



A Time to Mend

In Matthew 4:21, Jesus notices two men in a boat mending their fishing nets. Cleaning and mending nets are necessary tasks for people who fish for a living. Nets catch not only fish but also debris in the water that can damage the net. Mending requires carefully checking for weaknesses in the net, retying knots, and replacing worn or torn sections with new rope. Taking time to check and mend the nets after a long day of fishing can seem like a meaningless task, but that simple routine prepares the fishers for another day of work.

If you are regathering after a time apart, take the needed time to mend the fabric of your life together that has been frayed by separation and loss from the pandemic. As you prepare to teach, think about practices and routines that will help build and strengthen relationships. It can be as simple as an opening greeting and sharing, or a blessing that you repeat each week. While not specific to the pandemic experience, here are some ideas to help you set a positive and nurturing tone with your group as you regather this fall.

Welcome. Be present at the beginning of a session to welcome children and youth to the space, just as you might when welcoming guests into your home. If you have last-minute preparations as your guests are arriving, make sure to have something for them to do, such as listening to music or coloring a picture, and engage them in conversation as you complete your preparations.

Build relationships. Your relationship with the children is very important, more important than any planned activity. Young children learn best when they are with adults who genuinely like them. Children are observing and learning from you, even if it doesn't always seem like it! They are affected by the way you pray and the enthusiasm you show as you tell a story, sing a song, or lead a game. When you talk about your favorite Bible story or name things that you're grateful for, this is a model for the children. When you smile at a child and say something kind, this conveys the love of God.

Form community. Your warmth and care are key elements of building community with elementary-age children. At this stage in children's lives, friendships are taking on more importance. Children are beginning to realize how their actions affect others—both positively and negatively. Nurture your time together as one of kindness and acceptance. Create a space that gives children confidence to work out and develop their relationships as they grow in the church.

Junior youth may at times feel invisible, forgotten, or lost. They worry about belonging and being noticed, so building community is extremely important for this age group. The

community of faith should be different from the other groups to which youth belong. Work at creating a place where relationships are built on equality not superiority, cooperation not competition, and vulnerability rather than bragging. And don't forget to have some fun! Show your enthusiasm for and genuine interest in the lives and experiences of youth. Laughing together is good for the soul!

Respect and honor differences. Make space for different experiences, remembering that each person comes with a unique story. This means different socioeconomic backgrounds, church experiences, educational contexts (including homeschooling), racial and ethnic identities, family structures, physical abilities, and so on. It can be helpful to consider that we, like the disciples, are a diverse group of people who act from our own personal stories. Yet all of us are welcome in Jesus. Learning to know everyone may take some time, but as children's stories unfold, be inspired by the blessing that each one brings.

Encourage participation and leadership. Look for opportunities for your children or youth to work together and help. They can help prepare the room, set up chairs, and distribute supplies. Each person's contribution demonstrates care for the other people in the group and helps create a positive space for worship and learning. They can also lead during prayers, songs, and readings. People of all ages thrive when they know that they have a place and that their participation and leadership is valued and desired.

Our world right now seems broken and in need of mending. Our children and youth are watching to see how we respond. Model what it means to mend as you teach: listen carefully to each other's stories and experiences, attend to those who need special care, encourage kindness, strengthen relationships, and try something new when the old unravels.

Blessings as you engage your children and youth in routines and practices that mend and inspire hope for the future.



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Love Jesus. Grow in faith. Change the world.

A Blessing for Teachers and Learners

One: God, you sent Jesus into the world to show us how to live as God's people.

Children: Who will tell us about Jesus?

Teachers: We will tell you about Jesus! We want to share the story of Jesus so that you may choose to love him and follow in his way. As we worship, pray, and share the Bible story, may you be inspired to love Jesus and live like him every day.

All: As we hear and share God's story together, may our hearts be opened to love Jesus.

One: We are all created, known, and loved by God, and each person's faith journey is unique. The Bible offers guidance for this journey, revealing God's work in the world and how to be part of the ongoing story of the people of God.

Children and youth: Who will guide us on this journey of faith?

Teachers: Along with your family and this congregation, we will guide you! We will lead you in practices of prayer and worship that will help you develop a relationship with God that will sustain and encourage you throughout your life. Faith is not only a personal connection to God; it grows within community. We will learn from each other and discern together how to faithfully follow God.

All: As we discern God's will together, may we grow in faith.

One: Beyond these walls lies a hurting world. God, your love transforms us so that we can participate in the healing of that world.

Youth: There are so many problems. Where do we start?

Teachers: As we seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, together we make God's kingdom a reality here and now. We will study God's Word together and talk about how it connects to our lives. We will challenge you to share God's love and peace with everyone you meet.

All: Seeking God's kingdom together, we can change the world.

SONG SUGGESTIONS:

- "Jesus, Be the Center" from *Everybody Sing: Worship Songs for Children*, track 8
- "Longing for Light" from *Everybody Sing: Worship Songs for Children*, track 12

