

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

This is the age when young people are betwixt and between—their bodies are changing, their behavior can be both mature and attention seeking, their hearts are both yearning for love and pulling away. “Discovery” can be both exciting and threatening to them. They want to stretch their wings, but maybe not too far from the security of peers and—whether they want to admit it or not—family. This Exploration opens doors for them to begin to think about times of letting go and loss in their lives, as well as blessings and positive outcomes related to those losses.

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

As an adult you have experienced many more times of letting go and of feeling blessed than the youth in your group. Most likely, there have been both tears and laughter in your experiences of blessing and letting go. As you lead youth through the discovery aspect of this faith practice, you will have the opportunity to help “spin” (in the most positive sense of the word) their views of these natural life occurrences. You will have occasion to acknowledge the reality and hardship of pain, both from your personal experience and from what the youth have known. But you will also be able to reassure them that negatives can become positives and that God is with us through it all.

Prayer: God of the shepherd boy that you called to be a king, thank you for also being the God of these young people that have been entrusted into my care. May your Spirit open creativity within me and these young people, and may we together discover the rich ebb and flow of embracing and releasing in our lives. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 From Minus to Plus (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be aware of youth in your group who have experienced recent or deep losses and whose pain may be quite fresh. Also be aware that as losses are mentioned or discussed, youth may be judgmental of one another. Guide them toward compassion.

Supplies:

- drawing paper
- markers

Invite youth to think for a few moments about a time when they lost something or someone. It could be the death of a person or a pet or the disappearance of something valuable to them, but it should be something they never got back. Ask them to do a quick sketch of what they lost. When everyone is done, mix up the papers and distribute them so that each youth has a sketch that isn't his or her own. Have youth guess what the sketch portrays.

Return sketches to the owners, and ask youth to explain a bit about what they drew. Then tell them to write down a number between 1 and 10 to rate how the loss felt when it happened—with 10 being “it felt like the end of the world” and 1 being “it wasn't a big deal at all.” Then ask youth to think about how they feel about that loss today. Tell them to write down a number between 1 and 10 to rate how the loss feels to them now—with 10 being “it still feels like the end of the world” and 1 being “it doesn't seem important anymore.” Ask: *Has your rating of this experience changed over time? If so, how much and why?*

Ask youth to turn their papers over and draw a large minus sign in the middle. Sometimes in the losses and negative happenings of our lives there are also positive outcomes. Tell them to add a vertical line through the middle of the minus sign so it becomes a plus sign. Invite youth to write down one possible positive outcome of the loss they described on the front of the paper.

Our lives are all filled with losses and gains, bad times and good, times when we let go of something and times when we are blessed. We don't always get to choose what happens to us, but we always get to choose how to react to it. “We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.”

2 What's Christina Thinking?

Leader preparation: Locate the artwork “Christina's World, 1948.” Put it in a place where it can be covered with a sheet of newsprint that a person can lift to look at the picture without the entire group seeing it. Print the following questions on newsprint and put them next to the artwork:

- What do you think Christina is thinking?
- What is she feeling?
- What is happening in her life at this time?

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.

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>
- plain paper
- pencils
- markers and newsprint

Ask youth to take turns peeking behind the newsprint to view the artwork and to think about the questions next to it. Tell youth not to discuss what they saw until everyone has looked. After everyone has viewed the artwork, distribute plain paper and pencils. Ask youth, working from memory, to either make a sketch of the image or describe it in words. After a few moments, unveil “Christina’s World, 1948” and invite youth to compare the artwork with what they recalled.

Talk about how emotions often help us to remember things. Discuss:

- To what extent did thinking about answers to the questions help you remember what was in the picture?
- When have you been in a position like Christina’s—literally or figuratively?
- Think of how you might use the words “letting go” to describe this scene. Who is letting go of what?

3 Naturally

Leader preparation: Decide whether this activity will take place outdoors or in your regular meeting space.

Supplies:

- (optional) photos from magazines or the Internet that illustrate nature’s cycle of life, such as seasonal trees, cocoon and butterfly, infant and old person, seed and plant

If taking youth outdoors, form groups of three and ask each group to find as many examples of the cycle (circle) of life as they can in five minutes. After five minutes, gather and ask each small group to report the examples they found, pointing out where they found those examples. If doing this activity indoors, ask youth to consider the photos of things you are showing and to decide what they all have in common—they show the cycle of life.

Explain that in our lives, there are also cycles. Invite youth to name examples of the following.

- Times or situations when life feels full and wonderful.
- Times or situations when life feels empty.
- Times when emptiness has opened space for something new to grow.

Times of growth and change are sometimes painful, but they are a part of the process of life, designed by our Creator God, who promises to be with us all the time.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Be My Guest (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Ahead of time, ask a member of your church to come and tell the group about some of his or her life experiences: a time of feeling truly blessed, a time of releasing something or someone into God’s hands, and a time of realizing that blessing and letting go hand-in-hand.

Supplies:

- guest
- snack

Welcome your guest. Ask youth to introduce themselves to your guest, and serve a snack to enjoy during the conversation. Invite the guest to tell his or her stories, based on the instructions above (in Leader preparation). Encourage youth to ask questions or make comments on what they have heard.

If youth are comfortable doing so, invite them to tell some of their stories about blessing and letting go.

5 David’s Story

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 16:1–13 and think about how the different people involved in this story might have reacted to the choice of David.

Make a copy of the attachment, and cut apart the strips. Glue or tape each strip to the top of a plain piece of paper.

Supplies:

- “David’s Story,” Attachment: Activity 5
- scissors
- plain paper
- tape or glue stick
- Bibles
- markers

Gather the group and distribute the pieces of paper with the story strips. Challenge youth to put the papers in the correct order to tell the story about how David was chosen to be king of Israel. Depending on your space and size of group, this could be done on a table top or the floor. When all the papers are placed, distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to 1 Samuel 16:1–13, helping one another as needed. Form two groups and read aloud the story, alternating verses between groups. Allow a moment for the group to check the order of their story strip papers and make any adjustments.

As a group, review each story strip paper, asking youth to write a “D” on each part of the story that involves some type of decision making and a “F” on each part that involves “figuring something out,” that is, discerning. Discuss people’s decisions and what they discerned as the story unfolded.

Focus for a minute on David’s decisions and discerning. Note that he was probably about the age of the youth in your group when this happened. Ask:

- What do you think David might have thought about this situation?
- How do you think David might have felt?

- What do you think David was most excited about in being anointed as the next king? What do you think he was most worried about?
- What was David thinking about why God chose him?

Explain that David was a person we read about in the Bible, but he wasn't any holier or better than we are. He was a kid who thought and felt things just like we all do. He was confused at times, felt close to God at times, and wondered about life and what it would hold for him. And, just like David, we can trust God that things will work out because God knows each one of us.



6 Letting Arthur Go

Leader preparation: Read the story "Arthur" on the attachment. Recall a time in your own life when you had to let go of something in order to honor a promise.

Supplies:

- "Arthur," Attachment: Activity 6
- highlighter pens
- supplies to make necklaces, including lacing, beads, lettered beads

Distribute copies of the attachment and highlighter pens. Ask youth to take a quiet moment to read the story, highlighting any sections that seem like a blessing. After all have finished, invite a conversation about what they highlighted and why. Discuss the story, asking the following questions.

- If you had been this owner, would you have decided to keep Arthur? Why or why not?
- Have you ever let something go that you really wanted to keep? If so, what was it? What happened?
- When have you experienced a blessing after letting go of someone or something? To what extent did this blessing surprise you?

Invite youth to think of something in their lives right now that they need God's help in letting go. Assure youth that they will not be asked to tell the group about this. Arthur had a special collar, and you will have the opportunity to create a necklace for yourself that symbolizes the thing in your life you just thought about. Distribute materials and offer any instructions needed for making the necklaces.

When the necklaces are completed, place them together in the center of the group and offer this or a similar prayer of blessing: *God, you know the thoughts and feelings that went into these necklaces. You know what's happening inside the lives of . . . [name each young person.] Send your Spirit among us and remind us, when we see or wear these necklaces, that you give us everything we need for whatever we face. And all of God's children said, Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 A David Soothes Saul (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 16:14–23. Recall the feelings you had when you left home.

Arrange for a person who is not in your group to send a text message to you during this activity. The message should say: “Serve others, serve me. Luv, God”

Supplies:

- Bibles
- a text message sent to your cell phone

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to find 1 Samuel 16:14–23. Ask a volunteer to read the story to the group. Tell youth that David was about their age when these events took place. Discuss:

- How excited would you be if you were told that you have to leave your family and friends this week and go work for the President or Prime Minister?
- What might be some good things about such an experience? What might be some bad things about it?
- What would it be like to play a musical instrument or read a poem or a story or sing in order to calm this leader?

Long before David became known for his ability to kill a giant, lead a country, or write poetry, he was a young boy who took care of sheep. God chose him to be the next king, but first he had to play music for the current king and be a blessing to him. David had to let go of the security of his home to follow that call. We may or may not be called to serve the way David did, but we are all called to let go of some of our security in order to be a blessing to others.

At some point during this discussion, you will receive the text message. Hand around your phone so everyone can read it. Ask:

- What does this mean?
- What are some of the things we can do in order to be a blessing to others? Are we willing to commit to doing it?

8 In the Bulb There Is a Flower

Leader preparation: Listen to the song “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” at the link below. See if this song is in the hymnal or songbook your church uses.

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; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- computer with Internet access
- hymnal or songbook your church uses (if the song is in it)
- bandanas or other strips of cloth to be used as blindfolds
- drawing paper
- oil pastels or colored chalk
- fixative spray or hairspray

Gather youth around the computer to view the music video of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Ask if any youth know this song, and any memories they might have of singing it.

Ask youth to put on the blindfolds and to listen to the song again, this time imagining their own visuals with the words. After the song, ask them to remain silent

and to think of something that is a “darkness” in their life. Tell the youth that you will be removing their blindfolds. As you remove each one, say the person’s name along with these words: *There’s a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.*

Invite youth to read the words to the song in a hymnal or songbook or online at the link above. Invite each participant to choose a favorite line to illustrate, either literally or with shapes and colors that the words suggest. Provide drawing paper and oil pastels or colored chalk for these illustrations. Play the song as youth work. When the drawings are finished, spray the illustrations with art fixative or hair spray. Display these in your meeting area as reminders of the blessings of growth and new life.

9 The Positive Cross

Leader preparation: If possible, purchase a very small wooden or metal cross for each young person. If this is not possible, cut index cards in half and use a marker to draw a cross on each one. Or create small cross cards on a computer, using clip art of a cross.

Supplies:

- small wooden or metal crosses or index cards, scissors, marker
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bible

Ask a volunteer to draw a large minus sign in the center of the whiteboard or newsprint. Sometimes, in the losses and negative happenings of our lives, there are also positive outcomes. Ask a volunteer to change the minus sign into a plus sign.

Give a cross or card with a cross drawn on it to each young person. Explain that the cross is another kind of plus sign. Ask: *Why do Christians view the cross as a positive sign?* As is helpful, add the following points to the conversation: Jesus’ death on the cross gives us more abundant life now as well as life forever with God; being in a relationship with Jesus is what helps us get through the times of loss and letting go; the cross is a reminder of the blessings of God’s love and forgiveness that are ours in Christ.

Ask youth to consider another symbolic aspect of the cross.

- What might the vertical bar on the cross symbolize? (God’s relationship with us.)
- What might the horizontal bar symbolize? (Our relationship with other people.)
- What is helpful about thinking about the cross in this way?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 3:16–19 as a prayer for the group.

Reflect

What did you discover about yourself and the youth as you led them through these activities? Seeing the ups and downs of life as natural times of blessing and letting go takes effort and, at times, a change of perspective. Many times, being a leader is such an avenue for personal growth. In what ways might your perspective be different because of the time you spend with young people?

Attachment: Activity 5

David's Story

Instructions: Make one copy of this handout. Cut apart the strips, and tape or glue each strip to a separate sheet of paper.

David grew up in a family with seven brothers.
He was the youngest.

David's job was to take care of the sheep.

David had to-die-for eyes, a great tan,
and he was just one good-lookin' guy.

A person named Samuel, who worked full time for God,
was out looking for someone to be the next king of Israel.

God told Samuel that he would find the next king
of Israel in the family of a man named Jesse.

Samuel arrived at Jesse's house and told
Jesse why he was there.

Samuel saw the oldest son in Jesse's family and figured
he must be the guy that God wanted to be the king.

Attachment: Activity 5 *(continued)*

God told Samuel it wasn't the oldest son.

Seven of Jesse's sons were considered by Samuel for the role of being the king of Israel, but every time Samuel heard God say, "Not this one."

God said, "Don't look on his appearance or on the height of his stature . . . for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Samuel was confused because he thought God told him that he would find the next king in Jesse's family, and none of Jesse's sons seemed to fit the bill.

Samuel asked Jesse if all of his sons were present. Jesse said the youngest one, David, was taking care of the sheep.

David was hanging out with the sheep when somebody ran out to him and told him to go home ASAP. David wondered what was going on.

David went home and met Samuel. Samuel heard God say, "This is the one."

Samuel anointed David with oil.

The spirit of God filled David, and David knew he would never be the same, but he still wondered what was happening.

Attachment: Activity 6

Arthur

A true story by Carol Duerksen

Arthur was a little white lamb that lived on a farm in Kansas, along with a flock of other sheep. He wore a green collar with a tag that had his name on it, and he received letters from an 89-year-old attorney named Arthur.

As you can see, he was not a “typical lamb.” When this lamb was born, the mother sheep rejected him, so he had to be fed a bottle by his owner. On the day that this lamb was born, his owner met a very nice man named Arthur, so she decided to name the lamb after him. And then she told the man Arthur about the lamb Arthur.

The man was so intrigued by his namesake that he sent the lamb letters, a collar, and a name tag.

Arthur was his owner’s favorite lamb. He came up to her to drink his bottle of milk twice a day and followed her around the farm.

Now it just so happened that the owner of this farm had made a deal with God years ago. The deal was that as part of her stewardship, she would give God all of the boy lambs that were born on the farm. Of course she didn’t literally give the lambs to God—she sold the boy lambs and gave the money to God’s work in the world.

The time was getting closer when the boy lambs would be sold, and the owner of the sheep realized that this meant selling her favorite lamb, too. She dreaded it, but the day came when she led Arthur into the trailer that would take him away. She took his collar off and tried not to listen to his cries from inside the trailer.

As the trailer left the farm, taking Arthur away, his owner stood in the yard, waving goodbye, holding his green collar in her hands. With tears in her eyes, she knew she would never forget her special lamb, Arthur.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Youth have different levels of experience with the scriptures and the biblical story. Some feel that they've "heard it all" through their years in Sunday school. Others are new to the stories. In both cases, this Exploration gives opportunity to take a fresh look at passages in light of this faith practice. Scripture stories take on new meanings that are practical for the everyday life of a young person.

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, to live fully is to bless and be blessed.

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

Leader Preparation

This Exploration opens several Bible passages and stories for you and the youth, and invites the group to be immersed in new insights from old stories. Scriptures have the power to stay with us through the years, whether through memorization or through remembering the stories. Spend time with these scriptures before leading the activities. Write them on the doorposts of your heart, so that you are not only taking the youth through words, but you also are taking them into a personal experience with the meaning in the words.

Prayer: God, speak through your Word and refresh my life with what I learn. May I understand that the experiences of your people through the ages is not so different from mine. Assure me that when I leave something behind, I can be journeying toward something new and good in your "big picture" plan. With love and trust, I pray. 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 Desert Island (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think through your favorite Bible stories and verses. Which would help you most if you were stranded on a desert island? Check in the resource materials in the back of the Bibles your group uses to see if there is a list of "favorite" Bible verses. If not, locate one on the Internet, such as at "Top Verses" or "Bible Gateway."

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) copies of list favorite Bible verses from an Internet site, such as "Bible Gateway," <http://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2009/05/the-100-most-read-bible-verses-at-biblegatewaycom/>, or "Top Verses," <http://www.topverses.com/>

Invite youth to imagine the following scenario.

You are the sole survivor of a plane crash over the ocean, and you wake up to find yourself washed up on an uninhabited island. You've lost everything except the clothes you are wearing. You don't know if, or when, you will be found. What one Bible verse or passage do you have memorized that will help you face what has happened and is still to come?

Distribute Bibles. Point out the chart of favorite Bible verses in the back of the Bible, or provide copies of a list of favorite verses from an Internet site. Allow a few moments for youth to choose a verse. Form pairs and ask partners to help each other memorize the verses they've chosen.

Even when you face a challenge, and you think that nothing good can possibly come out of it, positive blessings may still come. What might they be? (Possible answers: an appreciation for life, closer relationships with others, growing trust in God.)

Invite youth to consider the being on an uninhabited island again, with this difference: Your entire group is on the island together. Begin a conversation about which of the Bible verses they've learned in this activity will be their group motto and why.

2 Too Blessed to Be Stressed

Leader preparation: Read Matthew 6:25-34 and reflect on the stresses you feel in your life right now.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite the youth to sit in a circle. Begin by saying, "I am so stressed because . . ." and fill in the blank. The person on your right says "[Person's name] is so stressed because . . . [describe the stress that person named], and I am so stressed because . . ." Continue around the circle in this way, with each person repeating the stresses named before and adding his or her own.

On newsprint or whiteboard, list the reasons for stress given during the activity.

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.

Then take a new sheet of newsprint or in another section of the whiteboard and invite youth to take markers and list on it all the good things—the blessings—in their lives.

Take a moment to look at both lists. Discuss which list is longer, and speculate why that might be.

Ask two volunteers to read aloud Matthew 6:25–34, alternating verses. Discuss:

- What makes it hard for you to do what Jesus says—to not worry? What helps you to follow this teaching?
- To what extent is it possible to maintain a balance between feeling stressed and feeling blessed? What are the benefits of seeking such a balance?

3 Remember the Blessings

Leader preparation: Before the activity, print copies of Attachment: Activity 3 on card stock and cut the cards apart. Make enough activity cards so that there is a set of 28 cards (four each of the same scriptures) for every four youth.

Supplies:

- “Activity Cards,” Attachment: Activity 3
- scissors
- Bibles

Invite youth to play a new version of the memory game they might have played as children. Form groups of four. Give each group a set of 28 activity cards (four each of the same scripture). Have them lay the cards on a table or the floor in a grid of four rows. Tell small group members to take turns turning the cards over, four at a time, in order to locate the matches. When someone gets four cards of the same scripture, he or she keeps the cards.

After small groups have finished playing, gather everyone. Invite youth to read the verses from this game that are their favorites. Begin a discussion about the connection between these scripture verses and the practice of blessing and letting go.

- Which passages speak of blessings?
- Which passages speak of letting go?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 It Takes Practice (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Jesus calls his followers to do some challenging things, like letting go of the hate we may feel for an enemy. Being able to do this takes hard work and practice. This activity compares the work of letting go of hard feelings for an enemy to the work of getting in shape through doing exercises. In the end, we are blessed when we can forgive, and when we reap the benefits of exercise.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Being sensitive to youth with physical limitations, ask youth to choose one of the following exercises to try.

1. Stand with your back to the wall, then slide down the wall until your legs are bent and your knees form a 90-degree angle. See how many seconds you can hold this position.
2. Lie down on the floor on your back. Keeping your legs straight, bring them up, at the same time bringing your upper body forward until your body forms a V. The legs should be at a 45-degree angle. See how many seconds you can hold this position.

Begin a conversation about these exercises by asking the following questions.

- How challenging are these exercises?
- What would make them easier?
- What would it take to be really good at doing them?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 5:43–48. Invite questions and observations about Jesus' teaching.

- When would it be easy to follow Jesus' teaching in this text? When would it be nearly impossible to do so?
- Why do you think Jesus says it is important to do this?
- What makes it possible for people to follow Jesus' teaching?
- Is there a difference between extending God's love to an enemy and disregarding or excusing what that enemy has done? If so, what?
- What blessings might there be in being able to extend God's love to someone we think of as an enemy?

Assure youth that it takes God's Spirit within us and a lifetime of practice to follow what Jesus says, just as mastering physical exercises takes practice. Invite youth to take a quiet moment to think of what they may have to let go of in order to follow Jesus' teaching, and to imagine what blessings might await them if they do. Encourage youth to take these concerns to God in prayer.

5 Moses News Story

Leader preparation: Bring a video camera and a device to play the video that is created.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- video camera and device to play the video created

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Ask a volunteer to read the story aloud as the others follow along.

Invite the group to imagine what a news show on television might have done with this story. Explain that the group is going to make a video of what that news story might have been like. Ask for volunteers for the following roles: news reporter, video camera operator, Joshua, one or more relatives of Moses, one or more Israelites. As a group, talk about this event as a news story, and plan how to

present the story to a television audience. (For example, what the reporter will say about Moses, what maps or diagrams might be shown, what the reporter will ask the relatives and Israelites about his death, how Joshua feels about it, and what the future of the kingdom looks like now that they have a new leader.) Make a video of the group's news story and then view it together. Discuss: *What sense of blessing is apparent in this story?*



6 Read It All

Leader preparation: Check the Bibles your group usually uses to see what study notes are included for 2 John. If these Bibles have no notes, locate other study Bibles to bring for this activity.

Supplies:

- "2 John," Attachment: Activity 6
- Bibles that have notes on 2 John

Tell youth that during this activity they get to read an entire book of the Bible! Distribute Bibles and ask them to find 2 John, helping one another as needed. Point out the study notes about 2 John in the Bible. Distribute copies of the attachment. Tell youth to work individually or in pairs to read 2 John and then complete the items on the attachment.

After youth have finished the activities on the handout, gather the group and compare answers. Ask: *What is this writer asking people to hold on to? What does the writer say about the blessings of doing this?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Baby Moses (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Exodus 1:15–2:10. What stands out for you in this story?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- pennies, one per youth

Distribute Bibles, and have youth find Exodus 1:15–2:10, helping one another as needed. Ask for volunteers to each read aloud a few verses of the story. Then make four lists on the whiteboard or newsprint, labeled as follows: Moses' mother, Moses' sister, Pharaoh's daughter, Moses. Invite youth to circulate and make notes in each column about how that person was letting go of something or how that person was being blessed in some way. After youth have written on the charts, add the following information, as is helpful.

Moses' mother: blessed to have a child; had to let go of Moses in order to save him; blessed when she was able to nurse him, but had to give him up again; blessed that Moses was in a safe place

Moses' sister: blessed to have a little brother; had to let go of him; blessed when Pharaoh's daughter found Moses; blessed with the idea of offering to

find a nurse for him; had to let go of him when he grew up

Pharaoh's daughter: blessed to find the baby; blessed to have a solution of how to feed him; blessed to get Moses back as a son

Moses: had to let go of his mother when he was put into a basket in the water; blessed to be back with his mother; had to let go of his mother when he went to live with the Pharaoh's daughter

There was a lot of blessing and letting go in and around Moses in his early life, and it continued for the rest of his life. In all of our lives, the end of one chapter often means the start of something new and completely different. We get through these times by being sad at the losses, letting go, and moving on to new adventures.

Give each youth a penny. Explain that every coin has two sides. So do our life experiences. Just like Moses' story, one side of the story is letting go, and the other side is blessing. *In our lives, blessing and letting go are often the two sides of the same coin. Take this coin with you. Flip it back and forth as a reminder that there can be blessings even when it's tough to let go.*



8 Blessed Children

Leader preparation: Locate the artwork "Christ Among the Children" and display it where youth can see it easily.

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
- song: "Go, My Children, with My Blessing," by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm>
- device for playing the recording of the song
- newsprint
- watercolors, brushes, cups of water, paper toweling
- protective coverings for tables

Gather youth around the artwork and invite them to look at it carefully as they listen to the song "Go, My Children, with My Blessing." Discuss together what seems most powerful in this painting.

Invite youth to create their own painting of Jesus blessing the children, only with them as the children being blessed. Form groups of four. Give each group a sheet of newsprint. Each group will work together to create a painting that shows Jesus blessing the four of them.

After groups finish painting, make a display of the artwork and take a moment to enjoy each one.



9 Bless You!

Leader preparation: Use your favorite recipe or refrigerated dough to bake cookies with messages inside them, following instructions on the attachment. If someone in the group is diabetic or gluten-intolerant, insert the messages into balloons and inflate them rather than using cookies.

Supplies:

- “Blessing Cookies,” Attachment: Activity 9
- cookies baked with messages in them
- (optional) balloons

Invite youth to take two cookies. Let them know that they will find a message inside each one. Ask youth to read the messages they find. (If using balloons, invite youth to pop the balloons and take out the messages.)

Lay all the messages on the table, and ask youth to choose one they want to take with them as a blessing for the day and the coming week.

Invite youth to text or post Facebook messages in order to say “Bless you!” to one another in the week to come, saying a prayer for the person as they send or post the message.

Reflect

The story of God’s people and God’s efforts to connect with those people is timeless. To what extent were youth able to consider the biblical stories and passages as not just about “back then,” but also as important here and now? Thank the Holy Spirit for helping you to plant seeds of understanding and for help in watering them into the future.

Attachment: Activity 3

Activity Cards

*Print two copies of each page on card stock, and then cut apart the cards.
There should be four cards for each verse.*

The grace of the Lord
Jesus be with you.
(1 Corinthians 16:23)

The grace of the Lord
Jesus be with you.
(1 Corinthians 16:23)

Attachment: Activity 3 *(continued)*

So if anyone is in Christ,
there is a new cre-
ation: everything old has
passed away; see, every-
thing has become new!
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

So if anyone is in Christ,
there is a new cre-
ation: everything old has
passed away; see, every-
thing has become new!
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

For by grace have you
been saved through faith,
and this is not your own
doing; it is the gift of God.
(Ephesians 2:8)

For by grace have you
been saved through faith,
and this is not your own
doing; it is the gift of God.
(Ephesians 2:8)

Attachment: Activity 3 *(continued)*

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29)

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29)

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

Attachment: Activity 3 *(continued)*

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:13)

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:13)

Attachment: Activity 6

2 John

Mark each statement with T for true or F for false.

- This book wasn't written by a guy named John.
- The "elect lady" was the author's wife.
- John was concerned about running out of paper and ink.
- If John were living today, he would rather talk in person than send a text message.
- The big issue in this letter is that believers are falling for wrong teachings.

In your opinion, what is the most important verse in this book?

John is asking people to hold on to something. What is it? What will happen to people who hold onto this?

Attachment: Activity 9

Blessing Cookies

Make your favorite recipe for cookies or use purchased dough. Cut apart these strips. Fold each strip several times. Insert one folded strip into the center of each lump of cookie dough before baking. Make two cookies per youth.

May the grace of Jesus Christ be with you.

May your words give grace to others.

Forgive one another, just as Christ has forgiven you.

Go with God!

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

O God, you have put gladness in my heart.

I will praise God for dealing mercifully and bountifully with me.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit in me.

May God be gracious to you and bless you; may God's face shine upon you.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

In some ways, the concept of discipleship may be a stretch for this age group, because they are still discovering who they are and choosing which values they will follow in their lives. At the same time, the enthusiasm and energy that youth bring to life can be guided and channeled. They can grow in understanding what it means to follow Christ in day-to-day attitudes and behaviors.

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

The life of a disciple of Jesus is all about letting go and being blessed. The letting go may be tough, and the blessing will often be different from what the world teaches about “the good life.” When you teach youth about discipleship and how following Jesus is a lifelong goal, it helps to model that lifestyle. As you prepare to lead these sessions, choose one value from the activities as a focus for your life, and talk with youth about your experiences in trying to live as a disciple. They will respect your vulnerability.

Prayer: Jesus, sometimes I feel inadequate to lead others in thinking about discipleship because I still have so much to learn about following you. Thank you for this challenge of teaching. Thank you for your patience with me, even as you were patient with your disciples. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Come Along (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Luke 5:1–11 and reflect on the experiences that have led you to follow Jesus.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Invite youth to name things they enjoy doing.

Imagine that a person you don’t know well stops by while you are doing that favorite activity and tells you how to do it better. What would you think? How would you respond?

Distribute Bibles and have youth find Luke 5:1–11, helping one another as needed. Ask for volunteers to read aloud the parts of narrator, Jesus, and Simon Peter. Remind the youth that Peter was an experienced fisherman. That was his occupation before Jesus called him to be a disciple. After the reading, ask:

- What was Simon Peter doing when Jesus came to him? How was Simon Peter’s day going?
- What did Jesus tell Simon Peter to do?
- Why do you think Simon Peter followed Jesus’ instructions?
- What was the result of following Jesus’ instructions?
- What were the benefits for the fishermen in becoming Jesus’ disciples? In what ways were they blessed?
- If Jesus walked into this room today and said to you, “Come along with me,” how easy would it be for you to do that? What might you have to leave behind?
- What might be the benefits of leaving something behind in order to follow Jesus?



2 Forgiveness

Leader preparation: Display the artwork “Forgiveness” and cover the title.

Supplies:

- 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>
- Bibles
- large paper clips
- play dough
- drawing paper
- markers

Invite youth to gather around the artwork and take a quiet moment to study it. As a group, decide what title you would give to this artwork. Entertain all suggestions, and encourage each person to offer a possible title. After coming to agreement on a title, reveal the actual title. Ask:

Blessing and Letting Go

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.

- How closely does the title “Forgiveness” fit with the title we chose? Which title do you like better?
- In what ways does this title describe what is happening in the scene?

Ask for volunteers to read aloud Matthew 6:9–15 and Colossians 3:12–14. Ask:

- What message do these two passages have in common?
- Why do you think Jesus and Paul tell God’s people to forgive as they are forgiven by Christ?
- What is challenging about this teaching?

Invite youth to choose the craft supplies they’d like to use to create a piece of art that expresses “forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you” (Colossians 3:14).



3 What’s Wrong With This Picture?

Leader preparation: Read Luke 17:11–19. When have you forgotten to give thanks for a blessing received?

Supplies:

- “Skit,” Attachment: Activity 3

Distribute copies of the attachment, and ask for volunteers to play the various parts. If your group is small, some may need to double up on parts. Take a quiet moment for youth to read through the script and ask any questions they have.

Perform the skit, and then gather the group for discussion:

- Why do you think the Gospel of Luke includes this story?
- What is your top ten list of reasons why the other people didn’t thank the Miracle Man for blessing them with healing?
- On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being “blessed beyond belief,” how blessed do you think you are?
- On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being “many times a day,” how often do you thank God for the blessings in your life?
- Why is showing gratitude important?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Who Will Follow Jesus? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: When have you sensed a connection among your experiences of letting go, your experiences of blessing, and your eagerness to follow Jesus?

Supplies:

- magazines and newspapers to cut apart
- scissors
- pens

Invite the youth to look through the newspapers and magazines and cut out pictures of people. After a few minutes, spread out the pictures on a table or the floor so youth can see them all. Take a moment for youth to look at the photos. Encourage them to use their imaginations about what each person's life. Perhaps they can imagine more than one scenario or setting for each picture, settings that are opposite from each other.

Ask each group member to choose one photo of a person to whom they might attach the word "blessing" and to write that word in the corner of the photo. Next, have each group member choose one photo of a person to whom they might attach the words "letting go" and to write those words in the corner of the photo. Invite youth to show and tell about their choices.

Clear away the remaining photos and have youth spread out the photos they have chosen. Ask each group member to look at photos and choose one person that he or she thinks would be likely to follow Jesus and to write "follow Jesus" in a corner of that photo. Again, invite youth to show and tell about their choices. Discuss:

- What connection might exist between feeling blessed and following Jesus?
- What connection might exist between having an experience of letting go and following Jesus?

5 Reaction Time

Leader preparation: Write the following statement on a piece of artwork board:

Our lives are filled with losses and gains, times when we let go of something and times when we are blessed. We don't always get to choose what happens to us, but we always get to choose how to react to it.

Cut the artwork board into about twelve pieces to make a puzzle.

Supplies:

- treat (a food youth will enjoy)
- artwork board
- marker
- scissors

Before youth arrive, set out the treat with only enough for half the group. (Put the remaining treats out of sight.) Next to the treat, put a sign that says: "Please do not touch the food!"

Gather the group and have youth count off by twos. Explain that the treat is only for those who are "1s." Tell the "1s" that they cannot share their food. After the "1s" have eaten their treat, ask the "2s" how it felt to watch the others eat. Ask the "1s" how they felt about not being able to share.

Give the puzzle pieces to the "2s" and ask them to put the puzzle together while the others watch. When the puzzle is finished, invite the group to read it aloud in unison: "Our lives are filled with losses and gains, times when we let go of something and times when we are blessed. We don't always get to choose what happens to us, but we always get to choose how to react to it." Discuss this statement as it applies to the treats earlier in the activity.

Divide all the puzzle pieces among the youth. (Some may have more than one piece.) Ask them to turn over the pieces to the blank side and write some “wise words” about how to react when life hands you a loss. These words may be their own, or they may refer to Bible verses or prayers they know. Have the group put the “back” of the puzzle together and read the words they wrote in unison.

At the end of the activity, give the “2s” a treat to enjoy.

6 My Way

Leader preparation: Plan to bring a digital camera and a way to view the photos you take. If possible, have a printer available so you can print the photos and have youth make cards from them. If you can’t print during the session, make cards during the week and send them to the youth.

Supplies:

- digital camera
- device for viewing photos
- Bibles
- printer and photo paper
- fine-tipped permanent markers

Give these instructions to the group.

If someone sculpted a statue of you that highlighted something that you are very stubborn about—that you would say, “I want to do this *my way*”—what would the statue look like? For example, maybe you are stubborn about wanting to stay up late and play on your computer, or maybe you are stubborn about choosing what you will wear or not eating a particular food. Think of one thing that you feel very strongly about having your way, and then make yourself into a statue to illustrate that point.

Strike a pose and freeze in that position. Take a picture of each young person in his or “statue mode.” View the photos as a group.

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to find Proverbs 3:5–8, helping one another as needed. Read aloud these verses in unison. Ask: *What, if anything, is the connection between these Bible verses and the statue pose that I photographed?*

Ask youth to think about how they would adjust their statue poses if they were going to live according to these verses in Proverbs. Have them strike that pose and photograph each one. View the photos as a group. Invite each youth to explain why his or her pose is or isn’t different from the first one.

If you are able to do so, print out the photos of the second pose and have youth copy a phrase from Proverbs 3:5–8 on the photo. If you are not able to do so, print the photos after the session, write Proverbs 3:5 on each one, and send them to youth during the week.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Let It Go (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read the activity and think about your responses. Participating in activities with youth is a great way to build community spirit.

Supplies:

- small envelopes that can be sealed (one per person)
- small pieces of paper
- pens

Give each young person a small piece of paper, an envelope, and a pen. Ask youth to think of something that they feel they need to or want to let go of in their lives, such as anger toward a friend, the need to be popular, frustration with something in school, a problem within their family, and so forth. Tell youth they will not have to tell this thing to anyone. Ask youth to write this “letting go” thing on the piece of paper, put it in the envelope, and seal it. On the outside of the envelope, have them write: “Letting Go.”

It is important to spend time praying about letting go of these things. Take the envelope home and put it by your bed. Whenever you see it, stop and pray for God’s help in letting go of what you wrote on the paper. Once you feel you are able to let go of this situation, shred the envelope.

Invite youth to tell how they expect to feel when they have let go of what they wrote in the first envelope. Ask: *What are some things you might do to celebrate when you have “done the work” to let go?*

8 Sing a Blessing

Leader preparation: Check to see if the song “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” is in the hymnal or songbook that your church uses. Plan to show the music videos of this song.

Supplies:

- song: “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm>; music videos, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHNig73qrG4&feature=related>, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cDz1ufQSgA>
- device for viewing the music videos

Gather the group and watch the two music videos of the song “Go, My Children, with My Blessing.” Discuss which version you like best. Ask youth if they know this hymn and, if they do, to recall memories of when they have sung it.

Distribute hymnals or songbooks and read the words to this song in unison. Invite youth to decide if they’d like to sing the song as if they are a top-notch choir or like little kids who are doing their best to sing the song. Either way, ask one person to be the choir director to lead the group in singing the song.

If you like, go serenade another group.

Sending & Serving Activities

9 Designer Clothes

Leader preparation: Locate a broad assortment of old clothes. On a piece of newsprint or a whiteboard print the following words: “compassion,” “kindness,” “humility,” “meekness,” “patience,” “forgiveness,” “love.”

Supplies:

- an assortment of old clothes for youth to put on—shoes, hats, skirts, shirts, pants, scarves, jackets
- Bibles
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to Colossians 3:12–14, helping one another as needed. Read aloud these verses in unison. Invite youth to choose clothing items to put on that symbolize the “clothing” found in this passage. They should be prepared to explain their clothing choices and how they relate to the words in these verses. *If you want God to forgive you when you mess up, keep the clothes on that you’ve just put on. If you don’t care about God forgiving you, take them off.* Ask youth who kept the clothes on (which most likely will be all of them) to read verse 13 again. Ask what it says about them receiving forgiveness from God. (“So you must also forgive.”) Discuss:

- The writer of this letter uses the word “must.” Why do you think this person feels so strongly about forgiveness?
- What makes it possible for us to forgive another person?
- What happens when we fail to forgive others? (Assure youth that God stands ready to forgive us when we ask and bless us with the love of the Spirit so we can try again.)

Ask youth to take off the old clothing. Together, read the words on the newsprint or whiteboard list. Invite youth to think of one item of clothing that they own which could help them remember one word from this list when they are wearing it. Close by reading Colossians 3:15–17 in unison.

Reflect

The musical *Godspell* includes a prayer to see God more clearly and follow God more nearly day by day. This is the essence of discipleship. What did you observe that suggests the youth are growing in their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus day by day?

Attachment: Activity 3

Skit

Characters:

Miracle man
Person 1 (blind)
Person 2 (deaf)
Person 3 (quadriplegic)
Person 4 (gluten intolerant)
Person 5 (diabetic)
Person 6 (bipolar)
Person 7 (has cancer)

Person 1: Listen! What's that I hear in the distance?

Person 5: I have no idea. I can't see anything.

Person 1: No, I'm the one who can't see.

Person 5: Sorry, I mean I don't see anything.

Person 1: Well, I hear it. Sounds like somebody walking down the road.

Person 5: I can't imagine how you can hear that.

Person 1: Well, I can.

Person 3: You two are always arguing. I can see somebody off in the distance. He's getting closer. Yes, it's that Miracle Man. Oh, oh, oh! Somebody carry me so I can get close to him!

Person 4: C'mon, let's get him closer.

(Person 4 and Person 5 pretend to carry Person 3 to the Miracle Man as he approaches.)

Person 3: Hey! Miracle Man! Please help me! Please heal me!

Miracle Man: I would love to do that for you!

(Miracle Man touches Person 3 on the shoulder.)

(Person 3 stands up, waving arms and dancing around.)

Person 3: I'm healed! I'm healed! Look, I'm healed!

Attachment: Activity 3 *(continued)*

Person 1: Hey, I've gotta talk to that Miracle Man. Lead me, please!

Person 6: I'll lead you. I'm going, too! I can see what he did for that guy. Maybe he can heal me, too!

(Person 6 leads Person 1 up to Miracle Man.)

Person 6: Heal us, too! Please!

Person 1: Yes! I've been blind since birth! Please Miracle Man! Heal us too!

(Miracle Man touches Person 1's eyes, then Person 6's arm. They get all excited and start cheering.)

Person 4: Miracle Man, my problem isn't so big, but can you heal me too? I have celiac disease—I'm gluten intolerant.

Miracle Man: Sure, I can do that for you!

(Miracle Man touches 4 on the shoulder.)

Person 5: Me too! Me too! I'm diabetic.

Person 2: And me! I'm deaf.

Person 7: Miracle Man! Me too! I have cancer, spreading through my bones! Please heal me.

(Miracle man touches Persons 2, 5, and 7. The minute they are healed, all seven begin to leave.)

Persons 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7: I can't wait to tell my family and friends! This is amazing!

(Miracle Man stands there, watching them leave, shaking his head.)

(Person 1 runs back to Miracle Man.)

Person 1: Miracle Man! Thank you! Thank you! Thank You! How can I ever thank you enough for what you did for me?

Miracle Man: Just seeing you here and hearing your joy is thanks enough. What I want to know is, where are the others? Are you the only one who is thankful? I blessed seven people today with healing, and only one said thank you! There is something seriously wrong with this picture!

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

For young people this age, life is often “all about them,” and sometimes they may view traditions as boring. Others will have strong feelings about maintaining certain traditions, especially if they are related to Christmas and Easter. If youth do see tradition as boring, they may want to see it changed. Create openings for discussion. Help them to see that traditions are continued or discontinued because people like them take action (or don't) to make changes.

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

Here's your chance to find out what bugs youth about your church traditions and what they appreciate. Here's your chance to remind them of the traditions that others have deemed important and to help them understand those traditions. This is also a good time to give opportunity for interaction with congregational members who can speak to those traditions and to help youth appreciate the blessings of tradition.

Prayer: God, help me to see tradition through the fresh eyes of these young people, and help me guide them to see tradition through the seasoned eyes of adults. Help me lead the group to find common ground on which to worship and praise you. 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 It Changes (Easy preparation)

Leader preparation: Identify the traditions in your church that youth may have experienced, such as the celebrations of Christmas and Easter, or baptism and communion, or lighting the candles and passing the peace. In what ways have these traditions changed since you were a young person?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Take the youth outdoors, or stand by windows looking outside. Invite them to observe the natural world and to name the things that they can count on happening in nature. For example, the sun will rise, night will follow day, the wind will blow, the trees will have leaves, the grass will grow, it will rain, and the seasons will follow in order. Name as many as possible. Encourage youth to think of all the things that happen in nature that depart from the ordinary. For example, it may rain too much or too little, bugs may eat the tree leaves, there may be earthquakes or hurricanes or tornados. Ask: *So is nature dependable or not?*

Gather the group in your meeting space. Transition into a discussion about church traditions. Just as we see in nature, there are things in our church that have been done in the same way for many years. We call them traditions. Ask: *What are some traditions in our church? As is helpful, add some of the traditions you identified in preparing for the activity. Discuss:*

- Which of these traditions are most important to you? To your parents? To older people in our church?
- Which traditions have changed since you were a child? Do you think the change has been for the better? Why or why not?
- Which traditions do you wish would change? Why?

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to find Psalm 148, helping one another as needed. Form two groups to read the psalm aloud, alternating verses between groups. Wonder together what this psalmist might say about human-made traditions.

2 Stand or Dance

Leader preparation: Look at the list of church traditions below and add any traditions from your church that you think youth would respond to as something they like or something they are ready to change.

Supplies: None

Explain that you will read a list of traditions or aspects of church life that they may like or that they might be ready to change. If they like the tradition, they should stand up and say, "It's good as is." If they wish this tradition would change, they should stand and dance around. Read the following traditions one at a time, allowing time for youth to respond:

- The kind of music we sing in worship.
- The amount of involvement that young people have in our church.

- 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.

- Our church's willingness to accept people who are different from most of us.
- The starting time for our worship service.
- The clothing that is acceptable to wear to worship.
- The way we celebrate Christmas.
- The way we celebrate Easter.

Invite a discussion of what items youth stood for and which they danced for, and why.

- What is the blessing of keeping a tradition?
- What can be gained by letting go of a tradition and replacing it with something else?

3 Imagine a New Tradition

Leader preparation: Ask the pastor about what to do with the ideas generated in this activity.

Supplies:

- writing paper
- pens
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Tell youth that their task for the next few moments is as follows:

Imagine something that you would like our church to do that would be a blessing to you. Imagine how this blessing giving might become a tradition that would continue for years to come. What would this tradition be?

Form groups of three to brainstorm ideas. If they need some starters, suggest the following: receiving a Bible, being paired with a mentor, going on a youth trip, holding a graduation celebration, being recognized for getting a driver's license, and so forth. Encourage them to dream boldly. Take time for each small group to read its list of ideas. Write their ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard. As a group, choose which ideas to give to church leaders.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Our Church Traditions (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Invite a guest for this activity. Ask someone who is quite familiar with the traditions in your congregation and can tell stories about how traditions have changed through the years. Some topics that could be covered include music, worship styles, holidays, clothing, inclusive language, role of women. Ask your guest to tell not only what has changed, but how the changes came to be.

Supplies:

- guest presenter

Introduce your guest and invite youth to introduce themselves to your guest. Ask your guest to tell about some traditions in your congregation and what changes

have been made to those over the years. Ask your guest: *What blessings have come about because of these changes?*

Allow time for youth to ask questions. Then invite youth and the guest to brainstorm together about what changes to traditions they might like to see in the future, and what they hope will stay the same.

Peter's Sheet

Leader preparation: Plan an outdoor space or space indoors with a washable floor for the final part of this activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- beach towel
- play dough

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to Acts 10:1–48, helping one another as needed. Ask for volunteers to read the following parts: narrator, angel, Cornelius, the voice, Peter, the Spirit, the men. Invite the group to relax and enjoy the reading by the volunteers. After the reading, ask youth to summarize the main things that happened in this story. Ask:

- Why did God give Peter the vision of the sheet full of animals?
- How did Peter understand the meaning of this vision?
- What tradition from his faith was Peter told to go? Why was it important for Peter to do so?

Invite youth to use play dough to create a mini-sculpture that represents a tradition they think the church needs to change or let go.

After the mini-sculptures are made, go outdoors or to an area with a washable floor. Ask two volunteers to hold the beach towel while the other youth stand about ten feet away. Ask each one to state what his or her mini-sculpture represents before attempting to toss it into the towel.



A Final Gift

Leader preparation: Be prepared to tell the story of Bob Moss, as explained in the activity below.

Supplies:

- “A Statement of Faith,” Attachment: Activity 6
- highlighter pens

Ask youth if they know what the phrase “inclusive language” means. They may be aware of examples of this from their studies in school. Words are important. They can be used to include or to exclude. Before the use of inclusive language, most references to God and to people were male-only concepts. Such references left out a wide range of images of God and limited the important role of women in the faith. Inclusive language is an issue of social justice. It shows respect for all people. Explain that inclusive language is one tradition that is important to many churches, including the United Church of Christ.

Tell the story of Bob Moss. Bob Moss was the second president of the United Church of Christ denomination. Back in the 1970s, the church was trying to find

ways to use more inclusive language in church traditions. After Bob died, his coworkers found a document on his desk. He had written an inclusive language version of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith. It was a wonderful final gift.

Distribute copies of the attachment and highlighter pens. Ask youth to highlight the words and phrases that seem to be inclusive language in Moss's version. Talk with them about how and why this is important.

- Why did the UCC choose to let go of language that is not inclusive?
- Why do you imagine this change is hard for some people to make?
- How is it a blessing to be able to make changes in traditions?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 A Time for Everything (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider finding a way to include parents or other adults in the congregation in this activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. Form two groups to read these verses aloud, alternating verses between groups.

Invite youth to add their own verses to this passage, based on their life experiences. Write these on the whiteboard or newsprint. For example, “a time to sing hymns and a time to sing praise songs”; “a time to hold on to a tradition and a time to let go”; “a time to do homework and a time to play basketball”; “a time to text someone and a time to talk in person.” Add this last verse to the list: “a time to come here together, and a time to go away again.”

Read this adapted Celtic blessing to the group:

Leave now, through a mighty strength:
God's power to guide you,
God's might to uphold you,
God's eyes to watch over you;
God's ear to hear you,
God's word to give you speech,
God's hand to guard you,
God's way to lie before you,
God's shield to shelter you,
God's host to secure you.
Go in peace.



8 Bless the Birds

Leader preparation: Bring information about St. Francis of Assisi for this activity. You might find information in your church library or on the Internet. Display the artwork “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds” and cover the title.

Supplies:

- 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-assisi-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&origid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+francis+feeding+the+birds>
- information about St. Francis of Assisi
- “Prayer of St. Francis,” Attachment: Activity 8

Invite youth to view the artwork with the title covered. Ask:

- Who is this man, and what is he doing?
- Who is the man behind him, and what is he thinking?

After youth have responded, reveal the title and ask for their reactions to this. Hand around the information you gathered about St. Francis. Ask youth to find out who he was, what he did, when and where he lived, and why he is so well known. Ask youth to identify St. Francis let go of during his life.

Distribute copies of the attachment, “Prayer of St. Francis.” Invite youth to create movements that interpret the words of the prayer. Recite the prayer together.

9 Shalom Chaverim

Leader preparation: If any of your youth play a musical instrument, give them the music ahead of time (see <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>) and ask them to learn it.

Supplies:

- song “Shalom Chaverim,” Traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnn>
- device for showing the music video
- (optional) device to make a video of the group singing and post it on YouTube

Gather the youth and view the music video of the song “Shalom Chaverim.” If any youth know this song, ask about where they learned it. Sing the song together. If any youth learned to play it on a musical instrument, have them play along.

If you like, make a video of the youth singing or playing the song. View the video together and talk about posting it on YouTube or your church website.

Reflect

How did it feel to look at church traditions through the eyes of young people? Was it refreshing, or did you find yourself defending tradition, or both?

Attachment: Activity 6

A Statement of Faith

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith (original version)

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of men, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him.

Amen.

Attachment: Activity 6 *(continued)*

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith (adapted by Robert V. Moss)

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God.

Amen.

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to

be consoled, as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Many North American youth are accustomed to the world revolving around them. There are more activities and involvements available to youth than they can do, and parents often spend much of their “free” time shuttling youth from one activity to another. Thoughts of “mission” and giving time to others aren’t always a priority. This Exploration engages youth in letting go of self-centered thinking and invites them to think about mission and what they can do on a daily basis to extend God’s love to others. It also encourages them to perceive how the blessing of mission is as much about receiving as it is about giving.

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

Leader Preparation

The youth in your group watch you. Yes, they want to be independent, but they also pattern themselves after adults they admire. As you lead these activities, demonstrate that you know what it means to “walk the talk” of mission. Prepare yourself through prayer, awareness, and education. If outreach activities have been a part of your life, prepare to tell your story as a witness to God’s love at work in you.

Prayer: God, in the words of Francis of Assisi, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. 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



1 Jabez (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read 1 Chronicles 4:9–10. How do you understand this prayer? In what way is Jabez’s prayer your own prayer?

The name “Jabez” means “pain.” He must have been an amazing man for his story to be remembered in the middle of the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 4! Jabez was bold enough to ask God to bless him. And it wasn’t just a general blessing. He asked God to “enlarge his border,” always be with him, and keep him from evil. For Jabez, enlarging “his border” probably meant enlarging his homestead. He likely wanted more land, more opportunity. This doesn’t necessarily mean we should pray for more material possessions, more stuff. It may mean that we can pray for more opportunities to be who God wants us to be and to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives. One author, Bruce Wilkinson, says that his favorite way to explain “enlarge my border” is “ministry.” Another word could be “mission.” We can pray for ways to extend God’s love to others.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to 1 Chronicles 4:9–10, helping one another as needed. Ask a volunteer to read the verses aloud. Ask:

- What does the text tell us about Jabez?
- Why do you think this very short story of Jabez is included in the Bible?
- What blessings did Jabez ask God to provide?
- How do you understand the phrase “enlarge my border”? In what ways might a person’s “border” be enlarged? How could the word “mission” relate to enlarged borders?

Ask youth to imagine what might happen in their lives if they asked God for enlarged borders—for opportunities to extend God’s love to others.

Invite youth to get into small groups and create interpretive movements to go along with the prayer of Jabez in verse 10 and to memorize the prayer.



2 The Baptism of Jesus

Leader preparation: Locate the artwork “The Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West. Check books in your church library or public library or do an Internet search for other artistic depictions of the baptism of Jesus. Bring some of these to show to the youth.

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
- various artistic depictions of Jesus’ baptism
- drawing paper, watercolors, brushes, cups of water, paper toweling
- protective covering for tables

Blessing and Letting Go

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.

Make a display of the art depicting Jesus’ baptism. Invite youth to take a quiet moment to study them. Discuss:

- What did each artist want to emphasize about Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River?
- What differences among these pieces of art are most striking?
- What preconceived ideas about Jesus do you have to let go in order to engage these images?
- What symbolism do you see in these pieces of art?
- Based on these images, in what way was Jesus’ baptism a time of blessing? In what way was it a time of letting go?

Invite youth to create their own watercolor paintings that illustrate or interpret the tradition of baptism.



3 Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It

Leader preparation: Make enough copies of the attachment so that each young person will receive three different activity cards. Cut out the cards.

Supplies:

- “Activity Cards,” Attachment: Activity 3

Mix up the activity cards and place them in a stack. Ask a volunteer to deal three cards to each person. Youth should trade with one another and with the stack until they have three different cards.

Ask each youth to think about how he or she will “play” each card—creating a role play of how to respond to the situation described on the card. Encourage youth to work with others in these role plays. Take time for one or two role plays for each situation.

Encourage youth to decide on a card they will “play” this week in real life, and take it home as a reminder to do so.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 With or Without Words (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Print each word of the following quotation (from St. Francis) in large letters on a separate sheet of paper:

Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.

Supplies:

- plain paper
- marker
- (optional) treat to use as a reward

Spread out the sheets of paper (each with a word on it) on a table or the floor. Invite youth to work together to create as many sentences as possible by arranging some or all of the sheets. After a few moments, arrange the papers to form the quote by St. Francis: “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.” Ask

youth to explain how they understand the meaning of this statement.

Form groups of three and ask them to imagine that they are participants on a reality television show where teams have to work together to accomplish a project. Instruct each small group to come up with a project that accomplishes the following:

- Illustrates or follows the teaching of St. Francis.
- Names the blessings that grow out of following St. Francis's teaching.
- Names what is let go or left behind as part of the project.
- Reaches out to others with God's love.

Offer a reward, if you wish, to the group that comes up with the best project. If youth need an example, suggest work at a homeless shelter. Volunteers don't preach with words but with actions. Volunteers interact with residents based on what they can learn from the residents, not what they can give them. Blessings go both directions. And volunteers need to let go of preconceived ideas about persons who are homeless.

Ask each group to explain its project. If possible, plan with youth how to carry out one of the projects.

5 In the Name of Christ

Leader preparation: Invite a person who has participated on a mission trip or been involved in some other form of Christian outreach work to come and tell about his or her experience. Encourage him or her to bring photos and to emphasize the blessings given and received through this mission experience. Encourage your guest to tell how he or she grew and changed through the experience.

Supplies:

- invited guest

Introduce your guest and invite youth to introduce themselves to him or her. Allow plenty of time for your guest to tell about his or her mission experience. Invite youth to ask questions and make comments.

Ask youth to imagine taking part in a similar experience, or how they might be involved in Christian service in a different way.



6 When the Light of God Is on You

Leader preparation: In your own experience, when have you sensed the light of God shining in a particular situation? What did this sense of God's presence add to your experience?

Supplies:

- "When the Light of God Is Upon You," Attachment: Activity 6
- magazines and newspapers to cut apart
- scissors

Ask youth to imagine they are going on a mission trip. *While you are on this trip, what is mostly likely to happen?* If they think it is most likely that they will extend God's love and be a blessing to the people they will be helping, they should go to one side of the room. If they think the people they will be helping will extend God's love to them, they should go to the other side of the room. Tell youth they

have to make a decision between the two responses. Talk about where they are standing: *Was it hard to decide which way to do? Why did you choose to stand where you are?*

Distribute copies of the attachment, and give youth a few moments to read the story. Invite questions and comments about the story. Ask: *Who seemed to be blessing whom in this story?*

Explain that sometimes those of us who live in North America feel that we have all the answers and the material resources to help people who have less than we do. Although these people may be able to use the resources that we offer—and they may not have heard God’s good news the way we know it—many of them trust God and have the light of God shining in them in powerful ways. We cannot assume that we are “better off” than they are.

Ask youth: *What does it look like when the light of God is shining on people or places?* Invite them to cut examples from the magazines and newspapers. Gather in a group and ask youth to tell about one item they cut out. Offer a prayer, asking God to bless each of these people and situations.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Heading for Canaan (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Make two columns on the newsprint or whiteboard, with these headings: “The Same” and “Different.”

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- index cards
- pens

Distribute Bibles, and ask youth to find Genesis 12:1–5, helping one another as needed. Ask a volunteer to read the story aloud. Tell youth to look for ways that they are like Abram and ways that they are different than Abram. Invite them to write these in the appropriate columns on the whiteboard or newsprint.

As a group, read what is written in the columns. Which list has more? This Bible passage may seem like an old story about an old guy in a land far away, but looking deeper may yield something more meaningful. Explain that we each have your own Canaan. Every time we have to leave something behind that is familiar to try something new, we are going to Canaan. Every time we say or do something that helps or blesses another person, we are in Canaan. Every time we feel a nudge from God to step out of our comfort zones, we are going to Canaan.

Distribute index cards and pens. Ask youth to write a “going out to Canaan” blessing that will be given to another group member. Some examples might be: “Go with God.” “May you be blessed and may you bless others.” “God will provide.” “Let go and let God!”

Gather in a circle. Collect the index cards and mix them up. As each young person leaves, say: *God bless you as you go out to Canaan this week!* Hand him or her one of the cards.

8 Freely Receive, Freely Give

Leader preparation: Read Romans 15:22–29 and look at a map in your Bible to consider the breadth of Paul’s travels. Background information: A Gentile is someone who was not born into the Jewish faith. Paul is saying that God’s salvation is not only for the Jews, who were known as God’s chosen people, but for everyone. At the same time, because the Gentiles received spiritual blessings, they are called to share of their material possessions with people who are in need. This applies to Christians today, as well. We have been blessed beyond measure and are called to share what we have.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- information about serving projects in your congregation or denomination that youth might join
- song: “Blessed Be Your Name” by Matt Redman; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du0il6d-DAk>
- device for playing recorded music or video

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to find Romans 15:22–29, helping one another as needed. Together, identify what Paul is saying about his travel plans. If your Bibles have maps in the back, turn to a map that shows the Mediterranean region and locate these places. Discuss:

- Who are the Gentiles?
- What is Paul asking them to do?
- What do you think Paul would ask our congregation to do?

Brainstorm possible serving projects that you could do as a group. Offer information about your congregation’s serving projects and think about how youth might be involved in those. As is possible, choose one serving project and create a plan to carry it out.

Play the music video or another recording of the song “Blessed Be Your Name” and invite youth to sing along. Ask them to pay special attention to the phrase “Every blessing you pour out I’ll turn back to praise.” May this be their motto this week!



9 The Light of God

Leader preparation: Gather flashlights for youth to use. Choose a location for this activity that is as dark as possible.

Supplies:

- “When the Light of God Is upon You,” Attachment: Activity 6
- flashlights

Distribute copies of the attachment, and ask volunteers to read it aloud. When the light of God shines on us and through us, people see it, and we become blessings to them. *How much you can shine with God’s love when you allow it to happen?*

Darken the room. Hand out flashlights, or ask youth to use their cell phones as flashlights. Ask youth to shine the light onto their own faces from the chin up. Have them think about the times when they have felt God's light shining in their lives. *Who helped that to happen?* Then ask them to think of places and people that seem to need God's light to shine on them right now. Invite youth to tell how they might be able to shine God's light in these situations and be blessings to others. Offer a prayer, asking God's light to shine brightly in all you say and do.

Turn the lights back on and collect the flashlights.

Reflect

"When the light of God shines on us and through us, people see it, and we become a blessing." How well do the youth seem to grasp this? Take time to thank God for the times when you are God's light.

Attachment: Activity 3

Activity Cards

<p>Got a bad attitude toward a certain person?</p> <p>Special-agent-for-God assignment:</p> <p>Just let it go.</p>	<p>Feelin' like somebody did you wrong?</p> <p>Special-agent-for-God assignment:</p> <p>Surprise that person and forgive him or her.</p>
<p>Know people who are in need of prayer?</p> <p>Special-agent-for-God assignment:</p> <p>Bless them! Pray for them every day.</p>	<p>Feelin' like somebody in your family is just a pain?</p> <p>Special-agent-for-God assignment:</p> <p>Pray for that person, and pray that God will give you extra patience!</p>
<p>Know people who don't seem to have many friends?</p> <p>Special-agent-for-God assignment:</p> <p>Bless them! Send a text, give a smile, invite them to share your lunch table.</p>	<p>Got a bad attitude toward a certain person?</p> <p>Special-agent-for-God assignment:</p> <p>Just let it go.</p>

Attachment: Activity 6

When the Light of God Is upon You

As Bob walked across the open plaza, his wife Ruth and friend Marcia dropped a little behind. It was a gorgeous, blue-sky, cool, sunshiny day in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and we all were returning from lunch to continue giving free English lessons. Suddenly, a young man in a black leather jacket slipped up behind Bob and with one swipe lifted the wallet from Bob's pocket. Just as quickly, Ruth leaped forward and grabbed the young man by the jacket, screaming at him to leave her husband alone. The young man wrenched himself away and took off down the street, empty handed but still wearing his jacket.

"What was that all about?" Bob asked, more confused than worried, as he picked up his wallet from the ground.

"He was taking your wallet," Ruth exclaimed. "The last I heard he was yelling something that surely was the equivalent of "crazy American witch." I just grabbed him by the coat . . .," she trailed off. By then Marcia, Kelsey, and I had caught up with them, now able to laugh at the idea of white-haired grandmother Ruth tackling a teenage pickpocket.

Our team of five lived in this large Brazilian city of over 15 million people for three weeks as we gave free English conversation lessons using stories from the Gospel of Luke. Marcia, Bob, and Ruth—all in their sixties—and I in my fifties had answered the challenge when my 18-year-old daughter Kelsey wanted to form a team. Each of us had always wanted to do mission work in a foreign country, but the time had never been right. We all determined that God had plopped this opportunity in our laps and that we'd better respond. Four seniors and a teenager—what a combination!

One of my readers, Maria, was my age and also had taught elementary school, so we enjoyed our conversations immensely. When we got to the lesson of the seed falling on various soils, I asked her the question we'd been taught in our training: "What kind of soil are you?"

Earnestly, she said, "I think since I have been reading these lessons, I have changed. Now I think I am the good soil!" And I agreed, for I, too, could see how she had changed.

One of my favorite readers was Daniela, who had taught herself English through American movies and songs. As we began our lessons, we read about how Mary

Attachment: Activity 6 *(continued)*

would give birth to Jesus, who would be a blessing to all people. In discussing vocabulary, I asked my commonly used question: “Do you know what ‘blessing’ means?”

“Oh, yes!” Daniela smiled, eyes gleaming. “It is when the light of God is on you!”

I was speechless. I hugged her, my eyes tear filled. Finally I could say, “You are so right, Daniela! That is a beautiful meaning. It’s perfect!”

And so are you, I thought. God had brought to me a student who would teach me more than I would teach her.

—STORY BY LANITA BRADLEY BOYD. USED BY PERMISSION.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

The future for a young person this age is the weekend, or perhaps summer vacation, or maybe when they will be able to drive. They anticipate the future in relationship to how it will be a positive experience for them, but goal-setting for the future may not be a priority for them. Activities in this exploration encourage them to look beyond their immediate concerns and envision a bit of the future.

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

Leader Preparation

What did you dream about your future when you were the age of these youth? To what extent did those hopes for the future come to be? Reflect on those youthful dreams and how they shaped your life as you prepare to lead these activities about the future.

Prayer: God of the past, present, and future, walk with me as I lead these activities. Guide my thoughts as I consider tomorrow, and remind me not to be stressed about what I may have to let go or how I will experience blessings, but to put my trust in you. Amen.

Session Development

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

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



1 Future Goal (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Choose an open space outdoors or indoors for this activity.

Supplies:

- a coin

Ask the youth to gather at one end of the space. Tell them to close their eyes and turn around. While their eyes are closed and backs are turned, walk far enough away from them that it is impossible for them to see where you place a coin on the floor or ground. Move away from where the coin is placed, and tell them to open their eyes. Tell youth that there is a coin somewhere on the ground or floor, and you want them to choose a straight path and go towards that coin. They cannot change direction to look for the coin.

After everyone has attempted to find the coin by taking a straight path, send youth back to the starting point. This time, stand by the coin and tell the youth that you are standing by the coin. Ask them to take a straight path to the coin. Of course that will be easy! Discuss this activity:

- What was challenging about this the first time you tried? What made it easier the second time?
- What helps you decide which way to go when you are making decisions about your life?

Explain that it’s easier to get to a goal when we can see it. Ask youth to think of several words that would describe what they hope God’s relationship with them will be like in the future. Ask:

- What do you hope God will bless you with in the future?
- What are the things that you might have to leave behind in order to fully appreciate this blessing?”



2 The Winds of Change

Leader preparation: Based on your youth’s interests and abilities, locate craft supplies (colorful papers, pipe cleaners, play dough, markers, glitter glue, fabric scraps) for them to use to create their own art piece. Have available, but do not display, the artwork “Sisters in the Wind.”

Supplies:

- 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
- assorted craft supplies, such as colorful papers, pipe cleaners, play dough, markers, glitter glue, fabric scraps

As youth gather, invite them to choose craft supplies to use in creating an original work of art. The one requirement is that the title of their piece must be “Sisters in the Wind.” After about eight minutes, view what each young person has created.

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

Ask the group how each of these creations might be capturing a sense of blessing, a sense of letting go, or both

Show “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard. Look to see if anyone created anything similar to this artwork. Discuss:

- What is happening to the girls in this photo? What do you imagine might happen to them in the future?
- How does this artwork capture a sense of blessing, a sense of letting go, or both?



③ Dreams Then and Now

Leader preparation: If you choose this activity, it is *essential* that one or both parents or guardians of each youth be involved. Before the session, give parents copies of the handout “Questions for Parents” and ask them to write a response to each question. Ask them to bring the completed questionnaire to the activity, in which they will be participants, along with their young person.

Supplies:

- at least one parent or guardian for each youth
- “Questions for Parents,” Attachment: Activity 3

Welcome youth and their parents or guardians. Acknowledge to the youth that, while they are not used to doing Sunday school activities with their parents, it will be okay. Find your own words to use humor and put them at ease for this time together.

Form family groups of parent(s) and child. Read aloud the first question on the handout, pausing for parents to read their answer to their own child. Continue in this way through all the questions.

Gather the entire group together to discuss the experience:

- How did the parents feel about answering these questions? What made it hard? What made it meaningful?
- Which answers surprised the youth?
- How did youth feel about what they heard? What hopes for the future did they hear?

Thank parents for participating in this activity. Invite all participants to exchange a handshake or hug and these words: *The peace of Christ be with you always.*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Happy Blessing, Sad Prediction (Easy preparation)

Leader preparation: Think back to a hard time that you endured. How did you get through it? Who helped you?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Distribute Bibles, and ask youth to find Luke 2:22–38, helping one another as needed. Ask youth to pay attention to what’s happening for Simeon, Anna, and Jesus’ parents as you read the story aloud. After reading the text, ask:

- Who is receiving good news in this story? Who is delivering this good news?
- Who is receiving hard or sad news in this story? Who is delivering this?

Jesus’ parents heard two different messages from Simeon and Anna. On the one hand, these older people were thrilled to see baby Jesus, because they knew he was the Messiah. That was the greatest news that a Jewish person could hear at that time. But Simeon also had some hard and sad news. He told Mary that a sword would pierce her heart. This was a prediction that she would see Jesus die. Can you imagine hearing both the blessing and the prediction of something horrible happening in the future—all within a few minutes? This is part of life. There won’t always be such a big contrast between the good times and hard times, but there will most definitely be highs and lows in the future.

Lead a time of telling stories to one another around these questions:

- Tell us about one of the worst times in your life. How did you get through it? What or who helped you?
- Tell us about one of the best times in your life. Why was it so good?

Assure youth that, even as they have made it through tough times so far, God and God’s people will be with them in the future as well. Be sensitive to situations that are not yet resolved—tough times youth are in the middle of right now.

5 Is It in the Cards?

Leader preparation: As you look to the future, what would be a perfect scenario for you? Write the following card values on newsprint or a whiteboard, and keep them covered until the appropriate time in the game.

Diamonds	=	Wealth
Hearts	=	Good relationships
Spades	=	Employment
Clubs	=	Good luck
Jokers	=	Sense of humor
Kings and Queens	=	Power

Supplies:

- two decks of playing cards
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Deal out the cards until they are gone. Tell youth look at their cards and keep five that they think are the best. Don’t tell them yet about the card values. Youth should put the remainder of their cards back in the stack.

Uncover the newsprint or whiteboard and show the youth what the cards represent. Tell youth to imagine that the cards represent their future. They are to evaluate the cards in their hand and decide whether they want to keep them, based on what the cards represent, or trade the cards in. Explain that they can trade cards with the stack (without looking at what they draw from the stack) just two times to try to get the “perfect hand” for their future. When everyone has a

“perfect hand,” talk about what they traded in/gave up and what they kept or hoped to get.

When you have discussed the cards the youth assembled for their “perfect” lives, ask what role their faith and God’s relationship with them might play in the future and how God is connected to what they chose on their cards.

6 The Power of Love

Leader preparation: Be prepared to show the videos listed below. Prepare small cards for each youth with your name and your pastor’s name or the name of another person who would be a good counselor or confidante. Include contact information.

Supplies:

- video 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcaxtKfvPA0&NR=1>
- video 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrR25ONcfcQ>
- video 3: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/06/07/eveningnews/main20069849.shtml?tag=facebook>
- device for showing the videos
- index cards, pen

Show youth videos 1 and 2. Point out that these are from the movie *Back to the Future*. The first one is a quick synopsis of the movie, and the second features scenes from the movie and the song “The Power of Love.”

Discuss the movie plot together. Summarize: “We know that in reality, we can’t go back to the past and influence it, or fast forward into the future.” Ask: *How might we be able to influence our future?*

The theme “the power of love” runs through this movie, and it is certainly a powerful force in our world. Show video 3. Ask youth to recall what the mother says about forgiveness. *What did she have to let go? How was she blessed?* Explain that the woman who forgave her son’s killer realized what it would take for her to be healed emotionally, and she made a conscious decision to work through that. We all need to be aware of situations in our lives that are poisoning us emotionally, and to take the steps necessary to let them go.

Hand out the cards and tell youth that you want them to know they can be in touch with you or the other persons on the card when they need someone to talk to.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 You Go! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If you don’t know how to make a folded paper boat, learn at <http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Paper-Boat>.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- plain paper
- (optional) *The New Century Hymnal*

Distribute Bibles, and ask youth to turn to Matthew 28:19–20, helping one another as needed. Read these verses aloud in unison. Discuss:

- Jesus is giving these instructions to all disciples, including us. How might you be doing this now, at your age? How is our congregation doing these things?
- When it's hard to follow these instructions, where can we find help?

Demonstrate how to make a paper boat, and have youth follow along, step by step. When they all have their boats, read prayer 876 in *The New Century Hymnal* as a parting blessing. If that is not available, offer this prayer: *God, guide our way as we sail into the future. Amen.*

8 A Future with Hope

Leader preparation: Read Jeremiah 29:1–14 and pause to reflect on verse 11. What good news do you find in these words for your own life?

If you choose the option of offering each youth a gift, order the gifts well ahead of time. Search for jewelry items with Jeremiah 29:11 inscribed on them in a Christian supply store or online at such websites as <http://www.christianteenshop.com/Jeremiah-29-11-s/409.htm> and <http://www.christianbook.com>.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- card stock
- scissors
- markers, glitter glue
- self-adhesive magnetic tape
- (optional) purchased gift inscribed with Jeremiah 29:11

Distribute Bibles and ask youth to turn to Jeremiah 29:1–14. Explain that God told Jeremiah to deliver this message to the people of Israel. They had just lost a war and been removed from their homes in Jerusalem and taken to Babylon. Form pairs. Tell them they are going on a treasure hunt in this passage. They are to find two things as they read: the key to a good life for the Israelites living in Babylon, and a verse that is a treasure for them personally. Allow about five minutes for partners to read the story aloud to each other, alternating verses, and to find these two things.

Gather the group and ask pairs to report their two answers. (Verse 7 contains the key for the Israelites; the treasure verse may vary, though verse 11 is well-known.) Invite youth to refer to their Bibles and look for examples of losses in this story—things left behind—and of blessings. Ask: *In your life, have you experienced any losses or blessings like these? How so?*

Explain that in this passage God assures the Israelites that God will take care of them: “I know the plans I have for you and they are good, and they are for a future with hope!” And God makes that same promise to each of us today.

Spread out the card stock and art supplies. Invite youth to cut a shape from the card stock that makes them think of hope and to write Jeremiah 29:11 on that shape. Have them attach a piece of self-adhesive magnetic strip to the back to make a fridge or locker magnet. Or, as an option, you may give each youth a purchased item with Jeremiah 29:11 on it. Offer a blessing to one another by saying Jeremiah 29:11 in unison.

9 From the Past Will Come the Future

Leader preparation: Look in the hymnal or songbook that your church uses to see if it includes the song “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Make arrangements for youth to hear the song online at the link below.

Create a funny version of a “crystal ball.” Make a “bag” by folding aluminum foil, putting individually wrapped candy inside it, and then shaping the bag into a loose ball.

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; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- device for playing music video
- foil ball filled with candy
- a stick to hit the piñata

Display the foil ball prominently in your meeting space. Gather youth, and ask if any of them would like to know what will happen to them in the future. Create two teams to debate the pros and cons of knowing what will happen in the future. Run this like a real debate, with each team presenting its reasons and then allowing time for rebuttals. Decide which is the winning team, then say: *My prediction for the future is that this crystal ball is really a piñata, and that we will get candy.*

Take the group somewhere that is safe for them to break open the foil ball.

Return to your meeting space, and view the music video “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” If you have the lyrics, read them to the group. Discuss:

- What does this song say about predicting the future? (It is based on the seeds planted in the past.)
- What can affect seeds after they are planted? (A variety of good and bad things affect whether seeds grow, and the same goes for our plans.)
- What is our only guarantee in life? (God has final control and promises to be with us through everything.)

Close with a prayer of assurance of God’s presence in their lives in the days, weeks, and years to come.

Reflect

How does your goal setting and planning intersect with trust in God for the future? How do you resolve this tension in your life, and how did you work at this tension with the youth?

Attachment: Activity 3

Questions for Parents

1. When your child was born, in what ways did he or she receive special blessings from you, from family and friends, and from the church family?

2. What are some things that you have had to give up in order to be a good parent?

3. How have you been blessed by your child?

4. As you think about your child's next ten years, in what ways do you hope that God blesses him or her? What do you hope your child will be able to let go of?

5. How do you hope your child will be a blessing to others in the years to come?