The Next Normal?

Norm Dyck

While our churches were largely confined to virtual meeting spaces, we have witnessed a social upheaval across North America that has touched on every previous definition of “normal.” For many, planning for and implementing a reopening, or a next normal plan, feels overwhelming. What are the missional implications of this next normal? Does what we were doing before COVID still make sense?

Regardless of whether we are prepared to acknowledge the change we have experienced, none of us will enter the next normal as the same person we were before March 2020. If nothing else, forced isolation has shifted our patterns and daily rhythms, as well as given us time to evaluate everything that used to fill our calendars—including, but not limited to, our mission practices.

This does not mean we have stopped practicing our faith—even in lockdowns, the mission of God has continued—it just might look different from what we were used to. I would like to suggest three simple ways that we can celebrate and lean into this difference.

• **We have become accustomed to small gatherings**—and these while properly distanced and masked. Smaller social “bubbles” have become normative, while large gatherings have become uncertain, even anxiety-inducing.

  Families have spent much more time together, with extracurricular activities being among the first cancellations in lockdown. While many families have felt stressed and strained, many have also found ways to refocus, recalibrate, and live into a new way of being together.

  • **How have families in your church felt empowered (or not) to be on mission in this time?** In the summer of 2020, while sitting around a campfire with a small group of friends, someone asked how the church would persevere in the pandemic. The fact that we were still able to gather as friends, outdoors, at the height of local lockdowns, indicated a way forward. Smaller social gatherings have been an entry point for new believers throughout much of recent church practice.

  Your congregation has had many months of unintentional small group practice. **What have they learned from this experience? How did they practice hospitality when all the normal options were closed to them?** If someone does not have a heart for mission at home, nothing magical happens when people get on an airplane or venture into a cross-cultural setting. **How might the experiences of families on mission help reshape your neighborhood engagement in the immediate future?**

• **Our engagement with technology and virtual gathering platforms has grown exponentially.** Whether established churches or church plants, many report an increase in mission reach. Some churches have invited global church leaders as Sunday guest speakers via Zoom or livestream; others have helped nursing home residents find a connection with their home congregation. The rapid uptake, coupled with acceptance and growing familiarity with technology, creates opportunities for us to develop and grow mission connections in new ways. **How will you steward technology usage into the emerging normal? With whom do you need to have the important, vulnerable conversations about both the opportunities and the limits of technology?**

• **Listen, listen, and then listen some more!** This is as much a local call to listen as a regional, national, and global one. This has been a season of reckoning on numerous issues of social justice. From Black Lives Matter to victims of Residential Schools to mask mandates and the potential for vaccine mandates, we are being repeatedly confronted with how we care for the well-being of our neighbors. **What are the stories your neighbors are telling about their pandemic experience?**
What are the lingering questions they carry with them? Pay attention to the elements of transcendence, or a search for meaning, in your conversations. As you listen, what is God revealing to you? Where is the Holy Spirit prompting you to engage further? With whom? How?

In early April 2020, award-winning poet, activist, author, and leader Sonya Renee Taylor shared these words in an Instagram post: “We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

At that time, for most of us in North America, the pandemic had only just begun. We even thought it might be a short-lived inconvenience and that we would soon resume “normal” life. When I shared this quote with a group of pastors gathered in what was still an unfamiliar Zoom environment, many were unable and perhaps unwilling to wrestle with the far-reaching implications this pandemic has since wrought upon what we knew as “normal.”

“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19 NIV). Can we receive these words as we wrestle with what comes next? Whether these words fill you with curiosity or angst, we have certainly experienced a shift in the mission landscape of our neighborhoods and cities. Through focus on smaller group mission and worship, leaning into the possibilities provided by familiarity with technology, and an active attentiveness to the movement of God in the lives of our neighbors, God is revealing a way to thrive as we enter into this next normal.

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Community and Connection

Rev. Jimmy Rushton

I’m a lead pastor at a multisite church in Canada that’s made up of a bunch of little churches that are trying to communicate and live out the teachings of Jesus in our neighborhoods. Historically, we gather on Sundays and in “home churches” throughout the week.

And like most of us, we haven’t been able to do much of that for the past 18 months.

And like most of us, we’ve been faced with the tension of staying connected while staying home.

And as most of us have experienced, it hasn’t always been . . . fun.

Here are four things I’ve learned over this season that have helped my thinking in how to foster and encourage community:

1. HOW ARE YOU, THOUGH?
A few months ago, I sat down with one of my key leaders to talk about regathering in our context, and the first thing she asked was, “How are you?” I answered quickly with an arsenal of visionary ideas. She gently put a hand up. “No, that’s work/church stuff. My question was, how are you?”

I wasn’t prepared with a response. My adrenaline-pumped planning had usurped my soul care, and I realized that I probably won’t care well for my community if I haven’t cared well for myself.

So, question 1: “How are you? No, really?” Do you have rhythms of self-care and soul care? Are you regularly unplugging from the wall of “doing” and plugging into the wall of “being”? Jesus had regular rhythms of withdrawing from social and ministry life to attend to his own inner life with the Father. Is that your pattern too? Holistic health is a critical care factor. So as you think about fostering community and connection in your context, the most important question to start with is, How are you? No, really, how are you?

2. THE NEW NORMAL IS NOT JUST THE OLD NORMAL WITH NEW CLOTHES ON.
In the midst of the COVID pandemic, we can be lured into thinking, “Let’s just wait this out, do the best we can, and then we’ll get back to normal.” However, the new normal won’t just be the old normal with new clothes on. What we did before can’t be the only thing we do in the future.

Consider a few key ideas that you’re excited to innovate and strategize for your new normal with the spiritually curious (those who identify as spiritual but not religious) in mind. Keep the ministry programs and connection points that have continued to work. And consider, What are the things you would love to try but have been too nervous to implement? Maybe this is the season to flex some proactive ministry muscles.

3. LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!
In Anabaptist circles, we embody and espouse the community hermeneutic: that the spirit of God speaks through many voices together instead of a singular voice in isolation.

Who are your trusted, key, core, competent, and connected leaders who will cheer you on but also call you on your misses? Are you spending regular time with them to listen and learn? Multiple voices leaning into the future is always more fruitful than one
planning alone. Gather your team and listen; lean into your leaders, hear their experiences, and learn what they’re excited about, and don’t be afraid of contrarian voices—there are always places and spaces to learn from!

4. EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT!
Author Tod Bolsinger has reflected that this is not the time for the church to be building new predictive systems, as the future is still very much unknown, but instead we should be building a bunch of little ministry prototypes and turning them loose. The ones that fail, fail. We should pay attention to the ones that don’t and invest in those ideas and prototypes in shorter increments.

Think in two- to three-month increments and plan accordingly. Instead of “back to normal,” think in terms of this being a ministry season of experimentation. What ideas have been back-cataloged for you? Is this the time to bring them out front? Maybe this is your season of trying for the medium-term future. Create a culture, a team, and a season of “try” to see what you learn!

I know and have experienced the difficulty and frustration with trying to plan, predict, and strategize for this season and the season to come. Despite our present circumstances, I hope you’re encouraged to look inward and care for yourself, to not be content with how things have always been, to lean into what could be, to experiment and listen with your trusted colleagues, and most importantly to know that Jesus is with you and loves you.

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Defusing Polarized Thinking

Jayne Seminare Docherty and Sarah Bixler

WORLDVIEWING, NOT WORLDVIEWS

Human beings and their communities develop particular ways of perceiving the world around them. Scripture presents a variety of worldviews, all of which hold assumptions about how God interacts with the world. Two different worldviews lead off the very beginning of the biblical text. In Genesis 1–2:4a, creation becomes ordered by a God who brings structure and categorization to chaos, with seven distinct days and a hierarchy of created beings, with humans as the crowning achievement of this order. Immediately after this text, a different worldview is presented (Genesis 2:4b-24). This account does not count days or created objects, but rather depicts an intimate God who seeks out human beings for relationship. Through these Scriptures, people of faith have inherited a tradition of diverse worldviews—and these worldviews continue to expand and change over time.

Worldview, as a noun, implies that we “have” a worldview and that it is coherent and whole. Changes in worldview—especially those that disrupt how we have come to make sense of the world—can feel very threatening. Yet as we encounter new events or discover inconsistencies in our meaning making, we adjust our worldviews smoothly. So it’s helpful to think about worldviewing as an active and dynamic process, rather than worldview as an object that remains the same.

We don’t perceive the world directly but rather experience the world through a process of worldviewing that brings order to the onslaught of sensory data around us. At a deeply unconscious level, we are always answering five questions:

1. What is real or not real?
2. How is the real organized?
3. What is valuable or not valuable?
4. How do we know about the world?
5. How should we act?

Our answers to these questions operate as a (more or less) coherent system that influences what we see (and don’t see), and how we respond to the world. Most importantly, our worldviewing gives us a sense of the moral order of the world, our obligations to others, and what we can expect or require from others. For many, worldviewing is informed by the teachings of faith traditions.

REFLECTING ON THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR MORAL ORDER

The moral ordering that emerges from our worldviewing process is complex. We value multiple things that sometimes contradict each other. When faced with a particular problem, we often create a hierarchy of values to arrive at our response. For example, Jesus valued ministry and teaching with others as well as time alone with God in prayer. When the crowds became overwhelming, Jesus prioritized solitude (Luke 5:15-16).

It is often the case that people hold the same values but rank them differently. If we can start with identifying values we share, then we can explore why we are prioritizing them differently. Perhaps we can even find ways we can live together by focusing on ways to respect each other’s priorities.

RECLAIMING OUR WORLDVIEWING SKILLS

Sometimes, changes in the world around us are so big that we fall into worldview rigidity as a defense against anxiety and identity threat. This rigidity is amplified when leaders or influencers claim that changing our understanding of the world is a threat to our very existence. In such cases, worldview becomes an unchanging reality—an object—rather than a process that adjusts over time.
Rather than immediately tackling the biggest worldview conflicts our communities are facing, we can ease into fruitful reflection with the following kinds of questions:

- When did you first question or doubt something your community or family told you was true about the world? How did you reconcile what you had been taught with what you came to believe?
- Did you ever experience a time when you believed two things, but something happened, and you discovered that both could not be true? What happened?
- Have you ever encountered a situation for which you just didn’t have an explanation? How did you make sense of it?

Leaders can use these worldviewing questions to guide reflection both personally and with congregations. To move further, think of a prior experience when you altered your sense of the world. Then reflect on these questions:

- How did your sense of what is real or not real change?
- Did you change your understanding of what is valuable or not valuable?
- Did you adjust your expectations about how the world is organized?
- Did you accept a new form of knowledge?
- Did you change your sense of how you should act?

As reflected in Genesis, Scripture testifies to the potential for members of the same community to hold different worldviews. Rather than reinforcing worldviews as rigid and unchanging, faith leaders can cultivate worldviewing as a process through which God’s Spirit continually invites us to a new awareness of the world, one another, ourselves, and God.

RESOURCES


For more examples of strategies for managing worldviewing in conflict situations.


This book includes sample sermons for addressing controversial issues and tips for writing powerful sermons that invite dialogue.


This is an excellent resource on polarity management that includes some ideas about our current tensions around managing equally important values.

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Rev. Sarah Ann Bixler, PhD, is assistant professor of formation and practical theology and associate dean at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is oversight leader of the teaching cluster of ordained ministers in Virginia Mennonite Conference and attends Park View Mennonite Church.
Leading Amid Polarization

David Brubaker with Sarah Bixler

WHAT IS POLARIZATION?
Polarization refers to the process by which people in a social group increasingly come to hold opinions at the more extreme ends of a spectrum. Polarization can appear in any social system—a family, a community, a congregation, or a society.

Cases of a system “splitting down the middle” are quite rare. It is more common for a polarized system to divide into three relatively equal parts, with the two ends each representing about a third of the total and the center another third. Because the ends are more vocal than the middle, however, the “third voice” of the center is often overlooked.

WHAT CAUSES POLARIZATION?
While the country has been polarized in previous historical eras (including the American Revolution, the Civil War, and during the 1960s), as political polarization increased in the United States over the past 40 years, much research has focused on the causes of societal-level polarization, identifying these possible causes:

1. Economic inequality (growing gap between the richest and poorest citizens)
2. Identity threats (including a feared loss of status by many white Americans as the country becomes increasingly diverse)
3. Racism and racial inequality
4. Sexism and gender inequality
5. Differing moral universes (see Jayne Docherty and Sara Bixler’s piece on worldviewing)
6. Global nationalism (the global rise of populist and nationalist leaders)
7. Balkanized media (the polarization of the media, as illustrated by Fox News and MSNBC)
8. Political structure (the “winner take all” system of American elections)
9. Social sorting (individuals voluntarily choosing to associate only with like-minded others)
10. Leadership-driven polarization (leaders who foment “us versus them” thinking)

HOW CAN ONE LEAD IN POLARIZED TIMES?
The twin temptations for leaders are to take a side (fight) or to run from the fray (flee). But there is a third way for leaders caught in the web of polarized relationships. Drawing from social theory and biblical and theological insights, leaders can keep in mind five principles for courageous leadership in polarized contexts:

1. Engage conflict when it emerges, not just after it erupts. Since conflict is much more manageable at lower levels, leaders need to move toward it when it’s small. Doing so “takes heart,” and Christ’s presence empowers us to do so (Psalm 31:24; John 16:33).
2. Learn to “manage polarities,” not just “resolve conflicts.” Many of our challenges involve two realities that must be held together (e.g., “personal freedom” and “community responsibility”), and thus are not amenable to a simple resolution. The Gospels show Jesus managing competing perspectives by giving new metaphors or breaking out of common assumptions about a persistent conflict.
3. Remember that as goes the leadership, so goes the congregation or organization. Focus on keeping your leadership team united rather than trying to keep all the members of the broader congregation or organization happy. In the most critical moments of his leadership,
Jesus focused on building a unified team of disciples rather than trying to please other religious leaders or members of the crowd.

4. **Speak your truth.** Leaders who consistently withhold their own thoughts or opinions are often viewed as manipulative and insincere. Share your deepest beliefs and values. Spend time in prayerful solitude discerning what matters to you most and lean on God’s strength to share it in authentic ways.

5. **Stay connected.** It is equally important to invite others to share their deepest beliefs and values. The goal is to both self-define and stay connected. Holistic connection is based first of all on love of God, from which flows loving connection to self and others (Matthew 22:35-40).

**HOW MIGHT WE OVERCOME POLARIZATION?**

As followers of Jesus, our most compelling model for overcoming polarization is Jesus himself. Jesus called 12 disciples that represented the full range of his polarized society—from a freedom-fighting zealot to a collaborating tax collector. And while Jesus confronted the oppressive behavior of religious and political leaders, he had nothing but compassion for the people themselves. Time and again Jesus is moved with compassion—genuine care and concern for those around him (Matthew 9:36).

If we want to contribute to reweaving our fractured society, we will need to treat others with dignity as beloved children of God, seek first to understand and stay connected,1 and bring people together in cooperative efforts to improve our communities, focusing on shared values that we hold in common.

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1. As the prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) states, “Lord make me an instrument of your peace... Grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted, to understand rather than to be understood, to love than to be loved.”

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**RESOURCE**

This tip sheet was adapted from the book *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019). The lead author is David Brubaker, with chapter authors Carolyn Yoder, Everett Brubaker, and Teresa Haase.

David Brubaker serves as dean of the School of Social Sciences and Professions at Eastern Mennonite University, Virginia. He has 34 years of experience in workplace mediation and organizational consulting. David has worked in a dozen international settings in countries on six continents—including Angola, Myanmar, and Northern Ireland. He is the author of several books, most recently *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019).

Rev. Sarah Ann Bixler, PhD, is assistant professor of formation and practical theology and associate dean at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is oversight leader of the teaching cluster of ordained ministers in Virginia Mennonite Conference and attends Park View Mennonite Church.
**Beyond Hallmark**

**Ideas for Honoring Your Pastor**

*Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman*

“So don’t make them [your leaders] sad as they do their work. Make them happy. Otherwise, they won’t be able to help you at all.”

—Hebrews 13:17b (CEV)

October is Pastor Appreciation Month, so what better time to make your leader happy as they do their work? Whether an administrative pastor, children’s pastor, or outreach pastor, these spiritual guides share their gifts even through these uncertain times. Why not give back to these selfless givers?

Here are some ideas for showing appreciation to your pastor (and their family) according to five “love languages.” (Not sure which of the five your pastor prefers for receiving love? Choose a couple!)

**GIFT GIVING**

- **A subscription box** is the gift that will keep giving all year long. These could be inspired by something specific that your pastor loves, like coffee or raw honey, or it could be a fair-trade/ethically sourced box* that does some good in the world while honoring your pastor.
- **Commission an artist** in your congregation or community to create an original piece. Artwork from a painter or graphic designer, a set of soup bowls from a potter, or a handcrafted guitar from a luthier would be gifts your pastor treasures for years to come.
- **Purchase a share from a CSA that delivers.** Community Supported Agriculture supports local farmers and nourishes your pastor and their love of organic turnips and Swiss chard. You could even combine it with a garden tool made from a donated gun (check out https://RawTools.org).

**WORDS OF AFFIRMATION**

- If lots of folks are joining your services virtually, then passing around an online card (consider https://www .GroupGreeting.com) is a great way to share written words of affirmation. A scrapbook is another good way to bless your pastor—and don’t forget to include lots of kids’ artwork for your children’s pastor!
- For verbal words of encouragement, organize congregants to share live or prerecorded affirmations during a church service. If your church has a good sense of humor, perform a musical tribute by writing an original ditty or adapting song lyrics (“These Are a Few of My Favorite Things” might be a starting point), which is uplifting both for your pastor and for morale in your church.

**QUALITY TIME**

- Bless your pastor with a night out with their best friend or significant other and cover the cost of a show, dinner, and a babysitter, if needed. Or if the budget allows, give your pastor a weekend getaway to a cabin or a stay at your local Mennonite camp.
- If church finances are tight, you can simply give your pastor an extra Sunday off under the condition that they spend the time they would be preparing a sermon with the people and activities that bring them life.

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PHYSICAL TOUCH
- A gift certificate for a professional massage is an option for someone who would find it relaxing.

ACTS OF SERVICE
For acts of service, ask: Who depends on my pastor?
- If they’re raising young children or caring for an older parent, organize church volunteers to give them a day off from caregiving.
- If they have pets, cover dog-watching services for their next vacation.
- If their property requires maintenance, providing snow shoveling services in the winter or lawn care in the summer are great gifts for the pastor who finds those activities draining.

If your pastor has a heart for service, you could combine service to your pastor with service to the community.
- Does your pastor love creation? Plant a tree or perennial flowers on their behalf.
- Do they care about feeding the hungry? Make a donation and organize a volunteer day in their name.

Remember that your pastor is trying their best to lead and encourage and preach and love every month of the year, so why not send some love back to them this month? Everyone needs a little encouragement, and it may just help your pastor keep up the good work for many years to come.

Rev. Amy Zimbelman is the conference minister of Mountain States Mennonite Conference, serving 17 churches in Colorado and New Mexico. A graduate of Duke Divinity, she co-pastored a Mennonite church for three years. She’s spent much of her adult life being fascinated by other cultures and working for justice both through Mennonite Central Committee and in refugee resettlement for about a decade. She’s married to her best friend, Matt, and together they parent their two young sons.
Marking Life Together

A Guide for Congregational Rituals

Joanna Harader

After many months of limited in-person gatherings because of COVID, it feels particularly important to acknowledge life events in the context of our faith communities. Coming together as a faith community for worship helps us connect more deeply with God and with each other. Noting significant personal events—such as birth, death, marriage, and other life transitions—within the context of weekly worship reminds us that we remain connected with God and with each other beyond the specific time and place of our worship service.

The types of rituals presented here seem particularly important now for a few reasons:

• COVID has left many of us experiencing “disenfranchised grief.” This is grief that goes unrecognized or invalidated—by others and often even by ourselves. We may be grieving the death of someone we didn’t really know; maybe we feel guilty for being sad about missing a special event or vacation because that’s not a “real” loss; or we could even feel grief about transitions that are, on the whole, positive, but still involve loss. When we acknowledge such grief together in worship, it becomes recognized and validated; we are able to accept that we are grieving and find support in our faith and in our faith community.

• Many of us have felt painfully isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bringing aspects of our outside-of-worship lives into the context of worship strengthens our connection to others and helps us feel less alone.

Wrapping a familiar rhythm and language around unique experiences can help us as we transition into a “new normal.” Bringing experiences from the unprecedented time into the familiarity of worship—surrounding these experiences with prayer and song and blessing—can help us gain our footing and move forward in faith on more steady ground.

These worship resources are designed to encourage and guide you in developing meaningful rituals to use with your congregation during this time of transition. For each category of ritual, you will find Scripture suggestions, a liturgical piece, and a few additional suggestions. The ritual can be adapted to fit your context and be used as one element of your regular weekly worship. Regardless of whether your community uses the specific words provided here, we hope this resource points you toward more meaningful worship in this transitional time.

• Ritual 1: Grieving Together: Remembering Deaths
• Ritual 2: Welcoming Together: Honoring Births
• Ritual 3: Beginning New Things: Marking School and Work Transitions
• Ritual 4: Honoring Partnerships: Celebrating Marriages
• Ritual 5: Lamenting Together: Naming Our Collective Losses
• Ritual 6: Celebrating Discipleship: Honoring Faith Commitments

Note: Prayers and litanies are written in the plural but can easily be changed to singular if only one person is being recognized. For responsive readings, the leader parts are printed in plain text and the congregational parts in bold. Bold italics are for all to read together.
Ritual 1

Grieving Together

When someone who is connected to us dies, it is important to bring that loss before God. We need time and space for our pain, our disbelief, and our grief. COVID made it difficult to safely have funerals and memorial services in the way we’re accustomed to, and it disrupted our ability to travel to such events even when they did occur. Recognizing the death of community members as part of a weekly worship service can help individuals and the community process death in spiritually healthy ways. The worship suggestions below focus on recognizing the deaths of people within the church and acknowledging the ways those losses affect the church community. Such recognitions of death also provide an opportunity for us to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus and claim our hope of abundant and eternal life with God.

Focus Scripture
1 Corinthians 12:14-27

Other suggested Scriptures
Genesis 49:29-33; Psalm 90:1-6, 14; John 11:17-36; Romans 8:38-39

Remembrance and prayer
We now name before God these people who are missing from this body:
(Speak the names of recently deceased community members. A candle may be lit for each).
We celebrate their gifts, all that made them unique and beloved.
(You may have a time of silence or offer brief remarks about each person being remembered.)
They were a part of our community—our body—and we feel the pain of losing them.
Let us pray together:

Holy One,
you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
you are our dwelling place in life,
and you remain the dwelling place of (name those being honored) in death.
We give thanks that you have gathered them to their people and to yourself.
We also grieve because they are no longer with us on this earth.
A part of our body has been cut off, and it hurts.
O God, see how we loved them!
Let us find comfort and hope in your promise of new life.
Let us rest in your steadfast love.
We offer ourselves in our grief and our longing,
we offer our church in our disruption and brokenness.
Receive what we offer,
and lead us by your grace.
Amen.

Extras
• Invite people to bring items or pictures that remind them of those who have died to place on the worship table. For online worship, share pictures of those being honored.
• Use Romans 8:38-39 as a benediction.
• Suggested resources from Voices Together: readings, #981, #983; hymn, #656.
Ritual 2

Welcoming Together

In his letter to the Romans, Paul encourages people in the church to “rejoice with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15). The birth of a child within the church community is generally an occasion for great rejoicing, but COVID prevented us from meeting newborns in person and from supporting the new parents in the ways we would have liked. Yet even in the midst of a pandemic, it is important that we honor the births within our churches; that we rejoice with those who rejoice; and that we offer our blessing, prayers, and support for parents of young children.

A traditional child dedication is appropriate for a child of any age (prior to baptism), and many communities may prefer to wait to have such dedications until the church community is again gathering in person. The Voices Together hymnal (#969–#971) and worship leader edition (#278–#282) provide helpful resources for such a ritual. The ritual below is a less formal occasion to celebrate the birth of children and offer blessings for the children and their families. Because this is a celebration and blessing rather than a dedication, it is appropriate to include children who may not be a regular part of the congregation, such as grandchildren and nieces and nephews of church members.

Focus Scriptures
Mark 10:13-16; Psalm 36:5-9

Other suggested Scriptures
Isaiah 11:6-9; Hosea 11:3-4; Matthew 18:1-5

Litany of celebration and blessing
Today we celebrate the births of (list names).
Let us rejoice together!
We offer gratitude for the presence of these children in our world and in our lives.
Let us give thanks together!
We affirm the holy presence of God in the lives of these children.
Thanks be to God!
Like Jesus, we receive these children with open arms.
Like Jesus, we offer the children a blessing:
   Dearest (list names):
   As God’s steadfast love surrounds you, may human love also fill your lives.
   As you live within divine faithfulness, may you grow in life-giving faith.
   As the Holy One shelters you under her wing, may you also know earthly safety and protection.
   As God offers abundance, may you live with joy and delight.
   We offer this blessing in the love of our divine Parent, the peace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.
We welcome you, and we love you. Amen.

Extras
• For in-person services, you can invite those children being celebrated and their families to the front. If you are also recognizing grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and so on, family members can come to the front with a picture of the child.
• For online services, consider displaying pictures of the children being celebrated.
• In celebrating births, it is important to also be aware of the pain many families carry related to infertility, miscarriage, or infant death. If you know of such situations within your community, it may be appropriate to reach out with pastoral care to those families before celebrating new births in worship.
• Hymn suggestions from Voices Together: #10, #80, #512.
Ritual 3

Beginning New Things

Many of us faced significant life transitions during the pandemic. Some of these transitions, such as graduations and planned retirements, were expected, but we weren’t able to experience and celebrate them in the ways we might have hoped. Other transitions—particularly in terms of job status—happened unexpectedly because of COVID. It is important for us to honor all these transitions as a faith community, both for the sake of building relationships within the church and for the spiritual support of those experiencing the transition. The liturgy below is written with general language to cover a range of school and work transitions. If your worship observance focuses on a specific type of transition, you may choose to adjust the language to reflect that.

Focus Scripture
Isaiah 43:16-21

Other suggested Scriptures
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 9:16-17; Romans 12:1-2

Liturgy to honor those who have experienced school or work transitions

Congregational Litany
We know God makes a way, but we often struggle to see it.
We know God provides a path, but we often struggle to walk it.
So we celebrate the way that God has made for (list names of people whose transitions you are honoring).
We celebrate their faithfulness in walking God’s path.
May they find water in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

Prayer
God of constancy and change, let (list names) know your deep presence with them in this time of transition.
May they find joy in the new things that are springing forth.
May they walk faithfully the paths you set before them.
May we all learn from their faithfulness and support their journey.
We are the people you have formed for yourself, and we declare your praise!
Amen

Extras
- Invite people who have had significant school or work transitions to share briefly with the congregation. They can explain what their transition has been, and perhaps share what they most appreciated about their previous situation and what they most hope for in this new stage of life.
- You might choose to give a small gift to those being recognized. Perhaps a book that can encourage them in this new phase of life.
- Suggested resources from Voices Together: readings #985H, #884; hymns: #377, #419, #816, #507.
Ritual 4

Honoring Partnerships

People planning to get married during COVID have faced difficult decisions about when and how to have their weddings. Many chose to postpone their weddings, or to have very small—or even virtual—ceremonies. If anyone in your congregation got married during the peak of COVID, it is likely that many in the church who would like to have attended the wedding were not able to do so; and the couple was likely not able to feel the support of the full community at their wedding. Even without the cautions surrounding COVID, geography, timing, and venue limitations often mean that many within the church community are unable to attend a wedding of fellow church members. It can be a gift for both the newly married couple and the congregation to recognize, honor, and bless the marriage during a weekly worship service.

Focus Scriptures

Other suggested Scriptures
Song of Solomon 8:6-7; 1 Corinthians 13 (Voices Together 1045)

While we cannot know for sure, many scholars believe it likely that the two travelers on the road to Emmaus were a married couple. The two are on a journey together, engaged in intimate conversation, and it seems that they share a home. Whatever the relationship between these two travelers, this story gives us insight into the ways a marriage (or other intimate relationship) can strengthen faith and how a couple can be supported by the broader faith community.

The two companions process their faith—their grief, their hopes, their understanding and confusion—with each other. They are, quite literally, on a faith journey together. In partnership, they extend hospitality to Jesus, and it is in the intimate setting of a family meal that they recognize the risen Christ. Note, then, that their immediate reaction to learning of the resurrection is to travel all the way back to Jerusalem to share their intimate revelation with the broader faith community. As a couple, they seek the company and support of other believers as they process their experience with Jesus.

Congregational blessing and commitment (with Philippians 2:1-4)
(Speak names of the two people who are recently married),
we, your church community, celebrate your marriage and offer you encouragement in Christ.
We pray you will find consolation from love,
sharing in the Spirit,
compassion and sympathy with and for each other.
We seek to be a good example for you of a healthy, God-honoring, Christ-centered community.
Being of the same mind.
Having the same love.
May we do nothing from selfish ambition, but live together in humility.
May we look not to our own interests, but to the interests of each other.
As God has brought us all together as a church community,
so God has brought the two of you together as a married couple,
a broad community and a small one, both formed to help us grow in faith and share God’s love.
We pray God’s blessings for you, and we offer, as well, the blessing of this church.
We pledge our love and support to you on your faith journey as a married couple.

Extras
• Invite the couple to share photos of or briefly tell about their wedding.
• If one or both of the recently married people have children, consider including them in the ritual as well. The final words of the litany could be changed from married couple to family.
• Suggested hymns from Voices Together: #749, #524.
Ritual 5

Lamenting Together

Our culture is not well versed in lament. When tragedy strikes, when grief comes, we want to move toward problem-solving or denial. But Scripture offers us many examples of God’s people coming together in lament—in deep grief, and even in anger toward God. Offering an opportunity for lament in the context of worship gives people permission to acknowledge the full range of their feelings and encourages them to bring their full selves before God. Lament is a reminder that God is big enough to hold all our feelings.

During this time, there are some laments that all communities share: the loss of lives to COVID, the experiences we were not able to have, the disruption of our congregational worship and other church activities. Your specific community might also have particular losses to lament: a negative shift in the political climate, businesses that have closed, jobs that have been lost, families that have moved away, beloved traditions that were interrupted. Being honest together with God about our grief can help us grow closer to God and to each other.

Focus Scriptures

Other Scriptures
Joel 1:2-4, 12-14; Psalm 60:1-5

Litany of lament
(You may add more specific losses to the litany as desired.)

As Jesus wept over the city, as the women of Zion wailed, so we, too, raise our voices in lament.

Holy God, hear our cry.
For the deaths caused by COVID-19 and for those who suffer from the disease even now,

holy God, hear our cry.
For all that has been lost within our community,

holy God, hear our cry.
For all that we, as a church, have been unable to do as we sought to keep each other safe,

holy God, hear our cry.
For the ways the pandemic has divided people and created antagonism within families and communities,

holy God, hear our cry.
We bring our full selves to you, O God, trusting in your eternal compassion and mercy.

We bring our pain, our grief, our confusion, our regret, and even our anger.
We offer all this to you in sighs and wailing, in dirges and tears.

Hear us, O God, and restore us.

Extras
- Create a ritual that allows people to name individual laments and then bring them to the group. For example, you could have people write their laments on pieces of paper and place them on the front table, or have people hold some item such as a stone or a ribbon as they think about the grief they have experienced, and then bring those items together.
- Learn the sign language for “Christ, have mercy” (see Voices Together 615).
- Suggested resources from Voices Together: reading: #894; hymns: #610, #613, #643.
Ritual 6

Celebrating Discipleship

Our faith is shaped in community and we make our faith commitments within communities of support and accountability. Congregations have found varied and creative ways to maintain community during the physical separation of COVID, and people within our churches may have experienced significant spiritual growth and even made faith commitments during this time.

Some people may have received baptism during these past months, when many church participants were unable to attend the ceremony. Others may have decided to be baptized and are waiting for their community to regather in person before they make that commitment public. With the emotional intensity of this experience, it is likely that many people have considered their faith in new ways and may have made significant life decisions based on their renewed sense of God’s call. They may have decided to take on a new role at church, to give more time to local services or denominational ministries, or even to pursue a ministry career.

As we regather in person, it is important to acknowledge and celebrate these commitments. In such celebration, we are all invited to renew our commitment to Christ and to Christ’s church.

For those who wish to express their commitment through baptism, you can find baptism resources in Voices Together, #446–#451 and #930–#935, as well as the Voices Together worship leader edition, #203–#220. The liturgy below is intended to celebrate baptisms or other faith commitments made during the time of COVID separation.

Focus Scriptures
Acts 2:37-42; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (Voices Together 785); Romans 1:8-12

Other Scriptures
Psalm 37:3-6; Acts 16:13-15

Liturgy
Invite those who have made faith commitments to briefly share those commitments with the congregation. The congregation can celebrate and affirm those commitments with the following litany.

(Names of those who have shared), it is our honor to receive the commitments you have shared.
We celebrate the new creations you are becoming in Christ Jesus!
We hold your stories tenderly and walk with you on your continuing journey.
We thank God through Jesus Christ for you, that we can be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.
Through your faith, our faith grows. Through our faith, may you find strength to honor the commitments you have made as you, also, continue to grow.
Let us devote ourselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
We all commit to be church together: to follow the way of Jesus, to form holy community, to share in joy, to live in prayer.
Thanks be to God for the gift of the church.

Extras
- Share the stories of people’s faith commitments in your church newsletter in the weeks leading up to or after the worship celebration.
- Pair those who are making new commitments with a mentor who can encourage them in their faith.
- Suggested resources from Voices Together: reading: #922; hymns: #443, #545, #549, #553, #579.

Rev. Joanna Harader serves as pastor of Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas. She posts worship resources and other writings on her blog, SpaciousFaith.com.
Grow in Faith

After many months apart, faith communities are regathering and learning to know one another again. The incremental physical growth we may not have noticed on a weekly basis is now apparent after months of absence. Less noticeable but just as significant is the spiritual growth of our children and youth. How is the pandemic continuing to affect their faith journey? How can we, as parents and caring adults, nurture and guide them going forward?

**YOUNG CHILDREN**
- **Experience God through the people who care for them.** When caregivers are trustworthy and loving, children can transfer that trust and love toward God.
- **Learn as they explore the world through play.** Play that is based on key Bible stories helps them explore the ideas and symbols of the faith community.
- **Need to know that God loves them unconditionally.** Even when young children make mistakes, God’s love for them does not change. They need reminders that God watches over them and they are never alone. They need to be introduced to Jesus as a loving friend who cares for them.

**ELEMENTARY-AGE CHILDREN**
- **Need a sense of love and belonging.**
- **Are learning to communicate clearly, express feelings, show empathy, apologize, and forgive.**
- **Value rules and fair play.** They are developing a sense of what is right and wrong. They strongly desire to please adults and may feel guilt or shame when they do things that they know are wrong.
- **Need to experience the love of God in tangible ways.** Because these children are concrete thinkers, try to communicate faith concepts in ways that connect to their everyday, sensory experiences.

**YOUTH**
- **Are filled with critical questions and insecurity as they undergo puberty and establish new levels of independence from their parents and caregivers.** They rely heavily on peer relationships yet also value relationships with adults outside their immediate family. Youth need to ask important faith questions to help move them toward making a thoughtful and personal commitment to follow Christ. To do that, youth need to feel that they belong and are loved and accepted in the church.
- **Are learning critical thinking skills,** which brings an awareness of inconsistencies in what they’ve been taught and the realities they see in the world around them. Caring adults are needed to provide guidance and support to youth as they begin to develop their own personal values.

We are all created, known, and loved by God, and each person’s faith journey is unique. Spiritual practices like prayer and worship help children and youth develop a relationship with God that will sustain and encourage them throughout their lives. Faith is not only a personal connection to God; it grows within community. Along the way, we learn from each other and discern together how to faithfully follow God.

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**Grow in Faith Bingo**

Grow in faith together as a family. Many of these activities connect with Bible stories your children and youth are hearing in their faith formation classes this fall. Do five in a row or as many as you can!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grow in Faith Bingo</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Till or dig the soil and plant something in a pot, flower bed, or garden.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visit a creek, pond, or other body of water and give thanks to God.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe something good in our world and have family members guess what it is.</td>
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<td>Carry a reusable water bottle or mug to school or work.</td>
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<td>Surprise someone by raking their leaves or doing some other task to show kindness.</td>
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<td>Make a card or small gift for someone who needs comfort.</td>
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<td>Create your own family tree. How many “grafts” and branches does it have?</td>
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<td>Go outside and “lift up your eyes.” Make a list of ways you see God’s strength in creation.</td>
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<td>Make flatbread using olive oil, flour, salt, and water.</td>
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<td>Learn about or contribute to a Little Free Library or Little Free Pantry in your community.</td>
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<td>Read the verses below (from Psalm 104) each day. See who can say it from memory at the end of the week.</td>
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<td>Involve another person or family in doing one of these activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen online to Bobby McFerrin’s version of Psalm 23, a psalm attributed to David.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Play a listening game like Simon Says or go on a sound hunt. Find a Sound Hunt printable at <a href="http://www.ShineCurriculum.com/Extras">www.ShineCurriculum.com/Extras</a>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imagine a tree with 12 kinds of fruit. Make and enjoy a fruit salad.</td>
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<td>Look up facts about sheep online. Find a photo of some modern shepherds.</td>
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<td>Adam and Eve walked with God in the evening breeze. Walk in your yard or neighborhood as an evening prayer.</td>
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<td>Cut an apple in half across the core. Thank God for something at each of the five star points.</td>
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<td>Write “peace” on a balloon. Circle up and try to keep the balloon in the air for as long as possible.</td>
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<td>Make a peace mural using sidewalk chalk. Draw rainbows, doves, and peace signs.</td>
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<td>Show hospitality. Invite someone new in your neighborhood out for ice cream or to your home for a snack.</td>
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<td>Think of the wisest person you know and ask them to tell you stories about their life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Look at baby pictures from different generations in your family. How is life different now versus then? How is it the same?</td>
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**How many are your works, LORD!**

In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number—living things both large and small.

—PSALM 104:24–25 NIV