the space and community they visit. What among the remembered practices should be discarded, adjusted, or kept? What phrases were welcoming, and which were mechanical? How does the established community continue the conversation with visitors (a phone call, a loaf of bread or a batch of cookies, a letter from the leader of hospitality or the pastor)? What are the greeters' responsibilities? Should they only greet people they don't recognize, or is it important to greet every person who enters the building? Do they stand outside and help by opening the door, or do they wait in the narthex for people to enter?

If time allows and people are willing, invite the group to role-play being a greeter and being a visitor. Let everyone who wishes to participate have an opportunity to be in each role. Give each actor a note with clues to their character. The Visitor may be looking for a new church home, dropping in on impulse, returning after many years away, or visiting friends/family in the area. The Greeter may be gracious or clumsy, at ease with greeting people s/he doesn't know, anxious about this new way of serving the church. Be prepared for laughter, for discoveries, and for insight.

Briefly discuss what the group has learned. Invite them to serve as greeters over the next few months, choosing a few dates each as their schedules permit. If your community opens its doors at other times for hospitality (potluck suppers, concerts or lectures, adult or child daycare, fellowship times), include these as opportunities to serve as greeters.

Reflect

If your community has a ministry team or committee whose responsibility is hospitality and welcome, share what you have learned after each session with your group. It will be important, especially if your group finds new ideas that may be helpful, or current practices that can be improved, that feedback be prompt, particularly for seekers and new church participants' suggestions. If they see their good ideas put into action, they will begin to feel that they are a valued part of the community.

Prayer: As we go forth on your journey, gracious God, help us to feel your presence in our midst. As we encounter new ideas, new people, new situations, may we find your blessing and wisdom in our lives. May we serve your people by welcoming all into this beloved community of your faithful, so that we may be witnesses to your grace, love, and mercy. In the name of Jesus, who welcomes and teaches us all, we pray. Amen.

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Giving and Receiving Hospitality



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

Seekers and new church participants may be yearning for the experience of having their tears wiped away. They may be hoping for the joyful banquet where the generosity is lavish, the laughter is joyful, and the friendship is generous. Perhaps the ongoing conversation with and about God has been missing for a time, and they are looking for a way to reconnect with God, the community, their own past, or with future promises. Hospitality can mean hearing their concerns and questions, offering them a place in which they can begin or continue their work as people of faith. It may also mean that the existing community learns to take the time to hear the new voices (perhaps encouraging new voices to begin speaking) and to invite the Holy Spirit to move among them, making new connections, finding similarities and tensions, learning from each other. We can gain insight from the biblical stories of stepping out at God's invitation, discovering new things about ourselves, others, God, and the world, sometimes taking a wrong turn in the road, and recovering our way with rejoicing.

About this Exploration

As hospitality and scripture intersect, we acknowledge the many ways people enter and encounter sacred story. Multiple intelligences, cultural experiences, social locations, and life experiences impact the reading and interpretation of scripture. This invites dialogue, mutual learning, and broadened understanding. Hospitality requires a commitment to multiple expressions of the story. We honor one another and one another's viewpoints. We are called to embody scripture in the context of a diverse world with many sacred texts. At the intersection of hospitality and scripture, the sacred story challenges and changes all.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 18:1-15

(21:1-17)

Isaiah 25:1-9

Leader Preparation

Reading the Bible can be very personal and is subject to a great deal of personal interpretation. One helpful practice of biblical study is to take a step back from the story we're reading and hearing, and to consider the first listeners. For a moment, put on the culture and social expectations of that society. This sometimes takes a little research. A good Bible dictionary will help. Now listen again to the story, looking up key words, places, and names in the Bible dictionary. What else do you hear? Help your group learn to listen to the story through other than twenty-first century ears. Once we understand how the first listeners heard the story, we can move that story through history to our own time and situation and learn with integrity new meanings for the story of the ways in which God acts and interacts in the human and worldly story.

As we work on the practice of hospitality, we will find that our priorities, plans, calendars, and schedules change. Our lives are moving and changing, and occasionally that creates anxiety and reluctance to try new ideas. Understanding and patience will help the group walk through the inevitable changes that occur when we deliberately work on learning new ministries and changing our lives. Assurance of the possibilities of change can come from looking at the stories within the group, and within the Bible stories studied.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Open the Door (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: "Liminal space" is a place that is neither here nor there: doors, gates, "no man's land," houses built into city walls. Think of Rahab and the 2 spies in Joshua, or about the foreigners who are referred to in the Gospels: the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Roman centurion, the Gentiles, the Samaritans, the Greeks, even the "god-fearers" who worshiped YHWH God but who were not Jews. This activity is an opportunity to bring awareness to people about the places and ideas that are neither here nor there, neither one thing nor the other. Remind them that an ordinary door is the difference between being outside the sanctuary and inside. At one time, each member of your group, including you, was outside; now you are inside. Ask whether anyone remembers how it felt to be outside, and how it feels to be inside.

Arrange the chairs in your gathering area in a circle so that each person can see all others.

Supplies:

- image of a door or gate, or the door to the room in which you are meeting
- Bible for each participant marked with the passages for study: Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-17), Joshua 2, Isaiah 25: 1-9

In conversation with the group, consider doors and gates—liminal spaces that are neither inside nor outside. In some places in the ancient world, trials and judgments were held at the city gates, while markets were in the city center. Why? How do we use gates and doors to keep others or self in or out? Other than doors and gates, what else do we use to embrace, enclose, protect, defend, invite, step through? How do we feel outside? How can we discern when we are inside? What is God inviting us to do with our gates and doors, both real and metaphorical?

2 Open the Book

Leader Preparation: This is a simple practice for seekers and new church participants who are unfamiliar with the Bible. Mark your own Bible at the Table of Contents, Genesis, Psalms, Matthew, Romans. If you are uncomfortable with being perceived as the community's "Bible expert," or if a member or leader in your faith community has some training and education in biblical studies, consider inviting that person to help you with this activity. Inviting others to help lead will introduce newer participants to more of the church community and help them attach faces, names, and interests. Think about what a basic guide to the Bible has to do with hospitality. We're inviting people to become more familiar with an important component of their faith. We're inviting them into the Bible, into the biblical story, and into their own lives as children of God. Those who are comfortable with the Bible as a book may be less intimidated by the perceptions, superstitions, and baggage that others sometimes attempt to attach to the Bible as an element of faith.

Set up the gathering space so that each participant can see all the others. We will be exploring the Bible as a new adventure. Having to hold the Bible on laps can become awkward, so tables will help, if available.

Tensions may arise when we discover varying understandings of a Bible story, of God, of how we meet God in the Bible. We need some time to get used to new ideas. Sometimes conversation helps, or prayer, or compassionate friends who agree that sometimes it's difficult to give up long-held yet unhelpful ideas. As leader, one of your responsibilities is to continue to assure people that questions and doubt are parts of the human condition, and to remind them that patience and persistence are virtues when studying the Bible. Encourage them to continue wondering aloud; often the most basic questions will illumine the study of the group in new ways.

The Alban Institute's Rev. Gil Rendle reminds us that "conflict is two ideas occupying the same space at the same time" and nothing more than that. There's nothing wrong with conflict — usually it's the ways in which we deal with tension or conflict that create more difficulties. The Old Testament is full of stories of people who said "No" to God, argued and bargained with God, complained to God, demanded that God change the world, or expected the world to fit into their pre-planned lives. The disciples didn't always believe what Jesus said, and even Peter told Jesus he was wrong. We're allowed to disagree, and we're allowed to have some time to get used to new practices and ideas. One overarching understanding of the message of the Bible is that it contains the stories of how people dealt with their daily lives, with change, with tragedy, with blessing, and with the ordinariness of life. How do we deal with all the "stuff," and how do we use our discoveries and our wisdom to help others deal with their "stuff"?

Supplies:

- handout "Open the Bible," Attachment: Activity 2
- a Bible for each participant, preferably a study Bible, that has footnotes and explanations for students
- a list of Bible books, chapters, and verses for people to find: Genesis 1, Exodus 1, the end of Deuteronomy, the books of Ruth and Jonah, Psalm 23, Matthew 25, John 3:16, I Corinthians 13

This activity explores the Bible as a bound book of many different kinds of books. Give each person a book, chapter and verse to look up, and guide them through the process of finding what they're looking for. Invite group members to read aloud, so that all may hear as the first generation heard the stories. If the Bible is new for the group, make the assignments simple. As homework, invite each person to look up all the stories listed.

3 Learning to Listen

Leader preparation: Invite each person to bring his or her own favorite Bible, so that the scripture can be read from various translations. The passage will be read three times, with quiet time for meditation between each reading. The length of the silent time between each reading will be determined by the comfort level of the group; some can sit for 30 seconds, or 2 minutes, or 5 minutes. As leader, be aware of your group and when they are ready to continue. Prepare questions to encourage discussion if people in the group are reluctant to share: What sentence or phrase in this story caught your attention? Why do you think this phrase/sentence spoke to you? Are you remembering something familiar or funny or sad? Do you feel called out of yourself by this phrase/sentence/story? What might you do with this experience?

Supplies:

- extra Bibles of various versions and translations

Repeat the following activity, using Genesis 18:1–15; 21:1–17 the first time and Isaiah 25:1–9 the second time.

Read aloud the scripture passage while all listen in silence. Pause for silent reflection. The time of the pause will vary depending on the comfort level of the group. Then have a second person read the same passage. Pause again. Invite a third person to read the passage, and then pause again for silent meditation. Invite each person in turn to speak about the word or phrase that stood out for him or her and what that phrase or sentence might mean. Encourage conversation by asking these or similar questions:

(Genesis) If you're camping beside a stream and strangers walk up to your campsite, how do you feel? What do you do? What is the hospitable response to strangers? What does Abraham do? Why does Sarah react as she does? What would your reaction be?

(Isaiah) Imagine yourself to be one of the exiled leaders of Israel. If you don't know when or if you will ever see your home again, is this passage comforting? Does it give you strength to carry on, living as a stranger in a strange land? Are you able to praise God, even when you are in an unfamiliar and perhaps hostile place? If you are one of those left behind in Israel when the leaders were taken away, do you hear the words differently? Can this passage be applied to circumstances today?

Prayer: In this time and place, O God, you meet me in the midst of your story, my story, and the stories of your gathered people. May I hear with your love, respond with your grace, and offer a place of safety and comfort in the midst of the world's turmoil. May we learn together to share your story and our own. May we see your hand in our lives and in the stories told in the biblical witness. May we be your loving people, calling the world to you and welcoming the world in your holy name, as Jesus taught us. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from 9 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 using supplies normally found at the church). Using all 9 activities could take 90–120 minutes.

* To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose 3 activities using one activity from each category.

* To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose 4 or 5 using at least one activity from each category.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 What's Your Favorite? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity is for new church participants and established members who are at least somewhat familiar with the Bible. Before the group meets, invite each to find a favorite passage or story about hospitality, then to tell the group what is important about it to them. You might want to remind people of time constraints, and to limit the story to a certain number of verses, if your group is large. Help people discover how to use the concordance.

Supplies:

- Bibles for all participants
- Concordance that matches the Bible translation being used

Demonstrate how to use the concordance to find a passage by looking up a key word. Invite each person to read his or her favorite Bible passage and then to tell the group what parts of the story speak to him or her personally. If more than one person has chosen the same passage, invite them to work together to present both personal and community ideas.

5 This Is For You

Leader preparation: Work with your worship leader and/or pastor to prepare the liturgy for the reception of new members into your community. Plan to present each new member with a Bible, perhaps inscribed with a scripture passage that reflects the welcome and joy of the community and the expectations for a loving relationship. Examples are: Psalm 15:1; Psalm 16:7, 8, 9, or 11; Psalm 17:15; Psalm 18:1–2; Psalm 19:14.

Supplies:

- new Bibles for each new member
- hymn suggestions (From The New Century Hymnal

<http://www.tinyurl.com/2cct6b4>:

“I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry” (tune: BORNING CRY 9.79.6.D.)

“Great Work Has God Begun in You” (tune: VERBUM DEI L.M.)

“God, When I Came into This Life” (tune: LAND OF REST C.M.)

“Go, My Children, with My Blessing” (tune: AR HYD Y NOS 8.4.8.4.8.8.8.4.)

At the time in worship when new members are welcomed, present each new member with a Bible. An hospitable activity for church members (or for the Church Friend who mentors and guides the new member) is to find a verse that speaks particularly to each new church participant, and to inscribe that verse in the Bible. The mentor, leader of the hospitality study group, or the worship leader may offer a brief meditation on the gift and the prayer that it will guide the recipient through an abundant life in Christ. If your faith community has a Bible study group or ministry, encourage them to invite new members to attend as they are able.



6 May I Come In?

Leader preparation: Using a concordance that matches your Bible translation, locate a few scripture passages that comment on hospitality, such as: Exodus 2:11–22 (Moses names his son “Gershom,” which means “stranger in a strange land”); 1Samuel 1:1–18 (Hannah being misunderstood by Eli); Luke 4:38–39 (Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law so that she could fulfill her role as host in her home); Luke 19:1–10 (Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ house.)

Find some stories about your congregation. Does your community invite and support immigrant families or provide space for charitable organizations to meet? Does the church offer community meals or support or host an adult day care or respite center? Has the church been rescued after a natural disaster or hosted by another congregation who helped you recover? Tell the stories of your community throughout its life.

Prepare to share a personal story about an encounter with hospitality, and then to invite others to share their own stories. What are the connections between these stories? Where does God invite us to go, and what does God invite us to do?

Supplies:

- Bible for each participant
- 1 or 2 concordances
- Bible dictionary
- a history of your church, if available
- poster: <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources> “Embrace of Peace,” by George Tooker

Invite the participants to study the poster “Embrace of Peace.” What stories can they create about the picture? What evidence of hospitality do they see? Read the scripture passages and talk about any aspect of hospitality that is evident. Are there other biblical stories about searching and finding? About coming to a place as a stranger and being welcomed (or not being welcomed)? Are there stories about this church community being a stranger or welcoming a stranger? Not all stories end happily. Be honest and loving; this may be a time to examine an historical moment and understand it more clearly.

Are there personal or family stories around the table about hospitality, about being a stranger? What causes us to hesitate or be suspicious? When are we most comfortable taking a risk? What blessings do we discover when we are willing to try something new?

If there is time and a willingness to share, explore the emotions that the conversation raises. Are we comfortable being strangers? Do we prefer being the host? Why? Do we look forward to the bustle and preparation for a great feast, or do we prefer the quiet intimacy of a simple meal and conversation? How might each kind of hospitality be offered? How do we learn each person’s levels of comfort? When do we accommodate those comfort levels, and when do we invite some change?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 You Are Welcome Here (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Invite the congregation to be aware of changes in their own neighborhoods. They can take note of For Sale or For Rent signs, new faces, moving trucks or vans. Encourage the community to offer help to neighbors who are experiencing change, both leaving and arriving. Often a simple meal, an offer of child care, or help packing or unpacking will help relieve the stress that comes with changing locations.

Supplies: None

This activity encourages established church members to be observant about changes in their neighborhood or building and in the shadow of the church. Hints for location changes include For Sale or For Rent signs, new faces in the hallway or street, trucks moving furniture in or out.

Invite the group to brainstorm ways your congregation can demonstrate hospitality to people coming in to the neighborhood. What gestures do they think would be appreciated—offering a simple meal or a bag of cleaning supplies or a cup of tea? How can you provide information about your church and an invitation? Perhaps some group members would be interested in working on creating welcome packets. People moving out will be as grateful for help as those moving in. Helping hands during a stressful time of change can become a first friend, or ease the difficulty of parting.

8 Thank God for Friends

Leader preparation: Work with worship leaders to offer a celebration of friendship, with texts, hymns, and a sermon focusing on loyalty, compassion, generosity, laughter and tears, as well as other aspects of friendship. Make announcements regularly in newsletters, bulletin boards, and orally encouraging attendants to think about friendship and to invite one or more particular friends to worship on Friends Day. Remember to encourage children and youth to participate. Think about having a simple reception or meal following worship at which friends can be introduced to one another. Invite both adults and children to participate in worship, reading the scripture, ushering, greeting, receiving the offering. If their friends are willing to participate, assign parts that the friend-pairs can do together. This activity can be adapted to celebrate parents or grandparents, church leadership teams, or any other group of people you wish to raise up with celebration and thanksgiving.

Supplies:

- concordances
- hymnals

Invite the group to plan a worship celebration of friendship. Use concordances to find appropriate scriptures. Look up Friend, Friendless, Friendly, Friends, Friendship. Search through the hymnal or praise book to find songs on the theme of friendship. Your choir director or music minister can be a great help to you in this project. Find a story about friendship from a culture other than your own. Some appropriate quotations from world literature and stories from other cultures could be read or acted out as a chancel drama.

Encourage some in the group to work on invitations and announcements of the friendship celebration.

At weekly worship or at a special time, such as morning prayer, evening Vespers, or community meal, offer a service of thanksgiving and dedication for friends. Through music, scripture, sermon and world literature, highlight the importance of friendship and offer thanks for the gifts that friendship brings. Gather afterward for a reception or simple meal to continue breaking bread and sharing laughter with friends. This activity is easily adapted for use in an extended care facility, if your congregation has several members residing together.

Reflect

Scripture grounds and guides us, and many people who grew up in faith communities have favorite or familiar or frightening stories about the way the Bible was used in their own experience. Encouraging the telling of these stories will help the narrators and the listeners to understand the many universes that exist in our experience and in our understandings of the Bible. Others will not know anything about the Bible except what they have picked up from television, movies, and casual conversation. Speaking about these “worldly” understandings will help you as leader in expanding their horizons, in opening the doors of the Bible. The goal of this session is to invite the scriptures to become a friendly part of our lives in our churches and in all our days.

Prayer: You teach us, welcoming God, in many ways: through the words recorded by generations of believers, and the stories that have been told for centuries; through conversations with others of your children; through meditation and prayer. Help us to discern the gifts you offer us: discovery, new ideas, comfort, possibility, surprise, laughter, and tears. We are your students, and you are our most loving teacher, whose Son teaches us daily. Thank you for your presence among us, your willingness to be our God, and for our lives of extravagant joy in all things. Amen.

9 Who Is My Neighbor?

Leader preparation: A conversation for seekers and new church participants, this activity invites the group to think about the ways we offer or withhold hospitality. The activity can be expanded to include established church members in communities in which being welcoming is an issue.

Supplies:

- poster: <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources> “Embrace of Peace,” by George Tooker

Over the course of an agreed-upon time period (a week, a month), invite the individuals in the group to seek an opportunity to be kind or hospitable to another person. Assure participants that the action may be small, brief, and inexpensive or without cost to either party. Encourage people to move outside their comfort zones or established practices, to accept an opportunity to serve someone they don't know and to whom they are not related. In the conversation afterward, offer the opportunity for participants to discuss how they felt when looking for the opportunity to be hospitable, what kind of hospitable action they were planning, and what they learned from the experience. During their week/month, did any participants also receive hospitality or kindness? How did they feel about receiving? (We often have more difficulty receiving than giving!) The details of the hospitable acts, both given and received, need not be shared with the group, to protect privacy.

Attachment: Activity 2

Open the Book

(Leader Preparation)

Begin by talking about the Bible as a book of faith, a book of history, and a book of the story of human interaction with God. Speak a little about the way in which the Bible was written and canonized (see your Bible dictionary). Remind the group that most of us read the Bible in translations, and that different translators and committees understood the manuscripts they were using in different ways. Some translations are more poetic, or more linguistically correct, or more or less politically correct. Reading the same passage in various translations will often enlighten our understanding.

Lead people on a guided tour of the major sections: in the First Testament (often called the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures) the first five books are called the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books tell the stories of the beginnings of the Hebrew people. Genesis 1–11 contains general stories about the very earliest times and may have been told to answer questions such as “Why do we speak different languages?” or “Why don’t we like that tribe?” Genesis 12 starts the story of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants: their adventures, their struggles with the land, their God, and one another, and the ways in which they learned to function together as a community.

There are also books of History: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles. Some of these overlap in chronology, and are told from different viewpoints within the Israelite and Jewish communities.

The Psalms are part of the Wisdom literature, as are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. The books that tell the stories of the prophets generally are titled with the name of one of the prophets whose story is told therein; for instance the book of Ezekiel contains the stories about Elijah, who is a very important Hebrew prophet. Prophets were called by God to go to the people and their leaders when they were going astray. Prophets warned the community of what could happen if they did not turn back to God. Often history is found in the Prophetic literature, and prophecies are found in the Wisdom literature. It is helpful to understand that prophecies applied to the time in which they were made, and not, as later generations often assumed, to world events hundreds or thousands of years later.

For an interesting look at the Hebrew Scriptures as compiled and translated within the Jewish community, obtain a copy of the TANAKH, which is readily available in bookstores and online in paperback.

In the New Testament, the four Gospels are at the beginning: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Written in the late first century, each tells the story of Jesus from a different community perspective. They are named in honor of four important individuals in the early church. In a study Bible, an overview of each Gospel precedes the specific book.

The Gospels are followed by The Acts of the Apostles, a brief history of the early church. The author of



Attachment: Activity 2

(OPEN THE BOOK continued)

the Gospel of Luke also wrote Acts, and the two books can be read in sequence. Acts primarily tells the stories of two of the Apostles: Peter and Paul.

The Epistles, or Letters, were written down before the Gospels were. They speak to issues in churches in the first and second centuries. Several were written by Paul, who understood that he was called by God to take the good news of Jesus to peoples and nations beyond the borders of Palestine. Others are written by early church teachers and leaders who saw a need within a particular community, or the community at large, for guidance. Many of these last epistles show the influence of second century Greek society on the early church.

The last book in the Christian Scriptures is The Revelation of John. It was written by a founder of churches that were being persecuted by the larger culture in which they lived. The “John” in the title is neither John the Baptist nor the disciple John, the brother of James, but rather a Christian called John of Patmos. Revelation speaks to the fears and turmoil the community is facing, and uses graphic language to assure the church that its absent leader understands what it is going through. Although some later readers have attempted to use the language of Revelation to predict future historical world events, most students of the Bible understand Revelation to be speaking of the time and place and people directly involved, toward the end of the first century of the common era (C.E.).

Some Bibles contain the Apocrypha, which are ancient books not part of the original canon, but still important in the life of the church.

Other ancient manuscripts have been discovered, and we probably have not found every manuscript that speaks about matters of faith, God, Jesus, or the early church. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi discoveries are just two of the most well-known ancient religious libraries found in the twentieth century. The Dead Sea Scrolls are ancient copies of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Nag Hammadi library contains New Testament documents, as well as others. Some of the books in these libraries have been translated and published; others are being translated, and still others are so fragile that even unrolling the scrolls is an art and a science to be slowly and carefully addressed.

Giving and Receiving Hospitality



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Setting

Living and working in a new community, in which others seem to be more comfortable, to know the rules and be able to locate needed materials and helpers, can be daunting for new church participants. Kind and caring help offered to a new partner in faith encourages the nurturing of friendship and an increase in the comfort level of the newer participants. The newer partners learn patience and grace in the discovery and practice of unfamiliar ministries, as well as boldness in asking questions about methods, meaning, and history. New members of teams, boards and committees may have new ideas about making the work go more smoothly. Members more familiar with the process may have equally valid reasons for maintaining the old practices. All can benefit from active listening and working together toward a common goal. It's a good time to remember the attributes of God: gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6-7).

About this Exploration

Hospitable disciples see God in each encounter with the people in our daily lives and those who lie beyond our usual circles of experience. The distinctions between other and self decrease when other living creatures and the earth are encountered as a sacred system of interrelationships.

We practice hospitality in cultures with habits of expected interaction. However, Jesus calls us to habits of attentiveness which go beyond our own cultures, needs and experiences. As disciples, all can be encouraged to see the face of Jesus in every experience of hospitality.



Hospitality encompasses giving and receiving. Receiving the gift of hospitality from another, even when uncomfortable, embodies receiving God's many gifts to our world.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
John 13:1-7, 31b-35
Acts 2:42-47

Leader Preparation

Sometimes we think of discipleship as doing as Jesus taught. A disciple is a learner, one who seeks understanding, one who is willing to listen to others in order to discover new understandings. A disciple also has homework: practicing what he or she has learned. This helps the teaching become embodied within the individual and within the learning community. Established members as well as seekers and new church participants are disciples: learning and seeking understanding as we live within the community of God's people. As a leader you are also a disciple and student. For a helpful guide to facilitating learning, "Ten Lessons about being a Learner-Centered Teacher," go to the Alban Institute Web site:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/29uzwtk>.

Your group will teach you as much or more than you teach them. Your task is to facilitate learning and discovery, and to be open to new possibilities yourself. It's quite an adventure!

Prayer: Gracious God, who gives us one another and the whole world in which to discover your blessings and your bounty, may I faithfully guide these people in your way. May we learn together; may we become caring friends; may we offer hospitality to all creation. For your gift of Jesus, who teaches us, we thank you. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Simple Encouragement (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: A simple activity we can offer to our communities is a combination of a little humor mixed with a gentle reminder that we are called to hospitality and service. It's the reason we print at the bottom of the order of worship, or say at the end of a service, "The service is ended; now the service begins." There might be a sign at the exit from the church parking lot saying, "Go forth and serve in the name of the One who created you." On the nursery door in some churches, there is a sign reading, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."

This activity invites your group to brainstorm ideas like these that are personalized for your community. You know your community better than anyone else; your group's ideas will speak best to the people they know, or are learning to know. An added benefit is the group camaraderie that comes from the sharing of ideas from serious to silly.

Supplies:

- newsprint or white board and marker

Invite the participants to think about ways to remind people in the community, both visitors and members, that hospitality is a practice of faith that encourages sharing, caring, and welcome. Give them some examples and ask for their ideas. Where would they place reminders in the church? Where would they place printed signs: parking lots, walls, kitchen cabinets, orders of worship, newsletters? What might the signs say? In what ways can you include gentle reminders and encouragement in prayers and benedictions, or on the church answering machine? Are your signs formal, professionally made, or informal, handmade or graffiti-like? What suits your community? What might surprise your community into reading and thinking about your signs?

Take your ideas to church leadership teams and invite them to use the suggestions in the church's ministry, or offer (with the permission of the group) the hospitality group's energy and labor to bring the ideas to fruition.

2 A Meditation on Serving One Another

Leader preparation: Each person brings his or her own Bible, or the leader can supply Bibles in various translations. Invite people to read the chosen lesson from several translations. If sufficient Bibles are not available, the passages can be printed from the Web: <http://bible.oremus.org/>. Prepare questions to encourage discussion if people in the group are reluctant to share: What sentence or phrase in this story caught your attention? Why do you think this phrase/sentence spoke to you? Are you remembering something familiar or funny or sad? Do you feel called out of yourself by this phrase/sentence/story? What might you do with this experience?

Set up the space so that people can see one another for conversation. Provide tables so that participants have a place to work and to put their Bibles and papers.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from 9 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 using supplies normally found at the church). Using all 9 activities could take 90–120 minutes.

* To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose 3 activities using one activity from each category.

* To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose 4 or 5 using at least one activity from each category.

Supplies:

- Bibles

This is an exercise in thinking and in being, rather than in doing. Invite the participants to find John 13:1–17, 31b–35 and Acts 2:42–47 in their Bibles. You may need to assist some of those for whom Bible skills are confusing. Have someone read the passage for the group. Pause for a few moments of silence. Then have a second person read the text. Again, pause for silent reflection. Then have a third person read the passage again. Pause for silent meditation. Then invite each person in turn to name a word or phrase that stood out for him or her and to describe briefly what that phrase or sentence means. Encourage conversation and sharing by asking questions such as: How does each passage demonstrate discipleship? How does each person understand discipleship? How do people practice discipleship now? How might we expand our practice of hospitality by expanding our understanding of discipleship?

Consider John 13:1–17, 31b–35: If we step beyond the literal story, how might we understand Peter’s reluctance to giving and receiving care, and Jesus’ encouragement that Peter will learn and grow spiritually if he tries it? What about our own hesitation to be the one who needs, or the one who gives? What keeps us from giving or receiving? How do we get past that reluctance and reach Peter’s enthusiastic restatement, “Not only my feet, but also my hands and my head”? How do we apply what we have learned from this story to our own life in our church?

Consider Acts 2:42–47: Describe your understanding of a disciple. Is the disciples’ behavior in Acts voluntary? Do they do these things because they were told to, or because their hearts were changed and these actions became the natural way to live? How do we change our hearts? What do we do when our hearts are changed? Can we share within our faith community as the disciples did? How might we expand our discipleship practices outside the walls of our church?

Following discussion, invite people to sit in silence for a last meditation on the ways they might have found encouragement to share or receive care, or to think about caring in new ways.

3 A Cup of Tea

Leader preparation: Learning is a gradual process. As disciples, we are learners; as learners, we practice what we learn until we are proficient. Often our impatience gets in the way of our educational process. We want quick, instant, fast, speedy, with as little effort as possible in as brief a period of time as we can manage. If we could take a smart pill, we would. If we could go from total ignorance to complete understanding, we would. But learning is a process, and takes time. This activity is a visible reminder that patience is rewarded, as well as a meditation on patience as described in the scriptures for this Exploration.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- cool water
- a clear glass mug or clear glass tea pot
- one tea bag

Begin by telling the group that the topic is patience. Invite two of them to read John 13:1–17, 31b–35 and Acts 2:42–47. While they are reading, pour cool water into the glass mug or tea pot and submerge the tea bag in the water. Ask the participants to think about how the scriptures offer an understanding of patience.

Use questions of your own, or questions such as these: In the John passage, who is patient? Who is impatient? How does each demonstrate patience or impatience? What is Jesus trying to teach? Does he expect the disciples to understand without explanation, or is he willing to explain, wait for comprehension, encourage practice? What can we learn about patience from this story? How is the Acts story a demonstration of patience? What in the Acts passage teaches and encourages patience?

As the conversation continues, point out that water plus a tea bag doesn't equal tea until time has passed. Eventually, tea occurs. Willingness plus information doesn't equal understanding until time has passed and we have absorbed what we did not know before. Sometimes we need to be steeped in the context. Eventually, we learn and are able to embody what we believe. As we practice (as we steep our brains and our hearts and our bodies in new knowledge), learning becomes part of us, and we become more comfortable with new ideas and new behaviors. As with ideas, so it is with people. If we're new here, we'll need some time to learn who people are and how this community serves God and God's people. If we're established church members, we'll learn, in time, who new people are, and how they will serve God and God's people in this community. Over time, we will learn to make space for new people and new ideas, to help them become part of "us," and we can all meld new with old traditions and habits, thereby creating something good for God.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 How Are We Doing? (Easy Preparation)

Leader Preparation: This activity examines your church community and its ways of learning. Preparation consists of making a list of questions for your group to investigate. The group might add questions of its own. The goal is to find the ways in which your congregation serves one another and the wider community. Then the group can analyze the process by which learning takes place, or is assumed to take place. The group looks for positive and negative aspects, in the hope of serving God in the best ways we can. The activity may help new church participants become familiar with some of the practices of the community and can invite suggestions for improvement or compliments for work being well done. As established members reflect on their teaching ministries, new ideas or enhancements may come to mind.

Supplies:

- Bibles: John 13:1–17, 31b–35; Acts 2:42–47
- list of questions, Attachment: Activity 4

Invite the group to take a close look at the church community, its ways of learning, and its deliberate practices. This is an opportunity to critique, not to criticize and find fault. Encourage them to discover the stories behind the practices: Why do we do it this way? Who started it? How has it changed over the years? Does it fit with our current ministry? After an agreed-upon time for research, come back together and discuss what you have learned. Has this activity helped new church participants discover their community?



5 My Old Shirt

Leader Preparation: Read “My Old Shirt” to decide if you need to modify it to make it your own. Part of Discerning and Deciding is the awareness of ideas, practices, or teachings that are perhaps very comfortable and familiar, but no longer function as they once did. As our society changes, the faith community learns to respond in new ways for teaching, ministry, and mission. Use the story to invite the group to think about the ruts and habits we have used up, and the possibilities for new ways of living.

Supplies:

- “My Old Shirt,” Attachment: Activity 5

Tell the story “My Old Shirt,” then invite people to sit in silence for a brief time, thinking about their own lives: What habits are a comfortable part of their days? Do we do these things without thinking, because we have always done them, or because they are helpful to us in living a full and abundant life? Are our habits helpful or harmful? Why do we keep doing/saying/wearing/holding them? Then invite the group to think about the life of the faith community and ask: Are our practices in this congregation part of our heritage? Old habits? Left over from another generation? Beloved rituals that contain the stories of our people? Are these practices helpful? Do they build up the body of Christ, or might they seem unhelpful to new people who don’t know our stories? Do I personally have some expectations that the church will be or do particular things? How do I reconcile myself with the community when it is clear that others do not share my passion for specific actions or practices? How long do we advocate a minority position, and when do we acknowledge that what we want to do is not helpful or healthy for the faith community? These questions and others that are particular to your own community can be applied to all aspects of church ministry and mission: from the building to the hymnals to the translations of the Bible used in teaching, from whether or not the choir wears robes to the time and day when the faith education takes place, from faith practices to fellowship opportunities to ways the church building is used during the week.

Leave enough time at the end of the activity to offer this prayer for taking up and discarding:

God of leftovers and extra portions, we come to you with full hearts, with hands eager to do your work in your world. We understand that what we have always done is sometimes the best way we can work together, and yet sometimes it is no longer helpful to you. We lay before you all our ideas, our hopes and dreams, our church and the ways it provides one place where we find you. Take up, we pray, those offerings that are most helpful to you and your people. May we lay aside what will no longer do your work; may we take up the good gifts you share with us, even when they are new to us. We confess that some of what must be discarded is precious to us, and that we will perhaps come to visit it when we wish to remember or to seek comfort in familiar ways. Our first desire is to be faithful to you. May we work together in love and fervent joy so that your world may live together in your peace. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

6 Serving One Another

Leader preparation: In some congregations, foot washing is part of the common practice, often during Lent or Holy Week. In others, some participate, but others do not. In still other communities, foot washing has never been practiced, and there is some discomfort with it. This activity offers your group an opportunity to experiment with the ministry of foot washing within its own borders, to discuss why or why not it is important, or uncomfortable, or meaningful. We do not expect people to accept new (or old) ideas immediately, but rather, we offer ways

in which practices can be tried. Offer this activity as an experiment in trying new things, or in reconsidering what may have lost some meaning through repetition. Let your group know ahead of time so that they are prepared to remove socks and shoes without too much difficulty. Invite people to think about the ways we serve others by washing their feet, and the ways we receive care by allowing our own feet to be washed.

You may want to have the participants bring their own towels. Arrange your space with chairs set in a circle with room that allows movement between and in front of each place. Place a basin and a pitcher of warm water at each chair.

Supplies:

- Bibles: John 13:1–17, 31b–35 and Acts 2:42–47
- basins for washing
- pitchers of warm water
- towels
- sanitary hand wipes (optional)

Do this activity in silence once the foot washing has begun. Explain what is going to happen and invite people to place their bare feet in the basin in front of them. Read the two Bible passages. Pause for a few moments of silence and meditation. Offer a prayer that God will open their eyes to new ways of understanding what is being practiced in this place. Move to the first person, kneel at the basin, pour the water over the person's feet. Rinse the feet, then dry them with the towel. Return to your seat. The one whose feet are now clean moves to the next person and repeats the process. The last person will wash the feet of the leader. Sit in meditative silence for a few moments.

An alternative way of foot washing is to use sanitary hand wipes and dispose the wipes after use. These wipes are often quite cool and the evaporating alcohol will make feet cool, so the use of towels may be incorporated into this practice.

Afterward, or at your next session, invite conversation about the experience of washing and being washed. What insights did the imitation of the Gospel text open? If foot washing is a common practice in your community, ask what meaning it has for those who participate. If this is a new experience, was it helpful in understanding discipleship, or in becoming more comfortable with the idea of foot washing in the community? In Jesus' time, the host washed the feet of the guests who entered his or her home. How do we care for one another and offer hospitality? How might we expand our current practice of hospitality, moving beyond our own comfort level and into extravagant offerings of grace?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Recall the First Disciples (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 5:1–11 and become familiar with the story. Find a map of Israel that shows the location of the Sea of Galilee. Your church may have teaching maps. An Internet search will turn up several options.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- map of Israel

Invite the participants to find a place to sit comfortably where they can see the map. Point out the location of the Sea of Galilee. Tell them that in the Bible this is also called Lake Gennesaret.

Remind participants that in ancient times, lakes were gathering places. Traders stopped to refresh their animals and to exchange goods with residents. People lived near the lakes and made their living by fishing. Ask participants to imagine that they live on this lake, that they are engaged in fishing for a living. Remind them how ancient fishermen were at the mercy of the weather, using the wind or oars to move their boats. Fishing was often best at night, so fishermen worked by the light of the moon and stars. The work was physically demanding, setting and pulling nets. And not every night was successful. Sometimes there was little to show for the work.

Invite participants to imagine themselves in the story as a volunteer reads Luke 5:1–11.

Pose these questions for discussion: When you imagine yourself to be in the story, which character are you? What did the fishermen leave behind when they decided to follow Jesus? What do you think made Jesus' invitation appealing to the fishermen?

What might have prevented them from following? Would you have gone with Jesus? Does this story inform your understanding of what it means to be a disciple? How?

8 Learning to Share the Blessing

Leader preparation: Many communities offer language classes for those whose first language is not English (ESL: English as a Second Language). Your faith community can offer hospitality by providing classrooms or other gathering places for ESL students. Since many ESL students work long hours and/or swing shifts, a variety of class times are usually offered in the community. Your church can work with other groups to share times and days or evenings, so that the class meets at a time when the church will be open for other activities. Most ESL classes teach only basic English, and students often express a desire to have more practice than they get in class and in their jobs. To encourage the desire to learn and to discover new friends and practices, think about inviting ESL students to a regularly scheduled social event, such as a potluck supper, where they can practice English with church members and make new friends. Your group can serve as hosts and organizers.

Supplies:

- guest presenter, one who teaches ESL classes

Invite the group members to talk about being a stranger to a community where the language and customs are different from one's own. How do you begin to learn the language and the customs? If you have a guest presenter who teaches ESL classes in your community, invite that person to identify some of the barriers and obstacles encountered by his or her students. In what ways might the group be able to offer hospitality to those students?

If feasible, have the group plan an event to which they would invite persons attending ESL classes. Consider a friendship supper, service project, or other activities. In order for this to be a balanced activity with mutual respect and learning, offer the suggestions of international meals, at which people share the stories of the food they brought and the languages they learned as children. Results can

include learning new recipes, sharing songs from many lands, and picking up a bit of another language. In these ways, the group makes room for learning and laughter, sharing and friendship within the community.

9 Delighting the Eyes

Leader preparation: Invite the group to consider landscaping and/or maintaining the church grounds so that visitors are attracted to your location as a welcoming place. To help maintain a pleasant approach to the church grounds, plan to build on the critiques you have used in previous activities. Shape this activity to your particular location, building, and surrounding area. Invite the group to imagine ways they might invite people into the building simply by its attractiveness in the neighborhood. Realtors call this “curb appeal.” Seekers and new church participants will be especially helpful in this activity, as seeing the building and grounds for the first time will be fresh in their memories.

Supplies: None

When a faith community has occupied the same building or location for a long time, small flaws can be overlooked. Look at the physical presence of the church in your location with the eyes of visitors. Are there weeds to be pulled, overgrown or dead plants to be trimmed or removed, or trash to pick up? Is the paint peeling or faded or stained? Is there bare ground where low-maintenance plants could be planted to soften the exterior of the building? Are the windows clean or dusty? Are the sidewalks clean? Are the areas around the door handles and light switches clean, or will a bucket of soap and water and some elbow grease help? If your church has land around it, even a simple strip of grass, is it tidy and neatly trimmed?

Reflect

Discipleship grows with practice. Often we begin from a very new place, and our practice is basic. We are clumsy at first, and we move with some reluctance or reticence. Over time, with practice, we discover within ourselves the desire to share what we have, whether it’s warm socks or better communication skills or an awakening to the Spirit moving within us. We find that we are more aware of the needs and feelings and hesitancy of others, and that we have the patience, the grace, and the willingness to honor each other wherever we are on our journey. We do not all understand everything at the same time or in the same way, but sharing helps all of us grow in spirit and in truth. One of the most valuable skills you can demonstrate is the respect we give to one another as people of God.

As a group plan a church work day, in which new members and long-term members are partnered in small groups to help keep the church grounds pleasant and inviting. How often might people gather to work? Can those whose skills don’t include gardening or painting help by making a simple meal of soup and sandwiches for the others? How can this be turned from grubby work to an offering to God with joy? Can the upkeep of the house of God be a celebration of community? When the planning is complete, the group can work on finding a mutually convenient day and time, gathering all the volunteers, and getting the job done. Remember to offer thanksgiving prayers for the community at work and for willing hearts and hands.

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Attachment: Activity 4

How Are We Doing?

How does this congregation teach and learn about faith, the Bible, tradition, mission, and discipleship?

In order to find the answers, look at the history of the learning groups.

- Do children participate in a structured learning setting?
- Is there a children's time during worship?
- Is a summer camp or vacation Bible school offered?
- How do children serve others?
- How do youth, young adults, and adults serve the children?
- What do youth and young people do together?
- What opportunities are there for bonding, establishing friendships, conversation, exploring, and support?
- How do youth and young people serve others?
- Are multigenerational times a part of the life of the church community, so that each age group gets to share its blessings and questions with others?
- How is elder wisdom transmitted to another generation?
- How do adults learn?
- Are there structured learning opportunities for adults?
- What are the opportunities for bonding, support, friendships, and conversation for adults?
- How do adults meet and welcome visitors and new church participants?
- How long have all these ways of learning and sharing been in place?
- When was the last time we made a change?
- Are there hospitality practices we haven't tried?
- Are there ways of learning that were unsuccessful several years ago, but that might work now with these people in this place?
- How might we learn to serve God and the world in more helpful ways?
- What current practices are working well, and should be kept?

Add other questions that will help your faith community learn and grow.

Attachment: Activity 5

My Old Shirt

I have an old shirt that I can't quite throw out. It's long past its prime. It's worn smooth, and feels silky against my skin. It goes over whatever I've got on and adds just enough warmth. If I pull the cuffs down too hard, they're going to come right off the shirt, because the fabric is frayed at the seam. It only has two buttons left. When I put it on, my spouse asks me, "Do you still have that thing? Isn't it time to get a new one?"

Sometimes we find that our habits are like that. We do the same comfortable things over and over again because we already know how to do them. We buy the same style, or color, or brand. We sing the good old songs and sit in the same place in whatever sanctuary we find ourselves, even when we're visiting a new church for the first time.

We love our old stuff: our old shirts, our comfy jeans, the sneakers with holes in the toes that fit just right. We hold onto our old faith stuff, too: the hymns we learned as children, the Bible verses we memorized in Sunday school, the way we took communion or celebrated baptism.

Can we accept invitations to wear other shirts, or to sing other hymns, or to praise God with different words or actions? Try to offer our old practices to God, saying,

"I love these hymns, and this way of receiving communion, and these Bible verses. I know that the Bible has many verses, and that there are too many hymns to fit in any one hymnal. I know that your bread and cup are offered in many different ways. I'm giving you my old, comfortable ways of being faithful, gracious God. I trust you to hold them for me so that I can sing and celebrate in old ways sometimes. I'm also receiving new ways -- the ones you've taught other people to love. Perhaps we can celebrate your abundant life and amazing creativity together and learn from one another, and sing your praises in harmony. Help us grow into your life and love, in the ways that Jesus teaches us. Amen."

Giving and Receiving Hospitality



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

Often, seekers and new church participants understand Christian tradition as set-in-stone, hidebound, and rigid. Established church members can think that tradition is whatever they're used to doing. However, if we step back from the local church and look at the whole of Christian tradition, we see that there is very little that does not change over time. God remains God, but our concepts of God are affected by our time in history and our personal experiences. It is helpful to discern the differences between longstanding, helpful tradition and local church habits. In order to do this, we look at the history of Christianity from the earliest days, as well as the ways Christians have addressed their world and other cultures. We look behind the stories of our local church to see how we have served and cared for our world and to determine whether our current practices are still helpful to our ministry. Our traditions tell our story, and we honor those who have held our story for us. In order to keep our story alive in today's world, we are responsible not only for treasuring the stories we have learned, but for looking critically at the ways we practice our faith, and for asking, "How do we best serve God's people today and in the future?"

About this Exploration

God continually invites us to extravagantly welcome others into abundant life. We are not the first to experience questions, failures, accomplishments, joys and sorrows. Our Christian tradition gives us ancestors in faith whose stories and life experiences inform our own. Every drop of water reminds us of Christ's baptism. Shared meals recall Jesus' breaking bread and sharing the cup. Grounded in Hebrew tradition, Jesus displayed radical commitment to the poor. Love for the poor

continues to characterize Christian community. God invites us to welcome those whom we encounter in daily life, and those we might not otherwise encounter, to see them as God's beloved people, and treasure the diversity of humanity. We are called by God to create a safe, welcoming environment for all. We join the family of all time.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Mark 14:22–25

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

1 Peter 4:1–11

Leader Preparation

For some, tradition is a vital and holy part of faith. For others, it's a stumbling block. Our task here is to invite critical thinking about what we do and why we do it, and to consider prayerfully whether any particular practice is helpful to the faith community. Sometimes what the local church thinks of as Christian tradition is local practice, even habit, which is "the way we've always done it" without any deeper meaning. Sometimes tradition is so ingrained in our lives as Christians that we may intentionally work to include that tradition in our current and future practice. We remember that Jesus told his critics that Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for Sabbath. While tradition is an important way of telling and remembering the Good News, Jesus shaped his teaching to the needs and the hearts of the people he met. A simple quadrilateral might be helpful: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience together help us determine what is tradition and what is local church practice, and even what is simply a rut we've gotten ourselves into.

Prayer: Gracious God, you offer us invitations and surprises and steadfast love. We are your people, and we stand before you preparing to lead the way to joy and understanding. We have an entire Bible, we have hundreds of years of history and practice,

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Cool, Clear Water (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Use a concordance to identify water stories from scripture. Look up Water, Storm, Tempest, Well, Sea, Drink, Rain, and other "water" words. Remember that the Bible stories that are familiar to you may be totally unfamiliar to the members of your group.

Read about baptism in your denomination's book of worship.

Supplies:

- song: "Wade in the Water" <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPsong2>
tune: African-American traditional
- glass bowl
- pitcher of water
- towel

Slowly pour water from the pitcher into the bowl. Invite the participants to listen to the sound of the water and to watch as the water flows from pitcher to bowl. Play or sing "Wade in the Water." Have the participants describe some of their experiences with water. Some of their stories may be difficult if they have ever been flooded out of their home or caught in terrible storms. Water can be destructive as well as refreshing.

Throughout Christian history, water has been a powerful symbol. Talk about Jesus' baptism as it is practiced in your church. If there are members of the group who have been baptized, invite them to tell their story. If they were baptized as infants, they won't have a memory of the event, but they may know the story from hearing family members talk about it. What does baptism mean to each person? Why do we take such care with baptism?

Invite each person to wash another's hands and to dry them with a towel. Was this comfortable, unusual, nurturing, awkward? Why? What memories did the act evoke for the giver and for the receiver?

2 Lectio Divina

Leader preparation: *Lectio divina* (lek'-see-o dee-vee'-na) is an ancient practice still used today when studying or praying the Scriptures. Choose a passage of Scripture, such as Genesis 18:1–15 or another. If each person brings his or her own Bible, invite people to read from various translations. The passage will be read three times, with quiet time for meditation between each reading. Prepare questions to encourage discussion if people in the group are reluctant to share: What sentence or phrase in this story caught your attention? Why do you think this phrase/sentence spoke to you? Are you remembering something familiar or funny or sad? Do you feel called out of yourself by this phrase/sentence/story? What might you do with this experience?

Supplies:

- Bibles

and sometimes we do the good thing. May we do the good thing here. May we wonder and discover, may we learn and grow, may we be able to lay aside what is no longer helpful and to receive what will help us serve you. May we be aware of the needs of your people, may we hear the cries of their hearts and the laughter in their souls as we strive to tell your story to the entire world. We pray in Jesus' name, who showed us how to teach and love. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from 9 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 using supplies normally found at the church). Using all 9 activities could take 90–120 minutes.

* To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose 3 activities using one activity from each category.

* To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose 4 or 5 using at least one activity from each category.

Lectio divina is a slow, contemplative praying of the scriptures. Invite the participants to get in a comfortable position and to sit in silence for several moments. Pay attention to your breathing. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–25 while others listen. In *lectio divina*, God is teaching us to listen, to seek God in silence. God does not reach out and grab us; rather, we are gently invited ever more deeply into God's presence. Listen for a word or phrase in the text that touches your heart. Pause for a moment of silent reflection, then invite the participants to share their word or phrase. Ask a group member, preferably someone of the opposite sex, to read the text a second time. Hearing the text in a different voice may touch the heart in a different way. After the reading ask: Where does this text touch your life today? Have a third person read the text. Then ask: What is the text calling for you to do?

Encourage the participants to try this spiritual practice at home during the week. Suggest that they use Mark 14:22–25 or 1Peter 4:1–11 as the text for reflection. Remind them of the three questions: (1) What word or phrase touches your heart? (2) Where does the text touch your life today? (3) What is the text calling for you to do?

3 Saying What We Believe

Leader preparation: Become familiar with your church's statement of faith. This may be included in your hymnal or the church's book of worship, or you could find it on your denomination's website. Your church library or pastor may have statements of faith or creeds from other denominations and traditions for comparison.

Supplies:

- copies of your church's statement of faith or The Nicene Creed, Attachment: Activity 3

In the Christian Church, creeds or confessions, or statements of faith as they are sometimes called in later church history, are an attempt to summarize in formal statements the basic or essential beliefs of Christians or a group of Christians. Some churches are creedal, that is a person belonging to that church must agree with the creed, and the creed is used as a test of faith. Other churches are non-creedal, that is there is nothing you are required to believe in order to belong. Noncreedal churches use creeds and statements of faith in services of worship to help articulate their beliefs, but they do not subscribe to those statements as the exclusive or only expression of belief.

Read together either your church's statement of faith or The Nicene Creed. These questions may spark conversation: What parts of the statement are important for you? What are important words or phrases? Why? What causes you discomfort? Why? What other way might you say these things that expresses more completely what you believe?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Whose Table Is This, Anyway? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Because Christian churches and denominations have a wide variety of ways to practice the sacrament of communion, visitors and new church participants find it helpful if we are clear about who is welcome at the table. Some faith communities, such as the Roman Catholic Church, practice closed communion. Only members of that particular community or denomination may

serve or receive the bread and cup. Others practice open communion, inviting all to participate in the Lord's Supper. Some churches that practice open communion restrict access to the table to those who have been baptized or confirmed. Others, however, welcome all who believe in Jesus Christ to come to the table. A conversation within your church community will be helpful for you. Include the pastor and the people responsible for preparing and serving communion (often called deacons or the diaconate), either in your research or as guests of the hospitality study group. Keep in mind that some seekers will have little or no experience of communion at all, and some background information may be necessary.

Find out if your common practice is to serve juice or wine in the cup, or to offer both. Talk about why your church serves juice or wine, including consideration of scripture, people who may be susceptible to alcohol, children, and other reasons particular to your community. Does your communion tradition use wafers, unleavened bread like tortillas, pita or naan, or leavened bread? Why? Sometimes the decisions about the kind of bread and what is served in the cup have been made long ago, and it might be time to look at these decisions again. Is your church population the same as it was then? Is the community meeting the needs of the people it serves?

Supplies:

- Bible
- computer with Internet access and a projector to view a video about the Words of Institution <http://www.tinyurl.com/2f59v2c>
- your church's book of worship
- communion ware used in your service of worship

This activity is a conversation about communion between people who are familiar with your congregation's practice of communion and those who are new to the experience. Remember that some seekers will have little or no experience of communion, so some introduction and background may be necessary. Invite the participants to find Mark 14:22–25 in their Bibles. Ask a volunteer to read the passage. In a service of worship, this is called the Words of Institution. Show the video "Words of Institution," <http://www.tinyurl.com/2f59v2c>

Give an overview of the communion tradition within your church. Who is welcome at the table? What, if any, are the requirements for participating in communion? What elements are used? Note that there are a variety of ways of serving communion: coming forward to the table, intinction (dipping the bread into the cup), passing trays along the pews, etc. Invite the participants to describe some of their experiences of communion. What was helpful to the worshiper? What provoked anxiety or discomfort? How might the serving of communion be made more hospitable?

5 Let Us Make Bread Together

Leader preparation: Invite the participants to wear old clothes or aprons. Gather supplies and prepare a kitchen for group use. Prepare for conversation about bread in Bible stories, Christian tradition of communion, families, hospitality. Make sure there is time for the whole bread baking process without rushing. The French-Style Bread recipe, page 46–47 in James Beard's *Beard on Bread* cookbook, takes about 90 minutes from start to finish. If you are not comfortable with bread making, recruit someone from the congregation to assist. You could use a bread machine, or, as a last resort, use thawed frozen bread available in most grocery stores. Simple recipes for flatbreads or matzo can also be used. Additional recipes can be found at <http://www.tinyurl.com/ykr8uyw>.

Supplies:

- hand sanitizer for washing hands before handling food
- ingredients for the bread recipe of your choice

Example:

1 ½ tbsp dry active yeast
2 cups lukewarm water
1 tbsp sugar
1 tbsp salt
6+ cups white, unbleached, or bread flour

Proof yeast in warm water 5 minutes. Stir in sugar and salt, and enough flour, one cup at a time, to make a stiff dough. Knead 5–10 minutes on floured surface. Place in large oiled bowl and cover with clean towel. Let stand 30–60 minutes, till doubled in bulk. Turn out on floured board, punch down, and shape into two long loaves. Place in cold oven and turn temperature to 400°F. Bake 30–35 minutes, till bread sounds hollow when tapped with a knife handle. Remove from oven, place on racks to cool slightly. Eat while warm. The texture of this bread changes dramatically about 4 hours after baking, so it's best served very fresh.

Invite the participants to share stories of their family traditions related to bread. What kind of bread did they eat as children? Have their tastes changed? Talk about bread traditions in the Bible: manna in the wilderness, Jesus dining with strangers or friends or questioners, hospitality to others as common custom. Ask questions such as these: What are some church traditions about eating together? What are family traditions? Does the guest ever self-invite, or is Jesus' behavior with Zacchaeus too strange to imagine doing ourselves? How can we share this bread with others? When shall we get together to make bread to share with others? Who are the "others" we'll share it with? Will this be a visit to someone's home (are we self-inviting, showing up with warm bread to offer)? Will this be an invitation for someone to come into our place to visit us and break bread together? Invite conversation around the sacrament of communion, why and when and how we do it.

6 Baptism: Rinsing and Remembering

Leader preparation: We consider the tradition of baptism to be a sacrament: a holy action taken by God, witnessed and received and remembered by God's people. It comes from the Jewish tradition of *mikvah*, a cleansing bath before worship. Read about your church's baptism tradition in your denomination's book of worship. If you have your baptismal certificate and remember your baptism, consider sharing your story with the group. Prepare to invite other stories from the group or from other congregation members whom you invite to join you for this activity.

Some churches practice infant baptism, some believers' baptism, and some both. Among the participants in your group there may be family stories of each of these practices. Prepare to discuss the various ways (sprinkling, immersion, submersion) and times (infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood) of baptism. At each baptism the person baptized or the parents/guardians make promises, and so does the congregation. Look at the promises in the order of worship for baptism. Invite your minister to participate, for suggestions and guidance

Supplies:

- your denomination's book of worship
- hymnals

As an aid to remembering our baptism and the promises we made (or were made on our behalf), this activity helps the group create and lead a Baptism Remembrance liturgy. It can be used as a service of rededication of baptismal promises. Since baptism is a sacrament that is only performed with each person one time, it is not necessary to re-baptize someone who is returning to a Christian life. This affirmation of baptism or remembrance of baptism offers a ritual with God and the community as participants. Invite the group to create the liturgy, including hymns and other music, visual liturgy (dressing the communion table and sanctuary), and words used by worship leaders and the gathered community. If your group is large enough, smaller groups can work on various portions and return to the large group to assemble the worship service. To ensure that the liturgy flows smoothly, the group can walk through the entire service, performing the actions in sequence. Alternatively, this can be celebrated as worship within the group. Consider offering the completed liturgy to the congregation's worship leaders, to be used for new members when needed.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Standing at the Back of the Sanctuary (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Prepare for leading this activity by doing it yourself on an ordinary Sunday. Observe how visitors and members enter the sanctuary. Are they hesitant, taking slow, small steps? Do they stride in and head for a familiar pew or seat? Do they speak to others, or look around at the worship space, or sit quietly in meditation? Do others greet them?

Supplies: None

Sometimes, if the congregation fills most of the sanctuary seating even without visitors, people unfamiliar with the community will feel that it is unwelcoming. This activity invites the participants to observe both established member seating patterns and the ways visitors find places to sit in worship. Common seating issues can be avoided by people moving to the center of the pew or row, if they are able, rather than sitting close to the aisle, and by moving forward, leaving the last few rows for the shy, uncommitted, and reticent. Some visitors will move forward on their own, but many will not, especially if they're unsure of their welcome or whether they are going to be comfortable in worship.

As you study the traffic and seating patterns, consider these questions: Is it easy for people to enter the sanctuary for the first time? Invite the group to serve as greeters or ushers for a month and to observe the way visitors enter the sanctuary and find a seat. Some visitors will come early, in order to get used to the sanctuary, to have a little quiet time before worship begins, to learn about the church community by observing the ways church members relate to one another. Do members approach and greet visitors, introducing themselves and offering to sit with them? Others will come in quietly just as worship begins; are they hoping to remain anonymous, or are they preparing to worship? Are pews available near the back of the sanctuary, so that visitors can slip in and not call attention to themselves? Do members sit near the aisles in any pew, while the center of the row remains empty? Would a "reserved for visitors" on a few rows scattered

throughout the sanctuary help or hinder your church's ministry of hospitality? How might members help make worship a welcoming experience for visitors and new church participants?

Schedule a time after the study is finished so that all observers can report and reflect on the results.

8 Food for Families

Leader preparation: From the earliest stories in Genesis, God and humanity have been involved with the preparation and serving of food. In many communities, the practice of serving balanced, healthy, delicious meals at the family table has been lost or set aside, for many reasons. Inviting children and families to share meals in community is a way of continuing Christian tradition, introducing hospitality, and making sure that everyone gets nutritious meals on a regular basis.

Have available the contact information for various food-oriented ministries within the community. Encourage the group to think creatively about ways an ancient practice can make a difference in lives today. Balanced meals are important, and often in today's world, nutrition is lacking. Parents work swing shifts and may not be home to supervise and prepare breakfast, lunch or supper. Sometimes the old tradition of families eating meals together has been lost in the busy-ness of daily life. By inviting people to share the work, the practice of hospitality is made mutual: the church might provide the organizational piece and the work space, and others can share in the gathering of supplies, the making of bag lunches, and the distribution. In this way, new friends are made, and no one need feel beholden to another.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- newsprint or white board and markers

Invite the participants to share stories of their family meal times. How has their family tradition changed over the years? What prompted the change? Have the participants find and read Acts 2:42–47. The tradition of the early church was to break bread together, to share meals together, to use this time of fellowship to nourish their bodies as well as their spirits as they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” Talk about the tradition of meal times in your church. What happens at fellowship dinners? How often do you have them?

Invite the group to brainstorm ways your church could carry on a tradition of breaking bread together with the community.

Does the community in which your church serves have a program for giving meals to children? Possible service organizations include your church or a group of churches, a food bank or soup kitchen, Boys & Girls Club, Big Brothers Big Sisters, or the public school system. If so, the group might volunteer to help in some way. If not, invite the group to think about ways they might begin a ministry to offer nutritious, simple meals for families. In the summer, take brown bags of sandwiches, fruit, and cookies to the parks regularly. For a year-long project, think about people on fixed incomes and the lack of resources at the end of each month. Perhaps a monthly sandwich ministry during the last week of every month, when money is scarce, can answer a need in your community. Perhaps your church could serve a free soup and sandwich meal once a week or once a month.

9 All Ages and Abilities Welcome Here

Leader preparation: While it's not always the case, many times seekers or new church participants choose a congregation based on its welcome of children. Children are often present in worship without, however, understanding or participating. Observe children in worship in your church for a few weeks. When are they engaged in worship, and when are they just waiting for something to happen (or wiggling, drawing, whispering)? Do children sing the hymns, or, if hymnals are used, are they held in adult hands, above children's eye level? How do children learn how to read the words to hymns when the reading pattern is different than reading a paragraph in a book? Is there a special time for children during worship? Do children in your tradition stay for the whole service, leave after a children's sermon, never participate in worship with adults, come into worship at a particular time? Do children light candles, ring a bell to begin worship, help with ushering or receiving the offering? What questions do children have about worship that are not being answered? (Why do we sometimes stand and sometimes sit during worship? Why do we pass a plate for money, or why do we all walk to the front of the sanctuary to make our offering? Why do we listen to Scripture lessons? What's the purpose of the sermon? What is baptism? What's important about communion? Why do we all say words or sing together sometimes?) The hospitality study group can ask children to help them understand what it means for a child to be worshipping with the community, and work with worship leaders and educators to make community worship a meaningful experience for children.

Reflect

Meditating on scripture, studying the sacraments and statements of faith, reaching out to the community are all ways of introducing new people to Christian tradition and of reminding long-term members of our history and practice. From the activities you experienced in this session, what did you learn about the members of the group? Is your faith community being helpful to people who may not be familiar with Christian tradition? Are a few people using tradition as a reason not to make changes in welcoming practices? Are there ways in which the congregation can improve its mission and ministry, its welcome?

Prayer: Gracious and surprising God, you teach us, even when we don't recognize that we don't know. You guide us with the practices and wisdom of our forebears, and encourage us to look forward to a future of joy and abundance for all people. You welcome our questions, our discoveries, and our wonder. May we continue to learn your ways, O God, and may we teach with as much love as you do. In the name of Jesus, who knew how to teach with love and grace, we pray. Amen.

Supplies: None

What we learn when we think about children in worship helps us consider how worship is welcoming to people of all ages and all abilities. Welcoming children into participation in worship takes intention and thought, but is not complicated. A conversation can take place at the children's sermon time in worship, allowing adults to hear the spontaneous responses to questions. For older children, a written survey can be included. Ask parents what they do to help their own children, and how they would like the church community to help. Ideas and suggestions specific to your community will come from the observations and responses received.

Not everyone knows how to read the hymns. It is helpful to point out the pattern of written hymn music and words so that everyone can participate in the hymn singing. Not everyone in the congregation knows the Doxology or Gloria Patri or the Prayer of Jesus. It is helpful to children and visitors and seekers and new church participants to print the words of congregational responses the order of worship. Repetition will help people memorize without anxiety. People with visual limitations appreciate large print editions of the order of service, hymnal, and Bible. People with hearing limitations appreciate assisted hearing devices. People who use walkers or canes or strollers need more room and cannot always stand with the congregation. It is important that our church traditions include all people.

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Attachment: Activity 3

The Nicene Creed

(The Nicene Creed is the creed or profession of faith that is most widely used in Christian liturgy. It is called Nicene -- pronounced "ny'seen" -- because, in its original form, it was adopted in the city of Nicaea by the first ecumenical council, which met there in 325 A.D.)

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Giving and Receiving Hospitality



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

Seekers and new church participants want to discern their own context within their understanding of scripture, discipleship, Christian tradition, and discipleship. Where have we come from? Who are we now? What ministry is God calling us to offer? How do we discover our mission, and how do we enact our calling as God's people in this place and in God's world? Based on their journeys that brought them to your congregation, seekers and new church participants have new insights to offer and can expand the knowledge of the community beyond its previous borders. Established members hold the stability of tradition. Working together in prayer and practice the whole church can move forward into a mission that fits its context and answers the needs of the wider community.

About this Exploration

Hospitality marks the identity and inspires the action of a welcoming community. Discerning needs of the local community and expressing compassion for the global community call individuals and congregations to respond to the real need. Each individual brings unique gifts to the community and extends opportunities to share. Mission partnerships are never one-way streets. Risking outreach to others creates opportunities to receive. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison are ways of welcoming Christ into the community. Those sent forth in mission are uniquely able to return with lessons of hospitality offered by those who have been served. Looking to God for guidance, the open hearts and serving hands that reach out to the world are the same hearts and hands that welcome.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Romans 12: 9–18

John 6:1–21

Leader Preparation

You may have led the group through the activities and meditations of previous Explorations, or this may be the first Exploration you have chosen. You may have been able to observe the ways your community works together, or you may need to quickly discern which ministries invite enthusiasm and passion within the church so that you can help the group begin to share its new understanding with the congregation. While no one person can tell an entire congregation what to do or how to do it, the excitement of a few can be contagious. You get to help the group and the congregation find its central purpose within God's call to ministry. Who is God calling this particular church to be? How do we shape a mission that matches the discerned need in the world as well as the personality of the congregation? While it is unrealistic to expect every single person to leap into service, you have the opportunity to offer careful and loving encouragement to discern individual gifts, so that each person may wholeheartedly offer their time and talents to the overall mission and ministry of the church. Give regular updates to the congregation, your church groups, invite people to join the process in the printed newsletter or bulletin, and request prayers for guidance and support in the group's work.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Learning About Sharing the Blessings (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The scriptures for this Exploration are full of ways to share the blessings of life. This activity invites the group to read and think about ways the Romans and John passages can be applied in the life of your faith community. It invites daring to expand the community's horizons and expectations, while offering assurance of friendship and hospitality. If each person brings a Bible, invite people to read from various translations. The passage is read three times, with quiet time for meditation between each reading. Prepare questions to encourage discussion if people in the group are reluctant to share: What sentence or phrase in this story caught your attention? Why do you think this phrase/sentence spoke to you? Are you remembering something familiar or funny or sad? Do you feel called out of yourself by this phrase/sentence/story? What might you do with this experience?

Arrange your space with the chairs set in a circle so that each person can see all others. Tables are helpful.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Ask for a volunteer to read Romans 12:9–18 while others listen in silence. Pause for silent reflection. Then invite a second person to read the passage again. Pause for silent reflection. Ask another volunteer to read the passage a third time. After a pause, invite each person in turn to speak about the phrase that stood out for him or her, and talk briefly about what that phrase or sentence means.

Pose questions such as these to start a discussion: How can we hear Paul's words to the Romans today? What do we do well here? What do we need to work on? How do we live peaceably with those who don't understand us, or who disagree with what we do, or with those whom we want to change to be more like us?

Repeat this process for John 6:1–21. What does John's story of feeding the people invite us to do? What are the components of Jesus' ministry in this story? Hints: caring for the sick, being with friends, welcoming new people, accepting gifts from those we don't know, eating together, saving the leftovers (recycling? supplying food banks and soup kitchens? seeking people who are "leftovers" or left out of community life?), taking time for Sabbath rest and renewal, being caught up in the anxiety and worry of the world, finding Jesus in the turmoil of life, remembering that God is with us always. What else do you find?

Think about ways this faith community can live into the challenges of these texts.

2 The Cookie Study

Leader preparation: A simple visual drama invites people to think about the ways the community works together toward a common goal. This can be offered as a children's sermon or to your multigenerational community as a whole. Your job as the leader is to talk about how the bag of ingredients listed below can be a metaphor for church-wide participation in working together.

Prayer: God of surprises and blessings, you have offered us more than we have received. In this place, we hope to discover more of your gifts, and to use them wisely and lovingly in your name. Our task sometimes seems too big for us to manage. May we remember that you share your wisdom and grace with us always. We often want to go back to a more familiar way of being your people. Help us explore new paths. Show to us the ways of “yes” and “no”; give us “maybe” and “perhaps.” Help us lead your people to your light, and offer your love and grace and mercy to all who come. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from 9 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 using supplies normally found at the church). Using all 9 activities could take 90–120 minutes.

* To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose 3 activities using one activity from each category.

* To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose 4 or 5 using at least one activity from each category.

Supplies:

- one homemade cookie
- hand sanitizer
- ingredients for a simple cookie recipe in their packages, such as a bag of flour, a bag of sugar, a box of baking soda, a box of salt, a stick of butter, a bag of chocolate chips, a bag of nuts, a box of oatmeal, a box of raisins, a jar of cinnamon
- big mixing bowl, large enough to hold most of the ingredients, covered with a towel or a big grocery bag or two
- big mixing spoon
- cookie sheet

In your own words, tell the group the following: “I brought cookies for everybody today. I hope you like [chocolate chip cookies, or oatmeal raisin cookies, or snickerdoodles, or other], because I got these ready myself, especially for you. I’ll take one, and then I’ll pass them to you. Take just one, and then pass the rest to the person next to you. You can pick whichever one you like. Go ahead. Just take one, to make sure there are enough to go around. Don’t you love cookies? How’s yours? What’s wrong? Why aren’t you eating? What’s missing?” [Allow time for responses.]

Make the connection between having the ingredients and having the cookie: We need to stir the ingredients together, form it into the intended shape, bake it, let it cool a little, enjoy it. If Jason is flour and Kara is sugar and Luis is cinnamon and Ashlei is butter and Mason is salt and Olivia is oatmeal, what needs to happen to make cookies? They all need to work together. Jason can’t be a cookie without Kara and Luis and Ashlei and Mason and Olivia. It’s the same way with church. We have people who have great ideas. We have people who love to get right in and work on a mission. We have people who know how to analyze the progress, and can make suggestions about how to do it better. We have people who pray for us and encourage us to do our very best for God. We have listeners and thinkers and workers and prayers. Together we do mission: the cookies are made. God’s realm comes a little closer, and it is good.

③ Working It Out Together

Leader preparation: A helpful metaphor for discerning context and mission in your community is a jigsaw puzzle. Prepare a little meditation on jigsaw puzzles as an analogy for discerning context and mission: We don’t know what the picture is, and we don’t know how big it is, and we don’t know how long it will take us to complete, but while we’re here, we can work on it. We can sort the pieces: sky and clouds on top; grass or water on the bottom; trees, mountains, and boats in the middle: our skills and abilities and willingness; our understanding of tradition, discipleship, scripture, and the world around us. We can put the edges together: the parameters of time, creativity, finances, people, building capacity, passion and excitement for mission. Then we start assembling the puzzle: brainstorming, planning, trying pieces together to see if they fit, deciding who’s working on the sky and who’s working on the grass, and how many are needed to assemble the big mountain in the middle. Remember that not every attempt works, and some ideas about what piece will fit are rejected after trying.

Supplies:

- jigsaw puzzle with the picture hidden
- table large enough for the completed puzzle
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers

Invite the group to work on the puzzle. Describe how a jigsaw puzzle can be a metaphor for the church. Have the group think about the skills that are available among them and in the rest of the congregation. What are the needs of the community (and which community: neighborhood, town, state, nation, world)? How can you put the pieces of skills and need together to make a coherent and complete offering? Ask for a volunteer to record the ideas on newsprint or marker board for later refining.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Open the Doors (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This is a simple, brief meditation to be used as part of a service of worship. Plan to take about five minutes. Plan a day when the scripture readings will emphasize serving and ministering to those in need. Use hymns and art from the Faith Practices recommended lists, or choose music and visual aids from the community's collection.

Supplies:

- art posters or framed pictures showing ways of serving and ministering

During worship, invite the congregation to meditate on why each person walked through the door into the sanctuary today. How is your attitude different from the first time you entered this church? Why do you stay? What is it about this place and these people that keeps you returning and participating? Where do we gather our strengths and ideas and energy for reaching out to others? How do we care for each other? What's missing? How can each person help another to feel this connection between God and the community, between members of the community?

End the brief meditation with a simple unison prayer in your own words or words like these: *Welcoming God, who comes to us in our hearts, in our hands, and in our daily lives, you invite us to share our common lot with your Son, Jesus. May we hear your voice, as well as the needs of your people, and may we find ways in this time and place to answer your call to service. As we pray, so may we do your work with joy and grace. Amen.*

5 Mission Marketplace

Leader preparation: This activity takes planning, publicity, and organization before the event, but volunteers can help lessen the burden. Invite the hospitality study group to take part in the pre-event work, and ask them to include some of their friends. The same can be done with the simple after-event cleanup. The project can be done before and/or after worship, or with a potluck supper for a fellowship event (make sure you have enough space for both the marketplace and the potluck, if you choose this option).

Supplies:

- Letters to church ministry groups, and to local service organizations

- Tables set around the perimeter of the church's largest room (often the fellowship or friendship hall), with two or three chairs behind each one
- Signs for each group, set on the walls behind each table

This activity uses the model of a marketplace, where people browse among sellers' stalls, to offer education and opportunities for people to become involved in church ministries as well as nonprofit organizations that serve your town or county. Invite your community service representatives (Habitat for Humanity, Doctors Without Borders, Church World Service, National Alliance on Mental Illness, your community mental health service, Fish, local food bank, clothing bank, literacy and English teaching groups, etc.) as well as the ministry groups from your church. Explain that the event will give an opportunity for the congregation to shop for mission projects they would like to participate in. Make announcements before worship or as "mission moments," put up posters with time and date, and publicize the event in your bulletins or newsletters. Create some excitement by warning people that they can both serve God through mission and have fun while they're doing it.

On the day of the event, your hospitality study group can be leaders by starting the process of wandering around the tables, talking with the representatives, and by encouraging others to do the same. Make sure to have an ending time, so your clean-up crew has time to move or collapse the tables and chairs and do a little sweeping up.

Thanks to First Congregational UCC, <http://www.uccasheville.org>, Asheville, N.C., for this ministry.

6 Toot Your Own Horn

Leader preparation: If your faith community does not have an active volunteer roster, complete with skills and willingness to help, this is your golden opportunity. For a medium to large congregation, it is most easily managed in a computer database program, if available. Otherwise, index cards can be used, cross-referenced by person and skill.

Supplies:

- List of needs from each church team, ministry, board, committee, or group leader
- Questionnaire or checklist to be created as part of the activity

The hospitality study group can lead the survey, or can find volunteers to do so. A volunteer roster is an ongoing project which will need to be kept up to date as people learn new skills or move in and out of the community. Request from all ministry and group leaders a list of the skills needed for their particular ministries. Then create a one-page questionnaire or checklist for community members. Include prayer as a skill to be offered. Request both skills ("Talents") and available days and times. Leave space for comments and ideas. Ask each person in the community, including the children and the homebound and the elderly, to complete the page. Completed pages can be placed in the offering plate when gifts are received, with a prayer offering "the work of our hands and the dedication of our hearts" to God's service. It may be helpful for some members to be contacted individually by phone or in a home visit. Volunteers compile the information and record it by skill and by volunteer name and contact information. Include the checklist or questionnaire in every new member packet. A volunteer keeps track of members who move away or who die, so that their names can be removed both from the Names file and from the Time-Talents file. Repeat the whole process on a yearly basis, to ensure accurate information. The information should be accessible to all leaders.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 A Baby's Closet

Leader preparation: Since babies outgrow their clothes and toys so quickly, there is often a lot of use left in them. A Baby's Closet is usually a small unused classroom with easy access to an outside door. Clean, gently used baby clothes, bedding, toys, furniture, and car seats are donated for use by parents who cannot afford to purchase what their babies need. Information about the Baby's Closet is given to social service agencies, area hospitals, pediatricians' offices and other places where parents can learn about this ministry. The hospitality study group can do the planning and/or implementation, inviting interested others to join them in ministry to families in need. For the purposes of the hospitality study group, this activity may merely be the planning of the ministry; others in the church may wish to help implement the plan.

Supplies:

- Acts 2:42–47
- For planning, tables and chairs set in the round, so each can see all others, and a volunteer scribe to take notes and write up the plan
- For implementation, an unused room in a public place, such as the church, with easy access to an outside door and parking area, staff volunteers in pairs, policies understood by all, publicity in the wider community

A Baby's Closet distributes gently used baby clothes, furniture, bedding, toys, and car seats to families in need. Some detailed planning will take place before the ministry can be implemented, and review of the ongoing progress of the Closet will help catch errors and misunderstandings before they become unmanageable. For the purposes of the hospitality study group, this activity is merely the planning of the ministry; others in the church may wish to help implement the plan.

In discussion, the group can clarify the ministry, the process, and the goals. Difficult questions should be addressed: What if someone takes advantage of the Closet by receiving items and later selling those items for cash? How does the Closet staff determine who is truly in need and who could afford to purchase? (This question might lead to referral to or creating a counseling service for those who have difficulty understanding budgets.) How do the Closet and the church offer respect and dignity to those who come needing help?

Among the issues to be considered are: volunteers to research the need of the community, days and times when the Closet will be open for donations and sharing, volunteer staffer schedules, policies for giving, volunteers for repairing and cleaning the donated items, volunteer coordinator, publicity volunteers, creation of signs inside and outside. Are items sold for a minimal price to help support the ministry, or given to those in need? Does the ministry give items away for free, out of concern for the welfare of the child? Are the parents expected to be participating in the social service system? Will the Closet invite families who receive items to "pay it forward;" volunteering in the work of the Closet by staffing, repairing and cleaning donated items, or distributing Baby's Closet brochures?

Thanks to First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (<http://www.fwfcc.org/>), Fort Wayne, IN, for this ministry.

8 Buckets of Love

Leader preparation: Offering hospitality to those who live outside our immediate area can be complicated. Churches and denominations work together to meet the needs of communities that have experienced disasters and emergencies of all kinds. Church World Service offers kits prepared by volunteer faith communities to other communities in need, including school kits, baby kits, hygiene kits, and emergency cleanup kits. Each local church determines which kinds of kits it will prepare and send. CWS stores the kits until there is a need. The Web site link for information about preparing several different kinds of kits, and for ordering or downloading brochures is <http://www.churchworldservice.org>. Click on “Kits” at the top of the page. Some Conferences or other judicatories also collect and distribute disaster kits regionally. Check with your Conference mission board.

The success of the activity will be determined not only by the number of kits or the amount of dollars donated, but also by the enhanced understanding of the community about the definitions of “community,” “service,” and “hospitality.” Begin the study with a discussion of these words as they can be applied to world missions and support. How wide is our circle of love? How far does care extend? Whom do we serve, and how?

Supplies:

- Church World Service brochure or information from Conference mission board
- Shipping costs for kits (alternatively, the church can take up an offering to send so that Church World Service can determine where the need is greatest)

The hospitality study group has the opportunity to help plan a mission gift project from the community to those in need, in community with other churches from all over the world. Which of the opportunities will invite the most passion for ministry in your community? How will the project be publicized and carried out? The hospitality study group’s discussion centers around implementation and the wider meanings of hospitality, and how their thoughts and conclusions are shared with the faith community. Hospitality is practiced as the group converses with the congregation members, shares their enthusiasm for mission and ministry, and invites contemplation of the ways in which we serve neighbor and stranger.

9 Enfolding You in Love

Leader preparation: A prayer shawl ministry offers assurance to homebound members that they are remembered and treasured, and gives a warm embrace to those who are struggling with illness, loss, or celebrating a new adventure in life. Shawls are knitted, crocheted, or quilted locally and distributed to those who need a hug and a prayer. A Web site with patterns, suggestions, prayers and guidance is: <http://www.shawlministry.com>. It contains suggestions for beginning a group, prayers to include with shawls, a downloadable brochure, and other suggestions. Note: These shawls may not be sold, but must be given away.

Supplies:

- Handout page, Attachment: Activity 9
- Knitters, crocheters, and quilters
- Washable yarns in a variety of colors (see Web site for details at <http://www.shawlministry.com>)
- Knitting, crocheting, quilting instructions and patterns (see Web site for details at <http://www.shawlministry.com>)

Shawls are carried to the recipient by prayer shawl makers, by pastoral care providers, and by ministers, with the love and prayers of the local church. Shawls can be given to people undergoing medical procedures; as a comfort after a loss or in times of stress; during bereavement; for prayer or meditation; commitment or marriage ceremonies; birthing, nursing a baby; as a bridal shower or wedding gift; leading ritual; coming of age ceremonies (such as a *quinceañera*) or other rites of passage; during an illness and recovery; ministering to others; graduation, birthday, anniversary, ordination, holiday gifts; or just socializing. Your church community personalizes their gifts of prayer shawls as it perceives the need for ministry. A blessing or ritual may be offered whenever the prayer shawl group meets, when choosing a shawl to give, and when the gift is presented.

10 Warm Socks

Leader preparation: This is an activity for the autumn or winter months. The planning stages can be done by you as the leader or by the group. If your church has a clothing bank or shoe closet, this activity can be used in conjunction with that ministry. If the wider community or another church is the host for this ministry, ask if your hospitality study group might participate. Invite the church to donate new cotton socks in all sizes, from infant through adult. Create a timetable (monthly, quarterly) during which socks will be collected at the church. On a given day, planned ahead and agreed upon with the clothing bank or shoe closet, the hospitality study group will meet to hand out socks to those in need. If your group is willing, think about offering a hot, soapy footwashing service, with the final action being putting on a new, clean pair of socks (and perhaps shoes, if available).

Supplies:

- Donated new cotton socks
- Wide basins, liquid soap, hot water, towels, disposable gloves

Planning includes location, acquisition of socks (cotton, washable, not polyester), the logistics of handing out socks or washing feet and putting socks on. The group can work on the plan together, volunteering to communicate with the location manager, announcements of the ministry, monitoring of the SoxBox donations, practicing sock distribution on each other. Think about how socks will be given: are they in boxes according to size? Do the distributors speak to each person individually, meeting them and getting to know a little of each person's story as the gift is given and received? Are prayers offered with the socks? Role play a little, experimenting with different ways of offering the gift of warmth and care. Become comfortable with the ministry of sharing. On the appointed day, gather at the agreed-upon location and share the love.

Reflect

Discovering a church's mission is time-consuming, patience-driven, and grace-filled. Remember that not all your attempts will work. Begin with small, simple ideas and let them grow beyond your dreaming. Many church-wide missions grow out of small group activities that catch the attention and passion of the community, and call people out of themselves into greater service to God's people. The activities suggested here may change beyond recognition as your congregation works in its own special way to bring Good News and hope to the place in the world where you minister.

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Giving and Receiving Hospitality



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

Our lives as individuals and our life together in community move forward into a future over which we have little control. We can, however, influence the ways in which we approach the future, and the ways in which we meet the concerns and celebrations — the circumstances — we will encounter. Knowing ourselves and understanding our community will help us meet new challenges, new issues, and new ideas with both grace and mercy. The future can be frightening, but we can know that God is with us always, that Jesus teaches us daily through Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and that the Holy Spirit moves within the community. As we practice giving and receiving hospitality we sometimes succeed and sometime fail. We are sometimes discouraged and sometimes uplifted. We meet surprise in newness and old friends. As we meet the future we continue, by practicing, to serve God, to welcome those who come to our door, and to go out into the world to share the Good News.

About this Exploration

Pursuing hospitality invites self-examination and even criticism. Where are we as individuals and where is the community in the complexity of protecting, tending and making space for self, God, others and all creation? Where are the points of giving and receiving hospitality? How do we discover the courage to reach beyond the familiar? What growth is required as individuals and as a community? What practices, events and experiences are worthy of celebration? What sustains a continuing journey? Living into God's future calls forth a dance of individual and communal points of view, commitments, passions and understandings. God welcomes all into this future.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Luke 14:15–24
Mark 10:13–16

Leader Preparation

You have learned much about the personality and passions of the group and of the faith community by this point. Allow the flow of ideas to come from the group, and encourage the kind of dreaming that doesn't pay attention to such practical matters as budget or space limitations or lack of personnel. From these amazing dreams can come visions for the future that will draw the attention and enthusiasm of the whole community. While we don't expect everyone in a church to endorse any project, enough people can begin the work and gather others around them as the activity progresses. Perhaps one of the projects from another Hospitality component has already captured the imagination of the community. Ideally, leaders will be drawn into a practice that is engaging the spirit of the congregation, rather than feeling that leaders must do the work and haul the congregation along with them.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from 9 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 using sup-

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Hearing the Invitation (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: A study of a scripture passage can offer illumination when we seek wisdom for the future of our faith community. Choose passages such as Luke 14:15–24 or Mark 10:13–16, or another. If each person brings a Bible, invite people to read from various translations. Prepare questions to prompt discussion if people in the group are reluctant to share: What sentence or phrase in this passage caught your attention? Why do you think this phrase/sentence spoke to you? Are you remembering something familiar or funny or sad? Do you feel called out of yourself by this phrase/sentence/story? What might you do with this experience? Remember to encourage creative thinking, assuring the group that there are no wrong answers.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Ask for a volunteer to read the scripture passage while others listen in silence. Pause for silent reflection. Then invite a second person to read the passage again. Pause for silent reflection. Ask another volunteer to read the passage a third time. After a pause, invite each person in turn to speak about the phrase that stood out for him or her, and talks briefly about what that phrase or sentence means.

Pose questions, if necessary:

For Luke: Do we expect people to be grateful that we have invited them? How do we find time for our faith community worship and practice, and how can we invite others to make time for faith? How might we reshape our expectations? Is there something we can "do" or is there a way we can "be" that will help others see us as an interesting community to try out? Do we continue to invite the same people all the time, or are we looking for people who have been ignored, discarded, overlooked, or dismissed by ourselves or others? Are we judging people before inviting them, so that we can remain safely within our own experience, or are we daring to be as bold as Jesus was, when he talked to all sorts of people? Are we willing to have a discussion with Pharisees and prostitutes, the lame and the blind and the deaf, or do we want everybody to make us comfortable?

For Mark: How complicated are we in church? Is everyone welcome, or just those who understand faith in the same way we do? Can we welcome children with their questions and wiggles? Can we be comfortable with people who remind us of human frailty: those who do not see or hear, those who move about with a walker or wheelchair or a service dog, those whose age is beginning to affect their activity and participation in our church? How do we fine tune our welcome so that more people want to be with us in our worship and service to all of God's people?

2 Too Much for Me, Just Right for You

Leader preparation: In the spring, gather the members of your group to plan when and where a harvest table might be set up to share the overflow from the congregation's own gardens. Begin publicity during the planting season. This encourages gardeners to plant their gardens with hospitality and sharing in their minds. Your group can continue reminding the community about the coming bounty. Ask gardeners to let you know a week or so ahead of their harvest. Volunteers can bring grocery bags for the table, check the table for freshness and

plies normally found at the church). Using all 9 activities could take 90-120 minutes.

* To plan a session of 30-45 minutes, choose 3 activities using one activity from each category.

* To plan a session of 45-60 minutes, choose 4 or 5 using at least one activity from each category.

overripe produce, and announce at worship and other meetings what is on the table now. The gardeners can tell the group when their harvest is over, and the table, signs, and posters can be put away for another year.

Supplies:

- announcements in church newsletters and bulletins
- posters inviting donations and encouraging people to make use of the abundance of the garden
- sign for the table
- table placed within easy reach of an entrance door, perhaps near the parking areas for easy transition in and out

During the summer and early autumn growing and harvest seasons, gardeners often find themselves with an abundance of produce. Putting up a sharing table in the narthex or fellowship hall is an easy way to share the wealth of gardens and to allow others to take what they can use. We don't ever need to know if someone is taking the tomatoes or the zucchini because they love it, or because otherwise their family might go hungry. Their self-respect is intact, and they can express appreciation for the generosity of others without embarrassment. Over time, if it is successful, a single seasonal table can be expanded into a closet for no-longer-needed medical equipment such as crutches or walkers, a food bank, furniture exchange, book take-it-or-leave-it shelf, or other ministries suited to your congregation and their call to serve one other.

3 Church Friends

Leader preparation: Invite established members of the faith community to act as mentors to support youth studying for confirmation or baptism and as Church Friends for people becoming new church participants/members. Explain the responsibilities as noted below.

Supplies:

- A simple book about the polity of your denomination for each person
- A copy of the church's constitution and by-laws for each person
- A church directory for each person
- A roster of church leaders and participants in church ministries and governance for each person

Invite the group members to individually mentor people who are newly baptized or new confirmands and new church participants. Mentors will meet at least monthly with their student, helping with assignments, offering insights into faith practices, and guiding students through the questions and answers. At confirmation or baptism, the mentors introduce their students to the congregation and are available to their students as needed. Church Friends for new church participants guide people through the complexities of church life, including guided tours of the church building, inviting them to community activities, helping them understand the worship practices, polity, and ministries. Church Friends are available for questions, company, and hospitality.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Knocking on the Door (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Talk to the minister or pastoral care visitor about this ministry, and ask if your group can participate. Invite the person who supervises pastoral care for your congregation to address the group to talk about issues surrounding pastoral care visits, including confidentiality, length and frequency of visits, how to listen to concerns and celebrations, and to offer simple prayers with their people.

Supplies: None

People who are homebound or elderly often feel left out of the busy life of the community. Helping them feel included is an important ministry of hospitality. Invite your group to “adopt” one or more persons from the congregation’s pastoral care list and to commit to making a monthly visit, as well as sending timely holiday and birthday cards. Some recipients may be well enough to go for a ride to see the Christmas lights, fall colors, or spring flowers, or they might be able to attend church activities if transportation can be arranged. Remind the group about confidentiality and privacy issues.

5 Open Our Eyes That We May See

Leader preparation: Borrow stoles from the Shower of Stoles Project for display in your church. See the Web site at Welcoming Resources, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2d7gap3>, for details. The website has a picture of each stole and its narrative. Stoles can be chosen and requested for a display for a specific length of time.

Supplies:

- stoles borrowed from the Shower of Stoles Project Web site: <http://www.tinyurl.com/2d7gap3>
- hymn suggestions: “Tu has venida a la orilla (You have come down to the lakeshore)” (tune: PESCADOR DE HOMBRES 8.10.10 with refrain) <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong15> or “Give up your anxious pains” (tune: DIADEMATA), available in The New Century Hymnal, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2cct6b4>

In conjunction with a display, some of the stoles may be worn in worship. Each worship leader wears a stole from the collection and tells the story of that stole before presiding at his or her part in the service. After his or her portion, the stole is removed and placed on the communion table or altar. This is an opportunity to invite retired and other clergy from the congregation or members of your group to help lead worship so that as many stories as possible can be told. The stoles heaped on the table offer a silent story of their own. Work with your worship leaders and ministers to plan worship.

6 Stone Soup

Leader preparation: This activity comes from a story told in many cultures about villagers who heard that an army was coming through the area. Fearing that the army would take their food and leave them to starve, they hid everything edible. When the “army” came, it was only three soldiers, who invited the villagers to a feast of Stone Soup, which they would prepare. All the villagers had to do was to show up. The soldiers started by putting a large stone in a kettle and adding

water, which they brought to a boil. After a few hours of simmering, they tasted the soup, and expressed the opinion that it was pretty good, but it could do with a little onion. After a pause, one of the villagers remembered that she might have an onion at home, and ran to get it. The onion was chopped and added; then the process was repeated with other vegetables, seasonings, chicken, and whatever else you can think of. When the delicious smells entice all the villagers to come to the town square, and everyone is fed, they realize that the soup was made because they all shared. (This is available as a children's book called "Stone Soup" by Marcia Brown, and can be found at your public library. The book is available at amazon.com, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2alhgy9>, or online at <http://www.tinyurl.com/24n2x58>.)

The story frames the message of the activity. Work with your church mission group on details for a church-wide mission project for the final phase of the activity.

Supplies:

- signs visible from the congregation for "planners," "workers," "organizers," "cleanup," "dreamers," and others
- mission or ministry project plans for the congregation to do together

Offer a chancel drama as part of a Sunday worship to introduce the community to the idea of doing mission projects together. Tell the "Stone Soup" story and as the soup ingredients are mentioned, a sign holder stands and walks to the front of the sanctuary, turning to face the congregation. End the story by connecting the soup story to the idea of a ministry or mission project for your church, and invite people to gather after worship to talk about it.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Long Distance Godchildren (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Sponsorship of a child or children's home is a long-standing tradition within faith communities. The Global Ministries brochure (website below, under Supplies) explains how to begin sponsoring a child in need. This activity extends hospitality beyond the doors of the community to our worldwide neighbors.

Supplies:

- Global Ministries brochure on sponsorship for children at website: <http://www.tinyurl.com/22pwane>

Reflecting on hospitality and how hospitality can be shared beyond the doors of the faith community, invite the group to consider sponsoring one or more children in need. They can brainstorm ways to fund their sponsorship, between \$25 and \$30 per month, establish a schedule for communicating with their child(ren), and make a plan to share news with the congregation on a regular basis.

8 We Are Your Neighbors

Leader preparation: Learn from your faith community's ministry and/or membership group about previous efforts to meet your neighbors. What has been tried? How long ago? What did they do? What was the result? Inform them of the group's wish to participate in this activity, and invite their wisdom. Invite the



minister or membership leader to come to your group meeting to help plan the activity.

Supplies:

- plastic bags with zips or twist ties
- small loaves of bread baked by group members
- postcards with brief note about being neighbors

The neighborhood around a church can be seen as an opportunity to make friends out of strangers in a two-part activity that can take place on a monthly or quarterly schedule, or as determined by the congregation or the group. Decide in your gathering time the radius within which you will work. Depending on the location of your church, you might decide on a block in each direction, or a mile. Be practical about how much bread can be made and distributed while fresh.

In the first segment, a group of congregation members and friends gather in the church kitchen or in home kitchens to make small loaves of yeast bread or sweet tea bread. When cool, wrap the breads in plastic and add a postcard or note card with the name, address, phone number, and web address of the church and a brief message about being neighbors. If there is space, include worship times and some of the fellowship activities that are open to visitors.

The second step in the practice is to deliver the bread to neighbors of the church. Include businesses and apartment buildings, if possible. If the bread distributors meet someone while they're delivering, have established parameters for conversation, for instance, "Hello. I'm (first name) from (faith community). We're your neighbors. This gift is from us, no strings attached. We hope you enjoy it." Discuss whether they will accept invitations to enter the home and how long to talk (usually two to five minutes maximum).

For future sharing, talk about whether to visit the same places again or to expand your area of contact. Think about your town government, local police and/or fire station, paramedics, highways departments, animal control and shelter, waste management department, water and sewer departments. Who else might appreciate a gift from the church?

9 Whom Shall I Send?

Leader preparation: The discernment and recognition of a call to serve the faith community is often a time of exhilaration, fear, exultation, and confusion. Think about bringing together your ministerial staff, as well as chaplains, missionaries and others who are serving or have served in the church to tell their stories, either in a service of worship, or at another time when the whole community gathers together, perhaps with communion or a shared meal. Your group offers a time of telling stories, of listening, and of discernment of how God still speaks to individuals and to the gathered community. Together, past service is lifted up, present service is celebrated, and future service becomes possible.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- Hymnals

Plan a service of worship to celebrate the calls to ministry of people within the community and to invite others to consider ways in which they may be called to ministry. Alternatively, providing a shared meal with time before or afterward to tell the stories of call can be an opportunity for more informal and relaxed recounting of the ways God moves and lives within the community as well as



within individuals. The group acts as planners and hosts for the event, working with the ministers to determine the best way for your congregation to hear the stories that live within it. The emphasis is on the experience of being called by God to serve and how that call has been experienced in each life. Remember to invite the retired clergy in your midst! They have wonderful stories and the perspective of a lifetime to share.

If the setting is worship, three or four stories might be told in place of the sermon. Invite each storyteller to choose a biblical text that has been important in understanding and living out a call. Ask the guests to bring a stole or other token of ministry that symbolizes their call. After each story, the congregation responds in unison with words such as: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” or “Here am I. Send me.” Search through your hymnal to identify hymns related to call.

Reflect

Having shaped thought and practice about hospitality, the congregation learns about itself and has a better understanding of who God is calling you to be and where God is calling you to serve. For some, it is in the area of immediate need, in soup kitchens, food banks, and clothing closets. Others will find that they have been called to address past inhospitality and to welcome those who feel that they are “the least of these” to a place of safety and comfort. Still others may work best within the overwhelming and confusing system of bureaucracy and networks that bewilder the recipients and dehumanize the intended process. God calls each person to polish the gifts God gives us, and to use them for the good of the world, that all may have abundant life. Where does your church serve? How does your community answer the call? An ongoing conversation—sometimes argument, sometimes debate, sometimes plea—with God and one another helps us discern the answers.

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