Opportunities and Learnings

Martin Rhodes with Carol Tobin

We’re being given a glimpse of an alternative world. It’s a time of testing and discerning. It’s not permanent. How can we not receive it as an opportunity? These words from pastor Sam Wells in the webinar “Soul-Tending in a Virtual Age: How to Preach, Pastor, and Disciple in these Challenging Times” challenge the church’s preoccupation with petty issues when such a thing as COVID-19 is bringing its tsunami of change upon us.

Indeed, it is time for the church to shrug off all that hinders it so that it can equip disciples of Jesus to run the race that is set before us. We must ask, “What are the new opportunities?” and “What are the hindrances that need to be thrown off?”—not so that we can get back to normal, but so that we can engage in a life of mission to the world.

As our Virginia Mennonite Missions’ workers and church planters have reflected on these questions, the following emerged:

1. **Worship.** We are learning that the vibrancy of the church and individual spiritual lives is nurtured not primarily by grandly orchestrated Sunday services, but by many small acts of devotion and piety. In the busyness of life, it’s easy to jettison the simple life-giving rhythms of daily prayer and scripture reading that anchor us as we abide with Christ. We notice that with rekindled prayer lives, there is an overwhelming impulse to share this connection with others, in prayer over the phone, text, and Zoom.

2. **Small groups.** It’s the middle of winter and church buildings are closed. And yet the church gathers. Chairs encircle a backyard fire ring and people bundled in coats and scarves gather to read the Bible, pray, and sing. Although physical distancing is required, we are committed to being socially together. And where two or three are gathered, there the Lord is, in our midst. Our workers insist, “We must find ways to be together creatively and in public.” As we fill our neighborhoods with the hope-filled praises of God’s people, our neighbors will see and hear and be drawn.

3. **Going door-to-door.** We might negatively associate this practice with intrusive sales pitches, religious or otherwise. But our workers are discovering what a gift it is to show up with a simple question: “How can we help?” In times of sickness and plague, Christians have always shown up to nurse people back to health. In our time, loneliness is the real plague; we are learning that we can be present to our neighbors to relieve the sickness of soul that loneliness and isolation bring.

**COMMENDED PRACTICES**

2. Create new family rhythms, allowing the family to become a microcosm of the church through worship, fellowship, and outreach to neighbors.
3. Reactivate the priesthood of all believers by encouraging sharing and prayer together by phone and text and Zoom.
4. Go public in your neighborhoods—offering backyard or other outdoor meals, special events like ice cream socials, providing contexts for meeting and combating loneliness and isolation.
5. Continue to make spaces for individual and corporate lament and intercession for others in pain.

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What Do These Stones Mean?

We are a people shaped by story. From their very beginnings as a people of God, the Israelites sought to share their faith with their children through story. Abraham built altars of stone to mark places where he and his family experienced God’s protection. Moses instituted the celebration of Passover to tell the story of God’s deliverance of the people from Egypt. Joshua and the Israelites built a memorial of stones beside the Jordan River so that when the children asked, “What do these stones mean?” parents could tell them of God’s mighty act of stopping the river so that the people could cross into the Promised Land. This act of storytelling did not just recount facts; the stories shaped who the children understood themselves to be.

As Israelite parents led the family in remembering, they both recalled and relived the story. The Hebrew word we translate as remember means “to participate again.” Hebrew families participated in the story, making it alive and real again. As they sat around the Passover celebration, they were not telling a story about an ancient people. They were telling our story—that we were slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out from there and into the Promised Land. They remembered as if they had participated, and they became members of that original group.¹

Followers of Jesus were shaped through his telling of parables using everyday objects and experiences that invited them to participate in the story. Today, the Shine curriculum invites children and youth to participate in the biblical story through carefully crafted Bible storybooks like Shine On and All Together. As we continue to move through the ebbs and flows of the COVID pandemic, here are some tips for encouraging individuals and families to tell their stories. When children ask, “What does this mean?” we can tell of the mighty acts of God that brought our congregations and us through this difficult time.

Lament and pray. Allow space for children, youth, and adults to share and lament the losses they may feel. Many have experienced separation from friends, coworkers, and trusted adults over the past 18 months. Some may yet again not be able to gather with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins during the upcoming holiday season. Others may have experienced deeper losses through illness or the death of a loved one. Creating prayer stations or memorials within your church meeting space provides a place where individuals and families can express both laments and longings to God. Taking our laments to God in prayer can be a powerful example of trust and dependence on God that we can all practice long after 2021.

Create common experiences where storytelling can flourish. When the time feels right, host an intergenerational event where people of all ages can tell and listen to one another’s experiences of the pandemic. The event guide “What Do These Stones Mean?” outlines a 75-minute event for children, youth, and adults (age six and up). Using the story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River in Joshua 3–4, the event activities encourage participants to reflect on God’s presence in their lives during the pandemic as individuals and as a faith community.

Celebrate. Even though many of our holiday traditions and celebrations of the church year were upended by the pandemic, churches and families created new and innovative ways to celebrate. Take time to reflect on what worked and what you will want to continue. Encourage people to share new traditions that have emerged in their family celebrations of the past year. As you prepare to celebrate Advent and Christmas, find ways to connect families or pair them with a senior couple or someone in the congregation who is isolated so that they can check in on each other, read the Christmas story together, and share holiday greetings.

Blessings to you and your congregation as you share stories of God’s steadfast love and protection!


Practical, effective, Anabaptist resources from MennoMedia and Leader magazine. Find more at MennoMedia.org/what-now.
What Do These Stones Mean?
An Intergenerational Experience

Joshua 3–4

Story Summary
The priests carried the ark of the covenant into the Jordan River. When their feet entered the water, the river stopped flowing so the Israelites could cross on dry ground. After all the Israelites crossed, someone from each tribe carried a stone from the middle of the riverbed to create a memorial. When their children asked what the stones meant, the parents could tell them about God's mighty act in drying up the river.

Faith Link
We can remember and tell about God's faithfulness.

Event Overview
This event guide has been designed for simplicity and ease of use. A coordinator or small group will need to organize the event and make decisions about how it is structured and which activities are offered. It is ideal to have other leaders as listed below, but the activities can be done without preassigned leaders. The “Table Talk” Guide and Explore Instructions Cards are very detailed so that anyone can run the discussion or activity with little preparation.

Coordinator
• Assign table groups of four to eight people and find a table leader for each group. (Alternatively, people can self-select their groups and read the instructions from the “Table Talk” Guide.) Adapt group size as needed, but the goal is for groups to be intergenerational and relatively small so that everyone has an opportunity to respond to the questions and prompts.
• Set up tables for small groups. Put a “Table Talk” Guide on each table.
• Find readers for the readers theater.
• Choose Explore options, set up activity areas, and gather supplies.
• Serve as an emcee by welcoming the group, leading songs and prayers, and giving instructions for the Explore activities.
• Keep track of time and alert the groups when they need to move from activity to activity.

Table leaders (optional)
• Facilitate a small group using the provided “Table Talk” Guide. This guide has very specific instructions about what to say and do. No advance preparation is required.
• Watch the clock so that every person has an opportunity to contribute to the conversation or answer one of the questions.

Explore leaders (optional)
• Facilitate an Explore activity using the provided Explore Instructions Card. (The card has very specific instructions about what to do, so the activities can be done without an official leader.)
• Clean up between groups and get more supplies as needed.
• Clean up at the close of the session.

The event as outlined will take 75 minutes. It can be expanded to allow for participants to visit more than two Explore activities or incorporate more time for sharing stories.
Event Plan

Connect (15 minutes)
As participants arrive, have them gather at assigned or self-selected tables. Be sure there is a mix of ages at every table. Participants can do the Connect activity and discuss the questions on the “Table Talk” Guide on page 3.

When everyone has arrived, say a welcome and then sing “Come to the Table” from Worship Songs for Children, track 1. Invite the group to stand with their hands at shoulder height, palms facing upward and extended slightly. Explain that this posture is a version of an ancient prayer position called the orans. Some congregations use this posture during a prayer called “The Great Thanksgiving” that celebrates God’s faithfulness. Invite everyone to join you in the version of “The Great Thanksgiving” found on page 6. You will read the plain type; the group reads the bold type.

Supplies
- Everybody Sing: Worship Songs for Children (CD or digital album)
- CD or MP3 player

Encounter (10 minutes)
Present the Bible story using the Readers Theater on pages 9–10. Have table groups discuss one or more Encounter questions in the “Table Talk” Guide.

Explore (35 minutes total: 5 minutes for instructions, 15 minutes per station)

Explain the Explore stations, where they are located, and how long participants will have at each station (individuals will have time to visit two stations each). Be sure the relevant Explore Instructions Card is at each station. See pages 4–5 of this guide.

Identify how the groups will be formed. Options include:
- Move as a table group from station to station
- Children self-select or are assigned a station first and then youth and adults join stations so that there is a range of ages at each one.
- Divide up by age groups.

Explore options:
- Haiku!
- Toss the Tetrahedron
- Paint with Yarn
- Build an Ark!

Share (10 minutes)
Have participants return to their original table groups. Table leaders can use the Share section of the “Table Talk” Guide to facilitate conversation.

Bless (5 minutes)
Gather around the “river” you used in Encounter. Invite the group to line up and pass slowly through the river, one at a time, as you listen to “Spirit of God” from Worship Songs for Children, track 14 (repeat as necessary). On reaching the middle, each person will pick up a stone.

After everyone has returned to the circle, send the group with these words adapted from Psalm 57:9–10.

We will praise you, O God, to all who will hear.
We will tell and sing of your mercy to our children.
Your steadfast love is as high as the heavens,
and your faithfulness extends to the clouds.
Thanks be to God!
“TABLE TALK” GUIDE
Use this guide to facilitate group activities and discussions.

Connect
Invite participants to share “I remember when” stories that are often told around the dinner table or when their extended family gets together. It might be a funny tale about when a parent was a child, something that happened before they were born, or an important day in the family’s history. How did they come to know these stories? Ask why it’s important to keep telling stories of things that happened long ago. In today’s story, the Israelites plan to share an important story from their history.

Encounter
The questions about the Bible story move from simple and general to more complex. Choose one or more questions appropriate for the ages and developmental levels of the people in the group. Everyone could answer the same question, or you could pose different questions to different people.

- Imagine sitting on the banks of the Jordan River the night before crossing into the Promised Land. What hopes might you have? What fears?
- Joshua said that God would do a wonderful thing for the people the next day. I wonder what they thought might happen.
- Joshua set up a stone memorial in the middle of the Jordan, where no one would ever see it. Why do you think he did that?
- The Israelites did set up stones where people could see them as well. Why might it be important for children to ask what the stones mean?
- Imagine your church were to set up a memorial for the coronavirus pandemic. What might it look like? What questions do you think future generations will ask about this time? What might you want them to ask?

Share
Give everyone an opportunity to share their stories using one of the activities from an Explore station they visited.

Haiku!
- Share your pandemic lament and “silver lining” poems with the group.

Toss the Tetrahedron
- Toss your tetrahedron and share your story from the side where it lands (bottom).

Paint with Yarn
- Share the yarn painting you created and the story behind it.

Build an Ark!
- Share about creating the church’s story ark, items you added, and what they help you recall about your church’s experience of the pandemic.

After everyone has shared, pose some of these questions.
- When or where have you seen God at work during the pandemic?
- What have you learned during this time? About yourself? About God? About your church?
- As time passes, will future generations be interested in hearing our stories from the coronavirus pandemic? Why or why not?
- What would you want to tell your children or grandchildren about this time?
**Toss the Tetrahedron**

Create a storytelling tetrahedron to help you share your experiences of the past 18–20 months using the template provided. On two sides, write words or draw a picture that helps you describe the difficulties you’ve faced during the pandemic. On the remaining two sides, write words or draw a picture that helps you describe a good experience or a learning from the pandemic. Cut out the tetrahedron, fold, and assemble using tape.

**Supplies**
- Tetrahedron Template (p. 8)
- Pencils, pens, or markers
- Scissors
- Tape

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**Haiku!**

Describe your pandemic highs and lows through poetry. A haiku poem is a short three-line poem structured with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five in the third. Use stones cut out from the Stones Template on page 7 to create two haiku poems: one that describes a lament or something you found difficult about the pandemic, and a second poem that describes a “silver lining” or a learning that you’ve experienced from the pandemic. Write the lament haiku on one stone and the “silver lining” on the other.

**Supplies**
- Stones Template (p. 7)
- Pens or markers of different colors
Paint with Yarn

Yarn painting is an ancient art form from the Huichol (WEE-chol) people of western Mexico. The Huichol live in small communities in the Sierra Madre mountain range. They “paint” with yarn to record and remember their ancient stories and symbolize important events. To do this, they press cords of colored yarn into beeswax spread across a board. Individuals can create their own yarn art to remember their experiences of the pandemic. Instructions are on page 6.

**Supplies**

- Paint with Yarn Instructions (p. 6)
- Small pieces of cardboard—3-in / 8-cm squares
- Pencils
- Glue
- Scissors
- Short pieces of yarn of various colors

Build an Ark!

When people hear the word *ark* in the Bible, they usually think of the story of Noah. The ark of the covenant is not as familiar but is just as important. The ark of the covenant in Joshua was a chest that carried some of the most precious things that Israel brought with them out of their wilderness journey from Egypt to the Promised Land—stone tablets, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s staff. Work together to create your church’s own story ark. Cover a large box with pictures, words, Bible verses, and other things that remind you of how things changed for your church during the pandemic and how you remained connected to each other. You may want to put objects into the box. Ideas include a mask, hand sanitizer, a hymnal with songs marked, items or symbols shaped from clay, drawings, clippings from your church newsletter or a community newspaper, or other meaningful items.

**Supplies**

- Bibles
- Pencils or markers
- A large box
- Art supplies: paper, glue, markers, modeling clay
- Church newsletters, newspapers
- Glue or tape
The Great Thanksgiving
Print and copy for use in Connect.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give God thanks and praise.

When we cried out to you, you heard us and set us free.
You divided the sea and let us pass through.
You led us with a cloud and a fiery light.
You made streams come out of a rock and caused waters to flow.
We praise you, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Amen.

Paint with Yarn Instructions
Print for use in Explore.

Step 1:
On a small piece of cardboard, draw a symbol or design that expresses your experience of the pandemic. Keep it simple.

Step 2:
Squeeze a line of glue where you want to place your first piece of yarn.

Step 3:
Press the yarn into the glue. Cut off any extra yarn or frayed ends.

Step 4:
Continue adding pieces of yarn to your design, winding them around and pushing them close together.

Step 5:
Continue gluing and winding yarn of various colors until your design is complete.
STONES TEMPLATE
Print, copy, and cut out two stones per person for use in Explore.
TETRAHEDRON TEMPLATE
Print and copy (one per person) for use in Explore.
Readers Theater

Crossing the Jordan

An eyewitness account from Joshua 3–4

Cast: Reporter, Israelite, Joshua, God, Priest, Child, Israelite Parent

Reporter: This morning a group calling themselves the Israelites crossed the Jordan River on dry ground. The waters are still parted, and a group is standing in the middle holding a large box they call an ark. Who are these people, and what are they doing here? That’s what we’re here to find out. (Approaches an Israelite) Excuse me, but can you tell me what happened this morning?

Israelite: Well, after 40 years wandering through the desert, our group finally arrived at the banks of the Jordan and set up camp. Three days passed, then officers went through our camp and said, “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the priests, follow it, so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about 2,000 cubits; do not come any nearer to it.” Joshua told us to get ready because tomorrow God is going to do wonders among us.

Reporter: Here is Joshua, the leader of these Israelites. Joshua, what led you to say that God will do wonders?

Joshua: God spoke to me. So I called the Israelites together and told them what God had said. (Pauses as though remembering.)

God: (offstage) All Israel will know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant, “When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.”

Joshua: Yes, I told the people, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God: the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord touch the waters of the Jordan, the waters will stand still.”

Reporter: Let’s talk to one of the priests carrying the ark, the sign of God’s presence. Sir, what did you do when you heard Joshua say these things?

Priest: Well, the Jordan normally overflows all its banks this time of year. But we priests did as Joshua commanded anyway, and when our feet touched the edge of the river, the waters stood still, leaving us on dry ground. We stood in the middle of the river until all the people crossed to the other side.

Reporter: What a remarkable story. But, wait—something seems to be happening among the people now. Let’s listen in and see what’s happening:

Joshua: (loudly) Listen! God has said, “Select 12 men, one from each tribe, and command them to take 12 stones out of the middle of the Jordan. Carry these stones with you and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.” Each of you 12 who have been chosen must pass before the ark of the Lord and take up a stone on your shoulder, one for each of the tribes of Israel. Build a memorial with these stones to help you remember what happened today.

Reporter: The 12 men are now gathering the stones. Meanwhile, Joshua is setting up 12 stones in the river in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood. Those rocks will probably stay in the riverbed forever.

(Pause.)

Now the priests are moving out of the middle of the Jordan and crossing in front of the people, to once again lead the way. There must be 40,000 people moving toward Jericho. The waters of the Jordan are returning, and the Israelites plan to set up camp east of Jericho at Gilgal.

Child: (pointing to the pile of rocks in the middle of the river) What does that pile of stones mean?

Israelite Parent: This is where Israel crossed over the Jordan River on dry ground. God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you, as God did for our ancestors at the Red Sea long ago. Now everyone will know the wonderful things God has done for us. Every time you pass by these stones, remember and tell the story.
Connection Tips

Lisa Goetze

Our church gatherings will continue to fluctuate between meeting in-person and connecting virtually for some time to come. While practice can make perfect, it also makes for giving new things a try and tweaking to see what works for your community. Here are some ideas to support church connections:

1. **Create small touchpoints.** Meaningful connections often happen when we’re in more intimate settings, so don’t worry that your entire community can’t get together all at the same time in one place.
   - **Park pop-ups.** A park pop-up allows folks to show up and use an outdoor space however they want: use the playground, bring a ball to kick around, lounge on a picnic blanket. This is great because most public spaces allow for smaller gatherings such as this without a permit. Rally a few leaders to host these in a regular rhythm in your area for low-program, high-relationship connection times for all ages.
   - **Takeout Tuesdays.** Because who doesn’t love an alliteration! Encourage your community to pick up their favorite takeout meal and meet at a public space to enjoy with others. These not only help local restaurants but also give your church a chance to meet up in a relaxed setting. Consider a tailgate-style parking lot picnic.
   - **Viewing parties.** If your church is sharing its Sunday service by video live or after the fact, encourage people to host small gatherings to watch it together.

2. **Use several lines of communication.** I personally can get stuck on just one mode of communication. Other times (cough cough—frequently), I avoid the less-comfortable-to-me ways of communicating. But good news: You can share the load!
   - **One is not done.** We cannot assume that sharing a piece of information or a greeting once will land for everyone. It often takes a person hearing something three times to let it click and sink in.
   - **Use multiple platforms.** Broaden your communication of the same message across different platforms. Think Sunday in-person verbal announcement, email, and engaging stories via social media posts.
   - **Phone calls are golden.** You might enjoy it, or someone else in your community may love cold-calling simply to check in with people. This also ensures that people who have fewer tech devices are being reached.

3. **Share spiritual practices.**
   - **Feed yourself and others at the same time.** Jesus’ directive to feed his sheep (our people!) includes ourselves. Find ways for the spiritual practices you share with others to feed your soul too. Maybe you are exploring contemplative prayer, for example; invite your church to practice it as well.
   - **Printable booklets.** A print-at-home option is nice for those people who like to have their hands on a hard copy of writing. And you likely don’t need to re-create the wheel—reuse content your church has used in the past for special weeks in the church calendar, or search online for prayer practices to share.
   - **Live on social media or watch later.** This works well as a follow-up to the above ideas. Instagram Live and others are beginner-level friendly when trying out how to share videos. Give it a try. See who tunes in, and make the videos available to watch later. Suggest prompts for viewers to share their prayers in the comments.

4. **Support families and kids.** The way you incorporate families into the above ideas goes a long way in caring for them. Beyond that, consider these options as well:
   - **Provide online resources for families that they can print at home.**
   - **Shoulder-tap point people to pick up resources and share items with families.** Not only does this get the items into families’ homes, but it also creates an in-person connection at the same time.

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Lisa Goetze is passionate about helping people embrace their path in life, even if it’s not the one they’d planned or expected. She also attempts to keep daily rhythms of spiritual practices to stay aware of what God is doing in her own life and in those around her. Lisa is happiest with a coffee in hand and sand between her toes. She is a pastor at The Meeting House Oakville.
Responding to Violent Extremism

Lisa Schirch

WHAT IS VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Violent extremism refers to the use of violence against civilians to achieve an ideological goal. The term violent extremism also refers to the beliefs that encourage, condone, justify, or support acts of terrorism.

- Violent extremism and terrorism attempt to create a “pure” society by killing members of certain groups.
- Violent extremist groups demonize, dehumanize, and blame other groups for complex social and political challenges.
- Violent extremism rejects democratic methods of decision-making (like voting or dialogue), and instead advocates for strict patriarchal (male-led) authoritarian leaders who dictate rules to others.
- Rather than use political processes or nonviolent methods of change, violent extremist groups believe that violence is necessary to create their vision of a “pure” society.

WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Examples of violent extremist movements are found throughout history, in most religious traditions, and across geography.

- In the United States, along with Europe, New Zealand, Canada, and other countries, far-right white supremacist groups foment violence against Jews, Muslims, Black, Indigenous, and people of color. In the United States, white supremacist groups have killed nine times as many civilians as have Muslim extremists.1
- Governments like Nazi Germany have carried out genocidal violence against Jewish, Roma, LGBTQ+, and disabled people to create their vision of a pure society.
- Al Qaeda and ISIS carry out violence against Christian and Muslim civilians whom they deem unfaithful to achieve their vision of a “pure” Islamic caliphate.
- In Myanmar, extremist Buddhist monks foment violence against Rohingya Muslims.
- In India, Hindu extremists foment violence against Muslims.

WHY DO PEOPLE JOIN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS?

There are individual, social, and political reasons why someone may join a violent extremist group.

Psychological vulnerabilities
- To respond to feelings of isolation, humiliation, confusion, or anxiety
- To gain a sense of belonging, adventure, identity, empowerment, and dignity

Ideological beliefs
- To respond to perceived economic, social, and political injustices
- To advance an interpretation of “purity”
- To affirm a belief in authoritarian and patriarchal decision-making
- To express an intolerance of social differences, multiculturalism, and democracy

Behaviors
- To blame, demonize, and dehumanize certain groups in society
- To attempt to purify society through using violence

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WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT VIOLENT EXTREMISM?
The book of Genesis describes God as creating diversity of plants, animals, and peoples. Diversity is part of God’s design for humanity.

Biblical references to “purity” emphasize a purity of intentions toward others, doing good to others, and taking care of diverse parts of God’s creation. Jesus often intentionally breaks rules that prevent people from mixing with people different from them. For example, Jesus reaches out to lepers, to the woman at the well, to fishermen and tax collectors. Jesus offers a model for multiculturalism and caring for people no matter what they look like or what they do.

The Bible repeatedly implores humans to not kill others, from the Ten Commandments to Jesus’ teachings on loving enemies and welcoming the stranger. Jesus never gives a justification for killing people.

HOW CAN THE CHURCH RESPOND TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM?
- Acknowledge feelings of confusion and vulnerability that may lead people to embrace the simple worldview of violent extremism
- Address the fear-based and false news media that encourage dehumanizing migrants or people of color
- Warn about the addiction that social media companies build into their platform, and stress that violent extremist recruitment on social media is widespread in the United States and Canada
- Actively rehumanize migrants, people of color, and women in sermons, prayers, and faith formation classes
- Offer a theology of inclusion and coexistence, and emphasize God’s design for a diverse world
- Offer opportunities for meaningful community engagement to enable people to understand that “social justice is God’s love in action” to help neighbors in need
- Create spaces for belonging and shared identity especially during the pandemic and climate crisis and its humanitarian disasters from storms, floods, fires, droughts, and so on
- Deconstruct purity narratives and offer a theology of the beauty of diversity in the natural world
- Offer methods of pursuing justice through nonviolent collective action; hold up youth movements on climate, racial justice, and inclusion
- Offer spaces for youth leadership and empowerment to ask questions and voice ideas
- Question those who spread hatred and dehumanization of other people

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A leader knows the way, shows the way, and goes by the way.” But where do leaders turn when facing uncharted territory? Where do we seek wisdom? Who are we going to follow? Who’s going to deliver us from this pandemic?

Perhaps the familiar words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” are significant in today’s context. No one human is uniquely qualified to offer leadership today. But we can continue to look to Jesus, whose power—the same yesterday, today, and forever—is able to heal and deliver us.

The global pandemic has caused many adversities. It is not just a health crisis, but an economic, social, and mental health crisis too. Sometimes it’s hard to see God in the midst of all this. Why did this happen?

As followers of Christ, we are called to help people in need. We are called to love in the most difficult times. We are called to show people the way of Jesus. When the world is broken, polarized, anxious, and misinformed, it is our part to speak the truth about God’s world. “Telling the truth about God’s world is the most powerful thing that can be done,” says New Testament scholar N. T. Wright. “Jesus is speaking God’s new creation into existence.”

In other words, the world is broken, but God calls us to be wise humans, working as co-creators, fulfilling God’s dream.

So what are the practical steps forward? How does our theology inform our practice as we seek to follow Jesus amid this pandemic? What can we learn from Scripture? How do we make sense of our current situation as individuals and as a community?

ACCEPTANCE

In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. —John 16:33 NIV

The result of an acceptance is peace, while the fruits of denial are anger and depression. Acceptance of our pain, suffering, and trauma is the first step for healing.

While some may have experienced great loss, most of us have experienced some sort of trauma. If trauma is not addressed and honored, re-traumatization is likely to occur.

As leaders, we want to ensure that our trauma, and our collective trauma as a congregation, is processed in healthy ways, preventing further traumatization. This involves getting to the roots of the issues, not just addressing symptoms. As Christians, we have access to God’s restorative power through Jesus for this work.

• What are the areas of our lives that have been difficult to accept during the pandemic?
• What pain, fear, and trauma has surfaced?

SPIRITUAL MATURITY

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.
—Philippians 1:9-11 NIV

The journey toward maturity as believers does not end with baptism. To be like Christ, to have spiritual maturity, should be the goal of every Christian. Having the ability to discern, being adaptable, and doing what is right are all evidence of maturity.
Maybe people don’t want to hear the words or phrases new normal, social distancing, and toilet paper shortage anymore, but those words are new terms that we learned during the pandemic. Even the word unprecedented bears meaning that we should change our way of thinking, acting, and even doing church together.

God does not want us to be spiritual settlers in this world, and instead invites us to embark on a spiritual journey, seeking to be in tune with the Holy Spirit.

- What evidence of spiritual maturity do you see in your life?
- How do you discern being in step with the Spirit?

JOURNEY MINDSET

For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. —1 Chronicles 29:15 ESV

Life is a spiritual journey, and as with every journey there is a destination. As a follower of Jesus, our journey to eternal life began at the time we accepted Jesus as our God and Savior.

One of my favorite things to do with my family is to take a road trip. But there is always traffic, sometimes there is a detour, and sometimes I make wrong turns. So, too, with our spiritual journey; there are ups and downs. Sometimes we get stuck or make a bad decision.

This pandemic is not our destination; it’s only a temporary place where we can calibrate, meditate, and find meaning on our journey. God wants to use us to restore this broken world, embracing our calling.

- What new things have you been doing in ministry because of the pandemic?
- What hinders you from having a journey mindset?

COMMUNITY

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. —Galatians 6:2 NIV

The Acts of the Apostles records that the early church had a unity of heart and mind; they did not even claim private property but instead shared what they had. And God’s grace was powerfully at work in them all.

The church is not building, but the assembly of believers who commit in the way of Jesus. The way we gather may change because of COVID-19, but the relationship aspect is still there because we share life as a body of Christ. In the pandemic, the church bears witness to the world.

The best testimony to the truth of the gospel is the quality of our life together. In the pandemic, our relationships with God and other members of the body of Christ are being tested.

We need to develop, reshape, and practice the way we do community together, determining what is essential and what is not. Our rituals, programs, and events should make us more loving toward one another; if not, then change must happen.

- What practices are sustaining relationships in your church community?
- What needs to change?

As followers of Christ, we know that God wants to restore this broken world. God is working to equip us, enabling us to be God’s coworkers to help people in need and to show people the way of Jesus.

God’s invitation to us is to grow spiritually, becoming mature Christians, taking the spiritual journey so that we will not only find God, but also find friends—siblings in Christ—fellow sojourners. This is the church on the move, the community, the family in Christ. This church is not a monument but the global and local movement.
Cleaning Your Glasses
Retreat Resources for Pastors

Rev. Jane Hoober Peifer

Living a rhythm of prayer
Jesus lived a rhythm of prayer and action, and he called his disciples to do the same.

And after he had dismissed the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray. (Luke 5:15-16)

The thing that arrests my attention in these gospel accounts of Jesus’ rhythm of action and prayer is that he sometimes actually walked away from the action in order to pray. I confess that as a pastor, I too often allowed the action to set the pace of my life in ministry. We cannot afford to do that and sustain meaningful leadership of congregational life. Here are some questions to consider:

Orientation
• What kind of life rhythms or spiritual practices contributed to your well-being and ministry before the pandemic?

Disorientation
• Are there practices of self-care or prayer rhythms that aren’t working for you anymore?
• What has changed?
• What new things has the pandemic experience taught you about keeping regular spiritual practices?

Reorientation
• Who do you really want to be as a pastor?
• What have you learned about yourself during the pandemic that you don’t want to forget?
• What do you need in order to move in the direction of who you want to be, and who do you think God has called you to be?

Self-care for pastors is not something to attend to when there is a lapse in the action. It must become one of the priorities of your ministry. Otherwise, you will be unable to sustain the good things that you are doing or to do the good work that God is imagining for your community.

• The first step is to schedule it. Decide when you are going to “go to the mountain to pray.” It may be daily; a half day/week; a whole day/month; a week/year. It is a gift for the congregation to know that because you keep a daily rhythm of prayer each morning, you do not move into “action” until 9 a.m. But remember, there are no magical formulas for a life of prayer.

• Honor your intention (and keep it on your calendar). This way, when you are sitting with a committee trying to decide when to meet, you know when you are not available for the next meeting.

• Find a spiritual director/companion/friend who will help you take care of yourself. The care and love of someone who is invested with you in your ability to sustain the work of ministry can be a huge help -by listening deeply to you on a regular basis. A spiritual director often asks just the right question or speaks clarifying and guiding words after listening deeply to frustrations, joys, and questions. Spiritual directors also give “permission” to move more purposefully toward the call of one’s Spirit heart. Need a director? Check out the new Mennonite Spiritual Directors Network website that includes a list of available directors (https://MennoSDN.org). Zoom works great if there is no one available in your area.
Finally, you likely will not be able to keep the rhythm you desire. Do not despair. Nothing is lost on the breath of God! Put it on the calendar again. Keep working at it—letting go and forgiving yourself when you don’t meet your own expectations, or when you have a season of high demands that leave you floundering for self-care time.

The challenge of keeping a rhythm of action and prayer—giving care and receiving care—is a lifelong journey. Even the writer of Philippians seems to know that: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

What to (not) do with a retreat day

Why retreat?
Your life and the life of your congregation have been turned upside down by the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you have not been keeping a regular rhythm of “going up to the mountain to pray” as Jesus did, now is the time to start!

The spirituality of your congregation is affected by your soul care practices. Making time for the nurture of your soul and spirit, for conversations with God about your own inner stuff, for soaking up the gifts of creation, for time to just be is very important and a good use of your pastoral hours. Not just a good use but an essential use of your on-the-clock time. Make no apologies. Tell your family and your congregation that you need time to “clean your glasses.”

You who wear glasses know how it is. Your glasses can get very dirty before you recognize that they are not clean. Dirty with things like your own fingerprints, splashes from encounters with things, and smears from your sweat, and so on. On occasion I have looked at someone and wondered, “Is that a blemish on their cheek?” In reality, the problem is that my glasses are dirty and, in fact, everything I see looks smudgy or spotty. This is a great metaphor for the importance of regular retreating. It is a time to clean your glasses, which sometimes is quite an ordeal as you come to terms with the spots of stuff that are actually part of you—and not part of what you are looking at.

Basic things to do on a day retreat

- **Be alone and be silent** (unless you are talking aloud to God or singing or shouting or crying). If you are sharing the day with others, avoid chit-chat. Solitude and silence are a powerful resource for managing ego needs.
- **Attend to the loves of your life, beginning with your love of God and God’s love of you.** Make sure you either write or speak something to God about your relationship. Be sure to listen for God’s side of the conversation. What do you think God’s prayer might be for you?
- **Attend to your desires and your fears.** Ask yourself what you really wish were true about your life and the life of your congregation. How do you wish your life would be? What do you really want? Give it words—tell God about your longings. Also, notice and name what gets in the way when you think about what you really want or wish for. Notice and name the reason or reasons you don’t want to—or can’t move in the direction of your desire. Ask God for help with your fears about being honest about what you are really afraid will happen. When are you most afraid to be yourself? What do you need from God when you are afraid? Ask for what you need with openness to God’s Spirit within.
- **Speak or write a conversation with God/Jesus/Spirit.** Give words to your feelings about your job, your primary relationships, the problem person at church, whatever is grabbing your attention at the time or weighing you down—or making you feel more alive than you have for a long time. Listen for God’s response to you or imagine how God is responding.
- **Walk and notice where your attention is drawn.** Follow your attention. Walk barefoot and feel the earth under you if possible. Contemplation means to take a long, loving look at something. Resist the urge to collect sermon material—just walk and notice, reflect and contemplate without purpose.
- **Be creative and play without purpose.** Whittle a stick, doodle, paint, knit, create a collage, pick up the instrument you haven’t played in years and play whatever you feel like playing. Use items in nature (sticks, stones, leaves, etc.) to make a mandala on the ground.
- **Sleep.** It could be that you are so tired physically that what you need is to take a really long nap. Especially if you keep falling asleep as you are trying to do some of these other things—don’t fight it. Go ahead and sleep—that could be very good use of the day if that is what you need most.
Things to be careful about on a day retreat

- **Phone and computer.** Practice not being available—as well as not having something to add to a conversation. Kiss your loved ones goodbye, tell them where you will be, and silence your devices. Add an automatic response message to your device that says you are “on retreat.”

- **Reading.** Don’t plan on reading a book unless you are disciplined to read reflectively (which means you likely won’t get through a chapter). If you take a book along to read, you need to stop to actually “listen” to the phrase or words that catch your attention, or else you will just be reading for information. Retreat days are about transformation, not information.

- **Accomplishment.** You are using your skills of problem-solving, theologizing, negotiating, mediating, visioning, explaining, listening, visiting, and reading all the time. These are the tasks that go with the job of a pastor. People always want to know your opinion about things. Your ego is very accustomed to this reality and likely loves it! Your retreat will be most restful if you can let go of needing to accomplish anything. You don’t have to have one articulate thought for eight hours.

- **Expectations.** Don’t expect anything earth-shattering to happen. Again, it is your ego that wants you to be able to say, “Oh, wow—I had this amazing day retreat when I felt so inspired and enlightened.” Just let that go. You do not need to produce or accomplish anything. Sabbath days are about resting and renewing—not accomplishing or producing anything except a deeper, more alive and honest relationship with God, which is actually the most important gift you bring to your congregation!
Retreating suggestions

1. For everything there is a season: Reflecting with poetry
Listen and attend to your body and soul as you slowly read the following poem.

“For Everything There Is a Season . . .” by Ruth Haley Barton

Sometimes on the Sabbath
all you can do is
  settle into the soft body of yourself
  and listen to what it says.

Listen to
  the exhaustion that is deeper than tiredness
  the hunger that is for more than food
  the thirst that is for more than drink
  the longing for comfort that is more than physical.

On the Sabbath
body and soul reach out for time of a different sort
time that is full of space rather than activity:
  time to watch the burning bush in your own back yard . . .
  the movement of the wind among bare branches . . .
  the last leaf that clings to the branch before its final letting go.

Letting go is hard,
  letting go of that which no longer works . . .
  should fall to the ground
  sinking into the earthy mud along with everything else that is dying
  no longer recognizable for what it used to be.

It seems cruel but it is the way of things.

One generation gives its life for the next
  One season slips away so another can come.
  One crop of fruit falls from the tree so that more can be borne.
  One wave recedes while another gather strength to crash upon the shore.

It seems cruel
  but it is the rhythm of things.
  And rhythm has its own beauty.

Reflect
• What word or phrase stopped you? Listen deeply to what your body is telling you.
• Journal or talk to God about what you are feeling/need[ing/open to . . .
• Is there a burning bush in your backyard that you have been ignoring?
• What isn’t working for you? What do you need to let go of in order to birth something new?

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2. Joining with Jesus: A guided meditation through Scripture

Listen to and reflect on Mark 6:30-52:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

Listen deeply to Jesus' invitation to stop and rest.

Now many saw them going and recognized them, And they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When/how has your compassion been ignited for those who are like lost sheep? Who are they?

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; Send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.”

But Jesus answered them, “You give them something to eat.”

When have you felt without what you need or unable to “feed” the people who are in front of you—looking to you?

(Verses Mark 6:37b – 43 – feeding of the 5000)

Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Are you with Jesus—going up to the mountain—or with the disciples in the boat? Or somewhere else?

When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and Jesus was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea.

How are you feeling the effects of an “adverse wind”?

He intended to pass them by.

How do you respond to Jesus’ intent to keep walking past the disciples who were in trouble?

But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Have you ever mistaken Jesus for a ghost?

How have you heard Jesus speak into your fear?

Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

When/how has your heart hardened because you did not understand something—even something really good—like these miracles?

Continue a dialogue (written or aloud) with Jesus about this story.

Is there an invitation that you are sensing from Jesus?

What bothers you about this story?
3. The gift of being yourself: A journaling exercise

Allowing God to accept me just as I am helps me accept myself in the same way. This is essential for genuine spiritual transformation. Any hope that you can know yourself without accepting the things about you that you wish were not true is an illusion. Reality must be embraced before it can be changed. Our knowing of ourselves will remain superficial until we are willing to accept ourselves as God accepts us—fully and unconditionally, just as we are.

God’s acceptance of us as we are is not in any way in conflict with Divine longing for our wholeness. Nor is our acceptance of our self. But until we are prepared to accept the self we actually are, we block God’s transforming work of making us into our true self that is hidden in God. We must befriend the self we seek to know. We must receive it with hospitality, not hostility. No one—not even your own self—can be known apart from such a welcome.²

Notice where you are drawn. Listen deeply. Journal. Walk and “ponder these things in your heart.” Do you sense a new invitation as it pertains to accepting yourself just as you are—as God does?

4. Reflect and write: A poetry exercise

Write a poem using the “Golden Shovel” poetic form. The form was created by Terrance Hayes and inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks.³

1. Choose a favorite scripture verse or phrase. Or it could be a line from your favorite hymn, or some other sentence or phrase that inspires you. Indicate the source of your choice.
2. Write the individual words of that line down the right-hand side of your paper—one word under the next.
3. Write a poem using each of those words as the last word in a line—so if you begin with a phrase that includes six words, you will have a six-line poem when you are done. The theme of your poem can mirror the phrase, or be about something completely unrelated.
4. On a computer, you can type out the poem and then select it and move it to the right margin.

Example:

Psalm 46:10
I find it is hard to be.
No loss of desire, but still
my monkey mind and all its cohorts know
just how to snag my attention that will carry me away until I stop and realize that I am distracted again. O help me God.

(JHP 2020)

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² David G. Benner, The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 53.
5. Welcoming prayer: Reflection and blessing

“Welcoming Prayer” by Thomas Keating

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me
   in this moment because I know
that it is for my healing.
I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions,
   persons, situations, and conditions.
I let go of my desire for security and survival.
I let go of my desire for approval.
I let go of my desire for control.
I let go of any desire to change any
   situation, condition, person, or myself.
I open myself to the love and presence of God
   and the healing action and grace within.