

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Seekers may be exploring affiliation and meaning in a particular community of faith. They may be new members of that community and still wrestling with fresh questions. Or they may be members of longer duration who are facing wonderment and choices. Seekers dwell with questions. Seeking can be exciting and unnerving. Faith lives continually bump up against new discoveries. We are en route rather than at a destination.

About this Exploration

The concepts of blessing and letting go are not new to us. We see them in the natural world, and we experience them in our lives all the time. How we choose to relate to them, however, makes all the difference. In this Exploration we will discover how others learned to let go, thereby opening space for something new to emerge in their lives, and how they were able to find the blessing in both the challenges and the joys of life. As we explore this faith practice, we will consider the implications of blessing and letting go within our communities, churches, and the world. We may discover the freedom available to us when we are able to both embrace and release in a world of constant transition.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
1 Samuel 16:1–23
Ephesians 3:14–20

Leader Preparation

Life's losses, disappointments, and unexpected twists and turns often bring us face-to-face with grief. That grief can appear bottomless and without end. The anointing comfort of new possibility often arrives in surprising moments, places, and people, offering healing when it is least expected. You can glimpse that in Samuel's grieving struggle over God's rejection of Saul as king and the subsequent identification of David, the youngest of a long line of brothers, as that future king. In the perpetual flow of letting go and blessing that washes over our days, we are nudged to grow into a deepening spiritual understanding. This is understanding from the inside out, from the heart, from the mystery of Christ's love set loose in and among us. Within this understanding, the load of letting go does indeed lighten and even brings evidence of blessing.

Prayer: Abide with me in the heartbreak of my grief, O God. Give me the strength to endure and the wisdom to recognize times of release and moving on. Open my eyes and my heart to the abundance of both daily and extraordinary blessings, where your sustaining surprise is known within me and through me. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Anointing Oil (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Anointing with oil was a common biblical practice. It indicated sacredness and consecration. Anointing also was used for health and well-being. Use a light, plant-based oil, such as olive oil, which would have been used in biblical times. Be aware if anyone in your group is allergic to a specific oil or scent.

Supplies:

- oil
- small dish
- Bibles

Say a little about biblical anointing. Ask two volunteers to read aloud 1 Samuel 16:1–23, alternating verses. Invite questions and comments about this story. Discuss the role of anointing in indicating God's choice, in setting aside David for service to God and to the people. Discuss:

- The text indicates that Samuel mourned for Saul for a long time. What examples can you give of extended periods of mourning after deep loss or disappointment? When have you experienced a rhythm of grieving that couldn't be hurried, no matter how hard you tried?
- Name a time when the pain of loss in your life was lifted or relieved when you least expected it.
- What do you suppose it was like for Jesse to have one son after another rejected as the future king? (Parents in the group may identify moments of pain when their children didn't receive what they hoped they would.)

Find out if anointing is a new or familiar ritual for participants. Invite group members to recall any experiences they have had with anointing. Pour a small amount of oil in a small dish, and invite participants to anoint the back of the hand of the person next to them. Or, if they prefer, they can anoint their own hands. After the anointing, ask: *What did you experience in the experience of anointing? To what extent did it remind you of ways in which your lives are anointed with God's blessing?*

2 Shifting Identity

Leader preparation: We identify ourselves in ways big and small, in ways obvious and subtle. Consider all of David's different identities in 1 Samuel 16:1–23. Across a lifetime and through our letting go, many earlier identities are shed. Part of why grief is so challenging is because it involves a shift in our identity. We are no longer who we were. We are someone new. Underneath all the shifts is our identity as the beloved children of God. Jesus' blessing of the children is a blessing of each one of us, whoever we are, as a child of God.

Supplies:

- artwork: "Christ Among the Children," by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401

Session Development

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

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

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bible
- timer or watch with a second hand

Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 16:1–23. As a group, list on newsprint or a whiteboard the different identities David has in this passage. (For example, son, brother, shepherd, musician, future king) Wonder together if David could be all those identities at once or if one had to give way to another.

Form pairs and ask partners to sit facing one another. For two minutes, one person in each pair is the speaker and the other the listener. The speaker makes a series of “I” statements about aspects of who they are, how they identify themselves. (For example: “I am a mother.” “I love the color blue.” “I am from North Dakota.” “I am funny.”) The listener listens quietly—this is not a conversation. At the end of two minutes, partners switch roles. After two more minutes, ask pairs to talk with each other about what it was like being the speaker and being the listener. As time allows, ask pairs to report any key insights to the entire group.

Show the artwork “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde. Invite conversation about this question: *No matter how you have identified yourself, how do you feel blessed as a child of God, or how do you struggle to know that blessing?*

③ No Need to Supersize

Leader preparation: Review Proverbs 30:24–28. Here we learn, as we do with young David, that wisdom and potential don’t always reside in the most obvious or the biggest. Attending to the small can yield us great blessings. Small steps frequently move us through seasons of letting go too. Continue to fine tune your attention to see the small things around you more clearly.

Supplies:

- 4 small nature items (an acorn, a bird’s egg shell, small berries, fresh spices, stones, sticks, leaves)
- Bible

Gather the group outside if weather and your location allow. Read Proverbs 30:24–28 aloud and lay out the four small items you brought. Ask participants to think about how each of these is part of a bigger picture. Name other small items and actions that make something happen or change a reality for other things far greater than their size. Continue your discussion by asking group members to exchange ideas about how to become more attentive to the small things around us and to consider how these things are significant in the larger scheme of things.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Larger and Lighter than Before (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: We often become aware of blessing when there is a sense of expansion and lightening in our lives. When our perception of blessing shrivels, it is common to feel both a shrinking of possibilities and a heaviness.

Supplies:

- balloons
- permanent markers

As participants arrive, give each person several balloons to stretch out, fill with air, and tie. Once balloons are inflated and tied, invite group members to use permanent markers to write on balloons something that is expanding their lives. (For example, size of family, paycheck, waistline, hope, number of friends.) Have them write one idea per balloon.

Now it is time for fun. See how many balloons they can keep in the air, batting them back and forth among themselves. Continue as long as participants have breath and energy. Shift from balloon play to discussion about the motion of release and blessing in their lives, using the following questions:

- How do people receive blessings as they release smaller truths and are led into larger truths?
- What are those blessings?
- How is receiving God's blessing like entering an open and expansive place?
- When has letting go of something resulted in the leavening and lightening power of blessing?

5 Lighting Up Life

Leader preparation: In one sense, blessing is an illumination. It puts a person, a situation, a struggle, or a question into a whole new light.

Supplies:

- an assortment of light sources, such as flashlight, candle, spotlight, table lamp, lantern

On the table in the space where you meet, place the assortment of light sources you gathered. Darken the meeting space as much as possible. Begin by lighting one light source and welcoming participants to assume a comfortable position. Slowly light the other items, one at a time. As you do them, speak this guided meditation at a gentle pace:

Imagine you are carrying some sort of light into a shadowed place.
You haven't been able to see clearly what lies in the shadows.
You think you know, but you are not certain.
Check in with your feelings. Are you scared or feeling something else?
Carefully approach the shadows with your light.
One step follows the step before.
And then, with your light in hand and standing close, you can finally
see what wasn't clear before.
Surprise!
What lies in the illumination now?
What kind of blessing is there with the clarity of sight?
How are you going to interact with what you now see?

Invite group members to re-enter this time and place when they are ready. Invite those who would like to tell about their reactions to this experience to do so.

Close with a participatory prayer circle in which any who wants to speak can share a prayerful line of thanks for illumination.

6 The Weight of It

Leader preparation: At the core of who we are and how we approach life is the reality of how we shoulder and lug around our difficult losses. The losses are often not a choice, but our manner of carrying them is always a decision we make. How are we going to pick them up for the time they are ours is up to us.

Supplies:

- for each pair of participants: a plastic grocery bag filled with heavy items such as books, rocks, cans of food; two empty grocery bags; and a backpack or shoulder tote
- poem: “Heavy” by Mary Oliver, from her volume *Thirst: Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007) or online at <http://digitaldoorway.blogspot.com/2007/11/poem-by-mary-oliver.html>

Form pairs. Have partners take turns doing the following steps:

1. Carry the bag of heavy items in one hand, walking in a circle around the room for one minute.
2. Repack the same items into two grocery bags, one for each hand. Carry the two bags, walking in a circle around the room for one minute.
3. Pack the items in a backpack or shoulder tote and carry it, walking in a circle around the room for one minute.

After each person has completed this activity, read aloud Mary Oliver’s poem “Heavy.” Allow a quiet moment, and then ask: *In what ways might you choose to carry the heavy weight of a painful time of letting go?*

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Strengths Assessment (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: What is the difference between an assessment of strengths and an assessment of needs? Are you more likely to begin with what you have or what you lack? As people face loss and blessing, their resilience is grounded in their strengths. Consider young David, an unlikely candidate to be king. His strengths emerge over time as shepherd, musician, healer, warrior, and one full of speech and presence.

Supplies:

- writing paper
- pens or pencils
- Bible

Life tosses all people unexpected curve balls. Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 16:11–13. Together discuss whether or not young David anticipated being chosen as king. *What strengths did he take with him into his new role?*

A resource people can rely on each day is one’s own resilience. Resilience involves both a sense of internal strength to cope and thrive no matter what and the perception of a core of greater goodness in one’s experience. Invite participants to nurture a sense of resilience by beginning a strengths assessment. Distribute writing paper and pens or pencils. Allow a few quiet moments for group members to begin listing the strengths they carry into a new role or situation. Affirm

that nothing is too small or too ordinary to list. Ask them to tell what it is like to focus on, name, and draw from their own strengths.

Challenge participants to take the papers with them and continue to add to the assessments during the week. Ask them to bring their lists back the next time you meet. At that time, discuss together the blessing of the various strengths they have identified.

8 With a Small Boy

Leader preparation: Locate a copy of the children's book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Australian author Mem Fox (La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller, 1985), or arrange for the group to view a telling of this story at the link given below. Stories are strong vessels for important truths. This is a story with intergenerational appeal. At 96, Miss Nancy has endured her share of losses. The love that she shares with Wilfrid Gordon wrests blessing from the depths of one of those losses. He embodies that incomprehensible, indwelling, transformative love known in Jesus the Christ.

Supplies:

- storybook: *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox; online reading of this story, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usnOEnTXabw>
- Bible

Gather the group and read aloud or listen to the story *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Together identify and discuss the interweaving of blessing and loss in this delightful tale. Let it remind you who you can be with and for one another, even when you or others don't expect it.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 3:14–20. Pause for a few moments of silence. Then have another volunteer read the text again. Discuss:

- How does the story of Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge reveal a love akin to that described in the Ephesians 3:14–20?
- What comparisons might people draw between a faith community and the community of friends on which Wilfrid Gordon relies as he seeks to recover what Miss Nancy has lost?
- What occasions of giftedness and blessing have you received in caring for a person with dementia?

9 Go, My Children, with My Blessing

Leader preparation: In anticipation of singing “Go, My Children, with My Blessing,” locate this song in a hymnal or songbook in your church or at the link given below. If needed, recruit someone to play this song and lead the singing for your group. Decide whether to make the paper-doll chains ahead of time or to have participants make them.

Supplies:

- song: “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” by Jaroslave J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm>
- supplies for making paper-doll chains: paper, scissors, pencils
- directions for making paper-doll chains, http://www.ehow.com/how/5747238_make-connecting-doll-chain.htm

- markers
- artwork: “Christ Among the Children,” by Emil Nolte, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401

Display “Christ Among the Children.” Sing together “Go, My Children, with My blessing,” a lilting hymn of benediction set to a Welsh melody. Discuss:

- What explicit and implicit examples of blessing and letting go fill the stanzas of this hymn?
- What gifts to children of all ages are described in these words?

Distribute the paper-doll chains made ahead of time, or give instructions for group members to make their own. Invite participants to use markers to label the figures in their chains with the names of children—either individuals or groups—whom they want to hold in blessing. Invite group members to speak aloud the names and groups of children they have written on their paper doll chains. Together, think of how you might extend God’s blessing to these children.

Reflect

What losses did group members mention in the activities you used? How much were they able to dwell with both the pain and the possibility that change, loss, and grief open up in their lives? To what extent are they aware of anointing moments when God’s presence amidst struggle is a goodness to grab hold of? Do you think group members see their faith community as a place where such goodness and its blessings can be embodied? Why or why not? Which activities were most effective with your group?

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Seekers and new members may or may not have much biblical knowledge. Check with group members about their basic familiarity with the Bible. Do they know how to locate a passage? What, if anything, has been their prior experience with scripture, both positive and negative? What understandings do they carry about how texts can be used and interpreted in modern life? If they have significant questions about modes of biblical interpretation, you may want to consult with a pastor about the most helpful responses.

About this Exploration

The practice of blessing and letting go is integral to human existence, for to be alive is to experience change. The biblical narrative is, in large measure, the story of God's people and their history of leaving behind and journeying toward. Just as the Hebrew people are about to enter a new land, they must say goodbye to Moses and embrace a new leader. The end of one chapter often means the start of something new and completely different. We negotiate these times of transition by grieving the losses, letting go, and moving onto new adventures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his disciples to let go of old understandings and embrace a way of life based on love and grace. As we grapple with the scriptures, we recognize that to live is to let go, that to live fully is to bless and be blessed.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Matthew 5:43-48

Leader Preparation

We are part of a story much longer than the span of our lifetime. Generations stretch before and after us. If we are open, we are blessed with perspective on where our living and being fit into a larger whole. After so many years of leading an often reluctant people, Moses did not step onto the land long promised. He had to let go of that fulfillment as his people had to let go of him. Moses was blessed, however, to see that land shortly before death. There had been such difficult challenges along his way, as there would be for Jesus and for us. One of Jesus' most challenging texts is his teaching about loving one's enemies. That reality may seem as distant to us as the land Moses could only glimpse. What will be necessary for us to journey into that teaching?

Prayer: Make your presence known, O God, when I am disappointed in my expectations, breathless because of grief, or overwhelmed with what is asked of me. Help me to find that center where I can trust your goodness. Grant me the grace to live into a future beyond where I have been. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Be of Good Courage (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Courage is rooted in the word "heart." Its early meaning was "to align with one's core." That alignment is a great resource when expectations are dashed, pain is intense, or learning is difficult and demanding. The blessing of courage can carry us through both expected and startling moments of letting go. Note that The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith highlights God's promise to gift us with "courage in the struggle for justice and peace." Also, Mark Nepo's *Facing the Lion, Being the Lion* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2007) is a provocative book on courage.

Supplies: None

Gather the group and tell this story: There was once a group that published a periodical called *Courage*. Decades later, the periodical no longer exists, and the lives and work of the group members are scattered widely. But they continue—whenever they are in touch face-to-face, on paper, or by electronic screen—to greet one another with one word—courage.

The word "courage" is rooted in the word "heart." The early meaning of "heart" was "to align with one's core." Work together to list words you associate with the word "courage." Discuss:

- If courage is about aligning our lives with our deepest and truest selves, what inside of us would allow us to love our enemies, as Jesus taught?
- How have you experienced courage like this extended to you or by you?
- What example can you think of from the public world where such courage has been extended?

Invite participants to practice the "courage" by greeting with one another as you depart. And then invite them to try out this greeting throughout the week and to report back in your next session on the responses they received.

2 Sympathy Cards

Leader preparation: Letting go is always accompanied by some level of grief. Grief, like the letting go it accompanies, may be large or small. Our North American culture is fairly grief phobic. We are not well versed in grief.

Gather a wide assortment of sympathy cards, either new ones or ones you or your family have received. Seek to have a broad range of images and texts.

Supplies:

- assorted sympathy cards, at least one for each group member
- artwork: "Sisters in the Wind," by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401

Spread out the assortment of sympathy cards on a table in your meeting space. Gather the group around the table and take a moment for each person to select a card. Allow a few moment for participants to read their cards, and then discuss:

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

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

- What picture of death and grief is painted by the card you chose?
- If you received this card after a family member died, how much comfort would it offer? Why?
- Of the cards here, which do you think are most helpful and which seem of little use?

Display “Sisters in the Wind.” After a few quiet moments, invite conversation about this image by asking the following questions:

- What do you think happened just before this image was captured?
- What images of blessing or letting go do you see in this work?
- How do you think these sisters sense they are accompanying each other? How do you think these sisters sense they are alone?
- What word might someone speak to these girls to comfort and strengthen them?
- How does faith sustain or uphold you in grief, alone or with others?

3 Place and Perspective

Leader preparation: God leads Moses up from the plains to the mountain where he can gain perspective on all that has been and what lies ahead for the Hebrew people after his death. Different locations might provide a change in perspective for us, as well.

Gather an assortment of photos of a wide variety of landscapes and geographical features. You might find these photos in magazines, photos you have taken, calendar art, or on the Internet.

Supplies:

- assortment of photos of a wide variety of landscapes and geographical features
- Bibles

Lay out the assortment of photos on a table in your meeting space. Invite participants to gather around the table and take a moment to look at the photos. After a few moments, ask each person to choose one photo to hold. Invite group members to be seated with their photos. Distribute Bibles and ask everyone to turn to Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Form two groups and read the passage aloud, alternating verses between groups. Ask if any of the photos being held remind participants of this reading. If so, how?

Moses was able to see the blessing of a particular land that he would not enter. *Do you think Moses drew more strength or experienced more sadness from seeing the land from afar? How so?*

Invite group members to consider how the places in their photos might widen their perspective, sharpen their attention, or help them to notice what they haven’t seen before, especially in a challenging situation. Ask volunteers to tell about their observations. End the conversation by discussing the following questions:

- What place helps you widen your perspective or sharpen your attention?
- How and when has the natural world led you into the blessing of healing?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Dinner Party Placemats (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In the 1970s artist Judy Chicago designed a large piece of art titled “The Dinner Party.” Each place setting commemorates an important woman from history. The settings consist of embroidered runners, gold chalices and utensils, and china-painted porcelain plates. For more information and pictures of her work see <http://www.judychicago.com/gallery.php?name=The+Dinner+Party+Gallery>. Inspired by her work, this activity invites participants to make placemats for specific enemies to be invited to a hypothetical dinner party.

Supplies:

- plain white placemats, or large pieces of construction paper
- markers, glitter pens, and other decorative art supplies
- Bibles

Distribute Bibles and form two groups to read aloud Matthew 5:43–48, alternating verses between groups. Ask:

- From what you know of the world in Jesus’ day, what enemies might Jesus be referring to?
- How hard would it be for Jesus’ followers to sit down to eat a meal with these people?

Tell participants about the Judy Chicago art project. Spread out the placemats and art supplies, and invite group members to imagine a dinner party to which you invite your enemies. These might be personal enemies or enemies identified by your community or nation. Wonder together how the design on the placemats might describe the person or group, welcome the person or group, and perhaps shift the relationship with that person or group. Acknowledge that it is very challenging to imagine breaking bread with someone who has hurt us, betrayed us, or done us wrong.

Allow time for each person to create one placemat. In your church find a table or a bulletin board on which you can display these placemats..

5 Peace Fleece

Leader preparation: Go to the website for “Peace Fleece” to learn about this international collaboration of sheep herders and those who work with yarn (knitters, crocheters, weavers, felters, spinners, quilters). Their mission is to be a “yarn company committed to helping historic enemies cooperate and prosper through trade.” Click on “Our Wool Journey, 1985–2011” to read about their story. Plan a way to tell the story of this organization to members of your group. If you have people in the group or others in the congregation who work with yarn, invite them to come to class and practice their craft during this activity.

Supplies:

- Bible
- website: “Peace Fleece,” www.peacefleece.com

Tell the group the Peace Fleece story. Have a discussion about how others become one’s enemies. Ask if any in your group, like Peter Haggerty of Peace Fleece, have come to question the enemy status of another person or group. Invite group

members to recall any examples of people who have figured out ways to unite people who have been held apart by the category of “enemies.”

Scripture in our Christian tradition sets us on journeys toward new life, transformation, attitudes, and actions we wouldn’t have considered before. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 5:43–48. Wonder together about what it takes to follow this teaching. Discuss:

- Peace Fleece is in its twenty-sixth year. What is necessary for such efforts to continue over the long haul?
- How do stories like Peace Fleece open up possibilities for other people to find ways to love their enemies, as Jesus taught?

6 A Taste of Honey

Leader preparation: In Jewish mystical teaching, it is recognized that every learning opportunity has an element of loss in it. In order to integrate any new learning, some old learning is let go. Honey is built into this teaching tradition. Students are given honey to sweeten their learning as old understandings are set aside. Borrow this honey habit for this activity. Be sensitive to any food allergies among the participants.

Supplies:

- honey treats, such as honey, honey butter and crackers, honey candy, tea sweetened with honey
- small plates, napkins, serving spoons
- Bibles

Arrange honey treats on a table in your meeting space. Gather the group around the table for a time of taste testing. While they enjoy the flavor of honey, tell participants about the Jewish mystical teaching tradition that says every learning opportunity has an element of loss in it, and the honey habit of giving students honey to sweeten their learning as old understandings is set aside. As a group, discuss old cherished beliefs or positions you have left behind.

The two texts for this Exploration address loss in learning. Ask two volunteers to read aloud Deuteronomy 34:1–12 and Matthew 5:43–48, pausing for a moment between the two readings. Discuss:

- In these texts, what old understandings and positions are let go? What blessings may come in the space opened up by those losses?
- When have you worked for a long time on something you were not able to complete? When have you, like Moses, only been able to get within sight of some finish line you were moving toward?
- When have you felt called to do something beyond your imagination, something like loving your enemies?
- What stands in the way of growing beyond where you have been and the ways you have acted before?

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Artist's Date (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo by himself. Moments of solitude are necessary as we hone our capabilities of letting go and opening ourselves to blessing. Throughout her numerous books on creativity and writing, Julia Cameron guides readers toward an exercise in solitude called an "artist's date." On an artist's date, you spend at least an hour by yourself, doing something that feeds your spirit, refreshes your being, and gives you energy. An artist's date need not cost much money, if any money at all. More information about an artist's date can be found in Cameron's classic *The Artist's Way* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002) or any of her many other books. If you could take an artist's date today, what would you do?

Supplies: None

Explain to group members about Cameron's concept of an artist's date. Together, exchange ideas about where and when you might take such time for yourselves. Discuss:

- When have you taken time for yourself to feed your spirit, even though you probably didn't call it an artist's date? Where did you go and what did you do? Was it easy or difficult to take this time for yourself?
- How comfortable are you with times of solitude?
- Descriptions of moments of solitude are woven throughout scripture, such as times that Jesus went off by himself to pray. When has a moment of intentional solitude opened the space for listening to yourself, God, and one another?
- When and where is it easiest for you to identify what you need to let go? When and where is it easiest for you to identify where God's blessings have touched your life?

Invite each group member to take an artist's date before you meet again. Pause the next time you meet for people to tell about their experiences. You may want to revisit the discussion questions above, asking them about the most recent experience.



8 Labyrinth Walk

Leader preparation: Our spiritual lives are filled with journeys. The labyrinth is a walking prayer practiced in varied cultures and religious communities. It is an echo of a spiritual journey. Labyrinth walking introduces rhythms of release and letting go, stillness and listening, and integration and connection. Two written resources on labyrinths that may provide helpful background: *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* by Dr. Lauren Artress (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) and *Praying the Labyrinth* by Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999).

Print copies the finger labyrinth, Attachment: Activity 8, or plan for your group to visit a walking labyrinth in your area.

Supplies:

- "Finger Labyrinth," Attachment: Activity 8
- (optional) a local labyrinth to walk

Take a moment to offer background information on labyrinths to the group. Ask group members to tell about any experiences they have had with labyrinths.

If there is a labyrinth close by, take a field trip to experience walking it—into the center and back out again. If this is not an option, distribute copies of a finger labyrinth. A labyrinth pattern can be followed with one's finger just as it can be walked with one's feet. Remind participants that this is a prayer experience, without a right or wrong way to do it. Encourage them to be open to whatever happens for them.

After experiencing the labyrinth, invite a conversation about the experience

9 Inspired by Friendship

Leader preparation: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rabbi Abraham Heschel experienced a powerful friendship as they prayed and walked arm-in-arm from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1965 march for voting rights. Their story is told in Richard Michelson's picture book *As Good As Anybody*. These two men were different in many ways—from different countries, religious traditions, and ethnic origins. But each was fortified in a loving childhood home where he grew to know that he was as good as anybody. And both were committed to challenging injustice by building coalitions and living in a different way.

Supplies:

- book: *As Good As Anybody* by Richard Michelson (New York: Knopf, 2008)

Gather the group and read aloud *As Good As Anybody* by Richard Michelson. Depending on the age of group members, you may have to supply some background on this time in the Civil Rights struggle. Ask group members to identify both the striking differences between King and Heschel and the enemies they faced together. Discuss:

- How are participants inspired by the story of King and Heschel's blessing of one another?
- What friendships in your life have been a source of courage and strength?

Reflect

Which activities seemed to resonate best and least with your group? What new appreciation for scripture did you observe? How did they perceive both the challenge (letting go) and the comfort (blessing) present, often side by side, in the texts? Which strategies for reading scripture in the group seem to work well?

Attachment: Activity 8

Finger Labyrinth



Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Seekers and new members are considering discipleship for the first time or discipleship with a community of faith that is new to them. They may have questions about a life of following in the example and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. In intentional seasons of seeking, we keep in focus the continual unfolding of our lives as disciples. To be a disciple is to be one who follows, to be one who seeks. In Christian discipleship there are landmarks along the way, but there is also plenty of wonderment. Disciples know times of rest and dwelling and times of journey and movement. We are seeking and changing as disciples throughout our lives. We don't have pat answers to rely on for all times. Discipleship is about how we faithfully and fruitfully follow the Spirit's leading in our seeking.

About this Exploration

As followers of Christ, we are on a journey of discovery. In both blessing and letting go, we look to Jesus as our example and trust God for guidance. Jesus shows us how to love and forgive, just as we are forgiven. As Jesus' disciples we are called to let go of our own understandings and open ourselves to new paths filled with compassion, kindness, and thankfulness. God's Spirit dwells with us on this difficult and rewarding adventure, as individuals and as the body of Christ. We are encouraged to discard our own agendas and allow the peace of Christ to inform our thoughts, so we can live in harmony. Christ's message fills our lives so we might bless others through loving, grace-filled words and actions.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Proverbs 3:5–9
Colossians 3:12–17

Leader Preparation

In order to walk off the edge of the abyss and fly—one metaphor of letting go—we are wise to cultivate trust in that which is larger than ourselves. Journeying into such sturdy trust requires a lifetime of surrender to following God’s lead, resilience, and nurturing a heart that is not rigid. Steadfast trust animates us; it blesses and quickens our thanks, enriching our lives with gratitude. It also makes the release of forgiveness possible. Texts of sustaining trust are found on pages we read, across the world in which we move, and through the story of Jesus of Nazareth. In that trust, an abiding peace is found.

Prayer: Remind me, Holy One, that I am not alone. Help me to discover what is reliable to follow. Guide my growth into new dimensions of who I can be. And grant me the peace of confident life, life with trust. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Seasonal Rhythm (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: There is a reliable flow to the seasons of the natural world—winter yields to spring, which ushers in summer whose harvest is gathered in autumn. The seasonal flow around us can be a great teacher about trust and reliability.

Supplies:

- Bibles

If the weather and your location permit, meet outside for this activity. If inside, consider meeting near a window. Offer the following questions to guide discussion:

- How would you describe the current season?
- Where are we in the season’s flow—beginning, middle, or end?
- Do you enjoy this season or simply endure it? Why?
- When this current season ends, how easy or hard will it be to let it go?
- How has your perspective of this season changed since you were a child?
- What comfort and blessing do you experience in the regular and reliable rhythm of the seasons?

Distribute Bibles. Form two groups and read aloud Proverbs 3:5–8, with groups alternating verses. Invite a conversation about what this text teaches about trust. Ask: *In what ways are you well-practiced in such trust of God? In what ways do you resist and question it?*

2 Confidence through and after the Storm

Leader preparation: Find a copy of the children’s book *Do Not Open* by Brinton Turkle.

Supplies:

- children’s book: *Do Not Open* by Brinton Turkle (New York: Puffin Books, 1981)
- Bible

Gather the group and read aloud *Do Not Open* by Brinton Turkle. Observe Miss Moody’s confidence through the blustery storm and her confident and grateful going forth to find what treasures the storm tossed up on the shore. Ask:

- What storms can you absorb? What storms overwhelm you?
- The beach is strewn with blessings for Miss Moody. What blessings, large or small, have your life storms tossed up?
- How does Miss Moody help her frightened cat, Captain Kidd, let go of fear and access his confident action? When have trusted others helped you be more confident and less fearful?
- What does this story have to say about gratitude for small gifts in our lives?

Faithful and fruitful discipleship does not mean that our lives are storm-proof. As we encounter fear, as well as trust and gratitude, we mature in our journeys of discipleship. In communities of faith, we can help one another find that trust and

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.

gratitude. Close this activity with the blessing words of Proverbs 3:5–6.

3 Trust Walk

Leader preparation: Locate blindfolds or strips of cloth or bandanas that can be used as blindfolds. Scout out a route for the trust walk, either inside or outside.

Supplies:

- blindfolds

Gather in the space you have chosen for your trust walk. Form pairs, participating yourself if there is an odd number of group members. Explain that one member of the pair will be blindfolded while the other person leads him or her on a trust walk. After a designated period of time, switch places.

After all have experienced the walk, sit together and discuss what it is like to be responsible for another's well being and what it is like to be dependent upon another's leading. For most of us, there is challenge and maybe even discomfort in one or both of these roles. As we learn to trust the leading of one another, we practice what it means to trust the unseen and ever present leading of the divine. Do not worry if this is hard or challenging for you. It takes most of us a lifetime to learn to deeply rely on God who will never abandon us or leave us only to our own understanding.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 I Trust That (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: How many times have you heard yourself or others say, "I have trust issues"? Trust does not come easily to many people. We work at being open to receive the grace of trust in our lives. It is good for us to begin with small, concrete things that we can easily identify. Those small concrete things will seed larger dimensions of trust to season our discipleship.

Supplies:

- writing paper
- pens or pencils
- (optional) blank calendar pages

Ask group members to give examples of affirmative statements. For example: "My children love me." "I find peace when gardening." "Friday night is going to be fun." "Everything is going to be all right." Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Challenge group members to write as many affirmative statements as they can in three minutes. They are to begin each statement with this phrase: "I trust that . . ."

After the three minutes, invite a conversation about what it was like to state these affirmations and to indicate an ability to trust them, if only on paper. Point out that trust is a challenging issue for many people, and yet it is essential for discipleship. This exercise is an opportunity to consider noticeable things that you trust. Trust in smaller spaces can lead to trust in much larger arenas.

Give everyone a blank calendar for the month and encourage them to write "I trust that . . ." on each square. Challenge them to preface the activities they note

on the calendar with that phrase and to post their calendars somewhere they will see them regularly.

As a group, pray a litany, inviting each person to speak one affirmation from his or her paper, and having the group respond: “O God, our trust is in you.”

5 With All Your Heart

Leader preparation: In Colossians 3:15 we read: “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body; and be thankful.” That peace, like trust and gratitude, is critical to lives of growing discipleship. Participants will play artfully with the image of a heart to create a visual reminder and a prompt for discussion about God’s peace in their hearts.

Supplies:

- construction paper
- scissors, glue sticks, markers
- glitter glue, heart stickers, and other paper decorations
- Bible

Spread out supplies and set a playful tone as you invite group members to cut out large hearts and decorate them like the valentines of their childhood. Allow plenty of time for everyone to create one such heart. Invite each person to “show and tell” what he or she has made. Discuss:

- Are there open hearts, peaceful hearts, joyful hearts, giving hearts, cautious hearts, troubled hearts, childlike hearts, or other hearts in the mix before us?
- How else might we describe these hearts?
- What blessings are tucked inside these hearts?

Read aloud Colossians 3:15. Trust, gratitude, and the expansive and expanding peace of God are significant elements in our lives as disciples. They allow us to let go of control and fear and surrender to being led into the blessing of lives aligned with the presence of a living and gifting God. Discuss: *When has your heart been flooded with an experience of God’s peace, of peace beyond your own doing or making?*



6 Movie Date

Leader preparation: At first people were horrified by the massacre of Amish schoolchildren at the West Nickel Mines School in October 2006. Then observers were humbled by the response of that grief-stricken community, as community members quickly reached out to the widow of the shooter. They were ordinary people in excruciating pain, acting with extraordinary grace and faith. This is one of the stories woven together in the beautiful documentary *The Power of Forgiveness*. This documentary film is both international and interfaith in scope. Preview the film and select the segments you are going to show. Also, spend time with the artwork “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona. Consider connections between the film and this piece of art.

Supplies:

- documentary film: *The Power of Forgiveness*, <http://www.thepowerofforgiveness.com/> (2007)

- artwork: “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>
- Bible

Gather to view the documentary film *The Power of Forgiveness* or the portions you have chosen. Display the artwork “Forgiveness” where everyone can see it. Invite conversation by asking the following questions:

- Who or what are the enemies faced in the film?
- How is forgiveness enacted in the film? What new relationship is offered to enemies?
- How might these examples of forgiveness bless our approach to enemies, our capacity to love our enemies?
- What would you have to let go of to embrace such love and forgiveness toward enemies?
- What support would help make this possible?
- What words does the artwork “Forgiveness” draw forth from you?

Point out that forgiveness can be added to trust, gratitude, and the embrace of peace as elements that we pray toward and work toward in our journeys of discipleship. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Colossians 3:13. After a moment of silence, ask: *When has forgiveness given or received changed your life?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Languages of Peace (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Cut apart the words for peace on the attachment. Glue or tape each word on a separate index card.

Supplies:

- index cards
- “Words for Peace,” Attachment: Activity 7
- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnncc>

Arrange the index cards with the various translations of peace on a table in your meeting space. Invite group members to try to speak peace to one another in these different languages. Ask: *What is your feeling when someone wishes you peace or God’s peace?*

Listen to the song “Shalom Chaverim,” and then sing it in Hebrew and English. If you are feeling musically brave and have enough singers, sing it as a round they selected the one they did. End by reading and briefly discussing Revelation 7:9–17.

8 Garments of Grace

Leader preparation: Colossians 3:12–17 raises the question of how we clothe ourselves for living as disciples. Before the session, ask participants to bring a garment from home that they are ready to give away.

Supplies:

- garments that participants bring
- Bibles

Distribute Bibles. Ask two volunteers to read aloud Colossians 3:12–17, alternating verses. Pause for a quiet moment after the text has been read. Invite conversation about the reading, considering what is helpful about the image of being clothed for a life of discipleship.

Invite each person to show the garment that he or she brought and to tell about a time when it was worn. Ask each person: *Why are you ready to part with this? Who do you hope will wear it next?*

If your faith community has a clothing ministry, donate these garments there. If not, take suggestions from the group about an agency in your community that welcomes donations of clothing.

9 Choose to Acknowledge Blessings

Leader preparation: We let go of our illusion of self-reliance when we tell others how they have contributed to our lives. This exercise provides a way to grow as the body of Christ, to promote a sense of wellbeing and peace, and to foster an environment in which to forgive and be forgiven. Everyone can choose to tell specific people about tangible moments of blessings they have given us.

Before the group arrives, write each participant's name at the top of a piece of newsprint. Hang these sheets of newsprint on the walls of your meeting space.

Supplies:

- newsprint, one piece per person
- markers
- tape or wall adhesive
- Bible

As the group gathers, read aloud Colossians 3:15. Affirm that discipleship is about our shared journeys as well as the individual journey each one takes. Take a moment for participants to quietly remember things that other group members have said or done that have been blessings for them. After some quiet remembering time, ask group members to turn their attention to the newsprint sheets. Invite them to write on each sheet at least one of that individuals' acts or words that has been a blessing to them. Do this at an easy pace. Don't rush. When all are finished, have each participant take home his or her sheet.

Conclude the activity by asking the following questions:

- What is it like to be affirmed for the blessing you are in the lives of other people?
- In what ways does the affirmation and acknowledgement of the whole body of disciples strengthen your discipleship?
- What do you give up when you bless others?
- How might you blessing the people you meet in the week ahead?
- How might you tell other people in your life how they have blessed you?.

Reflect

What insights came from these activities about some of the aspects of discipleship: trust, gratitude, peace, and forgiveness?

Attachment: Activity 7

Words for Peace

Language	Translation
Africans	vrede
Albanian	páqja
Arabic	salam
Bosnian	mir
Bulgarian	мир (mir)
Burmese	nyein chan yay
Cherokee	nvwatohiyadv
Chinese	和平 (HePing)
Cree	papayatik
Croatian	mir
Czech	mir
Danish	fred
Dutch	vrede
German	der Friede / Frieden
Greek	ειρήνη (irini)
Haitian Creole	lapè
Hebrew	shalom
Hindi	shanty
Hungarian	béke
Indonesian	damai / perdamaian / ketentraman
Italian	pace
Japanese	heiwa
Macedonian	mir
Malay	damai
Maltese	sliem / paci
Maori	rangimaarie / rongo
Mongolian	enh taivan (Энх тайван)
Norwegian	fred
Persian	solh
Polish	pokój
Portuguese	paz
Romanian	pace
Serbian	mir
Spanish	paz
Swahili	salama
Swedish	fred
Thai	สันติภาพ (santiphaap)
Turkish	barış
Ukrainian	мир (mir)
Urdu	salaam
Welsh	tangnefedd
West Indian Creole	la pé
Yiddish	sholem

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Seekers and new members in our midst are a good reminder that Christians never stop seeking and searching. We seek both when we arrive brand new and fresh to a faith community and when we are seasoned in faith. As questions and circumstances arise, old answers and ways of being may no longer fit or suffice. We seek expression for what we behold of God, for the unfolding meaning of the story of Jesus, and for the Spirit's guidance in it all. While we let go of what has been, we pray to recognize the blessing that is arriving. In various nooks and crannies of our tradition, there are examples too numerous to count of people and communities seeking understanding and direction afresh. Our tradition resembles a patchwork quilt whose pieces are stitched together in many sorts of patterns of comprehension. Seeking is not new in the Christian story.

About this Exploration

As Christians, we are supported in the process of blessing and letting go by rituals that have grown out of the traditions of the church over the centuries, by the pastoral concern expressed by our faith communities in worship and other areas of our common life, and by the many acts of kindness and mercy extended to us in the name of Christ. As new occasions for blessing and letting go arise, we, as faith communities, develop new responses that may become part of our ongoing traditions. Although our behavior may be rooted in and shaped by our traditions, these traditions are not static. They are constantly modified and expanded as we move on in life. This Exploration provides resources for participants as they discern ways in which looking back on our shared tradition propels us forward into the future.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 148
Acts 10:1–48

Leader Preparation

Psalm 148 describes a world saturated with the witness of praise. We wonder how we and others before us grow into this universal chorus on days when we have to work at it and on days when it bubbles up from within. There is evidence in us and in earlier believers that a greater awareness of blessing enhances our praise. There is also evidence that praise opens us outward to the calling of the divine and to a broadening and deepening of our human community and our kinship with creation. Praise does not release us from encountering the real world in which we live. In all this, we continually let go of our smaller stories and enter into larger versions of who and how we can be.

Prayer: Awesome Creator, let me hear the voices of praise around me and find my place among them. Shake me loose from settled patterns that have grown stale. Remind me of the essential necessity of prayer, mercy, and just ways. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



① Increasing Our Visibility (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: A traditional African bush greeting exchange goes like this: “I see you.” “Here I am.” When a space is safe, there is a sense of healing, well being, and blessing when we are seen by others—seen for who we are or who we are becoming. The story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10 is about increased visibility, about locating and seeing others.

Divide Acts 10:1–48 on the attachment into enough voices that each person in the group will have a speaking part. You might use the voice of Cornelius, the voice of the Lord, the voice of Peter, the voice of the Spirit, the voices of Cornelius’s men, several narrator voices. Have a copy of the text for each participant with that person’s lines highlighted. If you need more voices for the number of people in your group, have more than one Peter and more than one narrator.

Supplies:

- “Acts 10:1–48,” Attachment: Activity 1

Explain the African bush greeting (described above). Invite group members to welcome one another with this greeting. After greetings are exchanged, ask: *How does this greeting compare with our worship tradition of passing the peace? What blessing does each greeting carry?*

Pass out the copies of the Acts 10:1–48, with the various voices highlighted. Explain that you will read the story as a group, with each member reading the highlighted words on his or her copy. After reading the text, have a conversation about how the characters in this story were initially faithful and how they came to hear the Lord or the Spirit call them to leave behind old patterns of familiar, faithful action and embrace new ways of seeing and being.

- What did each person have to leave behind in order to follow the Spirit’s lead?
- How were they blessed in the process of doing so?
- When in your life have you been invited or nudged to move from well-known traditions to new places of faithfulness, kindness, or witness?

② Grow or Refuse to Grow

Leader preparation: In the fourth century there was great change in the Christian tradition. Emperor Constantine stopped persecuting Christians and converted to Christianity. There were Christian men and women of all walks of life who worried that members of the Christian community would start identifying their well being with categories of status and success in the empire rather than with the steadfast and abiding love of God as known in Christ Jesus. These Christians moved out into the desert away from settled communities and became known as the *abbas* and *ammās*—the fathers and mothers of the desert. Others sought them out for teaching and wisdom. One of their understandings of sin was that sin is the refusal to grow. The blessing of growth always requires letting go.

Supplies:

- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower (also found

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.

in many church hymnals and songbooks); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>

- Bible
- (optional) seeds or bulbs to plant on the church grounds, garden tools

Listen to or sing “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Invite comments about the text of this hymn.

Tell group members about the fourth century desert fathers and mothers. Explain that one of their understandings of sin was that sin is the refusal to grow. With the hymn and your lives as reference points, enter into discussion using the following questions.

- To what extent do you agree with the assertion that sin is the refusal to grow? Why?
- When have you encountered the choice to grow or to refuse to grow? Would describe this choice as easy or challenging? Why?
- What is the role of the Spirit and of faith in situations that call for such a choice?

Some adults know blessing when their hands are in the dirt. An extension of this activity is to plant seeds or bulbs outside your building or in containers where growth can be watched.

Collage It

Leader preparation: This activity will be most successful if participants have a wide variety of magazines to use. If necessary, ask friends to save magazines for you.

Supplies:

- magazines to cut apart
- scissors, glue sticks
- poster board
- markers
- Bibles

Lay out the supplies for making a collage before participants arrive. Invite participants to browse through the magazines, cutting out pictures and words they are drawn to—for any reason. Form pairs and give each pair a piece of poster board. Ask pairs to glue their pictures and words to the poster board in a arrangement that pleases them. When pairs have finished their collages, gather the group.

Distribute Bibles and read aloud Psalm 148 in unison. After reading the psalm, ask: *What does the psalmist say about the links between praising God and everyday life?*

Lay out the collages and take a moment for group members to view each one. Invite volunteers to point out examples of praise, letting go, and blessing in the artwork. Ask pairs to choose one phrase or verse from Psalm 148 to write on their collages. Create a display of collages for others in the church to enjoy.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Praying at the Window (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: There is a line in the Talmud about never praying in a room without a window. The Talmud is the authoritative text of tradition, learning, and instruction in Judaism. It captures centuries of oral tradition that discussed and debated what was found in Hebrew Scripture. This line from the Talmud is echoed in a Christian statement from the twentieth century about praying with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Notice in Acts 10 that Peter went out on the roof to pray, within sight and earshot of the larger world. And there his practice of faith expanded like a sponge in water.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) newspaper for each person

Distribute Bibles, and ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 10:9–16. Ask:

- Why do you think Peter went up on the roof to pray?
- Do you think that the place where Peter prayed influenced what happened? Why or why not?

Invite a discussion about what locations or postures of prayer have been important to group members. Ask:

- What prayer traditions seem to close you in on yourself, your concerns, and what you already know?
- What prayer traditions seem to open you to what you haven't beheld or known before?

Referring to information in Leader preparation above, describe the Talmud and offer its teaching of never praying in a room without a window. Then tell them the teaching from recent Christian practice about praying with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Discuss: *How do you understand the intent behind these teachings? Do you agree or disagree with them?*

If your building has plenty of clear windows, suggest that group members take a few minutes to look out a window and hold a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Reassemble and ask what they saw that might be embraced prayer. Close with a time of prayer, inviting participants to offer their spoken petitions.

5 Drenched in Peace

Leader preparation: Hildegard of Bingen, a Christian mystic who lived in the twelfth century, wrote: "May you be drenched with the longing for peace." Ponder this line prayerfully as you prepare for this activity.

Supplies:

- artwork: "The Baptism of Jesus," by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- pitcher of water, bowl, towel

Assemble in a comfortable place to view “The Baptism of Jesus.” Offer the following questions as discussion starters.

- How is baptism portrayed in this painting? What links can you make between this depiction of baptism and the traditions of baptism you have known or experienced?
- On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being challenge and 10 being comfort, how do you sense the artist’s work? Why?
- How might both challenge and comfort be blessings in one’s life?
- To what extent is God’s peace depicted in this painting?
- As Christians grow in their lives as baptized children of God, what might they be called to let go?

When your discussion is over, invite group members to join in a ritual that echoes baptism and other occasions of passing the peace of Christ. Form a circle. Explain that you will pass a pitcher of water, a bowl, and a towel to the person on your right. That person will pour a bit of water on the outstretched hands of the person on his or her right, catching the drips in the bowl. This activity will progress around the circle until all have had a turn. Each time water is poured, the group will quote the words of Hildegard of Bingen: “May you be drenched with the longing for peace.”



6 Outdoor Worship

Leader preparation: The Celtic tradition of Christianity goes back to the earliest centuries of the church and was prevalent in England and Ireland. The Celts celebrated creation and grace as primary gifts from God. They frequently worshiped outside around large standing crosses. These crosses often were carved with scenes from the Bible on one side and depictions of the created world on the other. In Celtic understanding, two books help us witness to our faith—the small book of two Testaments we hold in our hands and the larger book of creation in which we move and have our being. In this activity we will rely on both of these books of scripture.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower (also found in many church hymnals and songbooks); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- artwork: “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds,” by Giotto di Bondone, <http://www.art.com/products/p11724653-sa-i1350212/giotto-di-bondone-st-francis-of-assis-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&origid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.francis+feeding+the+birds>

As the group gathers, take a moment to explain Celtic Christianity and its teaching about the “two books.” Then form two groups. Ask each group to plan a time of worship that will last five to ten minutes. If weather and location permits, ask them to choose an outdoor location for this time of prayer and praise. Each group should use Psalm 148, the artwork “St. Francis Preaching to the Birds,” and the song “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” in some way. Encourage groups to think about these considerations.

- Where will participants sit or stand?
- How do the elements of Psalm 148, the artwork, and the song connect with worship traditions in our congregation?
- How will the texts we read or sing reflect the larger text of creation?
- How can this be an occasion of letting go and an occasion of blessing?

Give groups about ten minutes to plan, and then have each group lead its time of worship.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Blessing Bowl (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The act of blessing one another is one way to act in the image of God, to be a likeness of our blessing God. We don't need fancy words or advanced training to bless others. In modern life, many of us experience a great deal of examination and criticism in our day-to-day lives. The balm of Christian blessing is a resource we can practice giving one another to increase our joy, our strength, and our connection.

Supplies:

- slips of paper
- pens
- a large bowl
- pieces of individually wrapped chocolate and hard candy, including some sugar-free
- Bibles, hymnals or songbooks

Give each participant several slips of paper and ask him or her to write a blessing on each one. Each blessing may be in group members' own words, or it may be a verse of scripture, a line from a hymn, a quote from poetry or fiction, or a liturgical phrase from worship. After the blessings are written, ask group members to fold each one and placed it the bowl. Add wrapped candy to the bowl to sweeten it.

Gather in a circle. Pass the bowl, inviting each person to draw out a blessing and a sweet treat to take home with them. When your group meets again in the future, make a practice of having the blessing bowl there. Place strips of paper and pens beside it, so that participants can draw out a blessing and/or add one to the blessing bowl.



8 You Are Invited

Leader preparation: Create a simple invitation on a computer. At the top of the invitation, write: You Are Invited! Below this, put the typical information, with blank lines after each word: What, When, Where, and RSVP. As an option, if your group enjoys art activities, bring paper and markers for participants to use to create their own invitations.

Supplies:

- “Invitation,” Attachment: Activity 8
- pens
- (optional) drawing paper, markers
- Bibles

As we read and pray with biblical texts again and again, the Spirit awakens us to encouragement from God, and our faith can change and grow into new shapes of serving. Distribute Bibles and ask two volunteers to read aloud, one to read Psalm 148 and one to read Acts 10:34–48. Invite group members to talk about the various invitations to new actions and attitudes they hear in these texts. Point out that such invitations, which are not requirements, present themselves as intentional choices for us to make in our lives each day.

Distribute the invitations, and pens or materials with which to make them. Invite group members to jot down their own thoughts as you read the following questions, pausing between each one for a time of quiet reflection and writing:

- *What:* What new attitude or action do I feel I am being invited to embrace in my life of faith? What attitude or tradition in my life might I choose to renew?
- *When:* When might I practice this new or renewed attitude or action?
- *Where:* Where might I live out this new or renewed attitude or action?
- *RSVP:* What will I say to God in response to the invitation I have heard?

9 Helping with Disaster Relief

Leader preparation: The breadth of creation celebrated in Psalm 148 can coalesce quickly into the powerful destruction of a flood, hurricane, tornado, tsunami, or earthquake. With a window on the wider world, Christians become more and more aware of people in every corner of the world who have had to let go of everything. As a study group or congregation, our response to basic needs can be vital blessing.

Supplies:

- website: information about the types of relief kits from Church World Service, http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=kits_main
- (optional) information about disaster relief kits from another aid organization your church or denomination supports
- Bibles

Distribute Bibles. Form two groups to read aloud Psalm 148, alternating verses between groups. Invite a discussion of what happens when the powers of creation coalesce into destructive forces of floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Identify and talk about traditions of response within your church and

denomination to such situations of need and crisis.

Tell the group about the serving ministry of Church World Service or a similar aid organization that your church or denomination supports. Offer information about the various types of relief kits that this organization is seeking.

As a group, decide on a particular type of disaster relief kit to take on as a project. Plan if or how you will promote this project in the congregation: What is needed? How will you get the word out? When will you gather donations? When will you assemble the kits, pack them, and send or deliver them?

On the day you assemble the kits, offer a prayer of blessing for the kits and those who will receive them.

Reflect

To what extent did these activities help group members gain a sense of the stability that Christian tradition provides in the lives of individuals and faith communities and the openness tradition provides for transformation and change? How well are group members able to reside with both the stability and the transformation? Which activities appeared most successful with your participants? How would you change or improve similar sorts of activities in other sessions?

Attachment: Activity 1

Acts 10:1-48

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." So Peter* invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." And as he talked with-

Attachment: Activity 1 *(continued)*

him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say." Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Attachment: Activity 8

Invitation

Your Are Invited

What: _____

When: _____

Where: _____

RSVP: _____

Your Are Invited

What: _____

When: _____

Where: _____

RSVP: _____

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Seekers and new members are often drawn to a particular community of faith because of the mission activities in which that community engages. Such people may well be on a search for contemporary meaning in how they and a church connect and serve the larger community, locally and beyond. That deep search confronts seekers with necessary letting go and precious blessing. The contexts we inhabit, like everything else, flow and flux. Out of those changing situations, our opportunities to serve with spirit and joy take on new shapes. And our seeking goes on and on.

About this Exploration

God's call to blessing and letting go is a call to action. Those who receive a blessing have a mission to give a blessing. Responding to God's call requires that we let go of the way things were and boldly set forth in response to the call, an active process that often involves hard work. We receive that call as individuals and also as members of the community of faith. When we let go of habits and comforts that threaten to impede our journey, and to which we cling, we are freed to go forth both as recipients and givers of blessing. In this Exploration we journey with ancestors who have been sent forth and have struggled with fear, promise, grief, and hope. Like them, we are called to lay aside material blessings so that we may open our lives to spiritual blessings in our context and mission.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 12:1-5
Romans 15:22-29

Leader Preparation

Blessing and letting go defy age and season. They are not quick fixes, nor do they supply ready answers. They are human realities over the long haul, nurtured and upheld with life-giving questions and stories. Peeking into segments of the journeys of Abram and Sarai and Paul confirm this. In our faith journeys, we listen for, develop, and rely on particular contexts of promise, preparation, patience, and perseverance. Those contexts enliven and make possible the transformation of our passion into meaning and mission.

Prayer: Strengthen my willingness, Almighty One, to choose the journey onward, growing beyond old stasis and the confines of comfort. Help me recognize and respond to the choices I face. Guard me from the tempting lure of instant, but shallow, solutions that will not hold. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Choices (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: To journey or not to journey is a choice we face frequently. The decision to choose to journey can be initiated by nagging restlessness, by circumstances beyond our control, or by a sense of energy and enthusiasm.

Option: Enter “I Always Have a Choice NPR” into an Internet search engine, or go to the online NPR address in the Supplies list. An audio segment and reproducible article by Catherine Royce will be on your screen. Copy the one-page article for participants.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) computer with Internet access and printer
- (optional) copies of the article “I Always Have a Choice” for group members, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6560320>

Distribute Bibles. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 12:1–5. Note that Abram and Sarai were surprised by the journey that God presented to them. Work together to list the journeys group members have taken that they did not anticipate. *Ask: What particular sense of God’s presence did you experience in any of these journeys?*

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Note that Paul was kept from his intended journey by countless detours. Work together to list times when group members’ life journeys have been interrupted by detours.

- At times when you have encountered detours in life, what evidence of divine guidance have you sensed in the midst of waiting and delay?
- A willingness to journey forth is not universal in scripture or in our lives. When have you responded “no” when faced with the possibility of journeying into the unknown?

Option: Distribute copies of the article “I Always Have a Choice” and give group members time to read it. You may wish to play the audio segment for group members. Summarize that Royce’s article serves as a conversation starter about choices we face in our own life journeys. *Ask: How do we weigh the costs of blessing and letting go in such choices?*

2 Embrace Something New

Leader preparation: An Irish proverb states: “A good beginning is half the work.” This activity is a playful, improvisational exercise for imagining the beginning of the journey, for starting something new. Fill an opaque bag with enough ordinary objects for each group member to have one. Objects might include: kitchen gadgets, DVD or video game case, jump rope or other exercise equipment, shower cap or bar of soap, interesting hat or scarf.

Supplies:

- opaque bag, assortment of ordinary objects

Gather the group in a circle. If your group is large, form two circles with one bag of objects for each circle. Explain that you will pass the bag to the person on your

Blessing and Letting Go

SEEKERS & NEW CHURCH PARTICIPANTS

- 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.

left. That person is to draw an object from the bag and suggest a new use for it. (For example, a DVD box might be the protective case for a tiny digital device or a new-fangled salad scooper.) After this person has named a new use for the object, that object is passed to the next person to do the same. Participants can say “pass” if they can’t think of an idea to add. When the first object has been around the circle, the bag is passed to the next person who will draw a second object from the bag, state a new use for it, and send it around the circle. Continue until everyone in the circle has had a chance to select an object and start the process.

After the game, join in conversation about what it means for individual believers and the church as a whole to find new ways to respond in mission to familiar realities. Consider ways of recognizing new ways the Spirit may be stirring within you. For instance, individual or communal money may be given to situations or agencies than have not been supported before. A congregation may change the use of part of its space to accommodate a new ministry of mission. A youth group’s spring break or adult/family vacation week may be committed to a mission trip. The church yard may become a communal garden to benefit the food bank. Ask:

- What is the role of opening our eyes, hearts, and resources to innovative uses of what is familiar to us as we respond to Jesus’ call to serve?
- What is let go when new ways of mission and serving are pursued? What blessing may come from such situations?

3 Oasis

Leader preparation: In Romans 15 Paul outlines the many steps of his journey. Genesis 12:9 reports that Abram and Sarai and their company journeyed “on by stages toward the Negeb.” Spiritual lives include stretches of journey and places of dwelling. One name for a dwelling is an oasis. If you are near an Interstate rest area or oasis, you may want to there and take some photos to show during this activity.

Supplies:

- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html> (also may be found in many church songbooks); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnnc>
- Bibles
- (optional) photos of a travel oasis or Interstate rest area

If you brought photos of a travel oasis or Interstate rest area, hand them around the group. Ask participants to think of a travel oasis or rest area that they have visited. Ask:

- What blessings are found in such an oasis or rest area? What can be let go there?
- Where have you experienced a sense of oasis or rest? Have times when you have felt the sense of oasis been abundant or scarce?
- In what ways is our church an oasis where there is a hearth of welcome? Where stories are shared? Where shelter is found? Where a table is set? Where directions are given? Where rest is possible? Where there is a trading of experience? Where diversity gathers?

Distribute Bibles. Ask two volunteers to read, one to read aloud Genesis 12:1–9 and one to read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Point out that the journey of Abram and

Sarai and the journey of Paul took a long time and had many stages. Surely, they needed resting places along the way. As a group, discuss how and where people of faith today find such resting places. Learning to be oasis with one another and for others strengthens congregational life.

Sing “Shalom Chaverim,” which makes good oasis music.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Life Maps (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: When we stop and pay attention to where we have been, the circumstances we have faced, and the courses of thought or action we have chosen in the past, we have more understanding of our current situation, however stable or shifting it may be. What we care about and act upon now and how we hear God speaking to us can be focused with broader clarity when we pause to review our journeys thus far. Life maps are one way to do that review.

Cut pieces of newsprint in fourths lengthwise, creating four long strips per sheet. Make one of these strips for each participant.

Supplies:

- newsprint
- markers
- scissors
- (optional) magazines to cut apart, scissors, glue sticks, old road maps

Gather the group and ask what they think of when they hear the term “life map.” Then distribute strips of newsprint and markers. Invite each participant to make a map that illustrates his or her entire life or at least the last fifteen years. Invite them to consider the shape (curved, straight, jagged, looped, and so forth) of the line of their life, how they will label certain moments and seasons, and appropriate illustrations for what was or wasn’t happening. As an option, provide magazines and old road maps for participants to cut apart to add pictures or words to their life maps.

After participants have finished, invite those who would like to do so to “show and tell” their work. Then discuss the experience by asking:

- What did you first expect to write and illustrate? What actually showed up on your life map?
- As you look at your life map, how would you characterize your journey thus far?
- How does your life map show any detours you have faced along the way?
- Where was the guiding and grounding Spirit then, and where is it now?.

5 Migration

Leader preparation: In the natural world, migratory animals embody journey. If there are birders in your congregation, invite them to join you for this activity. If your church has a video viewing license, plan to show the film *Winged Migration* or the film *Fly Away Home*. If this is not possible, locate information and photos about bird migration in library books or on the Internet to show during the activity. If you live in a flyway and it is time for seasonal migration, plan a time to

travel as a group to place where you can observe this.

Supplies:

- film: *Winged Migration* (Sony Picture Classics, 2001); trailer, <http://www.sonyclassics.com/wingedmigration/home.html>
- film: *Fly Away Home* (Columbia Pictures, 2001); trailer, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116329/>

Travel together to observe a seasonal migration or watch either *Winged Migration* or *Fly Away Home*. If birders have joined you, ask them to tell about their experiences with seasonal migration. Discuss group members' experiences with migration:

- What emotions arise in you when the sky is filled with migrating birds or when you hear the honk of geese and see them flying in "V" formation?
- To what extent is your sense of settledness rattled or your interest in the lure of flight enhanced by witnessing seasonal migration?
- What does the natural pattern of migration in creation suggest about patterns of letting go and of blessing?
- In what ways is the church's journey in mission akin to migration?

⑥ Progressive Meal

Leader preparation: Plan a progressive meal that includes four stops: appetizer; soup or salad; main course; dessert. The stops may be the homes of four different group members or four different places in your church building. Choose a date for your group to enjoy this progressive meal and give group members plenty of notice about it. Decide on the stops and what will be eaten at each place. Who will provide the food and tableware?

Supplies:

- food to be served during the progressive meal
- Bible

As you begin the progressive meal, offer a prayer at the first stop for a sure beginning and sufficient nourishment along the way. At the second stop, ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 12:1–5. You are in the middle of your meal. God called Abram and Sarai in the middle of their lives to take a totally different course. Invite members of your group to tell of their experience of being interrupted midstream by God's provoking presence. At the third stop ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Paul's journey was long and detour filled, and so are your life journeys. At the fourth stop, remember that Paul detoured partially to attend to the needs of the Christians in Jerusalem who were in need. Discuss: *Based on our blessing of being together for this meal, how might we—as individuals or as the church—deepen or enrich a place of mission that calls out to us, even if it requires a detour or two?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Listen for the Unspoken Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Spend time viewing the artwork “Christina’s World, 1948.” What questions and feelings does this image evoke in you?

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christina’s World, 1948,” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p10041656-sa-i783641/andrew-wyeth-christinas-world-1948.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=0f6ded272c5f442f8f4b43201f2adbfc&searchstring=christina%27s+world>

Place “Christina’s World, 1948” by Andrew Wyeth where each group member can see it easily. Invite the group to imagine this woman as experiencing both blessing and letting go. Ask the following questions to guide discussion:

- What relationship ended in the house? How did this happen?
- What adventure is this woman about to begin?
- When is the house sale or her move going to take place?
- How did she experience terror or wonder in this house?
- Is this a first or a last glance, or one in between?
- What rich possibilities might be seen over her shoulder?
- In what ways do we look back at where we have been or what we have valued as we get ready to move on in faith? How does such looking back help us to face new challenges, to let mission opportunities lead us where we have never been before?

8 Cooperation

Leader preparation: Cooperative games emphasize participation, challenge, and fun rather than defeating someone. One source for finding cooperative games is New Games, an international movement in cooperative play. Dale Le Fevre is a principal player in the new games movement. He has been affiliated with this joyful, intergenerational mode of play since 1975. As people let go of the necessity to always have one or a very few winners, they can enter the blessing of including everyone more fully and with greater delight. Check the website “New Games” (www.inewgames.com) for further information. Choose one new game that you think your group will enjoy playing.

Supplies:

- “Cooperative Games,” <http://www.learningforlife.org/exploring-resources/99-720/x08.pdf>
- Bibles

Tell your group about new games, including information above and from the “New Games” website. Give the directions for one of the new games and play it as a group. Invite comments about the experience.

Distribute Bibles. Recall how Paul was able to nourish a sense of shared welfare among the communities he visited and nurtured. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:25–28. Note that this long-term question is always before us: *How do we faithfully enhance our appreciation and anticipation of the common good?* This sense of common well-being underlies all sorts of mission. Ask:

- What examples can you give of when involvement in a shared mission has enhanced your sense of the common good?
- In Romans 15:25–28 Paul identified people in Jerusalem, Macedonia, and Achaia as both givers and receivers of mission. How does such mutuality shape the work of mission in our church?

As an option, plan a time when your group might lead children and adults from your church in playing several of these cooperative games.

9 Among the Saints

Leader preparation: Think about potential outreach or serving projects for your group. Consider projects that invite hands-on activity, donations, and/or prayer, and projects the group might do in cooperation with the congregation. Bring information about some projects for group members to consider.

Supplies:

- materials needed for project chosen
- Bible

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:25–28. Point out that Paul wrote of the believers in need in Jerusalem as “saints.” Discuss who the saints might be with whom you might serve.

As a group, discuss and decide on a specific outreach project in your church that you would like to join or initiate. Provide any information that you brought about potential projects. Be frank with one another about your motivation for drawing near to the anguish and need in someone’s life or community. Think of the ways that your own lives might change and be transformed through this project. Encourage group members to let go of the habit of seeing yourselves as helpers and others only as those who need help. When the focus is on what will happen in your lives, you will be both blessing and blessed.

After you identify the project that participants want to undertake, create a plan of who will do what, when each step will be taken, and what resources will be needed.

Reflect

If the mission involvement of your congregation drew seekers and new members to your congregation, how has their sense of and commitment to mission, individual and communal, changed during this Exploration? What understanding have group members gained of the resources needed to continue along a mission way for the long haul and through?

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

It is not uncommon for seekers and new members to come with ideas, questions, and suggestions that the congregation has not considered before. We are wise to offer a welcoming space for what they bring with them. Their energy can be a real grace as a congregation seeks to remain open to God's new song in every season and time. The future is informed, but not limited by where we have been. New patterns of blessing and letting go await our seeking in the days yet to come.

About this Exploration

Experiences of blessing and letting go teach us there will be more change, loss, and grief in the future. Letting go is an essential part of our lives. Our resurrection faith provides us a vision of blessing and being blessed in the midst of letting go. Blessing does not come easily, and the process of letting go can be a painful adventure. Genuine hope is often costly and benefits from the courage of our imagination. The practices in this Exploration open individuals and congregations to the blessings for the journey when we are willing to let go.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Jeremiah 29:1-14
Luke 2:22-38

Leader Preparation

Our paths into the future are marked with times of waiting. The challenge is to know what to do during the waiting. We ponder about how to get ready. We ask if our hope will hold out. The two texts used in this Exploration suggest day-to-day routines and traditional ritual activities to contain and shape the waiting. We are to seek well-being and blessing wherever we find ourselves. There will be letting go and change as we wait. The intent is that we keep eyes and heart alert to the promise we have been given until we behold that promise among us.

Prayer: O God, guide me through the detours, disappointments, and despair that life brings. Remind me to affiliate, connect, and build community. Give me the courage to imagine what has not been, and grant me hope sufficient for the journey. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

① At the Threshold (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: There is a traditional monastic practice called *statio*. In this practice, monks and nuns intentionally pause on the threshold of the sanctuary for a moment of prayer before they enter. This practice identifies the threshold as a boundary, a place to acknowledge transition. Practicing this pause of *statio* invites the letting go of what has been and opening to what is coming. There is intention in the movement from what was to what will be.

Supplies: None

Tell group members about the monastic practice of *statio*, and invite them to name other threshold rituals that they know of or that they have practiced, such as the Japanese custom of removing shoes at the door.

Have participants wander around the building, stopping to practice *statio* at the various thresholds they encounter. Encourage them to be intentional as they move across each threshold. They might do this silently or they might say a word of prayer, such as “peace,” “I surrender,” or “Lead me Lord.” Have them return in ten minutes.

After the group reassembles, invite participants to tell about what they experienced as they paused on various thresholds.

- What might it be like to let go of multitasking and rushing from one thing into the next in order to practice *statio* each day? What blessing might be experienced in doing so?
- How might one practice *statio* before beginning a new opportunity or task?
- How might *statio* help a person remain more aware of God’s presence and leading throughout the day?

Suggest that everyone practice *statio* at home, at work, and when they come to worship before you meet again. At your next meeting, check in on what people are learning and experiencing through *statio*.

② Treasure in the Breaks

Leader preparation: Long ago, broken vessels were repaired with liquid gold. The gold gave repaired vessels more value than original, unbroken ones. How do human hearts and lives increase in value when repaired in the golden light of God’s love? Where is the mix of blessing and letting go in such repair?

Supplies:

- red card stock
- scissors
- gold ink gel pens, gold glitter glue

Invite group members to take a quiet moment to call to mind a time or two when their hearts have been broken. Distribute the red card stock, and scissors and ask each person to cut out a large heart shape. Lay out gold ink pens and glitter glue as you relate the information in Leader preparation above about the repaired vessels that increased in value because of their gold repairs.

take 90–120 minutes.

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

Ask group members to draw gold lines on their hearts to represent the broken and repaired places. If they would like to add some sparkle, they can use glitter glue. Invite participants who would like to do so to tell the story that is represented by one of the lines on their heart.

- What examples of broken heartedness can you name? What emotions do you attach to such broken heartedness?
- What does the story of the broken vessels repaired with gold heard suggest about the value of the repaired places in your heart?
- When our hearts are broken, what do we need to let go in order to be mended?
- What blessings come from the process of mending a broken heart?
- What strength that can be found in person whose broken heart has been mended?



3 Fear of the Storm

Leader preparation: Locate a copy of Patricia Polacco's children's book *Thunder Cake*. If you have time, make a thunder cake to share with the group (from the recipe in the book). Or bring a bowl of strawberries. Think about links between this book and how Jeremiah mentored the Jewish people through their difficult time of waiting and how Simeon and Anna mentored people through years of faithful practice in the temple.

Supplies:

- children's book: *Thunder Cake* by Patricia Polacco (New York: Philomel Books, 1990), http://www.patriciapolacco.com/books/thundercake/thundercake_index.html
- a thunder cake or bowl of strawberries
- napkins
- artwork: "Sisters in the Wind," by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401Bible

Gather the group and read aloud *Thunder Cake*. Offer pieces of thunder cake or strawberries for group members to enjoy as they listen to the story. Invite a conversation about the ways that the grandma led or mentored her granddaughter.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 29:1–14. After a quiet moment, ask:

- In what ways did Jeremiah lead and mentor the Jewish people through their difficult time of waiting in Babylon?
- What were Jeremiah's instructions about how to live while enduring that time of waiting?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:22–38. After a quiet moment, ask: *In what ways did tradition and ritual lead and mentor Simeon and Anna during their time of waiting?*

Take a moment for everyone to study "Sisters in the Wind" by Ethan Hubbard. Ask:

- What do you think the sisters are experiencing?
- Who might be leading and mentoring these girls during this time in their lives?

- In your own life, who has been a reliable leader and mentor in times of waiting?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Blessing and Burden of Belonging (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In Jeremiah 29:1–14 the prophet tells the people of Judah to affiliate in daily life with those who are holding them in exile. Such affiliation would have been difficult for many of them to consider and would have required them to let go of how they understood the Babylonians and the welfare they shared with them. Our affiliations often bless us through difficult seasons as we struggle to hold onto the promise of God in our lives.

Supplies:

- newsprint, markers
- Bibles

Distribute Bibles. Invite group members to find Jeremiah 29:1–14 and then to join in reading it aloud, with each person (or at least those who are willing) reading a verse until all verses have been read. Comment that Jeremiah spoke to the people of Judah who had been taken as captives into Babylon about making common connections of shared life with the community of the Babylonians. In those connections they were to seek the welfare of the city.

Form groups of three. Give each group a piece of newsprint and a marker. Ask each group to list the affiliations that fill their lives—spiritual, political, work-related, neighborhood, family, recreational, and others. They can use words and drawings to compile this list. When the small groups have finished, post the newsprint sheets so that the entire group can see them. Take a moment for all to look at what others have written or drawn. Begin a conversation with the following questions:

- Which affiliations are life-giving blessings? Which affiliations drain you?
- What affiliations do you long for?
- What affiliations might you let go of so that new ones can be picked up?
- What affiliations once served a purpose for you, but do not now?
- How do these affiliations connect you or fail to connect you to the greater good, to a sense of common welfare?
- How do these affiliations sustain you and bless you when you are facing times of waiting or letting go?

Summarize that people seek affiliation and meaning making in their lives. In challenging times of transition, waiting, and letting go, affiliations can make all the difference in how people wait for a new sense of supportive meaning. It is part of growing as a person of faith to be attentive to one's affiliations, to how many can be juggled, and to how each affiliation enhances or depletes life.

5 Wake Up

Leader preparation: Collect a variety of clocks and other electronic devices that can be programmed with alarms. Arrange the devices on the table where you meet. Set one alarm to go off 3 minutes after your gathering time and the alarms

on the other devices to go off about 30 seconds apart from one another from that point.

Supplies:

- electronic devices with alarms

Gather the group and invite everyone to sit quietly. After all the alarms have gone off, ask:

- What keeps you awake and alert, ready to perceive God's leading and to receive the fullness of God's presence and promise?
- What gets in the way of being in such a wakeful and alert state?

6 John Woolman (1720–1772)

Leader preparation: John Woolman was a Quaker tailor who spent twenty years walking from one Quaker meeting to the next, inviting conversations about ending slavery. While he walked and talked over those many years, his home meeting cared for his family. Go to the website, and scroll down five pages until you find the story of John Woolman (page 237).

Supplies:

- website: the story of John Woolman, *Politics of the Brokenhearted* by Parker J. Palmer, p. 237–238, www.couragerenewal.org/images/stories/pdfs/politicsbrokenhearted.pdf
- Bible

Tell the story of John Woolman to the group. Invite group members to offer their reactions to this story. Continue discussion with the following questions.

- How and by whom was the common good addressed in this story?
- With whom do you identify most closely with in the Woolman story? Why?
- Why was Woolman able to persevere for such a long journey? (*Note:* The Quakers did abolish slavery among themselves long before the nation did.)
- What other issues in history have been pursued with such determination?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 29:1–14. Ask:

- What connections can you make between John Woolman's experience and the experience of exile addressed in Jeremiah 29:1–14?
- What contemporary issues can you bring into conversation with the Jeremiah text and the Woolman story? In what ways might change be sought, after the manner of Woolman and Jeremiah?

Unknown and often untold historic stories like this one can cross generations and cultures to uphold others in similar sorts of struggles. Close with a moment of prayer for the current issues that were named.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Inhale the Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Irish poet and spiritual writer John O'Donohue told a short story about his father's daily departure for work. Every day, just before he put his hand on the door to leave for the day, his father turned, faced the hearth and the family, and drew in a deep breath while gazing upon them, with eyes brimming with love. He inhaled the blessing of his home and his beloved and slowly exhaled it throughout the day until he was back home again.

Supplies: None

Tell the story of John O'Donohue's father, as given in Leader preparation above. Invite participants to tell their reactions to this practice, perhaps telling of similar rituals they have observed.

Encourage participants to inhale a breath of blessing from the group as they leave today—a blessing breath to take into the week ahead while you are scattered. Like O'Donohue's father, group members can slowly exhale the memories of being together, what they have learned with one another, and how they have connected in ways that matter. Challenge them to try this spiritual practice of breathing blessing with other groups that are important to them, too.

8 Blessing Hands

Leader preparation: The members of one European Resistance cell in Germany during World War II later told about a woman who joined them for every meeting. She never spoke a word, but she carried a pot of tea and blessed them all as she served hot tea. They never knew her name. She is not remembered for public acts of courage or daring. She is remembered for her simple ordinary gesture in a dangerous place, a blessing that brought a human touch to the lives of many in a time of great stress.

Supplies:

- tea and cups
- Bible

Serve tea as the activity begins. As you do, tell the story of the German woman who served tea to members of the Resistance. This woman offered blessing with a tea pot in her hands. Simeon blessed young Jesus by taking him in his arms. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:25–35. Invite group members to speak out a word, phrase, or image from this text that stands out for them.

We all have the capacity to bless others with our hands. Invite everyone to sit with their hands open before them. Encourage them to mention instances of how they bless others with their hands. Examples might include: preparing food at the shelter, writing thank you notes, bringing flowers from one's garden, baking bread for neighbors, doing home repairs for others, working on a Habitat project, volunteering with a recreation program.

The possibilities for hands-on blessing are endless. Offer this or a similar prayer:

God of Great Blessing, be with us as we pray with humble hands and hearts. Keep before us the possibilities that we might be daily blessings for others as an image of your great blessing in our lives. Help us to never dismiss the simple and the small acts that lend

kindness, joy, strength, and comfort to others' lives. We pray with thanks and hands of blessing. Amen.

9 A Symbol of Promise

Leader preparation: The Gospel of Luke tells how Simeon and Anna lived for years on the promises they had heard. Jeremiah articulated for his people the promise of God to sustain them through seventy years of exile. Adults are familiar with a ring as a symbol of promise. In this activity, paper chains (rings) of promise are assembled.

Supplies:

- colored copier paper cut into strips (1½" x 11") for making paper chains
- clear tape or staplers
- pencils and pens
- song: "Shalom Chaverim," traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html> (also found in many church songbooks); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnc>

Call on group members to recall the stories from this Exploration about Simeon and Anna and Jeremiah. Simeon and Anna lived for years on the promises they had heard. Jeremiah articulated for his people God's promise to sustain them through seventy years of exile. Explain that this activity echoes Simeon, Anna, and Jeremiah's ancient commitment to lives lived through promise.

Ask those in your group who are wearing a wedding ring or other ring of commitment to describe what their rings symbolize to them. For example: their rings carry promise into an unknown and uncharted future; they encircle a long-term commitment.

Form a ring with a strip of paper and tell group members you are going to replicate that symbol of commitment with a paper chain. Lay out the pre-cut strips of paper and clear tape or staplers. Ask each person to take six strips and, on the back of each strip, write either a promise they have heard or a promise they have made regarding the future. These should be promises that will nurture hope. Then invite participants to work together to assemble their strips into a long chain of promise, speaking aloud the promise they have written as they connect each strip to the chain. Loop the chain around your meeting space and bask in the wealth and blessing of promise for the journey. Close the activity by singing "Shalom Chaverim."

Reflect

How did you sense that the stories of Simeon and Anna and Jeremiah encouraged people's understanding of the slowness with which the future may unfold? In what way did they glimpse the importance of identifying what will sustain and bless faithful response through long waiting, necessary letting go, or difficult circumstance? Reflect on the activities you were most comfortable leading and the ones people participated in most fully. What are you learning about yourself as a teacher?