

SIGNS OF LIFE

why church matters



LIGHT • WATER • FOOD • SHELTER • COMMUNITY

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

Forum Curriculum



INTRODUCTION

Forum Curriculum

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.

Learning Goals

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.

Session Plan

Opening Prayer (2)

Gather in prayer with *Signs of Life* collect

Video (15)

Introduce the *Signs of Life* video
Watch the video

Question for Reflection (5)

Participants are invited to reflect on how a Sign of Life connects to their lives

Discussion Groups (15)

Participants break into smaller discussion groups to discuss three key questions

Gathering Conversation (10)

Forum Facilitator gathers and reflects on responses

Closing (3)

Go over weekly *Signs of Life* practice
Pray *Signs of Life* collect

Set up:

The *Signs of Life* videos are an integral part of this forum curriculum. Therefore, it is very important that all participants be able to see and hear the videos. Please ensure that the technology is ready to go before the session begins. If there is not adequate or consistent wi-fi at the church, the facilitator may need to download the video before the session.

It may be convenient for participants to be seated at tables. However, as long as participants are able to engage in discussion with groups of four or five, any arrangement of chairs that allow the screen to be seen is sufficient.



LIGHT

Forum Preparation

Set up:

Chairs should be arranged where each participant can hear and see the video as well as the facilitator. Because there will be discussion groups, facilitators may choose to use tables, but tables are not necessary. Participants should be able to move their seats around so that they may speak with one another.

Questions for group discussion should be posted somewhere easily seen by all of the groups. There should be newsprint or a whiteboard for the facilitator to write on.

Needed Materials:

- A way for the facilitator to keep time (a smartphone timer would work nicely)
- Newsprint or a whiteboard and markers
- Audio-visual capabilities
- One copy of the *Signs of Life Practice Sheet* per participant

Learning Goals

The learning goals for Light are:

- Connecting the sign of light to personal spirituality or experience
- Understanding how light plays a role in Christian worship and community life
- Learning a new contemplative practice that can help participants connect more deeply to the sign of light

Forum Plan

Collect (5 minutes):

Gather the group's attention, and 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.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Read the following prompt:

"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."

Press play and watch the video through to the end.

Reflection Question (5 minutes):

After the video is over, read the following script:

"Take one minute to think about the answer to this prompt: 'Tell a story about a time you needed light. Where did you find it?' At the end of one minute, I'll invite you to turn to a neighbor. You will each have two minutes to share your experience. One of you will start, and the other should listen. At the end of two minutes, I'll ask you to switch. When one person is talking, the other should not interrupt. Please listen to your partner."

Use a timer to give the group one minute to think about the question. At the end of one minute, invite them to

share with their neighbor, reiterating that they will each have only two minutes to answer the question, and that the listener should not interrupt. After two minutes of sharing, invite the other participant to take their turn. At the end of the second two minutes, call the group back to attention.

Discussion Groups (15 minutes):

Read the following script:

“Please gather into groups of four or five. You will take the next 15 minutes to discuss the following three questions:

- Where does light show up in the life and liturgy of your worshipping community? How does light help you tell the Story?*
- In the video, the brothers talk about how darkness is not just the absence of light, but rather a generative force—seeds grow in the dark. Has this been true in your life, and what new growth happened when you were in the dark?*
- We are called to be light in the darkness of the world. How does your worshipping community share light?*

You will be able to reference the questions here [gesture to where you’ve posted the questions] or on your handout. You may decide to answer all three questions, or spend more time on one or two. This is a conversation. Please be inclusive, and remember that not everyone needs to respond to every question. I’ll remind you when you are halfway through your time.

We will then gather back together so that the groups can share.”

Use a timer to remind participants when seven minutes have passed. When there are two minutes remaining, give participants a two minute warning.

Gathering Conversation (10 minutes):

Ask one person from each small group to share a highlight of their discussion with the larger group. Responses may be gathered on whiteboard or newsprint.

Closing:

Bring attention to the *Signs of Life: Light Practice Sheet*. Read this script:

“Here is a reminder of the daily 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.”

Pray 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.

Thank participants for participating. The session is over.



WATER

Forum Preparation

Set up:

Chairs should be arranged where each participant can hear and see the video as well as the facilitator. Because there will be discussion groups, facilitators may choose to use tables, but tables are not necessary. Participants should be able to move their seats around so that they may speak with one another.

Questions for group discussion should be posted somewhere easily seen by all of the groups. There should be newsprint or a whiteboard for the facilitator to write on.

Needed Materials:

- A way for the facilitator to keep time (a smartphone timer would work nicely)
- Newsprint or a whiteboard and markers
- Audio-visual capabilities
- One copy of the *Signs of Life Practice Sheet* per participant

Learning Goals

The learning goals for Water are:

- Connecting the sign of water to personal spirituality or experience
- Understanding how water plays a role in Christian worship and community life
- Learning a new contemplative practice that can help participants connect more deeply to the sign of water

Forum Plan

Collect (5 minutes):

Gather the group's attention, and 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.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Read the following prompt:

"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."

Press play and watch the video through to the end.

Reflection Question (5 minutes):

After the video is over, read the following script:

"Take one minute to think about the answer to this prompt: 'What body of water has meant the most to you, and why?' At the end of one minute, I'll invite you to turn to a neighbor. You will each have two minutes to share your experience. One of you will start, and the other should listen. At the end of two minutes, I'll ask you to switch. When one person is talking, the other should not interrupt. Please listen to your partner."

Use a timer to give the group one minute to think about the question. At the end of one minute, invite them to share with their neighbor, reiterating that they will each have only two minutes to answer the question, and that the listener should not interrupt. After two minutes of sharing, invite the other participant to take their turn. At the end of the second two minutes, call the group back to attention.

Discussion Groups (15 minutes):

Read the following script:

- “Please gather into groups of four or five. You will take the next 15 minutes to discuss the following three questions:*
- Where does water show up in the life and liturgy of your worshiping community? How does water help you tell the Story?*
 - In the video, the brothers talk about how they see their baptism in moments of surrender. Reflect on a time when you chose to surrender. How did you experience resurrection?*
 - All people and creatures need clean and safe water to live and flourish. Is this need being met in your community? How does your worshiping community meet this need?*

You will be able to reference the questions here [gesture to where you’ve posted the questions] or on your handout. You may decide to answer all three questions, or spend more time on one or two. This is a conversation. Please be inclusive, and remember that not everyone needs to respond to every question. I’ll remind you when you are halfway through your time.

We will then gather back together so that the groups can share.”

Use a timer to remind participants when seven minutes have passed. When there are two minutes remaining, give participants a two minute warning.

Gathering Conversation (10 minutes):

Ask one person from each small group to share a highlight of their discussion with the larger group. Responses may be gathered on whiteboard or newsprint.

Closing:

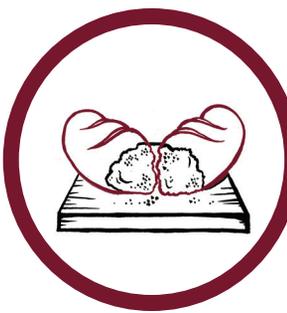
Bring attention to the *Signs of Life: Water Practice Sheet*. Read this script:

“Here is a reminder of the daily practice for this Sign of Life. This week while you wash your hands, you are invited to take time to feel the water and remember your baptism.”

Pray 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.

Thank participants for participating. The session is over.



FOOD

Forum Preparation

Set up:

Chairs should be arranged where each participant can hear and see the video as well as the facilitator. Because there will be discussion groups, facilitators may choose to use tables, but tables are not necessary. Participants should be able to move their seats around so that they may speak with one another.

Questions for group discussion should be posted somewhere easily seen by all of the groups. There should be newsprint or a whiteboard for the facilitator to write on.

Needed Materials:

- A way for the facilitator to keep time (a smartphone timer would work nicely)
- Newsprint or a whiteboard and markers
- Audio-visual capabilities
- One copy of the *Signs of Life Practice Sheet* per participant

Learning Goals

The learning goals for Food are:

- Connecting the sign of food to personal spirituality or experience
- Understanding how food plays a role in Christian worship and community life
- Learning a new contemplative practice that can help participants connect more deeply to the sign of food

Forum Plan

Collect (5 minutes):

Gather the group's attention, and 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.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Read the following prompt:

"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 worshipping community."

Press play and watch the video through to the end.

Reflection Question (5 minutes):

After the video is over, read the following script:

"Take one minute to think about the answer to this prompt: 'In your life, how is food used to mark special occasions? Share an example.' At the end of one minute, I'll invite you to turn to a neighbor. You will each have two minutes to share your experience. One of you will start, and the other should listen. At the end of two minutes, I'll ask you to switch. When one person is talking, the other should not interrupt. Please listen to your partner."

Use a timer to give the group one minute to think about the question. At the end of one minute, invite them to

share with their neighbor, reiterating that they will each have only two minutes to answer the question, and that the listener should not interrupt. After two minutes of sharing, invite the other participant to take their turn. At the end of the second two minutes, call the group back to attention.

Discussion Groups (15 minutes):

Read the following script:

“Please gather into groups of four or five. You will take the next 15 minutes to discuss the following three questions:

- Where does food show up in the life and liturgy of your worshipping community? How does food help you tell the Story?*
- Brother Luke says, “A piece of bread each day is a helpful reminder [that] I’m given what I need as opposed to all I crave.” When have you received what you what need instead of what you want?*
- All around us, people are hungry for food that nourishes body and soul. Is this need being met in your community? How does your worshipping community meet this need?*

You will be able to reference the questions here [gesture to where you’ve posted the questions] or on your handout. You may decide to answer all three questions, or spend more time on one or two. This is a conversation. Please be inclusive, and remember that not everyone needs to respond to every question. I’ll remind you when you are halfway through your time.

We will then gather back together so that the groups can share.”

Use a timer to remind participants when seven minutes have passed. When there are two minutes remaining, give participants a two minute warning.

Gathering Conversation (10 minutes):

Ask one person from each small group to share a highlight of their discussion with the larger group. Responses may be gathered on whiteboard or newsprint.

Closing:

Bring attention to the *Signs of Life: Food Practice Sheet*. Read this script:

“Here is a reminder of the daily 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.”

Pray 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.

Thank participants for participating. The session is over.



SHELTER

Forum Preparation

Set up:

Chairs should be arranged where each participant can hear and see the video as well as the facilitator. Because there will be discussion groups, facilitators may choose to use tables, but tables are not necessary. Participants should be able to move their seats around so that they may speak with one another.

Questions for group discussion should be posted somewhere easily seen by all of the groups. There should be newsprint or a whiteboard for the facilitator to write on.

Needed Materials:

- A way for the facilitator to keep time (a smartphone timer would work nicely)
- Newsprint or a whiteboard and markers
- Audio-visual capabilities
- One copy of the *Signs of Life Practice Sheet* per participant

Learning Goals

The learning goals for Shelter are:

- Connecting the sign of shelter to personal spirituality or experience
- Understanding how shelter plays a role in Christian worship and community life
- Learning a new contemplative practice that can help participants connect more deeply to the sign of shelter

Forum Plan

Collect (5 minutes):

Gather the group's attention, and 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.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Read the following prompt:

"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."

Press play and watch the video through to the end.

Reflection Question (5 minutes):

After the video is over, read the following script:

"Take one minute to think about the answer to this prompt: 'Where do you feel most at home?' At the end of one minute, I'll invite you to turn to a neighbor. You will each have two minutes to share your experience. One of you will start, and the other should listen. At the end of two minutes, I'll ask you to switch. When one person is talking, the other should not interrupt. Please listen to your partner."

Use a timer to give the group one minute to think about the question. At the end of one minute, invite them to

share with their neighbor, reiterating that they will each have only two minutes to answer the question, and that the listener should not interrupt. After two minutes of sharing, invite the other participant to take their turn. At the end of the second two minutes, call the group back to attention.

Discussion Groups (15 minutes):

Read the following script:

“Please gather into groups of four or five. You will take the next 15 minutes to discuss the following three questions:

- Where does shelter show up in the life and liturgy of your worshiping community? How does shelter help you tell the Story?*
- Brother Geoffrey says, “When we try to settle too much in our lives, we can forget that we’re actually on a journey and that we’re called to be a pilgrim people.” When has God been with you on a journey?*
- Who are the people in your community that need shelter? Is this need being met? How does your worshiping community meet this need?*

You will be able to reference the questions here [gesture to where you’ve posted the questions] or on your handout. You may decide to answer all three questions, or spend more time on one or two. This is a conversation. Please be inclusive, and remember that not everyone needs to respond to every question. I’ll remind you when you are halfway through your time.

We will then gather back together so that the groups can share.”

Use a timer to remind participants when seven minutes have passed. When there are two minutes remaining, give participants a two minute warning.

Gathering Conversation (10 minutes):

Ask one person from each small group to share a highlight of their discussion with the larger group. Responses may be gathered on whiteboard or newsprint.

Closing:

Bring attention to the *Signs of Life: Shelter Practice Sheet*. Read this script:

“Here is a reminder of the daily 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 of. Remember that God hides us in the shadow of God’s wings; in God we always find shelter.”

Pray 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.

Thank participants for participating. The session is over.



COMMUNITY

Forum Preparation

Set up:

Chairs should be arranged where each participant can hear and see the video as well as the facilitator. Because there will be discussion groups, facilitators may choose to use tables, but tables are not necessary. Participants should be able to move their seats around so that they may speak with one another.

Questions for group discussion should be posted somewhere easily seen by all of the groups. There should be newsprint or a whiteboard for the facilitator to write on.

Needed Materials:

- A way for the facilitator to keep time (a smartphone timer would work nicely)
- Newsprint or a whiteboard and markers
- Audio-visual capabilities
- One copy of the *Signs of Life Practice Sheet* per participant

Learning Goals

The learning goals for Community are:

- Connecting the sign of community to personal spirituality or experience
- Understanding how community plays a role in Christian worship and community life
- Learning a new contemplative practice that can help participants connect more deeply to the sign of community

Forum Plan

Collect (5 minutes):

Gather the group's attention, and 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.

Watch Video (15 minutes):

Read the following prompt:

"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."

Press play and watch the video through to the end.

Reflection Question (5 minutes):

After the video is over, read the following script:

"Take one minute to think about the answer to this prompt: 'When did you experience joy in community?' At the end of one minute, I'll invite you to turn to a neighbor. You will each have two minutes to share your experience. One of you will start, and the other should listen. At the end of two minutes, I'll ask you to switch. When one person is talking, the other should not interrupt. Please listen to your partner."

Use a timer to give the group one minute to think about the question. At the end of one minute, invite them to

share with their neighbor, reiterating that they will each have only two minutes to answer the question, and that the listener should not interrupt. After two minutes of sharing, invite the other participant to take their turn. At the end of the second two minutes, call the group back to attention.

Discussion Groups (15 minutes):

Read the following script:

“Please gather into groups of four or five. You will take the next 15 minutes to discuss the following three questions:

- Where does community show up in the life and liturgy of your worshiping community? How does community help you tell the Story?*
- Talk about a time in your life you experienced friction in a community. How was it resolved?*
- Loneliness is the absence of true community. Are people lonely in your neighborhoods? How is your worshiping community combating loneliness?*

You will be able to reference the questions here [gesture to where you’ve posted the questions] or on your handout. You may decide to answer all three questions, or spend more time on one or two. This is a conversation. Please be inclusive, and remember that not everyone needs to respond to every question. I’ll remind you when you are halfway through your time.

We will then gather back together so that the groups can share.”

Use a timer to remind participants when seven minutes have passed. When there are two minutes remaining, give participants a two minute warning.

Gathering Conversation (10 minutes):

Ask one person from each small group to share a highlight of their discussion with the larger group. Responses may be gathered on whiteboard or newsprint.

Closing:

Bring attention to the *Signs of Life: Community Practice Sheet*. Read this script:

“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.”

Pray 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.

Thank participants for participating. The session is over.



Signs of Life: Why Church Matters
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SIGNS OF LIFE SignsofLife.org

Worship engages our deepest human needs and has the power to transform our lives. Join the Brothers of SSJE in exploring the signs and symbols at the heart of Christian worship.

Daily Practice · Weekly Video · Small Group Guide · Sunday Forum · Podcast

About this series

This series is a collaboration between the Brothers of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist and members of the Virginia Theological Seminary community. It emerges from a week-long exploration of the signs and symbols of our common worship. During the week-long collaboration, the Rev. Becky Zartman introduced each topic with a short homily and a set of provocative questions that became the foundation for structured conversations with both individual Brothers and groups of Brothers. It is our hope that this series will be a resource for your spiritual life.

Additional resources, intended for groups and individuals, can be found at SignsofLife.org.



**LIFELONG
LEARNING**
Virginia Theological Seminary

LIFELONG LEARNING AT VIRGINIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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