

Living Stewardship



Exploration: Discovery

About this Setting

Designed for seekers and new church participants, these activities do not assume familiarity with the language or the practices of the Christian faith. Instead, through scripture, personal reflection, and the life of the church, they introduce participants to stewardship as a life principle. As the participants grapple with issues related to receiving, giving, and sharing, they are challenged to consider how they might live as stewards, both individually and in community.

About this Exploration

For many, stewardship is only or primarily about money and tithing. This Exploration will help individuals and churches discover and imagine possibilities of what it means to live into a Christian sense of stewardship that involves all of life. We will explore both what this can mean and how we might integrate it with our life experiences. Because God still speaks, we listen, envision, and embrace our responsibility as God's people, drawing upon the stories found in scripture and the importance of continuing and sharing the story of what it means to be a disciple who is living stewardship.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 8:7-18
Matthew 2:1-11

Leader Preparation

Living stewardship is a complex endeavor that incorporates intensely personal experiences and feelings, particular scriptural passages, traditions from Christian history, and practices of local congregations in the context of contemporary North American society. These activities are designed to foster thoughtful discussions that encourage reflection upon how our lives express living as stewards. Developing a sense of community in the group is essential for this kind of reflective work. If possible, arrange chairs so that everyone can readily see one another and still allow easy access to newsprint, white board, easel, or projection. Affirm the participants' responses and, when possible, build on them. Trust the Holy Spirit to move in exciting and unexpected ways.

Prayer: O living God, you call us to lead even when we may have no idea what we are doing or where we are going, but we know that you do. We trust you for that, and, as you have so many times before, we ask that you again speak to us and move among us as we participate together through these activities. For the sake of Jesus. 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 Remembering God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Deuteronomy 8:7-18 carefully. If you are unfamiliar with the larger context of this passage, skim chapters 5 through 9. For the background of verse 8:15, see Exodus 17:1-7, and for verse 8:16, see Exodus 16:1-3, 9-18. You may want to explore the contrast between responses to neediness and prosperity. With the former, we may question God's presence, as in Exodus 16:3. With the latter, we may ignore God, as in Deuteronomy 8:11-14. Either way, people become alienated because of their often naive expectations and assumptions. This passage provides an invitation to explore how alienation resulting from prosperity can be overcome by practicing stewardship as an act of remembering God.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Welcome the participants, share names, and open with this or a similar prayer: *Great Creator, you who have created and continue to create, thank you for your presence with us. May we open ourselves to you so that we can be attentive to what you say to us through your Word and through one another. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to recall an experience about something they accomplished in the past and tell the group about it (such as an education, professional, or work achievement, survival of a serious physical or emotional illness, financial success, and so forth). After the participants have shared, ask questions such as: How did you feel about your accomplishment? In what ways were you aware of the support of others who may have helped you to attain it? Do you recall having any awareness of God's presence during or after your achievement? Introduce the scripture that focuses on the ancient people of Israel as they entered their new homeland after generations of slavery in Egypt. The passage is part of a longer section that describes Moses, the leader of the people. Here Moses gives the people God's commandments and interprets for them the significance of the need to stay in relationship with God, especially after they have settled in the land and prospered. Invite someone to read aloud Deuteronomy 8:7-18. Questions to consider: Verse 8:9 describes how good the land is. What are the people to do in response to God's goodness? (See verse 8:10.) Amid such abundance, what does Moses warn the people that they should not do? (See verses 8:12-14 and 8:17.) Instead, what does Moses command them to do? (See verse 8:18.)

Invite the learners to focus on verse 8:18. What do you think Moses means when he says that the people are to remember God? How should we do this? In Hebrew, the original language of Deuteronomy, "remember" means to keep in mind someone as worthy of consideration or recognition. How do we, or might we, as individuals, keep God in mind? As a church? As a group of believers? If your group is primarily composed of seekers, focus only on the questions about individuals, but also keep in mind how a community could help in this act of remembering. Encourage the learners to go back to the remembered experiences they identified at the beginning of this activity. After discussing the passage from Deuteronomy, has your understanding of the experience you described changed? If so, how? If not, why not? Are you more likely to think of future accomplishments differently? If so, how? If not, why not? Will understanding God as ultimately responsible for the goodness we experience affect how you understand your accomplishments? If so, how?



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.

Close with this or a similar prayer: *Wondrous and faithful Creator, how long you have been reaching out to people! Thank you for the challenge presented to us in scripture. And thank you for your invitation to understand our accomplishments in light of your faithfulness to us and our happiness. May we practice a greater awareness of your presence in our lives so that we may grow closer to you and to one another. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

2 Planting

Leader preparation: Spend time alone viewing the print *Planting* by Rex Goreleigh, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>. Note the large size of the human figure compared to the small size of the plant, suggesting that to be stewards is an immense responsibility. Note the curved edges of the land at the bottom perimeter, suggesting the roundness of the earth and the global responsibility of faithful stewardship. Besides understanding the woman as one fulfilling her human responsibility to be a steward tending the earth, consider the woman also as a symbol—the presence of God’s own self tending the earth. This “double image” suggests a powerful connection between our responsibility as stewards of the earth and God’s caring for the earth through us. An additional connection here is the figure as a woman of color. Display the poster so all have easy access to it.

Supplies:

- poster: “Planting” by Rex Goreleigh, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- newsprint or white board and markers
- easel (or blank wall)
- masking tape

Welcome the participants, share names, and start with this or a similar prayer: *Creator of us and all that is, thank you for this opportunity to explore the meaning of living stewardship together. Grant us understanding and wisdom as we try to discover what you desire from us as we seek to live as stewards in your good creation. Amen.*

Ask the group: When you think of the word “stewardship,” what comes to mind? Record their responses on the newsprint or a white board.

Display the poster “Planting,” and invite the group to study the print carefully and silently. After a while, ask: What do you see in the picture? After several responses, if stewardship has not been mentioned, ask: In what ways might this picture also illustrate stewardship? How can stewardship as responsibility be seen in the picture? What might be the significance of the perimeter at the bottom? Why do you think it is rounded? Why is the human image a woman and a woman of color? Have we missed anything—what other ways are there to see this picture?

Refer to the list of definitions and ask: Having considered the print of “Planting,” what can we add to our understanding? What understandings and insights will we take with us?

Thank everyone for participating and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, Creator, for being present with us during this time together. Continue to work with us as we seek to discover what stewardship is and how we might practice it. Amen.*

3 Giving and Receiving

Leader preparation: The purpose of this simple activity is to heighten awareness of a basic meaning of stewardship, that is, giving and receiving. Giving and re-



ceiving reflect essential parts of who God is. As God gives, we receive and give back to God in joyful gratitude. The nature of our relationship with God and with one another reflects the extent to which we practice stewardship. Review Matthew 2:1–12.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 8-1/2" x 11" paper with A GIFT printed on one side

Welcome the participants, share names, and open with this or a similar prayer: *Generous God, we recognize your presence with us at this time, especially in your generous provisions for our lives. You graciously supply us with more than we need to live. Guide us now as we explore together what your generosity means in our lives. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite someone to read Matthew 2:1–11. Pose these or similar questions for discussion: What do you know about the Magi? How did the astrologers (Magi) respond when the star stopped? (See verse 2:10.) What did they do? (See verse 2:11.) What does this story suggest about the nature of God's gift of Jesus to the world? After exploring the text, invite the participants to stand and move so that each one faces someone else in the group. (If the group is odd-numbered, you will be in a pair.) Greet each other with a handshake and a verbal greeting, making sure you look into each others' eyes. Distribute a sheet of paper to one person in each pair. That person is to give the paper to the other person and say: I give you this gift, freely and with absolutely no strings attached. The one receiving the sheet of paper responds: Thank you very much. Separate from your partner with a handshake and verbal goodbye, looking into each others' eyes, and then return to your seats.

Pose these or similar questions for reflection: What was the setting? If you had not greeted each other at all, would this have lessened the meaning of the gift? Why or why not? What would the meaning of the gift be if you had found it here when you entered the room and no idea where it came from? Discuss the feelings of givers and receivers. What did it feel like to receive? To give? How did it feel to have to look into each others' eyes? How does the presence of certain emotions or power relations affect the giving and receiving of a gift? Which is easier to do—to give or to receive? Why?

Reflect briefly on the differences and similarities of God's giving and human giving: Are human beings able to give or receive unconditionally? Why or why not? What insights will you take with you from this session? Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, Generous God, for being present with us during this time together. May the insights we have gained inspire us to explore further what stewardship is and how we might practice it more faithfully. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Discerning Your Responsibilities (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The central theme of this activity presents living stewardship as a range of responsibilities we live out individually and with others. This activity is designed to help the participants reflect on this understanding of stewardship in the context of their own lives. Sometime before the group meets, complete the worksheet so that you are familiar with it.



Supplies:

- copy of "Discerning Your Responsibilities," Attachment: Activity 4
- pencils or pens

Welcome the participants, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *O Great One, who takes responsibility for sustaining life by the breath of your Spirit inspiring all of creation, thank you for your faithful presence here. Grant to us the wisdom we need to discern the responsibilities of living stewardship and so be your agents of nurture and care for the earth and all that is in it. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Distribute the worksheet "Discerning Your Responsibilities" and read the directions. After allowing time to complete it, review the worksheet item by item, inviting the participants to tell how they checked each one. What insights did they gain? Here are points to highlight: No one has responsibility for the first six items, yet these are among the most significant factors contributing to who we are. Reflecting on this can help us appreciate the grace-filled gift of human existence. It can also free us from feeling responsible for things over which we have no responsibility.

All the remaining items should receive checks in the second and third columns. The point here is to help the participants understand that our responsibilities as living stewards have both individual and communal aspects most of the time. Understanding stewardship as "taking responsibility" necessarily involves working together with others and in institutional systems extending far beyond our individual lives. Invite the participants to reflect on actual responsibilities in their lives. Ask questions such as: How do your responsibilities reflect what is important to you? If most don't, then what might you do about it? Are there responsibilities that conflict? If so, what is the nature of the conflict and how might it be resolved? Is there a responsibility that needs to be let go? Or a new one taken on?

Close with this or a similar prayer: *Great Sustainer, the One who never sleeps, thank you for this time we have had together to reflect on our responsibilities as stewards of your creation. Help us to better discern what we can do to more fully fulfill our call to be responsible stewards. We ask for your strength to do it. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

5 Tough Choices

Leader preparation: This activity is designed as an opportunity to prioritize household possessions. The discussion can move into a wider consideration about how social expectations can drive what we might think is necessary.

Supplies:

- paper and pens

Welcome the participants, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Gracious God, who freely gives to us everything we need, thank you for this opportunity to reflect on the things we have. Guide us in this time that we may learn from the deep wisdom of your mysterious presence. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to pretend that they have just been offered the dream job of their life: It has everything you ever wanted in a job and is located in a wonderful place to live. You're tremendously excited about all this and can hardly contain yourself. The only glitch is that the cost of housing in the city where the job is located is much greater than where you live now. The only place you can afford is one-third the square footage of your current living space. This means you have to get rid of two-thirds of your possessions in order to fit into your new home—not



only furniture, but also clothing, kitchenware, and other things. How would you decide what's absolutely essential for your life? Distribute paper and pens and ask the participants to make a list of the items they would keep. Note: Be sure that all meeting time is not given to the lists so that you allow plenty of time for reflection that allows the participants to share how they made their decisions.

Thank the group for their participation and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time to meet together and to reflect upon what's important to us. Help us to be free of attachments to things so that we can be more open to serving you and others. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

6 Discerning Your Fulfillment

Leader preparation: Sometime before the session, complete the worksheet to acquaint yourself with it.

Supplies:

- copies of "Deciding Your Fulfillment," Attachment: Activity 6
- pencils and erasers

Welcome the participants, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Gracious and generous God, thank you for your presence with us and for this opportunity to reflect upon and learn about living stewardship. Grant us your wisdom that we may better discern what is truly important to us that we may more faithfully serve you and one another. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Distribute the "Deciding Your Fulfillment" worksheet, read the directions, and invite the participants to complete it. After everyone is finished, ask questions such as these: How did you feel doing this exercise? What did you learn about yourself? In what ways does your everyday life reflect what you checked? How does what you checked connect you with others and with purposes beyond yourself? Reflecting on this exercise, what changes might you contemplate making to make your life more fulfilling?

Thank everyone for participating and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for life with the promise of fulfillment—for us, for other creatures, and for your earth. Guide us to find that deep sense of purpose that brings the kind of fulfillment that you desire for us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Feelings about Money (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: For this activity to work well, a reflective, nonjudgmental environment is essential. The participants need to feel comfortable and accepted. While it doesn't take a lot of preparation, it may be a good activity for a time after the participants have spent quality time together over a longer period.

Supplies: None

Welcome the participants, share names, and pray this or a similar prayer: *God, we recognize your presence with us now just as you have been present with us throughout our lives. Guide us as we remember our past and consider our present in our attitudes about money. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*



Money is a huge issue in nearly everyone's life, whether it is not having enough or having more than you need. Therefore, an important aspect of living stewardship is serving God with our money. Take a few minutes to recall memories of our childhood experiences with money. Invite the participants to think about these questions: When you were ten years old or so, what were the conditions and assumptions in your family for your receiving money? Did you earn it by doing household tasks, or did you only have to ask for it? Did you receive an allowance? Perhaps it was a combination of these? How did you feel about these conditions and assumptions—guilty? happy? confused? lucky? or . . . ? Once you had money, what were the expectations governing what you did with it? Was it yours to do whatever you wanted to with it? Were you expected to save some of it? Were you encouraged to give some of it away? How did you feel about these expectations—guilty? happy? confused? or . . . ?

Now fast forward to today. What are the conditions and assumptions for your receiving money today? Do you earn it, do you have to ask for it, or . . . ? How do you feel about the conditions and assumptions of getting money—guilty? happy? confused? or . . . ? What about the conditions and assumptions for using money in your life today? Are you a free spender or a bargain hunter? Do you give money away? If so, for what? Is it easy or difficult? Why?

If participants identified memories or feelings that affect their attitudes about money, ask them to reflect on them in the days ahead. Either invite people to talk about how this session impacts how they think about money and life, or suggest that during the next session you'll revisit these questions in light of time for reflection.

Thank everyone for coming and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for your presence that sustains and guides us in our lives. Thank you also for the life you have given us so freely and generously, that we may also live freely and generously. Guide us to do so in the days and weeks ahead. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

8 Facilities Tour

Leader preparation: The purpose of this activity is to heighten awareness about the extent to which a congregation is environmentally friendly. The activity also offers the participants an opportunity to become better acquainted with church facilities and the issues involved in using and maintaining them. In advance of this session, identify a church member who is knowledgeable about church facilities and their use to lead a tour focusing especially on what steps have (or have not) been taken to make the facilities and their use more environmentally friendly. You may want to take notes during the tour or ask a member of the group to do so.

Supplies: None

Begin with this or a similar prayer: *O Great Spirit, who has made and continues to sustain your good creation, you called us together in this time and place to learn about and reflect upon how we use what you have given to us. Enlighten our minds that we might learn; move our hearts that we might act. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Introduce the tour leader and have all introduce themselves. Tell the group that they are going on a tour of the church facilities, focusing on the use and maintenance of the facilities. At each stop during the tour, ask questions such as these: How is energy being used, wasted, or conserved in this space? Are the materials used environmentally sensitive? Is recycling of materials possible? After the tour, take a few minutes to debrief. Ask questions like these: What did you learn



that was most surprising? What would be one simple thing that the church could do right away to be friendlier to the environment? What could we do to help? What about some longer-term actions? Share the group's findings with the trustees or property committee.

Express appreciation to the tour leader. Thank the group members for their participation. Close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this opportunity to reflect upon how our congregation uses energy. Help us use what we have learned today to increase awareness and action to use your good gifts as wisely as we can. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

9 Take My Gifts

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with the hymn "Take My Gifts and Let Me Love You" (tune: Talavera Terrace), <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong5>. If possible, arrange for an accompanist.

Supplies:

- copies of the hymn "Take My Gifts and Let Me Love You" (tune: Talavera Terrace)

Welcome the participants, share names, and pray this or a similar prayer: *Generous God, you have given us all that we need and more. Grant us wisdom and courage to see ourselves in your call to share from your abundant bounty. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Ask the accompanist to play the hymn "Take My Gifts." Invite the group to sing it together. After singing, ask: How did you experience this hymn as we sang it? It's relatively new, so some of you may not be familiar with it. How did it strike you? Invite someone to read the first stanza, then ask: According to the hymn writer, Shirley Elena Murray, who or what is responsible for our gifts? What do you think she means at the end of the second line, "set me free"—free from what? to do what? In the last line, what do you think the images of bread and loaves refer to? After someone reads the second stanza, ask: In your own life, what has been the "fruit" that you have gathered? What does this mean to you? The third line ends with "flavor of the Jesus life." What is this flavor like, according to the hymn writer? How do you understand the "tang of risk and new adventure"? How do these images resonate with you—exciting, scary, something else?

After reading the third stanza ask: What gifts do you have that you have yet to utilize or skills that you are slow to sharpen? If so, what do you think is the responsible action? Are you in the place you belong? If not, what do you need to do to get there? Does anyone have anything to add—something that we haven't touched upon? Conclude by singing the hymn together again.

Thank everyone for coming and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the gift of music. May what we have learned in this session inspire us to share our gifts and skills with others so that your gracious love may be experienced by everyone. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect

So how did it go? Did most of the group participate actively? Were you able to find ways to engage the entire group, even those who tended to remain quiet? Did the discussions touch on significant issues? If so, how did that occur? How did you experience the group as you began and as you ended—did a sense of community develop? How might you tweak your leadership of future activities?

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Attachment: Activity 4

Discerning Your Responsibilities

Place a check in the column that best describes the nature of your responsibility. For some items, you may check more than one column.

	I have no responsibility for this.	I have some responsibility for this.	I share with others responsibility for this.
My genetic make-up			
My experiences before I was 2 years old			
The seasons changing			
The fact that my heart beats			
What I dream about while sleeping			
Sunshine			
Growing spiritually			
Getting enough sleep			

Attachment: Activity 4, page 2

Paying my bills			
Expressing kindness			
Recycling			
Working for justice			
Having a dinner party			
Worshiping at church			

Attachment: Activity 6

Discerning Your Fulfillment

One understanding of living stewardship is to live as we are meant to live; to be fulfilled. What does this mean to us personally? Read the list. Check only ten items that best describe what brings fulfillment to you.

- building relationships
- making lots of money
- being paid well
- being entrepreneurial
- working for something I believe in
- being an expert
- being creative
- doing something well
- knowing a little about a lot
- nurturing and caring for people
- making something
- wearing stylish clothes
- keeping a trim figure
- working out
- cooking
- celebrating holidays
- repairing something
- raising children
- teaching
- cleaning my living space
- writing
- painting
- listening to music
- playing an instrument
- attending an arts event
- reading
- going to church
- talking on the phone
- remodeling
- gardening
- cutting the grass
- shoveling snow
- going to the beach
- hiking
- sewing/knitting
- camping
- birdwatching
- hunting
- fishing
- dancing
- doing a hobby: _____
- taking walks
- swimming
- going to garage sales
- owning a pet
- traveling
- living with a life obstacle
- shopping
- solving problems
- going to a movie
- watching TV
- watching DVDs
- attending a sports event
- recycling
- contributing money
- volunteering
- singing
- throwing a party
- praying
- eating well
- other: _____

Living Stewardship



Exploration: Scripture

About this Setting

Designed for seekers and new church participants, these activities do not assume familiarity with the language or the practices of the Christian faith. Instead, through personal reflection, the life of the church, and, especially, through scripture, the activities introduce the participants to stewardship as a life principle. As the participants grapple with issues related to receiving, giving, and sharing, they are challenged to consider how they might live as stewards, both individually and in community

About this Exploration

When we hear scripture as a community, we discern its life-giving blessings and reconcile its power to generate wholeness with its history of abuse and its potential for misuse. Scripture gives us a foundational image of God that is relational and embodies differences within the whole. We hear many different voices and contexts within scripture and are invited to sit with these differences without resolving the tension. Within the context of stewardship, scripture affirms that God blesses each part of creation as necessary for the well-being of the whole. At the same time, our experience, guided by the Holy Spirit, calls us to reject an understanding of dominion as power over creation. Scripture tells us that we are made in the image of God the Creator and Source of Life and so invites us to accept the gifts God provides for the enjoyment of all and to embrace "life that is really life" rather than storing up treasures and individual possessions.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 1:26–31
1 Timothy 6:6–10**Leader Preparation**

Living Stewardship is a complex endeavor that incorporates intensely personal experiences and feelings, particular scriptural passages, traditions from Christian history, and practices of local congregations in the context of contemporary North American society. These activities are designed to foster thoughtful discussions that encourage the participants to reflect upon how their life expresses living as stewards. Developing a sense of community in the group is essential for this kind of reflective work. During times of financial crisis in both personal and national economies, the question of God's blessing becomes very serious and very personal.

The Bible has different perspectives on wealth and faithfulness. Some participants may be experiencing very serious financial difficulties, while others are quite prosperous. It may be that you also have persons with you who would fall into the government defined poverty level. Be sensitive to these realities, and encourage thoughtful and compassionate discussion. If possible, arrange the chairs so that everyone can readily see one another, and allow easy access to newsprint, white board, or easel. Affirm the participants' responses and, when possible, build on them. Trust the Holy Spirit to move in exciting and unexpected ways.

Prayer: Living God, who calls us to lead even when we may have no idea what we are doing, we know that you do. We trust

Exploring & Engaging Activities**1 Exploring Who We Are (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: This activity is a study of Genesis 1:26–31. To prepare, note its wider context. Genesis 1:26–31 describes “the sixth day” of creation. A “day” is the Hebrew poet's way of organizing the movement of God's creative energy from the most elemental, light, to the most complex, human beings, and to symbolize the fullness of creation when the “week” of creation and rest is completed. Points to emphasize include:

- What it means to be human is rooted in what it means to be created in the image of God. All human beings carry God's image, whether they know it or not. The image of God is rooted in both females and males; God's blessing and command to fill the earth and to be responsible is given to both sexes equally.
- “Let them have dominion” (v. 1:26) assumes the role for humanity in relationship to creation as, not dominators, but stewards of what God has created. “Dominion” means “be responsible for.”
- God's creation is good and, after the sixth day, “very good.” This opposes any spirituality that downplays the value of physical existence. In verse 26 the plural pronoun used by God probably refers to the divine beings composing God's heavenly council. (See also Genesis. 3:22, Job 1:6, Isaiah 6:8.) “Dominion” is not a license to exploit the earth and its creatures, but to exercise responsibility for the well-being of all. For a similar perspective, see Psalm 8:3–8.
- In Genesis 1:28 God graciously blesses; humanity does nothing to earn it. God blesses and commands both female and male. The gift of creation is full; every living being has everything it needs.
- In Genesis 1:31 “God saw” is a poetic device to place God outside of the creation. The order “evening and morning” reflects the Hebrew understanding that a day starts at sundown.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- each of the following words or phrases printed on a 3"x5" card or the back of an old business card: alter ego, appearance, build, cast, chip off the old block, copy, correspondent, counterpart, double, emblem, embodiment, example, facsimile, figure, form, guise, hallmark, icon, idea, likeness, mate, mold, notion, parallel, photograph, picture, portrait, portrayal, reflection, replica, representative, reproduction, resemblance, shape, specimen, symbol, thought, type, vision

Welcome everyone, share names if there are new folks present, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great Creator, by your word you have created and continue to create. Speak to us anew as we reflect on these words of Scripture from ancient testimony. Guide us in the way you would have us go, that we may be your image to nurture your creation for the good of all. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Ask: When you think of the word “image,” what comes to mind? After some responses, pass around the cards, asking each person to take one until all cards are distributed. Note that each card reflects an aspect of the meaning of the word “image.” Directions: “Starting with [name of person], please read one card, and then we'll pause for a moment of reflection. Then the next person will read from one card, then a pause, until we have read all the cards.” When all the cards have



you for that, and, as you have so many times before, we ask once again that you may speak to us and move among us as we participate together through these activities. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

Session Development

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

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

been read, ask: What surprises were there in the words and phrases you heard? Any word or phrase that especially struck you? How has your understanding of the word “image” deepened? (You could also allow for outspoken comments during the reading rather than only at the end.) Following this, invite someone to read Genesis 1:26–31.

Look more carefully at each verse.

Verse 26: What are some examples of how humans are images and likenesses of God? What are good and bad examples—contemporary or historic—of how we human beings have responded to God’s command to “have dominion”? What might we learn from native spiritual traditions teaching that all of life is interconnected? What do you think is important for us to understand or to do to exercise dominion more faithfully?

Verse 28: What do you make of the fact that God blesses and commands (“Be fruitful and multiply”) both water creatures and birds (v. 1:22) and human beings? What do human beings and other creatures have to do to be blessed by God? Many native spiritual traditions teach that all of life is interconnected. How does this mesh with this verse—contradictory or complementary or . . . ?

Verse 31: Why do you suppose the writer included God’s opinion (“it was very good”) about what God had created? How does understanding ourselves as being created in the image of God affect how we live? For example, about ownership? Are we thinking well about our wealth or lack thereof? About our relationship to nature and other living beings, including humans?

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, O Creator God, for meeting with us during this time. Continue your creative work with us, that we may discern more and more your will for our lives, especially as we try to live faithfully as stewards made in your image. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

2 Connecting Faith and Money

Leader preparation: Become familiar with the scripture passages.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Welcome everyone, share names if there are new folks present, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and loving God, we know that talking about money can make us squeamish. Yet, we also know that you have promised to be present with us. We trust you to lead us as we read your Word and reflect on what it means. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Begin the discussion by asking: What’s the connection between a person’s faith and money? After some responses, tell the participants that the purpose of this activity is to explore contrasting biblical understandings regarding money and to provide an opportunity to explore the implications of such understandings. Invite someone to read Proverbs 3:1–2, 9–10, and follow with this question: What does this passage assume will happen when one keeps God’s teachings and commandments (v. 2 and v. 10)? This passage from Proverbs provides a kind of paradigm for understanding the classic biblical connection between faithfulness to God and receiving reward—“years of life and abundant welfare.” The more one is faithful, the reasoning goes, the more God blesses with material “reward.” Read Genesis 24:34–35: Abraham’s servant connects God’s blessing with Abraham’s wealth. Read 1 Chronicles 29:28: King David’s blessed status when he dies. Read 2 Chronicles 1:7–12: God makes promises to bless Solomon.



Probably the greatest story about wrestling with the implications of the connection between faithfulness and material status is the story of Job. He starts out “blameless and upright” and very rich—see Job 1:1–3. Even so, Job’s righteous status is challenged as he experiences the loss of everything, a sign of God’s curse, according to the conventional understanding of the day. The story ends affirming the connection even more strongly. See Job 42:12–13.

Invite someone to read Mark 10:17–27. Use these or similar questions for discussion: What indicators suggest that the man is righteous according to conventional understanding? (See vv. 20 and 22b) Given the conventional understanding of the relationship between faithfulness and wealth, why do you suppose the man was “shocked” by Jesus’ words? (v. 22) In verse 24, Mark describes the disciples as “perplexed” by what Jesus said in verse 23. Why were they perplexed? In verse 26, Mark describes the disciples as “astounded” that wealthy people will have difficulty entering the reealm (kingdom) of God. Recalling the classic connection between blessing and wealth, why do you think Mark describes them reacting this way?

The responses of the rich man and the disciples in this story show that Jesus clearly departed from the conventional understanding that linked faithfulness to wealth. For him, wealth was not a sign of faithfulness; it was an impediment to faithfulness. Jesus reasoned that wealth may replace faith, providing a self-sufficiency that makes faith in God unnecessary. In other words, as long as one has plenty of money, one doesn’t have to trust in God. Jesus, however, makes the use of money a matter of faith.

Suggest these questions for reflection at home: How do you connect your faith and your money (a) in your mind and heart and (b) with the way you live? How would your life change if you tried to live as much as possible according to Jesus’ position about money and faith?

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of sharing and challenge. Inspire us to reflect on what we have considered in this session that we may be more faithful stewards of all that you have so graciously given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

③ What Do We Expect?

Leader preparation: This activity is designed to engage the participants’ expectations regarding what the New Testament says about money and possessions. Some of the quotations are followed by (a), (b), or (c). The passages from which these quotations are drawn are listed. Beforehand, choose the passage you want the group to read and discuss from the three listed. Of course, if there’s sufficient time and interest, you may consider more than one passage.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Welcome everyone, share names if new folks are present, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Generous and loving God, you have given us more than everything we need. Yet, sometimes we get confused about our possessions and what they mean. Guide us now as we consider what the Bible says and how it might affect our lives. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

When we consider what the Bible says about money and possessions, what do we expect? As a way to think about this, read the following excerpts from the Bible and other sources. Ask the participants to raise their hand if they think the excerpt is from the Bible.



“A penny saved is a penny earned.” Benjamin Franklin

“Money is the root of all evil.” An incomplete quotation of 1 Timothy 6:10a:
“For the love of money is the root of many kinds of evil.”

“We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.”
1 Timothy 6:7 (a)

“It is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents [people] from living freely and nobly.” Bertrand Russell

“You cannot serve God and wealth.” Matthew 6:24b/Luke 16:13b (b)

“Penny wise, pound foolish.” Robert Burton (1577–1640)

“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Luke 12:15b (c)

“Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire.” James 5:1–3a

“Goods which are not shared are not goods.” Fernando De Rojas (c. 1465–c. 1538)

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:21/
Luke 12:34

Following this quiz, ask: Which of the excerpts from the Bible surprised you? Why? What do we expect (or want) the Bible to say about money and possessions? Invite someone to read (a) 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19; (b) Matthew 6:24–33; or (c) Luke 12:13–21. Follow the reading with questions such as these: What is the main point about money and possessions? What does it say to you about how you live your life? In light of this passage, how might your attitude toward money change? And your spending patterns?

Close by thanking everyone for coming and pray this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time to consider the role of money and possessions in our lives. Continue to guide us as we grapple with how to respond faithfully as stewards of all you have given to us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Being Blessed (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Become familiar with the scripture passages.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- 8 ½" x 11" paper
- pen or pencil

Welcome everyone, exchange introductions, especially if there are new folks, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and loving God, thank you for this opportunity to reflect upon the blessings you so freely give us. As we read and reflect on your Word*



together, guide us to understand our lives more fully so that we might live more faithfully. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

Distribute paper and pens and invite the participants to make a list of a dozen or so blessings they have experienced either in the past or currently. After all have made their lists, ask those who are willing to name a blessing from their list. Allow time for sharing. Then ask: How did you determine what to put in your list? This helps us to define “blessing.” Invite the participants to work at developing a definition for blessing and to describe what it means to be blessed. After some responses, explain that the purpose of this activity is to explore what scripture means by blessing and to provide an opportunity to explore the implications of such understanding in our lives.

Scripture presents blessing basically in two ways. Invite someone to read Genesis 1:28, then ask: What did the human beings do to deserve God’s blessing? This is one meaning of blessing in the Bible: God provides for the well-being of creatures with absolutely no strings attached. This is the point Matthew Fox makes in his book *Original Blessing*. Invite someone to read Psalm 1:1–3. The word “happy” in verse 1 is one translation of the Hebrew; “blessed” is another. What does this psalm assume will happen when people “delight in the law of the Lord,” when they are happy or blessed? (See verse 3b.) The psalmist says that in all they do, they will prosper. This understanding of blessing can be seen throughout the Bible—for example, with Abraham in Genesis 24:34–35 or with Job in Job 42:12–13. These classic examples underscore the understanding of blessing as the reward for right living. A blessing is earned.

Invite the participants to review their list of blessings and ask themselves: Did I earn this one, was it given to me freely, or is it a combination of the two? How do I feel about the nature of the blessing? Do I feel better about the earned ones or the free ones? Is it difficult for me to accept the free ones? After some time for individual reflection and if there is time, ask those who are willing to share anything from their wrestling with these questions.

Thank everyone for participating and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of sharing and challenge. Grant that we may be inspired to reflect on what we have considered in this session, that we may be more faithful stewards of all that you have so graciously given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

5 Jesus as Steward

Leader preparation: Be familiar with the scripture readings in the activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- copies of “Circle the Blessings,” Attachment: Activity 5
- pens or pencils

Welcome the participants, exchange introductions, especially if there are new folks, and offer this or a similar prayer: *God, you revealed yourself in Jesus Christ. Thank you for your Word. It is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Guide us now in our time together that we might encounter you through your Word and so find peace. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Distribute a copy of the “Circle the Blessings” worksheet to each participant, read the directions at the top, and allow time for everyone to complete it. Go through each pair of words/phrases on the worksheet, asking participants which one they circled. Generally, we believe that the words and phrases in the left column



are blessings. We associate blessings with plenty and with good experiences. (If there's time, read examples of Genesis 24:34–35, Job 42:12–13, and Psalm 1:1–3.) Point out that Jesus had a radically different way of understanding what being blessed entails.

Invite someone to read Luke 6:20–26, and ask for reflection. Jesus took everything we assume are blessings and turned them upside down! All those Jesus thought of as blessed knew their need, and so were more likely to turn to God and one another. Also, these who were officially unable to share in the blessing, that is, “unrighteous” or “sinners,” were completely excluded from the religious practices of that day. You might ask whether there are persons today excluded from the church or other religious gatherings because they appear to be the opposite of blessed. Note also that Jesus actually condemned those who were satisfied because they were less likely to turn to God.

According to Jesus, stewardship does not arise from the satisfaction and security of wealth and excess; rather, we choose to give. It does not arise from our abundance. Rather, to Jesus, stewardship is practicing an awareness of insecurity and of need—ours, another's, the world's—and then seeking ways to share. By affirming our common sense of insecurity and loss, we create a community sensitive to the poor, the rejected, the mourning, and ignored—“the least of these”—and so are more likely to turn to God.

Invite the group to reflect on who we spend time with and the nature of the groups with which we affiliate, especially the church. How would they relate to Jesus' approach to stewardship? Are they satisfied or yearning for more? Do they tend to ignore needs or to fill needs?

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of sharing and challenge from the words of Jesus. Grant that we may be inspired to reflect on what we have learned in this session, so that we may be more faithful stewards of all that you have so graciously given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

⑥ Stuff and Self-Absorption

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with the scripture passages and anticipate the answers to the questions.

Supplies:

- copies of the questions for each person

Welcome participants, share names (if new folks are present), and offer this or a similar prayer: *Living God, the One in whom we live and move and have our being, we praise you for your marvelous Word that can lead us to life. We ask you now to move among us as we meet together that we may discern your desire for us and that we may decide to follow it. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite someone to read Luke 12:13–21, and then pose these or similar questions: Who and/or what was responsible for the rich man's abundant harvest? Did he do anything illegal, commit a criminal act, or exploit workers? To whom does the rich man speak and for whom does he care? What does he assume will give him “the good life”? How is his assumption challenged? How might the rich man have been “rich toward God” (v. 21)? After the discussion, point out that hoarding wealth for one's own use only—being greedy or covetous—was apparently a widespread problem in the earliest churches. Hoarding not only puts goods in the place of God, vainly trying to ensure life and security, but it is also an act of basic disregard for the needs of others. (To demonstrate that this is not a one-



time matter, and if there is time and interest, consider the following scripture passages with the group: Romans 1:29, Mark 7:22, Colossians 3:5, Ephesians 5:5, and 1 Timothy 6:10.)

Consider this: In March 2009, the Self Storage Association reported more than 52,000 storage facilities operating in the United States, or 7.4 square feet of self-storage space for every man, woman, and child in the nation. This makes it physically possible for every American to stand—all at the same time—under the total canopy of self-storage space. It appears that the rich fool of the parable would feel right at home with us here in the United States!

Distribute the sheets with the questions below. This is a highly personal issue and normally we do not like to talk about it, but invite the participants to examine their life by asking themselves these questions: What do you assume that your money and possessions give you? How might you “be on your guard against all kinds of greed”? In what activities do you engage that make you “rich toward God”? What concrete steps might you take to affirm that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”? What will you do with the insights you’ve discovered?

Conclude by thanking the participants for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the challenge of your Word. Guide us now, as we go, that your Spirit may teach us how to live the life that is really life, and to put our stuff into proper perspective, serving you and others. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Meaningful Giving (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with the script for the imagination exercise based on Mark 12:38–44.

Supplies: None

Welcome everyone, share names, especially if new folks are present, and offer this or a similar prayer: *God, we pause at this time to remember your promise to be with us no matter what. We depend on your presence now to guide us into your Word and into our lives that we may experience the fulfillment in meaningful giving. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to put their imaginations to work regarding an incident in the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the gospel according to Mark. Have them get in a comfortable position in their chair or on the floor, or wherever. Have them close their eyes and take a few deep breaths to settle in. Then lead them on this imaginative walk.

You are in the holy city of Jerusalem, approaching the temple with its massive pillars and the hustle-bustle of the faithful moving up and down the long stairs. As you take the steps to enter, look up and see the courtyard, a porchlike area with lots of activity. As you reach the top step, odors of burning fur and pungent incense waft across your face and you sneeze. What’s that? Over to one side, a gathering has formed and someone is answering questions. Drawn to the murmur of voices, you make your way closer, until you can hear his words: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widow’s houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”



Your eyes are now glued on the one who is speaking, and you watch him as he sits down and looks intently across the courtyard. What's he looking at? You look across and see about a dozen metal chests, shaped like trumpets with bells pointed upward. Squinting, you can barely read the labels. Squinting more, you can make out one that's marked "Temple Maintenance" and another "Oil for Sacrifices." Just then, several scribes in their long robes walk over to the chests, take out their bags of coins, and make their deposits. Even at a distance, you can hear the heavy coins clanging as they hit metal. Some of the scribes stand in front of the chests for a time, putting in a lot of coins, some at this one, some at that one.

Then, out of nowhere, you see an older woman wearing tattered clothes and hobbling with a limp. This woman hesitates, then approaches a chest and makes her deposit. But hers is silent. Her deposit is too small to make any noise. Suddenly, the one who was speaking springs to his feet and calls to those nearby: "Did you see what that woman did?" he asks. "This poor widow has put in more than all those others. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Those around turn to one another with wrinkled brows, as if to ask, "Huh?" You suddenly remember that you were going to meet someone in a few minutes, and so you bolt across the courtyard and scurry down the steps.

Pause for a moment of silence and then ask the participants to reenter this space. What struck you as you imagined this scene? What stood out? How did you feel? To whom did you relate more—Jesus or the listeners—when Jesus said that the widow contributed more than everyone else? Did you "get it" or say, "Huh?" What do you suppose Jesus meant by this? Recall Jesus' comments about the scribes, and note the contrast between what giving meant to them (to be seen; as a display) and what giving meant to the widow (the last of what she had; a trusting act). What conclusions can we draw from Jesus' teaching using the widow's offering as an example (giving needs to be meaningful to the giver; token—or easy—giving is not meaningful; giving for another purpose than to give is not meaningful; risk is involved, and so forth)?

Christians are called to serve God by giving of their money. Whether money is given to the church or other worthy causes, one's attitude to the giving is the most important part. A gift needs to be large enough to be meaningful, but not so large to cause anxiety. Giving reminds us of all that we have been given. Giving helps us connect with others through mutual sharing. Giving helps us to feel good. So may we "carry" this story about the widow with us and remember it the next time we are in a giving context. Remember, God wants us to give meaningfully so that we can all share in the goodness that comes from giving.

Pray together: *Generous God, thank you for this time together to reflect on what it means to give, and how we can give with meaning. Inspire us to be quick to give, remembering that widow so long ago who gave all she had. May we follow her example and give our all for you. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

8 Contented Service

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19.

Supplies:

- Bible
- 8-1/2" x 11" unlined sheet of paper
- pens or pencil



- colored markers or crayons

Welcome everyone, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and generous God, you give us much more than we can ever need. May your extravagance inspire us to be content with what you have given us so that our striving for more would be transformed into contented service. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Many years ago an advertisement for a dairy boasted “milk from contented cows.” Even today the thought is comforting. Whether or not you’re a milk drinker, it just sounds soothing, doesn’t it? Visualizing cows peacefully eating grass and chewing their cud out in a beautiful green field makes us almost believe that cows can experience contentment. What scene would show us as contented? Distribute paper, pens, and markers. Invite the participants to take a few minutes to reflect on these questions: What in your life brings contentment? What makes you feel satisfied? Draw a picture to represent that. Or, if you prefer, jot down a list.

After allowing time for everyone to draw or make lists, ask everyone to turn to 1 Timothy 6:6–8. Ask for a volunteer to read. Direct the conversation with questions such as these: What reason does the writer give for being content with food and clothing? “Food and clothing” represent basic necessities to live; is it reasonable to think that we in consumerist North American society can be content only with basic necessities? The word “contentment” comes from the Latin word meaning “to restrain.” What do you think of that? What kind of restraints might be necessary to practice a life of contentment?

Now invite someone to read 1 Timothy 6:9–10, 17–19. In our time, what are examples of people loving money? What are some results of people loving money or those “eager to be rich”? Why should rich people be told not to be haughty and not to set their hopes on wealth? How might we support one another in the practice of “contented service” for others in a society that spends billions of dollars trying to make us discontented (so we buy more things) and serve only ourselves?

In light of the discussion of 1 Timothy, review the exercise from the beginning of the activity. How might you do the exercise now? What changes might you make? Why?

Pray together: *Loving God, who desires our fulfillment, thank you for your Word of inspiration and challenge. As we ponder what we have discussed in this session in the coming days, grant that we may open ourselves more readily to being content, so that we may be in a better place to serve others. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

9 Giving and Getting

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with Luke 6:37–38. Carefully review the “pouurer-holder” activity so you’re sure what’s supposed to happen.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- large glass bowl
- 4-cup glass measuring pitcher, or large clear canister
- more than enough rolled oats to fill the container

Welcome everyone, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and generous God, you give us much more than we can ever need. May your extravagance inspire us to forgive and to give, so that we may live with generous hearts and freely give. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Have the participants find Luke 6:37–38 in their Bibles, and invite a volunteer



to read. Pose these or similar questions: If followers of Jesus are to avoid being judged or being condemned, what does Jesus command that they should do? Instead, what positive actions does Jesus command? Gospel writer Luke pairs two negative practices with two positive ones. What can we learn from this?

Invite two volunteers to assist you, one to be the Holder and the other to be the Pourer.

To Pourer: Pour enough oats to fill the container halfway.

To Holder: Push down the oats using your hands. Notice, everyone, how there's a little more room.

To Pourer: Fill the container almost to the brim.

To Holder: Shake the container. Notice, everyone, how the oats settle a bit, creating room for more oats.

To Pourer: Pour in enough oats to create a cone above the edge of the container.

To Holder: Push against the cone. If possible, make a small indent or hole in the top and add more oats. Pack in as much as you can without spilling.

To Pourer and Holder: Thank you for your help.

What we just recreated is how grain was measured in the ancient Middle East. This is the practice Jesus refers to in Luke 6:38. Look at the verse. A "good measure" is one that is fully loaded with grain. It is "pressed down, shaken together, and running over." All this grain, Jesus says, "will be put in your lap." Notice the passive voice here. A very common convention in biblical writing, this is the "divine passive." Since using the name of God directly was considered offensive, God's actions are often described in the passive voice without using God's name. In this passage, each passive voice phrase assumes God's action: you will not be judged by God; you will not be condemned by God; you will be forgiven by God; it will be given to you by God. But God's ability to do these things depends upon our actions. We play an indispensable role in our own fulfillment. It doesn't just happen to us; we partner with God to make it happen—by giving. This is part of what being made in God's image means.

Here we are with this generous measure of abundance in our lap. What do we do with it? Jesus observes: "for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Notice how countercultural Jesus' saying is. What does our culture teach us? What does Jesus say? As the church has long taught: "What we keep, we lose, and what we spend, we have." How does that change your paradigm? What difference does this make to you?

Reflect

So how did it go? Did most of the group participate actively? Were you able to find ways to engage the entire group, even those who tended to remain quiet? Did the discussions touch on significant issues? If so, how did that occur? How did you experience the group as you began and as you ended—did a sense of community develop? How might you tweak your leadership of future activities?

Remember the measure, so full of oats! That is God's generosity, freely given to us so that we may give to others. If we turn from judging and condemning and forgive, we can give generously. What are we giving from the full measure God has given us?

Pray together: Loving God, who desires our fulfillment, thank you for your Word of inspiration and challenge. In the coming days as we ponder what we have discussed, grant that we may open ourselves to give, freely give, so that through this sharing, we may receive the fulfillment you wish for us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

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Attachment: Activity 5

Circle the Blessings Worksheet

For each pair of words or phrases, circle which you think is a blessing:

wealth

poverty

having food

being hungry

laughing

weeping

being admired

being reviled

being included

being excluded

being accepted

being rejected

Living Stewardship



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Designed for seekers and new church participants, these activities do not assume familiarity with the language or the practices of the Christian faith. Instead, through personal reflection, the life of the church, and scripture, they introduce participants to stewardship as a life principle. As the participants grapple with issues related to receiving, giving, and sharing, they are challenged to consider how they might live as stewards, both individually and in community.

About this Exploration

Generational and experiential differences condition how we perceive, understand, and practice discipleship. Living as an intentional disciple of Jesus assumes being a person of faith who embraces life as a journey of discovery and discernment about who Jesus is and what it means to live as a steward of God's creation. Discipleship involves the stewardship of our whole lives even as it enables our stewardship.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Isaiah 55:1–3
Mark 10:17–22

Leader Preparation

Living Stewardship is a complex endeavor that incorporates intensely personal experiences and feelings, particular scriptural passages, traditions from Christian history, and practices of local congregations in the context of contemporary North American society. These activities are designed to foster thoughtful discussions that encourage the participants to reflect upon how their life expresses living as stewards. Developing a sense of community in the group is essential for this kind of reflective work. If possible, arrange chairs so that everyone can readily see one another and allow easy access to newsprint, white board, or easel. Affirm the participants' responses and, when possible, build on them. Trust the Holy Spirit to move in exciting and unexpected ways.

Prayer: Living God, who calls us to lead even when we may have no idea what we are doing, we know that you do. We trust you for that, and, as you have so many times before, we ask once again that you may speak to us and move among us as we participate together through these activities. For the sake of Jesus. 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 Connecting Faith and Money (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Become familiar with the scripture passages.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Welcome everyone, share names, especially if there are new folks present, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and loving God, talking about money can make us squeamish. Yet, we also know that you have promised to be present with us. We trust you to lead us as we read your Word and reflect on what it means. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to think about this question: What do you think the connection between faith and money is? (Depending on the group, you could qualify faith with Christian, but all may not know how to answer that.) In this activity you will explore contrasting biblical understandings regarding money and provide an opportunity to explore the implications of such understandings.

Invite someone to read Proverbs 3:1–2, 9–10. Pose this or a similar question: What does this passage assume will happen if one keeps God's teachings and commandments (v. 2 and v. 10)? A passage such as this provides a kind of paradigm for understanding a classic biblical connection between faithfulness to God and receiving reward, "years of life and abundant welfare." The more one is faithful, the reasoning goes, the more God blesses with material "reward." Look at some examples of how this works out:

- Read Genesis 24:34–35: Abraham's servant connects God's blessing with Abraham's wealth.
- Read 1 Chronicles 29:28: King David has blessed status when he dies.
- Read 2 Chronicles 1:7–12: God makes promises to bless Solomon.

Probably the greatest statement and the greatest example of wrestling with the implications of the connection between faithfulness and material status is the story of Job. He starts out "blameless and upright" and very rich—see Job 1:1–3. Even so, Job's righteous status is challenged as he experiences the loss of everything, a sign of God's curse, according to the conventional understanding. The story ends affirming the connection even more strongly. See Job 42:12–13.

Invite someone to read aloud Mark 10:17–27, and then pose these or similar questions: What indicators in the story suggest that the man is righteous according to conventional understanding? (See vv. 20 and 22b) Given the conventional understanding between faithfulness and wealth, why do you suppose the man was "shocked" by Jesus' words? (v. 22). In verse 24, Mark describes the disciples as "perplexed" by what Jesus said in v. 23. Why do you think they were perplexed? In verse 26, Mark describes the disciples as "astounded" that wealthy people will have difficulty entering the realm (kingdom) of God. Recalling the classic connection between blessing and wealth, why do you think Mark describes them reacting this way?

The responses of the rich man and the disciples in this story show that Jesus made a radical break from the conventional understanding linking faithfulness to wealth. For him, having wealth was not a sign of faithfulness; it was an impediment to faithfulness. Jesus reasoned that wealth provides a means of faith in itself, an illusory self-sufficiency making faith in God very difficult. In other



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.

words, as long as one has plenty of money, one doesn’t have to trust in God. Jesus’ position makes the use of money a matter of faith. Offer these questions for the participants to carry with them (or if there is time, these could be tentatively discussed during the available time):

- How do you connect faith and money (a) in your mind and heart, and (b) by what you spend your money on?
- How would your life change if you tried to live as much as possible according to Jesus’ position about money and faith?

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of sharing and challenge. Grant that we may be inspired to reflect on what we have considered in this session, that we may be more faithful stewards of all that you have so graciously given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

2 Real Food, Real Drink

Leader preparation: If possible, meet around a table and have magazines, scissors, and glue/tape lying around the table.

Supplies:

- old magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Bon Appetit*, *Country*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Gourmet*, *Sunset*
- glue sticks or tape
- poster board
- scissors
- Bible

Welcome everyone and offer this prayer: *Great and loving God, talking about what really matters to us can make us uncomfortable. Yet, we know that you have promised to be present with us no matter what. So we trust you to lead us as we encounter your Word and reflect on what it means for our lives today. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to look through the magazines for pictures that look especially delicious. Cut them out and glue/tape them on the poster board to make a collage of a great feast. Be sure to affirm everyone’s effort for the collage. Then ask the group to study the collage while you read Isaiah 55:1–3. Pose these or similar questions: What is this passage getting at? What messages do we hear that encourage us to eat food “that is not bread” (for example, junk food, fatty food) and to do work that “does not satisfy” (that is, work that is not fulfilling)? What is the meaning of the prophet’s invitation to “you that have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come and buy wine and milk without money and without price?” How do we know the difference between spiritual junk food and spiritual nourishment?

Thank everyone for coming and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of sharing and challenge. Grant that we may be inspired to reflect on what we have considered in this session, that we may be more faithful stewards of all that you have so graciously given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

3 Stewards of Time

Leader preparation: Beforehand, complete the worksheet according the directions in the activity, and make a copy of the “Time Use Worksheet,” Attachment: Activity 3.

**Supplies:**

- “Time Use Worksheet,” Attachment: Activity 3
- pens or pencils

Begin with a prayer such as: *Great and loving God, we have gathered to explore our lives and how we use the time we have. Knowing that you are here with us, we ask you to move among us and teach us what we need to learn in order to be more faithful stewards of all that you have so graciously given to us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Distribute the “Time Use Worksheet” and give these instructions: For the most recent day—or a typical day—that you did not have to work at a job, jot down the main activity you did during each hour of that 24-hour period. For example, if at 1 a.m. you were sleeping, then write “sleeping.” If you were doing five things during the 5:00 p.m. hour, then list those five things.” Then, for each hour, write and circle a number indicating the value that the activity had for you according to this scale: 1 = awful; 2 = bad; 3 = okay; 4 = good; 5 = great.

Allow time for everyone to complete the worksheet, and then pose these or similar questions: In what ways did this exercise raise your awareness? Regarding the activities you chose, did you “just do them,” or did you use a conscious process? If the former, would your activities have been different if you had been more intentional? If the latter, did your process help you to make choices that were satisfying (that is, did you rate them “good” or “great”?). As a result of this exercise, what changes might you make in the way you decide to use your time?

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of sharing and reflection about the way we use the time you have given us. Grant that we may be more conscious of the choices we make every day that we may learn how to be more faithful to our call as stewards of everything you have given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Stewards of Spending (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The purpose of this activity is to enhance participants’ consciousness about how they spend their money and what is important to them regarding giving to the church.

Supplies:

- 8-1/2” x 11” paper
- pens and/or pencils

Greet everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Wondrous and generous God, who gives us enough to live and so much more, we are reminded of your promise to be with always. Lead us now, by your Spirit, that we may become more conscious of our decisions about money. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

After distributing paper and pens/pencils, give these directions: In the middle of the paper, draw a circle. This circle represents 100 percent of your household gross income. Divide the circle into parts, like pieces of a pie, with each piece of the pie representing a rough percentage of your spending each month. No need to be exact; rough estimates are fine. Pieces need to include: housing, utilities (gas, electricity, water, sewer, and so on), phone, food, clothing, and transporta-



tion (all costs for maintaining a vehicle if you have one, such as maintenance), insurance (home, auto, medical), medical (prescriptions, doctors, dentist). Don't include taxes. We normally consider these pieces as essential to life. Include a piece for discretionary income that you choose how to spend, for example, charitable giving, gifts, entertainment, cable, (TV, Internet), hobbies, and so forth. Finally, include a piece for savings (if we do it at all!). For the discretionary piece of the pie (if there is any), make a list with the main categories in the piece (or below the circle, if there are many).

After the pie charts are complete, pose questions such as these:

- By doing this activity, what did you discover about your spending that surprised you?
- Regarding your discretionary spending, do you spend with a plan? If so, what informs your plan?
- If you tend to spend on a whim, what is most likely to inspire you to spend?
- Was church giving in your budget—or your expenditures?
- If you give money to the church, is it a very significant factor leading you to give? If you don't why not?

Thank everyone for their participation and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for being with us during this time. May the learning and sharing that we have had serve to lead us into more thoughtful and generous care of the money you have entrusted to us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

5 Stewards of Treasure

Leader preparation: Scholars agree that Jesus used the parable as a central teaching device. One fruitful way to understand a parable is to look for a central meaning. In Matthew 13:44, Jesus compares finding the kingdom, or realm, of heaven (synonymous with the realm of God) to finding a hidden treasure. Several points to keep in mind: Eastern storytelling tradition had stories about treasure, but these always associated treasure with royalty and wealth. Jesus subverts this common expectation by locating the treasure in a field simply accessible to anyone who—a surprise according to his audience's expectation—looks for it there. The subverted expectation and great joy in its fulfillment give the parable its power.

In the ancient Middle East, valuables were often kept safe by burying them in the ground. The reason the finder doesn't just take the treasure is two-fold: first, the treasure could be more easily stolen and, second, someone could question the finder's right to the treasure. Buying the field ensured both the safety of the treasure and the right to enjoy it. The point of the parable is not what is given up (selling all), but the reason for doing so—the joy of finding the treasure. The overwhelming joy of living in the realm of God brings about a radical response.

Supplies: None

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Generous and loving God, who deals with us in unexpected ways, grant that we may be open to your surprises, that we may find treasure where we don't expect it, and so find life. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

When we think of "treasure," what classifies something as a "treasure"? In other words, what are some characteristics of "treasure"? Why would we want treasure? Using either or both of the versions below, slowly read Jesus' parable from Matthew 13:44:



- “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then, in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (NRSV).
- “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then, rejoicing, goes and sells all and buys that field” (writer’s version).

Pose these or similar questions: Have you, in the past or present, had “treasure”? Were you ever called to give up a lot in order to get it or keep it? If so, what was it? Was it worth it? Why is “treasure” a vivid comparison? What suggests that the treasure Jesus has in mind is much more than, say, a bag of gold? For this parable, what do you think the point is? Is there more than one point? In light of our discussion, imagine what Jesus means by the kingdom of God. What “treasure” (physical, emotional, spiritual) do you have in your life right now? How do you use or cultivate your “treasure”? How does/might it be developed or shared with others? How does God figure into your “treasure”?

In the light of this parable and this discussion, how has your awareness of treasure changed? How might you discern where God is bringing you treasure, especially in unexpected ways? How are you looking for it?

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for this time to think about what is valuable to you and valuable to us. May the discussion we have had together inspire us to inquire further toward being faithful stewards in all that we are and do. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

6 Following Jesus

Leader preparation: For this activity to work well, create a thoughtful, meditative atmosphere. If possible, dim the lights in the meeting space, light some candles, play gentle music, provide comfortable chairs, and so forth. The goal is that such an atmosphere will make room for participants to reflect on their lives—and for the Holy Spirit to work. Turn off music before the activity starts. For each pause, wait for about 30 seconds.

Supplies:

- candles and gentle music

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Gentle God, we have come here to meet with one another and to encounter you. Thank you for your promise to be with us at all times and in all places. Most Holy Spirit, we call upon you now to minister to us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to get in a comfortable position. That could mean lying on the floor, reclining in a chair, or simply closing their eyes. Be sure that all cell phones are turned off.

- Center yourself together in this place.
- Breathe deeply and slowly. Breathe in slowly through your nose, hold it for a moment, then slowly blow the air through your lips. Repeat this several times.
- Close your eyes. (If you prefer to keep them open, look downward and focus on one point.)
- Let each question move your mind and heart with words or images that speak to you. Try not to force anything. Just let it come from deep within yourself. *(pause)*



- What are you working toward or hoping for? *(pause)*
- How are you trying to enhance your life or deepen your experiences? *(pause)*
- What are you trying to gain from life? *(pause)*
- What, if anything, are you concerned about losing? *(pause)*

Listen to these words from Luke 9:23–25: "Then [Jesus] said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. *(pause)* For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. *(pause)* What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?' " *(pause)*

Imagine walking through a huge field. The sun is shining and a gentle breeze blows the grass in ripples across the field. Then, almost out of nowhere, you see someone motioning to you. It's hard to make out at first, but he seems to be motioning to you to come. As you get closer, you see that it's Jesus calling you. "Follow me," he says. Are you able to, or does something hold you back? What do you see yourself doing in response to Jesus' call? *(pause)*

Gently invite the participants to return slowly to the room: Open your eyes, move limbs that have fallen asleep, slowly "return" to the room. *(pause)* Who is willing to share anything regarding what we just did? Any insights? Discoveries?

Read an excerpt from *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* by Alexander McCall Smith. (This is also available as an electronic book; hearing it read with an appropriate accent may add to the experience.) Since the novel's setting is Botswana, the references to "black" and "white" in this excerpt refer to the contrasting cultural orientations of African Botswanans and European expatriates, respectively. The main character, Precious Ramotswe, is contemplating retirement:

She would buy a house, or build one perhaps, and ask some of her cousins to live with her. They would grow melons on the lands and might even buy a small shop in the village; and every morning she could sit in front of her house and sniff at the wood-smoke and look forward to spending the day talking with her friends. How sorry she felt for white people, who couldn't do any of this, and who were always dashing around and worrying themselves over things that were going to happen anyway. What use was it having all that money if you could never sit still or just watch your cattle eating grass? None, in her view; none at all, and yet they did not know it. Every so often you met a white person who understood, who realized how things really were; but these people were few and far between and the other white people often treated them with suspicion.

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency by Alexander McCall Smith. New York: Anchor Books, 2002:162)

How do you respond to this reading? Does it sound good or scary or boring? Do you think she's right?

Thank everyone for attending and offer this or a similar prayer: Thanks, God, for meeting with us in this time. May you continue to stir within and among us by your Spirit, that we may discern more and more the call of Jesus and, when we do, that we may follow. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.



Sending & Serving Activities



7 Giving Up Possessions (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If possible, visit the Reba Place Web site to become familiar with that community. The final question used in the discussion of the Merton quotation is a tough one that requires participants to share some vulnerability. Prepare an example from your life to share to help “prime the pump.”

Supplies:

- copies of “Parting with Possessions,” Attachment: Activity 7
- pens and/or pencils

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and generous God, you give us all that we need, and more. In this time together, help us to better understand the role of possessions in our lives so that we may make ourselves more available to serve you and others. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Distribute copies of the “Parting with Possessions” worksheet. Invite the participants to consider: How do you decide to part with something you own? Reflect on this question, addressing the four items on the worksheet: an article of clothing, a car, a piece of furniture, and money. If an item does not apply to you, just skip it.

After everyone has had sufficient time to complete the worksheet, ask questions such as these: What did you become aware of as you completed this worksheet? How would you rate the ease of filling out the worksheet on a scale from 1 (“No sweat”) to 5 (“You’ve got to be kidding!”) Why?

Read Luke 14:33: “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Why would Jesus single out giving up possessions as the condition for following him? What are possessions especially problematic?

After some discussion, suggest that Jesus’ vision can be seen in gospel writer Luke’s characterization of the earliest churches in the Acts of the Apostles 2:43–44: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Taking Jesus’ words seriously requires social and economic arrangements to support those who have given up all their possessions. For a current example of this, see <http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org>.

For most people in mainstream society, giving up all their possessions in this way is not possible. If that is the case, how are we to understand and respond to Jesus’ words to give up all our possessions? Thomas Merton gives us some direction. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961:21), Merton wrote: “We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God.”

Read that again, slowly, to allow the words to sink and understand better what Merton is trying to say. How might we become more detached from self, not as an end in itself, but “to see and use all things in and for God”?

Thank the participants for attending and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for this time to reflect upon the meaning of possessions in our lives, and the meaning*



of your challenge to give them all up if we want to become your follower. Help us to understand this challenge in the context of our own lives, so that we may understand more fully that all we have and all we are is yours. Lead us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

8 God's Covenant with Creation

Leader preparation: Before the participants arrive, arrange seating so that all have easy access to the displayed print of "With Hoof and Squawk and Squeal and Bark . . ."

Supplies:

- poster With hoot and squawk and squeak and bark ... by Barbara Reid, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- Bibles
- masking tape

Welcome the participants and offer this or a similar prayer: *Creator of us and all that is, thanks for this opportunity to reflect upon your covenant with creation and its implications for us. Give us understanding and wisdom as we try to live into your desire for us as we seek to live as stewards in your good creation. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite everyone to find Genesis 8:13, and invite a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 8:13–19. Ask: Why does God command Noah to "bring out with you every living thing" (8:17)? Now ask everyone to turn to Genesis 9:1–3 and invite someone to read aloud this passage. Note that a similar to verse 9:1 occurs earlier in Genesis (Genesis 1:28). What might this similarity suggest?

Now, ask everyone to turn to Genesis 9:8–17 and for someone to read aloud the passage. With whom does God make a covenant? (9:8–10) What does God promise? (9:11) Display the poster "With Hoof and Squawk and Squeal and Bark . . ." and invite everyone to engage it thoughtfully and silently. Invite them to move closer to it.

After everyone has had time to study the print, ask questions such as these:

- What feelings arose as you spent time this picture?
- Most pictures of the ark show creatures entering. By contrast, what do you think the artist intends by showing creatures leaving the ark?
- Which party to God's covenant does the artist emphasize?
- Why is this significant? What else speaks to you in this picture?

Thank everyone for participating and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, Creator, for being present with us during this time together. Give us courage as we seek to live out your covenant with us and all creation. For the sake of Jesus, through whom all things were and are created. Amen.*

9 "Jesu, Jesu"

Leader preparation: Before the session arrange for someone to play an instrument to accompany the singing of the hymn. This might require the group to change locations.

You can hear the tune and see the lyrics at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSONG4>. Photocopy the readings in this activity and give them to two different volunteers before the session begins.



Supplies:

- copies of the hymn “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love” (tune: Chereponi)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPsong4>
- Bibles

Welcome the participants and pray this or a similar prayer: *Generous God, you give us all that we need and more. Grant us courage to see ourselves in your call to serve our neighbors we have from you. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite someone to read John 13:1–17, and another to read Galatians 5:13–14.

Listen to the hymn “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love.” Then sing it together. After the singing, ask:

- How did you experience this hymn as we sang it?
- How did it strike you?

Continue to explore the hymn more deeply:

- How does verse 2 describe neighbors?
- Verse 3 urges us to love the neighbors described in verse 2. What might make this especially uncomfortable or difficult to do?
- How might we overcome these difficulties?
- Verse 4 starts: “Loving puts us on our knees.” What does this mean?

After discussion, sing the hymn again.

Thank everyone for coming and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for the gift of music and for the gift of this hymn. We want to be inspired by what we learned in this session about sharing our gifts and skills with others, so that your gracious love may be experienced by everyone. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect

So how did it go? Did most of the group participate actively? Were you able to find ways to engage the entire group, even those who tended to remain quiet? Did the discussions touch on significant issues? If so, how did that occur? How did you experience the group as you began and as you ended—did a sense of community develop? How might you tweak your leadership of future activities?

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Attachment: Activity 3

Time Use Worksheet

1 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
2 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
3 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
4 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
5 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
6 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
7 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
8 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
9 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
10 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
11 a.m.	1 2 3 4 5
12 noon	1 2 3 4 5
1 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
2 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
3 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
4 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
5 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
6 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
7 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
8 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
9 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
10 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
11 p.m.	1 2 3 4 5
12 midnight	1 2 3 4 5

Description of Activity

1 = awful; 2 = bad; 3 = okay; 4 = good; 5 = great

Parting with Possessions

How do you decide to part with:

. . . an article of clothing?

. . . a car?

. . . a piece of furniture?

. . . money?

Living Stewardship



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

Designed for seekers and new church participants, these activities do not assume familiarity with the language and practice of Christian faith. The activities introduce the participants to discover stewardship as a life principle through scripture, personal reflection, and the life of the church. As the participants grapple with issues related to receiving, giving, and sharing, they are challenged to consider how they might live as stewards, both individually and in community.

About this Exploration

Our ancestors in faith have given us a rich inheritance of living stewardship. The spiritual practice of tithing is a gift that forms us as a community and provides for all even as it honors God. From tithing as joyful celebration in community among our Hebrew forebears and the “holding all things in common” of the earliest Christian churches, we see that people of faith before us were formed and challenged by God’s call—as we are today—to live generously and compassionately, sometimes at great cost. From the beginning of the church, shaped for stewardship by worship, education, fellowship, and service, as intentional disciples of Jesus, we embrace life as a journey of discovery and discernment about who Jesus is, what it means to live as stewards of God’s creation, and as workers for justice, peace, wholeness, and inclusion. Exploring this legacy can inspire us to add faithfully to the tradition through our own acts of generous and compassionate stewardship.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Deuteronomy 14:22–29
Acts 4:32–5:11

Leader Preparation

Living Stewardship is a complex endeavor that incorporates intensely personal experiences and feelings, particular scriptural passages, traditions from Christian history, and practices of local congregations in the context of contemporary North American society. These activities are designed to foster thoughtful discussions that encourage the participants to reflect upon how their life expresses living as stewards. Developing a sense of community in the group is essential for this kind of reflective work. If possible, arrange chairs so that everyone can readily see one another and allow easy access to newsprint, white board, or easel. Affirm the participants' responses and, when possible, build on them. Trust the Holy Spirit to move in exciting and unexpected ways.

Prayer: Living God, you call us to lead even when we may have no idea what we are doing; we know that you do. We trust you for that, and, as you have so many times before, we ask once again that you may speak to us and move among us as we participate together through these activities. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Eating Your Tithe (Easy Preparation)

Leadership preparation: Decide where to hold the meal called for in this activity. A church location would reflect the instruction in Deuteronomy 14:23, 25, but this may not provide the means for a fine meal (for example, with "strong drink"—see 14:26). Another option would be someone's home. If the group lacks a desire to cook, consider a catered meal. The idea is to have a gourmet-quality meal and a really good time in order to honor God. If no one in the group is a "Levite" (pastor, church musician, prayer or worship leader), recent immigrant, widow, or orphan (see v. 14:29), then the group should recruit marginalized people to fill these spots.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *God, you supply us with everything that we need and more. Thanks for the enduring value of your ancient commandments. Lead us, we pray, into a deeper understanding of your grace-filled provisions for us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Through their understanding of God as Creator, the ancient people of Israel believed that they were stewards of the land. They adopted a widely known practice of giving a tithe (literally, a tenth) or a portion of the first fruits of the harvest as a way to honor God as the source of their blessings. In later times, the tithe was paid with money as a tax used to support temple personnel.

Invite someone to read aloud Deuteronomy 14:22–29. Then pose these or similar questions: Of what is the tithe composed? Where is the tithe to be given? What's the purpose of the tithe? Under what condition may the tithe be converted into money? What guides the spending of the tithe? Where and with whom shall the tithe be enjoyed? What is the mood of such an event? Who should receive the tithe every third year? Why?

Suggest to the group a way to adopt this ancient practice. Take the first fruits of our lives and eat them in a joyous meal to honor God as the source of what sustains us. Propose that each participant will give a tithe—a tenth—of what they spend on groceries in a month as the "first fruits." If this is impossible, then give what you can. With that money, we'll cook and enjoy a meal together. Not just any meal, but a gourmet meal made of "whatever we wish" (v. 26). As a group decide on a menu and schedule a time.

Depending on the group's response, find out who would be willing to take the lead to plan this meal. Solicit participants who will follow up with the group to plan and host the meal. It's important that the community character of the event be maintained throughout.

Once the leadership for the party is established and all understand what is going on, ask for any questions or concern before closing with this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for the abundance you so freely give us. Grant that through honoring you through having a joyous meal together we may nurture grateful hearts and better understand our responsibility as stewards of your wondrous creation. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*



ing.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

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

2 Mr. Bean Goes to Church

Leadership preparation: Decide the best way for you to access the video clip, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2fpo3f6>, or order *The Best of Mr. Bean* DVD from a Web site like <http://www.amazon.com>. Or perhaps the video is available at a local video rental store.

Supplies:

- video clip “Mr. Bean Goes to Church,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/2fpo3f6> and projection availability

Welcome everyone and begin with a prayer such as: *God, you nurture us with abundant life. Thanks for the gift of humor. Through your Spirit, move among us and teach us in the way you would have us to go. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Mr. Bean is a character creation of the British comedian Rowan Atkinson. Show the 9-minute video. After viewing the video, lead a discussion asking questions such as these: Did this video touch on anything you’ve experienced attending a church service? Who did you relate to more, the regular worshiper or Mr. Bean? Near the end of the clip, why do you think the man refused to share the hymnal with Mr. Bean? How might the regular worshiper have made Mr. Bean feel more comfortable?

Usually, when the church considers stewardship, it means talking about giving money and pledging, which means making a promise to give a certain amount on a regular basis. Although an important part of stewardship is how we use our money, a more comprehensive vision understands that stewardship is about how we use all of what God has given us, including how we relate to others. The video clip didn’t show an offering being taken, yet it did show many ways that the regular worshiper could have related to Mr. Bean in a more welcoming way. How we relate to others friends, professional associates, church members, loved ones, and strangers, especially strangers—is part of what stewardship means. How might the participants greet others this week?

Thank everyone for participating. Offer this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for this time to think about the meaning of stewardship. Help us become more aware of how we use all of what you so freely give us, and respond in ways that you want for us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

3 We Are Not Our Own

Leader preparation: Become thoroughly familiar with the hymn “We Are Not Our Own” by Brian Wren (tune: Yarnnton). You can find the lyrics at <http://www.tinyurl.com/25z5eyd>. If you need an accompanist, you may need to have the meet where the instrument is located.

Supplies:

- copies of the hymn “We Are Not Our Own,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/25z5eyd>
- accompanist (optional)

Welcome the participants and pray this or a similar prayer: *Generous God, you give us all that we need and more. We ask for your insight as we reflect on our existence—how we are formed and supported in ways far beyond us. May this be a time to explore how your presence leads us to fullness of life. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Read the lyrics of the hymn, and ask the accompanist to play it. Then sing it



together. According to the hymn writer, Brian Wren, we are not our own. If we aren't, then, whose are we? List all the ways Wren describes this. How do "strangers show us who we are"? "Through a human life God finds us"—to whom is he referring? Whose human life? What does Wren suggest is our response to affirming we are not our own? What are some example of "liturgies of care"? (You may need to define "liturgy"—a prescribed form or set of forms used for Christian worship.) How might affirming that "we are not our own" help us to be a "house of welcome"? What do you think this hymn has to do with stewardship?

After the discussion, sing the hymn together again, and thank everyone for coming. Close with this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for the gift of music and for the gift of this hymn. May what we have learned in this session inspire us to affirm that we, indeed, are not alone, and that we find our lives in you, the earth, and all who have loved us and made us who we are today. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Everything Held in Common (Easy Preparation)

Leadership preparation: Since the scripture passage may be unfamiliar to most, and utterly mystifying to many, be thoroughly familiar with this activity.

Supplies:

- newsprint or white board and marker
- Bibles

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and generous God, you have indeed given us good news through Jesus Christ. Now we ask you to move among us by your Spirit, that we may more fully understand the implications of this good news, especially in ways we may never have thought of. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to reflect on this question: How do we know when God is present? Or what are signs of God's presence? Record their responses on the newsprint or white board.

Luke, who wrote the gospel that bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles, had a particular perspective on what he understood reflected the presence of God—as the claims of the gospel are lived out faithfully. Invite a volunteer to read aloud Acts 4:32–35.

After the passage is read, ask: What words or phrases does Luke use to describe the community? Affirm these responses but don't write them on newsprint or white board. After this time of sharing, redirect the participants to the beginning questions. Which of our initial responses are reflected in the passage from Acts? Affirm those that are. So we have some common ground here with Luke.

Luke insists that when God's Spirit is present, people respond so that needs are met. For him, the gospel has direct economic implications. Generosity is not an option, but an indicator of God's presence and of people responding to that presence.

Luke's writing style needs to be understood. In Acts, he exaggerates strategically in order to highlight the significance of an event. His technique is a form of hyperbole. For example, when the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles at Pentecost, Luke writes that there were "devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem" (Acts 2:5). Literally, this was impossible. What Luke means is that



the Jewish community in Jerusalem was very diverse in language and culture, his way to underscore the universality of the gospel. Another example of Luke's hyperbole is the response to Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:41: "So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added." Yet, to find a suitable baptismal site (some distance from Jerusalem for pouring or immersing) and then to baptize that many people in a day would be impossible. If we put Luke's hyperbole in contemporary language, we might say: "A ton of people joined the church that day."

Look at the text again. Luke's description of the church now begs for examples and that's exactly what Luke delivers. First, he gives us a positive example, then a negative one. Ask a volunteer to read Acts 4:36–37.

The practice of laying the money "at the apostles' feet" recognizes the authority that the apostles had in the community to distribute the money. Notice the name change that the apostles gave to Joseph. This is a common practice in the Bible. You may remember the Apostle Paul's name before his fateful journey to Damascus was Saul. A name change was a common way to mark someone's change of heart; here, "son of encouragement" was especially apt, given Joseph's deed. Now, for the negative example. Invite a volunteer to read aloud Acts 5:1–11. Pose these or similar questions: Is there any hyperbole here? What do you think Luke is trying to emphasize by using hyperbole in this way?

Why was Ananias condemned? (See Acts 5:3–4.) Since patriarchy prevailed in the wider culture at this time, it's somewhat surprising that Sapphira is also condemned, since wives were the property of their husbands. What might this suggest about the nature of the Christian community at this time? The community was marked by an egalitarian ethic (see, for example, Galatians 3:28). Also, it suggests that Sapphira was the title holder of the land since she "consented" to its sale, suggesting that she was wealthy. Why do you suppose Ananias and Sapphira were buried immediately with no funerals?

As a community, how do we stack up against the one Luke describes? We certainly don't hold everything in common, but we're probably much better at tolerating lying. Invite the participants to ponder this question in the next week: What's one step I might take to share more of my possessions with others?

Thank everyone for participating and offer a prayer similar to this: *Thanks, God, for this time together. Help us to take what we have learned and find ways to nurture our own call to be your stewards in this community and beyond. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

5 Generosity or Greed?

Leader preparation: If you cannot show the video clip, then make copies of the script: "The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA" (Gordon Gekko speaking in the film *Wall Street*).

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability, or copies of the quotation
- Bibles



Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for this opportunity to meet together. Move among us, and by your Spirit help us discern how to nurture faithful stewardship in our lives. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the participants to consider a classic virtue in Christian tradition—generosity—by considering its antithesis, greed. Show the video clip from the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Gordon Gekko, the main character, is speaking to the shareholders of a company in financial trouble. The excerpt is the last part of his speech. See <http://www.tinyurl.com/awdtff>. If this is not possible, distribute copies of the quote and read it with dramatic flair. Perhaps you have an actor in the group who could perform this. Pose these or similar questions: What makes this excerpt so disturbing? The film was released in 1987 after the “junk bond crisis” on Wall Street. In recent years, around the world, we have seen one financial crisis after another. How would you characterize the attitude of Wall Street today?

From the beginning, Christianity has taught that greed is a vice and a sin. Instead, generosity is a virtue and a practice that should characterize the Christian community. Divide into small groups and assign each of these passages to a group for reflection: Acts 2:43–47, 2 Corinthians 8:1–15, 2 Corinthians 9:6–15, and Galatians 5:22–23a.

Pose these or similar questions: Why is it important for the Christian community to shun acts of greed and to practice generosity? What does following this practice indicate? How might we enhance our practice of generosity, both as individuals and as a community?

Thank everyone for attending and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for this time to reflect on the practice of generosity, and for calling us to practice this virtue in our lives. Empower us, we pray, to resist the powers that justify greed so that we may be free to be the people who have created us to be. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

6 Resisting Advertising

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with the activity.

Supplies:

- newsprint or white board and marker
- Bibles

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *God of wonder and delight, you created us in your image to be stewards of your good creation. Show us your way to better living, that we may find freedom in doing your will. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

One challenge of practicing stewardship is discernment, the ability to see distinctions among choices. Discernment is one of the gifts of the Spirit and is vital in the life of the follower of Jesus. We need to discern what’s real and worthy of our attention so that we can resist the false and embrace the good. In a consumerist society, like most of the Western world, at least two-thirds of the economy is dependent upon consumer spending. Thus, the resources used to influence our buying are incomprehensible. By 2013, the predicted annual spending for online advertising alone will be \$42 billion.

Invite the participants to identify all the ways advertising gets through to us, to our eyes and ears. Record their responses on newsprint or a white board. Studies suggest that each year about \$10 billion is spent on advertising to children and youth (ages 12 to 17) for all types of food and beverages. Companies often use an integrated approach that combines traditional media (such as television), packag-



ing, in-store advertising, sweepstakes, and the Internet. These campaigns involve cross-promotion with a new movie or popular television program. (Source: Federal Trade Commission. "Marketing Food to Children and Adolescents: A Review of Industry Expenditures, Activities and Self-Regulation." A Report to Congress July 2008, <http://www.tinyurl.com/28hjajf>.) Examining TV advertising aimed at children and youth, a 2007 study reported that children and adolescents see up to 6,100 televised food advertisements a year. Approximately one third of the ads are for candy and snacks, a fourth are for cereal, and a tenth are for fast food. Only 5 percent are for healthy foods/beverages, such as dairy products and fruit juice. None are for fruits and vegetables. (Source: Kaiser Family Foundation. "Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising to Children in the United States." 2007, <http://www.tinyurl.com/yq3sse>.) Meanwhile, in 2009, UNICEF issued a report saying about 200 million youngsters are chronically malnourished worldwide. Think about it: Ten billion dollars spent in the USA to entice children to eat certain, mostly unhealthy foods, while 200 million children don't have enough to eat.

Christian tradition teaches that responsible stewardship requires us to challenge—and even to resist—the powers that diminish life. Jesus had just been baptized, affirmed by God for the ministry he was called to do, and immediately was driven to the wilderness for forty days without eating (Matthew 4:1–4). Famished, he was given a pitch by Satan, the advertising power of his day. Satan pointed to his needs, trying to make Jesus feel inadequate. (Trying to make us feel inadequate, by the way, is a function of all advertising.) Satan invited hungry Jesus to change a stone into bread. Jesus replied by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Invite volunteers to read aloud Isaiah 55:1–3 and Matthew 6:19–21. The huge advertising industry spends billions and billions of dollars each year trying to get us to buy things. Yet, Christian stewardship requires us to resist buying that which is harmful, useless, or excessive. How do we discern the "down side" of consumerism? How do we resist the almost ubiquitous presence of advertising in our lives?

Suggest to the participants that they try to do one thing this coming week to lessen their exposure to advertising.

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, merciful God, for the opportunity to be together and to consider matters that affect our lives. As we go, lead us in ways that will nurture us to be more faithful stewards. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Feeding the Hungry (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Learn of opportunities in your community where people can volunteer to address hunger.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- newsprint or white board and marker
- stick-on dots in various colors



Invite someone to read aloud Matthew 25:31–46, a portrayal of the last judgment. We may not think about this very often; we may even say that it's not relevant anymore; but the expectation that we should take responsibility for those neglected by society was a core teaching of Jesus. If we are going to be followers of Jesus, we need to think seriously about this passage.

Consider this: The US Department of Agriculture's annual report on Household Food Security in the U.S. revealed that in 2008, 17 million households, or 14.6 percent, were food insecure. Families had difficulty putting enough food on the table at various times during the year. This is an increase of 13 million households, or 11.1 percent, from 2007. The 2008 figures represent the highest level noted since nationally representative food security surveys were initiated in 1995. (For the result of the current study, visit <http://www.tinyurl.com/yq3sse>.)

Clearly, hunger is a problem in our society and everywhere in the world. What's especially troubling is that, according to the USDA report, hunger is getting worse. The gospel calls us to address human need, including hunger. Invite the participants to brainstorm ways to address the hunger issue. No idea is too bizarre or outlandish. Be as creative as possible. Money is no object at this point. It is okay to name strategies that are already in place either in the church, in the community, or through global agencies. List their ideas on newsprint or a white board.

When the list is complete, organize the ideas into categories, such as individual, corporate, government, social service, and so forth. Which of their ideas are already being implemented in the community? Give everyone three dots to use to vote on which ideas they would be willing to pursue either individually or as a group. You can vote for three different ideas, or use your dots all on one idea, or use two on one idea and the other one on a different idea.

If the group agrees on a particular idea, plan ways to implement that idea. Seek volunteers to organize and lead the effort.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thanks, God, for your presence with us and for reminding us of our responsibility as living stewards to serve others. Help us to make faith not just about believing, but about action. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

8 Stepping Up

Leader preparation: Skim the articles at the Internet addresses listed on the information sheet "They Stepped Up." The group will need Internet access to do this activity. For those without Internet access, print and photocopy the material.

Supplies:

- "They Stepped Up," Attachment: Activity 8

Over the centuries many people have lived out the Christian tradition through service to others. They became living stewards: saw a need, shared their gifts and skills, and thereby brought God's love to the world. This activity has two parts. The first part involves research about someone who stepped up and met a need. After time for research, meet again to share the results. Distribute the information sheet and make the assignment to visit one of the addresses, find a person's name, and answer three questions:

- What need did the person meet?
- How did he or she meet it?
- What did you learn? or How did their actions speak to you?



Invite each person or small groups of persons to choose a name and let all know which one you choose. Cover as many different persons as possible. If there is time in the session, do the research now. If not, have everyone bring their reports to the next session. These people stepped up to respond to God's call to nurture others through using their gifts and skills. What are you being called to step up to?

9 "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending"

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with the hymn "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending" (tune: Austrian Hymn; alternate tune: Hyfrydol). You can hear the tune at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong6>, and see the lyrics at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong6a>.

Before the session, arrange for someone to accompany the singing of the hymn.

Supplies:

- copies of the hymn "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending"; you can hear the tune at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong6>, and see the lyrics at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong6a>

Welcome the participants and pray this or a similar prayer: *Generous God, you give us all that we need and more. Grant us wisdom and courage to see ourselves in your call to share with others from your abundant bounty. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Read the lyrics and listen to the tune of the hymn. Then sing it together.

Ask someone to read aloud the first stanza and then ask questions such as these: According to the hymn writer, Robert Edwards, who or what is responsible for our gifts and what is our human response? (v. 1) What are some of the ways Edwards suggests that God calls us to live as servant-stewards? (vs. 2–3)

Ask another person to read aloud the third stanza and follow up with questions such as these: What does the hymn say we are called to do with "treasure" (aka "money")? What are we called to heal, teach, and reclaim? Why?

Ask another person to read aloud the fourth stanza: How does our giving "light our pilgrim way"? What keeps us in "the night of anxiety"? What frees us "into generous day"?

Does anyone have anything to add; something that we haven't touched upon? Sing the hymn together another time.

Reflect

So how did it go? Did most of the group participate actively? Were you able to find ways to engage the entire group, even those who tended to remain quiet? Did the discussions touch on significant issues? If so, how did that occur? How did you experience the group as you began and as you ended—did a sense of community develop? How might you tweak your leadership of future activities?

Thank everyone for coming and close with this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, O God, for the gift of music and for the gift of this hymn. May what we have learned in this session inspire us to share our gifts and skills with others so that your gracious love may be experienced by everyone. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

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Attachment: Activity 8

They Stepped Up

Find the article listed by the Internet link. Read the article, find the name (listed in order of appearance) and then answer these questions:

- What need did they meet?
- How did they meet it?
- What did you learn? How did their actions speak to you?

<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/american-indians-missions.html>

- Tibbitts and Frazier families
- Harold and Eva Case
- Robert Fox (two in the article with this name)
- John Stacy
- Mitchell Whiterabbit

<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html>

- Lewis Tappan
- James Pennington
- Henry Garnet
- Mary Ann Cary
- Mary Smith Peake
- Edmonia Highgate
- Thomas Tucker
- Barnabas Root
- Adam Spence & George White

<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/the-deaconess-movement-in.html>

- Theodore Fliedner
- Gertrude Reichard

<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/sho-chiku-bai.html>

- Neesima Jo (Joseph Hardy Neesima)
- Shinjiro Okubo
- Joseph Fukushima
- George Aki
- Galen Fischer and Ruth Kingman

Living Stewardship



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Setting

Designed for seekers and new church participants, these activities do not assume familiarity with the language or the practices of the Christian faith. Instead, through scripture, personal reflection, and the life of the church, they introduce the participants to stewardship as a life principle. As the participants grapple with issues related to receiving, giving, and sharing, they are challenged to consider how they might live as stewards, both individually and in community.

About this Exploration

We live in relationship with God and one another in a world created and sustained by God. The scriptures help us discover how God intends us to live as living stewards within a grateful community that goes beyond rituals to serve the needs and celebrate the potentials of our neighbors near and far with extravagant grace and generosity.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Isaiah 1:10–17
Mark 14:3–9

Leader Preparation

Living Stewardship is a complex endeavor that incorporates intensely personal experiences and feelings, particular scriptural passages, traditions from Christian history, and practices of local congregations in the context of contemporary North American society. These activities are designed to foster thoughtful discussions that encourage the participants to reflect upon how their life expresses living as stewards. Developing a sense of community in the group is essential for this kind of reflective work. If possible, arrange chairs so that everyone can readily see one another and allow easy access to newsprint, white board, or easel. Affirm the participants' responses and, when possible, build on them. Trust the Holy Spirit to move in exciting and unexpected ways.

Prayer: Living God, you call us to lead even when we may have no idea what we are doing; we know that you do. We trust you for that, and, as you have so many times before, we ask once again that you may speak to us and move among us as we participate together through these activities. For the sake of Jesus. 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 Stewards of Justice (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Study all the scripture passages cited, even those not used in the activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles

In ancient Judaism, the relationship between priests and prophets was always tenuous. Priestly concern for ritual purity and the maintenance of the status quo often came at the expense of justice. Prophets arose to rebuke priestly (and kingly) excesses, calling the people to repent by doing acts of justice. The historic Isaiah, responsible for chapters 1–39, prophesied to Judah (the Southern Kingdom, then divided from Israel, the Northern Kingdom) from about 742 to 701 BCE. In the tradition of other biblical prophets, Isaiah attacks Judah's complacent neglect of social justice as a clear indicator of Judah's troubled relationship with God. With this background turn to Isaiah 1:10. Invite a volunteer to read verses 10–17.

Notes on the reading:

v. 10: To Isaiah and other prophets (for example, see Jeremiah 23:14, Ezekiel 16:46ff.), Sodom and Gomorrah represent a refusal to practice justice, especially hospitality to strangers, first described in Genesis 18:16–19:28.

vv. 14–15: Human activities—weariness from burdens, closing eyes, not listening—applied to God is a common communication technique in Hebrew tradition.

vv. 14–17: For very similar imagery, see Amos 5:21–24 (Amos was a contemporary of Isaiah).

v. 17: Isaiah calls the people to accountability to "practice what they preached"—the Law; see Exodus 22:21–24. Other prophets condemned the peoples' neglect of orphans and widows—see Jeremiah 7:1–7; Zechariah 7:8–12; Malachi 3:5.

According to Isaiah, what's the problem? How has God responded to the peoples' lack of practicing social justice? (See vv. 14–15.) How does God's refusal to receive the peoples' worship (vv. 14–15) affect your understanding of God? Of worship? Who are the "oppressed, orphan, and widow" in our society today? How might we "rescue, defend, and plead" for them?

Thank everyone for attending and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for being with us in this time of exploring the connection between stewardship and justice. In your deep mercy continue to guide us in ways that are just and right so that we may be more and more the people you created us to be. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

2 Emerging Creation

Leader preparation: Display the poster.

Supplies:

- poster" Orion Nebula by Stocktrek Images, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters6>

Invite the participants to study the poster of outer space. Open yourselves to letting it speak to you. After a few moments, pose these or similar questions: What



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.

does the picture evoke within you? What stands out to you? Did you notice the complete color spectrum—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet? This is the same spectrum that we see when sunlight hits a piece of glass just right.

This is a picture of the Orion Nebula. The Orion Nebula is a cloud of gas and dust located south of Orion’s Belt. It is one of the brightest nebulae, and is visible to the naked eye in the night sky. The closest region of massive star formation to Earth, the nebula is located about 1,350 light years from Earth and is estimated to be 24 light years across.

The Orion Nebula is one of the most photographed and intensely studied celestial features in the night sky. It has revealed much about the process of how stars and planetary systems are formed from collapsing clouds of gas and dust. It is a “stellar nursery” where approximately 700 stars in various stages are being born. The youngest stars in the Orion Nebula are thought to be less than 300,000 years old, with the brightest of these being perhaps only 10,000 years in age. This is the current stage of evolution of the nebula, with additional stars still forming from the collapsing molecular cloud. Some of these collapsing stars can be particularly massive, emitting large quantities of ionizing ultraviolet radiation contributing to the dazzling colors seen in photographs. Collapsing stars are the emergence of new creation throughout the universe.

Looking into the heavens above us has long been a source of inspiration and discovery. Reflecting on our human role in creation, an ancient Hebrew poet muses to God:

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands you have put all things under their feet . . .

—(Psalm 8:3–6)

Recently, Michael Dowd writes of a different way to understand our connection to the stars:

Ancestral stars are part of our genealogy. We can now know and feel a familial bond to the heavens. Every atom in our bodies, other than hydrogen, was forged in the fiery belly of a star that lived and died and recycled itself back to the galaxy before our own star, the Sun, was born. . . . We are made of stardust! We can trust this fact in the same way that we know the Earth is a planet that revolves around the Sun.

—*Thank God for Evolution* by Michael Dowd (New York: Viking, 2008: 89).

How does affirming our divine role in creation, given by the psalmist, and our organic connection to the stars, given by Michael Dowd, inform and inspire us as stewards?

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Amazing and awesome God, thank you for this opportunity to reflect upon your creation and our role in it. Help us to continue this reflection, seeing beauty and wonder in all the many places around us, so that we may give you thanks and praise all the days of our lives. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*



3 Stewardship Gallery

Leader preparation: Having the widest variety of supplies available will enhance this activity. You will need an ample workspace for participants to spread out. Arrange ahead of time for a site where the “Stewardship Gallery” will be displayed. Before displaying, you may want to ask the pastor if the gallery could be incorporated into a worship service as part of a processional and displayed, at least temporarily, in the sanctuary. Before the session begins string twine across the open space of the meeting room

Supplies:

- old magazines, preferably ones with lots of pictures
- blank paper (various sizes preferred, but not necessary)
- paints and colored markers
- pencils and pens (colored if possible)
- scissors
- tape
- glue sticks
- twine or heavy string several feet long

Invite the participants to make a “Stewardship Gallery” to recognize and celebrate the many different ways we can practice stewardship in our world. This includes not only distinct acts, such as helping someone, cleaning up a stream, or contributing money, but it also includes practices such as appreciating the beauty of creation, gratitude for our lives, being together in community. Anything we do as human beings that nurtures, develops, recognizes, or enjoys life is part of practicing stewardship.

A “Stewardship Gallery” is a wide variety of images, drawings, paintings—but no words—portraying stewardship. Find or create images of stewardship. Once you have an image, tape it to the twine that is strung across the room. If the finished “Gallery” is to be displayed on a wall, make sure that all the images face the same way. If it is to be hung across a room or hallway, images should be facing both ways. Use all the supplies to find or make images: pictures from magazines, drawing or painting on the paper, and so on. Let your creative juices flow! Find or make as many images as you can. The more the better.

After the participants have had sufficient time to make the “Stewardship Gallery,” call the group together and review the gallery together from one end to the other, affirming and celebrating what has been created. Thank everyone for coming, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, Creator, for being here with us and sharing with us your amazing gift of creativity. Bless us as we go on our way that we may continue to be your stewards in ways that we have yet to imagine. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Give Something Away (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This short activity would be ideally used in tandem with another activity on a related topic.

Supplies: None



Invite the participants to reflect for a moment about the stuff they have and the things they own. A central idea of being stewards is that nothing we have is truly ours; it is loaned to us. As 1 Timothy 6:7 reminds us, “We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.” Following Jesus’ observation that life does not consist of having lots of stuff (for example, see Luke 12:15), suggest to the participants that they give away something. In the next session have them report on what they decided to give away, to whom they gave it, and the experience they went through. Perhaps the participants would like to journal or blog what they learned about themselves and about being a steward.

Thank everyone for coming and pray this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for being with us. We ask for your guidance as we try to figure out what we can give away. Teach us what we need to learn from this simple exercise. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

5 Being Rich

Leader preparation: Get a copy of Bryan Sirchio’s song “If You Eat Each Day.” Here are two ways to find it:

- Download the song or the CD *Justice and Love* from <http://www.sirchio.com>
- Purchase the CD *Justice and Love* from the same site (allow several days for delivery)

Display the second, longer quotation from Sirchio’s song.

Supplies:

- newsprint or white board and marker
- a way to play the song

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great Creator, thank you for the creativity of music—how it challenges our hearts and stirs our souls. Inspire us as we gather that we may share in your Spirit of love and justice. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect for a moment by completing this sentence: “Being rich is . . .” After about a minute or so, give these instructions: Turn to your neighbor and with a partner complete the sentence in a way that you both can live with. After several minutes, ask each pair to report. Write each completed sentence on the newsprint or whiteboard. After each pair has reported, indicate that these sentences will be revisited soon.

Bryan Sirchio is an award-winning singer-songwriter from Madison, Wisconsin. After pastoring a congregation in the United Church of Christ for a few years, he discerned that his true calling was to write and perform Christian music. He has done that ever since. Listen to one of his songs that gives one definition of “being rich.” Play “If You Eat Each Day” from Bryan Sirchio’s CD *Justice and Love*. Sirchio writes: “Sometimes it gets so hazy in this land of I consume therefore I am.” What is he getting at? How does the Haitian man define “being rich”?

Display the following stanza:

‘Cause if it’s true as we often say that wealth is relative
It just might take the dying poor in a place like Port au Prince
To help us see this relativity from God’s point of view
To cut through our first world denial with gospel Truth.

What do you think Sirchio is getting at about “God’s point of view” and “first world denial”?



Direct the group's attention to their earlier completed sentences and ask: Did "eating each day" make our list? If it did, you may ask how the person who suggested it came to this awareness. If it did not, then asks questions such as these: Why do you suppose none of us thought of "eating each day" as a definition for being rich? How does this awareness change the way you think of yourself and of what your responsibilities are as a steward on behalf of God? What does it suggest about our efforts to share what we have with others?

Thank everyone for participating and offering this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of reflecting on what being rich means, and how our understanding can affect how we live. Continue to challenge us that we may grow more and more into the image of the one who calls us to live, even Jesus Christ. Amen.*

⑥ Enjoy or Change or . . . ?

Leader preparation: This activity can be easily expanded if the participants decide to do "an act of enjoyment" and an "an act of change" together, according to the interest, availability, creativity, and energy level of the group.

Supplies:

- newsprint or white board and marker
- masking tape

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *Gracious and merciful God, you created a beautiful and wonderful world. As we meet together, lead us to discern our responsibilities, as your stewards, to enjoy the world and to change it. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Read from the *Upanishads*, a Hindu sacred text: "Gain a mastery over your waking state. Enjoy your world. This is the first step" (Mandukya Upanishad, 1–3). Then read "I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (Ecclesiastes 3:12–13). Ask: How do we enjoy ourselves? What do you do to enjoy the world? List the responses on the newsprint.

Then read a statement from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Ask: How do we change the world? What are some examples of people or organizations making change happen? Record those responses on a separate sheet of newsprint.

You now have two lists: one giving examples of enjoying the world and the other giving examples of changing the world. Keep these two lists in mind and read a fourth quotation from E. B. White: "If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." Ask: How should we deal with this difficulty? How do we affirm, at the same time, both of our lists?

In the coming week, challenge the group to do one thing to enjoy the world and another thing to help change it. Pay special attention to your process—how did you decide what to do? Also, try to note your feelings at various points. In the next session allow time to hear what was done and what was learned.

Thank everyone for coming and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for giving us the desire to enjoy the world and the desire to change it. Help us as we try to carry out these desires in the rough and tumble of our lives. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*



Sending & Serving Activities



7 Incredible Extravagance (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: These notes on the passage might be helpful:

v. 14:1—The setting for this story is right before the Passover, a Jewish festival commemorating the angel of death “passing over” Jewish households in Egypt. Part of the Passover celebration involves giving money to the poor.

v. 3—Both alabaster jars and nard, imported from India, were expensive. That the woman broke the jar underscores the extravagant nature of her gift and suggests burial, since jars used to apply burial oils were usually broken and left in the tomb. Anointing was also done in Jewish healing rituals and enthronement ceremonies.

v. 4—The criticism of the woman’s act is consistent with Jesus’ identification with the poor and the Passover practice of giving alms.

v. 5—Since a denarius (singular of denarii) was the usual daily wage for a laborer, 300 denarii would be almost a year’s wages.

v. 7—Has sometimes been used to justify ignoring the poor, but the second part of the verse—“you can show kindness to them whenever you wish”—advocates just the opposite.

v. 8—Jesus makes the connection between anointing and burial explicit.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *O God who overflows our lives with extravagant blessing, thank you for this opportunity to reflect upon your Word. Move among us, inspiring us to faithful stewardship, as we seek your will together. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Invite the group to reflect for a moment about extravagance. When are we most likely to do something extravagant? What does extravagance signify? When a situation would normally suggest an extravagant act, what might keep us from being extravagant? Invite the participants to turn to Mark 14:3–9 and invite someone to read this passage. Why do you suppose the woman anointed Jesus’ head with such expensive ointment? Was the criticism of her act fair? Who do you identify with in the story? Why do you suppose Jesus defends the woman?

Note that the anonymous woman’s extravagance was an act of great courage. She risked being criticized and misunderstood because her act contradicts a central commitment of Jesus—the well-being of the poor. Her extravagant act was her response to what Jesus meant to her. At that moment, she recognized Jesus’ significance more than anyone else did. Like the woman, may we be extravagant toward those who mean a lot to us, especially to those who are outside our family. Who are those persons? How might we show extravagance toward them? How can we be as extravagant toward Jesus as this woman was?

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, Extravagant One, for this time to learn of one person’s extravagant gesture so long ago.*



May her example inspire us to be extravagant stewards of all you have given us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

8 Transformed through Service

Leader preparation: Become thoroughly familiar with the print “The Moorish Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus” by reviewing the questions about it in the activity. Display the poster before the session begins.

Find the poem “The Servant-Girl at Emmaus” in the book *Breathing the Water* (New Directions Publishing, 1987), <http://www.tinyurl.com/28juwt2>. Be familiar enough with the poem to be able to read it meaningfully.

Supplies:

- poster The Moorish Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- Bible
- a copy of the poem “The Servant-Girl at Emmaus,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/28xulvu>

Welcome everyone, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Faithful One, thank you for your presence with us no matter where we are and no matter what we’re doing. May we open ourselves to your presence wherever we are and whatever we are doing. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Refer to the poster entitled “The Moorish Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus” by the Spanish artist Diego Velazquez, which he painted in about 1618. Read Luke 24:13–35. Explain that the passage takes place just hours after the women discovered that Jesus was not in the tomb. Study the painting for a few minutes, silently and meditatively. What do you see? What is happening? What do you think the artist is trying to communicate? After a few moments, ask questions such as these:

- Did you notice the figures in the next room—who do you think they are? Why are they included in the painting?
- How does the artist use light in the painting, and what do you think it communicates?
- Could the artist be suggesting Jesus as the light that transforms the maid’s way of being or affirms her and her work?
- In addition to being in the next room, how else does the maid represent a marginalized status?
- The maid appears to be deep in thought. What do you think she’s thinking about?

The poet Denise Levertov has written “The Servant-Girl at Emmaus (A Painting by Velazquez)” as her reflection about what the maid is thinking. Read the poem slowly and thoughtfully.

Ask: How do Levertov’s words strike you? Do they fit with your sense of the painting? Do they capture what the artist was trying to say?

The simple maid’s job was serving. Through her mundane serving, she quite unexpectedly discovered something much greater. The words of the One in the next room became light and life to her. Her life was transformed. In living stewardship, we too can be transformed, often in the everyday, in unexpected ways. As we go out to serve, may we be open to the transforming presence of God, who goes with us so that we, like the kitchen maid, may be also transformed.



Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *For all the many ways you surprise us by your presence, God, we give you thanks. Help us to be open to you as we seek to serve others, that we may find the life of fulfillment and meaning that you desire for us. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

9 Coffee Stewardship

Leader preparation: Coffee is available to everyone, but many don't realize its significance in the world's economy as well as its impact on the lives of persons and nations. If you are not already using it, consider brewing Fair Trade coffee so that all coffee drinkers can have a cup.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access and projection capability
- video "Fair Trade—The Story" at <http://www.tinyurl.com/2cfltrx>
- copies of the "Price Tag—Cost Tag" available at <http://www.tinyurl.com/25zdqga>

Ask: How many coffee or tea drinkers are in the group? Have you ever thought about what goes into your morning cup of coffee, what costs make that cup available to you? For those of you who don't drink coffee or tea, please be patient. As the second biggest commodity traded on the New York Board of Trade, coffee affects all our lives—even if we don't drink it.

Distribute copies of "Price Tag-Cost Tag" and walk through the steps that determine the real cost of a cup of coffee. After completing that journey, ask: What should we do? Let people share their thoughts and, then, if no one brings it up, share about Fair Trade: The Fair Trade movement is gaining momentum worldwide. Churches have been one of the reasons for this growth. Show the video that describes the basic idea behind Fair Trade and how it works.

More information is available at <http://www.transfairusa.org>. Fair Trade may be a solution as it makes sense in every way: environmentally, socially, economically, and great taste to boot! Even so the price is a barrier that can prevent people from buying Fair Trade coffee. At the grocery store, Fair Trade coffee is much more expensive than, for example, Folgers. By reviewing what goes into the "Cost Tag" for coffee, we know why this price difference exists. The less expensive cup of Folgers has been subsidized by the environment and workers. Most of us were socialized to buy, when given a choice, the least expensive item. We weren't taught to consider the cost to the environment or the burden on workers that may be hidden in that lowest price. Buying Fair Trade coffee requires that we change this way of buying. For some, this change can present quite an emotional hurdle.

Reflect

So how did it go? Did most of the group participate actively? Were you able to find ways to engage the entire group, even those who tended to remain quiet? Did the discussions touch on significant issues? If so, how did that occur? How did you experience the group as you began and as you ended—did a sense of community develop? How might you tweak your leadership of future activities?

What can we do to promote Fair Trade? What about this church? Does anyone know if this church buys Fair Trade coffee? If not, or if no one knows, asks for volunteers to follow up with the church board or individual responsible for coffee purchasing and urge them to buy Fair Trade coffee.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time to reflect upon our purchasing practices. In the days and weeks ahead, help us to be open to new ways of thinking and new ways of doing, that your creation may more fully realize the purposes you intend. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

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Living Stewardship



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Setting

Designed for seekers and new church participants, these activities do not assume familiarity with the language or the practices of the Christian faith. Instead, through scripture, personal reflection, and the life of the church, they introduce the participants to stewardship as a life principle. As the participants grapple with issues related to receiving, giving, and sharing, they are challenged to consider how they might live as stewards, both individually and in community.

About this Exploration

As we move into the future, a clear vision of where we are headed emerges out of our understanding of stewardship. This growing understanding will be enhanced as we consider far-ranging questions like: What kind of persons do we want to be? To what purpose do devote our lives? What are our core values and beliefs? That vision will also benefit by wrestling with more immediate questions such as: What choices and decisions are we making every day in our use of the money, time, talents and abilities, the environment, and other resources that have been entrusted to our care? Living stewardship comes down to individuals and the communities of which they are a part. It also involves acting in new ways; growing out of our reflections on how we are living our lives and the journey we are on; discerning the messages that we've received throughout our lives from culture, family, and God; experiencing ourselves in community; and deciding our next explorations.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
1 Chronicles 29:1–19
Revelation 21:10;
21:22–22:5

Leader Preparation

Living Stewardship is a complex endeavor that incorporates intensely personal experiences and feelings, particular scriptural passages, traditions from Christian history, and practices of local congregations in the context of contemporary North American society. These activities are designed to foster thoughtful discussions that encourage the participants to reflect upon how their life expresses living as stewards. Developing a sense of community in the group is essential for this kind of reflective work. If possible, arrange chairs so that everyone can readily see one another, and allow easy access to newsprint, white board, or easel. Affirm the participants' responses and, when possible, build on them. Trust the Holy Spirit to move in exciting and unexpected ways.

Prayer: Living God, you call us to lead even when we may have no idea what we are doing; we know that you do. We trust you for that, and, as you have so many times before, we ask once again that you may speak to us and move among us as we participate together through these activities. For the sake of Jesus. 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 Funding a Future (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be thoroughly familiar with 1 Chronicles 29:1–19.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Provide background for the story of King David's last actions as king. The Bible records David's exploits in 1 and 2 Samuel and, in a more polished version, 1 Chronicles. David rose from being a humble shepherd to become a military conqueror, unifier of all Israel, and king for forty years. He slew the Philistine Goliath, committed adultery with Bathsheba, and had her husband Uriah killed so he could marry her. He was a musician, dancer, and author of a few of the Psalms. David moved the capital to Jerusalem, restored the Ark of the Covenant there, and anticipated the construction of a glorious temple, which is the topic of the passage we are going to read now.

Ask for a different person to read aloud each of four parts of the story from 1 Chronicles 29: verses 1–5, verses 6–9, verses 10–13, verses 14–19.

Pose these or similar questions:

- Is David being stingy or generous in his support for the building of a temple (verses 2–5a)?
- After describing his donation, what challenge does David give to the people (verse 5b)?
- How do the people respond to David's challenge (verses 6–9)?
- How does everyone perceive the gifts (verses 12,16)?
- What is the basis of the joy expressed by the people (verse 9)?

Note that this account is probably idealized. Even so, how does it contrast with our contemporary views about giving in terms of our perceptions of who the money belongs to? Getting an immediate return for gifts (for example, did those people get a coffee mug or CD of David's greatest hits after they gave)? Contributing to the future of what is important to us? The level of generosity in giving? The experience of joy in giving? Close this discussion with this question for reflection: What future are you funding? Your own? Your children's? God's?

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time to reflect on your Word, for it is indeed a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. Grant us courage in the days ahead to reflect upon what we have learned so that we may be responsible givers to ensure a future full of hope and promise. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

② Teaching a Future

Leader preparation: Study the print "The Banjo Lesson."

Supplies:

- poster: The Banjo Lesson by Henry Ossawa Tanner, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters4>

Invite the participants to study the poster quietly and meditatively. After a few minutes, ask questions such as these: Describe the setting of the painting. How



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.

does the painting feel? How does the composition of, and elements in, the painting suggest strength and dignity? What is the significance of the action?

Read this analysis:

At the time “The Banjo Lesson” was painted, 1893, most American artists painted African-American subjects either as gross caricatures or as sentimental poor folk. The banjo had become a symbol of ridicule, and caricatures of banal, smiling African Americans strumming the instrument were commonplace. But the African-American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner observed: “Many of the artists who have represented Negro life have seen only the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and appreciation for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior.” With “The Banjo Lesson” Tanner subverted the stereotype, portraying an African-American man with dignity and banjo-playing as a skillful endeavor. If popular nineteenth-century imagery of the African-American male made him a buffoon, then Tanner in “The Banjo Lesson” recreated him in the role of skilled musician, elder, and sage. “The Banjo Lesson” is about nurturing the future—sharing knowledge and passing on wisdom. It is about subverting stereotypes to create a future full of hope and promise.”

Source: *Rings: Five Passions in World Art*, J. Carter Brown and Michael Edward Shapiro, eds. Harry N. Abrams, publisher, 1960

Pose this question for further reflection: What stereotypes do we cultivate that need to be subverted by creating different portrayals? How do we begin? And what do these questions have to do with stewardship?

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time to reflect on a truly marvelous work of art and to learn from the genius of Henry O. Tanner. Help us be ready to resist demeaning images of ourselves and of others, and give us the courage to build truthful, living relationships instead. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

③ Feasting a Future

Leader preparation: Read Luke 14 for the context of the parable.

Supplies:

- newsprint or white board and marker
- Bibles

What is the difference between an ordinary meal and a feast? What makes a feast a feast? Record the responses on newsprint or a white board. In the Bible lots of significant things happen around meals. Perhaps more than anywhere in the Bible, the gospels show this tradition in the life and ministry of Jesus. Besides being a time of enjoying food and fellowship, a meal can also be a time for considering important matters. For example, in Italian culture, the appropriate place to discuss important family matters is around the table.

Introduce one such situation in Luke’s portrayal of Jesus. The setting is a Sabbath dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees (Luke 14:1). Since arriving, Jesus has cured someone (Luke 14:2–6), made an observation about how the guests chose places of honor around the table (Luke 14:7–11), and given disturbing advice to the one who had invited him (Luke 14:12–14). Upon hearing this, one of the dinner guests exclaims: “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15). Not your typical dinner party!



The stage is now set for Jesus to tell a parable about what the kingdom of God is like—in other words, what life is like when God’s desires for creation are fully realized. A parable is a simple story meant to illustrate a single truth. Telling parables was one of the key techniques Jesus used to teach. Invite a volunteer to read aloud Luke 14:16–24.

After the passage has been read, ask questions such as these: Why did the king get angry? What did the king do? Instead of emphasizing those who did enjoy the dinner, Luke emphasizes those who made excuses and did not attend. How might this speak to us today? Simple excuses, such as “I’m so busy” or “I don’t really understand this stuff” are still effective ways to keep us from experiencing God’s generosity. But God gives a way to anyone open to saying “yes” to God’s invitation. A simple excuse or a simple “yes”—which will it be for us?

Stewardship is usually associated with giving—money, time, or talent—to activities associated with God’s will. But this parable teaches that stewardship is also about receiving God’s extravagant grace. When we open ourselves to the receiving part of stewardship, we allow God to fill us, so that we have something to share with the world. Part of the reason some people resist the notion of stewardship is because they have never learned to receive. Receiving is as basic in stewardship as giving. In the coming days ask yourself: How am I opening myself to receiving God’s extravagance?

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Generous God, thank you for the stories of old that continue to inspire us today. Teach us how to open ourselves to receive your gracious provisions so that we may be your stewards in the coming days and weeks. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 A Steward’s Epitaph (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity calls for everyone to write an epitaph. Write yours before this session begins. Think about setting up your meeting space with Halloween decorations or “over the hill” decorations to set the mood.

Supplies:

- 8-1/2” x 11” paper
- pens and/or pencils

An epitaph is the short inscription on a gravestone. The idea behind an epitaph is to convey something that reflects the character or accomplishments of the deceased person. Here are some examples:

- “Liberty, Humanity, Justice, Equality”—Susan B. Anthony
- “He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.”—George Washington Carver
- “I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is ready for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter.”—Winston Churchill
- “A Genius of Comedy His Talent Brought Joy and Laughter to All the World”—Oliver Hardy
- “Workers of All Lands Unite. The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”—Karl Marx



- “And alien tears will fill for him / Pity’s long-broken urn, / For his mourners will be outcast men, / And outcasts always mourn.”—Oscar Wilde

Imagine that we have all lived as faithful stewards of God’s creation. Our life has ended; we are dead. What would we want to have written on our gravestone? The one exclusion for all is “Well done, thou good and faithful servant”; that’s too easy. After everyone has had time to write an epitaph, share yours and then invite others to share.

Suggest that the participants post their epitaph somewhere in a conspicuous place that they will see every day: the bathroom mirror, the dashboard of the car, by the computer screen, on the refrigerator. In the next session plan to hear how it felt to see your epitaph every day.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for making a creation full of your presence and giving us the awesome and exciting task of being your stewards. Help us to make those decisions that foster faithful stewardship by what we do and say. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

In the next session be sure to ask how the epitaph affected thoughts and actions. How can this awareness help us to make everyday decisions that foster faithful stewardship?

5 Discerning the Holy

Leader preparation: Prominently display a print of the baobab tree photograph.

Supplies:

- poster: “Baobab, Okvango Delta, Botswana” by Pete Oxford
<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters5>

As stewards of God, we are charged with responsibility for creation. Some say we are called to nurture creation. Yet, sometimes, creation nurtures us. Creation becomes an avenue to the sacred and a way to commune with God.

Invite the participants to get in a comfortable position for a meditation on one image from creation—a tree. Instruct them:

- Slowly take a deep breath through your nose, and then slowly exhale through your mouth. Do this several times, slowly. *(pause)*
- Center your attention on the picture of the tree and reflect quietly on what I am saying. *(pause)*
- This tree is a living organism. While the participants are focused on the poster, pose these questions for silent reflection: What does the tree say to you about life? *(pause)*
- What kind of life do you imagine it has been living? *(pause)*
- What does the tree communicate to you? *(pause)*
- Consider the many different ways a tree can be understood as an avenue of the sacred, as a way to God. *(pause)*

This is a photograph of a baobab tree. Baobab trees are native to southern Africa, Madagascar, and Australia. Some are reputed to be thousands of years old. Since they store gallons of water in their massive trunks, they can live for long periods of drought and provide water for animals and people in times of drought.

- How does this information affect how this tree speaks to you? *(pause)*
- Throughout human history, trees have provided inspiring imagery for spiritual life. Listen now to some of these as you continue to gaze upon



the picture of the tree. *(pause)*

- “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’” (Genesis 2:15–17). *(pause)*
- “[Righteous people] are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither” (Psalm 1:3a). *(pause)*
- “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 55:12–13). *(pause)*
- “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1–2) *(pause)*

Invite everyone to “come back” and be present to the group. Ask questions such as these: How did you experience this time? What struck you? What sticks with you? Did you experience any connection between the tree you were gazing upon and the imagery from the scripture passages? If so, what was it?

Trees are powerful organisms that can speak to us about holy matters. In the coming days, invite the participants to discern the holiness of a tree. And not just trees—any part of creation can provide this rich gift to us, since all of creation is holy. So, open yourself to discern the holy and get ready to be surprised by the wonder that is all around you every day of every year.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for making a creation full of your presence. May we be ready to discern you through the organisms and elements and relationships all around us. And then, when we do behold the holy, may we give you thanks and praise. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

⑥ A Relational Vision

Leader preparation: Arrange for someone to accompany the singing of the hymn.

Supplies:

- Bible
- copy of the hymn “You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore (“*Tú has venido a la orilla*”) (tune: Pescador de Hombres)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/nchymnal>
- newsprint or white board and marker

When we think of a vision for the future, we often think of a model drawn from the business world or another kind of complex organization. A vision for the future is a plan complete with headings and bullet points, each with a timeline for completion. A typical plan is scheduled for completion in five years. To complete the plan, people in the organization are supposed to marshal their best effort and utilize their strongest skills in order to achieve the goals of the plan. Sometimes, even churches use this kind of model for planning. The hymn describes a



radically different model for a vision of the future. Instead of a set of statements comprising a plan that people are expected to follow, the vision of the future for this model is relational. The vision is not oriented toward strength but weakness and not oriented toward goals but to relationships. This hymn gives us an outline of this model.

Read Mark 1:16–20 and then distribute copies of the hymn “You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore” (“*Tú has venido a la orilla*”) (tune: Pescador de Hombres). Have the accompanist play the hymn as the group follows along. Then play the hymn again as the group sings all verses.

In verse 1, who does Jesus not seek and who does Jesus seek? In verses 2 and 3, what does the follower offer to Jesus? Wait a minute—we are supposed to bring our exhaustion? What good is that for getting anything done? In verse 4, Jesus is described as “the longing of souls that are yearning.” Usually, we think of Jesus as “the one longed for,” especially during the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. How does thinking of Jesus as “the longing of souls that are yearning” open up our understanding? In the refrain what images underscore a relational understanding of vision? What do you think “I have abandoned my small boat” signifies?

As we have been discussing the words and images of this hymn, we haven’t once talked about goals, objectives, or timelines. Yet, we have considered a powerful model for visioning the future. In a word or short phrase, how would you describe this? Write the responses on newsprint or a white board. Suggest that the participants take this model for visioning the future and reflect on it in the coming days and weeks. It is a basic way to live as stewards in God’s creation through which we can expect to experience the presence of God in especially powerful ways when we seek to embody this way of living in the world. Sing the hymn again.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the gift of music and for the gift of hymns. Grant that we may be open to new ways of relating to ourselves, to one another, and to you that reflect your radical love and grace that seeks to make all things new. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Imagining the Vision (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Arrange for the group to meet around large tables and assemble the supplies beforehand.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- newsprint or butcher paper
- multicolored paper
- color markers, pens, crayons, and/or paints
- scissors
- tape and glue sticks
- glitter (optional)

Welcome everyone and offer this or a similar prayer: *God of visions and dreams, you imagine through your prophets a new world. As we delve into one such vision from the*



book of Revelation, inspire us to see what the prophet saw, and so find life. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

The Revelation to John, also known as the Apocalypse or the book of Revelation, is the final book in the Christian Bible. Its style and imagery are both brilliant and tragic as it portrays the consummation of the biblical story of redemption for all creation. It is perhaps best understood as a picture book with a crescendo of poetic images, each making a powerful appeal to the reader's imagination. According to Revelation, the fulfillment of creation happens through those who, resisting all evil and every false god, remain faithful to worshiping the true God. Since the prophecy is addressed to seven churches, interpreting the book must account for how the prophecy spoke to them in the present.

Say: The passage for the group's consideration is John's culminating vision. As the passage is read, let your imagination run wild; in your mind's eye, try to see the images. Read aloud Revelation 21:10, 21-22; 22:5. Say: Remember to let your imagination run wild. Close your eyes if you like.

Keep those images you saw in your mind's eye while we make a representation of this passage. Use as much of the supplies as you need to create a rendition of this vision. Be sure to include as many elements of it as you can. You can use words, but try to use images as much as possible. Make representations of the various elements of the vision on smaller pieces of paper, and then arrange them on a much larger piece of paper. In this way, you can experiment with different ways to arrange images. We won't give out points for accuracy or beauty; just try to represent what you imagined. Work alone, or, if you prefer, work with someone else.

The participants' creative representations should include as many elements as possible, such as: a great, high mountain the holy city Jerusalem the throne of God Almighty and the Lamb the glory of God the nations the city's light the Lamb's lamp glory of the kings of the earth perpetual light (no night) glory and honor of the nations always open gates those in the book of life the river of life the street of the city the tree of life servants worshiping God/the Lamb God in heaven twelve kinds of fruit leaves of the tree the healing of the nations

After everyone is done, arrange the results on a table or wall and ask everyone to view one another's work. Reconvene the group and share impressions and responses to the activity. How does this consummate vision inform our being stewards and our practicing stewardship? The group may decide to post their work somewhere in the church or consult the pastor about presenting the work in an appropriate way as part of a worship service.

Thank everyone for their participation and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for giving us vivid imaginations and for speaking to us through them. Grant that the vision of the prophet so long ago can continue to inspire us today, giving us hope and faith to go forth as your living stewards in the world. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

⑧ Dreaming God's Dream

Leader preparation: The sheet music for "Dream God's Dream" is available on Bryan Sirchio's Web site <http://www.sirchio.com>. The music is also available in the *Sing! Prayer and Praise Songbook* published by The Pilgrim Press (2009). Optional: Use a recording of the song available on Bryan Sirchio's site as a single download or in a CD. The song is on both the *Artist's Hand* and *J-Walking* CDs. Find someone to accompany the singing of the song.

**Supplies:**

- copies of “Dream God’s Dream”
- equipment to play a recording of the song (optional)

Welcome everyone, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: Great Creator, thank you for the creativity of music—how it can challenge our hearts and stir our souls. Inspire us as we gather that we may share in your dream of love and justice for all. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.

Introduce the song written by Bryan Sirchio, an award-winning, singer-songwriter from Madison, Wisconsin. After serving a congregation in the United Church of Christ for a few years, Bryan discerned his true calling as a writer and performer of Christian music, something he has done ever since. This song is one of many Bryan has written that reflects a concern for justice, both for people and for the earth. Being faithful stewards requires vision. Bryan’s song is one source for this vision. Sing “Dream God’s Dream.”

In the chorus, how does Sirchio describe God’s dream? In verse 1, what aberrant or unjust conditions does Sirchio address? In verse 2, how does Sirchio envision our role in dreaming God’s dream? After discussion, share that this song was originally written as a theme song for the 1991 senior high youth retreat of the Illinois South Conference of the United Church of Christ. The retreat took place on the holiday weekend commemorating the birthday and life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Sing the song again.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for this time of reflecting on your dream for us and for the world. May your dream for a just and healthy world for all continue to challenge us to be stewards seeking to fulfill your dream. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

9 Singing Visions

Leader preparation: Be familiar with the scripture reading, and be able to read it reflectively. There is also the need for someone to accompany the singing of the hymns.

Supplies:

- copies of the hymns “There in God’s Garden” (tune: Shades Mountain), available with an excellent interpretation at <http://www.tinyurl.com/24yepok>, and “For the Healing of the Nations” (tune: Westminster Abbey; alternative tune: CWM Rhondda), <http://tinyurl.com/NCHymnal>
- Bibles

Welcome everyone, share names, and offer this or a similar prayer: *Great and loving God, thank you for the gift of words and music and the power that comes to us when these are joined together. May this session be a time of inspiration reflection on our service to the world as your stewards. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Hymns are a distinctive product of the church. Over centuries, hymns have brought together word and music in ways that both inform and inspire. During this session, consider two very different hymns inspired by a visionary text from the book of Revelation. Read slowly Revelation 21:10, 22–27 and 22:1–5. Invite the participant’s to close their eyes and imagine the vision.

Distribute copies of the hymn “There in God’s Garden” and ask the accompanist



to play the hymn as the group follows along. Play the hymn again as the group sings all verses of the hymn. How does the Hungarian hymn writer develop the Tree of Life (Revelation 22:2) as an active image fulfilling God's desire for creation? (See verses 1–4.)

Now distribute copies of the hymn "For the Healing of the Nations" and ask the accompanist to play the hymn as the group follow along. Play the hymn again as the group sings all verses of the hymn. What phrase speaks to you and what does it say? Both hymns refer to God's actions to fulfill the destiny of creation. How does each hymn do this? In other words, what kinds of actions, both human and divine, does the hymn highlight? How do we relate to these actions—with fear, frustration, or inspiration? Which hymn speaks to you more? Why? What does this suggest about your faith and the living as a steward in the world?

Sings both hymns again.

Thank everyone for participating and offer this or a similar prayer: *Thank you, God, for the gift of music and for the gift of hymns. Grant that we may be open to new ways of relating to ourselves, to each other, and to you that reflect your radical love and grace that seeks to make all things new. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.*

Reflect

So how did it go? Did most of the group participate actively? Were you able to find ways to engage the entire group, even those who tended to remain quiet? Did the discussions touch on significant issues? If so, how did that occur? How did you experience the group as you began and as you ended—did a sense of community develop? How might you tweak your leadership of future activities?

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