

# Giving Testimony and Witness



## Exploration: Discovery

### About this Setting

Within the church, people have given testimony in a variety of ways. Their testimony has included stories of what God has done for them and stories of how they see God working in the denomination. They have used art, music, and dance as well as the written and spoken word. More recently, they have used communication technology and various digital media. The three Exploring and Engaging Activities that follow will help learners consider the ways that we give testimony and begin to uncover their own stories. The Discerning and Deciding Activities are designed to help the group think about how and where God is calling them to give testimony. The Sending and Serving Activities will offer learners the opportunity to share their growing testimony with others.

### About this Exploration

We are a people of story, built on the witness of our Bible and rooted in the testimony of our communities. Discovering the power of giving witness and testimony means recognizing that we each have a valid story, indeed, many stories, and that we can identify God's work within those stories. It takes courage to share one's own story; it takes openness to fully listen to the stories of others. Claiming this practice involves shaping a common language. Sharing our testimonies celebrates enriching traditions of communities and the particularity of personal experiences of grace.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:  
**Genesis 24:34–67**  
**Acts 16:16–34**

## Leader Preparation

Find a quiet place where you can be alone with God for a few minutes. Bring your journal or paper and pen. Quickly jot down everything you think of when you hear the word “testimony.” Look back over the list, and think about your own faith journey. What questions, thoughts, and feelings emerge for you when you think about sharing your faith story? What are you feeling as you prepare to lead a group in their own explorations? Center yourself in God’s presence. Breathe deeply and calmly, letting your thoughts, anxieties, and excitement wash over you. When you feel anchored in God’s presence, ask for God’s guidance on this step of your journey.

*Prayer: Ever-present God, all of creation is part of your story. Fill me with your wisdom and courage as I prepare to lead your people into a deeper understanding of their own stories. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

## Exploring & Engaging Activities

### 1 God Is Still Speaking . . . through Testimony! (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Biblical stories of testimony can inform our own testimony. They give us a framework through which we can understand the process of discovering our stories and sharing them with others as well as hearing the stories of others. In this activity, the group will eavesdrop on the testimony of Abraham’s servant in order to reflect on the process of giving and receiving testimony.

Before meeting, read Genesis 24:1–67 in order to gain an understanding of this passage within the larger story.

**Supplies:**

- five Bibles of the same version

Explain to the group that this story takes place when Abraham is quite old. Abraham has sent his servant back to Abraham’s homeland to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham’s son. This passage begins with the servant telling Rebekah’s father, Bethuel, and brother, Laban, about his mission. Ask for five or six volunteers to read the parts of:

- Narrator
- Abraham’s servant (This person will do most of the reading. Select a strong reader.)
- Laban and Bethuel (Their line is spoken together. This may be one person or two.)
- Rebekah
- Rebekah’s mother

Have the volunteers read Genesis 24:34–67. Introduce the idea of testimony as a story told about an experience of God. In the UCC, we understand that God is still speaking. One way we can hear God’s message to us is through open, prayerful dialogue with others. Discuss how the servant’s testimony can inform our own testimony.

- Laban and Bethuel come to a point where they have to decide whether to trust the servant’s testimony (Genesis 24:50). When have we received testimony? How did we decide whether it was trustworthy?
- Rebekah’s decision to trust the servant’s testimony was literally life-changing (Genesis 24:57). When in your life have you made a decision that was life-changing? How did you experience God in the midst of that decision?
- The servant’s testimony has a purpose. He tells the story in order to convince Rebekah’s family that it’s God’s desire for Rebekah and Isaac to marry. What is the purpose of our testimony?



## 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” 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 Conversation, Not Confrontation

**Leader preparation:** “Testimony” can be a loaded word within many congregations. This activity is designed to encourage participants to talk about their understandings of testimony and what makes them reluctant to engage in it. In preparation for the conversation, think about what experiences members have with giving and receiving testimony. Where are the stumbling blocks for them? View the clip “Stories are at the center of Holy Conversation,” and be prepared to flesh out your group’s particular understanding of testimony for a deeper, more vital understanding.

#### Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- LCD projector if group is too large to comfortably see a computer monitor
- video: “Stories are at the center of Holy Conversation,”  
<http://tinyurl.com/3opbd9c>.
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers

At the top of the newsprint or whiteboard, write “Testimony is . . .” Ask the group what images come to mind when they hear the word testimony. What experiences have they had with testimony? How do they feel about the idea of “giving testimony”?

Introduce the group to the Holy Conversation project, explaining that it’s a resource by UCC minister and professor Richard Peace meant to encourage people to talk about God in everyday life. A guiding principle of the project is that witness is conversation, not confrontation. Watch the clip “Stories are at the center of Holy Conversation.” If you’re working with younger youth, you may find that it’s helpful to summarize the ideas presented in the video rather than watching it.

*Discuss: How does the understanding of testimony as Holy Conversation, or holy storytelling, change the way we do testimony? How might it encourage developing our own testimony?*

### 3 Web of Stories

**Leader preparation:** Spend a few moments prayerfully considering the faith journey of those in your congregation. What is their experience of giving and receiving testimony? Many people are not accustomed to being asked to share their faith, even in church. How might previous experiences of faith-sharing shape your group’s understanding of testimony?

#### Supplies:

- ball of yarn

Have participants sit or stand in a circle. Hold the end of the yarn or ribbon and introduce yourself, sharing something you believe about God. When you’ve finished, toss the ball or spool to another member of the group and invite that person to say something that he or she believes about God. Continue until each person has had the chance to share and a “web” of yarn has been formed. Explain that testimony is simply a story about God. The UCC is a diverse community of faith where our faith journeys are enriched by sharing our testimonies and helping others share theirs.



## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 4 A Personal Catechism (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Catechisms have been used throughout Christian history as a way of sharing the faith. The UCC affirms several historical catechisms, including Luther’s Small Catechism, the Evangelical Catechism, and the Heidelberg Catechism. Catechisms are made up of a series of questions and answers that are memorized and recited within the faith community. UCC congregations, particularly those with a strong Reformed heritage, may use catechisms at baptisms or confirmations. Catechisms have, at times, been criticized for their static quality. However, catechisms give learners an opportunity to practice the vocabulary of faith and the sharing of the Christian story. As such, they may be understood as the beginning of a personal testimony in which a person explores his or her faith and prepares to share it with others. In this activity, learners will practice answering questions of faith as a way of both discerning their own story and practicing giving testimony.

If your congregation doesn’t regularly use a catechism, skim Luther’s Small Catechism, the Evangelical Catechism, or the Heidelberg Catechism found at <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs>. Be prepared to explain briefly to the group what a catechism is and how it can be used to explore our stories and practice sharing them.

Write one question or sentence across the top of each piece of newsprint or poster board:

- Name a time when you were aware of God’s presence.
- How has your church helped you in your faith journey?
- How do you see God working in this church?
- Where have you felt God working in the UCC?
- What makes the UCC special to you?
- Why is Jesus important to you?
- Why is God important to you?
- How do you know God exists?
- Why should people come to church?
- Of what part of UCC history are you particularly proud?

Tape the papers on the wall around the room. Make sure there’s space for people to walk around. If your group is large, consider writing each question on two pieces of paper. Place several markers near each paper, or provide one marker for each participant.

#### **Supplies:**

- newsprint or poster board (If you don’t have easy access to this, use a few sheets of regular paper at each station.)
- markers
- tape

Introduce the idea of a “catechism” to the group, explaining how a catechism is a traditional way of teaching people about the faith. In this “round-robin” activity, they’ll explore their own faith and practice giving testimony by answering questions about their relationship with God. Give the learners 10–15 minutes to walk around the room answering the questions in brief words or phrases. When the participants have finished, gather together and talk about what was difficult,



what came easily. *What benefits might there be to memorizing a catechism? In what way might a catechism be beneficial to helping a person verbalize his or her own beliefs?* Remind them that in the UCC we want to value people no matter where they are on their journey, and so we encourage people to verbalize their own faith rather than making them memorize what others have come to believe.

## 5 Sharing the Journey

**Leader preparation:** Like our lives, our testimony is a journey. As our relationship with God grows, so does the witness that we give. Welcoming people on the journey means trusting that our paths are meant to intersect; the witness that we have at any given moment may be the witness that another needs to hear. In this activity, learners will think about the trajectory of their own journeys and explore the changing nature of their testimony. In preparation for leading this activity, spend a few moments reflecting on your own growing testimony. Be prepared to offer it to the group as an example, if needed.

### Supplies:

- paper
- scraps of fabric, ribbon, yarn, and paper of different colors and textures
- scissors
- glue
- markers, pens, or pencils

Invite learners to envision their faith life up to this point as a journey. Draw or collage their “paths,” using different textures to represent their changing awareness of God—their growing testimony. *What points of your journey were smooth? Rough? Bumpy? Bright? Dull? Narrow? Wide? Straight? Circular? Where are the points when others’ testimony helped you on your journey? How would those points look and feel?*

When the participants have finished their paths, close by making the connection between testimony and sharing our faith journey with others. Thank all the participants for sharing the ups and downs of their journey today, and encourage them to continue to think about how they can share with others.



## 6 Branding Our Story

**Leader preparation:** People give their testimony and witness in many ways; they may paint, sculpt, or dance to express their relationship with God. In the church, even worldly details take on importance as witnesses to God’s work. The UCC logo is one example. Unlike company brands, for which the use of a logo is meant to quickly identify the product, the UCC logo tells a story of God. It is a visual testimony. Read “What does the logo symbolize?”

### Supplies:

- “Christian Symbols,” Attachment: Activity 6
- paper
- colored pencils or markers
- large printout or projection of the UCC logo from <http://tinyurl.com/ucclogo>
- paragraph: “What does the logo symbolize?” from <http://tinyurl.com/ucclogo>



Introduce the idea that testimony can be given in a variety of ways. Display the UCC logo and have someone read aloud the article “What does the logo symbolize?” Explore the ideas represented in the UCC logo. Pass out the handout of Christian symbols and paper and pencils or markers. Invite the group to practice testimony by drawing their own logo, capturing their understanding of God. Share individual logos in pairs or small groups. As an extension, you may also consider displaying the logos, along with the UCC logo and description, in a place where others in the congregation can see them.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Liberating Testimony (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Acts: 16–34.

#### **Supplies:**

- Bible
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers

Read Acts 16:16–34. Invite participants to listen for the places where testimony is given. *Who gives testimony? Where? How? After the reading, list on newsprint or whiteboard the places where they heard people give testimony. If it’s not mentioned, note for the group that testimony is the cause both of Paul and Silas’ imprisonment and of their release. When does testimony feel dangerous or uncomfortable to us? How is it liberating?*

As a church, the UCC and the predecessor denominations have given testimony that is both dangerous and liberating. Ask group members to think of examples of this: taking a stand against slavery; ordaining African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians before it was common; standing up for civil rights; and undertaking relief efforts in countries torn apart by war or natural disaster are all possibilities. Ask the group to reflect on how it feels (or might feel) to engage in acts of testimony that are socially or physically dangerous. *How do we find liberation in these acts of testimony?*

### 8 Not Forsaken

**Leader preparation:** Music is deeply intertwined with the act of giving testimony. Think about the songs you know that have bolstered your faith in a difficult time. Visit “Hidden Histories” and scroll to the first section, “Hungarian emigration patterns.” Be prepared to tell the story of the Hungarian galley slaves to the group. Locate a copy of the hymn “Lift Your Heads, O Martyrs Weeping,” which can be found in many hymnals. In *The New Century Hymnal*, it’s hymn 445. Find someone who can play the hymn for the group, and practice singing it so that you can lead the group in song.

**Supplies:**

- hymn: “Lift Your Heads, O Martyrs Weeping,” hymn 445 in *The New Century Hymnal*
- article from “Hidden Histories” <http://tinyurl.com/3nfan5z>
- *TIME* magazine brief on January 14, 1957, titled “Religion: Not Forsaken,” <http://tinyurl.com/ydhlzpn>
- musical instrument and someone to play it

Tell the story of the Hungarian Protestants who refused to recant their faith and were sold as galley slaves during the sixteenth century. Introduce the hymn “Lift Your Heads, O Martyrs Weeping.” Explain that it was composed and sung by the Hungarians as they suffered through slavery and was later written down. Sing the hymn together. Note the impact that this testimony continues to have more than 300 years after it was written. Share with the group the brief write-up in *TIME* magazine from 1957 when the hymn was rediscovered. *How might the rediscovery of the hymn have impacted people then? How does the story of the Hungarian galley slaves and the testimony they left impact the group today?*

Play the hymn again, this time asking the group to use the time to reflect and pray. *What could God be saying to us about our own testimony?* After a time of reflection, ask God’s blessing on the group as they continue to discover when and how God is calling them to give testimony.

## 9 Growing Our Testimony

**Leader preparation:** In the UCC, we have a rich history of people who came before us and in one way or another shared their testimony. These people help shape our faith story when they share their own. Part of practicing testimony is recognizing those people in the church whose acts or words have affected us. In preparation for this activity, take a few moments to think about someone in the local congregation who shared his or her faith with you. Did someone invite you to church, help you settle in when you were new, or share a word of encouragement when you were down? How did this act of faith impact your growing testimony? On one side of your note card, write “I grew in faith because of you.” On the other side, write a brief note to the person whose testimony shaped you. Tell that person what he or she did or said and how it helped you grow in faith, and then thank them. Using the ribbon, tie the card to the pot.

**Supplies:**

- seeds or seedlings (Ask a gardener in your congregation if he or she has any to share.)
- small pots (You can get these inexpensively in a craft store.)
- potting soil
- note cards
- hole-punch
- ribbon
- colorful pens, markers, or pencils
- outside space to work (weather permitting)



Explain that recognizing and receiving the testimony of others is part of developing our own testimony. Share your story of receiving testimony. Show the group the plant you've prepared. Explain what you have done with the card, and invite them to do the same. Pray a prayer of thanksgiving for those who have shared their witness. If possible, give the pots to the individuals named during a time of thanksgiving in worship or another community gathering. Taking time to recognize those who have touched our lives is powerful for both the giver and receiver.

### Reflect

Think about the activities that you introduced to the group. What types of activities seemed most engaging, least engaging? Use this information to plan future sessions. Think about ways you can encourage engagement with different types of activities by building on the group's strengths.



## Attachment: Activity 6

## Christian Symbols

**Cross:** The cross is the most frequently used Christian symbol. The crucifix traditionally used in the Roman Catholic tradition depicts the body of Christ still on the cross and therefore emphasizes the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus. Protestant traditions usually depict the empty cross, emphasizing the resurrection.

**Dove:** The dove is both a symbol of peace and a symbol of the Holy Spirit. In Genesis 8, the end of the flood is signified when the dove returns to the ark with an olive branch. In the Gospel of Luke, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove during Jesus' baptism (Luke 3).

**Flames:** Flames are a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

**Fish:** The fish symbol was used as a secret symbol by early followers of Jesus. Fish appear often in stories of Jesus, for example, when the loaves and fish were multiplied and when Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of all" (Mark 1:17).

**Bread and wine:** Symbols of Communion, bread and wine remind followers of the new covenant instituted by Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection.

**Three interlocking rings:** These represent the Trinity.

**Star:** The star symbol originates in Jewish tradition with the Star of David. It is also associated with the birth of Jesus.

**Lamb:** The lamb signifies Jesus obedience and sacrifice as the Lamb of God. (As a representation of sacrifice, it is often used with the cross.) The lamb also reminds followers of their own place as one of Jesus' flock.

**Shepherd's crook:** This reminds followers that Jesus is the shepherd and also ties in with imagery found in the Psalms, most popularly Psalm 23.

**Crown of thorns:** This recalls both the suffering and victory of Christ in the crucifixion and resurrection.

**Alpha and Omega:** The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, this symbol represents Jesus as the beginning and the end as said in Revelation 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13.

**Anchor:** The anchor was a symbol of hope in ancient Rome. For Christians, the anchor becomes a symbol of hope in Jesus. "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Hebrews, 6:19-20). Many Christian anchors combine the anchor with a cross.

# Giving Testimony and Witness



## Exploration: Scripture

### About this Setting

As we explore scripture and testimony in the UCC, we are reminded that the Bible is central to our lives as Christians. How do we witness to the power of scripture? How do we share it with others? We will explore how scripture intersects our lives and informs our own testimony along the way.

### About this Exploration

Our lives are part of the tapestry of God's larger story in the world. Scripture contains testimonies of people who aren't perfect, which invites us to tell our stories in response. In John's account of Jesus and the blind man, the man's witness sparked a process that touched on people's relationships, different understandings of God, the role of religious authority, and viewpoints within the community. The healed man's testimony inspired dialogue and, ultimately, transformation. Similarly, our stories may shape other people's response to scripture and draw out their testimonies. The experience of hearing scripture varies according to our experiences, situations, traditions, and settings.



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**John 9:1–41**  
**Psalms 116**

## Leader Preparation

Take your Bible to a place where you can focus on being with God. Hold the Bible in your hands and feel the weight of it. Take a moment to imagine the number of people who have poured their hearts into these stories. What might their lives have been like? What might their purpose have been? Close your eyes and allow yourself to ponder these questions for a minute. One way to think about the Bible is as a collection of testimonies. People recorded the stories that were important to them, whether they were first-hand accounts or stories that had become personal after many hearings. As you prepare to lead the group in this Exploration, know that you join a faithful cloud of witnesses guiding people into deeper understanding of the witness of scripture and the practice of testimony in their own lives. Keep in mind that people's experiences with scripture are shaped by more than just age. Some may have extensive knowledge of the Bible, some may have a deep spiritual connection to scripture, and others may have limited experience with either intellectual or devotional practices. Their background with scripture will shape the testimony that they give at this point.

## Exploring & Engaging Activities

### 1 TestimonyCorps (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** StoryCorps is a nonprofit organization dedicated to recording the stories of people's lives. People sign up to interview someone who is important to them, often a family member. The recorded interview is then placed in the Library of Congress. If you'd like to hear an interview, you can listen online at <http://storycorps.org/>. In this activity, participants will use the StoryCorps format to share their experiences of scripture with one another. If possible, consider recording these stories to keep in your own church library or link to your church website. However, this isn't necessary for the activity; the process of sharing testimony with another person is the most important aspect.

**Supplies:**

- scratch paper and pens
- (optional) audio or video recorder

Remind the group of the importance of the Bible in our tradition. Drawing on our Reformation tradition, the Bible is central to our lives. Part of the testimony we give is that all people should have access to the Bible. We also believe that each person has the freedom and responsibility to interpret the Bible faithfully. Introduce the group to the StoryCorps project and explain that they will be conducting their own interviews in order to practice giving testimony about scripture. As a group, quickly think of some possible interview questions. Some suggestions:

- Do you have a special Bible? Who gave it to you? On what occasion?
- What does the Bible mean to you?
- What "aha!" moments have you had while reading the Bible?
- What do you find challenging about the Bible?
- Is there a particular passage that you turn to when you need comfort?

Invite participants to select a partner for the interviews. Have partners take turns interviewing each other. To keep this activity at about 15 minutes, give each participant 5 minutes to interview the partner and then switch. If each only asks one question, that's okay. The depth of the story told is more important than the quantity of stories collected. Close this activity by encouraging participants to continue to explore what scripture means to them, and to share this witness with others.

If you're recording these interviews, you may want to move on with other activities, allowing each partner to come to the recording station as it opens up. This will keep the session moving while still giving everyone the opportunity to give witness about scripture in their lives.

### 2 From Generation to Generation

**Leader preparation:** This activity uses two pieces of art to explore the way that scripture becomes part of our testimony. Scripture is read in each generation, but it becomes personal for each of us and we experience it differently based on our context. You'll need to be able to display both paintings at the same time. It is easiest to have a print version of each painting, or a print version of one painting and a digital version of the other.



Prayer: *God of the story, thank you for drawing us together across time and space through the witness of those who came before us. As I journey together with this group, guide each of us into a deeper understanding and fuller relationship with you. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Spend a few minutes looking at the two paintings. Note the similarities and differences between the two. To pique your interest, notice that although both paintings are a nativity scene, they include people dressed in sixteenth-century clothes. Jan Brueghel's painting appears to be a wider scene than Pieter Bruegel's (from 1559 Pieter dropped the "h" from the family name). Jan's image includes the daily life of a sixteenth-century village in the background, while Pieter's focuses on the Holy Family, the kings, and a few others. Notice, though, that both include a black king and one man whispering to another behind the family.

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

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

#### Supplies:

- artwork: "The Adoration of the Kings" by Jan Brueghel the Elder, <http://tinyurl.com/fp-uccr>
- artwork: "The Adoration of the Kings" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, an online version can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/3gkxu4o>
- computer and projector to display Pieter Bruegel's piece, if using the online version
- ability to connect to the Internet, if using the art online, or download a version of the painting ahead of time

Display the paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Jan Brueghel the Elder. Invite comments from the group on similarities and differences in the two paintings. If needed, prompt discussion by naming one thing you noticed during your preparation time. Explain that Jan Brueghel the Elder was inspired by his father's 1564 painting, and painted his own version of the nativity in 1598. Ask participants to tell which version they prefer.

Point out that our sharing of scripture is an act of testimony. Scripture is handed down to us by previous generations, but each time we read the Bible, the stories become part of our personal testimony. Our understanding of the Bible is shaped by other people in the same way Jan Brueghel's painting was inspired by his father. In the UCC, sharing scripture with one another is a central part of our worship and study. In doing so, we share the witness that has been handed down to us by the generations that came before.

### 3 Sacred Dance

**Leader preparation:** In scripture, dance is one way that people praise God, giving testimony to God's work. We call this type of dance "liturgical dance," meaning that it has its roots in worship. The earliest mention of dance as a form of praise is found in Exodus 15, when Miriam leads the women in dance following their safe passage across the Red Sea. The popularity of dance as a form of worship has ebbed and flowed throughout the years. Notably, the Puritans, who were ancestors to our Congregational tradition, didn't approve of dancing in any form. Their concern was that dancing detracted from the sacred, rather than pointing toward it. Today, we appreciate the possibility of dance as another way to glorify God and are free to incorporate it into our worship. In this activity, participants will experience liturgical dance as a form of testimony. Think about music that you have found meaningful and select a piece to use in this activity — a hymn, contemporary Christian song, a meaningful pop/rock song, or a classical piece are all possibilities. "All Things Bright and Beautiful," <http://tinyurl.com/3jcazfk>, "Amazing Grace," <http://tinyurl.com/3llh2cl>, or "On Eagle's Wings," <http://tinyurl.com/3oa9x6d>, have clear melodies and descriptive lyrics that lend themselves to visualization and depiction. To allow more freedom for participants to interpret and portray their own testimony, consider a piece without lyrics. An



instrumental version of Ave Maria, <http://tinyurl.com/3ffczzhh>, is one possibility. (The video versions online are provided for your reference. If you chose to use them, turn off the monitor on the computer to allow participants to focus on their own dancing.) If you'd prefer to use pop or contemporary Christian music, ask your group ahead of time for songs that are meaningful to them. You might also consider choosing a piece that is used in your worship service.

**Supplies:**

- music from the examples above, or of your own choosing
- (optional) scarves, streamers, cloth, or simple instruments for dancing

Tell the group about liturgical dance and its roots in scripture and tradition. Invite them to think about their understanding of God. How would they put their witness into movements? Play the music you've selected and invite participants to listen, thinking about how they might express their witness in dance. Remind them that liturgical dance is not primarily about performance, but about praise and story. Their movements may be as big or as little as is comfortable. Have participants find an area of the room where they'll be free to move around. This activity can be done by simply moving in place whether standing or sitting. Those with restricted mobility can still participate.

Play the music again, this time asking participants to dance their testimony. Reflect with the group on this form of testimony. How did it feel to use their bodies to tell their story? If there are those in your group for whom this was a particularly insightful activity, consider helping them get connected with a liturgical dance group, or make time in your congregation's worship life for them to participate in this way.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 4 A Moving Testimony (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Psalm 116. Notice how action-packed it is. In the UCC, we affirm that God is an action-packed God. God has acted, is acting, and will continue to act into the future. In response, we seek to be a people that "proclaim in word and action the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Because we often experience the Bible in devotional settings, we sometimes miss the active nature of the story we have been given. In this activity, participants will experience scripture in action and reflect on how they are called to be active in response.

**Supplies:**

- study Bibles for each participant, or copies of Psalm 116
- pencils

Pass out copies of Psalm 116, or have participants use their study Bibles. Ask participants to read the psalm and to underline the action words they see. Invite them to look over their passages and notice how many of the words are underlined. Have participants go to an area of the room where they'll be able to move around. Read aloud the passage, asking participants to make movements to match the psalm. Participants with restricted mobility may make the movements where they are seated.

Ask participants to reflect on how it felt to move in response to scripture. *What image of God emerges when scripture is read in this way?* Explain that we believe that



God is active; this is why we say, “God is still speaking.” We could just as well say, “God is still acting.” Because of the biblical witness to God’s activity, we believe that we, too, are called to action. We seek to give witness through both our words and our actions.



## 5 Drawing from a Deep Well

**Leader preparation:** Read the paragraph on the attachment.

### Supplies:

- “We Read the Bible . . .” Attachment: Activity 5
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers

Ask the group to name Bible passages that are meaningful to them. On newsprint or a whiteboard write the passages as they name them. These may be passages they remember from Vacation Bible School, a verse that got them through a difficult time, or one that they used at a celebration such as a wedding, confirmation, or baptism. Ask participants where they learned these passages. Did their parents, a church member, teacher, or pastor share the Bible with them? Did they hear the passage in popular culture?

Read the paragraph “We Read the Bible as a Book with Special Authority” from “The Bible and the UCC” (see the attachment). Remind the group that sharing scripture is an act of testimony. Ask participants to list ways they can share scripture with others. Invite them to commit to sharing scripture with someone else during the next week.

## 6 The Colors of Witness

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with Jackson Pollock’s art, and be prepared to describe the technique to the group, or have a picture available to show them. You can find several images at <http://tinyurl.com/3hfyybh>.

This activity requires a lot of space, so think about what room will be available for your group. Clear a space in the room you’ll be using and cover the floor with newspaper. You’ll also want somewhere for the paintings to dry. If you can’t leave them on the floor for a while after the group meets, plan to set up tables lined with newspapers.

### Supplies:

- newspaper
- tempera paint
- large paper
- paint brushes

If possible, show pictures of a few Jackson Pollock paintings. Otherwise, describe the style to the group, or consider making your own painting ahead of time. Give each person a piece of paper, paint brush, and paint. Have participants write their names on one side of the paper. Place the papers on the floor, name side down, and invite the group to use splatter painting to express their relationship with God. Participants might approach this by thinking about what color they would paint God, or how they understand God’s work in the world. If needed, you can point out that splatter painting is very active; it can capture explosive acts of creation, or a gentle, ongoing call to transformation. Colors can be layered on one another to express the depth of the Christian experience, or left simple to express the purity of God.



As participants finish their paintings, remind them that the Bible gives witness to the variety of ways that people have experienced their relationship with God. Like the collection of the group's paintings, scripture contains a collection of testimonies. In the UCC, we seek to be responsive to the witness of scripture by sharing the good news of God's presence with others.

If participants are interested in a deeper look at the Bible, a good resource is "The Bible and the UCC" found at <http://tinyurl.com/uccbible>.

## Sending & Serving Activities

### 7 The Words of My Mouth (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** We believe reading and sharing scripture is a spiritual exercise; it must be undertaken with God's guidance. In group study, worship, and private devotions, we believe in reading the Bible with a prayerful heart. We call these prayers "prayers of illumination," because we ask the Holy Spirit to light up our reading. A popular prayer for illumination is the one found in Psalm 19:14: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." In this activity, participants will create their own prayer for illumination as they prepare to share scripture with others.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper
- pens
- markers, colored pencils, chalk, or other drawing materials
- (optional) materials for collage: magazines, glue, scissors

Introduce the idea of a prayer for illumination. Explain the significance of praying before reading and sharing scripture. Read Psalm 19:14 as an example of a prayer for illumination. Note that this prayer requests God's guidance on both our understanding and our speaking. Invite participants to write, draw, or collage their own prayer for illumination for use in their personal devotions and as preparation for sharing their stories.

### 8 Breaking the Silence

**Leader preparation:** Read and print "Breaking the Silence." Read John 9:1–41. Read the suggested discussion questions that follow, and choose a few to discuss with your group. When deciding, think about what challenges the participants have faced or are currently facing.

**Supplies:**

- article: "Breaking the Silence." <http://tinyurl.com/3djwgzs>
- Bible

Read John 9:1–41 to the group. Ask a volunteer to read aloud "Breaking the Silence." Both of these stories transform a story of suffering into a story of witness. Discuss this with the group using a few of these or similar questions:



- What difficult times have participants experienced in their lives? In what ways was God glorified in these times?
- It is often hard to see times of difficulty as opportunities to glorify God. Where does the HIV positive woman find the strength to see her tragedy as an opportunity? What difference is her witness making in the world?
- Looking forward, how could participants use times of personal difficulty to witness to God? What skills or attitudes do they need to practice in calm times in order to be prepared for this challenge?
- For the man who is blind, testimony happens after he's been healed. What healings have participants experienced? How have they testified to these?
- Both the Gospel story and "Breaking the Silence" have an advocacy component. Jesus used his own powers to heal the man who was blind, while the HIV positive woman used her experience to advocate for others. What people around us need advocacy? How might our actions toward those in need testify to God's glory?

### 9 Journaling Our Story

**Leader preparation:** Throughout history, many religions have used icons both as expressions of faith and devotional objects. Coming out of the Reformation, our faith tradition doesn't typically use icons as items for veneration. However, we have a deep appreciation for the power of art as an expression of faith for the artist and an inspiration for others. The artist who painted "Hopi Virgin Mother and Child" is a Roman Catholic priest who often paints biblical stories in Native American settings. In this activity, participants will practice using art as a way of interacting with scripture. The process of journaling helps participants discern their story, as well as practice giving testimony by putting matters of faith into words.

#### **Supplies:**

- artwork: "Hopi Virgin Mother and Child," <http://tinyurl.com/fp-uccr>
- "'Hopi Virgin Mother and Child' Journaling Prompts," Attachment: Activity 9

Display the artwork "Hopi Virgin Mother and Child" by John Giuliani. Note that the painting is done in a style that is typical of icons, but the Native American depiction is nontraditional. Using the information found in the leader preparation section, briefly summarize the UCC's history of using traditional icons and other forms of art. Give each participant a copy of the handout "'Hopi Virgin Mother and Child' Journaling Prompts" and spend 10–15 minutes in silent reflection and journaling time. Close this activity by encouraging participants to use journaling, or other devotional practices, as a way of discerning their story and preparing their testimony.

### Reflect

Think about your group as a whole. Is there a group dynamic? Does anyone seem to more easily capture the attention of the others? Is anyone frequently overlooked in group activities, whether intentionally or unintentionally? If so, make an effort to balance out this dynamic in your group times and everyday life.

Copyright ©2011 The Pilgrim Press. Permission is granted for use by a single congregation for one (1) year from the purchase date of the subscription. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.



Attachment: Activity 5

### **We Read the Bible as a Book with Special Authority**

We vest the Bible with special authority and honor the testimony of those who have gone before us, not only those whose stories are recounted in the Bible, but also those who have handed those stories down to us. After all, they speak from within the ongoing experience of the community to which we now belong. Each generation can choose to dig its own new wells, but such wells necessarily will be rather shallow. No single generation is capable of more. But there is another option: we can dip into the deep wells that were dug long ago by many generations of the faith community.

Excerpt from *The Bible and the United Church of Christ, How we read the Bible in the United Church of Christ* by Martin B. Copenhaver. ©Writer's Group 2008.



**Attachment: Activity 9**

**“Hopi Virgin Mother and Child” Journaling Prompts**

*Journaling is a powerful way to explore biblical stories, deepen your relationship with God, and practice putting matters of faith into words. Viewing the painting “Hopi Virgin Mother and Child” by John Giuliani, use the suggestions below to journal your thoughts, feelings, and reflections.*

When I look at this painting, my first thought is . . .

I wonder . . .

If I were going to paint Jesus and Mary, they would be wearing . . .

When I look at this painting, I feel . . .

I think the artist’s message (or testimony) is . . .

I believe the story of Jesus’ birth is important because . . .

If I were to describe this painting, I would use the words . . .

This painting enriches or inhibits my own testimony because . . .

# Giving Testimony and Witness



## Exploration: Discipleship

### About this Setting

As a church, we take seriously our call to discipleship. Yet, for many church members, sharing our faith with others is a difficult task. These activities will explore the relationship between discipleship and testimony. How and where does God call us to give witness? When it comes to giving testimony, how can we be faithful disciples? The activities found here are suitable or easily adaptable for youth through adults.

### About this Exploration

When giving testimony and witness, a disciple becomes both learner and leader. In response to God's prompting, disciples serve the community through speaking and acting faithfully.



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Mark 8:27–38****Psalm 25:1–10****Leader Preparation**

Find a place where you can spend a few uninterrupted moments with God. Look around your space. What reminders of God are there? What reminders of God do you carry with you? A necklace, watch, or ring with a Christian symbol on it? A t-shirt or hat from the church softball league? A rock you picked up during a church retreat? The journey of discipleship is a journey of remembrance. We remember the witness we've been given as we seek to understand our own experiences of the Holy. Telling our stories is another act of remembrance. We share with fellow disciples in order to remind each other of the truths we hold. Testimony is not about convincing another, but about strengthening one another for the journey.

*Prayer: Speaking God, all things hang on your very breath, and your speech makes the world come alive. You call us into discipleship to proclaim your story in word and deed. Grant us the grace of community in which we can share and remember. Guide me so that I might share faithfully and, by doing so, love more deeply. Amen.*

**Exploring & Engaging Activities****1 Two-minute Testimonies (Easy Preparation)**

**Leader preparation:** Think about why you come to church. What brings you here each week? Has there been a particular time when you knew that you belonged? If you've just "always come here," what makes you come back? The UCC's commitment is to be "united and uniting, multiracial and multicultural, accessible to all, open and affirming, and a peace with justice church." The diversity present in our denomination creates rich soil in which we can grow as disciples of Christ. In conversation with others, we can explore our experiences and consider how God is working in our church and our world. In this activity, participants will experience both listening and talking in order to consider how God is calling them to participate in the communal work of testimony.

**Supplies:**

- clock or watch
- (optional) paper and pens

Make sure there's enough clear space for the group to stand comfortably. Divide the group in half. (If there are an odd number of participants, you'll need to fill in.) Form two circles of people, one inside the other, with the inner circle facing a partner in the outer circle. (If your group is smaller than eight people, simply divide into pairs.)

Explain that today you'll be giving "Two-minute Testimonies." Invite learners to think about why they worship at this particular church. You may prompt them to think about meaningful experiences, their favorite part of worship, other church activities they're involved in, or how their gifts are used in the community. Have paper available for those who want to jot down thoughts before beginning. Each member will share with a partner for exactly two minutes. Keep time yourself or designate a timekeeper. If anyone runs out of things to say, that person's partner may offer a question as a prompt. Begin by having the inner circle share. At the end of two minutes have the outer circle share. At the end of that round, have the outer circle rotate so that they're in front of a new partner. Begin a new round of two-minute testimonies with the same question, "Why do you come to church here?" This time have the outer circle go first.

After the activity, take a few minutes to reflect with the group about what it was like. *Was it easier to share or listen? What made it easy? What made it hard? How did the first time you shared your story compare to the second time? What could this exercise teach about testimony? What did you learn about testimony by listening to others?*

Note that for some, the challenge of discipleship is to be a good listener to the testimony of others. For other people, the challenge is to share their testimony. Because one of the commitments of the UCC is to welcome all people, from all backgrounds, we have many opportunities to learn about God in the stories of others. Invite each member of the group to consider whether sharing or listening was more challenging. Ask them to practice this aspect during the week, either by asking someone else in the congregation about his or her faith, or sharing a story of faith with another person.



## 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” 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 Unique and Valuable

**Leader preparation:** As a church, we believe that “each person is unique and valuable,” and that God’s will is for “every person to belong to a family of faith where they have a strong sense of being valued and loved.” (You can read this statement, as well as other central beliefs of the UCC, on the “What we believe” section of the UCC website, <http://tinyurl.com/3k7xlmo>.) Think about your group. How do you form a family of faith where all people know they are loved? This can be a challenge for many groups, even within the church. If this is true for your participants, consider following this activity with Activity 7 in this Exploration.

#### Supplies:

- magazines, newspapers, or pictures for collage
- scissors for each participant
- glue
- artwork: “Blind Feeling” by Diana Ong <http://tinyurl.com/fp-apdo>

Display the print “Blind Feeling.” Ask participants for their reactions to the painting. What do they see? Why might there be multiple faces? If no one makes this point, suggest that it could be a depiction of one person in multiple roles. Invite participants to use the collage materials to find about five pictures that illustrate some aspect of themselves. It may be a picture of a person who resembles them, someone who is doing something they like to do, or an object that has special meaning for them. It may be just the smile or the eyes in a picture, or it might be words from a headline

When participants are done with their collages, gather the group together again. Note the variety present in the collages. Explain that part of our testimony in the UCC is that “each and person is unique and valuable.” Because we know that we are unique and valued by God, we are commanded to share that same testimony with others. Have each participant turn to someone nearby and say, “You are unique and valuable.”



### 3 To Know God’s Ways

**Leader preparation:** Read Psalm 25:1–10. Notice the words or verses that speak to you. Practice aloud the steps on the Lectio Divina handout so that you’ll be comfortable guiding a time of prayer. For more information on lectio divina, visit the UCC website.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- candle or another focal object
- tablecloth
- “Lectio Divina,” Attachment: Activity 3
- “Lectio Divina: How to use the Bible as a tool for meditation,” <http://tinyurl.com/27wy354>

Create a focal area by laying the cloth on a table near where the group will sit. You may also include another object, such as a cross or an item from nature, but keep the table simple. If it will work for the group, set this up on the floor and have participants sit in a circle around it. They will need to be comfortable sitting in this position for 10–15 minutes.

Remind the group that a regular prayer practice is vital to our ability to give testimony. In prayer, we encounter God, developing the relationship to which we



are called to give witness. We also find strength for the challenges of discipleship, including the courage to share our story with others. Introduce the group to the practice of Lectio Divina as a traditional way of reading and praying with scripture. If participants are unfamiliar with Lectio Divina, briefly tell them what to expect. Guide the group through a time of prayer using the handout. If they would like more information on using Lectio Divina, direct them to the UCC website.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 4 16 Reasons I'm a Disciple (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Think about why you're a Christian. What message does the gospel offer you personally? What message does it offer the world? Be prepared to brainstorm these ideas with the group. As part of the Still Speaking campaign, the UCC published a series of booklets, each with the theme "16 reasons . . ." The four booklets were "16 Reasons I Love Jesus," "16 Reasons I Love God," "16 Reasons I Love the Holy Spirit," and "16 Ways to Say 'I Love My Church.'" In this activity, participants will create their own poster-style lists in order to explore their reasons for discipleship.

**Supplies:**

- poster board
- pens
- markers

Introduce the group to the "16 Reasons . . ." series. Invite them to create and decorate their own list titled "16 Reasons I'm a Disciple." Display the posters for others to see and perhaps spark each participant's own testimony about life in Christ.

### 5 Where's the Love?

**Leader preparation:** Read the article "Hate Speech on Facebook: Where Is the Love" and view the 2010 Language of God ad.

Think about current technology being used by members of your group, such as social networks, cell phones, smart phones. What messages are communicated? As you discuss the group's experiences of online hate-speech or cyber-bullying, particularly with middle and high school age youth, be attentive to the possibility that members of the group have experienced or are experiencing cyber-bullying. If you have concerns, discuss them with parents and help connect the participant with your pastor, a local school counselor, or someone else who can help.

**Supplies:**

- computer
- (optional) projector for showing the ad
- video: Language of God, <http://tinyurl.com/3o7pyx5>
- article: "Hate Speech on Facebook: Where Is the Love?" <http://tinyurl.com/3b2zntb>

Have a volunteer read aloud the article "Hate Speech on Facebook: Where Is the Love?" For younger youth, consider briefly summarizing the article. Ask participants about their own experiences with cyber bullying or hate speech online. Ex-



plain that a viral ad campaign is one where an organization's message is spread entirely by word of mouth using existing social networks. The 2010 viral ad campaign by the UCC used social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter as well as video sites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Show the "Language of God" video. Discuss the impact of testimony of this type. *As a counter cultural message, how does it impact users who may also be seeing hate-driven messages?*

### 6 Who Do You Say I Am?

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 8:27–38. Be prepared to read the passage aloud to the group. Purchase or make modeling clay. Don't use Play-Doh because you want clay that can be baked or dried into a hard sculpture. If using a homemade recipe, make sure you try it before the session.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- modeling clay

Read aloud Mark 8:27–38 to the group, or have a volunteer read it. Ask the group to think about their relationship with Jesus. Who do they say he is? Invite participants to create a sculpture representing their understanding of Jesus using the modeling clay. There's no right answer; it may be a symbol, figure, or something more abstract.

Once the sculptures are done, bake or dry the clay according to the manufacturer's instructions. Suggest to participants that they keep their sculpture in a place that will help them remember their call to discipleship.

## Sending & Serving Activities

### 7 A Family of Faith (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** How we treat one another is an important testimony to who we are and a witness to our discipleship. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' last command to the disciples is that they love one another as he has loved them. How does your church demonstrate that each person is loved and welcome in the family of faith? Where is God calling you to improve on this walk of discipleship? Be prepared to read John 13:34–45 to the group. For more information on the central beliefs of the UCC, visit <http://tinyurl.com/3k7xlmo>.

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read John 13:34–35. Invite participants to describe a specific time when they felt loved by the church family. After all have had the opportunity to share, have them each find a space to stand in the room. Invite them to think of a time when they were not valued or loved. Have each participant create a body sculpture that captures how this felt. For example, if they felt dejected, they might take a posture of someone who is hopeless: shoulders rounded, head down, face sad. Give the group several moments to get into a position. Invite them to look around and notice the feelings represented. If you haven't done Activity 2 in this Exploration, tell participants that one of our central beliefs is that "each person is unique and valuable," and that God's will is for "every person to belong to a family of faith where each has a strong sense of being valued and loved." Invite participants to find someone else whose body sculpture is similar to their own. In pairs, ask par-



Participants to come up with three specific ways that they can show fellow disciples that they are loved. Ask participants to commit to trying at least one of these ways.



### 8 Unity in Diversity (youth, adults)

**Leader preparation:** Read the story “The Blind Men and the Elephant” on the Peace Corps website. at Familiarize yourself with the formation of the UCC. The sections “An Ecumenical Age” and “The UCC Comes of Age” in the “Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ” are good resources. Go to <http://tinyurl.com/3ac4cny> and use the links on the left to find the sections. Using the handout, cut out an elephant shape for each person.

#### Supplies:

- (optional) “Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ” <http://tinyurl.com/3ac4cny>
- story: “The Blind Men and the Elephant” from <http://tinyurl.com/3esbg9g>
- pens or pencils
- “Cutout of Elephant,” Attachment: Activity 8
- scissors

Ask for volunteers for the following parts: Blind person, numbers 1–7; Narrator; Rajah (the wise person). If your group does not have nine participants, double up on the parts. Give each person a copy of “The Blind Man and the Elephant” and have them act out the story for the group. When they’ve finished, note that this story is often told as a parable about tolerance. However, it is also a story of testimony. It’s only when the seven blind people respectfully share their experience with one another that they can begin to understand the mystery of the elephant.

Explain that ever since the life of Jesus his followers have been divided about who Jesus is and what his teachings mean. Even in the Gospels we see the disciples arguing. By the time Paul wrote his letters, there were clear divisions among followers of Christ. In 1958, the United Church of Christ sought to repair those divisions by bringing together two denominations, both of which already had a history of Christian unity and variety of Christian experience. By sharing our diverse stories, the UCC seeks a deeper understanding of God and witnesses to the world that we are all one in Christ.

Distribute the elephant cutouts. Invite the participants to write on the elephant one belief they have that is important to them. If possible, display the elephants somewhere as a witness to Christian unity.

### 9 Who Do You Say I Am Around the World?

**Leader preparation:** In 2004 our Global Ministries team asked mission partners around the world to write brief essays answering the question, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” Skim the “Who do you say that Jesus is” resources. If your group is small, choose the ones you’d like them to read. Keep in mind that some statements are longer than others; choose ones that will be appropriate for your group to read in the time you have available. Most of this activity will take place in small groups of two to three people. There is a brief time to “report back” to the group at the end, but large group discussion is not the focus. The main goal is for participants to hear the witness of someone in another part of the world. Be sure to allow 5–10 minutes for reading in the small groups.



### Supplies:

- pens or highlighters
- all or some of the following statements, depending on the size of your group:

Hong Kong: <http://tinyurl.com/6dqcrvp>

Africa: <http://tinyurl.com/3uj547t>

East Asia and the Pacific: <http://tinyurl.com/69omzgd>

Haiti: <http://tinyurl.com/3uzjteg>

Middle East and Europe: <http://tinyurl.com/4n46eur>

Latin America and Caribbean: <http://tinyurl.com/63kfsv5>

Explain that Global Ministries is a mission partnership between the UCC and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Introduce the “Who do you say that Jesus is?” resources, noting that the statements were written in 2004 and so will not reflect more recent world events.

Divide the group into small groups of three to five and give each small group one of the mission statements to read. Have participants highlight the key words or phrases used to answer the question, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” Some of the readings are longer than others, so some groups will finish more quickly than other groups. As groups finish, have them discuss:

- How is the country’s understanding of Jesus similar to their own? How is it different?
- What new ideas did you encounter in this reading?
- What did you learn about the country you read about?

Once each group has had the chance to read and make notes, ask small groups to report back to the large group. What descriptions did their country use to talk about Jesus? Affirm that each writer’s context was vastly different than our own. Invite participants to think about how their witness is strengthened by hearing the witness of those in different settings. If time allows, you may also ask the small groups to share their reflections on the small group discussion questions.

## Reflect

Think about the activities you used with your group. What discussion questions sparked the most interest? Consider ways that you can follow up on the energy that was generated. How can you and other members of the group support one another in this journey of discipleship?

---

Copyright ©2011 The Pilgrim Press. Permission is granted for use by a single congregation for one (1) year from the purchase date of the subscription. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.



Attachment: Activity 3

### Guide for Group Lectio Divina

Light the candle.

Say, "Breathe deeply. If you are holding any tension in your body, let it go. If you are holding any thoughts, any emotions, any worries or joys, set them aside for now. Trust that God will hold them for you for this time."

Pray for God's guidance. You may say something like: "Prepare us, God, to hear your word. Make us know your ways, teach us your paths, lead us in your truth."

Read Psalm 25:1-10 one time. Allow a minute of silence at the end of the reading.

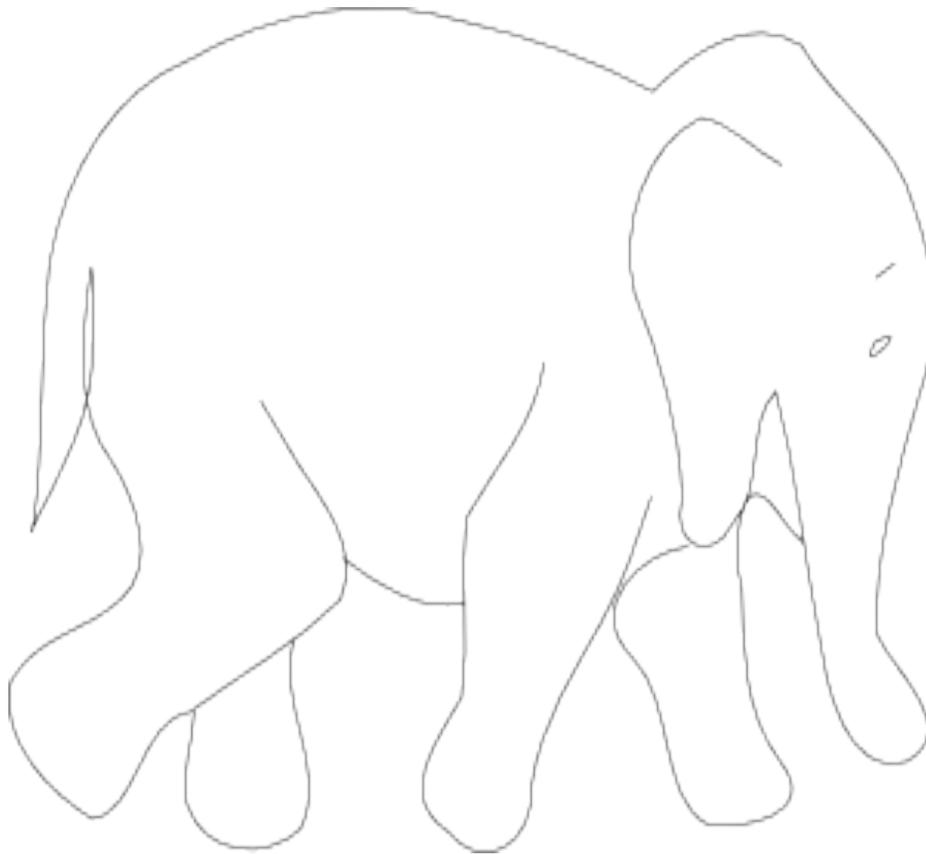
Read Psalm 25:1-10 again. Allow several minutes of silence, or as long as your group can prayerfully tolerate.

Ask participants what words or phrases caught their attention. Where did they hear God's message just for them today? Allow time to share. Before leaving this time of reflection, ask for God's continued presence with the group. You might say something like: "Gracious God, you have gathered us here and blessed us with your word. Grant us now the courage to share your truth with others."



Attachment: Activity 8

**Cutout of Elephant**



# Giving Testimony and Witness



## Exploration: Christian Tradition

### About this Setting

The UCC is one denomination of many within thousands of years of Christian tradition. Stretching even beyond that is the tradition of the Jewish people in which Christianity was born. As we give testimony, we consider the testimony of those who came before us. What did they say about God? How did they say it? The UCC itself encompasses many backgrounds, and its polity allows for each congregation to develop within its own rich tradition. With this in mind, be aware of the histories that exist in your local setting and the background of your participants. These varied histories are rich resources for developing and sharing our own testimonies. They give us a framework on which we can build. Using these activities, participants will explore this framework and think about how it can enrich their own witness.

### About this Exploration

In addition to the witness of scripture, our faith story continues to be told through the holy and imperfect journey of the Christian church. From the day of Pentecost to the current day people have testified to God's work in our lives and in the world. In this exploration, we will look at how the varied expressions of the Christian tradition over time and around the globe shape our testimony and witness today.



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Isaiah 52:7-10**  
**2 Peter 1:16-21**

## Leader Preparation

Take a candle to a calm place where you can be alone with God. Light the candle and let yourself be drawn into the flicker of the flame. Notice the way it dances, the movement of colors in the center, and the play of light in the shadows of your space. The book of Acts tells the story of Pentecost, using the imagery of tongues like fire descending on a gathering of Jesus' followers. Once touched by this holy experience the people burst into speech. Hold this image in your mind, and think of the rich Christian tradition of which you are part. Like those long ago on Pentecost, God has entrusted you with a story to tell. As you prepare to lead the group in this Exploration, trust that the Holy Spirit will guide you and those you lead.

*Prayer: Flame of God, fill my heart with the words to lead your people. Fill their ears with the sound of your voice. Guide us all as we dive into the story of your followers so that we might pass on a proud and faithful heritage. Amen.*

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 Story Train (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Think about how your own story is shaped by the stories of others. How have the stories of the church shaped your testimony? Prepare to share this with the group. Practice teaching someone the game "Chugga Chugga Choo Choo" before the group gathers.

**Supplies:** None

Have the group sit in a circle and explain the game. They'll be doing a progressive-story game where one person begins by saying the first word of the story. The next person adds a word, and so on, around the circle. If sitting around a table, be sure that participants can comfortably tap their own legs. Begin by tapping a moderately paced four-beat tempo on your legs and invite the group to join in. Keeping the rhythm, say "chugga, chugga, choo, choo." As the group joins in, do a few rounds of tapping and chanting to get into the rhythm. Signal to the group to stop chanting, but continue tapping. You (the leader) begin the story by saying a word, then rotate to the left. Use the tapping to keep pace. If a person can't think of a word in four beats, the story passes to the next person. "Once . . . there . . . was . . . a . . . dog . . . that . . . went . . ." Depending on the size of your group, go about three times around the circle. When it's time, close the story on your turn by filling in a brief ending.

Make the connection between the idea of a progressive story and our relationship to tradition. The stories others tell become part of our story, and our testimonies will influence generations that come after us. Share how the tradition of the UCC or your local congregation has shaped you, and invite the group to share their own reflections.

### 2 Testimonies, Not Tests

**Leader preparation:** The UCC recognizes the historic creeds and confessions of the Christian church as testimonies to (not tests of) faith. That is, creeds such as the Nicene Creed or the Apostle's Creed are the witnesses of the generations before us. When we read them or say them together, we hear the voices of other Christians throughout history. We may study them for deeper understanding of our faith and the historic witness, but creeds are not to be used as a litmus test to determine whether a person belongs.

**Supplies:**

- copies of the Nicene Creed, #883 in *The New Century Hymnal*, or <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/> (If your congregation regularly says one of the other historic affirmations, they may enjoy working with that on instead.)
- colored pencils, markers, or highlighters, three for each participant

Introduce the idea of "testimony, not tests" of faith. Note for the group that the Nicene Creed was written in 325 C.E. and has been used in Christian churches around the globe since then. Read aloud the creed, asking the participants to listen for the voices of earlier generations of Christians. Distribute markers and a copy of the Nicene Creed to each person. This time, ask participants to read silently, marking the creed with different colors to highlight points with which they agree, points with which they disagree, and points of which they are not



## 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” 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.

sure. Gather the group together again and ask for any insights they might have had during this process. *What did it feel like to interact with the creed in this way? How was it different than the way you have used it in the past?* If your church uses the creed in worship, ask about the impact this exercise may have on the way they say the creed together. If time allows or the group would like a longer discussion, consider having people share their points of agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty. Practice community testimony by drawing the group together again to say the creed in unison.



### 3 Baptism: Telling Our Story

**Leader preparation:** Read the brief statements about baptism at <http://tinyurl.com/3lf4ptx>, particularly “What does Baptism signify?” and “How does Baptism take place?” Think about baptism in your congregation. When, where, and how does it take place? Think about your own baptism, and be prepared to share the story with the group. Because the UCC shares the sacrament of baptism with infants and children as well as adults, it’s possible that members of the group may not remember their baptism. If possible, tell the group ahead of time that you’ll be sharing baptism stories and ask them to come prepared to tell their own. This will give them the opportunity to look through family photos or ask parents to share the story.

#### Supplies

- artwork: “Baptism” by Hullis Mavrick, <http://tinyurl.com/fp-aphm>

If weather permits, hold this activity outdoors. If you’re near a river or stream, or your setting has a fountain, sit near enough to hear the running water. Show Hullis Mavrick’s painting “Baptism.” Tell the story of your baptism. Ask participants to share their own stories of baptism. If needed, prompt discussion with specific questions, such as: *When were you baptized? By what method?* (Sprinkling, pouring, or immersion are possibilities.) *In what church? By whom? How old were you?*

Affirm that baptism happens in many ways. If you have participants who were baptized in other denominations, affirm their experience also. The UCC, along with many other denominations, believes that in baptism we join the universal church, not a particular denomination or a particular congregation. All Christian baptisms are recognized as valid. For participants who were baptized as young children and haven’t heard the story of their baptism, invite them to ask their parents or church members to tell them the story. Make time at another session to hear those stories. Encourage participants to continue practicing testimony by knowing and telling the story of their baptism.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Stepping into the Story (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read 2 Peter 1:16–21. Most scholars believe that 1 and 2 Peter probably were not written by the apostle Peter as the letters claim. However, this was not an act of deception on the part of the author. Rather, it was in keeping with a tradition at the time: attributing a testimony to a well-known figure. By imagining oneself into the life of another, the author honors that person, demonstrating respect for the testimony that person has offered. This is popular in poetry, music, and art, as well. If you don’t have a print of Jan Brueghel the Elder’s painting “The Adoration of the Kings,” view it at



<http://tinyurl.com/42y35qo>. Note that Brueghel painted the nativity scene in Brueghel's own context of a sixteenth-century village. The hymn "Tú has venido a la orilla" ("You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore"), hymn 173 in *The New Century Hymnal* (TNCH), places the singer at the lakeshore with Peter or one of the other disciples who were called from lives as fishermen. "I Come to the Garden Alone," hymn 237 in TNCH, allows us to imagine ourselves at the garden with Mary Magdalene on the morning of the resurrection. Be prepared to briefly share these examples with the group.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- (optional) *The New Century Hymnal* or other hymnal with either "I Come to the Garden Alone" <http://tinyurl.com/2mazhb> or "Tú has venido a la orilla" <http://tinyurl.com/fp-orilla>
- artwork: "The Adoration of the Kings" by Jan Brueghel the Elder <http://tinyurl.com/fp-uCCR> (optional)

Read 2 Peter 1:16–21. Explain to the group that most scholars believe that 2 Peter was probably not written by the apostle Peter, but by someone honoring his testimony by writing the story of Jesus through Peter's eyes. As examples, remind the group of the hymn "Tú has venido a la orilla" ("You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore") or "I Come to the Garden Alone." (If time allows, sing one of these hymns. Be sure to leave enough time for participants to work on their own projects.) At several points in Christian tradition it has also been popular to paint oneself into a biblical scene, or set a biblical scene in the artist's time. If you have Jan Brueghel's painting "The Adoration of the Kings," point it out to the group. Otherwise, briefly describe the painting or ask participants to name a painting they've seen in this style.

In the UCC, the Bible takes center stage in worship, study, and devotional life. Ask participants to think of a Bible story that has particular meaning for them. It may be a story they identify with, or one that they love hearing time after time. Invite them to imagine themselves in the story and give testimony to the story's truth in their lives by creating a song, poem, picture, or hymn that places them in the context of the story. Close this activity by encouraging participants to continue using this form of second-hand testimony as part of their devotional lives.

### 5 Worship as Witness

**Leader preparation:** Many things happen during congregational worship. Not only is the worship service a time for prayer and praise, it is a form of testimony. This can happen in numerous ways; for example, when we read the scriptures or sing hymns we testify to God's love. It may be a community act of witness, such as saying a statement of faith, or a personal act of testimony, as in the sermon. It may be carefully coordinated, as in a choir anthem, or unplanned, as when spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving are offered. We come each week to gather together as a community that testifies and gives thanks for all that God has done.

Take a moment to think about how the elements of worship impact you. When are you particularly moved? When do you feel centered or refreshed? How do you integrate these life-giving moments into your day-to-day life? Are there aspects to which God is calling you to pay more attention?



### Supplies:

- UCC *Book of Worship* or download the Introduction to the *Book of Worship* (<http://tinyurl.com/3q2hf5t>). On page 1 of the Introduction, find and mark the following sentences for easy reference: “Christian worship is more than a passive response to God’s revelation. It is itself a Pentecostal proclamation. It both announces the good news of God’s love for the entire world and invites all people to share God’s saving embrace.”
- copies of the congregation’s Order of Worship or Sunday bulletin
- pens or pencils

Begin by introducing the *Book of Worship* to the group, explaining that it is the UCC’s guidebook for worship leaders. Read the sentences you marked in the *Book of Worship*. Ask the group for their reactions to that brief statement. How does that compare to the way they’ve understood the worship service?

Pass out or display the order for worship used by your congregation. Ask participants to spend a few minutes analyzing the service. *What “parts” does the service contain? Put a “P” next to times of prayer, an exclamation point next to times of praise and an “S” next to times when stories are shared. It’s okay to leave things blank, or mark something with two symbols.*

As a group, list the places in worship where stories are shared. This will probably include the reading of scripture, the sermon, or times of personal sharing. Other places in the service may be more ambiguous. People may also note that singing, the passing of the peace, Communion, or the call to worship are times of storytelling as well as times of praise or prayer. If no one mentions this, encourage discussion by asking how the participants marked these elements. Did everyone mark them the same way? If so, could they be understood differently?

Looking at the list of “storytelling” moments in the worship service, note how much of the congregation’s weekly time together is proclamation, the act of telling about God. We might also call these times of testimony or witness. Ask the group to reflect on these parts of the service. *Why are they important? Why do we need to hear and tell the stories every week?*



## 6 Announcing Peace

**Leader preparation:** This activity will help participants explore the testimony of two people living in difficult times and places. Read Isaiah 52:7–10. The passage offers a message of comfort to the people of Israel, who are living in exile. Read the brief introduction to Phillis Wheatley on the attachment under “Celebrating Freedom.” Read Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America.”

As you prepare to lead this session, note that for some people Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” may raise uncomfortable issues. Some may hear her particular expression of Christian faith as justification for slavery or the denigration of African traditional religion. Note that discomfort if it arises, or if you sense participants may be feeling it. Explain that testimony often arises out of difficult experiences when we seek to understand how God moves among us. The poem should not be interpreted as a policy statement, but as a good example of someone discerning God’s work in her life, even in tragically unjust circumstances.

**Supplies:**

- newsprint, whiteboard, or poster board
- marker
- “Mission Moments,” Attachment: Activity 6
- Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” <http://tinyurl.com/3qzx2zu>
- Bible

Draw a line to divide the newsprint or whiteboard in half lengthwise. On one side, write “Isaiah.” On the other side, write “Phillis Wheatley.”

Briefly introduce the group to the biblical context of Isaiah, as described in the preceding leader preparation section. Read aloud Isaiah 52:7–10. Discuss with the group what themes emerge from this passage. Affirm each answer and write them on the newsprint or whiteboard.

Then introduce the life and work of Phillis Wheatley. Read aloud “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Now ask the group to brainstorm the themes that emerge from the poem. List these on the newsprint or whiteboard in the “Phillis Wheatley” column. Once the group has finished, draw attention to the similarities between Isaiah’s testimony and Wheatley’s. If it hasn’t come up, note for the group that Isaiah and Wheatley were both giving testimony in a time of great difficulty. *What was the testimony they gave?* Close by noting how powerful testimony can be to those facing hardship. Ask the group to consider where God might be calling them to witness to God’s love.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 By the Lakeshore (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** This activity is worship-centered. It will be particularly suited for use as a closing activity. If you’re using this resource in a retreat setting, this activity would also work well before a break or when moving from large to small group times.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- tablecloth
- candle in holder
- lyrics to the hymn “Tú has venido a la orilla” for each participant—173 in *The New Century Hymnal* or online at <http://tinyurl.com/fp-orilla>
- (optional) fishnet
- (optional) sea shells or river rocks

Create a worship space by covering a table with the cloth. If you’re using them, lay the fishnet and shells on top of the cloth. Place the candle in the center.

Lead a prayer for illumination, using this prayer or one of your own: *God of the fish, and God of the fishers, you have called us by name. Open our ears now so that we may be refreshed by your words, and make us ready to follow you with the joy of one who has been called by name.*

Read Matthew 4:12–22. Ask participants to share any insights they’ve gained from your activities in this session. How is God calling them to be “fishers of



people”? As they practice giving testimony, where might they be called to share their stories about the UCC?

Sing “Tú has venido a la orilla.” If this is your last activity of the session, offer a closing thought and blessing for the group. You might say something like: *We have been called and we have answered. Let us go now to share our stories, confident in the grace and the courage of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Holy Spirit.*

## 8 The God of All Times

**Leader preparation:** God is present in all times and places, presenting the church the opportunity and challenge to witness to God’s work in new and exciting ways. Engaging the church community and the world at large through new media is one way we attest to God’s ever-present nature and share it with each generation. This activity gives participants the opportunity to practice testimony in the “virtual world” of the Internet.

Set up a blog, or ask a technically savvy member of your church to do it. Be sure that each member of the group will have access to post. Many sites have free blogs and simple steps to set it up. If your church has a website, consider linking it to the website, or ask the webmaster to do it for you.

### Supplies:

- Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, <http://tinyurl.com/3cw3gr4>
- computer and Internet access
- access information for the blog you set up
- paper and pens for individual ideas and thoughts
- tech-savvy person to help the group use the blog

Introduce the Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, saying something like: The Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ affirms “the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. For each generation, we are charged with finding ways to express our faith in the Christ who lived and moved in God from the very beginning.” Explain that one way we express our faith for each generation is to make use of the technology created and used by each generation.

Ask participants to think about where they see God working in their church. To get them started, you might ask questions such as these:

- Why do you worship here?
- What is your favorite part about the service?
- What people are particularly meaningful to you?
- Why do you think of this church as “your” church?
- Has there been a time when you celebrated something in the church?
- Has there been a time when the congregation has helped you through a difficult situation or event?

Introduce the group to the blog you’ve set up. Use a computer to show them how to connect and, if time allows, begin posting their testimonies. Make sure each member knows log-in names, passwords, and all other important access information. Ask participants to post their story sometime during the week. Ensure that everyone can access the Internet and is comfortable doing so. Have those who are more comfortable with the technology help others, or have participants



handwrite or type their stories and ask someone to post the stories to the blog. Once the group has had the opportunity to post, share the blog with the rest of the congregation. Invite the rest of the congregation to join in the online conversation by posting their own stories. Remind those who use the blog to be mindful of privacy and security concerns on the Internet. It may be helpful to set guidelines asking participants not to use full names, locations, or other identifying information. Particularly if you're working with youth, consider using a password to limit access to the blog to those within the group or congregation. It will still be a practice of testimony for participants to share their stories online with one another.

### 9 Testimony as Poetry

**Leader preparation:** If you haven't used Activity 6, "Announcing Peace," read the brief introduction to Phillis Wheatley's work found at <http://tinyurl.com/3s294a9>. Read Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought to America from Africa." It may also be helpful to read the introductory information on Attachment: Activity 6.

#### Supplies:

- paper
- pens or pencils
- "Testimony as Poetry," Attachment: Activity 9
- Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought to America from Africa," <http://tinyurl.com/3qzx2zu>

If you have not done Activity 6, tell the group about Phillis Wheatley. Read aloud "On Coming to America," and take a few minutes to discuss initial reactions. *What is Wheatley's testimony?* This question may raise uncomfortable questions. Wheatley's experience of becoming a Christian, for which she is expressing gratitude, is inseparable from her experience of being sold into slavery. You may need to remind participants that her testimony is not offered as a general statement of support for slavery, but as a personal testimony about God's presence even in the midst of suffering.

After you've done Activity 6 or introduced Phillis Wheatley and read "On Coming to America," invite participants to create their own poem of testimony. If you have participants who enjoy reading or writing poetry, allow them to work independently. For others, guide them through the process using the handout "Testimony as Poetry."

For those who are willing, consider sharing the poems with the congregation. They could be read during worship, printed in the bulletin or church newsletter, published on the church website, or displayed together on a bulletin board, perhaps along with Wheatley's poem.

## Reflect

Look back on the activities that you used with the group. How did the group deepen their understanding of tradition and testimony? Where were the "aha" moments for you? For group members? If these moments seemed to occur with certain types of activities, consider tailoring future sessions with this group to include more activities of that type.

Copyright ©2011 The Pilgrim Press. Permission is granted for use by a single congregation for one (1) year from the purchase date of the subscription. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.



Attachment: Activity 6

## Mission Moments

### Celebrating Freedom

This month we celebrate Independence Day and the heritage of freedom practiced by our United Church of Christ forebears. The Pilgrims came to North America seeking religious freedom. Pastor John Robinson urged them to keep their minds and hearts open to new ways, as God “has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy word.” As the Congregational churches grew in New England, they aimed to create a model for a just society lived in the presence of God. In an early experiment in democracy, each congregation was a self-governing unit electing its own pastor.

In 1640, the Congregationalists published the *Bay Psalter*, and a free press was established in North America at a time when the European press was silenced for criticizing King James. Today Pilgrim Press, an imprint of the United Church of Christ, is the oldest publishing house in the United States. The first published African American author was Phillis Wheatley, a young member of the Old South congregation who was freed from slavery soon after her poetry was published in 1773.

Just four years later, the British occupied Philadelphia, seat of the rebellious Continental Congress. The British planned to melt down the Liberty Bell to manufacture cannons, but members of the Old Zion Reformed Church in Allentown hid the bell under the church floorboards. They saved the bell, still a famous and beloved symbol of liberty.

The desire to worship God freely led to these and many other acts in support of the freedoms we know today.

God is still speaking.

### Here Is the Church, Here Is the Steeple

“Heavenly Parent, your loving warmth comes to us in the sun’s first rays and the moon’s first beams. You have placed us at the edge of Your sea where we can walk paths like those Christ walked. By Your grace, may we always give thanks, always contribute joyfully, and always offer our energies to bring hope and compassion for all Your creatures. Amen.”

—A prayer from Eastport Central Congregational Church, UCC

The steeple at Eastport Central Congregational Church, UCC, in Eastport, Maine, receives the sun’s light each morning before any other UCC church—and possibly before any church in the country!



### Attachment: Activity 6 (continued)

Church steeples are enduring parts of the landscape in much of the country. In many places, they rise above everything else in town—symbols of hope, with meaning for church and community members alike.

Like 95 percent of all UCC churches, Eastport Central Congregational Church was built before 1960—*well* before 1960, in the case of Eastport. Church buildings, and their steeples, often require costly maintenance. Fortunately, in the United Church of Christ, our congregations can turn to the Cornerstone Fund, which provides loans to churches when, frequently, banks turn them down. Not only that, the loans—for refurbishing, rebuilding, and refinancing debt—are provided at the lowest possible interest rate.

While the primary mission of the Cornerstone Fund is lending, the loans are made possible through investments by UCC congregations, Associations, Conferences, and individuals. If you are interested in investing in mission this way, visit [www.cornerstonefund.org](http://www.cornerstonefund.org) to learn more.

God is still speaking.

#### **Church Camp: Brought to you by Our Church's Wider Mission**

What percentage of Our Church's Wider Mission goes for administration? That's a question often voiced by church members wishing to give responsibly. It can be difficult to answer. Keep reading and you'll see why.

Lives can be shaped or changed at church camp. Ask the campers and you'll hear:

"I really enjoyed who I was at camp. I was able to be myself."

"We had a special sense of community where everyone could feel loved and included."

"Camp gave me a safe place to talk about my beliefs and questions, surrounded by others doing the same thing."

"Great friendships and great memories."

"A place to grow in trusting God and appreciate God's creation."

"Music, music, music. Discovering my gifts."

And a camp counselor says, "A week at church camp can have as much impact as a year of Sunday school. A lot of kids will remember camp as one of the most significant faith events in their lives. I do."



### Attachment: Activity 6 (continued)

Conference camp trustees work creatively to promote camp usage and set registration fees to cover costs—directors and staff, training volunteers, processing registrations, food, equipment, program supplies, insurance, facilities upkeep, and remodeling and additions. Our Church’s Wider Mission may supplement fees, paying staff salaries, promoting camp, providing camp scholarships, or balancing the camp budget when needed. Is that administration? Or is it program? If it builds faith and transforms lives, does it matter?

God is still speaking.

#### **The Integrity of God’s Creation**

“One reason we pay so little close attention to the separate natural world around us is that it has always been there and we presume it always will. As it disappears, its primal importance will be clear—in the same way that some people think they have put their parents out of their lives and learn differently only when the day comes to bury them.”

—Bill McKibben

Science and religion have often been at odds. But today we must forge a new alliance of these former adversaries around the urgent issue of global warming.

Scientists can measure the destructive effect of human behavior on climate—as they have repeatedly done in recent years. But science cannot motivate people to change their harmful ways. It takes a passionate faith to move people in new directions—and only religion can provide that.

The idea that taking care of the environment is a religious duty is hardly new. In the beginning, according to the Book of Genesis, God placed humanity in charge of creation. But, by and large, God’s people have not been good stewards of God’s creation.

It is up to us as people of faith to pledge our assistance to the leaders in religion and science who are calling for public policies to reduce climate change while there is still time to make a significant difference, and to encourage the lawmakers who are working to make global stewardship the law of the land.

God is still speaking.



## Attachment: Activity 9

### Testimony as Poetry

Think of a concrete experience of God's presence. Write a phrase about it at the top of your page.

Remember what was going on around you. Was it loud? Quiet? Were you alone or with people? Was it dark or light? Write a brief phrase describing the setting.

What color would you use to describe your experience of God? Write it down.

How did it happen? Was it a gentle answer to a long night of prayer? Or did the experience of something outside yourself burst in on you when you didn't expect it? Write it next to the color.

Write a brief phrase describing the feeling of God with you. How did you respond? Did you rush out to work on something you felt called to do? Meet a difficult situation with a new peace? Go about your daily life with a new resolve? Write a brief phrase capturing your reaction.

Looking back on the experience, how would you describe it as a taste, smell, or touch? Is it a sweet memory?

Lastly, how has it impacted your life today? Do you recall that time often, or has it slipped away until now?

At this point, your poem may look something like this:

In the night,  
The only light from the blinking clock,  
Blue descended,  
Filling me with peace.  
To rest and wake renewed,  
Like the overpowering taste of wine,  
It lingers on my tongue.

With the basic outline in place, rework the poem until you're comfortable that the essence of your experience has been captured in a new way.

# Giving Testimony and Witness



## Exploration: Context and Mission

### About this Setting

Like “testimony,” “mission” can be a loaded word. Some will hear these words with images of debates or a desire to convince others that our particular way is the right way. Because of this, they may be reluctant to engage in either testimony or mission. In the UCC, we see mission as a conversation and partnership. We do not do mission *to* others; we do mission *with* others. From this vantage point, we have a broad circle in which to give and receive testimony. In these activities, participants will explore how sharing testimony with others enriches their own faith.

### About this Exploration

We live in circles of context, one of the richest of which is the local church. This Exploration investigates webs of relationships that call us beyond family, workplace, congregation, or community out to a mission of sharing and listening with all people. Testimony can be a tool for building justice when we engage in dialogue beyond our usual circles. The body of Christ is strengthened when our witnessing is intertwined with those whose situations are vastly different from our own.



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Matthew 5:13–20**  
**Romans 8:31–39**

## Leader Preparation

Take your journal or a piece of paper and find a place where you can sit uninterrupted for a few minutes. Think through a typical day and make a list of the people with whom you come into contact. Draw or imagine them in circles around you. Nearest to you are the family and friends, farthest from you are the strangers you pass on the street. Imagine having the time for a deep conversation with each one of them. What stories would you tell? What part of your life would you share? What would you want to know about them? When we widen our testimony to include those beyond our innermost circle, we share ourselves in a new way. To what extent does leading this group challenge you to share yourself across unfamiliar circles? How is God using this experience to prepare you to move even further out of your comfort zone? As you prepare to lead this Exploration, know that each person is experiencing varying degrees of comfort and discomfort. Trust that God is working with all persons as they continue on their faith journey.

*Prayer: Living God, like a wildfire you are always on the move. You call us ever outward to share stories of your love with those near to and far from us. Give me courage and wisdom to guide this group. Open our hearts to new possibilities, our mouths to share your story, and our ears to hear your good news again and again. In Jesus name. Amen.*

## Exploring &amp; Engaging Activities



## 1 God Speaks Everywhere (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Go to the Ho-Chunk page on the website for the UCC Council for American Indians. Read the introductory paragraph on the page, the story of the Winnebagos and Professor H. Kurtz. Notice that the Winnebagos acted first; Kurtz's response was out of gratitude for their life-saving actions. Be prepared to share this story with the group.

**Supplies:**

- story from <http://tinyurl.com/3vetsss>

Tell the story of the Winnebagos and Kurtz. Invite responses from the group. *Where do you see God acting in this story? What testimony did the Winnebagos give through their actions? We know very little about Professor Kurtz from this story. Invite the group to imagine that they are in his place. What testimony would you give after this experience? How is this story a story of mission? How might this story challenge or expand our understanding of mission?*



## 2 The Sower

**Leader preparation:** Art can be a powerful medium for taking us into another context, creating space for us to encounter the Divine. Before leading this session, practice reading aloud the guided reflection. Leave enough silent time for the group to think after each question or "I wonder" statement. Don't rush. However, be aware of the group's ability to experience and tolerate long silent periods without losing focus. In order to better understand the connection between churches in the Reformed tradition, view the flyer from the World Communion of Reformed Churches at <http://tinyurl.com/3mjooa9>. You may also be interested in the UCC news story about the 2010 conference <http://tinyurl.com/3ocac3y>.

**Supplies:**

- artwork: "The Sower" by Vincent van Gogh, <http://tinyurl.com/fp-uccr>
- means to display the art: easel, frame, tape, or digital image and projector
- "Guided Reflection for 'The Sower,'" Attachment: Activity 2

Introduce the group to Van Gogh's "The Sower." Briefly explain that Van Gogh had a strong heritage in the Reformed tradition. The UCC is one denomination within the larger family of churches who claim this heritage. Van Gogh and his father were both ministers in the Dutch Reformed church. Today, Reformed churches around the world honor their shared history by participating in the World Communion for Reformed Churches. Van Gogh's work often reflects biblical imagery as well as his concern for the welfare of humankind.

Explain that art can be one avenue for us to experience God, deepen our witness, and respond to God's call. Lead the group through the guided reflection, using the handout "Guided Reflection for 'The Sower.'"



## 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 Activities,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding Activities,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving Activities.” 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.



### 3 Showing Our Faith

**Leader Preparation:** Print the attachment and cut apart the lists. Make sure there are enough lists for half of the participants to have one.

#### Supplies:

- “List of Everyday Items to Describe,” Attachment: Activity 3
- scissors
- stopwatch, kitchen timer, or clock

Divide into pairs. If there’s an odd number of participants, make a group of three, or fill in yourself. Explain that one person in each pair will be given a list of everyday items. That person’s job is to describe each item without naming it or using pictures or gestures of any kind. The other partner will try to guess what is being described. The goal is to guess as many items as possible in 1 minute without skipping ahead on the list. Have partners sit or stand back-to-back. Ask partners to decide who will describe and who will listen. Give the “describer” the list of items. When all pairs are ready, set the timer and have them begin.

At the end of 1 minute, or when someone finishes, gather the group together again and ask them how it went. *What was it like to describe these everyday items? What was it like to listen?*

Point out that we rely on many things to communicate. While words are extremely important, we also use actions, pictures, and gestures. One reason that mission is an important part of church is because it’s a visible way that we give testimony. When we engage in acts of service, we show our story as well as telling it. The UCC engages in mission in many ways. Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) supports UCC efforts locally, nationally, and internationally in order to witness to the life-changing power of God to all people.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Language Barriers (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** In the early 1800s, German immigrants to the United States settled in the Midwest. Although existing churches, including the Congregational churches, tried to welcome them, the language barrier made it difficult for German Christians to settle into existing American churches. Instead, immigrants formed their own churches where they could worship and serve. These churches later became the Evangelical Synod, an American denomination that honored its German heritage and sought to meet the needs of German immigrants. You can read more about the Evangelical Synod, one of the predecessor denominations to the UCC, on the UCC Short Course in History at <http://tinyurl.com/42yphxg>.

Find the lyrics to “Jesus Loves Me” in two to three languages at <http://tinyurl.com/3e3zfqz> (or hymn 327 in *The New Century Hymnal*). Practice leading the song in the languages you’ve chosen, or ask someone in the group to be prepared to lead the music. Consider using German for one of the verses.

#### Supplies:



- lyrics to “Jesus Loves Me” in two to three languages, <http://tinyurl.com/3e3zfqz>, or hymn 327 in *The New Century Hymnal*
- (optional) The German Evangelical Synod, <http://tinyurl.com/42yphxg>

Tell the story of the German immigrants to the United States and the formation of the Evangelical Synod. Ask participants to think of ways that we give testimony to those whose language is different from ours. *How do we express our faith when language is a barrier? What are universal signs, symbols, or actions that can help people understand what we believe?* There are no right answers, but art, music, and acts of service are all possibilities. *In your context, who are the people who may struggle with language or cultural barriers? Who provides English as a Second Language (ESL) classes? How can your church witness to them?*

### 5 Salt for the Earth

**Leader preparation:** The UCC has a history of justice and advocacy work that stretches back into each of its predecessor denominations. We believe that working for God’s realm on earth is a crucial part of our testimony. It is impossible to talk about God without also acting. This is why our national advocacy ministry is called the Ministry of Justice and Witness; we cannot work for one without also working for the other. In this activity, participants will explore the transformative nature of testimony.

#### Supplies:

- magazines or newspapers for collage
- glue
- scissors
- blank paper
- hymn: “You are Salt for the Earth, O People,” <http://tinyurl.com/fp-salt>

Distribute the magazines and newspapers. Ask participants to practice testimony by creating a collage depicting the realm of Christ. As participants work, point out that they are transforming an everyday, worldly message into a holy message. As a church, our vision is that Christ is active among us, transforming our world into the realm of God. We believe that making the world a just and peaceful place is inextricably connected with giving witness. When participants have finished their collages, sing together “You are Salt for the Earth, O People.”

### 6 A City on a Hill

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 5:13–20. Think about the metaphors Jesus uses. Which is your favorite? Which seems most confusing to you? Think about the similarities and differences among the three metaphors and be prepared to guide learners as they explore them. If possible, have available items representing each metaphor. Most homes, churches, or meeting spaces have a light of some kind and salt. If you can’t find a model or picture of a city on a hill, be creative in making one. Small buildings like those found in children’s toys or a Christmas village can be set on a raised surface, or a skyline can quickly be cut from construction paper.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- candle, lamp, or flashlight
- bowl of salt
- picture, model, or another representation of a city on a hill  
(see <http://tinyurl.com/42cfcpr>)

Display the light, salt, and city on a hill. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 5:13–20. Point out that Jesus gives three metaphors to think about: salt, light, and a city on a hill. Divide the newsprint or whiteboard into three columns, labeling them “salt,” “light,” and “city on a hill.” Invite the group to list the qualities of each item. This passage is a familiar one for many people; encourage them to use all their senses to think differently about the properties of each item. You might ask, “What is \_\_\_\_ like?” Stick with the metaphors for several minutes, digging deep to uncover their rich meanings. If needed, prompt further discussion with open-ended questions such as: *When/where/how do you use salt or light? What would a city on a hill be like? What would it be like to live there?*

Review the lists you’ve made and note the similarities and differences between each item. For example, a light and a city on a hill are both highly visible, while salt may be hidden in food or water. Salt and light have in common that it takes only a little bit to make a big difference. Once you’ve taken a moment to notice some commonalities, point out that all three items are noticeable. As Christians, our lives are meant to be noticeable—we are living testimonies. One way that the UCC and its earlier denominations have tried to live out this calling is through advocacy ministries. Taking a stand against injustice, as in the antislavery movement, civil rights, and ordination of blacks, women and gays and lesbians is often highly visible and sometimes lonely work. Encourage participants to remember the metaphors Jesus gives when they engage in mission and testimony on behalf of others.

## Sending & Serving Activities

**7 Held Together in God’s Love (Easy Preparation)**

**Leader preparation:** Think about the divisions that exist in the world. What about in your city or town? Your workplace or school? Your church? Read Romans 8:31–39.

**Supplies:**

- newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- pen or chalk
- UCC Statement of Faith, <http://tinyurl.com/3yv2kdr>

As a group, spend a few minutes naming and listing on newsprint or a whiteboard the things that divide people in our world. If an additional prompt is needed, you might ask them to think about the news stories they’ve seen recently. *Over what things do people argue, fight, or kill?*

When a list has been created, invite participants to quiet their hearts and minds to hear God’s good news. Read Romans 8:31–39. Point out the difference between the divisive spirit we sometimes see in the world and the love that God extends to all people as scripture testifies. Remind participants that one part of our tes-



timony is that “God calls us into the church to . . . proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory” (from the UCC Statement of Faith). Discuss the importance of witnessing to God’s love for all people. Some questions to consider:

- How is testimony the glue that holds people together in God’s love?
- As people who are called to join in God’s unifying work, how can our testimony make a difference in a divided world?
- What testimony do we give when we encounter divisions among people?

### 8 Attentive to the Word

**Leader preparation:** Find “A Statement of Commitment” online. Read the portion titled “A Church Attentive to the Word.” Print that portion so that you can share it with the group. Being attentive to the Word means both listening to and speaking it. Think about how you balance those two aspects in your own life.

The group will use cotton swabs and baby oil to paint on construction paper. Set up for this by pouring a small amount of baby oil in several containers so that it’s accessible for each participant. This activity isn’t particularly messy, but keep in mind that baby oil can stain wood and clothes. If you’re using a wood table, consider lining it with newspaper to protect from spills.

#### Supplies:

- construction paper
- baby oil
- small containers, small paper cups, baby food jars, or shallow bowls work well
- cotton swabs or small foam paint brushes
- “Toward the 21st Century: A Statement of Commitment,”  
<http://tinyurl.com/349lf85>

Invite the group to think about what it means to be a child of God. *How does it feel?* What responsibility does it bring? Allow a few minutes for comments before asking the group to think about what the world would look like if all people understood themselves as children of God. Imagine for a moment the realm of God on earth.

Draw participants’ attention to the baby oil and cotton swabs. Ask each group member to create an image that reflects a vision of God’s realm. It may be a symbol, a word, or a picture. Have participants take their papers to a sunny window, lamp, or other light source so that they can see that their images become translucent.

Gather the group together again and introduce “Toward the 21st Century: A Statement of Commitment.” Explain that the statement was adopted by the General Synod in 1993. The first part of the statement was a commitment for the UCC to be “a church attentive to the Word.” As part of this commitment we are called to listen for God in day-to-day life, Bible study, worship and prayer. We are also called to share our stories about God. Read the last paragraph from the section “A church attentive to the Word” to the group. Explain that we have been given a vision of God’s love for creation so that we can share it with others. Serving others in mission is one way we testify to the ideals of the Christian faith. Just as the baby oil made the paper transparent, our stories and actions can help people see the world differently.



### 9 All the Children of the World (youth)

**Leader preparation:** When we do mission, we do more than good works. We show people that they are valuable members of God's creation. Our mission acts become acts of testimony. In this activity, participants will think about ways that they can engage in acts of testimony.

**Supplies:**

- felt in several colors, enough for each person to have about a 10" square
- scissors (sharp enough to cut felt)
- fabric glue
- permanent markers or fabric pens that contrast with the felt colors
- white or light colored chalk
- hymn: "Jesus Loves the Little Children," <http://tinyurl.com/3tq7cpr>

For an easy preparation activity, use construction paper instead of felt.

Note for participants that we often think of mission as something we do. However, mission is also a testimony we give. By embracing those in need or those who are different from us we testify to God's love for all of creation. We recognize that our witness has power. This is why Our Churches Wider Mission (OCWM) uses the motto "changing lives." Ask group members to think about how they can show God's love by reaching out to others in their day-to-day lives.

Have participants use chalk to trace their hand on the felt. On their handprints write one way they can show God's love to someone outside their usual circle. After participants have listed one idea on their handprint, ask them to cut around their own handprint. Glue the handprints together in the shape of a circle to create a wreath of handprints. The wreath can be hung as is, or attached to a larger piece of fabric for stability. Encourage participants to think about incorporating a new act of mission into their lives in order to testify to God's far-reaching love. Close this activity by singing "Jesus Loves the Little Children."

## Reflect

Think about your group as they moved through these activities. What seems to be each person's gift in the practice of testimony? Who are the better listeners than talkers? Who love to tell their faith story? Know that both of these are strengths, and embrace these different personalities. Think about ways you can encourage each person to live fully into her or his gift of witness.



**Attachment: Activity 2**

**Guided Reflection for 'The Sower'**

*Invite the group to sit or stand in a comfortable position where they can see the painting. Lead them through the following reflection, keeping a slow pace and a moderate and gentle voice.*

As you look at the painting, let yourself relax into the feeling of Van Gogh's work.

Notice what element captures your attention. I wonder what God could be saying to you in that element.

I wonder where the sower is going.

Who might live in the house behind the sower?

I wonder if the sun is setting or rising.

I wonder who the sower is. Is the sower male or female? Young or old?

Why is the sower alone?

What feeling do the colors evoke for you?

Imagine yourself into this painting. Where are you?

What is God saying to you through this work?

*As the guided reflection ends, give the group a few minutes to jot down any thoughts they had that they would like to return to in individual prayer.*

*Invite participants to share thoughts they had about the experience. What connections did they make between this reflection and the practice of giving testimony? Affirm all answers.*



Attachment: Activity 3

List of Everyday Items to Describe

<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>
<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>
<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>	<p>Apple Telephone Cartoon Money Milk Dolphin Flower Perfume Map Quilt</p>

# Giving Testimony and Witness



## Exploration: Future and Vision

### About this Setting

In the UCC we look forward to the time when all God's people will live together in peace. We seek, too, to honor the creation with which we are entrusted. These forward-thinking ideas propelled our ancestors into action in various times and places. By knowing the witness they gave, we honor their courage. By exploring their witness and considering the needs of the world around us, we discern how God is calling us to move forward with our own testimony.

### About this Exploration

A glimpse of God's realm becomes possible every time we practice testimony and witness. In this Exploration we move daily to express the presence of God through language, symbols, and rituals, as we increase our hope and vision for ourselves and future generations. By sharing our experiences of God's love day to day, we pass on the all-encompassing grace that sets a foundation for the church of tomorrow. Acknowledging that the practice of testimony and witness is an ongoing process, we focus our attention upon God's continuing revelation, as we move toward the future "kin-dom" (the realm of God where all are kin).



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18**  
**Philemon 1:1–25**

## Leader Preparation

Paul speaks of a life and hope that is centered in God. In our lives, staying focused on the realm of God is a challenge. What practices help you maintain this focus? What can you do to help yourself achieve the goal of keeping the faith? One way you are serving God is in your leadership of this group. What do you need to do for yourself to make the most of this time? Take three minutes to journal or pray over these questions, asking God's guidance as you reflect.

*Prayer: Timeless God, fill me with a sense of your purpose. Bless the members of my group as together we learn to live faithfully. Guide each of us so that we live more fully into the future you've created. In Jesus' name. 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 Activities," at least one from "Discerning and Deciding Activities," and at least one from "Sending and Serving Activities." The first activity in each category is designed for "easy preparation" (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 Dear Church (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Philemon 1:1–25. Paul's letter contains four parts: the greeting (verses 1–3), thanksgiving (verses 4–7), the request (verses 8–22), and the closing (verses 23–25). His words were an inspiration to the early church that treasured and kept his letters, and to the modern church that continues to read them thousands of years later. In preparation for guiding the group, think about what message you would send into the future.

#### Supplies:

- paper
- pens or pencils
- Bible for each participant
- (optional) music, any type the group enjoys

Ask for several volunteers to read Philemon. Each volunteer can read four to five verses, stopping whenever they are comfortable. (Younger youth often enjoy stopping in the middle of a sentence to catch the next reader off guard. If doing this activity with younger people, you might include in the instructions that they can stop whenever they want, or make it into a game to see if they can "catch" the next reader.) The passage is quite long; provide Bibles to all participants so they can follow along, even if they choose not to read aloud.

Explain the impact that Paul's letters have had on churches throughout history. Invite participants to write their own letter to the church of the future. What elements of faith do participants hold dear? What would they like to see the church do in the future? What impact has the church and/or denomination had on them today? Point out the four-part format of Philemon as a possible way of structuring their letter. If you chose, play music while the group works.



### 2 Creation's Testimony

**Leader preparation:** Print and cut apart copies of "A Litany for Creation's Testimony," Attachment: Activity 2. Practice leading "Shout to the Lord," or ask a group member to be prepared to lead it. If you don't have access to *Sing! Prayer and Praise*, an Internet search for "Shout to the Lord" will turn up several sites with the lyrics. If your group would prefer a traditional hymn, "For the Beauty of the Earth" would work well. It's hymn 28 in *The New Century Hymnal* and can also be found online or in many other hymnals.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- "A Litany for Creation's Testimony," Attachment: Activity 2
- tablecloth
- a variety of natural objects: plants, leaves, stones, sticks, flowers, if you'll be doing this session indoors
- cross for the table if doing this session indoors
- lyrics to "Shout to the Lord," 126 in the *Sing! Prayer and Praise* songbook or <http://tinyurl.com/3d99gwf>; or "For the Beauty of the Earth," 28 in *The New Century Hymnal* or <http://tinyurl.com/25hcbwk>
- (optional) candle

If possible, move to a quiet area outdoors for this activity. If you're doing this



- 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.

activity indoors, set up a focal area on a small table using the tablecloth, cross, natural objects, and Bible. Invite the group into a time of prayer and reflection. If you're using a candle, light it now and draw the participants' attention to the objects on the table.

Explain that there is a long tradition of experiencing God in the natural world. From the Bible through modern times, people have often found that the beauty of nature inspires a deeper connection with God. Psalm 19 is one example. Today, the UCC continues to value the earth as part of God's creation. Our Outdoor Ministries offer the opportunity to experience God's beauty in nature, while our Environmental Ministries work toward better stewardship of the earth. Tell participants that this activity is a mini-outdoor experience in order for them to listen for God's voice in nature.

Distribute copies of "A Litany for Creation's Testimony," and divide the group in half. Read the litany together. Ask participants to think of a time they've experienced God in nature and reflect silently for a few moments on what they learned about God from that experience. In other words, to what did creation testify? Spend a few moments in silence. This will vary by group; groups accustomed to silent reflection or that are naturally introspective may spend several minutes in silent reflection. Groups that haven't had much experience with silent reflection may spend only a minute. Draw the group together again and offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the earth as a testimony of God's glory. Invite the group to think about ways that they can work to ensure that the earth continues to be a source of inspiration and connection to God. End this activity by singing "Shout to the Lord" or "For the Beauty of the Earth."

### ③ Language Matters

**Leader preparation:** Think about the ways your church typically uses language for God. Think of a few titles or descriptions commonly used in prayer and worship. Be prepared to share this with the group to prompt discussion if needed. Read the "Inclusive Language Covenant" online.

Find a video of the "For unto Us a Child Is Born" chorus of Handel's "Messiah." If you have Internet access in your setting, the YouTube clip of the London Symphony Orchestra is easy to use. The chorus is about 4 minutes long; you'll need to plan on using about a minute of it. If using the London Symphony Orchestra performance, you can begin the clip at about 1:00 and end at 2:10. (If you're looking for this section on another performance, don't worry about being exact. You're simply trying to hear enough of the music to listen a couple of times to the names given to Jesus.) Find the section you want to use and have it ready to play. You may choose to use the whole chorus, but be aware that it is often difficult to listen to several minutes without becoming distracted if participants are not also watching the performance.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- video: "For unto Us a Child Is Born" chorus from Handel's "Messiah," from <http://tinyurl.com/3s3x4p> or another recording
- "Inclusive Language Covenant," <http://tinyurl.com/5rtpzu6>, for reference
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers

Introduce the idea of "names" to the group. Point out that the names we give things have power. Listen to the "For unto Us a Child Is Born" chorus of Handel's "Messiah," or read Isaiah 9:6. Note the number of names given to the Messiah in



this one piece. Ask the group to list names or titles for Jesus, then broaden the list to include names, titles, or descriptions for God. If the group is stumped, another way to phrase this question is: “When you pray, how do you address God? It may include “our Father,” “Wisdom,” “Holy God,” “Creator,” “Tock,” “Tedeemer,” “Christ,” “Spirit,” and so forth. Write the names on the newsprint or whiteboard as the group lists them.

Explain to participants that when we give testimony, we try to convey a truth about something that is too big to describe in just a few words. The reason we call God by so many names is because God is too big to fit in just one description. In the UCC, we recognize that language has power to help people draw nearer to God. This is why we covenant to use inclusive and expansive language for God. The Inclusive Language Covenant does not seek to “throw out” traditional ways of talking about God, but rather to broaden our understanding of God’s relationship with us. By doing so, we honor our biblical tradition and commitment to scripture. In the Bible, God is spoken of in many ways, including a mother who comforts her child (Isaiah 66:13), an eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11), and a fortress (Psalm 91). Encourage the group to witness to God’s abundance by using many ways to talk about God. Invite participants to choose one name or description that they don’t normally use and include it in their devotional life throughout the next few days.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Running the Race (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Be prepared to tell the story of *La Amistad* uprising and the work of abolitionists to come to the defense of the captives. The March 2008 “Mission Moments” bulletin insert is a good summary. Online, scroll down to the second page, titled “The Amistad’s Legacy at the Church House.”

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- “Mission Moments” (March 2008), <http://tinyurl.com/3hwcaj4>

Read 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18. Note for the group that one way we prepare for the future is to know our past. Tell the story of the captives on *La Amistad* and the Congregationalist abolitionists’ involvement in seeing the captives freed and returned home. The Christian Churches, another predecessor denomination, worked heavily to abolish slavery in the early 1800s, eventually becoming a church where blacks were welcome in leadership roles. Their actions were a testimony to God’s love for all people. Remind participants that this antislavery stance wasn’t popular at either time, even among fellow Christians.

Discuss: *Where are people struggling in today’s world? In America? In your town or city? How is your group or congregation lending their testimony to those in need? In other words, how are they putting their story into action?*

Invite participants to imagine themselves “at the finish line” of their lives. Of what will they be most proud in the “struggle for justice and peace”? Suggest that participants keep this question in mind as they consider where God is calling them to give testimony on behalf of another.



### 5 On the Fringes

**Leader preparation:** Find a print of “The Blind Pedlar” by Robert Mcgregor. In this activity, participants will be role-playing the peddler and the young girl. Decide where you’ll hold this session in order to give them room to walk around. If possible, hold this session outdoors to capture the feel of the painting.

Find two colors of scrap paper. On each color, create slips of paper that are numbered with half the total number of people in the group. For example, if there are ten people in your group, write the numbers 1–5 on each color of paper. You’ll be using the colors to put people in character and the numbers to match them with a partner.

**Supplies:**

- artwork: “The Blind Pedlar” by Robert Mcgregor  
<http://tinyurl.com/fp-aprm>
- slips of colored paper cut into pieces and numbered for half the number of your group

If possible, hold this activity outdoors. Otherwise, choose another large area where there is room to walk around. Display “The Blind Pedlar.” Draw participants’ attention to the relationship between the man and girl. Note that both exist on the “fringes” of typical society. Young children and the elderly or disabled people are not often included in day-to-day life, yet our faith affirms that God is present to all regardless of their worldly status.

Divide the group in half by having participants draw a slip of colored paper. Assign one half of the group the role of the girl, the other half the role of the man. Next, create pairs by having participants find the other person with their number. Each pair now has one “man” and one “girl.” Invite them to imagine themselves as the people in the painting and to role-play their walk. *What would they talk about to each other? What is their testimony? Where do they experience God in the world? How would they like others to see them?*

Gather the group together again to share any insights they had. To prompt discussion, you might ask them how they felt in that role, how they imagine their witness would be different or the same, or if there was anything their partner said that was particularly meaningful. Note for the group that the UCC is a church of extravagant welcome. We intentionally welcome those who are different from us not only as a witness to God’s love, but so that we might learn from the range of their experiences. Listening to the testimonies of others increases our own understanding as we grow into the future God has created for us.

### 6 All Creation Testifies

**Leader preparation:** People of faith from Old Testament times to modern day have experienced God in creation. Psalm 19 describes this experience as nature’s testimony. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus even says that if people failed to praise God, the stones themselves would cry out (Luke 19:40). In developing our own testimony, then, we should take seriously the message creation has for us. This activity will help participants explore a new vocabulary to talk about God, drawing on the witness of God’s creation.

Think about how participants experience nature in your area. Is there somewhere near your meeting location that you have access to the natural world? It doesn’t need to be grand or completely secluded; a small church garden will work, as will a city park. If there are no options for holding this session outdoors, or if the weather is uncooperative on the day you’ve planned this activity, gather a



selection of items from nature. Try to be as varied and abundant as possible. Leaves from different trees and plants, pinecones, rocks, seashells, flowers, sticks, or branches are all easy to bring indoors. Pictures of natural landscapes are freely available on the Internet, or in many magazines or photography books. Gather as many as you can in order to represent the variety present in nature.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and pens for each participant
- (optional) a collection of natural objects and pictures

Introduce the group to the idea that we learn about God in the natural world. If you haven't done Activity 2, "Creation's Testimony," read Psalm 19:1–4 to the group. Point out that Jonathan Edwards, eighteenth-century Congregational minister and a central figure in American Christian tradition, often wrote of the power of nature to point toward God. John Calvin, a strong figure in the Reformation and central figure for the Reformed traditions, also wrote of the testimony present in the natural world.

Invite the group to walk or sit quietly for 5–10 minutes, observing the world around them. What testimony do they hear, see, touch, or smell? Ask them to jot down descriptions of God based on what they experience. If, for example, a flower catches their attention, what might it teach about God's nature? Participants may wish to use the format "God is..., like a..." Examples: "God is seeking, like a bumblebee," or "God is strong, like an ant."

Encourage the group to be creative without censoring themselves so that they may discover a new way of talking about God by exploring creation. Before moving to the next activity, practice giving testimony by gathering in pairs to share one new way of describing God as discovered in nature.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Time Capsule (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** In this activity, the group will begin gathering items for a time capsule. Think about how to best handle this in your setting. When and where could you place the time capsule? What might be your timeframe for opening it? Consider your options for a traditional time capsule, with plans to open it in fifty or one hundred years. Is your congregation in a time of building, renewal, or celebration? Could a time capsule be dedicated as part of a community event? You might also consider less traditional ways to place a time capsule. If working with younger youth, create a capsule that they'll open when they graduate from high school. Invite adults to create a time capsule for their children, or for their own group to open in a few years.

**Supplies:**

- paper for collecting group ideas
- marker or pen
- (optional) article: "St. Charles Church Opens 100-Year-Old Time Capsule"  
<http://tinyurl.com/3jb83nu>



Read or summarize the article “St. Charles Church Opens 100-Year-Old Time Capsule” (optional).

Scriptures, church documents, art, and songs are like a time capsule of testimony from our ancestors in faith. Discuss what kind of testimony the group would like to leave to those who come after them. Create a list of things participants would want people to know. Next, begin a “scavenger hunt” to find items that represent the group’s witness. For example, if one wish for future generations is that they know that God loves them, what physical reminder might be included in the capsule? If the group did Activity 1, “Dear Church,” they may consider putting their letters in the time capsule.

Develop a plan to follow through on the work of creating a time capsule. *Who will bring items to the next meeting? Who will find a location for the time capsule? When will it be placed and who will set that up? What container will we use, and who will bring it?*

## 8 Called to Wholeness

**Leader preparation:** This activity works best if you’ve done Activity 5, “On the Fringes,” as it builds on ideas introduced in that activity.

Read the General Synod Resolution “Called to Wholeness in Christ: Becoming a Church Accessible to All.” Think about your church’s accessibility to people of all ages and abilities. Read the activity and decide ahead of time whether you’ll have the group walk through certain areas of the church and how you’ll divide them. Think about possibilities for future meetings to explore the issue of accessibility in more depth.

### Supplies:

- paper for each participant
- pen or pencil for each participant
- clipboard, notebook, or other hard, portable surface to write on
- General Synod Resolution “Called to Wholeness in Christ: Becoming a Church Accessible to All,” <http://tinyurl.com/3k477ae> (link opens a pdf file)

Explain that the act of listening to the witness of those different from ourselves is both an act of receiving testimony (hearing their stories) and giving testimony (witnessing to our belief that God values all people). Briefly introduce the General Synod Resolution “Called to Wholeness in Christ: Becoming a Church Accessible to All,” particularly the first two statements. Give each person paper, a clipboard, and a pen. Take a walk through the church. If your building is large, you may wish to assign sections to individuals, or work together in one area. As they walk, participants should view the church through the eyes of someone different from themselves in age or ability, such as: *How might a child experience this? How would a person who is blind experience this? A person hard of hearing? A person in a wheelchair, or with a cane? A family with a stroller?*

Gather the group together and note their observations. *What could be changed in order to make the space accessible for more people?* Don’t filter ideas at this time, simply take a few minutes to reflect on the experience and brainstorm together. Set aside time to revisit this issue and develop a plan for expanding the church’s welcome. Plans may include a session to study the “Called to Wholeness” resolution and recommendations, developing a service project to address identified needs, sharing the exercise and suggestions with the church council or governing board, researching accessibility laws, or visiting other facilities to see how they’ve gone “above and beyond” basic requirements to create an atmosphere of welcome.



## 9 A City on a Hill

**Leader preparation:** Gather four pieces of paper. Write one of these sentences across the top of each paper:

- We are stewards of creation; we take care of the earth.
- We love one another.
- We welcome strangers.
- We help those in need.

Practice leading “Siyahamb’ ekukhanyen’ kwenkhos.”

### **Supplies:**

- four pieces of paper
- pens or pencils
- hymn: “Siyahamb’ ekukhanyen’ kwenkhos,” 526 in *The New Century Hymnal* or at <http://tinyurl.com/fp-siyahamb>

Divide participants into four groups. Give each group one piece of paper. In their groups, ask participants to think of concrete ways that they can meet the goal they’ve been given. Once participants have had time to work in small groups, have each group share their ideas.

Explain that the UCC and each of its predecessor denominations have sought to live out the Christian life in a way that gives witness to God. A popular quote from the Puritan John Winthrop, one of the ancestors to the Congregational denomination, was that the Puritans would “be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” The Christian Churches, over 150 years later, named “Christian character” as one of their six guiding principles for the church. Today, the UCC seeks to continue this tradition of living in a way that testifies to God’s goodness. Encourage participants to carry on this tradition of living faithfully and giving testimony through everyday actions. Sing “Siyahamb’ ekukhanyen’ kwenkhos.” Add one verse for each of the four topics: “We are caring in the light of God,” “We are loving in the light of God,” “We are welcoming in the light of God,” “We are helping in the light of God.”

## Reflect

Reread the activities that you used in this session. What activities were challenging for you to lead? Were there places that made you uncomfortable or unsure? Think about those times. What strategies did you use to meet the challenge or overcome the discomfort? Note these in your mind so that you can use these strategies when you encounter similar challenges at a later time.

---

Copyright ©2011 The Pilgrim Press. Permission is granted for use by a single congregation for one (1) year from the purchase date of the subscription. No part of this download may be reproduced or transmitted—beyond the group using these materials—in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the written permission from the publisher.



**Attachment: Activity 2**

**A Litany for Creation's Testimony**

**Right:** The sky is telling the glory of God  
**Left:** and the earth proclaims God's handiwork.  
**Right:** Day after day pours out speech  
**Left:** and night after night declares knowledge.  
**Right:** There is no speech, there are no words;  
their voices are not heard  
**Left:** yet their voices go out through all the earth  
**All:** and their words to the end of the world.

*(Based on Psalm 19)*

**A Litany for Creation's Testimony**

**Right:** The sky is telling the glory of God  
**Left:** and the earth proclaims God's handiwork.  
**Right:** Day after day pours out speech  
**Left:** and night after night declares knowledge.  
**Right:** There is no speech, there are no words;  
their voices are not heard  
**Left:** yet their voices go out through all the earth  
**All:** and their words to the end of the world.

*(Based on Psalm 19)*

**A Litany for Creation's Testimony**

**Right:** The sky is telling the glory of God  
**Left:** and the earth proclaims God's handiwork.  
**Right:** Day after day pours out speech  
**Left:** and night after night declares knowledge.  
**Right:** There is no speech, there are no words;  
their voices are not heard  
**Left:** yet their voices go out through all the earth  
**All:** and their words to the end of the world.

*(Based on Psalm 19)*