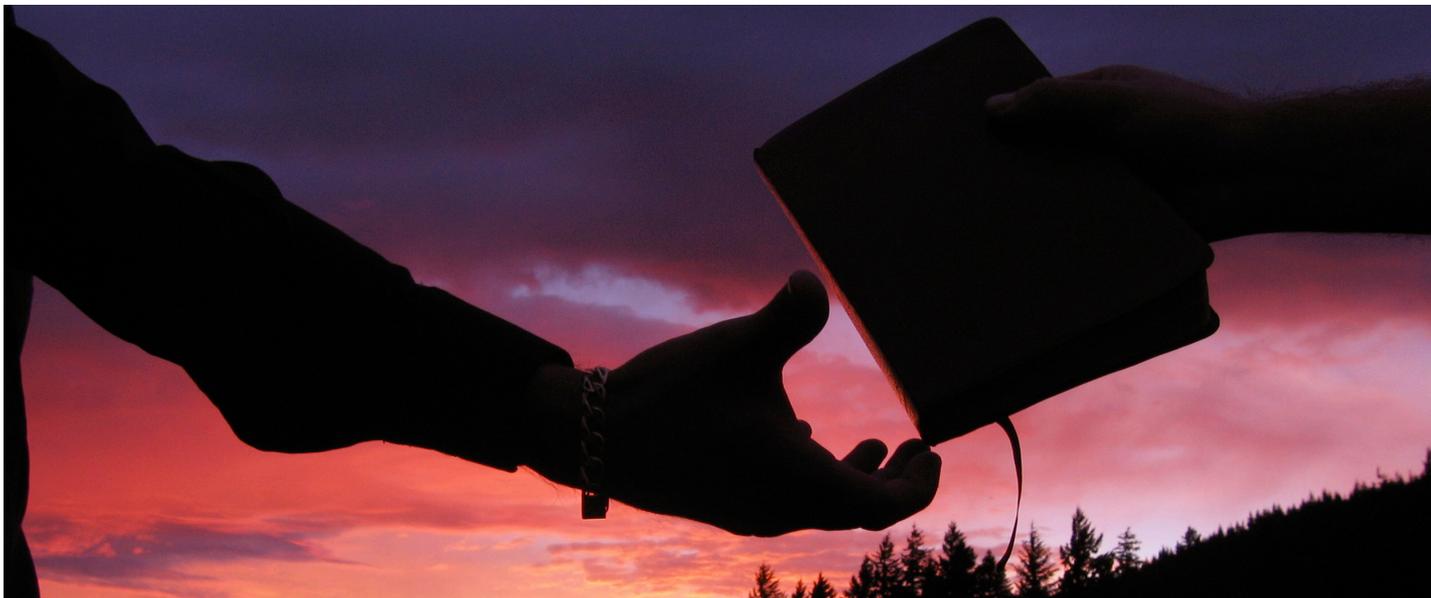




Discovering Gifts of Ministry



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

God always sees more in us than we see in ourselves. Whereas we might be tempted to acknowledge only our shortcomings or willing to compare ourselves negatively to another's outstanding abilities, God sees us as gifted and capable. At any age and during any stage of our lives there is yet more to discover about ourselves as seen through God's loving eyes. We are invited to discover what it is that God knows about us—we are created in God's image, filled with God's Holy Spirit, and therefore uniquely equipped to share God's Good News in creative and diverse ways.

About this Exploration

Throughout our whole lives we have the opportunity to discover our gifts of ministry. As we listen attentively to God's call and affirmation, identify our own passions, gifts, and skills, and participate in community where gifts are celebrated and shared, our gifts shape the unique ministry we have as we serve God and God's people. The process of discovery may involve prayer, community, scripture, nature, solitude, silence, and openness to the gentle nudging of the Spirit. We may be surprised by the Spirit, as well, and discover new and unexpected gifts along our journey.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Ezekiel 2:1–5
1 Corinthians 1:1–19

Leader Preparation

You are invited to lead participants in a conversation that people are often too shy to have—to reflect on their gifts, skills, and talents. People are often in awe of the abilities of others, yet are reluctant or unable to consider their own. Since we are all created in God’s image, all of us have God-given gifts and abilities.

Take time and make a list of your own gifts. Consider activities that you enjoy, hobbies that you engage in, and big and little ways that you make a difference in the lives of others. It is necessary for you to feel comfortable about speaking about your own gifts so that you can help your participants discover their own strengths. There is a saying that “God doesn’t make junk”—each of us is unique and precious. This is an invitation to discover some of the traits that make each one of us special.

Prayer: Creator and creative God, thank you for forming me in your image as your beloved child. Help me to claim the strengths and abilities that you have placed in me. Let us together discover our gifts so that we may offer our hands, hearts, and spirits to your service. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Quotable Quotes (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Ezekiel 2:1–5. Think about quotations that mean a lot to you—they could be famous quotations from well-known people or simply wise sayings from family or friends. If you would like, you may write some of your favorite quotations on newsprint.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- “Words to Live By,” Attachment: Activity 1
- (optional) prepared newsprint with quotations

Have the participants find Ezekiel 2:1–5, and invite someone to read to the group. Explain that this is the “call” of Ezekiel. This is the moment when God identifies Ezekiel as a prophet and directs Ezekiel to speak to God’s people. Ezekiel hears God’s words, and in that moment his life changes. He has a clear understanding of who he is in God’s eyes and what he is meant to do.

Ask the group to take a moment to reflect on quotations or sayings that inspire them. Encourage them to think not only famous quotations, such as Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream,” but also sayings that they might have heard at home or school. Ask the group to recall any “words to live by” that they have been given over the years. Record them on newsprint or a whiteboard. You may want to distribute the handout as a prompt to remember other sayings. Encourage folks to reflect on how these wise sayings have influenced their lives or behavior.

Share the quotations you recorded, if you have them. Tell the group that in the same way that God gave Ezekiel words of encouragement, we can also encourage one another on our spiritual journeys.

2 Called by God

Leader preparation: Read Ezekiel 2:1–5. Although we never hear Ezekiel’s voice in this passage, clearly he answers God’s call with a “yes.” He is willing to follow and serve. Read through the lyrics of “The Summons” by John Bell. The song asks if we would be willing to say “yes” to God’s call. Take a few moments and consider why we might hesitate to say yes to God.

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: “The Summons” by John Bell (tune: Kelvingrove), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0aAkOe87mo&feature=related>; lyrics <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/30338> (copy for each person)
- pens and pencils

Have the participants find Ezekiel 2:1–5, and invite someone to read to the group. Note that the only voice that is heard in the passage is God’s; God gives Ezekiel a task to complete. Although Ezekiel’s voice is not heard, we know that he agrees to become a prophet to God’s people.

Give everyone a copy of lyrics of “The Summons.” Invite volunteers to take turns reading each verse to the group. Explain that the group will use some of these

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

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

lyrics to try to understand the challenges of saying “yes” to God’s call. Invite participants to choose several of the questions posed in the song and write answers to those questions. After five to ten minutes, divide the group into smaller groups of two or three people. Invite the small groups to discuss their answers with one another.

③ The Summons

Leader preparation: Read Ezekiel 2:1–5. Preview the video of the song “The Summons.” Consider which images are most meaningful to you.

Supplies:

- Bible
- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- song: “The Summons” by John Bell (tune: Kelvingrove); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0aAkOe87mo&feature=related>; lyrics, <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/30338> (copy for each person)
- paper
- pens and pencils

Have the participants find Ezekiel 2:1–5, and invite someone to read to the group. It can be overwhelming to think that we are “called” by God to serve God. We might wonder what talents or gifts we have that could be useful or worthwhile. Invite the group to watch a video of the song “The Summons.” Hand out copies of “The Summons” lyrics, and invite the group to listen to the words and imagine what it means to be called to serve God. Before the group watches the video, tell them that they are invited to jot down notes as they watch if they see an image that is meaningful to them. After the video, engage the participants in conversation using the following or similar questions.

- Which image did you particularly like or find engaging? Why?
- Describe an image that might be similar to a situation in which you might find yourself.
- Which part of the song seems most foreign to you or most unlikely for you to experience?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ What Are My Gifts? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–9. Make a list of what you consider to be some of your own gifts or strengths. Write the following sentence on a sheet of newsprint and display in the meeting space: “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.”

Supplies:

- Bible
- paper
- pens and pencils
- prepared newsprint

Have the participants find 1 Corinthians 1:1–9, and invite someone to read the text. Paul wrote many letters to the early churches to encourage them in their

new Christian faith. His letters were both a teaching tool and a reminder of their identity as followers of Christ.

Invite the group to continue this tradition of encouragement today. Give everyone a piece of paper and ask them to write the names of everyone in the group in a column down the left side of the paper. Next to each name, invite the participants to write a strength or a trait that they admire about that person or a gift that they have witnessed in that person. Explain that this can be anything from “nice smile” to “lovely singing voice” to “very welcoming.” Encourage them to use their imagination!

When each list is complete, go around the room, say a person’s name and then say, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” Invite the group to name the gift(s) that they have written by that person’s name. Remind the group that we may not always recognize our own gifts, so it is valuable to listen to the insights of others. After everyone has been named, say: *We give thanks for the spiritual gifts of this Body of Christ. Amen.*



5 Nurturing Our Gifts

Leader preparation: Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–9. Take a few moments to look carefully at “The Banjo Lesson” by Henry Ossawa Tanner.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “The Banjo Lesson” by Henry Ossawa Tanner, <http://www.art.com/products/p10286254-sa-i677605/henry-ossawa-tanner-the-banjo-lesson.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6ce32fa19f9d47aaa58758970c9f0162&searchstring=banjo+lesson>
- “Discussion Questions,” Attachment: Activity 5
- pens and pencils

Our gifts and talents need to be encouraged, nurtured, and taught. Even famous musicians and skilled athletes need to receive training and time to practice. Invite the group to look at the painting “The Banjo Lesson” by Henry Ossawa Tanner. Distribute copies of the attachment, and give the participants five to ten minutes to answer the questions on their own. Then engage the group in conversation using the questions as discussion starters.

6 Inspired by Newsmakers

Leader preparation: Write the following on a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard and display in the meeting space:

I give thanks to my God always for _____ because of the grace of God that has been given in Christ Jesus.

Supplies:

- Bible
- prepared newsprint
- recent newspapers or news magazines
- paper
- pens and pencils

Have the participants find 1 Corinthians 1:1–9, and invite someone to read the text. Invite the group to discuss people in the news who share their gifts in a positive way. Have them write down someone who has or is making a difference in the community or the world and someone who inspires or impresses them. If

they need help thinking of someone, provide the newspapers and news magazines.

After everyone has written down at least one name, invite the participants to name the person on the paper along with a short description of that person's accomplishments. At the end of each person's presentation, invite the group to say together Paul's prayer from the newsprint you prepared, filling in the blank with a name.

When everyone who wishes to share has spoken, tell the group that one way we can help others share their gifts and continue in their ministry is to give thanks for them and to keep them in our prayers.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 No Age Limitations (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about the oldest volunteers in your congregation, consider the tasks that they do, and notice the difference that they make in the life of your congregation. Make a list of these older members and their gifts or tasks they do in the church. Gather addresses for each person on your list. If you do not know what tasks some of the senior members of your congregation do, discuss this with your pastor.

Supplies:

- Bible
- stationary or card with envelope for each person
- prepared list and addresses of older members and gifts they have or tasks they do in the church
- (optional) stamps
- (optional) small plates of cookie or small bunches of flower for each person

Have the participants find 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, and invite someone to read the text. Paul has great confidence in the abilities of these church members. He fully expects them to be active participants in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. There is no mention of a "retirement age" from serving God. Everyone can be a messenger of Christ, no matter how young or old.

Share the list you developed of older members and their contributions. Ask the group if they know of any other church members or friends to add to the list. Encourage the group to notice the contributions that the people on the list make to the life of your congregation. Many times these activities are "behind the scenes" jobs like kitchen work, preparing the sanctuary for worship, working on the newsletter, or visiting shut-ins. They may not know who these folks are yet, or know what they do. Share the list you prepared describing each person and the gifts they bring to your congregation.

Invite the group to discuss the tasks that these members do; encourage them to notice the difference that these volunteers make. Give the participants a card or stationary and invite them to choose someone from your list. Invite them to write Paul's words on the card: "I give thanks to my God always for you because . . ." Then explain why that person is an inspiration. Tell the group to let their card



recipients know that their gifts and services have been noticed and appreciated. Mail the cards, or hand deliver them with a small plate of cookies or flowers.



8 Saints of Old, Saints of Today

Leader preparation: Obtain a copy of the book *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God* by Lesbia Scott. It has great illustrations of children acting out the song “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” (tune: Grand Isle) with descriptions of the various people mentioned in the song. If you cannot get the book, use the information on the attachment “Saints of Old, Saints of Today.”

Supplies:

- (optional) book: *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God* by Lesbia Scott (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2001)
- song: “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” by Lesbia Scott (tune: Grand Isle); lyrics, <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh712.sht> (copy for each person)
- “Saints of Old, Saints of Today,” Attachment: Activity 8
- pens or pencils

Invite the group to read the words to this simple hymn in unison. The hymn gives examples of people who use their gifts to serve God and make a difference. Depending on the amount of time available, you may have everyone answer the questions on the attachment “Saints of Old, Saints of Today.” Questions 1–6 might be divided among the participants. Have all the participants complete as much of the bottom section as they are able. When everyone is finished, invite the group to share.



9 Gifts of joy!

Leader preparation: Look at the photo “Diamond Peak, Nevada, USA” and imagine what the snowboarder is feeling. In what do you participate that gives you a similar feeling?

Supplies:

- artwork: “Diamond Peak, Nevada, USA,” <http://www.art.com/products/p13950276-sa-i2807680/diamond-peak-nevada-usa.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=55eedd136d4049bcaab8f63c70afd3e3&searchstring=diamond+peak>

Invite the group to look at “Diamond Peak, Nevada, USA.” Tell the group that they will be expressing emotions without words as a way to try to understand what is going on in the photo. Invite the group to stand up, leaving room between each person so that they can move freely. Tell the group you will invite them to get into three different poses or positions.

1. Strike a pose that expresses the emotion that you think the snowboarder is experiencing in the picture. Take a few moments and allow people to look at one another. Invite people to say in one or two words what emotion they are expressing.
2. Strike a pose that expresses how you would feel if you found yourself in the snowboarder’s position. Is the same pose and emotions or different than the first pose and emotions? Why?
3. Stand in a pose that represents an activity that brings you joy. For example, a kayaker might pretend to be paddling or a musician might be playing an instrument. Describe your activity and the emotions it gives you.



Engage the group in conversation about this experience using the following or similar questions.

- What activities bring you joy?
- What is it about that activity that brings a smile to your face?
- How does this activity fit into your idea of ministry?
- Does your activity have more to do with active ministry or with Sabbath and restoration of spirit?

Reflect

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work” (1 Corinthians 12:4–6). We are encouraged to explore our own gifts while celebrating those of others; together we can work and serve as the Body of Christ.



Attachment: Activity 1

Words to Live By

Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.
—Mark Twain

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change
the world.
Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.*
—Margaret Mead

We must be the change we want to see.
—Mahatma Gandhi

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.
—Theodore Roosevelt

This above all: To your own self, be true.
—William Shakespeare

*Life must be lived and curiosity kept alive.
One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life.*
—Eleanor Roosevelt

*It is every man's obligation to put back into the world at least the equivalent of
what he takes out of it.*
—Albert Einstein

Never look down on anybody unless you're helping him up.
—Anonymous

*When one door of happiness closes, another opens; But often we look so long at
the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.*
—Helen Keller

*Be thankful for what you have; you'll end up having more.
If you concentrate on what you don't have, you will never, ever have enough.*
—Oprah Winfrey

Learning without wisdom is a load of books on a donkey's back.
—Zora Neale Hurston



Attachment: Activity 5

Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions can be used in thinking about "The Banjo Lesson" by Henry Ossawa Tanner.

1. What is the relationship between the old man and the boy? Teacher and student? Relatives?
2. Who is the teacher, and who is the student? If you reversed the roles, what difference does that make in what you see?
3. What emotions is the older man experiencing?
4. What emotions is the boy experiencing?
5. When have you have been a teacher?
6. When have you been a learner?
7. Who was a teacher that was particularly helpful to you?



Attachment: Activity 8

Saints of Old, Saints of Today

Based on the hymn "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God"

Read the short description of these "old saints." Then consider who is a modern-day "saint" or person who is making a difference under difficult circumstances.

Section 1

"And one was a doctor." (Luke)

In the first century C.E., Luke wrote the Gospel according to Luke as well as the Book of Acts. He was a physician who is now considered to be the patron saints of physicians and healers. He shared his faith through his writing and his hands-on ministry of healing.

Modern-day "saint": _____

"And one was a queen." (Margaret of Scotland, 1045–1093)

Margaret of Scotland married King Malcolm III of Scotland in 1070. In addition to her duties as a queen and mother to eight children, Margaret is well known for her compassion for the poor and orphans. She is remembered as a queen who used her power to do good.

Modern-day "saint": _____

"And one was a shepherdess on the green." (Joan of Arc, 1412–1431)

Although a simple peasant girl who helped her family by tending sheep, Joan of Arc at a young age (about 13) believed that she heard heavenly voices directing her to help the Dauphin, the crown prince of France. She rode with him in battle against the English several times. Joan was captured by the enemy and burned at the stake. She refused to save herself by recanting her belief in God and God's call to duty.

Modern-day "saint": _____

"And one was a soldier." (Martin of Tours, 315–397)

Born in Hungary, Martin of Tours was serving as a soldier in France when he met a poor beggar on the road. Moved to pity, he tore his robe in half and gave it to the poor man. He believed that he recognized the face of Christ in this needy person. Soon afterward he left the military, trained to be a priest, and eventually rose to be the bishop of Tours. He founded many monasteries and traveled constantly to share God's Good News of hope.

Modernday "saint": _____



Attachment: Activity 8

(continued)

“And one was a priest.” (John Donne, 1573–1631)

John Donne was a skilled priest, writer, and poet who served at Saint Paul’s cathedral in London. People traveled great distances to hear his sermons; his poems and writings continue to inspire to this day.

Modern-day “saint”: _____

“And one was slain by a fierce wild beast.” (Ignatius of Antioch, ?–115)

Born in Syria, Ignatius of Antioch was the bishop of Antioch. Many of his letters of encouragement to the Christian churches of that time remain today as a testament to his faith. Despite warnings from the Roman Empire to stop spreading the Gospel, he continued to preach about the saving grace of Jesus Christ. He was arrested, brought to Rome, and put to the death by the lions in the Roman Coliseum. He is reported to have said, “Let me follow the example of the suffering of my God.”

Modern-day “saint”: _____

Section 2

What about “everyday” saints—people who might meet in our day to day lives? Fill in the blanks below if you can think of anyone who fits the description of a person using his or her God-given gifts to make a difference.

“The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will.”

You can meet them in school, _____

on the street, _____

in the store, _____

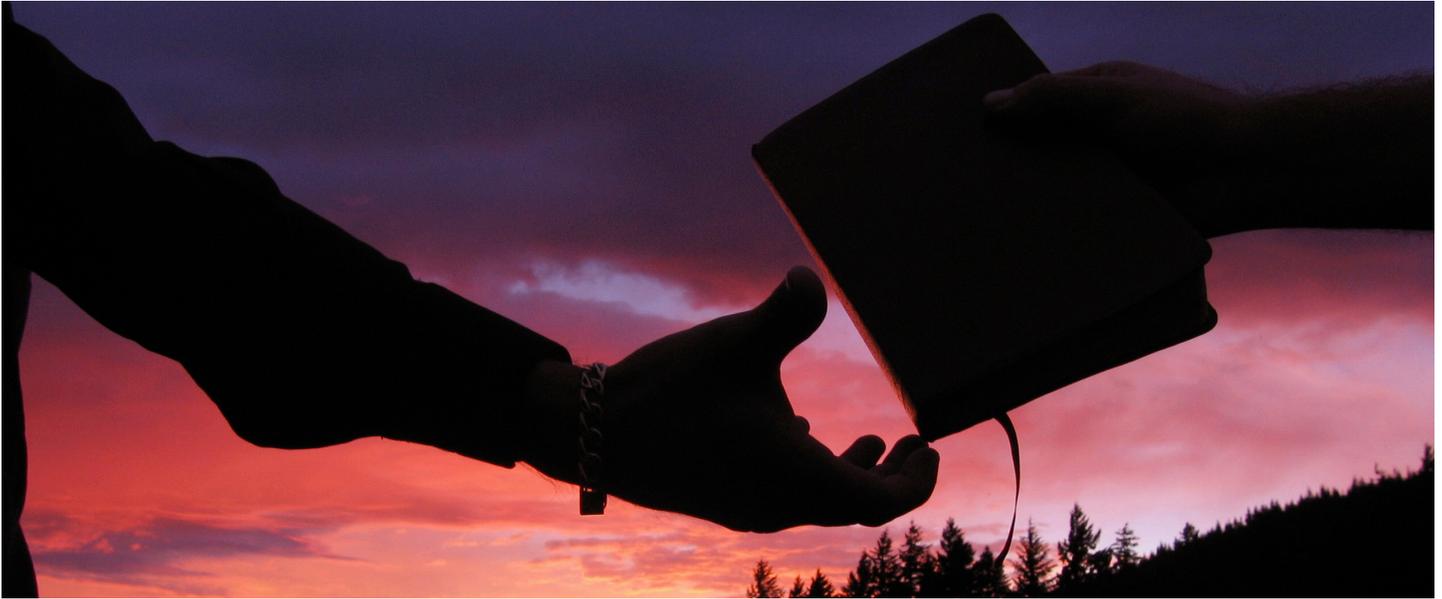
in church, _____

by the sea, _____

in the house next door. _____

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Discovering Gifts of Ministry



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Seekers and new church participants may feel insecure about their knowledge of scripture. Many (but not all) people approach the church with the attitude, “I don’t know much about the Bible.” This is an opportunity to not only read passages from scripture, but also to encounter and experience those passages. No previous biblical knowledge is required for this Faith Practice; participants are invited to be just that—participants. Not experts, not scholars, simply people who want to learn more about God, God’s gifts, and what it means to practice and live that belief.

About this Exploration

Scripture provides many examples of people discovering God-given talents that help them not only in their own lives, but also in ministering to or caring for others. As Solomon discovered, gifts such as knowledge and a discerning mind are to be valued more highly than riches, long life, or power. Scripture, along with the community, inspires and affirms people in recognizing the different gifts they possess. Gifts of ministry allow people to play important roles in this world, in faith-related settings as well as in homes, workplaces, schools, and places of recreation.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

1 Kings 3:3-15
Mark 1:14-20

Leader Preparation

The scriptures remind us that all of God's children are filled with the creative and creating Spirit of God. None of us is perfect; all of us can learn and grow. When the disciples answer Jesus' call, they demonstrate a trusting heart and a willing spirit—that is all God needs. When Solomon is called to serve God, he clearly states his lack of confidence in his own abilities and asks for God's help. Not surprisingly, God is delighted to respond to this heart-felt request. The scriptures in this Exploration invite us on a delightful journey of discovery of our own gifts, abilities, and skills. The Good News is that God is calling us to serve. God has great confidence in us; when we place our trust in God, we can use our God-given gifts to make a difference in our world.

Prayer: God, revealed to us in so many ways, speak to us through your timeless stories that we may be inspired to use our gifts to serve you. Open our hearts, stir our imaginations, and fire up our enthusiasm so that we may put our trust in you and offer our hands, hearts, and efforts. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



① I'm New at This (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Kings 3: 0. Solomon refers to himself as a "little child," which is probably more an indication of his humility than of his actual age. Scholars believe he was about 20 years old when he was called by God, and he was justifiably nervous about God's expectations of him. Think about a time when you started a new job or new activity. Try to recall how it felt to be inexperienced and perhaps overwhelmed.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Tell the group that you will be exploring what it means to be a "child" or to be young or perhaps inexperienced in a particular matter. We all have varying amounts of experience in different aspects of life; one person may be an "expert" in one area of life, yet be inexperienced in another. Invite the group to visualize this by arranging themselves according to the following questions.

- By age, from youngest to oldest
- By length of time lived in your town, from shortest to longest amount of time
- By amount of time involved in your church, from shortest to longest amount of time
- By how long it's been since they rode a bicycle, from shortest to longest amount of time

Invite the group to sit back down and ask what they learned about one another from this exercise. We always have the chance to learn new things as we go through life. Ask people to name some new activity or hobby or interest that they have pursued in the last five years. Invite volunteers to describe what they are doing and how long they have been doing it. Invite people to describe what it feels like to be a "beginner" at an activity.

Have the participants find 1 Kings 3:3-10 in their Bibles, and invite a volunteer to read. Solomon is about to embark on a new adventure (following God's call). Based on Solomon's statement "I am only a little child," invite the group to describe the emotions that Solomon may be experiencing.

② Let the Children Lead Us

Leader preparation: Watch the video "Emma sings 'I'm gonna live so God can use me.'" Think about why adults so often enjoy watching children perform and why adults may be more willing to accept a lesson from youngsters than from another adult. Write "Servant of God" as a title on a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard.

Supplies:

- Bible
- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- video: "Emma sings 'I'm gonna live so God can use me,'" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxDiW7cGOY4>
- prepared newsprint or whiteboard with the title "Servant of God"
- marker

Session Development

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

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

Have the participants find 1 Kings 3:3–10 in their Bibles, and invite a volunteer to read. All of us sometimes doubt that we have gifts or skills that could be useful to God. Even Solomon was not immediately sure that he was capable of following God’s call. Solomon feels like a young child and perhaps unequal to the task, but he asks God to give him the strength and skills necessary to serve God.

Ask the group to consider what one needs to be a servant of God. Invite them to describe the attributes necessary to serve God. Work together to formulate a job description for a servant of God. Write their responses on newsprint.

Show the video “Emma sings ‘I’m gonna live so God can use me.’” Engage the group in discussion with the following questions.

- How closely does Emma fit the group’s job description?
- How would you describe Emma?
- How is Emma acting as a servant of God?

God often chooses surprising people, but with God’s help all of us can serve God.



3 Following the Call

Leader preparation: Read Mark 1:14–20. Think about the willingness of Simon and Andrew to simply drop everything and follow Jesus. Have you ever experienced anything like this?

Supplies:

- “Follow the Call,” Attachment: Activity 3

God is able to discern our gifts even when they may not be obvious to onlookers or even to ourselves. God often calls people to follow in God’s way and to serve God, even before they have had a chance to “prove” themselves or demonstrate their abilities.

Hand out copies of the attachment “Follow the Call.” Ask for volunteers to act as Readers 1–4 as well as a volunteer to read the questions. Have the participants read each section, pausing to discuss the questions.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Risks of Using Our Gifts (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Mark 1:14–20. Familiarize yourself with the story of John the Baptist’s death. It is referred to in this passage, but it is described in more detail in Mark 6:17–29. One of John’s gifts was the gift of honesty. He told Herod the truth about the immorality of Herod’s extramarital affair with Herodias, who was Philip’s wife. This angered Herodias, and she revenged herself by demanding John’s death.

Many Bibles have footnotes and explanations that will enhance the understanding of a passage and give helpful background information. If no such Bibles are available in your church, a helpful website is “The Text This Week” (www.text-week.com), where information about specific passages can be found.

Supplies:

- variety of study Bibles with notes
- markers and newsprint for each small group

Make small groups of 3–4 participants each. Give each group a study Bible, and invite one person to read Mark 1:14–20 to the group. Then invite each group to read whatever notes or information is contained about that passage. Ask each small group to answer the following questions and record their responses on newsprint.

- What are the gifts and talents of John the Baptist?
- What facts or information have you learned from the notes in the study Bible?
- What positive gifts of John caused Herod to become angry?

Invite the group to come back together to share their thoughts and information. Engage in conversation about the question of examples of people who have encountered danger or hardship as a result of offering their gifts.



5 Garden Variety of Gifts

Leader preparation: Study “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” by Gustav Klimt, and read the description of the symbolism of flowers on the attachment “Garden Variety of Gifts.” Consider which flower you relate to the most.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” by Gustav Klimt, <http://www.art.com/products/p15177883-sa-i3715775/gustav-klimt-farm-garden-with-sunflowers-c1912.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=55eedd136d4049bcaab8f63c70afd3e3&searchstring=klimt+farm+garden+with+sunflowers>
- “Garden Variety of Gifts,” Attachment: Activity 5
- pens or pencils

Invite the group to look at the painting “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” (c.1912) by Gustav Klimt. Point out the wide variety of flowers depicted. Invite them to give their impressions of the painting, whether or not it appeals to them and which flower “jumps out” at them when they look at the painting.

Hand out copies of “Garden Variety of Gifts.” When participants have completed the questions, invite the group to discuss their answers.



6 Discerning Our Gifts

Leader preparation: Read 1 Kings 3:3–15. Notice that Solomon feels unsure about his abilities and has many questions. God clearly doesn’t mind questions! What God desires from us is a trusting spirit; Solomon is willing to place himself in God’s hands. We are asked to do the same; we may not be entirely confident about our gifts but we can trust that God can use us.

Read the “gifts inventory” on the attachment “Discerning My Gifts.” Fill out one for yourself. Once completed, ask yourself, “What gifts did I discover or rediscover?” Sometimes we need to be reminded just how many gifts, talents, and

abilities we possess. Write "Discerning Our Gifts" on a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- "Discerning My Gifts," Attachment: Activity 6
- pens or pencils
- prepared newsprint or whiteboard

Invite a volunteer to read 1 Kings 3:3–15 aloud. Solomon was not immediately sure about his abilities and gifts. He asked God for help, and this pleased God. Solomon was open to learn from God and to receive wisdom and guidance from God. Then he would be prepared to “discern” what course of action to take.

Hand out copies of "Discerning My Gifts" and invite the participants to fill out the survey. Invite the participants to share what gifts they have. Take time to discuss the open ended questions at the end of the survey. Ask permission for you to share these suggestions with the pastor or other appropriate leaders.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Qualifications to Serve God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Kings 3:3–9. Look at the questions on the attachment "Qualifications to Serve God."

Supplies:

- "Qualifications to Serve God," Attachment: Activity 7
- pens or pencils

Invite the group to compare themselves to Solomon. Solomon became famous as a wise and just king and judge. But even he had to start somewhere—he needed to acquire the necessary skills and grow in experience and knowledge in order to fulfill his call. Before the participants fill out the activity sheet, invite them to consider that if they don't have all the skills that they need right now in order to follow God's call, our generous and giving God can help them obtain the gifts necessary.

Hand out copies of "Qualifications to Serve God." Invite someone to read aloud 1 Kings 3:3–9. Give the participants a few minutes to answer the questions. Engage in discussion using the questions on the activity sheet.

8 Saying Yes to Something New

Leader preparation: Read Mark 1:14–20. Consider that the four men were transformed from “fishermen” to “disciples” based on their decision to say “yes” to Jesus. They went from an “old” way of life to something completely different and “new.”

Place two pieces of paper on the floor on opposite sides of the room. Copy the closing prayer below so that you may say it, or write it on newsprint for the group to say together.

Supplies:

- two large pieces of paper, one with the word “old” and the other with the word “new” written in large letters
- Bibles
- (optional) newsprint with closing prayer written on it

Have the participants find Mark 1:14–20, and invite a volunteer to read it for the group. This was a moment of transformation for these four men. Their “old” occupation was as fishermen. Suddenly they had a new identity—that of disciple and follower of Jesus. In the case of the disciples, this was a radical change in their life and lifestyle. Tell the group that sometimes God asks us to make big changes in our lives; other times even small changes can bring about a transformation or new understanding of who we are. This is a positive move; we are saying “yes” to a gift that God is offering.

Invite the group to stand on the “old” newsprint. Ask them to consider if there is something new or different that they yearn to do in their lives. This can be something as major as a complete career change or as simple as experimenting with a new hobby. Other changes might include make healthier choices in terms of food, activity level, or substance use.

One at a time, when each one is ready, invite a participant to state something “new” that he or she desires in his or her life or a new direction he or she would like to say “yes” to. That person can move to the “new” sign and describe the new thing that he or she would like to say “yes” to. For some people, this might mean maintaining a job, attitude, or lifestyle. (For example: “I say ‘yes’ to staying healthy in the near future,” or “I would like to keep on keeping on.”)

Conclude with this or a similar prayer: *Inviting God, thank you for asking us to say “yes” to you. Please bless us so that we may have the courage to follow you. Amen.*

9 Where Will I Serve?

Leader preparation: Read Mark 1:14–20. Think about Jesus’ disciples. When they were called into service, they didn’t know where they would be going or what they would be asked to do.

Now think about your church building. Plan a walking route through the building, with several stops along the way (such as in the children’s section, kitchen, gathering places, offices, sanctuary, and even outdoor spaces if available). Think about what gifts, skills and talents are used in each of these areas.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Invite a volunteer to read Mark 1:14–20. Tell the group that when the disciples were called by Jesus, they did not know where they would be going or what they would be asked to do; they simply said “yes” to Jesus and followed him.

Say to the group, “Come, follow me,” and begin your walking tour of your church building. At each stop, ask the group if they know what activities take place here. Then ask them to brainstorm what kind of gifts and talents are necessary to perform those tasks. Ask the participants if they think they have those particular gifts. Be sure that they realize that no one will have all the gifts and skills needed for all of the areas, but probably everyone will find at least one place where they feel like they could contribute their gifts.



Reflect

“What we are is God’s gift to us. What we become is our gift to God” (Eleanor Powell). We are created in the image of God. That means that each of us is filled with God’s Spirit of compassion, caring, creativity, and love. There is always more that we can learn about our gifts and the joy we can experience when we offer them to the glory of God.

At the completion of the “tour,” invite the group to join together in prayer. You can pray this prayer or any of your choice: *Dear God, here we are. We offer ourselves to you. You ask us to follow and we want to say “yes.” Show us where we can use our gifts and use us to touch the lives of others. Thank you. Amen.*

Attachment: Activity 3

Following the Call

Mark 1:14-20

Reader 1: Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

Discussion Questions

- What do we know about Simon and Andrew? What do you think Jesus knew about them so that he wanted to invite them to be disciples?
- Do you think they have a choice—could they say "no" if they wanted to? What could lead someone to say "no" to an invitation to follow Jesus?

Reader 2: And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think Simon and Andrew followed Jesus?
- What might be some reasons that people leave everything familiar behind in order to begin a new life?

Reader 3: As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

Discussion Questions

- What do we know about James and John?
- Based on your knowledge of professional fishermen, what talents and abilities do you imagine they might have had?

Reader 4: Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Discussion Questions

- Use your imagination and describe everything that you can think of that James and John might have left behind by following Jesus that day.
- What have you ever left behind in order to follow your faith?

Attachment: Activity 5

Garden Variety of Gifts

Symbolism of Flowers

Aster: love, daintiness, patience

Sunflower: devotion, warmth, happiness, longevity

Daisy: gentleness, innocence, loyal love

Petunia: anger and resentment

Marigold: sacred affection, jealousy, cruelty, grief

Anemone: bringer of luck, protector against evil

Look at the painting “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” by Klimt (1862–1918; painting completed in 1906). Historically, every flower has some symbolic meaning. A message could be sent to the recipient depending on which flowers were selected.

In the painting, a wide variety of flowers are depicted. In the painting, as in life, there is not simply one emotion or attribute. It is the combination of attributes that forms the richness and depth of the painting.

Questions

1. Based on the descriptions above, to which flower do you relate the most today?
2. Which gift do you wish you had? Why?
3. The church is also a collection of various temperaments, gifts, and abilities. Which flowers would you choose to depict your congregation?
4. Some bouquets have only one kind of flower. Do you think a variety of flowers adds or detracts from an arrangement? Why?

Attachment: Activity 6

Discerning My Gifts

What talents and gifts do you have? How can those God-given gifts be used for the good of God's people?

Please check all the gifts and talents that you possess.

- Like to visit older people
- Like to deliver flowers
- Able to take offering on Sunday morning
- Can be a greeter on Sunday morning
- Can be a lay reader
- Can play an instrument: _____
- Make a meal for a church family in need
- Run errands for a homebound church members
- Knit a prayer shawl, blanket, baby cap
- Help fold bulletins
- Help put together church newsletter
- Give someone a ride to church
- Help with seasonal grounds maintenance
- Help with small repair work around church
- Help with small painting projects
- Can decorate bulletin boards
- Can send birthday cards to Sunday School children
- Can send "thinking of you" cards to members of the military
- Can help put together "care packages" for service people
- Help with Christmas pageant
- Make snacks for youth group or Sunday School
- Take photos of special church events
- Help with the church website

I have these ideas I'd like to suggest to the church:

I have these gifts/talents that I would like to offer:



Attachment: Activity 7

Qualifications to Serve God

1. Solomon loved the Lord and is grateful to God for his many blessings. He expresses his love for God by giving thanks to God.

I am very grateful for the many blessings placed in my life. I give thanks for:

2. Solomon had a good role model (his father David) who demonstrated how to serve God:

“He walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you” (1 Kings 3:5).

Who are your role models? Which people are (or were) a blessing in your life?

3. Solomon confesses his fear and weaknesses: “I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in” (1 Kings 3:7).

Maybe you would like to serve God, but you have some hesitations, concerns, doubts, or fears. List them here:

4. Solomon asks for what he needs: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9).

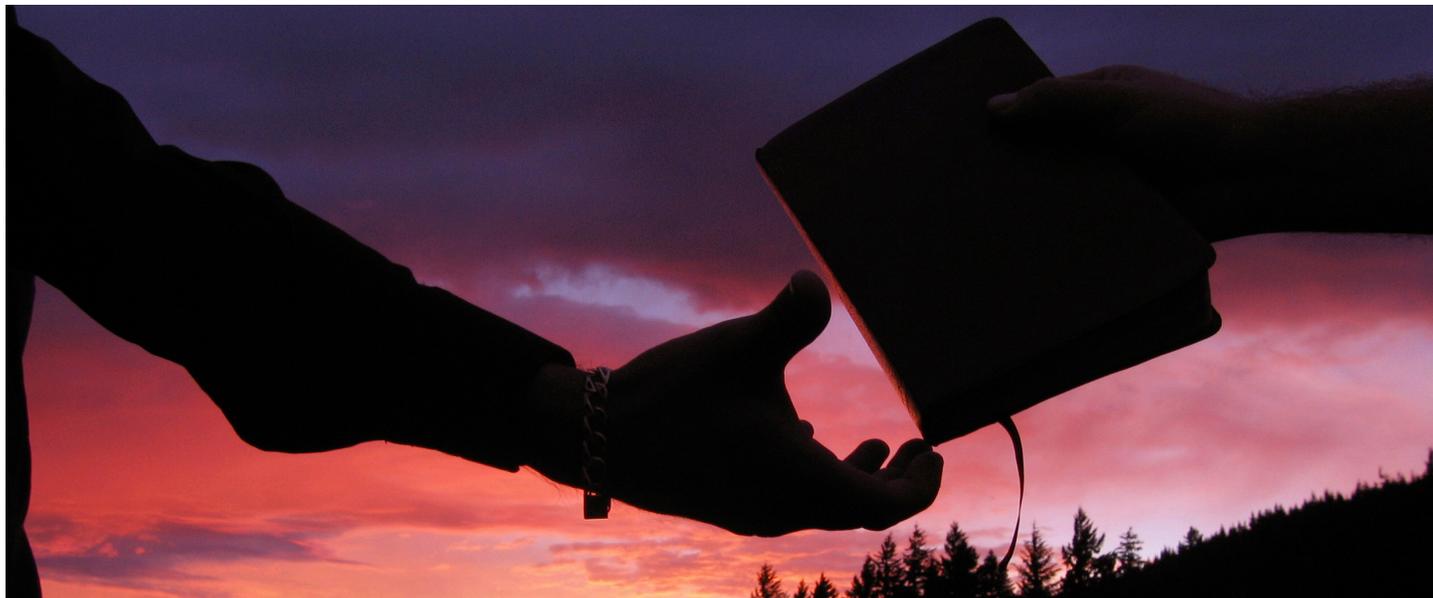
Solomon is not afraid to ask for help. God is pleased that Solomon wants assistance and is ready to learn. Write down some of your questions about serving God. What kind of help do you think you need? Where do you think you will be able to find this help?

That’s all there is to it!

You are now as prepared as Solomon was to serve God.

God can work with a willing spirit—all we need to do is say “yes” to God.

Discovering Gifts of Ministry



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Sometimes we think that a “disciple” describes an elite group of twelve men who lived thousands of years ago. Instead, we are invited to discover that a disciple may be the person who is seated at the table with us or sitting next to us on the bus or even gazing back at us in the mirror. A disciple is someone who wants to serve and follow God. It is the desire of our hearts rather than the depth of our resume or the list of our accomplishments that matter. God calls all of God’s people into service. When we answer “yes,” the adventure begins.

About this Exploration

Jesus extends the invitation to “come, follow me.” We are asked to trust that our gifts, talents, and interests may be used by God for the ministry that is before us. We are not asked first to learn more or begin afresh in order to be noticed by Jesus, but rather to hear the Spirit’s call and come just as we are. Through this invitation we are encouraged to place our confidence in God, who is able to work through our open hands and hearts that are offered to the church, community, and world. If we have doubts about our abilities or qualifications, we can be encouraged by the countless Biblical stories that remind us that God always chooses and uses the “least of these.” Come, let’s follow!

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Jeremiah 15:15–21
Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

Leader Preparation

Do you consider yourself a disciple? If you are leading this Faith Practice, you are a disciple! You are willing to explore your faith and share that exploration with others. A “disciple” isn’t someone who has all the answers or who sails through life without a doubt or question. A disciple is on a journey of exploration, searching for God who wants to be found by God’s children. A disciple says “yes,” to God’s invitation to “come and follow,” and is willing to discover where that path may lead. As a leader and a disciple, you will prepare for each session not only by reading the material provided, but also by praying for those in your group. As a disciple, you are invited to trust that the Holy Spirit will move and in through your gatherings.

Prayer: God, I don't know all the answers, but you do. I don't know all the questions, but you urge me to ask and to pursue. I'm sometimes reluctant to say "yes," but you patiently wait and continue to work through me. Help me trust you so that I may be a mentor in discipleship for those in my group. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 What Gifts Do You Have? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Make a list of the gifts or talents that you possess. The list should include at least five items. Good listener? Hard worker? Thoughtful? Good volunteer? Send cards? The list could be quite extensive—don’t be shy! This is just for yourself. Read Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26. Each of the three people who meet Jesus need something from him, yet each of them already possess at least one gift that we can see—the gift of faith. The synagogue leader and the sick woman also have the gift of courage. They dare to approach Jesus with their request. They might only view themselves as needy (or in the case of Matthew, as despised), yet God can see more in them.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- "Discovering Our Gifts," Attachment: Activity 1
- pens, pencils

Too often we overlook our own gifts and talents. We are often much more aware of our shortcomings and needs. Jesus is able to recognize our strengths long before we do.

Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26 to the group. Then give each participant a copy of “Discovering Our Gifts.” Invite the group to talk about the first three people on the handout and fill in the answers. Then ask the group to take a few moments to respond the fourth question about themselves. Ask for volunteers to share their reflections. If the group knows one another, they might be invited to add to the list of gifts and talents for each person.



2 Filled with God’s Spirit

Leader preparation: Look at “Pentecost from the Rabbula Gospel.” Pentecost is known as the “birthday” of the church when the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples so that they would be empowered to carry on the ministry of Jesus. Spend a few moments looking at the artwork. Be aware of the colors that are used, the expressions on the faces, and the presence of the flames, dove, and blue arc stretching over the disciples. Be aware of what emotions you feel when you look at the picture.

The disciples, earlier filled with doubt and fear, now appear as a cohesive unit, prepared to do God’s will. Read Jeremiah 15:15–16. Consider this sentence in Jeremiah 15:16a: “Your words were found, and I ate them.” It is Jeremiah’s poetic way of declaring that he is filling himself with God and God’s will. Write this sentence on a piece of newsprint and hang it in your meeting space. Ask yourself: “How do I fill my spirit? What feeds my faith?”

Supplies:

- artwork: "Pentecost from the Rabbula Gospel," https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37962&store_id=1401
- Bibles
- prepared newsprint
- blank newsprint, marker

Session Development

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

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

Ask a volunteer to read Jeremiah 15:15–16 out loud. Explain that Jeremiah is a prophet who often speaks with symbols and metaphors. Ask the group what they think this sentence might mean: “Your words were found, and I ate them.” Explain that this is Jeremiah’s poetic way of declaring that he is filling himself with God and God’s will. Ask: *What other ways could we express that same feeling?*

Show the group “Pentecost from the Rabbula Gospel.” Allow them a minute or two to notice the details of the picture. Then tell them that this depicts the day of Pentecost, when God gave the disciples the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised the disciples that they would be empowered so that they would be able to carry on with the work and ministry of Jesus.

Ask the participants to consider these three symbols in particular:

- the flame over each disciple’s head
- the dove
- the blue arc

These are gifts given to the disciples by God to help them in their service and ministry. Engage in discussion about what each of these gifts might mean. Encourage participants by saying that there are no wrong answers. For example, the flame might simply mean the Holy Spirit, or it could also mean power, strength, cleansing, and so on. The dove might remind them of the story of Noah’s ark, but it could also symbolize peace or purity. The arc might remind them of a rainbow or a shelter; the color blue could be seen as life giving. Be open to whatever answers the participants give; record their answers on the newsprint so everyone can see. Ask the participants how this picture reminds them of the gifts that God has given them for their ministry.



3 The Gift of Anger

Leader preparation: It is not always easy to be a disciple, and Jeremiah discovered that it is not always easy to be a prophet. Read Jeremiah 15:15–21, and pay attention to the anger and frustration that he expresses. Rather than finding God to be a “fountain of living water” (Jeremiah 2:13), he encounters God as a “deceitful brook.” Jeremiah gives us permission to express our anger to and about God. Jeremiah, a faithful prophet, casts his doubts, anger, and worry at God’s feet. The Good News is that Jeremiah does not remain estranged from God; after expressing his anger, he rediscovers God’s faithfulness.

Supplies:

- “Jeremiah 15:15–19,” Attachment: Activity 3
- pens and pencils
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Distribute copies of the attachment, and invite the participants to read Jeremiah 15:15–19 to themselves. Tell the group that Jeremiah was often a social outcast because he spoke God’s truth to the people when they did not want to hear it. Jeremiah did as God told him to do, but he often suffered as a result. Now Jeremiah is complaining. Ask the participants to circle any words that they experience as being angry or frustrated. Invite people to call out these words, and list them on the newsprint or whiteboard. Jeremiah offers us the gift of being honest with God—we are invited to speak plainly with God without the need to “sugar-coat” our prayers.

Explain to the group that they will be writing a unison prayer to God. First, though, they need to remember a time or period of their lives when they experienced doubt in God's existence or ability to make a difference, or a time when they were angry with God's response or lack of response to a situation. Explain to the group that they will not need to share these reflections out loud (unless they choose to), but that they need to at least remember what the emotion of anger and disappointment with God feels like.

Ask the group to name an ongoing social or world problem that has no clear resolution in sight (this could range from an ongoing war to environmental challenges to famine, human trafficking, and so on). Invite the group to write a prayer to God incorporating the words listed on the newsprint or whiteboard. After expressing anger or frustration, invite the group to list their hopes to God and offer themselves as faithful servants, following in Jeremiah's path.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Trying On a New Identity (Easy preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26. Spend a few moments thinking about the people Jesus encountered. Their lives and their identities were transformed by him. Matthew was no longer simply a tax collector; he was worthy of breaking bread with Jesus. The leader from the synagogue was known as the father of a sick child; he was changed into simply being a caring parent. The woman, previously only defined and described by her illness, becomes a person who can speak and act on her faith. Jesus allows (or encourages) them to become a new creation and to try a new identity.

Prepare a piece of newsprint or a whiteboard by drawing two vertical lines, dividing the paper into three parts. Label the first section: "Matthew the tax collector"; the second section: "synagogue leader"; and the third section: "sick woman."

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens, paper
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 9: 9–13, 18–26 out loud. Ask the participants to think about Matthew the tax collector, the synagogue leader, and the unnamed sick woman described in the story. Engage in conversation with the following questions and record their answers on newsprint or a whiteboard.

- What gift did Jesus offer each person?
- How did each person's life change following the encounter with Jesus?
- What was each person's old identity prior to meeting Jesus; what is each person's new identity?

Invite the participants to spend a few moments thinking about the changes lives of the people in the story. Ask them to write down an area of life that each would like to change and a gift that each would like to receive from Jesus. When they are ready, discuss their answers.

5 Need Some Encouragement?

Leader preparation: Read Jeremiah 15:19. When we are thinking about the gifts that we have, we may overlook the simplest one—the gift of being able to make a difference in someone’s life by offering that person words of encouragement or kindness. This does not demand a great deal of effort on our part, simply the gift of time and the intentionality to choose to offer compassionate words to another person. Today the group will be invited to follow in Jeremiah’s footsteps and act as the “mouth of God” by lovingly offering kind words to someone who may need some encouragement.

On a piece of newsprint, write this:

God says, “If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth.” (Jeremiah 15:19)

Hang the newsprint in your meeting room.

Supplies:

- Bible
- note cards, envelopes, pens
- newsprint with Jeremiah 15:19 written on it

Read Jeremiah 15:19 to the group. A gift that all of us have is the ability to be the “mouth of God.” Ask the participants to think about someone they know who could use a kind word or words of encouragement. We might often think of someone who could benefit from encouragement or a thoughtful note, but we often do not take the time to follow through on that intention. Invite each of them to choose a note card and take a few moments to write that person a note with whatever encouraging message he or she thinks that person needs to hear today. Encourage them to mail the card as soon as they get home.

Close this activity with this prayer or a similar one: *Loving and compassionate God, you offer us Jesus as your Word made flesh. In Jesus, we see your compassion and hear of your loving kindness. Help us to share your loving words with everyone we meet. We ask for your special blessing to be with those who will receive cards from us. We offer ourselves to you so that we may speak your words of peace and love. Amen.*



6 A Whole New You

Leader preparation: Look at the photo “Diamond Peak, Nevada, USA.” If you have never experienced the speed and excitement of snowboarding, imagine what that must feel like. Take a moment and consider what new activity you might like to try or what old habit you might like to shed so that you can take on a new identity. This new activity doesn’t need to be high-speed or dangerous. It might be as simple as a new hobby or a fresh way of doing a familiar task. Consider how we might encounter God if we break out of our routine.

Read Matthew 9: 9–13, 18–26. The three people who met Jesus are now embarking on a different journey. Do you think they might have experienced the same rush of excitement as the snowboarder in the photo?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: "Diamond Peak, Nevada, USA," <http://www.art.com/products/p13950276-sa-i2807680/diamond-peak-nevada-usa.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=55eedd136d4049bcaab8f63c70afd3e3&searchstring=diamond+peak>
- paper, pens

Invite the participants to look at the photo "Diamond Peak, Nevada, USA." Ask: *What emotions do you think the snowboarder is experiencing? When have you felt similar emotions? Were those emotions positive or negative? Why?*

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 9: 9–13, 18–26 out loud. Ask the participants which of the three people in the story might experience an emotion similar to the skier in the photo. Invite the participants to name the person in the story with whom they most closely identify and invite them to explain why.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Gift of Hospitality (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 9:9–11. Imagine what it was like to be Matthew, who lived life as a reviled tax collector, and who is suddenly invited to sit down with Jesus and share a meal. Jesus gave the gift of welcome. People who witnessed this were incensed that Jesus would take the time to talk and listen to this outcast. History does not record their conversation; the very fact that they shared a meal together was shocking and important enough.

Make a copy of "The Gift of Hospitality," Attachment, Activity 7, cut apart the strips, and place the strips in an envelope. Prepare an envelope for each small group of three or four people.

Supplies:

- Bible
- "The Gift of Hospitality," Attachment: Activity 7

Read Matthew 9: 9–11 to the group. Invite the participants to talk about the difference in the emotions of Matthew and the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus offered the gift of hospitality and took the time to break bread and have conversation with Matthew and others who were held in ill regard. Tell the group that today you will offer one another the gift of hospitality and the gift of listening to one another.

If the group has more than 5 members, divide the group into smaller groups (3–4 people per group is ideal). Give each group an envelope with the slips of paper in it. Invite them to take turns choosing one slip of paper out of the envelope. Tell the person to read the question out loud to their group and take time to listen to one another's answers. When they are done with one question, they may go on to the next question at their own pace.

If there is time at the end, invite the groups to briefly state which question generated the most conversation.



③ Breaking Bread Together

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 9:9–11. Jesus must have been a busy man, but we have many accounts of him taking the time to sit down and share a meal with others. He particularly seemed to make time for those who were often considered to be outcasts of society. This activity encourages the group to offer the gift of hospitality to the congregation. If your congregation has a regular time for coffee or fellowship, that would be an ideal time to implement this exercise. If not, this may be an opportunity to invite parishioners to take a few moments to talk and listen with one another.

Think about where people from the congregation could gather for an informal time of coffee and fellowship. Set up chairs in small circles of 4–5 chairs. As an option, the group could help you with this part of the preparation.

Make a copy of the attachment "The Gift of Hospitality" from Activity 7 above. Cut apart the strips, and place the strips in an envelope. Prepare an envelope for each small group of three or four people. On one chair in each circle, place the envelope with the question strips.

If coffee hour is an established practice at your church, there is no need for you to be involved in the preparation of the coffee. If this is not regularly done at your church, you and your group might want to take the time to make coffee and tea for the rest of the congregation.

Supplies:

- Bible
- "The Gift of Hospitality," Attachment: Activity 7
- prepared envelope with strips from the attachment for each small group of three or four
- coffee, tea, cream, sugar, cups (if needed)

Read Matthew 9:9–11 to the group. Engage the group in a brief discussion with the following questions.

- We are not told why Jesus called Matthew to follow him. If you had to guess, why do you think Jesus chose Matthew?
- If you were Matthew, what emotions would you experience when Jesus issued this invitation?
- Jesus had dinner with "tax collectors and sinners." Why did breaking bread together make such a powerful statement?

Tell the group that all of you will invite the congregation to enjoy some fellowship time together. Invite the participants to come into the room where the small clusters of chairs have been set up. Have each group member go to one of the chair circles. The group will be spread out throughout the space so that they are not all sitting together. Each participant will hold the envelope containing the questions. When the rest of the congregation comes in, invite them to get a beverage and find a seat in one of the circles.

Tell the entire group that you will be offering one another the gift of hospitality by asking one another questions and listening to the answers given. Each participant from your group can draw a question from the envelope, read it to the small group, and invite their responses. When they are done with one question, they may go on to the next question at their own pace.

9 Serving as God's Mouth

Leader preparation: Read Jeremiah 15:19. Consider that God tells us that we can be the mouthpiece of God. When our words are helpful, encouraging, loving, patient, and kind, it is as if God is speaking through us.

On a piece of newsprint, write:

God says, "If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth." (Jeremiah 15:19)

Hang this in your meeting room. On another piece of newsprint, write "Worthless" on the top left-hand side of the paper; on the top right-hand side, write "Precious."

Supplies:

- Bible
- prepared newsprint with Jeremiah quotation
- prepared newsprint with "Worthless" and "Precious"
- 3" × 5" cards, cut in half, enough so that each participant receives two

Read Jeremiah 15:19 out loud. Our words have great power. God directed Jeremiah to be say only precious words. If Jeremiah did that, he would have the power of the mouth of God. One way that we can share the gifts of God is by sharing words of hope and encouragement.

Invite the group to make the distinction between words that are "worthless" and "precious." Ask them to first list words that would not be helpful to hear. For example, "You're fat," or "Your brother is smarter" or "You can't do anything right." Write these examples on the newsprint. On the other side of the paper, write suggestions from the group of words or phrases that are helpful, or "precious." Some examples might be: "God loves you," "You are created in God's image," and "You are special."

Once a list of "precious" words and phrases has been written, invite the group to choose one or two and write these on the 3" × 5" cards. Invite them to "be God's mouth" by giving these cards out to members of your congregation or other people they may meet.

Reflect

John Wesley said, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can." This is one description of a disciple's life.



Attachment: Activity 1

Discovering Our Gifts

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Matthew the tax collector

Matthew is viewed by others as:

Matthew views himself as:

Jesus can see these gifts/attributes in him:

Leader of the synagogue

The leader is viewed by others as:

The leader views himself as:

Jesus can see these gifts/attributes in him:

Sick woman

The sick woman is viewed by others as:

The sick woman views herself as:

Jesus can see these gifts/attributes in her:

Myself

I am viewed by others:

I view myself:

Jesus can see these gifts/attributes in me:



Attachment: Activity 3

Jeremiah 15:15–19

The Message

You know where I am, God! Remember what I'm doing here!
Take my side against my detractors.
Don't stand back while they ruin me.
Just look at the abuse I'm taking!
When your words showed up, I ate them—
swallowed them whole. What a feast!
What delight I took in being yours,
O God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies!
I never joined the party crowd
in their laughter and their fun.
Led by you, I went off by myself.
You'd filled me with indignation. Their sin had me seething.
But why, why this chronic pain,
this ever worsening wound and no healing in sight?
You're nothing, God, but a mirage,
a lovely oasis in the distance—and then nothing!
This is how God answered me:
"Take back those words, and I'll take you back.
Then you'll stand tall before me.
Use words truly and well. Don't stoop to cheap whining.
Then, but only then, you'll speak for me.
Let your words change them.
Don't change your words to suit them.
I'll turn you into a steel wall,
a thick steel wall, impregnable.
They'll attack you but won't put a dent in you
because I'm at your side, defending and delivering."
God's Decree.
"I'll deliver you from the grip of the wicked.
I'll get you out of the clutch of the ruthless."

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Attachment: Activity 7

The Gift of Hospitality

Describe the first church you ever attended. Where was it and how old were you?



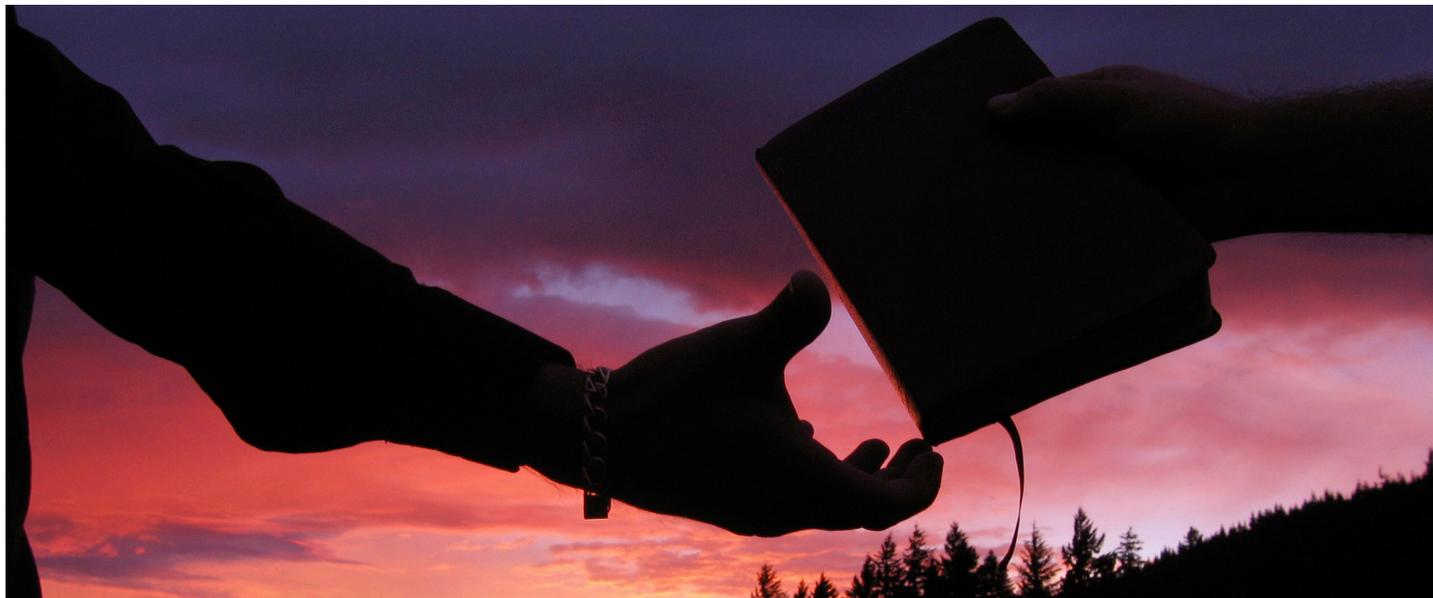
Describe where you lived when you were 10 years old?

Describe someone who taught you about faith.

Describe the best gift you ever received.

What is your favorite holiday? Why?

Discovering Gifts of Ministry



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Many people who are new to the church may not have a sense of Christian tradition or may have experienced very different traditions than the ones that are celebrated in your church or denomination. Don't assume that everyone comes with the same background. Simply asking the participants to name a faith tradition that is meaningful to them could be an interesting and useful "ice breaker" for the group. Traditions can be comfortable and enjoyable to those "in the know," but traditions also have the power to make newcomers feel like outsiders. Reassure seekers and newcomers that old traditions can be learned and new traditions can be developed.

About this Exploration

Faithful Christian practices encourage a communal awareness that God calls, nurtures, and blesses the use of our gifts to strengthen God's work in the world. Our understanding of this partnership with God is always emerging. Traditional gifts, such as preaching, hospitality, music, and caring may be demonstrated in ways recognizable since ancient days. Christian tradition may also be informed and evolve to include modern forms of expression such as social media, video, legislative advocacy, and more. No matter the era or tradition, gifts of ministry are grounded in a desire to minister with and on behalf of Christ

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Isaiah 49:1-7

Luke 10:1-11

Leader Preparation

The oldest “tradition” in Christianity is the tradition of love. Jesus was given to all of humanity because of God’s great love for us. Jesus taught his disciples about love and lived a life that reflected God’s compassion for all of God’s children and especially for the weak, oppressed, and marginalized. God called Isaiah to offer this message of love to the people of Israel. Jesus told his followers to bravely go out into a sometimes unwelcoming world to present this radical notion of unconditional love and transforming forgiveness. There is never a guarantee that this message will be accepted, but God’s ongoing tradition is to continue to offer this love, today, tomorrow and always.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for entrusting me with your life-changing message of love and acceptance. Help me to echo Isaiah’s words, “Here I am, Lord. Send me.” Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 How Are We Sharing the Message? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 10:1–11. Jesus tells his followers to share a message of peace. God’s peace is available to all of God’s people because God promises to be with us. This is the message that the church still has to share today. Think about your own church. How do different groups share this message of peace and the presence of God? Consider the physical layout of your church. Is there is an area for teaching and learning for children, youth, and adults? What is the sanctuary like? Are people greeted in the church entry way? Do you have a time of “passing the peace” during worship? Is there any fellowship time before or after worship? Do you have any outreach activities that share a message of hope and peace? What other ways can you think of that your church follows Jesus’ directive to go out and offer “peace to this house.”

Plan a short route through your church so that you can stand together as a group in several different areas of the church and reflect on the ministry that takes place there. If possible, invite someone to meet you at that area to talk about what they do and why (for example, a church school teacher in the children’s area, or a musician by the keyboard, or someone involved with refreshments in the kitchen).

Make a copy of this unison prayer for each participant:

God of welcome, bless the people who meet here. Help them to give and receive the Good News of your peace and presence. Amen.

Supplies:

- Bible
- copy of unison prayer for each person

Read Luke 10:1–11 aloud to the group. Jesus sent his followers out to share a message of hope and peace. The church today has the same message to share. Invite the group to walk through the church building and explore how that message of hope is being shared today by your congregation.

Lead the group on your preplanned route. At each stop, ask the group to describe what activities go on here and how that helps share Jesus’ message of peace. If the group doesn’t know what happens in that space, be prepared to tell them, or invite the designated volunteer to briefly explain the ministry that takes place there. Before you depart that area, invite the group to join together in the unison prayer to bless this place and the people who meet there.

2 Called by Name

Leader preparation: Read Isaiah 49:1 and consider that Isaiah was called by God even before he was born. God knows each of us by name; we are precious in the sight of God. Baptism is one way that the Christian church celebrates this relationship.

Get a copy of the baptism certificate used by your church or denomination and make a copy for each participant. Notice if any scripture passages, creeds, or a statement of faith is on the certificate (there may not be any, and that is fine). Ask your pastor for a copy of a baptism service and make copies of it for the group.



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

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

Supplies:

- Bible
- blank baptismal certificate used by your congregation one for each participant
- copy of baptismal service for each participant

Read Isaiah 49:1 to the group. God formed a relationship with Isaiah even before Isaiah was born. Baptism is a celebration of our relationship with God; we celebrate that the one being baptized is known and named by God. Invite the group to look at the baptismal certificate. If the certificate contains scripture verses or other quotations, invite someone to read these out loud. Engage in conversation with the following questions.

- What does it mean to you that God knows our names?
- Describe a baptism that you have witnessed and talk about its significance.

Invite the group to look at a sample of a baptismal service from your church. Talk together about any vows taken and who promises what. Conclude your time together by inviting people to share what they might know about their own baptisms or that of a family member or close friend. Do not assume that everyone has a personal baptism story.

③ What Is Your Name?

Leader preparation: Read Isaiah 49:1 and notice that God calls Isaiah by name even when Isaiah was still in the womb. God already had an identity in mind for Isaiah. In a similar way, when a child is named by his or her parents, the parents usually have a reason for choosing that child's name.

Get copies of baby name books that include the meanings of the names. These can be obtained at a local library or book store. Another option would be to have a computer with Internet access to look up name meanings.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 1–3 baby name books, depending on size of group, or computer with Internet access
- paper, pens, pencils

Read Isaiah 49:1 to the group. Isaiah was called by name in the womb. Give the participants a chance to discover what their names mean. Invite each participant to look up her or his name in the baby books or on the Internet and then share what that name means. Ask if she or he likes or agrees with the description given. *Did you know this was the meaning of your name? Do you know why your parents gave you that name?*

Give each participant a piece of paper, and ask each to write her or his name on it vertically. The participant can then use each letter to write a descriptive word for her- or himself. For example, "Eve" might write E—energetic, V—vivacious, E—empathetic. When people are done writing, invite people to share their descriptive words.

Close with a prayer naming all of the participants and offering the whole group to God's care and guidance.



Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 A Light to the Nations (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Isaiah says that believers are given to the world so that they can be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 49:6). The believers will offer guidance and reassurance to those around them. This is an opportunity for the group to consider the mission of your church and how that mission is expressed to others. Stand outside your church and notice any visible symbols or signs that might help passers by understand what kind of building this is and what goes on inside.

Look at the morning worship bulletin from your church. Notice what kind of information is provided for newcomers. If someone was coming to the church for the first time, would they know what denomination you belong to? Does the church have a mission statement? Is there a way to obtain more information, such as through bulletin boards, a website, or information on how to ask further questions?

Supplies:

- Bible
- copy of Sunday morning worship bulletin for each participant

Read Isaiah 49:6 to the group. Isaiah was called to serve God. All those who serve God are considered to be a “light to the nations.” Ideally, the believers will proclaim the message of God with both words and actions.

Invite the group to walk to the outside of the church. Together, point out any symbols or signs that give information about what kind of building this is and what people here believe. Brainstorm together about any additional signs or symbols that you would like to see or that you believe might be helpful to define the mission of the church.

Return to your gathering place and invite the group to look at the morning bulletin. Ask: *When you first came to this church, how helpful was the bulletin? What would you have liked to have had in the bulletin?* Invite them to consider what it would be like to come to the church as a stranger who has no familiarity with Christianity. Ask the participants to notice what kind of information is given in the bulletin.

- Is the denomination named? How can people find out more about it?
- Is there a way to get more information about the church?
- What can we do to make our “light” shine more brightly so that people know about our church and the message we have?
- What insider messages are there? For instance, does everyone know the way the congregation prays the Lord’s Prayer? Are the page numbers in the hymnal list for the Doxology and the Gloria Patri? Are the pew Bible page numbers given for the scriptures? Are the names of the worship leaders given?

5 Laboring in Vain

Leader preparation: Read Isaiah 49:1–4. Think about times when you were discouraged or when it seemed like you had worked very hard with little visible results. Isaiah’s job as a prophet was not an easy one. He was asked to be faithful and to serve God, yet often he was frustrated by the lack of progress.

Prepare slips of paper on which this sentence is written:

Surely my cause is with the Lord.

You will need a small paper cup for each person, planting soil, and flower seeds.

Supplies:

- Bible
- small paper cup for each person
- potting soil or dirt
- flower seeds, enough for two for each person
- prepared slips of paper
- tape

Ask a volunteer to read Isaiah 49:1–4 to the group. Ask the group to describe the tone of voice that they can imagine Isaiah using when he states that he has been “laboring in vain.” Ask: *When in your life a time did you work hard toward a goal, but didn’t see immediate results?* Invite them to reflect on those experiences and how that made them feel. Ask the group to name examples of a huge undertaking in the news that is going slowly (for example cleaning up the environment, battling crime, affordable housing). *What advice would you give on how not to become discouraged?*

Invite each participant to fill a paper cup it almost to the top with soil. As they plant the seeds, ask them to reflect on the amount of time that it will take for a plant to appear. Remind them that there will not be instant results—this is an example of needing patience and not giving up. Remind the participants that they will need to take care of the plants by providing water and sunlight. If they offer that consistent care, the plant should grow. Invite them to tape to the cup the scripture verse on the slip of paper; this can serve as a visual reminder of the patience that is needed by a servant of God.



6 What Do You See? What Do You Hear?

Leader preparation: Read Luke 10:1–11. The followers are all sent out with the same message from Jesus, a message of hope, healing, and encouragement. Some listeners receive it with joy and offer the followers a warm welcome, while other hearers of this Word reject the message and do not welcome the bearers of Good News. People can look at an object or hear a message or song and experience something entirely different than the person standing next to them.

Look at the painting “Vision after the Sermon” by Paul Gauguin. How would you describe the scene? What do you think the women who are standing there are experiencing? Do you imagine that they are all experiencing the same emotions, or are they varied? Probably five different people could look at this picture and come up with five different interpretations. The way that someone responds to a painting, a song, or even a message from God can depend on the many variables in that person’s life.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: "Vision after the Sermon" by Paul Gauguin, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37962&store_id=1401
- paper, pens

Ask a volunteer to read Luke 10:1–11 to the group. Jesus gave the exact same instructions to everyone in the group; each pair of followers was told to offer “peace to this house.” Jesus warns them that some people will receive this greeting with joy while others will reject it and not welcome Jesus’ followers. The participants will be asked to reflect on the difference in reaction when presented with the same information.

Show half of the group the "Vision after the Sermon" for a minute, and then give them a few moments to write down their impressions. Then ask them to describe the picture to the other half of the group in as much detail as possible. Allow enough time so that everyone who wishes to speak has a chance. The more information they share, the more effective this will be.

Invite the second half of the group to write down some notes about what they expect to see in the picture. When they are done, show the whole group the picture. Ask the second group if this is what they expected to see; invite them to say what differences they experienced, if any.

Invite everyone to talk about what they see in the picture, whether it appeals to them or not, what emotions it may evoke, and what word or phrase they would use to describe it. Although everyone is seeing the same painting, everyone may have a different reaction. Ask the group to reflect on the story from Luke and to discuss why the hearers of Jesus’ message may have different reactions to it.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Offering Peace (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 10:1–11. Think about what it feels like to offer a beloved gift or a special present and then have that offering rejected or misused. Jesus tells his followers to anticipate that not everyone will welcome what they have to say or offer. This is not a reflection of their value or of the importance of their gift; it simply means that not everyone will be ready to hear or receive what the followers have to say.

Prepare small circles of construction paper with the words “Peace of Christ” written on each one. Ahead of time, arrange with two or three people to be “negative receivers.” These people will be offered the gift of peace but will refuse to accept it (they can either say “no thank you” or “not interested” or some other phrase rejecting what is being offered). The group will also go to other people who haven’t been notified ahead of time of the group’s activity. These people will simply react to what is being offered—you have no control over their reactions.

Supplies:

- Bible
- prepared circle of construction paper for each participant

Read Luke 10:1–11. Ask the group to notice that there is no guarantee about how the gifts of God will be received by people. God only offers good gifts, but not everyone is ready to receive them. Engage the group in a brief discussion with the following questions.

- How do you think it feels to offer something and have the offer “not be welcomed”?
- Describe a time when you offered a gift or something that was important to you and it was not well received.

Following the discussion, give each participant a construction circle. Send them out in pairs to offer these gifts to whomever they meet. In order to be sure that at least some of the pairs encounter the “negative receivers,” you may need to give them explicit directions on whom to offer the gift. Instruct the participants to come back to your meeting place when they are done. The exercise should only take a few minutes.

When they return, ask them to describe their experience. *Was it positive? Negative?* Invite them to reflect on their experience compared with the followers in Luke 10.



③ Passing On Our Light

Leader preparation: Read Isaiah 49:1–7. God gave Isaiah many gifts. God describes Isaiah as a light to the nations, a polished arrow and a sharp sword. God clearly views Isaiah as being gifted. Now God wants Isaiah to share those gifts with others. Consider a talent that you have learned from someone else. It could be anything from crafts (knitting, quilting, painting, and so on) to working with your hands (ability to make repairs). Almost any gift or talent that we possess, we have learned from someone else. Think about the process of teaching and learning. Do you prefer to be a teacher or a learner? It takes particular gifts to do both, and certainly both activities require patience.

Before the group meets, invite the participants to bring something simple that they could teach to the other members of the group. This could be as varied as a card trick, origami, a simple song, or even a phrase or short poem to memorize. Encourage the participants to use their imaginations and encourage them to realize that all of them have gifts and talents to share.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: "The Banjo Lesson" by Henry Ossawa Tanner, <http://www.art.com/products/p10286254-sa-i677605/henry-ossawa-tanner-the-banjo-lesson.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6ce32fa19f9d47aaa58758970c9f0162&searchstring=banjo+lesson>

Invite someone to read Isaiah 49:1–7 out loud. Ask the group to list the descriptive words God gives for Isaiah. God views Isaiah as someone with gifts and talents to share. Sharing our gifts can be part of our ministry and a way that we serve God.

Invite the group to look at "The Banjo Lesson" by Henry Ossawa Tanner. Ask people to describe how the man feels and how the boy feels. *Who is the teacher, and who is the student? Could the roles be reversed?* Invite people to talk about a time that they learned something. Encourage them to describe the person who did the teaching.

Invite participants to explain what they have to teach to the group. Ask volunteers, one at a time, to teach their gift to the group. If there is time, invite the group to reflect on how it felt to be a teacher and a learner.

⑨ Will You Come and Follow Me?

Leader preparation: Read Luke 10:1–11. Jesus is calling his followers into service. Jesus states candidly that the service may be difficult and their best efforts may not be appreciated or accepted. This is not a measure of their “success.” The followers are simply asked to share the Good News; they are not responsible for the reactions of those who hear them.

Think about times when you felt called to serve God. How did you receive that call? Was the calling difficult? What did you learn through your service to God? Were there blessings that you had not anticipated? Any disappointments?

Watch the video “The Summons.” Notice how many different avenues of service are depicted in the images. To which ones do you relate most easily? Do any inspire you to new or continued service?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access and projections capability
- song: “The Summons” by John Bell (tune: Kelvingrove); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0aAkOe87mo&feature=related>
- paper, pens

Reflect

God says, “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you.” (Isaiah 41:10). When God calls us into action or sends us out to minister to others, God never sends us alone. God has great confidence in us because God knows that God can work through us. We are invited to open ourselves up to the gift of God’s Spirit.

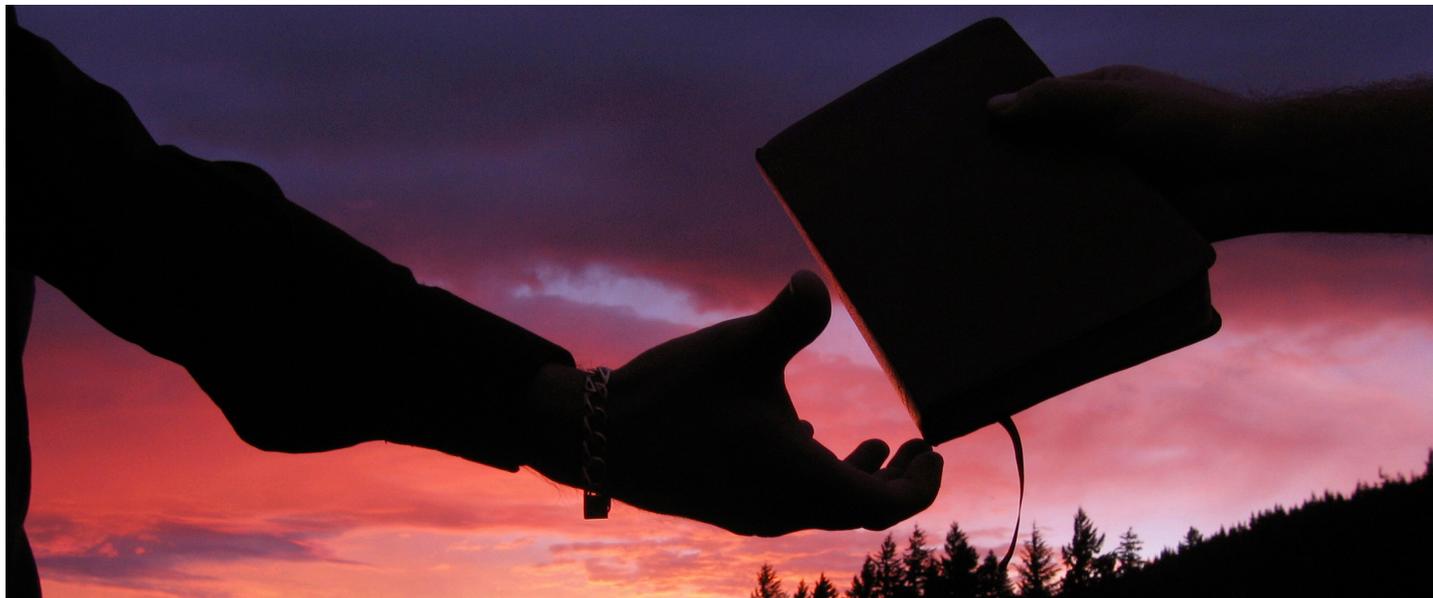
Invite a volunteer to read Luke 10: 1–11. Tell the class that all of Jesus’ followers are called to serve God but that it is not always easy. Sometimes the message and the messenger are not accepted. God does not ask us to be “successful” but only obedient. Our task is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ; we can entrust the listeners to God’s care.

Prepare to watch the YouTube video “The Summons” together as a group. Before you start, ask the group to write a brief description (2–3 words) of the various kinds of service or scenes of need that they see depicted as they watch the video. When the video is over, ask the group to look at their lists and put a star next to the three scenes that spoke to their hearts or left a lasting impression.

Invite the participants to list as many of the scenes/images as they can. Encourage them to share which of these images made the greatest impression on them.

If there is time after the discussion, watch the video once more. Encourage people to look for the scenes that people had described as the most meaningful to them.

Discovering Gifts of Ministry



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Many people who are new to the faith or seeking a deeper relationship with God do not wish to simply learn “about” God; they would like to put their faith into action and serve God. Faith is not a pretty idea; it is a lifestyle. This is what context and mission is all about. The context of our faith is our daily lives; our mission is to live out our faith in God not only in church, but also at home, in the workplace, in the neighborhood, and in the world. This is an exciting opportunity for seekers to discover that they already have the gifts needed to serve God. As children of God, they are filled with the Holy Spirit. By trusting God’s power within them, they can serve God and share God’s hope and love wherever they find themselves.

About this Exploration

Each of us is like a “letter from Christ,” as Paul says, sent to bring hope and healing wherever there is need. In all contexts, there are opportunities for us to share our gifts of ministry in a variety of ways, be it at home, at school, in the workplace, in the neighborhood, and at church. Over our lifetimes, the diversity of our gifts can emerge and grow, and may change, as we move into new places and spaces in our lives. Trusting that God can work through us right where we are is an exciting way to realize that the Holy Spirit is all around us.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Nehemiah 2:11-20
2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Leader Preparation

Context and mission is where book-learning makes room for action. We are invited to roll up our sleeves and be amazed by the power of God within us. God has great confidence in us. Paul describes us as a letter written by God. We are now being sent into the world and are invited to share God's creativity, new life and hope with all the people and situations we encounter. Both Old and New Testament scriptures give a sense of great possibility; amazing that can happen when we place our trust in God.

Prayer: Creative and giving God, I am humbled by the power of your Holy Spirit that you freely give to me. Thank you for entrusting me with your power and grace. Help me to follow in the footsteps of Nehemiah and Paul and trust you. You say that you can do great things through me. Give me the grace to believe that. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 You Are a Letter (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-6. Notice the beautiful and encouraging description that Paul uses for the Corinthians. He describes them as a letter from Christ, written by the Spirit. This is a powerful way to look at ourselves! If we are letters from Christ, it might be time to wonder what it is that we are saying to people whom we encounter. Think of words that might describe your personality or characteristics.

You will be helping your group discover their individual characteristics and gifts. At the top of an 8½" × 11" sheet of paper, write: "I am a letter from Christ. I am . . ." Prepare one for each person. The rest of paper will be blank so that other participants will write descriptive words related to that person. For example, they might write "always smiling" or "very helpful" or "welcoming" or whatever positive impressions they have received from a person.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- prepared sheet of paper for each participant
- tape
- washable thin-tip markers

Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 aloud to the group. Repeat verse 2 for the group to hear. Ask the group what they think it means to be a "letter from Christ."

Tell the group that they will be exploring what kind of letter they are and what type of message they are sending. We may not always be aware of what kind of impression we give to others. This exercise helps us hear what other people have "read" in us. Someone might be considered to be a "welcoming" letter and not even be aware of it.

Tape a paper that you prepared on the back of each participants. Have the participants go to each member and write as many descriptive words about that person as they can. Be sure participants use washable markers that do not bleed through the paper! Encourage the participants to use their imaginations and share as much information about the person as possible. When they have finished, invite each person to remove his or her paper and read the words. Invite the group to share what words were used to describe them. Ask them if they are surprised by what kind of "letter" they are.

2 Not Always a Direct Route

Leader preparation: Read Nehemiah 2:11-20. Notice that Nehemiah takes a very circuitous route in order to accomplish his goal of talking to the officials. The story lists many points along the way. Although those ancient stopping points can no longer be pinpointed on a map, we can assume that Nehemiah's journey was longer than if he had only gone directly from Point A to Point B. The stops along the way may have been necessary and even helpful, but they made the trip longer.

This can be our experience as well. Oftentimes when we look back in our lives, we can detect side trips, detours, and roadblocks along the way. Those obstacles



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

can be frustrating; they can also be life-changing. Take time to think about your own faith journey, where it has led you and who you have met along the way.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- paper, pens
- tape or a thumbtack

Before the scripture is read aloud, ask a volunteer to listen for the names of the places that Nehemiah mentions. These can be places where he makes a stop or simply passes by. Instruct the participant to write on newsprint or a whiteboard the name of each place that is mentioned (hint: there should be six—Valley Gate, Dragon’s Spring, Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, King’s pool, Valley Gate [second time]). Then have a volunteer read Nehemiah 2:11–20 to the group. When the list is completed, hang it where everyone can see it.

Nehemiah wanted to reach the officials so that he could talk with them. He knew where he wanted to end up, but his journey was not a direct trip—there were several stops along the way. Our faith journey is often similar. We might have a plan or a dream for our lives, but then events, planned and unplanned, can take us on a surprising route. It is important to note that even when we might think that we are lost or on the wrong path, God promises to be with us and can even bless this unexpected journey we are on.

Give each person a piece of paper and a pen. Ask each to write his or her “starting point” (a birthplace or hometown) at the top of the page and today’s date and the name of the town where you are meeting at the bottom of the page. The space in between these two phrases represents the person’s faith journey. Invite participants to list five or six “stops” or important life events along the way. As they work on that, invite them to consider where God was at that time in their lives. Ask: *Were you aware of God’s presence at the time, or now in retrospect can you see how God was moving in and through your life?* Invite people to briefly share some of the highlights of their faith journey.

③ An Invitation to Follow

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6. Paul describes each of us as a letter written from Christ. What would happen if we received a letter from Christ? Watch the video of “The Summons.” Since it is sung in the first person, it is easy to imagine that Jesus is speaking directly to the listener. The listener is asked, “Will you come and follow?” Every disciple, from biblical times to today, is asked to say “yes” to God by serving God.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- song: “The Summons” by John Bell (tune: Kelvingrove); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0aAkOe87mo&feature=related>

Paul describes each one of us as a letter written by Christ. Tell the group that today you will consider what it would be like to receive a letter or an invitation from Christ.

Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6 out loud. Engage the group in a brief discussion with these questions.

- If Jesus were a letter, what would the letter say?
- If you could send a “Jesus letter” to anyone you know, who would receive it and why?
- If you received a letter from Jesus, what would you like it to say to you?

Invite the group to listen to an invitation from Jesus through the song “The Summons.” Encourage the group to pay attention to what the listeners are being asked to do. Show the video of “The Summons.” Enjoy some moments of reflections with these questions.

- List some of the activities in which the listeners are invited to engage.
- Which parts of the invitation are easy to say “yes” to? Which are difficult?
- What part of the invitation do you feel called to respond to?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Letter of Recommendation (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6. Paul knows that he does not need a letter of recommendation in order to serve the church at Corinth because he comes recommended by God. He goes on to say that each one of the Corinthians is a letter written by God. This is high praise. We are often reluctant to “sing our own praises,” but Paul encourages the readers to recognize that they are indeed gifted—they have been filled with creative power of the Holy Spirit.

Remember a time when you needed to ask someone for a letter of recommendation. Now think about writing your own letter of recommendation. What are your strengths, your gifts, and your positive qualities?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper, pens

Invite the group to imagine that they are applying for a job. It can be any job that they can think of, but it needs to be one that they are truly interested in. They could choose to think about an actual employment position that they would really like to obtain, or they can fantasize about a “dream job” that may or may not actually exist but that they would enjoy doing. (For example, someone who enjoys travel might imagine a job as a worldwide tour leader, while a sports enthusiast could dream of a job with a favorite team.) Tell them that they will need to write a letter of recommendation for themselves, “selling themselves” based on their skills, gifts, and personality.

Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6 aloud. Paul is confident about his qualifications because he knows that he has been called by God. God will give him the skills and attributes that he requires when the need arises. Ask the group to discuss the difference between boasting and being confident about one’s abilities. Ask the group if they feel comfortable talking about their own gifts and abilities.

Ask each participants to write a recommendation letter for him- or herself. As they imagine themselves applying for this wonderful position, tell them that God has indeed filled them with the Holy Spirit and that they should therefore not be shy about honestly portraying their strengths and abilities.

When all have completed their letters, invite each person who is willing to share the letter. Ask the group if they have anything that they would like to add to the letter—tell the participants that often other people recognize gifts in us that we might not see (or be too shy to mention).

Ask the group to reflect on the activity. If some people found it difficult, engage in conversation to discover why that might be.

5 God Puts It on Our Hearts

Leader preparation: Read Nehemiah 2:11–20. Nehemiah says that God has put a mission on his heart. Nehemiah senses that God has called him but he tells no one what he is about to do. Nehemiah is about to embark on a journey based on his faith in God.

Look at “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbell. The girls seem to be on an adventure. It may only be in the backyard, but that can be a place of endless possibilities for a child. As you look at the faces of the girls, what emotions do you detect? If you were Nehemiah about to start off on a perilous journey, what emotions do you imagine you would have?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401

Invite a volunteer to read Nehemiah 2:11–20 out loud. Have the group consider the phrase “I told no one what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem” (v. 12). Ask: *How it is that God puts something on our hearts? It could be different for every person. It could be in a dream, through a conversation, or inspired by something that was read. There are no wrong answers!*

Show the picture to the group and allow them 2–3 minutes to look at it carefully. Imagine that these two girls are embarking on a journey. Imagine where the girls are, where they are going, and what they are feeling. Pose the following or similar questions.

- Where do you imagine the girls are going?
- What emotions does the picture convey to you? What clues do you have about these emotions?
- The girls are in this activity together. If you were about to start on a faith adventure, who would you like to have with you? Why?

6 I Haven’t Told Anyone

Leader preparation: Read Nehemiah 2:11–12. Notice that Nehemiah chooses not to tell anyone about his call until he is ready. We are not told why he waits—he may have wanted to get more information, he may have wanted to be careful because of a dangerous political climate, or he may have simply wanted to adjust to the idea of service before jumping into it. Sometimes we hesitate to tell other people about our dreams or desires because we fear ridicule, lack of understanding, or an absence of interest.

Consider whether you have dreams or desires that you have not shared with anyone. Think about a time (either now or in the past) when God was calling you to try a new direction or inviting you to experience a new interest. Before we share

this thought with anyone else, it may be important to simply ponder that invitation or call alone with God.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- slips of paper that will fit into the small box
- pens
- small boxes with lids; these can be obtained inexpensively at craft stores
- ribbon or yarn to tie as a bow around the box

Tell the group that everyone is going to think of something that God is saying to him or her but that this will not be shared out loud. Throughout the Bible God called people into action and often into a new direction. (Some examples: Noah being called to build the ark, Moses being called to save God's people, Esther being called to save the Jewish people from annihilation, Mary called to be the mother of Jesus, Paul being called to be a follower of Christ). Ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 2:11–12 out loud. Tell the group that Nehemiah knew what God had called him to do, but Nehemiah was not yet ready to share that with anyone else. Encourage the participants to think of times in their lives when they have started on a new venture or made a decision that would change the pattern of their lives. God had put an idea or calling into Nehemiah's heart. Ask the group if they can understand Nehemiah wanting to keep that to himself for at least a short time before sharing it with others.

Invite the participants to think about the many aspects of their own lives—work, home life, hobbies, relationships, free time. Is there any area that they would like to change in any way—it could be a major change (finding a new job) or a minor adjustment (fitting in more exercise time). Tell them to keep this in their hearts; they are not being asked to talk about this but only to think about it.

Invite everyone to write at least one of these thoughts on the slip of paper provided and to put this piece of paper into the small box. It is theirs to treasure and to look at from time to time. This written note can serve as encouragement to step out in faith to try something new and as a reminder of God's call to us every day.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 What Is on Your Heart? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This is an opportunity for your seekers to discover more about the people and interests in the congregation. Nehemiah says that he is led to action because of what God has put in his heart. God's concern for the people of Jerusalem dictates Nehemiah's call and actions.

If someone asked you "What has God put on your heart?" what would you say? Or, put another way, "What is an issue that is important to you? What is worth your time and energy? What are you willing to work for?" Read Nehemiah 2:11–12, and think about what is in your heart.

As soon as you arrive at church, pose these questions to the first people you see: "What has God put on your heart? What is an issue that is important to you? What is worth your time and energy? What are you willing to work for?" Invite several people to visit your group and share their answers.

Supplies:

- Bible
- invited guests

Invite the group to explore what is on the hearts and minds of the people of your congregation. Ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 2:11–12 out loud. Emphasize to the group that Nehemiah felt called into action by the concern for the people of Jerusalem that God had put into his heart. Tell the group that they will have the chance to ask people in your congregation what is on their hearts and minds and what is important to them.

Introduce the guests, and pose the question, “What has God put on your heart?” or “What is an issue that you are willing to work on or an activity that is important to you?” The examples could be as varied as global warming to an improved play area for children to providing social activities for seniors to advocating for improved housing for the elderly. There are no wrong answers. Listen and discover what God has put on the hearts of the people of the congregation.

This is not a time for a prolonged conversation. After each guest has answered the question, he or she may leave. Invite all guests to stay, though. Pose the same question to the members of the group.



⑧ Many Are the Wonders of God

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6. God is the source of unending gifts and creativity. The group will be exploring some of those today. Practice the song “One Spirit of Love” by Paul B. Svenson.

Supplies:

- song: “One Spirit of Love” by Paul B. Svenson (©1987/2011 Dad’s Songbook Music LLC – All rights reserved, used by permission www.dadsongbook.com); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBg80JaNj1M>;
- “One Spirit of Love,” Attachment: Activity 8a
- “Litany,” Attachment: Activity 8b
- old magazines
- scissors
- markers
- glue
- construction paper
- music player

Hand out the litany written using the lyrics to the hymn “One Spirit of Love,” Attachment: Activity 8b. Lead the group in the litany. Ask the participants if there is a line or two that particularly appeals to them or “jumps out” at them. Take a few moments to listen to the responses of the group and encourage them to engage one another in conversation.

Invite them to create a collage to illustrate a line from the litany. On the construction paper, participants can write a favorite line or two from the litany. Then they can look through the magazines and cut out pictures and phrases that represent or illustrate this line, and glue the images to the construction paper, forming a collage. Display the completed collages in the order of the words of the song.

When participants finish, invite anyone who is willing to share what has been created. Invite the group to watch and listen to the video of the song.

9 Anywhere, Any Time

Leader preparation: Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6. This is a celebration of God’s gifts in God’s children. Paul has confidence not only in himself but also in his readers. The confidence is based on God’s ability to work through all of us with God’s Holy Spirit. Watch the video "I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me." Look at the size of the choir singing. This wide variety of people undoubtedly has a wide range of personalities, gifts and abilities. Together they sing an uplifting song celebrating their willingness to serve God. It is clearly not drudgery to serve God, but an opportunity and a blessing. Think about how you serve God in your daily life. Leading Faith Practices is one way!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- video: "I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABUTPedTr_A&feature=related
- song: "I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me," African American spiritual (tune: I’m Gonna Live), http://www.hymnary.org/text/im_gonna_live_so_god_can_use_me?tab=about

Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6 aloud. Paul is celebrating the gifts that God gives to all of God’s people. We all have great abilities, not because of our own strength or wisdom, but because of the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. Invite the group to listen to the song "I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me." Ask them to notice that the song begins with one person singing alone before the entire choir sings together. There are times when we are asked to work on our own, and there are other occasions when an entire group effort is required. Note the action verbs in the song: "live," "work," "pray," "sing."

Reflect

"Many are the wonders of God," says the hymn "One Spirit of Love." We serve God as a response to all that God has given and offered to us. Where did you discover God’s wonders today?

Show the video "I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me." Engage in conversation with these questions.

- Describe a time when you served God on your own or by yourself
- Describe a time when you were part of a group that was working together to serve God.
- Name the action verbs used in the song—what would you like to offer to God?
- What kind of gifts or action could your congregation use right now?

Sing the song together using the lyrics from the website listed in the Supplies above.



Attachment: Activity 8a

One Spirit of Love

♩ = 89
Muted strum
Light Reggae Feel

Paul B. Svenson

G 4 G D Em

1. Ma - ny are the won - ders of God ma - ny
2. Some will be the tea - chers of life some the
3. Li - ving as the bo - dy of Christ and the

Em/D C D G

doors o - pen wide ma - ny roads that are still un -
prea - chers of love some the fa - thers and some the
heart of the earth and the hands that will break new

C D G D

tra - veled Ma - ny are the gifts that we share
mo - thers Some will be the ones who will care
gro - und Cel - e - brate the gifts from with - in

Em Em/D C

ma - ny bur - dens we bear ma - ny
some will li - sten and share serv - ing
now its time to be - gin God's -

D G C D

my - ster - ies still un - ra - veled
God as they serve each - o - ther
peo - ple can turn the world a - rou - nd now!

C D G G7 C D G

CHORUS Ma - ny gifts One spi - rit of love one spi - rit of love

C D G F C D G

Ma - ny gifts One spi - rit of love one spi - rit of love

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Attachment: Activity 8b

Litany

Based on the song "One Spirit of Love"

One: Many are the wonders of God, many doors open wide,

All: Many roads that are still untraveled

One: Many are the gifts that we share, many burdens we bear

All: Many mysteries still unraveled

Unison:

Many gifts, one spirit of love, one spirit of love

Many gifts, one spirit of love, one spirit of love

One: Some will be teachers of life, some the preachers of love,

All: Some the Fathers and some the Mothers

One: Some will be the ones who will care, some will listen and share

All: Serving God while they serve each other

One: Living as the body of Christ, and the heart of the earth,

All: And the hands that will break new ground

One: Celebrate the gifts from within, now it's time to begin,

All: God's people can turn the world around now.

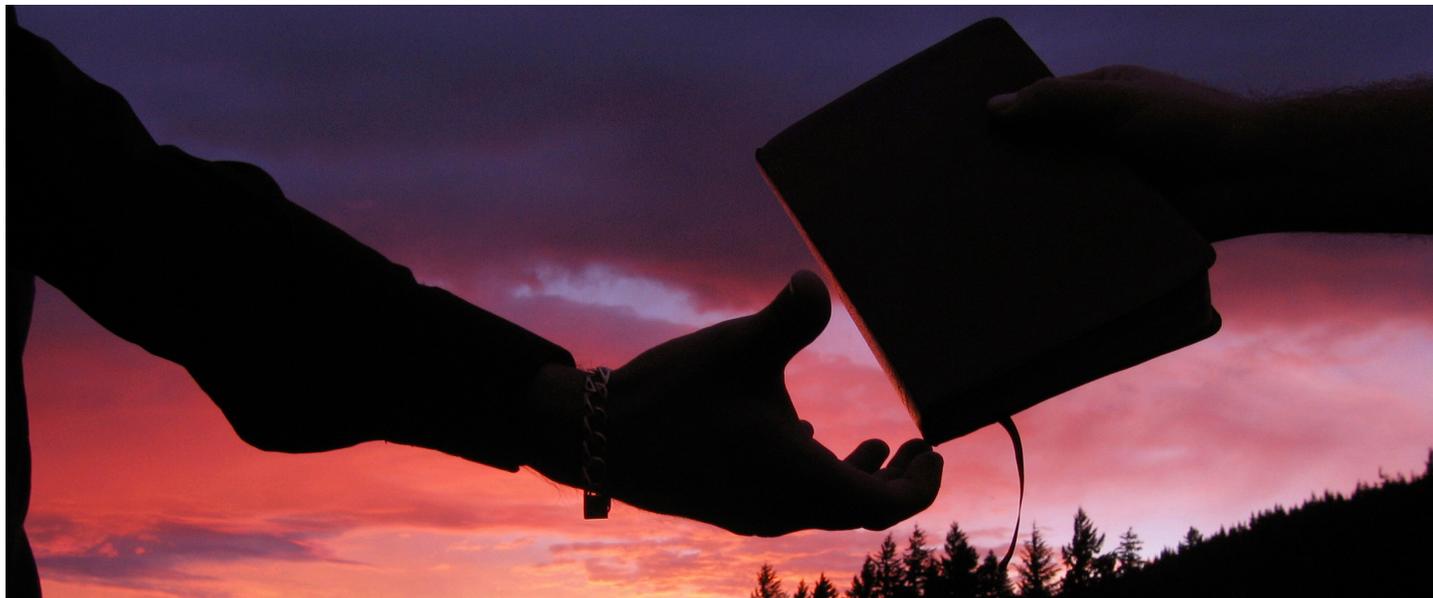
Unison:

Many gifts, one spirit of love, one spirit of love

Many gifts, one spirit of love, one spirit of love

"One Spirit of Love" by Paul B. Svenson ©1987/2011 Dad's Songbook Music LLC. All rights reserved, Used by permission, www.dadsongbook.com.

Discovering Gifts of Ministry



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

"Where do we go from here?" We need to have a vision and an inspiration in order to move forward. Both scripture passages invite us on a journey of exploration and faith. We can follow Samuel's example and offer ourselves to God with the trusting phrase, "Here I am, Lord." And we can take Paul's encouraging words to heart and strive to lead a life free of worry while rejoicing that God is with us always. We can go into the future confident that God calls us to serve and supplies us with the gifts necessary to share God's hope and peace.

About this Exploration

We are not who we once were. We adapt and change along with the shifting circumstances we experience. Gifts of ministry develop throughout the duration of our lives. Our gifts are revealed, acquired, and developed as we encounter the present and are led toward expanding hope for the future. When we engage our gifts of ministry we join with God in making that hope reality, and we become the people God calls us to be.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
1 Samuel 3:1–10, 11–20
Philippians 4:1–13

Leader Preparation

Two delightful and very different servants of God are our guides as we explore what it means to follow God's call and offer ourselves to God. We journey with young Samuel, so inexperienced that he doesn't even recognize God's voice. We are invited to receive the wisdom of Paul, an older, experienced man who is humbled by God's forgiveness and grace. Each of these biblical characters come alive as we imagine ourselves following in their footsteps as we discover our God-given gifts in the service of God.

Prayer: God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, help me to rejoice in you always. As I trust you that are near to me, I come before you with prayers for my Faith Practices group and with thanksgiving for the opportunity to learn more about you. I echo Samuel's words, "Here I am, Lord." Please use me in your service and bless us on our faith journey. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 The Call of Samuel (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read through the "Readers' Theater" on the attachment. Notice that Samuel is given a very challenging task. Not only is he called so serve God, he is asked to tell his mentor Eli that Eli has been unfaithful and therefore will no longer be considered a faithful servant of God.

Supplies:

- "Readers' Theater," Attachment: Activity 1

Invite the group to experience one of the "call" stories from the Bible. Instead of simply reading it, they will participate in the story by taking reading parts. Notice if the story seems more "alive" when it is presented in this way rather than simply read by one person. Invite four people to act as readers.

After the Reader's Theater, pose these or similar questions for conversation:

- Samuel didn't understand at first that it was God who was talking to him. Describe how you listen to God's voice. What do you do to be sure it is God that you are hearing?
- Eli tells Samuel to say "yes" to God and to be willing to listen to God. To what is God asking you to say "yes"?
- Samuel has the difficult task of telling his mentor Eli that Eli has not lived up to God's expectations. Samuel must speak truth to power. Name someone in power (for example a politician or town leader) who needs some advice or guidance in order to bring honor back to his or her position.

2 Soaking up God's blessings

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 3:1. The background to the story of Samuel's call was that the word of the Lord was rarely heard in that time—it was a dry period for the people of God. Often we think that people in biblical times simply carried on endless, easy conversations with God. But they also experienced times when God seemed silent and perhaps even distant. Modern readers can be encouraged to know that there have been times throughout history when God's people have had questions and wondered where God is. The story of Samuel reminds us to be ready to hear God's voice and to be prepared to respond.

Take several old, dried-out sponges and cut them into small pieces, perhaps 2" square. On each piece write a word with permanent marker. Choose from any of these words (or choose your own): "peace," "hope," "love," "call," "serve," "strength," "courage," "light."

Supplies:

- Bibles
- permanent marker
- scissors
- prepared old sponge squares
- shallow bowl of water

Read 1 Samuel 3:1 to the group. This is the introduction to the call of Samuel. Samuel lived in a time when the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not



church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

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

widespread. It can be a challenge to serve God when God seems silent or distant.

Ask the group to brainstorm about times when God might seem silent, removed, distant or uncaring. These might include times of war, famine, persecution, personal loss, or natural disasters. The Bible assures us that God is always with us. In those moments when we feel especially dried up or at a loss, we need to be refreshed by our faith that God is with us.

Show the group the dried up sponges. Ask them what will happen when they are dipped in water. Ask: *What can revive our spirits or bring us back to spiritual life after we have experienced a dry, difficult time?*

Give the participants each a sponge and invite them to dip it into the water. Invite people to say what they will do this week to feed their spirits to prevent becoming spiritually dried out.

③ Is That You, God?

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 3:1–20. Notice that Samuel was at first unclear about whose voice he was hearing. This highlights a concern that many of us share—how will we recognize God’s voice? How will we know that this is God who is speaking to us and not just our imagination?

Prepare a piece of newsprint with the following phrases written on it:

- Does it sound like something God would say?
- Is it grounded in scripture?
- Is it historical?
- Tell someone else. What do they think?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- prepared newsprint with questions

Invite a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:1–20 out loud. Samuel was at first mistaken about who was calling him; he thought he was hearing Eli’s voice when it was God who was speaking to him. Ask people to talk about a time when they believe they heard God’s voice or had a sense of God’s presence.

There have been misguided and even delusional people who have claimed to have heard “God’s voice,” directing them to do horrific acts. There are clues about how to discern if the voice we hear comes from God. Point out the phrases on the newsprint. For example, if someone was “told” to commit a crime, the answer to the questions would be “no.” No, this doesn’t sound like something God would say. No, there is no precedent in scripture. No, there is nothing like that in history. No, I can find no reasonable person who would agree with me. Engage the group in discussion about how to listen for God’s voice using these four questions and other suggestions that the participants might have.



Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Speak Lord, for Your Servant Listens (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 3:1–20. Notice that Samuel was confused at first about who was speaking to him. He thought Eli was calling him, but it was actually God’s voice that he was hearing. When Eli realizes this, he advises Samuel to be quiet and listen to what God has to say. Eli tells Samuel to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Too often we go to God with the opposite attitude as if to say, “Listen, Lord, for your servant speaks!”

Optional: If possible, find a CD of quiet, reflective music. Read the guided meditation below so that you are familiar with it.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) music recording of contemplative, quiet music, such as <http://www.worldprayer.org/meditate.html>
- (optional) computer with Internet access or a way to play music

In order to hear God’s voice, we need to be ready to listen. We live in a noisy world with numerous distractions. Ask the group what types of things they have in their homes that take a lot of their time or that make a lot of noise (this could be chores, computer, TV, radio). Invite the group experience the art of listening.

Have a volunteer read 1 Samuel 3:1–20 out loud. Notice that Eli told Samuel to maintain an attitude of listening for God. When Samuel heard God’s voice, he was directed to say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Ask people to sit comfortably in their chairs with nothing in their hands. If they are comfortable doing so, invite them to close their eyes. If you have quiet music to listen to, turn it on now. Tell the participants that you will say a short series of statements and they are invited to simply listen and reflect on them. Encourage them to stay focused on what you are saying and to temporarily “disengage” from other thoughts and worries.

Read the following statements, leaving 45–60 seconds between each one:

- God knows you by name and loves you.
- God can speak to us in many ways. What are some ways that God speaks to you?
- God trusts you to carry God’s words of hope to those who need to hear them.
- God promises to be with you today and always.
- God loves the people you love and shares your concern about them.

When they are ready, invite the participants to open their eyes. Invite them to reflect on this experience of listening.



5 Content with Whatever I Have

Leader preparation: Read Philippians 4:1–13; notice in particular Paul’s declaration in verse 11. How difficult is it to be content with whatever we have. Think about the emotions of envy, greed, yearning, and the difference between wanting and needing an item or an experience.

Obtain “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard. The girls are dressed very simply, yet they do not appear to be unhappy. Could they be content with what they have? Does the picture make you wonder what it is that they do have or what they have discovered that allows them to be content?

Write the word "Content" on a piece of newsprint with the following definition:

Content: satisfied with what one is or has; not wanting more or anything else

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- prepared newsprint

Ask a volunteer to read Philippians 4:1–13 aloud. Ask the group to be especially aware of verse 11; read this out loud once more. Read the definition of the word “content.” Ask the group when they feel most content and what it is that challenges a feeling of contentment.

Invite the group to look at “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard. Engage in conversation with these questions.

- Although the girls are dressed very simply, they do not appear to be suffering. Do you think this is a picture of contentment? What can you imagine brings them joy or happiness in this moment?
- What is the secret to being content in all circumstances?
- Look at the girls in the picture. How do their circumstances remind you of any of your experiences or times when you might have known a simple joy or contentment?
- How can we nourish Paul’s attitude of being content in all circumstances in our own lives?

6 Here I Am

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 3:1–20. Notice that Samuel answers the call with the words, “Here I am.” Even when Samuel was answering the wrong person (Eli instead of God), Samuel had the right attitude. He offered himself to serve. Look at the video “Here I Am, Lord,” which features the song by that title by Dan Shutte.

Supplies:

- Bible
- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- video: “Here I Am, Lord” by Dan Shutte, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzp83SWRNZw>

Ask a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:1–20 aloud. Samuel demonstrates his willing attitude with his repeated response, “Here I am.” He is ready to be used and serve. Invite the group to watch a video of the song “Here I am, Lord,” and to pay attention to the many images that are shown.

Show the video of “Here I Am, Lord.” Ask: *Which images made an impact on you? If you answered, “Here I am,” where do you believe God is leading you or asking you to go and serve?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Benediction: Words for the Week (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Philippians 4:1–13. Notice that verses 4–8 read like a benediction. The word “benediction” literally means “good word.” In a worship service, the benediction is offered like a gift. These are words for people to receive in their hearts for encouragement and inspiration during the coming week. As you read Paul’s words, think about which of these speak to you and your circumstances this week. We can be grateful for Paul’s reminder that “God is near.”

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Words of Benediction,” Attachment: Activity 7
- pens

Ask a volunteer to read Philippians 4:1–13 aloud. Verses 4–8 are written in the form of a benediction. Give the participants a copy of “Words of Benediction,” Attachment: Activity 7. Have them take a few moments to read each verse carefully to themselves and to follow the directions. When they are finished, invite people to share their reflections on these “good words.”



8 Sowing the Seeds, Waiting for the Harvest

Leader preparation: Read Philippians 4:1–13. Paul offers wonderful words to the church at Philippi. We hope that the readers received his encouraging words and immediately put them into action. However, change in the church often does not take place overnight! It might rather be compared with planting a seed, tending it, and then carefully monitoring its growth. Especially when we are asked to change our attitude or our outlook, we need patience and God’s guidance.

Look at “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” by Gustav Klimt. Imagine how long it took for those flowers to grow and how much care was exerted to create such a lovely display of flowers.

Prepare a piece of newsprint. Create columns; the headings of the columns are as follows: Gentleness, Prayer, Praise, Sharing Peace, Rejoice. Each heading is part of Paul’s encouragement for the church. Hang up the newsprint in your meeting area.



Supplies:

- Bibles
- prepared newsprint
- markers
- artwork: “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” (c.1912) by Gustav Klimt, <http://www.art.com/products/p15177883-sa-i3715775/gustav-klimt-farm-garden-with-sunflowers-c1912.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=55eedd136d4049bcaab8f63c70afd3e3&searchstring=klimt+farm+garden+with+sunflowers>

The apostle Paul wrote letters churches to encourage them in their new identity as Christian churches. He gave them instructions and encouragement. One can imagine that it sometimes took time and patience to see these attitudes put into action.

Ask a volunteer to read Philippians 3:1–13 aloud. Learning how to follow God is like planting a garden; none of us arrive fully formed or developed. It takes time for us to learn how God would like us to live.

Show the painting “Farm Garden with Sunflowers” by Gustav Klimt. Tell the group to imagine that this beautiful garden might symbolize a healthy and vibrant church. Using this imagery, discuss the following questions.

- What must be done prior to planting flower seeds?
- If it takes time for flowers to grow and develop, what does that tell us about the life of a church?

Invite the participants to look at the artwork and then consider the phrases listed on the newsprint. These are actions that Paul encourages the church to participate in so that a beautiful “garden” (church) can develop. Invite the participants to write ideas in each column describing activities that would bring these facets of faith to life.

9 Speak Truth

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 3:1–20. Once Samuel realized that God was speaking to him, he received a difficult message. Samuel needed to speak to his mentor Eli, the priest who had raised him, and let him know that God was not pleased with his actions or those of his children. The story tells us that Samuel was afraid to relay this message.

Unfortunately, it is not difficult to think about politicians or other people in positions of power who have betrayed the trust of their followers and have strayed from their promise to serve and be faithful. If you had the opportunity, what would you say to them?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper, pens

Ask a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 3:1–20 aloud. It took Samuel a while to understand that God was speaking to him, but once he realized this, he received a difficult message from God. God told Samuel to tell Eli that Eli had betrayed the trust that God had placed in him. God was displeased with Eli and his sons. Samuel



was reluctant to share this message and was fearful of Eli's reaction. Samuel, however, wanted to be faithful so he brought God's message to Eli, who received it bravely.

Ask the group to describe politicians or other public figures who have not lived up to their responsibilities and have let down the public trust. Encourage the group to think of what they would say to that person if they had the opportunity. Using the story of Samuel as an inspiration, invite the participants to talk to this person. Place an empty chair in front of the group. Imagine that the politician or public figure is sitting in that chair. Invite the participants to speak directly to that person. The point is to reflect on the importance of our actions and the impact that those actions can have on others. Perhaps individuals would prefer to put their sentiments in a letter. Provide paper and pens. They may decide whether or not to mail the letter.

It is not our job to simply be critical of others. We also need to be inspired to serve God with all our heart, mind and strength. Ask: *What inspiration do you take from Samuel's story? What is one way you can put that into action in your life?*

Reflect

Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." God has great confidence in us. If we offer ourselves to God and place our faith in God, God can do great things through us.



Attachment: Activity 1

Readers' Theater

Based on Samuel 3:1–20

Parts: Narrator, God, Samuel, Eli

Narrator: Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

God: Samuel! Samuel!

Samuel: Here I am! *(Samuel runs to Eli.)* Here I am, for you called me.

Eli: I did not call; lie down again. *(Samuel goes and lies down.)*

God: Samuel!

Samuel: *(Goes to Eli.)* Here I am, for you called me.

Eli: I did not call, my son; lie down again.

Narrator: Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli.

Samuel: Here I am, for you called me.

Eli: Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." *(Samuel goes and lies down.)*

God: Samuel! Samuel!

Samuel: Speak, for your servant is listening.

God: See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.'

Narrator: Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel.

Eli: Samuel, my son.

Samuel: Here I am.

Eli: What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.

Narrator: So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him.

Eli: It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.

Narrator: As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.



Attachment: Activity 7

Words of Benediction

Philippians 4:4-8

Read the following verses (or parts of verses) slowly, one at a time. Put a star next to the phrase(s) that seem especially important to keep in mind in the coming week. In the space allowed, write any comments, prayers, or thoughts that you might have about Paul's words.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.