

SIGNS OF LIFE

why church matters



LIGHT • WATER • FOOD • SHELTER • COMMUNITY

*A Five Week
Small Group Facilitator's Guide*

**LIFELONG LEARNING AT VIRGINIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
THE SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST**



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INTRODUCTION

Small Group Guide

Signs of Life: Why Church Matters is an opportunity for participants to engage with elemental aspects of liturgy and scripture: light, water, food, shelter, community. Each session will help participants connect the Sign of Life to their own spirituality, Christian worship, and a spiritual practice.

The rich signs of Christian worship speak to us day by day. As we explore the layers of meaning these symbols carry, and enter more fully into their truth, we learn to pray what we live and live what we pray.

How to start a Signs of Life Small Group:

Find a facilitator

Good facilitators:

- Carefully prepare for each session.
- Are familiar with the discussion material: “Let me rephrase the question a different way...” but need not be experts!
- Invite others into the conversation: “Would anyone who hasn’t yet shared like to share?”
- Are perceptive to non-verbal cues: “It looks like Sam is trying to say something.”
- Get the conversation out of the head and into the heart: “What does ... have to do with your relationship with God?” or “How does it make you feel that ...?”
- Open the conversation back up: “What do others think?”
- Engage introverts: “Just a reminder: if you always speak, count to three before speaking. If you never speak, don’t stop to count!” or “We’re going to take a minute of silence to think about the question, and then we’ll share.”
- Refocus the question: “I was wondering if anyone had any thoughts about the topic at hand.”
- Claim their authority as facilitator: “I’m sorry, but we don’t interrupt one another. Not interrupting is part of our group’s norms.”
- Watch the time: “This is a great discussion, but it’s time for check-out.”

The best training for small group facilitation is being a part of a well-functioning small group in the past.

Remember: good facilitation isn’t about knowing everything about the content, but rather the ability to facilitate meaningful conversation.

Gather a small group:

The optimal size for a small group will depend on the people who participate, but generally, twelve is a good number for a small group. Anywhere between eight and fourteen is manageable, but the closer to twelve, the better.

Rather than simply making an announcement at church, consider making personal invitations to individuals who would benefit from this type of relational formation. When you make your invitation, be clear about expectations. Small groups function best with consistent participation.

Plan logistics:

Thoughtfully consider the following questions:

- Where will sessions be held? Is this place safe and accessible for everyone in your group?
- When should sessions be held? Is this space available for five weeks in a row?
- Should we eat together?
- Do we need to provide childcare?
- How could we contact participants if the time or place had to change suddenly?

Setting up the videos:

Each week, the small group session will include viewing a 15-minute video featuring the SSJE Brothers in conversation with Lifelong Learning at VTS on that week's topic. Each video has been closed captioned, and has a printed transcript available online. The weekly videos can be played directly through the website (hover over the video to start closed captions if they are not already enabled). For highest audio and visual quality, we recommend downloading videos in advance, using the link on each week's individual topic page.

- If your group is larger than 8, we recommend using external speakers and a large screen to ensure that all can view and hear the content.
- If you have a group of less than 8, viewing on a laptop or PC should be sufficient.

Inviting people to sign up to emails::

If you think that your group members might benefit from receiving the videos over their own email each week (sent on Sundays), as well as a reminder email (sent on Thursdays), please invite them to add their email addresses at the SignsofLife.org website

Further content:

During Lent 2020, the SSJE Brothers' email Brother, Give Us A Word, will offer a daily mediation and an invitation to a daily practice that brings together Signs of Life and the Way of Love. We invite you and your group members to subscribe or learn more at SSJE.org/word.

Worship Set-up:

In addition to setting up the altarscape for each week's small group worship, the group leader will need to print out each week's poem before the group meets, to read during shared worship time. Copyright restrictions prevent us from printing the readings directly on the worship handout. Please find noted on each worship sheet that week's title and print out a version of the poem to read before your group meets.

Establish Group Norms:

Because this is only a five-session small group experience, we recommended establishing the following norms during the first session. Your small group will know what's best for itself and may wish to change these norms, but these are well-established practices for fruitful small group discussion:

- Arrive on time.
- Turn mobile phones on silent.
- Respect the other small group participants. Don't interrupt or talk over another participant. Don't dominate the conversation.
- Keep confidence: Don't share a story or other personal information from another group member unless you've specifically asked that person for permission.

Facilitators should feel empowered to reference the group's norms if a behavior is becoming a distraction.

Pray for your small group:

The facilitator should pray daily for each individual of the small group before the group starts meeting, continuing until the last session. This does make a difference.

Keep a consistent pattern each week: Here is a tried-and-true “ordo” for small groups:

(30 Minutes) MEAL:

Eating together is optional, but it's fun! If you'll be eating together, allow 30 minutes for the meal and then start your session after everyone is done.

(5 Minutes) PRAYER:

Open with the Signs of Life collect for that week, and then set a beautiful altarscape to keep the conversation grounded. More instructions in small group session guides.

(15 Minutes) CHECK-IN:

Check-in is a time for the group to reconnect about their past week. Check-in is different from small group discussion; the point of check in is to invite each person to share their own answer to the check-in prompt. Because this is not a regular discussion, the process of mutual invitation is a useful way to do check in.

Here is the process of mutual invitation:

- The facilitator states the question and invites a participant to answer.
- When the participant is done answering, that participant invites another participant to answer
- The participant may choose to either “pass for now” in which case they should be called on after everyone else has gone; or “pass for good” which means they will not answer that question. The passing participant should still invite another participant to answer the question.
- Continue until everyone has been given an opportunity to speak.

(15 Minutes) WATCH VIDEO:

The facilitator's task is to ensure that the video is ready to play before the session begins, and that everyone can hear and see the video. It is vitally important to check that your equipment works every week to avoid in-session technical troubleshooting.

(40 Minutes) DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

The purpose of a small group is relationship with others and with God. The foundation for these relationships is open, creative, and life-giving conversation. There are many discussion questions provided in the facilitators guide for each week. Before the session, review the questions and think about the questions that would resound with this particular small group first.

The small group may get “stuck” on one question, but if the conversation is fruitful and everyone is participating, a conversation centered around one question is just as good as moving through all of the questions.

Sometimes, the facilitator will have to ask some follow-up questions to keep the conversation going. Here are some helpful follow-up questions:

- How did that make you feel?
- Tell us more about that.
- What made you think of that?

It is the facilitator's job to shepherd the conversation if one person is dominating, or if a few people are not participating. Invite those who haven't spoken to speak.

(5 minutes) WRAP UP/WEEKLY PRACTICE:

Present the weekly practice sheet at this time, answer questions, and make announcements about next week to the group.

(10 Minutes) WORSHIP:

Never skip worship! You may be tempted by the depth of the conversation to skip worship, but worshipping together as a small group is very important. The worship that accompanies this small group curriculum has been specifically crafted with the help of the brothers of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist to briefly reflect the Daily Office and the prayers they pray each day.

Small Group Ministry with Affinity Groups

Facilitating a Small Group with Teens:

Teens can definitely participate in small groups! However, sometimes special considerations need to be made for this particular age group.

- **Give explicit permission for teens to think that something is boring, stupid, or irrelevant.** Give them opportunities to voice these feelings in a constructive way, and be ready to move onto a new question or activity that resonates with the group. Feel free to add pertinent activities and questions that you know will work for your group.
- **If an activity or conversation is going great, don't stop. If it's not working, stop!** If the discussion is eliciting a lot of engagement and bringing up real concerns and issues, let it keep going even if it's veered away from what you're "supposed" to be talking about. However, if the discussion has veered into utter silliness, this is probably a sign that your teens are bored and ready to move into a different activity, or need an opportunity to stand up and move around.
- With some groups, thoughtful discussion will really work. For other groups, not so much. As you gain experience with your group, **try to anticipate what will work best for your teens.**
- **Don't be afraid to talk honestly about real issues.** Teens can smell inauthenticity a mile away and crave honest discussion about things that matter with their peers and adults who are not their parents. That being said, it may take a while to build trust with your teens. Just be a trustworthy adult in their life. It matters more than you know.
- **Sometimes teens have very adult struggles. Sometimes they don't. Both are okay.** Be present to them regardless.

Facilitating a Small Group with Young Adults:

If meeting outside of church, a young adult group may have particular challenges finding a place where everyone can meet; not many young urban adults have homes large enough to host a small group. You may have to get creative and think outside the walls of church or home. Is there a bookstore that has a place for book groups to meet? Or does your local library have conference spaces to reserve for free? If you live in a warm climate, could you meet at a park? Restaurants, bars and coffee shops could all be good options as well if you can meet without being constantly interrupted. It's a good idea to call ahead to ask if there is some kind of reservation policy or fee associated with meeting at their place of business.

Facilitating a Small Group with Older Adults:

When creating a small group made up mostly of older adults, special considerations may need to be made around vision, hearing, and mobility issues.

- Sessions should be held in places that are quiet and do not have too much noise reverberations, as that can make it particularly difficult for those with hearing loss.
- Participants should be seated in a circle so that everyone can see the person who is talking.
- Ensure that everyone can get to the meeting place. Are the doors wide enough for wheelchairs or walkers? Are there steps that could be problematic? Does everyone know where the handicap entrance is to the building?



LIGHT

Small Group Facilitator Guide

Set up:

- Ensure that all technology is in place and ready to view the video. If your church does not have adequate WiFi, this may mean that the facilitator will need to download the video before arriving for the session. Facilitators will also need to ensure that everyone will be able to hear and see the video as it is being played. Facilitators may wish to turn on closed captioning.
- Create a welcoming space to have a conversation.
- Place a table in the center or near the conversation space to create an “altarscape” of items that will help set the tone and keep the conversation focused on each Sign of Life.

What you need:

- *Video viewing capabilities*
- *Small Group Facilitator Guide for the facilitator*
- *Signs of Life Practice Sheet and worship handouts for each participant*
- *A table for the altarscape*
- *Specific items to create altarscape. For light, you will need a votive candle for each participant.*

Learning Outcomes

- *For participants to be able to link light to liturgy, their own life, and experience of God.*
- *For participants to gain a better awareness of the presence of the holy in everyday life.*
- *For participants to deepen relationships through spiritual conversation.*

Small Group Session for Light

Gathering Prayer/Setting the Altarscape: (5 minutes)

Gather participants into the conversation circle. Invite a few moments of stillness, and then pray this collect:

Christ our True Light: when the lights of this world blind and bewilder and its darkness brings us no peace, train our eyes to behold your brightness and enfold us in the healing shadow of your wings, that we may love you by night as by day; who with the Father of lights and the Spirit of truth shine upon us, one God, through endless ages. Amen.

After the prayer, the facilitator or worship leader should give each participant a candle, and light the first candle. Each person lights their candle from someone else and then places their lit candle on the altarscape. Sit together in silence for a few moments with this scene as your focal point.

Setting Group Norms (15 minutes):

Because this is only a five-session small group experience, we recommended the following norms. Your small group will know what's best for itself and may wish to change these norms, but these are well-established practices for fruitful small group discussion.

Read each norm and have a discussion about whether these are reasonable for the life of your small group. If they are not, adjust the norm as necessary. Ensure that these norms are visible each time you gather.

- Arrive on time.
- Turn mobile phones on silent.

- Respect the other small group participants. Don't interrupt or talk over another participant. Don't dominate the conversation.
- Keep confidence: Don't share a story or other personal information from another group member unless you've specifically asked that person for permission.

Facilitators should feel empowered to reference the group's norms if a behavior is becoming a distraction.

After you set your group's norms, orient your participants to the session. Let them know that you will watch the video together, and then have a small group discussion, followed by worship.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Before you start the video, read this script:

"As you watch this video, pay attention to the various ways light is explored, and think about how light is present in the life and liturgies of your worshiping community."

Play video to the end. Invite the group to come back together for conversation.

Small Group Conversation (40 minutes):

Open the small group conversation with the following question:

"Where is light present in the life and liturgies of your own worshiping community? How are these symbols and practices similar or dissimilar to what you heard and saw in the video?"

After the opening question has been discussed, choose any of the following questions to discuss with your small group. The facilitator should use their best judgment to select the questions that they believe will elicit meaningful conversation for your context. The small group may spend the entire time on one question, or do several. How many questions the group moves through is less important than fruitful conversation for the group.

- How has light inspired you? How has light been a part of your spiritual journey?
- Brother Curtis talks about meeting God in the darkness instead of the light. Where have you met God in the darkness? What did you learn there?
- What do you think it means that God created light before God created the sun and the stars?
- Jesus not only brings light, but Jesus is the light. How does Jesus enlighten your life?
- We are called to be the light of the world. What can you illuminate?

When there are about five minutes left for conversation, ask the following question:

"What do you understand differently about light because of this conversation?"

Wrap Up/Weekly Practice (5 minutes):

Remind the participants of the weekly practice. Distribute the Signs of Life Practice Sheet for Light. Reiterate the instructions from the video:

"Here is a reminder of the practice for this Sign of Life. This week pay attention to light as you move through your day. Remember that Jesus is the light of the world."

This is also the time when the facilitator should remind participants of housekeeping details for the next session.

Worship (10 minutes):

Pass out the worship handouts to each participant. The facilitator may wish to lead worship, or may invite another participant to lead worship. Groups may wish to use the altarscape as a focal point during their worship time.

After worship, the small group session has ended.



LIGHT

Small Group Worship

Leader prays the collect: Christ our True Light: when the lights of this world blind and bewilder and its darkness brings us no peace, train our eyes to behold your brightness and enfold us in the healing shadow of your wings, that we may love you by night as by day; who with the Father of lights and the Spirit of truth shine upon us, one God, through endless ages. **Amen.**

Third Song of Isaiah

Read antiphonally by half verse.

Arise, shine, for your light has come, *
and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you.
For behold, darkness covers the land; *
deep gloom enshrouds the peoples.
But over you the Lord will rise, *
and his glory will appear upon you.
Nations will stream to your light, *
and kings to the brightness of your dawning.
Your gates will always be open; *
by day or night they will never be shut.
They will call you, The City of the Lord, *
The Zion of the Holy One of Israel.
Violence will no more be heard in your land, *
ruin or destruction within your borders.
You will call your walls, Salvation, *
and all your portals, Praise.
The sun will no more be your light by day; *
by night you will not need the brightness of the moon.
The Lord will be your everlasting light, *
and your God will be your glory.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Leader: Without silence, words have no meaning. Listen to this poem about light and darkness. *[Here we suggest reading the last stanza from "Choruses from the Rock," by T.S. Eliot.]*

In the silence that follows, rest in its afterglow. *[Silence for two minutes.]*

Prayers of the Gathered Community:

Leader: Even as we bask in the light of God, we pray for those who are in need of God's light. Pray for those on your hearts either silently or aloud.

We give God thanks for the ways God has been a light unto our path. Give thanks silently or aloud.

Almighty God, to whom our needs are known before we ask: Help us to ask only what accords with your will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, grant us for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Now let us pray the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

Leader: Let us bless the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Leader: Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**



LIGHT

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Light

Question:

Where is the light in your life?

Scripture:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

Collect:

Christ our True Light: when the lights of this world blind and bewilder and its darkness brings us no peace, train our eyes to behold your brightness and enfold us in the healing shadow of your wings, that we may love you by night as by day; who with the Father of lights and the Spirit of truth shine upon us, one God, through endless ages. Amen.

Practice:

Pay attention to light as you move through your day.



LIGHT

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Collect:

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Practice:

Pay attention to light as you move through your day.



WATER

Small Group Facilitator Guide

Set up:

- Ensure that all technology is in place and ready to view the video. If your church does not have adequate WiFi, this may mean that the facilitator will need to download the video before arriving for the session. Facilitators will also need to ensure that everyone will be able to hear and see the video as it is being played. Facilitators may wish to turn on closed captioning.
- Create a welcoming space to have a conversation.
- Place a table in the center or near the conversation space to create an “altarscape” of items that will help set the tone and keep the conversation focused on each Sign of Life.

What you need:

- Video viewing capabilities
- *Small Group Facilitator Guide for the facilitator*
- *Signs of Life Practice Sheet and worship handouts for each participant*
- A table for the altarscape
- Specific items to create altarscape. For water, you will need a pitcher full of water, and a bowl.

Learning Outcomes

- *For participants to be able to link water to liturgy, their own life, and experience of God.*
- *For participants to gain a better awareness of the presence of the holy in everyday life.*
- *For participants to deepen relationships through spiritual conversation.*

Small Group Session for Water

Gathering Prayer/Setting the Altarscape: (5 minutes)

Gather participants into the conversation circle. Invite a few moments of stillness, and then pray this collect:

Ever-creating Spirit, who brooded over the waters of chaos and brought forth all life from them: We thank you for the wondrous gift of water through which we die with Christ and are raised by you to the new life of grace; and we pray that we may ever be faithful stewards of this gift and make it available, clean and pure, to all living beings, that in so doing the springs of living water promised by Christ Jesus may well up in every human heart; through Jesus our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Father, one God, now and for ever. Amen

After the prayer, the facilitator or worship leader should stand up, go to the table or altar and pour the water into the bowl. Pour the water aggressively so that the sign of water can be experienced. Sit together in silence for a few moments with this scene as your focal point.

Check-In (15 minutes):

Orient participants to the rhythm of this session. Let them know that you will do check-in, watch the video, have a conversation, and then close with worship.

Invite participants to answer the following question:

Last week we discussed light. How did you notice the presence of light this week?

Facilitators may wish to practice mutual invitation (see Small Group Facilitator Guide, above) or they may wish

to simply go around in the circle. Participants who pass should be invited to share after the other participants have shared.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Before you start the video, read this script:

“As you watch this video, pay attention to the various ways water is explored, and think about how water is present in the life and liturgies of your worshiping community.”

Play video to the end. Invite the group to come back together for conversation.

Small Group Conversation (40 minutes):

Open the small group conversation with the following question:

“Where is water present in the life and liturgies of your own worshiping community? How are these symbols and practices similar or dissimilar to what you heard and saw in the video?”

After the opening question has been discussed, choose any of the following questions to discuss with your small group. The facilitator should use their best judgment to select the questions that they believe will elicit meaningful conversation for your context. The small group may spend the entire time on one question, or do several. How many questions the group moves through is less important than fruitful conversation for the group.

- How has water inspired you? How has water been a part of your spiritual journey?
- At the wedding at Cana, Jesus turns water into wine. Brother James said, “God uses ordinary things like water, and turns it into really fabulous wine. And I just think if God can do that with water, what can he do with me?” How have you seen God turn the ordinary into the extraordinary?
- In the wilderness, the people of Israel learn to rely on God for the water they need to survive. How has God sustained you in times of drought?
- Br. Keith reflects on the spiritual journey: “There are moments on the journey that are profoundly baptismal but we don’t name in that way, those moments where you come to a juncture, and you can absolutely say: “Something about me has now died. And I am now different, and from this moment I’m moving forward into a direction that is completely unknown. But at my core I am still a beloved child of God.” Have you experienced a moment like that? What died, and how did you experience new life?

When there are about five minutes left for conversation, ask the following question:

“What do you understand differently about water because of this conversation?”

Wrap Up/Weekly Practice (5 minutes):

Remind the participants of the weekly practice. Distribute the Signs of Life Practice Sheet for Water. Reiterate the instructions from the video:

“This week, when you wash your hands, notice the water. Really feel the water as it moves over your hands.”

This is also the time when the facilitator should remind participants of housekeeping details for the next session.

Worship (10 minutes):

Pass out the worship handouts to each participant. The facilitator may wish to lead worship, or may invite another participant to lead worship. Groups may wish to use the altarscape as a focal point during their worship time.

After worship, the small group session has ended.



WATER

Small Group Worship

Leader prays the collect: Ever-creating Spirit, who brooded over the waters of chaos and brought forth all life from them: We thank you for the wondrous gift of water through which we die with Christ and are raised by you to the new life of grace; and we pray that we may ever be faithful stewards of this gift and make it available, clean and pure, to all living beings, that in so doing the springs of living water promised by Christ Jesus may well up in every human heart; through Jesus our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Father, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

First Song of Isaiah

Read antiphonally by half verse.

Surely, it is God who saves me; *

I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, *

and he will be my Savior.

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing *

from the springs of salvation.

And on that day you shall say, *

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;

Make his deeds known among the peoples; *

see that they remember that his Name is exalted.

Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, *

and this is known in all the world.

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, *

for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *

as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Leader: Without silence, words have no meaning. Listen to this poem about water.

[Here we suggest reading from "Like the Water," by Wendell Berry.]

In the silence that follows, let God flow over you. *[Silence for two minutes]*

Prayers of the Gathered Community:

Leader: We pray for ourselves, and those who need to surrender something to God. Pray for those who need God's help, either silently or aloud.

We give God thanks for the waters of our baptism and how God has formed us. Give thanks silently or aloud.

O Lord our God, accept the fervent prayers of your people; in the multitude of your mercies, look with compassion upon us and all who turn to you for help; for you are gracious, O lover of souls, and to you we give glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Now let us pray the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your Name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those

who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial,

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours,

now and for ever. Amen.

Leader: Let us bless the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Leader: Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**



WATER

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Water

Question:

What keeps you afloat?

Scripture:

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Psalm 1:1-3

Collect:

Ever-creating Spirit, who brooded over the waters of chaos and brought forth all life from them: We thank you for the wondrous gift of water through which we die with Christ and are raised by you to the new life of grace; and we pray that we may ever be faithful stewards of this gift and make it available, clean and pure, to all living beings, that in so doing the springs of living water promised by Christ Jesus may well up in every human heart; through Jesus our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Father, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Practice:

As you wash your hands, take time to feel the water and to remember your baptism.



WATER

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Water

Question:

What keeps you afloat?

Scripture:

Happy are those
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Psalm 1:1-3

Collect:

Ever-creating Spirit, who brooded over the waters of chaos and brought forth all life from them: We thank you for the wondrous gift of water through which we die with Christ and are raised by you to the new life of grace; and we pray that we may ever be faithful stewards of this gift and make it available, clean and pure, to all living beings, that in so doing the springs of living water promised by Christ Jesus may well up in every human heart; through Jesus our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Father, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Practice:

As you wash your hands, take time to feel the water and to remember your baptism.



FOOD

Small Group Facilitator Guide

Set up:

- Ensure that all technology is in place and ready to view the video. If your church does not have adequate WiFi, this may mean that the facilitator will need to download the video before arriving for the session. Facilitators will also need to ensure that everyone will be able to hear and see the video as it is being played. Facilitators may wish to turn on closed captioning.
- Create a welcoming space to have a conversation.
- Place a table in the center or near the conversation space to create an “altarscape” of items that will help set the tone and keep the conversation focused on each Sign of Life.

What you need:

- *Video viewing capabilities*
- *Small Group Facilitator Guide for the facilitator*
- *Signs of Life Practice Sheet and worship handouts for each participant*
- *A table for the altarscape*
- *Specific items to create altarscape. For food, you will need a crusty loaf of bread, some fruit, a bowl, and a cloth.*

Learning Outcomes

- *For participants to be able to link food to liturgy, their own life, and experience of God.*
- *For participants to gain a better awareness of the presence of the holy in everyday life.*
- *For participants to deepen relationships through spiritual conversation.*

Small Group Session for Food

Gathering Prayer/Setting the Altarscape: (5 minutes)

Gather participants into the conversation circle. Invite a few moments of stillness, and then pray this collect:

O God, who by the abundance of your Son all Creation is nourished and satisfied: Grant us, we pray, a holy hunger to be filled with your good things, and food for the leanness of our souls; through the bread of eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After the prayer, create a still life scene. Place the cloth on the table, and then the bowl on the cloth, and arrange the bread and fruit attractively. Sit together in silence for a few moments with this scene as your focal point.

Check-In (15 minutes):

Orient participants to the rhythm of this session. Let them know that you will do check-in, watch the video, have a conversation, and then close with worship.

Invite participants to answer the following question:

Last week we discussed water. How did you notice the presence of water this week?

Facilitators may wish to practice mutual invitation (see Small Group Facilitator Guide, above) or they may wish to simply go around in the circle. Participants who pass should be invited to share after the other participants have shared.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Before you start the video, read this script:

“As you watch this video, pay attention to the various ways food is explored, and think about how food is present in the life and liturgies of your worshiping community.”

Play video to the end. Invite the group to come back together for conversation.

Small Group Conversation (40 minutes):

Open the small group conversation with the following question:

“Where is food present in the life and liturgies of your own worshiping community? How are these symbols and practices similar or dissimilar to what you heard and saw in the video?”

After the opening question has been discussed, choose any of the following questions to discuss with your small group. The facilitator should use their best judgment to select the questions that they believe will elicit meaningful conversation for your context. The small group may spend the entire time on one question, or do several. How many questions the group moves through is less important than fruitful conversation for the group.

- How has food inspired you? How has food been a part of your spiritual journey?
- Tell a story about a time that you connected with another person while sharing a meal.
- Brother James notes that Jesus feeds us both with the Eucharistic meal, but also with Scripture. How does Scripture feed you?
- Brother Luke says, “There is always more to receive of God...receiving a piece of bread each day is a helpful reminder that I’m given what I need as opposed to all that I crave.” How does the Eucharist sustain you? How do you know when you have enough?
- When we receive communion, we become more like Jesus. But during the Eucharist, the body of Christ is broken so that it may be given to us. Have you experienced a brokenness that was a gift to others?

When there are about five minutes left for conversation, ask the following question:

“What do you understand differently about food because of this conversation?”

Wrap Up/Weekly Practice (5 minutes):

Remind the participants of the weekly practice. Distribute the Signs of Life Practice Sheet for Food. Reiterate the instructions from the video:

“Here is a reminder of the practice for this Sign of Life. As you eat this week, give thanks to God for your food and also your feelings, whether hungry or full. Remember that Jesus is the Bread of Life; Jesus is food that nourishes us, body and soul.”

This is also the time when the facilitator should remind participants of housekeeping details for the next session.

Worship (10 minutes):

Pass out the worship handouts to each participant. The facilitator may wish to lead worship, or may invite another participant to lead worship. Groups may wish to use the altarscape as a focal point during their worship time.

After worship, the small group session has ended.



FOOD

Small Group Worship

Leader prays the collect: O God, who by the abundance of your Son all Creation is nourished and satisfied: Grant us, we pray, a holy hunger to be filled with your good things, and food for the leanness of our souls; through the bread of eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Magnificat

Read antiphonally by half verse.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Leader: Without silence, words have no meaning. Listen to this poem about food.

[Here we suggest reading from "Love (III)" by George Herbert.]

In the silence that follows, let God feed you. *[Silence for two minutes.]*

Prayers of the Gathered Community:

Leader: Even as we gather together, well fed and cared for, there are those who are hungry in body and soul. Pray for all those who hunger, either silently, or aloud.

We give God thanks for providing us with the sustenance we need. Give thanks for the ways in which you are fed by God.

Blessed are you, O Lord God, Ruler of the Universe, for you give us food to sustain our lives and make our hearts glad; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Now let us pray the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

Leader: Let us bless the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Leader: May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**



FOOD

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Food

Question:

For what do you hunger?

Scripture:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

Luke 26:26-29

Collect:

O God, who by the abundance of your Son all Creation is nourished and satisfied: Grant us, we pray, a holy hunger to be filled with your good things, and food for the leanness of our souls; through the bread of eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Practice:

Give thanks to God for your food and also your feelings, whether hungry or full. Remember that Jesus is the Bread of Life; Jesus is food that nourishes us, body or soul.



FOOD

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Food

Question:

For what do you hunger?

Scripture:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

Luke 26:26-29

Collect:

O God, who by the abundance of your Son all Creation is nourished and satisfied: Grant us, we pray, a holy hunger to be filled with your good things, and food for the leanness of our souls; through the bread of eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Practice:

Give thanks to God for your food and also your feelings, whether hungry or full. Remember that Jesus is the Bread of Life; Jesus is food that nourishes us, body or soul.



SHELTER

Small Group Facilitator Guide

Set up:

- Ensure that all technology is in place and ready to view the video. If your church does not have adequate WiFi, this may mean that the facilitator will need to download the video before arriving for the session. Facilitators will also need to ensure that everyone will be able to hear and see the video as it is being played. Facilitators may wish to turn on closed captioning.
- Create a welcoming space to have a conversation.
- Place a table in the center or near the conversation space to create an “altarscape” of items that will help set the tone and keep the conversation focused on each Sign of Life.

What you need:

- *Video viewing capabilities*
- *Small Group Facilitator Guide for the facilitator*
- *Signs of Life Practice Sheet and worship handouts for each participant*
- *A table for the altarscape*
- *Specific items to create altarscape. For shelter, you will need the “barn” part of a crèche. You will not need the figurines from the nativity scene, just the shelter itself.*

Learning Outcomes

- *For participants to be able to link shelter to liturgy, their own life, and experience of God.*
- *For participants to gain a better awareness of the presence of the holy in everyday life.*
- *For participants to deepen relationships through spiritual conversation.*

Small Group Session for Shelter

Gathering Prayer/Setting the Altarscape: (5 minutes)

Gather participants into the conversation circle. Invite a few moments of stillness, and then pray this collect:

Beloved God, who, in your mercy, shelters us with your tender embrace; grant that we may know you as our one true refuge from the world of suffering, and help us to offer compassionate sanctuary to our neighbors in need; even as you dwell within and among us, one holy and undivided Trinity, forever and ever. Amen.

After the prayer, place the shelter of the crèche on the table. Take a few moments to pause and think about shelter.

Check-In (15 minutes):

Orient participants to the rhythm of this session. Let them know that you will do check-in, watch the video, have a conversation, and then close with worship.

Invite participants to answer the following question:

Last week we discussed food. How did you notice the presence of food this week?

Facilitators may wish to practice mutual invitation (see Small Group Facilitator Guide, above) or they may wish to simply go around in the circle. Participants who pass should be invited to share after the other participants have shared.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Before you start the video, read this script:

“As you watch this video, pay attention to the various ways shelter is explored, and think about how shelter is present in the life and liturgies of your worshiping community.”

Play video to the end. Invite the group to come back together for conversation.

Small Group Conversation (40 minutes):

Open the small group conversation with the following question:

“Where is shelter present in the life and liturgies of your own worshiping community? How are these symbols and practices similar or dissimilar to what you heard and saw in the video?”

After the opening question has been discussed, choose any of the following questions to discuss with your small group. The facilitator should use their best judgment to select the questions that they believe will elicit meaningful conversation for your context. The small group may spend the entire time on one question, or do several. How many questions the group moves through is less important than fruitful conversation for the group.

- How has your experience of shelter influenced your spiritual journey?
- Br. Geoffrey describes his experience of finding home at the monastery, a place he had never been. Have you ever come home to a place you’ve never been before?
- When have you found shelter in God?
- Shelter doesn’t necessarily imply a physical space. Br. Nicholas shares the story of a time when someone offered shelter to him through silent presence. When have you provided shelter for another, or been sheltered by another?
- How has the knowledge that are always sheltered by God enabled you to take difficult journeys?
- Is your church truly a place of sanctuary for all? Why or why not?

When there are about five minutes left for conversation, ask the following question:

“What do you understand differently about shelter because of this conversation?”

Wrap Up/Weekly Practice (5 minutes):

Remind the participants of the weekly practice. Distribute the Signs of Life Practice Sheet for Shelter. Reiterate the instructions from the video:

“Here is a reminder of the practice for this Sign of Life. This week, when you return to the place you feel most at home, pay attention to what you set down or let go.”

This is also the time when the facilitator should remind participants of housekeeping details for the next session.

Worship (10 minutes):

Pass out the worship handouts to each participant. The facilitator may wish to lead worship, or may invite another participant to lead worship. Groups may wish to use the altarscape as a focal point during their worship time.

After worship, the small group session has ended.



SHELTER

Small Group Worship

Leader prays the collect: Beloved God, who, in your mercy, shelters us with your tender embrace; grant that we may know you as our one true refuge from the world of suffering, and help us to offer compassionate sanctuary to our neighbors in need; even as you dwell within and among us, one holy and undivided Trinity, forever and ever. **Amen.**

Psalm 31

Read antiphonally by half verse.

In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame: *

deliver me in your righteousness.

Incline your ear to me; *

make haste to deliver me.

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,
for you are my crag and my stronghold; *

for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.

Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, *

for you are my tower of strength.

Into your hands I commend my spirit, *

for you have redeemed me,

O LORD, O God of truth.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *

as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Leader: Without silence, words have no meaning. Listen to this poem about shelter.

[Here we suggest reading from "The Shelter" by Emily Dickinson.]

In the silence that follows, let God welcome you in. *[Silence for two minutes.]*

Prayers of the Gathered Community:

Leader: Even as we are gathered here in a place that is safe and dry, there are those who live without shelter and protection. Pray for those who lack shelter and security, either silently, or aloud.

We give God thanks for all the ways God has protected us and brought us home. Give thanks for the places you call home, either silently or aloud.

Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles, "Peace I give to you; my own peace I leave with you." Regard not our sins, but the faith of your Church, and give to us the peace and unity of that heavenly City, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Now let us pray the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your Name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those

who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial,

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours,

now and for ever. Amen.

Leader: Let us bless the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Leader: May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**



SHELTER

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Shelter

Question:

Where do you feel most at home?

Scripture:

One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Psalms 27:4-5

Collect:

Beloved God, who, in your mercy, shelters us with your tender embrace;
grant that we may know you as our one true refuge from the world of
suffering, and help us to offer compassionate sanctuary to our neighbors
in need; even as you dwell within and among us, one holy and undivided
Trinity, forever and ever. Amen.

Practice:

When you return to the place you feel most at home, pay attention to
how you settle in. Remember that God hides us under the shadow of
God's wings; in God we always find shelter.



SHELTER

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Shelter

Question:

Where do you feel most at home?

Scripture:

One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Psalms 27:4-5

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Beloved God, who, in your mercy, shelters us with your tender embrace;
grant that we may know you as our one true refuge from the world of
suffering, and help us to offer compassionate sanctuary to our neighbors
in need; even as you dwell within and among us, one holy and undivided
Trinity, forever and ever. Amen.

Practice:

When you return to the place you feel most at home, pay attention to
how you settle in. Remember that God hides us under the shadow of
God's wings; in God we always find shelter.



COMMUNITY

Small Group Facilitator Guide

Set up:

- Ensure that all technology is in place and ready to view the video. If your church does not have adequate WiFi, this may mean that the facilitator will need to download the video before arriving for the session. Facilitators will also need to ensure that everyone will be able to hear and see the video as it is being played. Facilitators may wish to turn on closed captioning.
- Create a welcoming space to have a conversation.
- Place a table in the center or near the conversation space to create an “altarscape” of items that will help set the tone and keep the conversation focused on each Sign of Life.

What you need:

- *Video viewing capabilities*
- *Small Group Facilitator Guide for the facilitator*
- *Signs of Life Practice Sheet and worship handouts for each participant*
- *A table for the altarscape*
- *Specific items to create altarscape. For community, bring back parts of the elements from each week: candles, a bowl of water, bread and fruit, and the shelter of the crèche.*

Learning Outcomes

- *For participants to be able to link community to liturgy, their own life, and experience of God.*
- *For participants to gain a better awareness of the presence of the holy in everyday life.*
- *For participants to deepen relationships through spiritual conversation.*

Small Group Session for Community

Gathering Prayer/Setting the Altarscape: (5 minutes)

Gather participants into the conversation circle. Invite a few moments of stillness, and then pray this collect:

Almighty Triune God, we thank you for the gift of community, by which we share life's journey and grow together. May we follow your example of mutual self-giving and love to bless each other with an ever-widening embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who dances with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity of persons now and forever. Amen.

After the prayer, create a tableau of the elements from the past four weeks. You may wish to invite different participants to place the elements on the table. Take some time to reflect silently on the nature of community.

Check-In (15 minutes):

Orient participants to the rhythm of this session. Let them know that you will do check-in, watch the video, have a conversation, and then close with worship.

Invite participants to answer the following question:

Last week we discussed shelter. How did you notice the presence of shelter this week?

Facilitators may wish to practice mutual invitation (see Small Group Facilitator Guide, above) or they may wish to simply go around in the circle. Participants who pass should be invited to share after the other participants have shared.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Before you start the video, read this script:

“As you watch this video, pay attention to the various ways community is explored, and think about how community is present in the life and liturgies of your worshipping community.”

Play video to the end. Invite the group to come back together for conversation.

Small Group Conversation (40 minutes):

Open the small group conversation with the following question:

“Where is community present in the life and liturgies of your own worshipping community? How are these symbols and practices similar or dissimilar to what you heard and saw in the video?”

After the opening question has been discussed, choose any of the following questions to discuss with your small group. The facilitator should use their best judgment to select the questions that they believe will elicit meaningful conversation for your context. The small group may spend the entire time on one question, or do several. How many questions the group moves through is less important than fruitful conversation for the group.

- How has your experience of community influenced your spiritual journey?
- Brother Jim says, “We are created as social beings, and God is a community of persons. It’s actually to our health that we do come together as community and have our rough edges rub up against those of others.” When have you had a rough edge rubbed off?
- Brother David says, “Silence is a gift that allows us to recognize and revere the mystery of every person. Only God can know this person as who they truly are.” How can being silent help you know someone better?
- In a healthy community, individuals can flourish as individuals. Tell a story about a time you were accepted exactly as you are.

When there are about ten minutes left for conversation, ask the following question:

“How has your experience of the Signs of Life (Light, Water, Food, Shelter, Community) been transformed?”

Wrap Up/Weekly Practice (5 minutes):

Remind the participants of the weekly practice. Distribute the Signs of Life Practice Sheet for Community. Reiterate the instructions from the video:

“Here is a reminder of the daily practice for this Sign of Life. When you spend time with other people this week, be fully present with them, putting away distractions, and ask them to do the same. Remember that Jesus dwells in each of us and is manifest among us in community.”

Assuming this is your final session, facilitator should thank people for participation and suggest upcoming formation opportunities, or recommended resources for continuing spiritual deepening.

Worship (10 minutes):

Pass out the worship handouts to each participant. The facilitator may wish to lead worship, or may invite another participant to lead worship. Groups may wish to use the altarscape as a focal point during their worship time.

After worship, the small group session has ended.



COMMUNITY

Small Group Worship

Leader prays the collect: Almighty Triune God, we thank you for the gift of community, by which we share life's journey and grow together. May we follow your example of mutual self-giving and love to bless each other with an ever-widening embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who dances with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity of persons now and forever. **Amen.**

Song of Ezekiel

Read antiphonally by half verse.

I will take you from among all nations; *
and gather you from all lands to bring you home.
I will sprinkle clean water upon you; *
and purify you from false gods and uncleanness.
A new heart I will give you *
and a new spirit put within you.
I will take the stone heart from your chest *
and give you a heart of flesh.
I will help you walk in my laws *
and cherish my commandments and do them.
You shall be my people, *
and I will be your God.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Leader: Without silence, words have no meaning. Listen to this poem about community.
[Here we suggest reading from "To be of use" by Marge Piercy.]

In the silence that follows, let God companion you. [Silence for two minutes.]

Prayers of the Gathered Community:

Leader: Even as we are gathered into a community of love, there are those who need to know the love of God. Pray for the lonely and all who need community, either silently or aloud.

Our communities have loved us and shaped us into who we are. We give thanks for those communities that we name, either silently or aloud.

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we may always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whom all our intercessions are acceptable through the Spirit, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Now let us pray the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

Leader: Let us bless the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Leader: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. **Amen.**



COMMUNITY

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Community

Question:

Who is your community?

Scripture:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

John 15:12-17

Collect:

Almighty Triune God, we thank you for the gift of community, by which we share life's journey and grow together. May we follow your example of mutual self-giving and love to bless each other with an ever-widening embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who dances with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity of persons now and forever. Amen.

Practice:

When you spend time with others this week, be fully present with them. Put away distractions, and ask them to do the same. Remember that Jesus dwells in each of us and is manifest among community.



COMMUNITY

Practice Sheet

This week we invite you to reflect on the sign of Community

Question:

Who is your community?

Scripture:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

John 15:12-17

Collect:

Almighty Triune God, we thank you for the gift of community, by which we share life's journey and grow together. May we follow your example of mutual self-giving and love to bless each other with an ever-widening embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who dances with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity of persons now and forever. Amen.

Practice:

When you spend time with others this week, be fully present with them. Put away distractions, and ask them to do the same. Remember that Jesus dwells in each of us and is manifest among community.

Navigating Tricky Small Group Situations

While every small group is unique, all small groups share similar challenges. Here are a few common situations of which facilitators should be aware, and how to deal with them:

The Extreme External Processor

Some people tend to talk in order to think. This in and of itself is fine! This behavior becomes rapidly not fine, however, when this person dominates the conversation and is always steering the conversation in a personal direction. If left unchecked, other members of the group will disengage, and small group time will become a drag.

You can try:

- Asking in general if someone who hasn't spoken would like to. "Would anyone who hasn't spoken yet like to add something?"
- Calling on individuals who have not been able to get a word in edgewise. "Sam, you look like you're trying to say something." Of course it is always appropriate for someone to pass when invited to speak.
- Politely telling that individual to listen! "Scott, you've had lots of opportunities to talk about your thoughts. I would like to be sure others have a chance to speak."
- If this seems to be an ongoing, group-wide problem, it might be helpful to add to the group norms. "If you always speak first, count to three before speaking. If you never speak first, don't stop to count!"
- If the problem persists, the facilitator might arrange for a private conversation with the individual to explore ways the person can remain fully engaged while affording that privilege to others.

The Extreme Internal Processor

This is the person who comes faithfully to the group, seems to be thinking deeply about the conversation, but won't share her thoughts spontaneously. She doesn't seem willing to jump into the fray, and would never interrupt another person who is talking.

Here are some things to try:

- Open the space for internal processors: "Does anyone want to share who hasn't shared yet?"
- Specifically invite that person to speak: "Christine, you seem to be thinking about something. Would you like to share?"
- A group activity that provides time to think before sharing out loud may provide the opportunity for internal processors time to gather their thoughts. "We're going to take a few minutes and explore this topic in pairs. Take a moment to think about what you want to say and then turn to your neighbor and take turns sharing your reflections."

The Extremely Lonely Person

This is the person who is so relieved to be listened to by other humans that he dominates the conversation, often to the detriment of the group. This person often turns the conversation to his favorite topic, which is not usually the subject at hand. The loneliness is palpable, and compassionate facilitators will want to allow them to continue to talk -- but don't do it! If left unchecked, the entire group will check-out after a few sessions.

Try:

- Rephrasing the question and call on another person: "Does anyone else have thoughts on..."
- Refocusing by asking the Extremely Lonely Person to answer the question you've asked. "John, I was wondering if you had thoughts about how we see this Sign of Life in our day-to-day lives."
- Finding this person friends. While this may seem like an extreme reaction to a short-term problem during a

small group session, it is not. If loneliness seems to be a persistent problem for multiple individuals in your parish, speak to your parish leadership about creating a group for these individuals so that they learn how to talk to each other and mutually support one another.

For some people, loneliness is a lifelong struggle, and our task as people who follow Jesus is to be compassionate for the lonely. However, this does not mean that this person should be allowed to override the conversation in your small group, because it will turn off all other participants to any small group activity and will likely alienate the individual further. Work with your parish leadership to find a better and lasting solution for your group and parish.

The Bible/Theology/Liturgical Know-It All

Whether this person genuinely knows scripture, or only thinks that she does, this can wreak havoc in a scripture-based small group by monologuing about scholarly debates. Knowledge is a good thing, but Episcopalians love to hide their heart behind their head, and this sort of conversation pulls us away from sharing our experiences. The purpose of small group ministry is to link our faith to our daily living and to open places of trust and vulnerability so that participants can see God working in their lives.

You can try:

- Relating the topic at hand back to everyday life: “Sarah, how does this passage speak to your situation right now?”
- Bringing it back to the heart: “How does it make you feel that Jesus promises to always be with us?”
- Gently reminding participants that this is not a bible or theology study: “That is an interesting summary of the Oxford Movement, but we’re here to discuss how these signs of life are a part of our daily life and relationship with God.”

Absentee Participant

This person came the first week and then doesn’t show up for the next two weeks. Or says they can only come weeks three and four. Or really wants to come, but something keeps coming up. Unfortunately, having someone enter a short-term small group halfway through is disruptive. This may not be as disruptive if group members are already intimate with one another, but having people come in and out is a real group-killer. It doesn’t feel secure. As facilitator, you may have to have some tough conversations about accountability. Ideally, setting clear expectations for attendance will encourage individuals to commit more carefully next time.

You can:

- Set clear expectations from the very beginning. If an individual plans to miss more than two sessions, they should not sign up. Invite them to participate during the next round of small groups if timing is better and encourage them to participate in Signs of Life as an individual or in a forum setting.
- Stress at every session how important it is to show up for group time together, because small group is about building relationships with one another so we can be in better relationship with God.
- Follow up with group members who were absent. There may be something happening in their lives that you don’t know about and it may be an issue to refer to your parish’s pastoral care team.

The Griever

Whether this person lost their loved one last week or twenty years ago, you may have someone who is having real difficulty grieving. Because grief is one of the most difficult and isolating of human experiences, it’s of utmost important to include this person in your group and to support him as he journeys through some of the hardest times of his life. At the same time, formational small group ministry is not therapy, and too much focus on any one person can entirely derail healthy small group dynamics.

Try:

- Directly acknowledging his grief. Whatever you do, do not pretend it does not exist or is too uncomfortable to talk about.
- If appropriate, gently refocusing the conversation: “Thank you for feeling safe enough to share. It’s always hard to lose someone you love. Can we all have a conversation about how we see signs of life even in the

middle of loss?”

- Following up with him after the small group session or in between sessions. “Jim, it sounds like you’ve been having a really hard time since you lost Patty. How are you doing?” and then actually listen. Sometimes just being listened to is an incredible relief.
- Ensuring that your clergy person knows that this person needs to have a pastoral conversation, or be referred to further resources or counseling. Your clergy may not be aware of the full situation. It is always appropriate to call in loving reinforcements when someone is hurting deeply.

To learn more about being a better friend to those who are grieving, we recommend:

- Don’t Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to those Who are Suffering (<http://www.stephenministries.org/books/default.cfm/753>) and other resources from Stephen Ministries
- There is No Good Card for This: What to do when Life is Scary, Awful and Unfair to People You Love (<https://www.amazon.com/There-No-Good-Card-This/dp/0062469991>)

If Your Group is not Cohering

Sometimes, for any variety of reasons, groups just don’t gel. Maybe the group doesn’t feel right, or you can’t get through the weekly lesson. As the facilitator, it can be easy to blame yourself, but it is just as likely to be a hang up in the group process. It takes extra work to find the root cause, but the result will be a better functioning group and participants who feel empowered to continue in small group ministry.

Here are some things you can try:

- If you are in the middle of your weekly meeting, take a 3-minute break. Get everyone up and moving. Using group stretching or even singing a simple hymn together can physically change the dynamics of a group.
- If the group dynamics feel off for more than one week, ask individual members you trust to give feedback. Commit to making the changes they suggest. Sometimes the correction is simple, like the group is constantly being interrupted by people walking past the room where you are meeting or the lights are buzzing.
- Go over group behavior expectations at the beginning of each session, and gently but firmly follow up with infractions. “Allie, we decided as a group that we would keep phones in our pockets. If it’s really important, could you please step out of the room?”
- Work together to create a new set of group expectations. Solicit feedback and create a rule of life tailored to the needs of your specific community. Time spent creating community is never wasted, even if it means you don’t move past the opening prayer in that week’s lesson.
- Engage more learning styles. Maybe you thought your group was going to be conversation based, but you may determine you need to allow more time for other activities like journaling or creating art.
- Allow more space for silence. If no one is answering questions, you may just have a group of internal processors who simply need more time. Don’t fill the silence, let it grow until someone has something they would like to share.

Pastoral Care Emergencies

Life happens. And sometimes it happens right before your small group session. Because pastoral care emergencies vary in size and scope, there really isn’t a script for this, except to let your heart and common sense rule. You might need to call your clergy person. You might need to send that person home with another group member. You might need to just throw out your curriculum and talk about what happened. You might need to bring the group together and just pray. Know that God is with you, and as long as you respond with kindness and faithfulness, your response will be enough.

Need more help?

- Learning to become a good facilitator takes time and practice, but most of all a facilitator needs to learn how to wield their authority as the group leader. This is more than an abstract concept; you are the one responsible for ensuring that everyone benefits from your small group time, not just the high-needs individuals.

Further Reading:

There’s much more to say about small group ministry for parishes!

- Education for Ministry is a wonderful resource for creating and sustaining small group ministries in your parish.

Based on a model of seminar, prayer and reflection, EfM groups are a balance of intellectual and prayerful work together. EfM mentors may be good resources for your small group leadership and former participants may become the backbone of your group. If you have a strongly academic group, you may suggest they look into EfM when this course is finished.

- Living Compass, offers short wellness courses for adults and teens on a variety of topics. Their courses offer specific ideas for the development of small group ministry. Your parish may already have a Living Compass trained Community Wellness Advocate. If your Lenten small group is successful, you might pursue further training through Living Compass.
- Sticky Church, by Larry Osborne, is an entire book dedicated to small group ministry. Aimed at a more evangelical audience than most Episcopal churches, Sticky Church contains valuable insights into how small groups function best.