

Being the Church

Emily Bisset

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Introduction

Sometimes we, as the church, wonder what we can offer our wider community – a community that is increasingly functioning without the church as a significant influence. As a denomination, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been reformulating a common mission and vision statement with a strategic plan to move our congregations and ministries into the future. We have been asking questions: What is the church called to *do*? What is the church called to *be*? What will this look like in the communities where we live?

Reflection led me to a different line of questioning: What *does* the church offer – what *can* it offer – that is not available in our communities? What essential teachings of the gospel are at work in congregational life that are not present in our communities because the teachings have been lost or contradicted?

Questions such as those above place the emphasis on a “present tense” exploration that highlights components or qualities already existing in many congregations. As a result, good news stories emerge. The church already values and tries to offer particular qualities as part of its mission and purpose. However, sometimes valued components of congregational life are endangered: taken for granted, they may be neglected; during periods of depleted resources, they may be put at risk; not having been named and recognized, their contribution may be overlooked.

In my work as a congregational minister and as a church leader, I began looking for good news stories in the church. I had the opportunity to work on a special exercise for the 139th General Assembly in June 2013: commissioners shared good news stories and were encouraged to make vibrant connections among congregations represented there and going forward. Indeed, ideas continue to flow from this event and you can find a series of good news stories at <http://presbyterian.ca/gao/vibrant-connections/>. As I contemplated these ideas, I began to think specifically about what strengths the church might have to offer the wider community as part of our faith and life and incorporated them into the worship services for the Clerks’ Consultation in April 2014, where clerks of presbyteries and synods gathered to learn, share and worship together. After that, colleagues encouraged me to develop my ideas further to bring into focus strengths that can create opportunities for *being the church*, serving in our local – and even global – community.

This process of reflection-presentation-feedback-reflection has led to this resource. Here, I name and encourage reflection on five specific qualities present in many of our congregations. These are qualities that I have valued in my faith journey, growing up in the church and now as a minister in a congregation and raising a daughter. From my experiences, many of our faith communities show great strength in

1. Singing together
2. Loving with empathy and compassion
3. Creating safe space
4. Welcoming all ages
5. Believing in life beyond death

This is *my* list, but it is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. After study and reflection, you may want to identify and explore different qualities relevant to your experiences.

While many congregations may value the same five qualities that I do, for various reasons not every congregation may have been able to keep them strong. And even when one or more of these qualities has been an important part of congregational life, the church may not have drawn on these strengths to “go out into the world.” Yet, each of the five qualities has enabled us, and can continue to enable us, to serve in the communities where we live.

The five qualities

While the five qualities are not extraordinary or new, they are extremely important to our Christian witness and near the core of our identity as the people of God. They are even, in a sense, primal to who we are created to be.

- **Singing Together:** In the book of Job, God speaks into the whirlwind and questions Job. Reflecting on the moment of creation, God says, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth...when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4,7) Perhaps our singing together is an echo of that first morning star song,

just now reaching earth, even as the light from an exploding star can take thousands or even millions of years to reach us.

- **Loving with Empathy and Compassion:** Creation began with singing and was soon followed by the need for companionship. It is God who first longs for a creature made in God's own image, with whom God can have a relationship (Genesis 1:27). And in the second account of creation, God creates *adam* (Hebrew for "creature of earth [*adama*]", the first human being) and immediately realizes that *adam* needs a companion and partner (Genesis 2:18). We are created for relationship, and so loving with empathy and compassion is at the heart of our identity as God's people.
- **Creating Safe Space:** God also knew that if we were to be vulnerable with one another, and free to be as God created us to be, then we would need safe space – where we are not ashamed (Genesis 2:25). In this space, there is provision, equality, and open relationship with God. While humanity broke the covenant with God and our home is no longer the Eden of God's first creation, God still longs for us to have that safe space. It is a reminder of what God intends for human life. Each church community, as part of the body of Christ, is called to create such space, where God is the one who clothes us and walks with us.
- **Welcoming All Ages:** Little can be clearer from the accounts of creation and the salvation history of God than that God has always intended to foster intergenerational relationships. "Be fruitful and multiply" is the mantra of God's creative task. The goodness of creation and the promise of the covenant were always intended for generations of God's people, and not just one family or one generation. Passing the story on to new generations is at the core of how God works in the world and among God's people.
- **Believing in Life Beyond Death:** Death has always been part of created life. The tree of life and immortality were off limits both in the garden and outside of it (Genesis 3:22–24). God created the first human being from the dust of the earth and commanded that to the dust our bodies would return (Genesis 2:7, 3:19). But the breath that gives us life is the breath of God (Genesis 2:7). As the story of covenant and salvation history unfolds, it becomes clear that death is the pathway to life. God continually works to bring us into eternity, the realm of God. Jesus links himself to the God of creation, the God of covenant and invokes God's holy name with the ultimate promise to humanity, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11: 25–26). When

the church believes this promise and Christians can speak with ease about the hope that accompanies death, we are witnesses to the gospel; we are being the church that God calls us to be.

Who can use this resource

From the first song of creation to our death into the new life of Jesus Christ, this resource seeks to help people explore some essential elements of our Christian identity. It is designed to be used by individuals and groups in our congregations, to help with reflections on what we do well and what we may need to pay more attention to in our life together. Let us affirm our strengths and, equipped with them, seek opportunities to serve in our communities.

This resource can be used in one or more situations such as small groups, house church groups, camp gatherings and youth or adult study groups. The sessions do not require a minister to lead them; different lay leaders can facilitate different sessions. This resource may also be used in sermon preparation by preachers. See <http://presbyterian.ca/worship/> for related worship materials from the author.

How to use this resource

These five sessions can be used individually or as a set, and in any order. Parts of them can be used as conversation starters at session gatherings, devotions for group meetings, as one-off studies of 60 to 90 minutes, or as a five-week study (or ten-week, depending on the amount of conversation and the response time a group wishes to engage in).

Each session includes:

Objectives: The purpose of the material

Preparation: A list of supplies needed

Prayer: An opening prayer

Gathering: An introduction to the theme

Scripture: A Bible passage followed by commentary and discussion questions

Being the Church: Information and stories from the author, and questions to encourage reflection on the theme and connection to congregational life

Celebrating and Sharing: Options for responding with discussion and/or action that might a) strengthen the congregation with respect to the theme, or b) identify opportunities for serving in the community

Closing: A closing ritual with prayer

Storytelling

Telling stories is also essential to who we are – as human beings and as Christians. In reacting to and discussing the material presented, participants are asked to share their experiences – their stories – from congregational life and/or their faith journeys. I have shared some of my own stories throughout this resource and I hope that they will complement yours. In this sense, storytelling is a part of all sessions.

In addition, a different, classic children's story is part of all but the first session. Stories, even those written for children, are not reserved only for children. In fact, often children's stories help adults reflect more deeply on the simple truths that both astound and puzzle us. In addition to that, children's stories are meant to be read and shared out loud, which I hope that you might take time to do in your groups.

Finally, in the response section "Celebrating and Sharing," each session includes the option to read a mission partner's story from the booklet *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope*. When we connect our stories with those of others who live in different contexts than our own, our faith is enriched and we become better human beings.

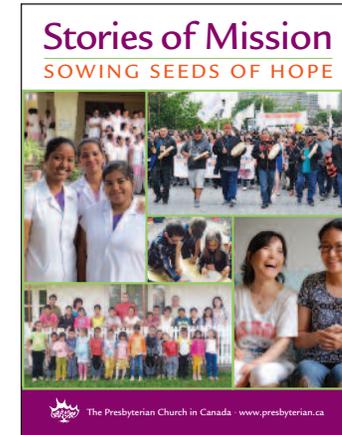
Benediction

For leaders wanting a benediction to close any of the sessions, consider the scripture passage below.

Clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in the one body.
And be thankful.
Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;
teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;
and with gratitude in your hearts
sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.
And whatever you do, in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.
Amen.

(Colossians 3:12–17)

This Colossians passage is also my prayer for you reading this now and for all who in the future might engage in any part of this study. – *Emily Bisset*, author



Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope

Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope highlights some of the mission and ministry work we do together across Canada and around the world through *Presbyterians Sharing*. Each story is followed by a reflection, discussion, prayer and hymn. The resource can be downloaded for free at presbyterian.ca/sharing. To order copies, go to the online order form at www.presbyterian.ca/resource-centre or contact the Resource Centre at 1-800-619-7301 or resources@presbyterian.ca.

SESSION

1

Singing Together

OBJECTIVES

- 1 To explore biblical and historical references that pair singing with our faith.
- 2 To appreciate the tradition of singing in our church.
- 3 To celebrate and share the church as a community where we can sing together.

PREPARATION

You will need:

- Copies of the Book of Praise and the Bible (NRSV)
- Three or four recent worship service bulletins with the hymns that were sung
- Option: a piano or keyboard, guitar or other instrument(s) and/or a music leader
- Option: access to the Internet
- Option: a copy of “A church that feels like home” in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (p. 25)

PRAYER

God of the morning stars,

We come wondering who we are.

In call and response, you invite us
to sing ourselves into faith.

Teaching empathy and compassion,
you gather us together to go out to love the other.

Accepting us as we are, you are our safe space,
your love nurtures us.

Transcending time, your love ties generations together,
giving each a story to tell.

And in Jesus Christ we learn that out of death,
your love brings life and hope.

Mold and make us; shape and form us;
teach and transform us.

Help us become your people. Amen.

GATHERING

Turn to “Holy Holy Holy” #299 in the Book of Praise. Note the dates for the writing of the words and music, and browse the lyrics. Did you know there was a time when many churches began every Sunday morning service with the first verse of this hymn? Read in unison or sing together the first verse. Share any special memories of hearing or singing this hymn. Read or sing the other verses together.

SCRIPTURE

The reading below is an excerpt of John's vision from the book of Revelation. Have two readers for the parts of **One** and **Voice**, with everyone reading **ALL**.

One: After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said,

Voice: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

One: At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

ALL: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

One: And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

ALL: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

One: Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

ALL: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

One: Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

ALL: "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

(Excerpts from Revelation 4:1–11; 5:6, 11–13)

Commentary

In Revelation, John gives us a glimpse into worship in the eternal realm. John stands at the entrance to a door into heaven and looks into a sanctuary of sorts with a throne in the centre, and in front of it seven torches that are spirits, and a sea of crystal-like glass. There are strange and wonderful symbolic creatures (loosely representing wild animals, domesticated animals, human beings and the birds of the air) who sing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come." Then "a Lamb" is seen in the worship room, at which point "the voice of many angels" blends with the singing of the creatures and the elders (Revelation 5:11–13). After that there is a great crescendo and everyone sings: "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them."
Option: Invite different people to read the passage aloud again before proceeding to the discussion questions that follow.

Joining our voices

I was pastor of a small, rural church in Northwestern Pennsylvania with a very small choir that tried very hard. Most of the time, its members were five or six older women with wobbly voices and one younger woman who sang in a monotone. The choir director, Joy, was always very encouraging, but she confided to me that she was sometimes discouraged. One morning we were both part of a Bible study where we read from Revelation 4 and 5. I talked about how we join our voices with other voices when we sing, that we join in with all those who sing to God – the eternal elders, the angels, the creatures of every time and place. I looked at Joy and she was beaming.

“Are you saying,” and she paused to find the words, “that when we sing in worship, God not only hears our choir but hears all the beautiful choirs of heaven all blended together in worship?”

“Well, yes,” I said.

She told me later that such a vision changed her whole outlook on worship and on her choir.

Discussion

- 1 Share reactions to John’s vision of worship in heaven. Read together the box “**Thin places.**” In Revelation, John uses apocalyptic language to describe an experience he had of worship when what Barbara Brown Taylor calls “the veil” was lifted. Such experiences are difficult for us to understand and our language is inadequate to describe them. However, apocalyptic literature such as John’s writings can help us look beyond what we know. What words might you use to describe a unique experience, a moment when you feel you are in the presence of God?
- 2 In describing his experience, John includes not only sound (singing and lyrics), but also movement and colour. Reflect on a time when you were deeply moved in worship – or when someone told you about being moved. Reflect on what contributed to the emotional impact. Turn to the person next to you and share the experience.

Thin places

A great preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, spoke in a sermon about life’s “thin places.” It is a phrase that she borrows from the Irish. She says that there are moments when “the veil between this world and the next,” the now and the eternal, is “so sheer that it is easy to step through.” She describes the experience of such moments in various ways: a door being cracked open between this world and the next, or as “a freshness that drenches you as thoroughly as a shower” (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Thin Places” in *Home By Another Way*, p. 59). We sometimes experience “thin places” in worship.

- 3 In church today we have a starting time for worship and an ending time – most commonly we worship on Sunday morning for 60 to 90 minutes. But in Revelation, John experiences a worship that occurs eternally and that he’d stepped into for a brief time. Reflect on the idea of worship as an ongoing, eternal, activity that we join temporarily. Read together the box “**Joining our voices.**” How do you think Joy’s outlook changed? What might John’s vision of worship mean for you – in worship and in the times between congregational worship?

BEING THE CHURCH

SINGING TOGETHER

Two of the great reformers, John Calvin and Martin Luther, both believed very strongly in the power of music – and in the power of singing in worship. Calvin believed that what you sing sticks with you. Therefore, to be on the safe side, when it comes to forming, shaping and influencing the people of God, he thought it best to sing only the psalms. In Calvin’s churches the psalms were set to tunes that were memorable, and in some cases even danceable, or at least toe-tap-able – so much so that it is reported that Queen Elizabeth refused to have them sung in the Church of England, referring to them as “Genevan jigs.”

Luther, too, believed in the power of music. Luther took bar songs and popular folk songs, and wrote Christian lyrics for them. He figured that if you already knew the tune and were singing it elsewhere, a good teacher of the faith could capitalize on that and find a way to get you singing religious truths instead. And so, to the horror of many Christians, he made extensive use of hymns set to bar tunes to teach the German people about the truths of the Bible and the Lutheran faith.

Today worship is one of the few places in common society, outside of formal choirs, where people still sing together, at no charge! It is also one of the few places where people have the casual opportunity to hear parts, create harmony and read or follow music – just by being in the congregation. Worship punctuated with songs and hymns of praise reminds us that the human voice is God’s best instrument of praise – not the classically trained voice, or the soloist or even the confident voice – but simple voices lifted in praise and joy, together. While there may be a choir to lead us, church singing isn’t about performance or being on display. In fact, it is the opposite: in worship we all blend our voices to create praise worthy of God’s hearing!

Blending our voices

John Chrysostom, a great preacher and early Christian, said to worshippers, “The psalm which we just sang blended all voices together, and caused one single fully harmonious chant to arise: young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free, all sang one single melody. All the inequalities of social life are here banished. Together we make up a single choir in perfect equality of rights and expression whereby earth imitates heaven. Such is the noble character of the church.” – From John Chrysostom, Hom. 5; PG 63. 486–7; quoted by J. Gelineau in “Music and Singing in the Liturgy” in *The Study of the Liturgy*; Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yanolds (eds); New York: Oxford University Press, 1978; p. 440.

Discussion

- 1 Read together “**Blending our voices.**” Psalm 23 is one of the best known and loved psalms worldwide. Recall times when you have sung or read Psalm 23 together in worship. Read it in unison from the Bible. Turn to #11 in the Book of Praise and sing it together. (Option: Enlist a music leader to help the group sing this confidently with blended voices.) Talk about experiences of reading and singing the psalms and comment on the difference, if any, that singing makes.
- 2 Read the box “**Statements of faith.**” Explain whether you agree or disagree.
- 3 Read together the box “**Hymns and our identity.**” Look at recent worship service bulletins and look up some of the hymns. Or choose a favourite hymn. (Option: Divide into pairs or small groups, with each looking at one hymn.) Explain what you like or don’t like about this hymn. What do you notice about the lyrics being used in worship songs? Consider what the lyrics say about the nature of God, about God’s relationship with human beings, about being in community as God’s people?

Statements of faith

Church was where I learned to sing and hymns were what taught me the story of Christian faith. Yes, I went to youth club and Sunday school; yes, I took piano lessons. But worship in the sanctuary was where I learned how to be a singer, to sing as part of a larger whole; and the hymnody was my earliest teacher of theology. In our hymnbook, we don’t just have a book of poems or rhyming verses, we have a compilation of statements of faith – dating from the 3rd and 4th centuries to the 20th century. It is a book of theology – what we believe about God. Someone once said, “When a parent invites a child to ‘find a page’ in the hymnal, that child is leafing through hundreds of short but profound lessons in the Christian faith that can inform them about who it is that we worship and about who we are as the people of God.”

Hymns and our identity

Whether you have a great voice or an average voice or cannot carry a tune at all, singing alone and singing together are ways that we teach our faith and build community in the church. As John Bell of the Church of Scotland has said, “Congregational singing is an identity-shaping activity.” The words or lyrics we sing are critical as they inform and shape us. It is important that worship leaders select with care the hymns for worship, ensuring that they express the congregation’s beliefs and vision.

CELEBRATING AND SHARING

Choose from these options, according to the time and interests of the group.

- 1 Worship music experiences:** Reflect on your memories of music and singing in the church. These might be good memories and from childhood, like the one told in “**The Hallelujah Chorus.**” But many of us have never sung in a choir – in fact, sometimes we have been discouraged from singing at all! In small groups of three or four, share your experiences of music – perhaps an instrument, a piece of music or hymn, a particular situation – and how music “speaks” to you. Then as one group brainstorm on how worship music experiences could be created for different groups in the church and the community. Whom might you meet with to organize one or more of these experiences?
- 2 Hymns as statements of faith.** In the Book of Praise there are four sections with hymns about God: God the Holy Trinity (#286–300), God Creator and Ruler (#301–339), God in Christ (#340–379), and God the Holy Spirit (#380–404). Divide into four groups, with each group taking one section and selecting one hymn as an example of a sung statement of faith. What does the selected hymn say about the nature of God and/or who we are as people of God? Have the groups take turns presenting their selected hymn to each other. Consider sharing this exercise in a worship service.
- 3 A community hymn singalong.** The church is one of the few places today where people come together regularly and sing in an informal, non-performance-oriented context. Why might this kind of gathering be significant? What effect does it have on the gathered community? Approach worship and choir leaders about holding an afternoon or evening hymn singalong. How frequently might this occur and how could an invitation be extended to people in the local community?

- 4 The benefits of singing.** Search online and/or go to the library to read some of the studies about physical and mental health benefits of singing together. The focus of studies ranges from heart health to the release of positive hormones to the benefits of stress relief. One article that addresses these benefits appeared in *Time* magazine in August 2013 – “Singing Changes Your Brain: Group singing has been scientifically proven to lower stress, relieve anxiety, and elevate endorphins” by Stacy Horn – can be found at <http://ideas.time.com/2013/08/16/singing-changes-your-brain/>. How might you share your findings with others? What group of people in your community might benefit from a singing program that reaches out to them? How could your congregation begin such a program – e.g. with whom could you partner to plan and implement it?
- 5 Mission partners:** Read “A church that feels like home” in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (p. 25). Through Canadian Ministries, contributions to *Presbyterians Sharing* are given to churches like Lighthouse Evangelical Arabic Church. Describe the identity of this congregation and the difference that its worship singing is making. How could your group or congregation celebrate the Lighthouse ministry?

The Hallelujah Chorus

My earliest memory of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” takes me back to Grade 7 and a Sunday morning standing in the church choir loft in the alto section, next to my mother. The choir members wore gold and blue robes. The masterful organist played with trembling hands. I knew I had to get two things right. First, there’s a place when the music gets soft and the bass section begins to sing, “The kingdom of this world...” And then the altos come in alone to finish that sentence: “is become the kingdom of our God.” Second, at the very end of the piece, the whole choir sings a staccato “Hallelujah!” and then rests. Complete silence follows. Then the final “Hallelujah!” You DO NOT want to be the only chorister still singing when everyone else is resting – especially if you are in Grade 7.

CLOSING

Sing or recite together a verse from a favourite hymn or from one that has been part of this session's discussions. Then say responsively:

One: The church is called to be a singing community.

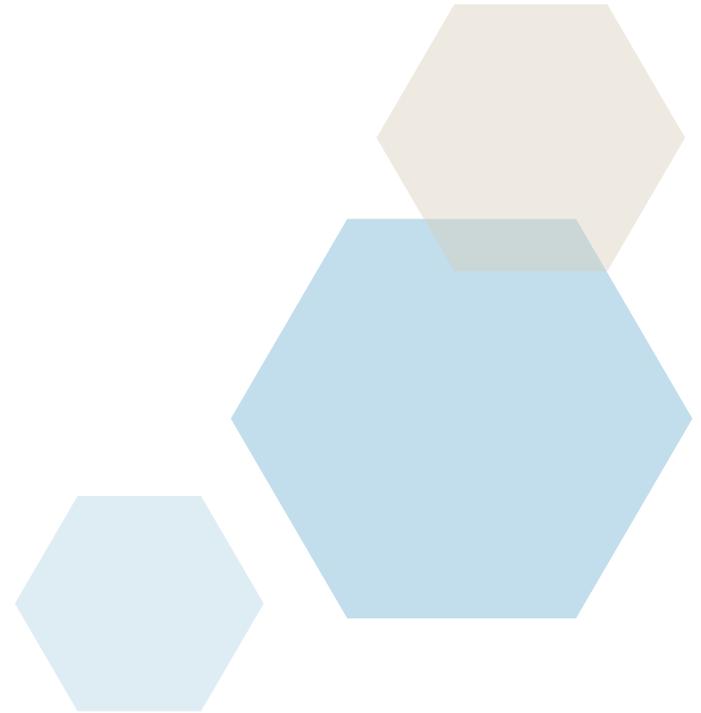
ALL: When we sing hymns and spiritual songs, we shape our identity in Christ.

One: When we lift our voices together, divisions and difference sound out harmony, not dissonance.

ALL: When we sing for God's glory,

One: God's heart is glad and our souls are nourished.

ALL: May we be the church that God is calling us to be. Amen.



SESSION

2

Loving with Empathy and Compassion

OBJECTIVES

- 1 To explore biblical references about love, empathy and compassion as fundamentals of our faith.
- 2 To appreciate the importance of being loving in our church.
- 3 To celebrate and share the church as a community where we learn to love others in word and deed to bring about God's justice.

PREPARATION

You will need:

- A copy of the story *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein (print or online version)
- Large sheet of paper or newspaper and markers; alternatively, writing paper and coloured pencils
- Copies of the Book of Praise and the Bible (NRSV)
- Option: access to the Internet
- Option: a copy of "The voice of the bell" from *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 16–17)

PRAYER

God of the morning stars,

We come wondering who we are.

In call and response, you invite us
to sing ourselves into faith.

Teaching empathy and compassion,
you gather us together to go out to love the other.

Accepting us as we are, you are our safe space,
your love nurtures us.

Transcending time, your love ties generations together,
giving each a story to tell.

And in Jesus Christ we learn that out of death,
your love brings life and hope.

Mold and make us; shape and form us;
teach and transform us.

Help us become your people. Amen.

GATHERING

Invite one person to read the 1964 story *The Giving Tree*. Brainstorm, and record on a large sheet of paper, words and phrases that describe the last image in this story when Boy receives what he needs from the tree. Alternatively, invite everyone to draw how they imagine that last scene. Display the results.

In 2007, there were over eight million copies of this book in print, and in one teacher survey the book was in the top-ten list of children's books. However, this story was not without controversy. Invite everyone to recall/surmise what was controversial about it (e.g. consider the gender and role of the tree, the behaviour and action of Boy). Why might some readers reject the book? Why might some readers love the story? Share reactions to the story. How might it be metaphorical?

SCRIPTURE

This is a reading from the gospel of John. Have different participants read the parts of narrator, Martha, Jesus, Mary and the Jews.

Narrator: When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus,

Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Narrator: Jesus said to her,

Jesus: “Your brother will rise again.”

Narrator: Martha said to him,

Martha: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

Narrator: Jesus said to her,

Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Narrator: She said to him,

Martha: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Narrator: When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately,

Martha: “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”

Narrator: And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him,

Mary: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Narrator: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said,

Jesus: “Where have you laid him?”

Narrator: They said to him,

Mary and the Jews: “Lord, come and see.”

Narrator: Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said,

The Jews: “See how he loved him!”

(John 11:17–36)

Commentary

This passage is part of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha, were not just people that Jesus met on the roadside; nor were they new acquaintances in one of the towns that Jesus and the disciples were passing through. No, they were Jesus’ friends – perhaps among his best friends. When he finally arrived at Bethany, Lazarus was dead. Jesus might have been prepared for that. What he might not have been prepared for was the intense grief people were showing. The sisters’ grief, their anger and deep sadness, and then their words seemed to cut Jesus to the core, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Discussion

- 1 Talk about how Jesus reacted to the conversations with Martha and Mary.
- 2 Read **“About empathy.”** Discuss the meaning of the word “empathy.” How do you think Jesus’ emotional state and actions were related to empathy, compassion and love? How would you differentiate between these three?
- 3 Divide into three groups with each group browsing through one of these sections of John: John 1–7, John 8–12, John 13–21. Identify instances in John where Jesus showed his emotions. What emotions did he express? When was he moved to action? Share your conversations with the large group.
- 4 Read **“Therefore, brothers and sisters.”** Comment on the following statements:
 - Jesus’ whole life could be described as an expression of God’s empathy for humankind.
 - Our call to follow Jesus might be a call to loving, compassionate actions arising from empathy for others.

“Therefore, brothers and sisters”

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he develops an argument to persuade the church that God’s grace has come through Christ, and that grace is available to all. In Romans 12 he shifts to focus on the practical implications of Christian living:

“I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters... Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

(Romans 12:1, 9–18)

About empathy

“Empathy is the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person.” *The Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2003)

“Genuine empathy is only possible when there is some form of egalitarianism... when there are mutual benefits and the possibility of reciprocity.” From civil rights scholar, Richard Delgado (1996)

“Empathy is the ability to identify with another person’s feelings. The ability to see and feel things as others see and feel them is central to competent parenting and successful social relationships in all stages of life.” From *Roots of Empathy* (2016) <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/en/who-we-are/mission-goals-and-values.html>.

I believe that at the heart of all these admonitions is the practice of love arising from empathy: with one another, with the stranger and even with the enemy. It could be argued that empathy is what drives us to prayer, loving service and compassionate action – all of which are required of us in this succinct and beautiful call to Christian living.

BEING THE CHURCH

LOVING WITH EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

I believe that empathy – and its crucial importance – is a subject that the Christian church is still teaching and emphasizing as central to human existence. The church teaches empathy in part through its pastoral care, and in part through its outreach and service. We encourage a kind of care that identifies with another person's suffering. That care grows out of a depth of friendship that often traverses many phases of life. We are shaped by such maxims as the great commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. We are even called to view one another as God would (2 Corinthians 5:16–17), not from a human point of view but as a new creation of God's own making. It does not stop there. We believe God asks us to extend empathy beyond our relationships with family and friends. Stories like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) call us to empathize with the stranger and then take action on their behalf, even if they are the enemy. Jesus' call to love our enemies means that there is no room in the Christian worldview for the bumper-sticker mentality of “no aid or comfort to the enemy – no way.” The gospel's call to empathy demands us to far-reaching – as well as close-to-home – actions of love and compassionate justice.

Discussion

- 1** Read “**Two kinds of love.**” What kind of love do you think *The Giving Tree* promotes? What do you think we can learn from this story?
- 2** *The Giving Tree* wrestles with both kinds of love. It starts with *philia* and ends up teaching us about *agape*. Reflect on the differences between *philia* and *agape* love. Recall experiences with each one. With a partner share a time in your life when you have given or received either *philia* or *agape* love. Then reflect on your experiences in the church. When have you seen the church (as a community, a group or individuals) express love in pastoral care or outreach? Talk about how this love was experienced and its impact.
- 3** What do you think churches do or could do to create greater empathy in their communities? How do you think empathy relates to acts of love and justice?

Two kinds of love

In the church we identify two different kinds of love:

- mutual, human, friendship love called *philia*
- selfless, self-sacrificial God love called *agape*

It has often been debated which kind of love God expects from human beings and we have wondered how to achieve such love. We have failed on both kinds of love – over and over again – but we still hold both as ultimate measures of our life, our faith, biblical interpretation and the purpose of the church in the world.

CELEBRATING AND SHARING

Choose from these options, according to the time and interests of the group.

1 Learn about empathy. How do people learn to be empathetic? View Brené Brown's RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts) 2013 talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>. Who in your church community draws on skills of empathy? Who might appreciate an opportunity to focus on the importance and skills of empathy? Consider if there are people in your church who could facilitate a workshop with this focus. Other resources might be a parish nurse, hospital chaplaincy, a school or school board or *Roots of Empathy*, which operates in every Canadian province. See <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/en/contact-us.html>.

2 Role of empathy in society. Research online (or in the library) recent studies and articles about empathy. Read "**Less empathetic.**" The rising lack of empathy is blamed for many things, including the pervasiveness of bullying and the newest aggressor called a cyberbully, though there are likely other contributing factors. Learn more about bullying. Who is addressing it in your community and how can the church support the efforts?

3 Being Good Samaritans. Have participants who know the story of the Good Samaritan tell it to the others. Then read it from Luke 10:25–37 and/or hear it in the six-minute video of the Church Council on Justice and Corrections at <http://ccjc.ca/reflection-on-empathy/>. Comment on how the Good Samaritan reacted with empathy. When has someone "walked by" you when you were hurting? When might you have "walked by" someone who was hurting?

With a partner, share experiences of empathy and some examples of empathy that, in the words of Stephen Siemens (in "Reflection on Empathy," the CCJC video referred to above), come from "an unlikely place, in an unlikely person." What can you and your church do – alone or in partnership – to build a community where people readily express empathy, love and compassion for one another?

4 Mission partners. Read "The voice of the bell" in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 16–17). Describe the expression and impact of empathy in the story. Through Justice Ministries, contributions to *Presbyterians Sharing* are given to encourage healing and reconciliation with Aboriginal people in Canada. How could your group or congregation participate? What could your congregation learn from this partner's story?

Less empathetic

There was a study done in 2010 by the University of Michigan. It can be found at <http://ns.umich.edu/new/releases/7724> (May 27, 2010). This study found that the university students of the first decade of the 21st century were far less empathetic than the students of the 1980s and 1990s. Sara Konrath, a researcher at the University's Institute for Social Research, found that when compared to college students of the late 1970s, "*College students today are less likely to agree with statements such as 'I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective' and 'I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.'*"

There could, of course, be many reasons for this – and many exceptions – but one concern that Konrath and her student, Edward O'Brien, raised was the pervasiveness of social media. We live in a culture where there is less face-to-face interaction, and more text-to-text or email-to-email interaction. O'Brien said, "*The ease of having 'friends' online might make people more likely to just tune out when they don't feel like responding to others' problems, a behavior that could carry over offline.*"

CLOSING

Gather in a circle around a worship table with a Bible and pillar candle on it. Light the candle and join hands. Explain that the candle in the centre is the Christ candle representing God's presence among us. Ask everyone to move back a little from the table. Point out that when we are farther away from each other, we are farther away from God. Ask everyone to move closer together. Point out that when we get closer to each other, we also get closer to God. Move closer to the candle and observe that the flame grows stronger and wavers less. Being closer to one another brings us closer to God and strengthens our perception of God's presence.

Extinguish the candle and sing the hymn "Brother, Sister, let me serve you" (#635 in the Book of Praise). Then say responsively:

One: The church is called to be an empathetic community.

ALL: When we share each other's joys and sorrows we reflect the love of Jesus toward his friends.

One: When we practice empathy, we point toward a different kind of love – that of *agape* – and each act of compassion stretches us toward that greater love.

ALL: When we teach such love – love of neighbour, stranger and even our enemies – to the children in our midst,

One: we fulfill the call of God.

ALL: May we be the church that God is calling us to be. Amen.



SESSION

3

Creating Safe Space

OBJECTIVES

- 1 To explore biblical references that remind us that the acceptance, protection and nurturing of all people has a central place in our faith.
- 2 To appreciate the priority that our church places on congregational life being safe and inclusive – emotionally, physically and spiritually.
- 3 To celebrate and share the church as a community that creates safe space for all people.

PREPARATION

You will need:

- Sheet of newsprint or poster board and markers
- Copies of the Book of Praise and the Bible (NRSV)
- Option: a copy of the *Leading with Care* policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada <http://presbyterian.ca/leading-with-care/>
- Option: a copy of “Hope and healing in Kenya” in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 28–9)

PRAYER

God of the morning stars,

We come wondering who we are.

In call and response, you invite us
to sing ourselves into faith.

Teaching empathy and compassion,
you gather us together to go out to love the other.

Accepting us as we are, you are our safe space,
your love nurtures us.

Transcending time, your love ties generations together,
giving each a story to tell.

And in Jesus Christ we learn that out of death,
your love brings life and hope.

Mold and make us; shape and form us;
teach and transform us.

Help us become your people. Amen.

GATHERING

Print the name of your congregation in the middle of the newsprint sheet. Print around it all the different categories of people that have connections to the congregation. Begin with those who are present for worship on a Sunday morning (e.g. retirees, babies) and then extend to those who are part of groups using the church building at other times of the week (e.g. Scouts, dance school). Who is missing from your church community and as users of your building (e.g. people who are mentally challenged, people who are homeless)? Add them to the paper, on the margins. Then turn to hymn #528 “Jesus calls us here to meet him” in the Book of Praise and together read Verse 3. If additional people come to mind, add them to the paper. Together sing, or say in unison, all the verses.

SCRIPTURE

Invite two people to present this reading from Matthew; or the group could read it responsively.

One: You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

Two: You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

One: You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.”

Two: But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.

One: You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

Two: But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

One: For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Two: Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

One: Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

(Matthew 5:13–14, 21–22, 43–47; 7:1–5)

Read this reading from John in unison:

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:25–27)

Commentary

In this series of teachings, which follows the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–12), Jesus touched on concerns about hospitality (loving those who don’t love you back), concern for the body (do not worry about your body and what you wear), and concerns about spiritual practices and relationships. Jesus described human tendencies toward anxiety, exclusivism, judgement, and piety for show. At the same time, Jesus called his disciples to a higher standard of behaviour in interpersonal relationships – beyond what was obligated by law or beneficial only for oneself. Jesus called upon his community of followers – and the church today – to be a safe community where human beings can be their best selves, as God created them to be.

The short passage from John comes at the end of Jesus’ final dialogue with his disciples before his arrest. He offered them a peace of mind, body and spirit that cannot be found apart from God. This is a peace that is peculiar and powerful, that the world cannot control and that releases people from their troubles and fears.

Discussion

- 1 What do you find personally challenging in this reading from Matthew?
- 2 Name some groups of people who are vulnerable, marginalized and/or discriminated against in the local or global community. How might these teachings be heard differently by people in these groups?
- 3 Jesus tells the disciples not to be troubled, not to be afraid, and to love their enemies. They lived in different times with different political, economic and personal hardships and threats. What hardships and threats do you face? The congregation? Residents of your community?
- 4 Read the author's beliefs in the paragraph "**Peace.**" What emotions and qualities do you connect to the peace spoken of in the John passage? How does your faith bring you peace of mind, of heart and of soul?

Peace

I believe that the peace Jesus offers us is not to be equated with happiness or with passive resignation to what is. But instead it is a peace with both the quality of reconciliation with present reality and the quality of hope for the future. It is not the peace found in the termination or absence of conflict, but the peace that is found in courageously facing hard truths. Jesus' peace gives us comfort when nothing is comfortable. It restores hope in us even in the face of great adversity. With the peace of Jesus in us, we can get up each day to face whatever may lie ahead.

BEING THE CHURCH

CREATING SAFE SPACE

The church is called to be a messenger to the world of God's peace. A church community can do this when its people strive to live as Jesus instructed in Matthew 5–7, reaching out to each other and beyond themselves to provide safe, welcoming space for everyone and anyone. But when an individual (or a community) judges, distorts and refuses to see others as God sees them – as beloved creatures made in the image of God – barriers and divisions are created. The effect can be tragic, and all too common: increased vulnerability, absence of safe space, and denial of the opportunity to receive God's peace.

A splinter in the eye

In the first part of his story *The Snow Queen*, (which you can read on the last page of this session), Hans Christian Andersen vividly described the destructive power of judgement when a magical mirror possessed by a devil-like creature causes every living thing in its reflection – no matter how beautiful – to shrivel up into ugliness, “to almost nothing.” When the mirror crashed and burst, the resulting trillions of tiny pieces, like grains of sand, were scattered. When they lodged in an eye or in spectacles, they made everything appear horrible; when a splinter got in a person's heart, their heart became like “a lump of ice.” I believe sometimes a speck or log – or splinter – lodges in a human eye, preventing the person from seeing, hearing or experiencing God in another part of creation, in a part that is made in God's image as we are, in another child of God, a guest we have failed to invite to God's banquet.

Discussion

- 1 Read “**A splinter in the eye.**” When do you have a “log” or “splinter” in your eye? We often form impressions of others based on the similarities and differences we perceive between them and us (e.g. skin colour, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, lifestyle, political views, power, socio-economic status). Judgements that criticize or condemn others can demean and divide people. What divisions exist between people in your church? Between people in your community? What judgements are people making about each other?
- 2 What are some of the steps that an individual or group can take to extend the peace of God to others to begin creating safe spaces? Read “**The Holy Spirit.**” What are the difficult conversations (past, present or future) that are part of your church community's story? How do you think these conversations might be different if the Holy Spirit's involvement were acknowledged and talked about...and trusted?

The Holy Spirit

If the church can create safe space, where we welcome all perspectives, respect each other in Christian love and honour one another's experiences of God at work in our lives, then – and only then – do we make room for the Holy Spirit to teach us. For, if our job is to speak with honesty, listen with genuine openness, and respect each other, it is the job of the Holy Spirit to change the church, to sweep through us and inspire and empower us to live as God would have us live with one another. If we set out to do our job to create safe space, can we trust the Holy Spirit to do God's job as well?

Leading with Care policy

This policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is an example of how the church values and prioritizes the importance of providing a safe place. The policy introduction states, “The Presbyterian Church in Canada is committed to providing safe environments for all persons, including children, youth, vulnerable adults, and those who minister to and with them.” Furthermore, this includes the commitment to “protect the vulnerable in our midst. The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirms that the protection of all children, youth and vulnerable adults is a spiritual, ethical and legal imperative.”

- 3 Being a safe community assures everyone who forms it, who comes into its space, or who is served by it can expect to be physically, emotionally and spiritually safe and protected. Read “**Leading with Care policy.**” What is your understanding of this policy and its implications for you and your church community?
- 4 Being an accessible community enables all people to be equal participants in worship, in fellowship, in all the community’s programs and activities of worship, education and service. Read “**Barriers.**” Comment on how barriers contribute to someone being disabled. What are some barriers that exist in your church?
- 5 In an inclusive community, people welcome the gifts – the ideas, participation and fellowship – of everyone, without prejudice with respect for individual attributes. Read “**Full inclusion.**” How have you seen instances of inclusivity in congregational life?

Barriers

A disability results, in part, from various barriers that hinder full and effective participation in society. These barriers include:

- Physical barriers, such as curbs without cutouts and non-accessible restrooms
- Communication barriers, such as lack of availability of large-print materials or of closed-captioning of videos
- Attitudinal barriers that stereotype people with disabilities resulting in, for example, an employment rate of only about 40 percent for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Inclusion Handbook, Terry A. DeYoung and Mark Stephenson (eds), Reformed Church Press, 2013.

Full inclusion

I once knew a woman whose daughter was severely hearing impaired. She was dedicated to the church and when the children were young, tried to bring them to worship and Sunday school. However, she quickly discovered that there was no way that her hearing-impaired daughter could meaningfully participate in the life of the church. It was not a safe or welcoming space for them as a family. I have also been privileged to witness how a church community has embraced two young women from a group home for those with mental-health challenges. The community offered the women leadership roles appropriate to their gifts (which were, interestingly, focused on hospitality and greeting), and helped them find full inclusion in worship and fellowship.

CELEBRATING AND SHARING

Choose from these options, according to the time and interests of the group.

- 1 Church space as safe space.** Obtain the *Leading with Care* policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and study it as a group. Discuss how it applies to your congregation. What situations need to be addressed to make your church a safe space for you and allow you or your family members to participate fully? Read “**Children.**” Name some other people whose perspectives may not have been heard. Brainstorm some ideas about what could be done to change this.
- 2 Hospitality challenge.** Read “**Welcoming diversity.**” Talk about the changing demographics in Canadian society and how the church has or hasn’t been affected. Think about your church’s neighbourhood. What neighbours do you think would make your congregation most uncomfortable and be most challenging to welcome? Brainstorm ideas about what people in your congregation could do to offer hospitality when such people come into your community. Share these with church leaders.

Welcoming diversity

Churches have often been places where like people gathered – people of similar economic and social standing, people of similar education or race. But the church is called to be a place that defies such socially constructed boundaries. Increasingly in Canada, churches are becoming more diverse gatherings of races, cultural backgrounds and classes of people. And the more churches move in that direction, the more faithful to God’s vision of the church we will be. The word *church* is derived from the Greek *ecclesia*, which means the assembly. It is not a building. It is not a homogenous group of people. It is an assembly that is gathered from all different parts of society into one body of people whose purpose is to worship God together. The first Pentecost is a great example of what the church can and ought to be: people gathered in the marketplace, speaking many different languages from many different parts of the world. When they gather, the Spirit descends on them and they are able to hear the good news of God in their own languages. Communication becomes possible. Sharing in a common life becomes possible. People who came from all over the world, doing parallel chores but not engaging with one another, now are joined together in the Spirit, to worship and witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Children

Does our openness to different perspectives extend to our children? Children are known for asking difficult questions when they learn the story of Christian faith. They particularly favour asking how or why, which makes some adults uncomfortable. In addition, they often make observations or ask questions that surprise us. Our tendency is to laugh when children share these perspectives or questions, especially during children’s time in church. If our churches are safe spaces for our children’s spiritual growth, how can we receive their perspective with seriousness, openness and respect? How can we hear every question as a good one? Our children’s questions and perspectives can make us think or re-think a practice or belief we have come to take for granted in the church or in our faith.

- 3 Connecting in your community.** What do you think you and others in the congregation can do to reach out and connect with people who have not felt hospitality from the church? Consider taking the church’s concerns and priority on safety out into your community to a group like Aboriginal people, people who are physically disabled, or people in the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community and their families.
- 4 Mission partners.** Read “Hope and healing in Kenya” in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 28–9). What would be some of the challenges for a church that provides counseling, education and advocacy related to an issue like HIV/AIDS? Through International Ministries, contributions to *Presbyterians Sharing* support partners who serve marginalized people. What might your congregation learn from the commitment of this overseas partner, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa?

CLOSING

Sing or read together “Just as I am, without one plea”
#682 in the Book of Praise. Then say responsively:

One: The church is called to be a safe space and community.

**ALL: Where we are safe in body, mind and spirit
and invited into honest conversation about difficult topics.**

One: In this safe space, we protect vulnerability and guard each other from shame.

**ALL: God provides the clothes for us to put on:
compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.**

One: And above all, God clothes us with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

ALL: When we create safe spaces for asking and offering, healing and being healed,

One: we fulfill the intention of God.

ALL: May we be the church that God is calling us to be.



Excerpt from *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen

(This excerpt is from the first chapter “Which tells of the looking-glass and the bits of it.”
It is available with permission from *Project Gutenberg of Canada, eBook.*)

Attention, please, we’re going to begin. When we’ve got to the end of the story we shall know more than we do now. There was a wicked troll. He was one of the very worst sort – he was the devil. One day he was in a very temper, for he had made a looking-glass which had this property: that everything good and pretty that was reflected in it shrivelled away in it to almost nothing, but everything that was no good and looked ugly came out plain and showed even worse than it was. The most beautiful landscapes looked like boiled spinach in the glass, and the best of men grew hideous, or else stood on their heads and had no stomachs. Their faces were so distorted that they couldn’t be recognized, and if anyone had a freckle, you could be sure it would spread all over his nose and mouth. It was extra-ordinarily funny, the devil said. If a kind pious thought passed through a man’s mind, there came such a grimace in the glass that the troll-devil couldn’t but laugh at his clever invention. Everyone who attended the troll school (for he kept a troll school) spread the news all about that a miracle had come to pass: you could now see, they said, what the world and mankind really looked like. They ran about everywhere with the glass, and at last there wasn’t a country or a person left who hadn’t been distorted in it. After that they decided to fly up to heaven itself and make fun of the angels and of God. The higher they flew with the glass, the more it grimaced, till they could scarcely keep hold of it. Up and up they flew, nearer to God and His angels, and then the glass quivered so fearfully with grimacing that it fell out of their hands and was dashed on the ground below, where it broke into hundreds of millions, billions, and even more pieces; and that very thing made matters worse than before, for some of the bits were hardly as big as a grain of sand, and these flew all about in the wide world, and when they got into peoples’ eyes, they stuck there, and the people either saw everything crooked or else had only eyes for what was wrong in anything; for every little splinter of the glass had kept the same power that the whole glass had. Some people even got a little bit of the glass into their hearts, and that was horrible, for the heart became just like a lump of ice. Some of the pieces were so big that they were used for window glass, but it didn’t pay to look at your friends through those window-panes. Other pieces were made into spectacles, and that was a bad business, if people put on those spectacles in order to see correctly and judge rightly. The evil one laughed till he split, it tickled him so. But out in the world little bits of glass were still flying about in the air.

SESSION

4

Welcoming All Ages

OBJECTIVES

- 1 To explore biblical references that remind us that our faith community includes people of all ages.
- 2 To appreciate the church's tradition of being intergenerational.
- 3 To celebrate and share the church as a community where all ages are welcome.

PREPARATION

You will need:

- Copies of the Book of Praise and the Bible (NRSV)
- The children's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, or view and listen to one of the readings of the book or animated adaptations on YouTube
- Option: access to the Internet
- Option: a copy of "Thinking outside the box" in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 22–23)
- Paper and pens for the closing

PRAYER

God of the morning stars,

We come wondering who we are.

In call and response, you invite us
to sing ourselves into faith.

Teaching empathy and compassion,
you gather us together to go out to love the other.

Accepting us as we are, you are our safe space,
your love nurtures us.

Transcending time, your love ties generations together,
giving each a story to tell.

And in Jesus Christ we learn that out of death,
your love brings life and hope.

Mold and make us; shape and form us;
teach and transform us.

Help us become your people. Amen.

GATHERING

Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* was first published in 1963 and made into a film in 2009. Millions of copies have been sold of this popular book about Max, a young boy who dresses in his wolf costume and makes a mess of the house, is sent to his room without his supper. Retell the story or read the book aloud in the group. Talk about why this book gained such popularity. Read "**Shared experiences**" (p. 30) and talk about how the different generations in your church community have shared experiences.

SCRIPTURE

The following passage is a reading from Deuteronomy.
Ask one person to read it aloud.

“Now this is the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances – that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6:1–7).

Read responsively the following reading of psalms as remembered by a child.

Sometimes I lie down on your heart God, and you wouldn’t even know I was there.

Sometimes I feel scared and I even want to see you,

I run to the water to you God and make sure you always see me.

God when you love me you can be an apple tree for me because you love me.

When you love me God, you are always special to me and I am special to you.

You will be my take care of, God.

You tell me which direction to go, so that I would always not be lost.

You love me in different ways upon yourself, God,

and sometimes fire comes out of myself

these things all come out of you God, because you make all things out of your love.

We want to love you inside, God.

Sometimes I would always be a little scared, but you help me God, because you love me.

and all of a sudden, you God will be the earth and strong to praise.

God I feel the things in the valley that you made for me and God feels like it too.

Because of you, God, I feel a little scared, God,

but you keep me safe when something wants to eat me for lunch.

ALL: God, I sometimes love you. And you always love me in your different way.”

(Three-year-old Rachel Bisset “read” aloud the above words while flipping through the pages of the book *Psalms for Young Children* by Marie-Helene Delval, which she had been reading with her parents.)

Commentary

The words of Deuteronomy give us a glimpse of God guiding the Israelites in their long journey from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to freedom in the land of Canaan. God was with them in visible and tangible ways. God provided manna to eat every morning and quails for their supper every evening. God went before the people as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As the Israelites reached the land and the end of their wanderings, Moses told them that there is a new way to remember God’s saving acts and to sense God’s presence in their midst. That new way was the story itself. First, God repeated the greatest commandment to the people: “You shall love the Lord, your one and only God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Of course to keep this commandment, the Israelites would need to keep all God’s “decrees and commandments” given them by Moses. Then, God told them to repeat this commandment over and over again. Tell your children, God says, when you are home and away from home. While you work, while you play, while you travel, when you rest, tell the story. In this way, you will remember God’s mighty deeds and love for you and your children and your children’s children – and all ages will come to know this truth as well.

Shared experiences

Treasured books like *Where the Wild Things Are*, are enjoyed generation after generation with children growing up and reading them to their children. Sometimes such books inspire more writing and artwork! In his blog series “Children’s stories 20 years later”, the Rev. Matt Schultz depicts what might happen if Max has a son of his own, who also dresses in a wolf costume and causes trouble. In this sequel, Max sets sail on the boat, named the Max, Jr., with his son to the amazing jungle of Wild Things. Perhaps they explore the wonders of power among the Wild Things together and learn again (as we all must over and over that being somewhere where “someone loves you best of all” is better than anything in the world. Sharing experiences of adventures taken (or created!) and lessons learned between the generations makes us all stronger and better – and closer to being the church God has called us to be. Check out Matt Schultz’s artwork, available at <http://mattschultz.worshiptimes.org/2016/03/09/childrens-book-characters-years-later/>.

Recite them to your children

The community that Moses led and gave God’s commandment to was a community of all ages, from babies to elders. And centuries later, according to biblical scholars, Jesus was born and raised in a similarly intergenerational faith community. The Bible gives evidence of this: he participated with his parents in Jerusalem for the “festival of the Passover” (Luke 2:42), the crowds following him included children (Matthew 14:21; 15:38); people brought their children for healing (Matthew 17:14–16; Mark 9:17; Luke 9:38; John 6:9), and for blessing (Matthew 19:13a, Mark 10:13a; Luke 18:15) “even infants.”

Intergenerational worship

Proponents of intergenerational worship believe that when all ages are present for worship, the worshipping community:

- represents the truth that the whole church is the body of Christ;
- helps children form an identity as being an integral part of the faith community that worships God together;
- is consistent with biblical traditions when “all God’s people” – all ages – worshipped together;
- enables young people to participate in worship, which is a critical act for faith formation;
- has opportunities to model intergenerational faith interactions that can be practiced at home.

(From *Equipping for Worship: Intergenerational Worship Services*, Canadian Ministries, The Presbyterian Church in Canada)

Discussion

- 1 After nomadic wanderings, the freed slaves from Egypt were going to settle down, yet they had little experience of real freedom or community living. But God provided guidelines, commandments, to live by. Thinking of a new beginning in your life, talk about the commandment in Deuteronomy 6:1–7. How does it seem insufficient, too simple? How does it seem more than adequate, perhaps all-embracing? (See also the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1–17.)
- 2 Because of the emotions expressed in the psalms, they are among the most accessible passages of the Bible for people of all ages. What are some of the feelings that are mentioned in this child’s version of the psalms?
- 3 In Deuteronomy 6:1–7, emphasis is placed on making this commandment known throughout the community and passed on to future generations. Who was being told to take responsibility for this? And how was it to be done? Read “**Recite them to your children.**” Talk about your experiences of being part of an intergenerational faith community. How do you think faith is being passed on now to younger generations?
- 4 Parts of Psalms are sung, recited, paraphrased and memorized more than any other passages of the Old Testament and more than most in the New Testament (except perhaps the Lord’s Prayer). A favourite is Psalm 23, read during Lent (on Good Shepherd Sunday with Luke 10:1–16) and often included in funeral services. Read it together and comment on what it means to you. How do you think it might be heard or understood by people of ages/stages of life not represented in your group?

BEING THE CHURCH

WELCOMING ALL AGES

The church is one of the few places in our society where a range of generations can be together and interact in loving, mutual-respecting ways. Outside of family groups, so much of our society now is broken into defined age-groups in schools, post-secondary institutions, camps, service clubs, adult lifestyle condos, sports leagues and teams, parent and tot groups, and the list goes on. In worship and in all the church's work and programs, the church has an opportunity to offer a place of trust between and among people of all ages.

Emerging from a period when our church gatherings segregated people by age (i.e. nursery, children's church school, youth gathering, adult worship) for the purpose of faith formation and worship and fellowship, the church is now trying hard to figure out how to break down barriers between ages.

Discussion

- 1 Some churches design worship services for all ages a few times a year. Why do you think this is not done for every worship service? Read "**Intergenerational worship.**" How important do you think it is to find ways to welcome all ages to worship?
- 2 Read "**Welcoming all ages.**" How does your church communicate by words and actions that all ages are welcome – welcome not just as bystanders but as equally valued participants in worship? How does this sort of welcome extend to other congregational gatherings and outreach?
- 3 There are many valid ways to bring different generations together in a church community. Read about the author's experiences in "**Where generations meet.**" Where do the generations meet in the congregational life of your church?

Welcoming all ages

A genuine welcome to church worship is often both child-friendly and adult-friendly:

"We welcome you here this morning! You belong to God's family and we are glad that you have come to worship God with us."
(From *A Children's Guide to Worship* by Ruth Boling and Lauren J. Muzzy, 1997)

"This is a very special place. It is very special because God is here... This is a special place to be with God, to talk with God, to listen to God, and to hear the stories of God..." (From "The Call to Worship" in *Following Jesus: More About Young Children and Worship* by Sonja Stewart, 2006)

"We welcome everyone to worship today. Your presence makes a difference. Our worship would not be the same if you were not here." (From the Duty Elder, Beaches Presbyterian Church, Toronto)

Where generations meet

My husband, Alex, and I are both Presbyterian ministers and neither of us have family in Toronto, where we live. In addition, we serve separate congregations. We also have a five-year-old child and neither of our congregations has a nursery. Rachel most often comes to church with me, where she sits with three single women, two middle-aged and one senior. She adores them and they adore her. At first, I grieved that as a minister, I could not sit with my daughter in worship. But I have come to believe that this, in fact, is a great opportunity for her. When I saw her using offering envelope boxes as building blocks with the 50-year-old man who chairs the property committee, I gave thanks. When I saw her standing on the pew with a *Living Faith* book open, as her hymnbook, I rejoiced. When I listened to her taking turns in the pulpit, being the "pray-er" with a 24-year-old choir member, and as I watched her grow comfortable enough to offer to give a woman new to our church a tour of the church balcony – with *The Lord is My Shepherd* stained-glass windows – I was sure that God was smiling. I now deeply appreciate the church as a place where the generations meet and interact.

CELEBRATING AND SHARING

Choose from these options, according to the time and interests of the group.

- 1 Connecting generations.** Reflect on the opportunities that church creates in its congregational life and in its community outreach to bring generations together. The church community can be a place where children and youth can learn how to form meaningful adult relationships. While providing encouragement and inspiration from the perspective of faith as they grow older, adults also often welcome the chance to connect with younger generations. Read “**A surprising relationship.**” Share some ways your church could help generations connect.
- 2 Helping youth succeed.** As a result of research that shows that a youth’s relationships with adults play a critical role in their successful development and thriving, it has been recommended that each youth has supportive relationships with three or more nonparent adults. This is one of 40 “developmental assets” that the Search Institute has identified in its research over the past two decades. Other assets include spending one hour or more per week in activities in a religious institution and placing high value on helping other people, placing a high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty. Relationships with caring adults, exposure to faith and helping advocate for the poor – doesn’t this sound like a call to adults in our churches? Brainstorm ideas about how adults in your church could become friends or mentors of youth in the church and local community. Read “**Search Institute.**” Share your ideas with church leaders.

- 3 Mission partners.** Read “Thinking outside the box” in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 22–23). What indication is there that this new Cooperative Ministry is welcoming people of all ages? Through Canadian Ministries, contributions to *Presbyterians Sharing* are given to support new forms of congregational ministry. How could you express support and hope for this partner? Think “outside the box” about your congregation and how it could better serve people of all ages.

A surprising relationship

In the children’s picture book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* (by Mem Fox and illustrator Julia Vivas, available on YouTube), the author tells the story of a young boy, Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, whose house was “next door to an old peoples’ home.” She describes the relationship that the boy has with many of the residents, including his special friendship with 96-year-old Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper, who has four names just like he does! When Wilfrid Gordon discovers that Miss Nancy has “lost her memory”, he sets out to find it for her. Remarkably, he does just that!

Search Institute

Use the Internet to learn more about the work of the Search Institute at <http://www.search-institute.org/about>, the 40 developmental assets at <http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18> and the essential elements of a meaningful relationship with a young person at <http://www.search-institute.org/downloadable/Dev-Relationships-Framework-Sept2014.pdf>

CLOSING

Meditate on some people of different generations with whom you have a relationship – people in the church community or beyond. Write their names down on pieces of paper or say them out loud. At baptism, the gathered worshipping community promises to guide and nurture the individual – whether a baby, child, youth or adult. Make the following promise for the people of different generations in your lives.

We are followers of Jesus Christ.

We promise to guide and nurture people in our lives,
young and old, from babies to centenarians,
including the people we have named today.

We will guide and nurture them
by word and deed, with love and in prayer
encouraging everyone to follow the way of Christ,
to do justice, to love kindness
and walk humbly with God. Amen.

Then say responsively:

One: The church is called to be the place where the generations meet.

**ALL: When we respect each one – no matter how young or how old –
and their real needs and joys,**

One: we are truly being the family of God.

**ALL: When we teach our children that the church is a place
where they can find trusted adults who love them and will listen to them,**

One: we are keeping the baptismal promises we made together.

**ALL: When we show the world around us that children, youth and adults of all ages
are healthier and happier when we share fully in each other's lives,**

One: we fulfill the call of God.

ALL: May we be the church that God is calling us to be. Amen.



Believing in Life Beyond Death

OBJECTIVES

- 1 To explore scripture that reminds us that our faith offers comfort and hope in death.
- 2 To appreciate the Christian practice of talking about the mysteries of life and death, and life after death.
- 3 To celebrate and share the church as a community for conversations about dying and death, and for expressions of comfort and hope.

PREPARATION

You will need:

- Copies of the Book of Praise and the Bible (NRSV)
- Option: a copy of the children's book *Water Bugs and Dragonflies* by Doris Stickney. Alternatively, ask one person to find and read the story online, and come prepared to retell it
- Option: a copy of "Keep us in your prayers" in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 34–5)

PRAYER

God of the morning stars,

We come wondering who we are.

In call and response, you invite us
to sing ourselves into faith.

Teaching empathy and compassion,
you gather us together to go out to love the other.

Accepting us as we are, you are our safe space,
your love nurtures us.

Transcending time, your love ties generations together,
giving each a story to tell.

And in Jesus Christ we learn that out of death,
your love brings life and hope.

Mold and make us; shape and form us;
teach and transform us.

Help us become your people. Amen.

GATHERING

Read or sing the first two verses of "In the bulb there is a flower" #674 in the Book of Praise. Read "**Mystery**" (p. 36). What does the word *mystery* mean in this hymn? How is this kind of mystery different from a mystery novel or movie? Talk about what it's like to live with the mystery of life after death.

Read or sing the last verse of Hymn #674. Then read "**Our end**" (p. 36). Review the opposites named in the hymn. Share some of your own stories of times when endings have also been beginnings.

SCRIPTURE

This reading is from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Have two people read Paul's argument and description of the spiritual body, with everyone joining to read the last part in unison.

Voice One: Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received [that] in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being...

Voice Two: But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory...

Voice One: So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the

image of the man of heaven. What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Voice Two: Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality.

ALL: Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:
 "Death has been swallowed up in victory."
 "Where, O death, is your victory?
 Where, O death, is your sting?"
 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Corinthians 15:1, 20–21, 35–42, 49–57)

Commentary

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul is playful with the idea of death and resurrection, even while he is very serious about it. He says, "There is a physical body and there is a spiritual body." The glory of the earthly body is one thing. And the glory of the spiritual body, the heavenly body, is another. God did not create just one kind of body that is stamped with God's image. We do not know what new body, what spiritual body, we will have – what it will look like, what it will feel like. And so we are invited to imagine and to ask questions.

As we try to imagine it, Paul tells us to think of a seed that we plant in the ground. The new body will grow into something that comes from that seed (which is our earthly body), but is much greater, much more magnificent, much more beautiful than a bare, small, hard seed. And seeds can grow into tall, strong oaks; sweet, ripe strawberries; hardy stalks of wheat; and myriad wildflowers.

Paul invites us into honest, and even playful, conversation about life and death – a conversation that we can have within and between every generation of the church, not just the elderly, not just those who stand in death's shadow. In fact, having the conversation outside those contexts can be a game changer for how we understand and talk about death when it does come. This approach to death allows us to move into new depths of faith, and engage with a world longing for honest conversation and for hope. That is precisely what Christians have been equipped to offer through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mystery

Craig Dykstra, a renowned Christian educator, has taught that mystery in the context of faith does not indicate a problem or a riddle that needs to be solved. Rather, mysteries point to a fullness of life that we can never exhaust or unravel. Mysteries are irreducible. Contemplating the mystery of life, of death, and of human beings (ourselves and others) is about recognizing that we can never know all there is to know. This sense of mystery connects us to the Ultimate Mystery, who is the keeper of all mystery and the God we serve. (See Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg*, 1981.)

Discussion

- 1 Together read 1 Corinthians 15:50–52, and then “**We will be changed.**” Talk about how you regard change, in general, and specifically how you regard change related to death. What do you think the spiritual body will be like? How easy or difficult is it to talk about this?
- 2 Reflect silently on what difference your faith has made in times of loss, death or life-threatening illness. Invite those who wish to share their experiences.

Our end

Natalie Sleeth, United Methodist musician and composer (1930–1992), wrote what was called “Hymn of Promise” in 1985 as a choral anthem, and later adapted it to become “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Soon after she wrote it, it was sung at her husband’s funeral. Natalie said that when she wrote the lyrics, she was “pondering the death of a friend (life and death, death and resurrection), pondering winter and spring (seeming opposites), and a T. S. Eliot poem which had the phrase, ‘In our end is our beginning.’ These seemingly contradictory ‘pairs’ led to the thesis of the song and the hopeful message that out of one will come the other whenever God chooses to bring that about.” (From: www.hymntime.com)

We will be changed

Paul muses that the spiritual body will be glorious beyond all imagining, impervious to the worries that wrinkle, the pain that scars, the disease that steals memory and speech. The spiritual body is not susceptible to any of that. And that moment of changing, of knowing, of seeing will be marvelous. Change is part of every kind of life. And sometimes we fear change. But, in God’s love and in the mystery of this gift of life and death that Christ has transformed for us, the change is from glory into glory.

BEING THE CHURCH

BELIEVING IN LIFE BEYOND DEATH

When it comes to death, the church has an opportunity to be a bearer of both truth and good news to our society. First, we can be the ones who talk about death, the reality of death, the pain of death. We can talk about death for what it is – resisting the urge to use euphemisms. And we can intentionally blur the lines of life and death, keeping them connected to one another, honouring them both with the reverence and awe that both deserve.

Second, as Christians, we can administer God's good work of taking the sting out of death. On the one hand, it is Christ and Christ alone who takes the sting out of death. And yet, like so many things, God has chosen to entrust good news to us in order that we might live it out, embody it and tell it to others. While we cannot take away the sadness and grief of death, and neither can we claim to solve the mystery of death, we can take away the fear.

When we talk honestly and openly in communities – within and beyond our church buildings – about death in all its mystery and about dying and fear and pain, then we fulfill God's calling to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Avoidance

On my way to lead a Sunday evening service in a retirement residence, I have to drive past a store called "The Anti-Aging Shop." It's a reminder of how we live in a youth-obsessed culture that keeps talk of growing old, dying and death out of the public eye and conversation. We don't even want to talk about death when it happens – it is becoming the domain of the funeral home – not the family home and not of the church. Moreover, as funeral directors will attest, families are increasingly choosing not to have funeral or memorial services, feeling that a reception – if "something" must be done – is sufficient.

Discussion

- 1 Many of us do not find it easy to speak about death in our everyday lives. Read "**To speak clearly or not.**" The child's questions opened the door for the mother to speak about death. What could the mother have said? Recount opportunities you have had like this – with people of any age.
- 2 Read "**Avoidance.**" How have you avoided or used situations as opportunities to speak about death and life after death? Share an experience of a funeral/memorial gathering where it was uncomfortable to talk about death. When and where have you participated in conversations about death that allow expression of the range of emotions that are part of it? When and where have these conversations also included speaking about the mystery and hope that Christians acknowledge and profess?

To speak clearly or not

There was a preschool housed in a church basement, and the church sat in the midst of a beautiful cemetery. Flowers were starting to appear around the gravestones, and as spring approached, the children were tempted by them. One preschooler ran over to pick up a tulip that had been placed on a flat headstone. Her mother scolded her and the child randomly dropped the flower. The mother told her to put it back where she had found it. When the child asked why, her mother said, "Because that flower belongs in the garden, and it belongs with that particular..." she paused, searching for a word "...stone." Then she looked at me and said, "That's as far as we are going with that!"

CELEBRATING AND SHARING

Choose from these options, according to the time and interests of the group.

- 1 Practice talking about death.** How can you be better prepared to have faithful conversations about death? Jesus spoke to the disciples about death. And as we read in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul found opportunity to do so. Disciples ever since have had similar conversations.
 - In pairs or small groups, read one or two of the passages that follow and talk about how to reword and express them in everyday adult conversation. (Some people could also review 1 Corinthians 15.) John 11:25–26; John 14:1–2; Ephesians 4:4–6; Thessalonians 4:13–14; Thessalonians 4:17–18; Revelation 14:13; Revelation 21:4.
 - Together read, or have one person retell, the *Water Bugs and Dragonflies* story by Doris Stickney. How could you talk to a young child whose grandparent has died, and the child is asking questions and wanting to understand?
- 2 Blessed are those who mourn (Matthew 5:4a).** How does your faith community “take the sting out of death” *for you*? Read and comment on “**Complete**.” How does your faith community “take the sting out of death” for people in the community beyond the church building? How does the congregation serve those coping with loss and death? Create a list of what your church does and/or could be doing. For ideas read “**We can**.” Develop specifics for two or three priorities that you want to affirm or suggest to your church minister and leaders involved in pastoral ministries.

- 3 A forum about death.** Organize a workshop or panel discussion with invited speakers and a facilitator to provide information and a safe space for conversations about death. Choose a topic like physician-assisted dying, palliative care or terminal illness. Promote the event beyond the church community, inviting people from all walks of life and different generations. Ensure a welcoming environment and a process that respects and cares for all people, regardless of their views and faith.
- 4 Mission partners:** Read “Keep us in your prayers” in *Stories of Mission: Sowing Seeds of Hope* (pp. 34–35). More than 130 years after its founding, the Near East School of Theology is under threat from the region’s political instability, violence, conflict, and religious persecution and extremism. How does the school’s president speak of this threat? Through International Ministries, contributions to *Presbyterians Sharing* are given to support partners whose communities are vulnerable, under threat or experiencing loss. How can you express support and hope for this partner? Where is there an experience of loss or threat of death in your community? How could faithful support and hope be offered?

Complete

There is a wonderful line in a funeral prayer that I use often that states, “Her baptism is now complete in death.” Particularly for a Christian who regularly goes to church throughout life, it is important for their death to be observed and honoured there as well. We live in the community of faith. We rejoice in that community in friendship and shared accomplishments. We struggle in that community when life is hard and we face loss or disappointment. We are reminded every week in the community of faith about the good news of Jesus Christ and the hope we have in God. Therefore, we should also die in the community of faith – our bodies or ashes present in that sacred space one more time as we, and those we love, proclaim once again the good news and rely on the promises of God. Our baptism is complete in death. We no longer need the symbol of God’s claim on our life, for through death God gathers us in once and for all.

We can

We can learn to speak honestly and openly about death.

We can embrace opportunities to remind one another about what our faith teaches us about death.

We can seek opportunities to participate in conversations about death with people of various backgrounds and generations, beyond our families and faith community.

We can allow people to express doubts and questions, fears and hopes, sorrow and relief.

We can provide a “safe space” for people to wrestle with the mysteries of life and death.

We can encourage and welcome people to hold funerals and memorial services in our church.

We can be at a grieving person’s side when they choose to have a gathering outside the church.

We can express in word and action God’s love and compassion to people experiencing losses.

CLOSING

Gather together in a circle. Place a candle on a table in the centre.
One by one, go around the circle, with each person in turn exchanging these words with the person to their left:

Voice One: From dust you, [*name*], were made, and from dust you shall return.

Voice Two: Beloved child, God breathed life into you, [*name*], and to God you shall return.

Then say responsively:

One: The church is called to be a community where we believe in life-giving death.

ALL: When we talk about the mystery of death and wrestle with it,
engaging our fears and peering into the mysteries of life and death,

One: we are truly being disciples of Christ.

ALL: When we teach our children that the church is a community
where we can live life fully and face death with hope,

One: and that God is with us both in life and death,

ALL: and when we can express this with honesty and hope in our communities,

One: we are truly being messengers of the good news of the gospel.

ALL: May we be the church that God is calling us to be. Amen.

