

THE BLESSING COURSE

Units in this series

- Unit 1 - Being Disciples
- Unit 2 - Building Our Faith
- Unit 3 - Prayer & Our Spiritual Lives
- Unit 4 - Being The Church
- Unit 5 - Being God's Servants
- Unit 6 - Blessing Your Local Area

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Illustrations By: Matthew Lawrence 2018



Diocese of Durham

Cuthbert House
Stonebridge
Durham
DH1 3RY

T: 01388 604515 | W: www.durham.anglican.org | E: enquiries@durham.anglican.org

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Diocese of Durham



UNIT 4

BEING THE CHURCH

THE BLESSING COURSE

LIVING AS DISCIPLES OF
THE GOD OF BLESSING

Blessing our communities in Jesus' name



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Foreword

God is in the business of blessing. He blesses in creation (Genesis 1.22, 28). He blesses in the covenants he makes with humanity (e.g. Abraham Gen 12.1-4). He blesses supremely in our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1.3-14).

We are blessed people. So in response we bless God in praise and worship.

Then we are also called to be a people of blessing. God chooses to use us to bless others, as individuals and communities, and to bless the whole of creation. So we need to grow in our experience and understanding of this blessedness. Hence *The Blessing Course*.

The aim of the whole series is to help us grow as followers of Jesus so that we can be a people of blessing. We bless by our presence, by our prayers, by proclaiming the good news, and by serving.

It is my simple prayer that *The Blessing Course* will be a blessing to all who engage in it; and that we will all then be a means of God's blessing to others.

+Paul Dunelm
May 2016

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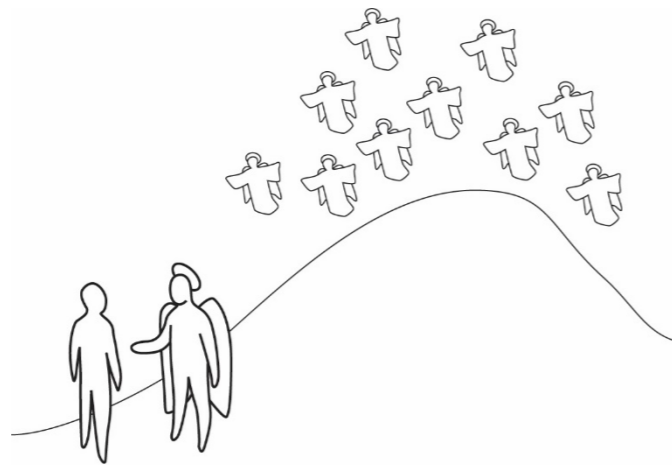
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Introduction to Being the Church

*You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.
You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,
to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.*

Hebrews 12.22-23a

The writer to the Hebrews gives us a big vision for our faith. When we come to Christ, we join the company of those who belong to God. We have a new status – we are citizens of God's Kingdom. We are part of the church and our names are recorded in heaven.



The church belongs to God. The church exists because of God and for God. God is at the very heart of the church's existence. The titles of the sessions in this unit emphasise this. For instance, the title of the Session 1 is 'The Church as God's People'. Being God's people is central to the identity of the church.

This booklet contains five sessions. Each session uses an image of the church to explore the nature of the church. The sessions are designed to help you to think about your own church in relation to these images.

Responding

Although life now may be difficult at times, our story has a good ending. God has promised good to his people.

- Activity 5.5 1 Corinthians 2.9 states: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.'



Use this verse to help you re-imagine your own church in light of its future destiny in Christ.

Conclude by praying together the 'Prayer for Courage', written by Eric Milner-White, an Anglican clergyman:

**Eternal God,
You have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.***

*Eric Milner-White and George Wallace Briggs, *Daily Prayer* (London: OUP, 1941).

Give out the goodie bags. Take home your goodie bag as a reminder of your destiny in Christ.

Session Contents and Structure

The sessions in this booklet are designed for group study and consist primarily of activities for you to engage in as a group. In between the activities are short explanatory paragraphs that are meant to guide your sessions. You may want to read these paragraphs aloud, or the group leader may summarise them briefly.

Each session is divided into three sections. The first section is called *Welcome and Worship* - all of the sessions open and conclude with worship. Worshipping God together honours God. It also reminds us that our sessions are about our spiritual growth and opens us to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The next part of each session is called *Reflecting Together*. Here you will find opportunities to talk about your faith and what you believe. The final section, *Responding*, helps you to relate your thoughts about your faith to your own discipleship. It allows space for personal reflection and includes the closing worship.

At the very beginning of each session, you will also see a section labelled *Resources*. This provides a list of items you will need for that session. The group leader may provide the items in the list, or you may divide responsibility for these items among the members of your group.

Session 1

The Church as God's People



The church is a community of people in covenant to God.

Resources

For this session you will need:

- Copies of 3-4 pictures of churches. You may want to use paintings such as Turner's *Durham*, Van Gogh's *The Church at Auvers*, Van Gogh's *Church Pew with Worshippers*, or Andrea di Bonaiuto's *Triumph of the Church, Church Militant and Triumphant*. At least one of the pictures should portray the church as people
- Coloured index cards, two per person, blu-tack & markers
- A large-scale paper people chain, consisting of four paper people. On each paper person write one of the following phrases: 'chosen people', 'royal priesthood', 'holy nation', 'people belonging to God'
- One Bible per person



The church has a destiny. Our life on earth is our period of preparation for meeting Christ face to face. Our destiny is to be united with Christ. This is something we can celebrate.

- Activity 5.4 The church's destiny is to come into Christ's presence, to see him face to face, and to live with him forever.

The eucharist points to this coming celebration (you may want to look up Luke 22.17-18 and 1 Corinthians 11.26).



Use your experience of the meal and your discussion in Activities 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 to talk about this coming celebration. How might this destiny influence your life as a church right now?

Reflecting Together

- Activity 5.1 Towards the end of your meal, talk about receiving the invitation to the meal. How did it make you feel to know that this session would include a meal? Did you experience anticipation? Excitement? Anxiety?

- Activity 5.2 Talk about the meal itself. How did it make you feel to be treated to nice food and a pleasant atmosphere?

How did it make you feel to be part of a group sharing food and fellowship?



The New Testament describes the church as Christ's bride. We, the church, are like a bride that is engaged to Christ.

- Activity 5.3 Read aloud Revelation 19.6-9. This passage is about the wedding of Christ and the church. Christ is the groom and the church is the bride.

How does a bride prepare for the wedding?

How does the bride relate to the groom?

What are the implications for your church?

Welcome and Worship

Hang the pictures on a wall where everyone can see them. Ask everyone to consider what views of the church are portrayed by the different pictures.

Then say together the following prayer from St Patrick, for this session and all of your sessions in this unit:

**Lord,
Be with us this day.
Within us to purify us.
Above us to draw us up.
Beneath us to sustain us.
Before us to lead us.
Behind us to restrain us.
Around us to protect us.
Amen.***

St Patrick

St Patrick, 'The Protecting God', in *A Celtic Psalter*, ed. By David Adam (London: SPCK, 2001), p.52.

Reflecting Together

We begin by considering: 'what is the church?'

- Activity 1.1 Give everyone one index card. Draw on your index card your response to the question: 'Who or what do you think of when you think of church?'

- Activity 1.2 Blu-tack the index cards around the pictures of the church. Talk together about the views of the church represented on the index cards.

What does the average person think of when they hear the word 'church'? Most people will probably think of a building, a worship service, or an institution like the Church of England. These are all impersonal views of the church.

It is vital to remember that our God is personal. He seeks relationship with his people, both individually and corporately. *Relationship* is central to who God is, and it is central to the people who belong to him, the church.

- Activity 1.3 How does it affect your view of your own church to think of it in terms of relationships?

Write or draw your thoughts here:



The church is first and foremost people.

The church is the community of people who are in relationship to God.

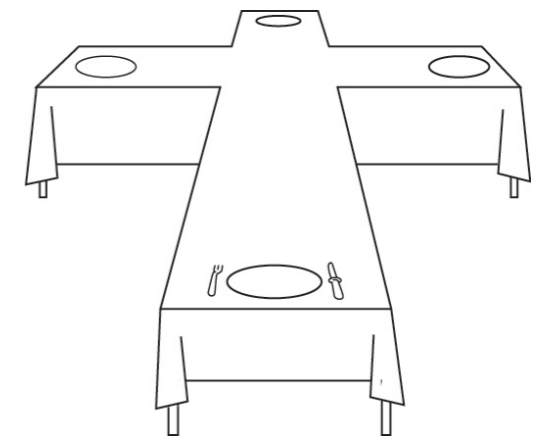
Welcome and Worship

Give out invitations to the meal prior to the session. You may want to do this at the end of Session 4.

Begin your session with a meal together. You may need to arrange in advance to have a longer session to make this possible.

You may want to ask everyone to bring food to share. Or one person may prepare the meal. Please remember to ask everyone in the group about dietary restrictions.

Decorate the room and tables to create the atmosphere of a wedding feast. You may, for instance, want to use candles, tablecloths, and place settings, and to play classical music in the background.



If your meal has more than one course, ask everyone to move around between courses, so that they sit with different people for each course.

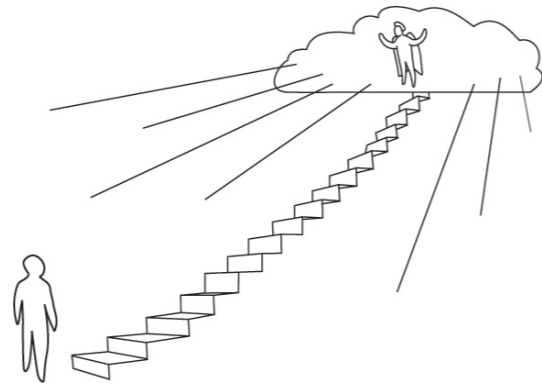
If eating a meal together is not possible, then prepare a table full of nice food for the group to nibble on together at the beginning of your session. This may include, for instance: a fruit platter, a cheese board with savoury biscuits, and cakes. Again, the table should be arrayed to create the atmosphere of a feast and please use real plates. You should also give out invitations to this mini-feast.

As people arrive, invite them to join you in the meal. Pray at the beginning and ask God to bless your time together. Then eat!

Session 5

The Church as Christ's Bride

The church has a destiny: eternal life in God's Kingdom.



This is clear if we think about the word 'church'. In the New Testament, the word church means 'assembly'. This is not a school assembly! It means the assembly of God's people. In the Old Testament, Israel is also called the assembly, or congregation, of God's people.

Our English word 'church' comes directly from a different Greek word, *kyriou*, which means 'of the Lord'. The church is the people who are 'of the Lord' or who belong to the Lord.

Attach the paper people chain to the wall near the pictures and index cards. The paper chain represents the church and the phrases on the four people describe the church. These phrases come from 1 Peter 2.9-10.



Resources

For this session you will need:

- A meal. See the description under 'Welcome and Worship'
- Written invitations to your meal
- One Bible per person
- Goodie bags, one per person. Be creative. You may want to use nice chocolates, small wooden hearts or crosses, tea lights, sweets, or a small card containing a word of encouragement for each person.

**You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, a people belonging to God,
that you may declare the praises of him who called you
out of darkness and into his wonderful light.
Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of
God. Once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.**

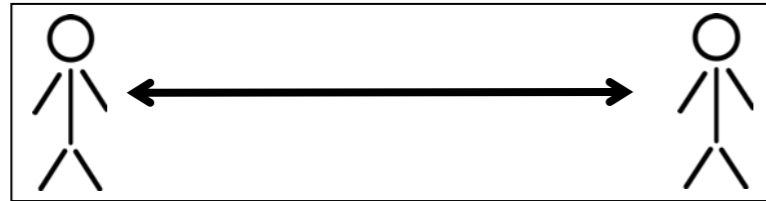
1 Peter 2.9-10 (NIV)

- Activity 1.4 Talk about these four descriptions of the church. Notice that people are central to all four of these descriptions. What does each description suggest about how you might view your church?

- Activity 1.5 If the church is a community of people, what makes it different from a social club?

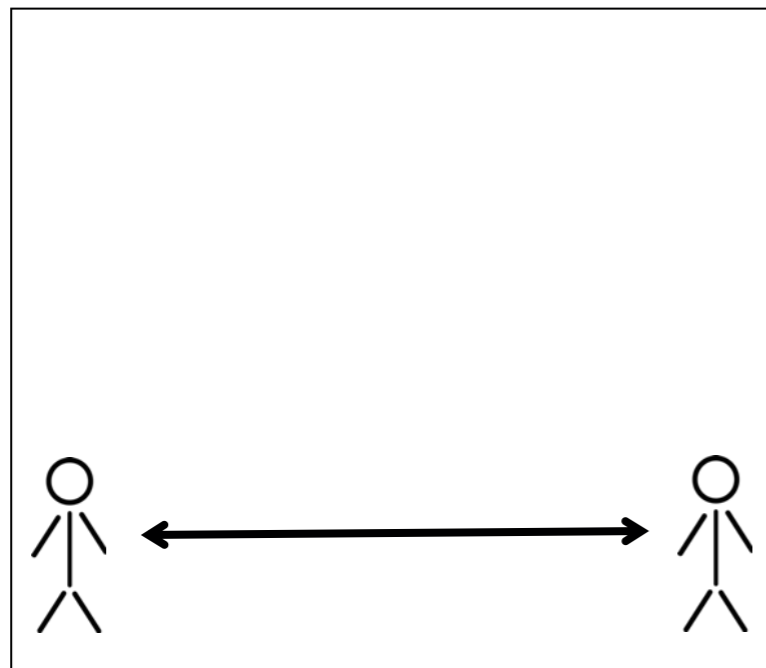
This box represents a social club with its horizontal relationships:

a social club



In the church, we are in relationship with one another, and at the same time with God. In the box below, add in a picture of God, and lines, to represent the church's relationship with God:

the church



What are the implications of this difference for the life of your church?

Pray together for the people for whom you have made the leaves, using the following Celtic blessing:

May God the Father bless *name*.
May Christ take care of *name*.
May the Holy Spirit enlighten *name*
all the days of their life.

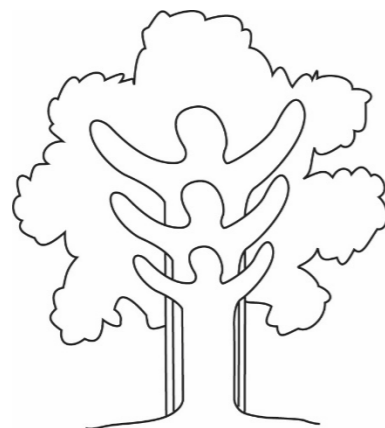
The Lord be their Defender
and Keeper of body and soul,
both now and forever,
to the ages of ages.
Amen*

*Adapted from 'Blessing', Book of Cerne, in *A Celtic Psalter*, ed. By David Adam (London: SPCK, 2001), p.125.

Arrange to give the leaves to the people you have selected. You may do this individually or you may put all of the leaves together and have one person deliver them.

Note that the next session begins with a meal. You may want to arrange for the meal at the end of this session. You may also want to give out invitations to the meal at the end of this session.

The church is one of the few inter-generational institutions left in our society. It points to the value of all ages, as God's created and loved people.



- Activity 4.8 Select a group of people in your church family whom you would like to bless. You may want to return to the list you made in Activity 4.5 to help you with this.

Give everyone another small leaf.

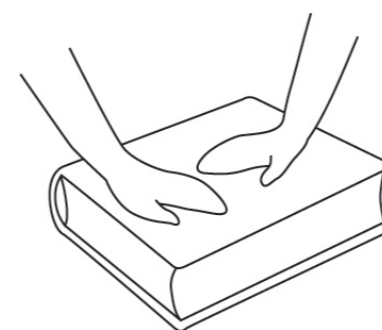
On one side of your leaf, write: 'thank you for being part of our church family', or, 'the Lord bless you and keep you.' (Numbers 6.24), or a similar, appropriate message. Then sign your group's name on the back of the leaf.

Responding

1 Peter 2.9-10 describes the church as 'a people belonging to God'. The church is not ours. It does not belong to us. **The church belongs to God.** And yet we talk about 'our church' or 'your church' because each one of us is a part of God's church.

This means that the life of the church is not firstly about what you want or like. The life of the church is about being God's people.

Our relationship to God is fundamental to our identity as a church. This relationship is based on *commitment*. This commitment is expressed as a covenant. God initiates this covenant because he loves his people.



In Exodus 19.3-8 (look this up if you have time), the Israelites enter into a covenant with God. Both make a commitment to each other.

A covenant is a commitment to relationship. It is like a marriage promise.

Like Israel, the church is in covenant with God. Jesus establishes this covenant at the Last Supper.

- Activity 1.6 Read out loud Matthew 26.26-28. Verse 28 tells us that the purpose of the new covenant is *forgiveness of sins*. What does this forgiveness have to do with your relationship with God? With other people?

God's forgiveness is at the heart of our life as a church. This forgiveness restores our relationships, with God and with one another.

- Activity 1.7 When we celebrate the eucharist, we celebrate our covenant with God. The eucharist is a covenant meal.

How might the eucharist help you to express your commitment to God?



How might the eucharist challenge you to live out God's forgiveness in the way that you relate to others?

Conclude by praying for your fellow church members.

Activity 1.8 Give everyone a second index card. Across the top of your card write 'people belonging to God'.

Then as a group, make a list of different groups of people in your church to pray for. You could include those who play behind the scenes roles, those who help with worship, those who work with children and young people, and so on.

You should then choose one group of people on the list to pray for. You may want to think of one person in that group. Write that person's or group's name on the centre of your index card.

Responding

The images of family and household highlight that the church is an inter-generational community.

- Activity 4.7 On the flip chart make two lists. First list the ways that your church encourages inter-generational worship, mission, and fellowship.

On the second list, note the things that might make inter-generational worship, mission, and fellowship difficult in your church.

Now talk about your two lists. How might your church become more inter-generational in its approach to worship, mission, and fellowship?

List 1
Encourages

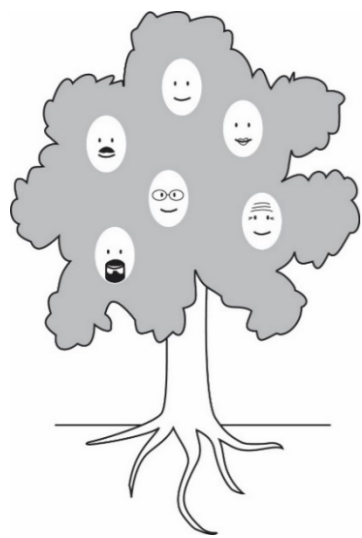
List 2
Discourages

The church brings together a wide range of people.

- Activity 4.5 Read aloud Galatians 3.28. This verse pairs up three categories of people and then states that in Christ, they are all one. Everyone in the church belongs together in Christ.

Make a list of different groups of people in your church. Some categories you may want to consider include: age, ethnicity, and social status.

Some different groups of people in my church:



The New Testament refers to the church as the family of God and as God's household.

- Activity 4.6 Ask one person to read aloud Galatians 6.10 and another person to read aloud Ephesians 2.19-22. The images of family and household suggest that relationship and belonging are at the heart of the church.

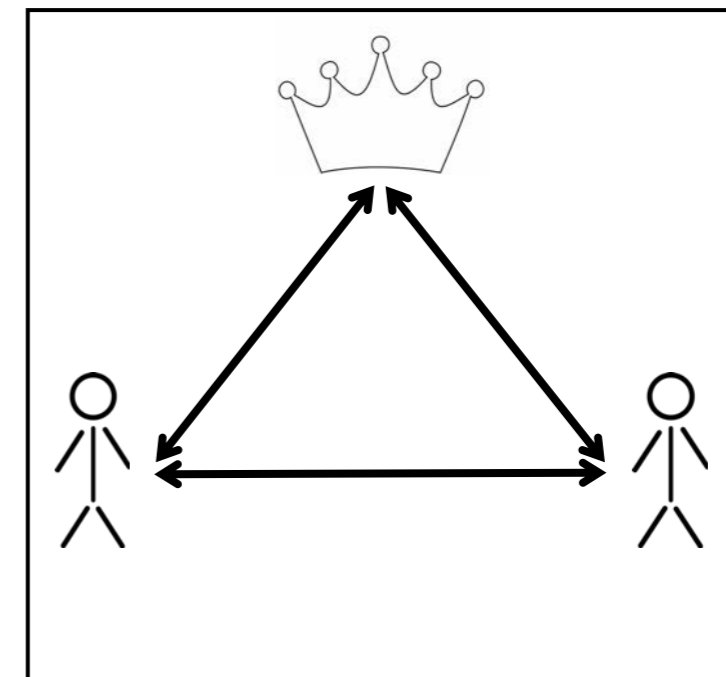
Talk about the ways in which your own church may be described as a family.



Close your time together in prayer. Give everyone the opportunity to pray either silently or out loud for the person or group listed on their card.

Take the second index card home and use it to pray for your church throughout the week.

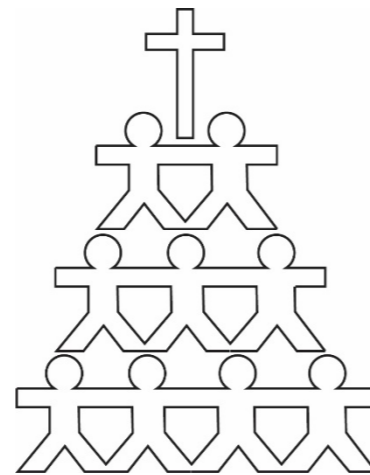
Here is one way of completing the second box in Activity 1.5



Session 2

The Church as Christ's Body

What does it mean for us to call the church 'the body of Christ'?

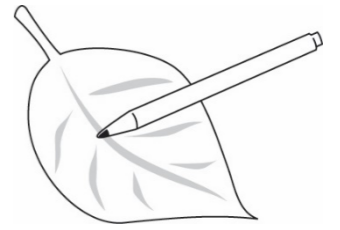


Resources

For this session you will need:

- A life-sized outline of a person. You may create this by asking someone to lie down on her or his back on a long roll of paper. Draw around the person. Then cut out the body outline. Do this prior to the session.
- Coloured markers
- One Bible per person
- A3 sheets of paper, one for every 3-4 people in the group
- Craft materials, scissors, glue, tape, and blu-tack
- An egg timer
- The words and music for 'Longing for Light' by Bernadette Farrell

- Activity 4.3 For each item on your list, draw a picture or write a word on a small card leaf, one item per leaf. Hang these leaves on the tree near their corresponding big leaf.



- Activity 4.4 Compare the number of small leaves around each of the four large leaves.

Which marks are strongest in your church?

Which ones might need some attention in the life of your church?

We thought about mark one, the unity of the church, in Session 2 when we talked about the church as the body of Christ. In Session 3 we thought about how the Spirit produces holiness in the church. Here we will explore the third mark - what it means for the church to be universal.

Your discussion for the rest of this session will focus on the diversity of people in the church, rather than upon the diversity of churches around the world (although this would be a good point to discuss as well!).

1. **'One' refers to the church's unity. We are all the people of the same God. We belong both to him and to one another.**
2. **'Holy' means 'set apart for God'. We are set apart by the Holy Spirit to live for God and to bear witness to God.**
3. **The word 'catholic' means 'universal'. The church includes all of God's people, throughout the world and throughout history.**
4. **'Apostolic' means that the church is built on the foundation of the first apostles. The role of the church is to carry on the work of the apostles, including mission, teaching, worship and fellowship.**

- Activity 4.2 On the flip chart, make a list of the ways each mark may be seen in your church.

The four marks in my church:

one

holy

catholic

apostolic

Welcome and Worship

Talk together about what you enjoy about your church. This may include for instance how people relate to one another, activities in your church, and roles that people play in the church.

Then pray together using the following prayer:

**At every moment of our existence
 You are present to us, Father,
 in gentle compassion.**

**Help us to be present to one another,
 So that our presence
 May be a strength
 That heals the wounds of time
 And gives hope that is for all persons
 Through Jesus, our Lord and Brother.
 Amen.***

*Weston Priory Vermont, 'Healing Prayer', in the Northumbria Community Trust, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Book One The Journey Begins* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p.424

Reflecting Together

We saw in our first session that the church is a community of people in relationship to God. In this session we will think about the relationships between people in the church and how the church works together.

- Activity 2.1 Place the life-sized body outline where everyone can see it. Refer to this in the following discussion and use it to help you think about the image of the church as the body of Christ.



Welcome and Worship

Place the tree where everyone can see it. Tell everyone that it represents your church family - it is your church family tree.

Say together the final section of the Nicene Creed, as a statement of faith:

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.

**We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the age to come.**

Then ask one person to pray, dedicating your time together to God.

Reflecting Together

Notice that the Nicene Creed contains a statement about the church. This statement describes the church in four ways: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These have been called the four *marks* of the church.

Each mark makes a distinct point about the church.

- Activity 4.1 Hang the four big leaves on the tree, one at a time. What do the four words mean? Use the box on the next page to help you talk about the meaning of the four marks.

The body of Christ is perhaps the most familiar image of the church used in the New Testament. This image is organic: it implies life, growth, and action.

One chapter of the New Testament that particularly helps us to think about the body of Christ is 1 Corinthians 12. This chapter compares the church to a human body.

- Activity 2.2 Read out loud 1 Corinthians 12.12-26. Then look at verses 12-13. These two verses refer to the church body as one unit. The body has unity. The source of this unity is the Holy Spirit.

Look at your body outline. In what ways is the human body united? What are the implications of this for the life of your church?

Write or draw your ideas on your body outline.

Session 4

The Church as God's Household

The church is God's family on earth. We live for Christ right where we are.

Resources

For this session you will need:

- A small tree in a pot – either a small conifer or a bare branch placed in a pot to look like a tree
- Four big leaves in four different colours, to hang on the tree, each with one of the following words on it: one, holy, catholic, apostolic
- A large number of tree 'leaves' cut out of card with a string attached so that you may hang them on the tree
- Coloured markers or pens
- One Bible per person
- Flip chart



- Activity 2.3 Using your responses to Activity 2.2, consider:

Why is it important that everyone in your church works together?



What is the role of the Holy Spirit in helping your church to work together?

The body is one unit, yet it has many parts.

- Activity 2.4 Verses 14-20 make the point that within this one body there is great diversity. The parts of the body have different roles, yet each part is necessary to the whole body.



Use verses 14-20 to talk about how each body part has a role to play in the body.

Verses 14-20 show us that everyone in the church has a role to play. Each of us is important. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to *every* member of the church for the life of the *whole* church.

- Activity 2.5 When you participate in the life of your church and use your abilities for other people, you bless the whole community. Talk about some examples of this, focusing as much as possible on the people in your group.



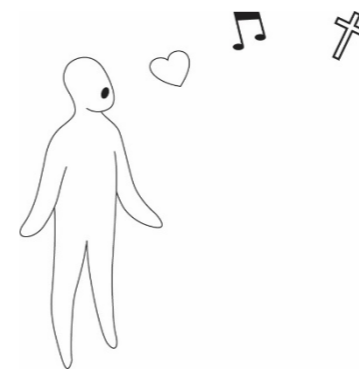
Write the names of the people in your group on the body outline and note next to them some of the roles they play in the body.

- Activity 2.6 Verses 21-26 point out that we are dependent upon one another. We need one another. One body part is *not* more important than another body part, no matter what the appearance.

Why are all of the gifts in your church equally valuable?

The other word for worship means adoration. It refers to taking time out to come before God and to praise him.


A good analogy is a parent with their child. The parent demonstrates their love for their child by washing their clothes. The parent also demonstrates their love for their child by kissing the child and saying 'I love you'. The first form of love is like worship as service. The second is like worship as adoration.



- Activity 3.7 Divide everyone into small groups. Ask each group to write a prayer or their own psalm which gives thanks and praise to God. You may want to use the list written for Activity 3.6 to help you.

Write your prayer or Psalm here:

- Activity 3.8 Worship God using your prayers and psalms. Ask each small group to lead the rest of the group with their prayer or psalm.

 You may want to conclude by singing together one of the songs that you used at the beginning of this session.

Responding

The Old Testament temple was the place where God was worshipped in Israel. The church, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, is the place where God is worshipped throughout the world.



The New Testament uses two different words for 'worship'. One word for worship means to serve God. It means living our daily lives in a way that honours God. Worship is not an intellectual exercise. We are called to worship God with our head, heart, and hands.

- Activity 3.6 In what ways might you worship God in your everyday life? Can you think of any examples?

Ask the group to give short responses to these questions and make a list of these responses.

List of responses:



- Activity 2.7 In Durham Diocese, we are encouraging both lay people and clergy to develop their gifts for the sake of the whole church.

What are some ways that this might happen in your church?

Responding

The body of Christ shows us that our church may be diverse, yet united. There is a difference between unity and uniformity. We are called to be together, but not all to be the same. Each of us is a valued part of the church.

- Activity 2.8 Divide everyone into teams of 3-4 people. Give each team an A3 sheet of paper. Place the craft materials, markers, scissors, glue, tape and blu-tack in the centre of the room for everyone to use.


On your paper, your team should use the craft supplies to create a collage of your church. The collage should depict your church as a group of people working together.

Give the teams exactly 7 minutes to create their collage. Use an egg timer to mark the time. All of the teams have to stop when the buzzer goes off.

- Activity 2.9 Each team should *briefly* explain their collage. What does your collage suggest about your church?

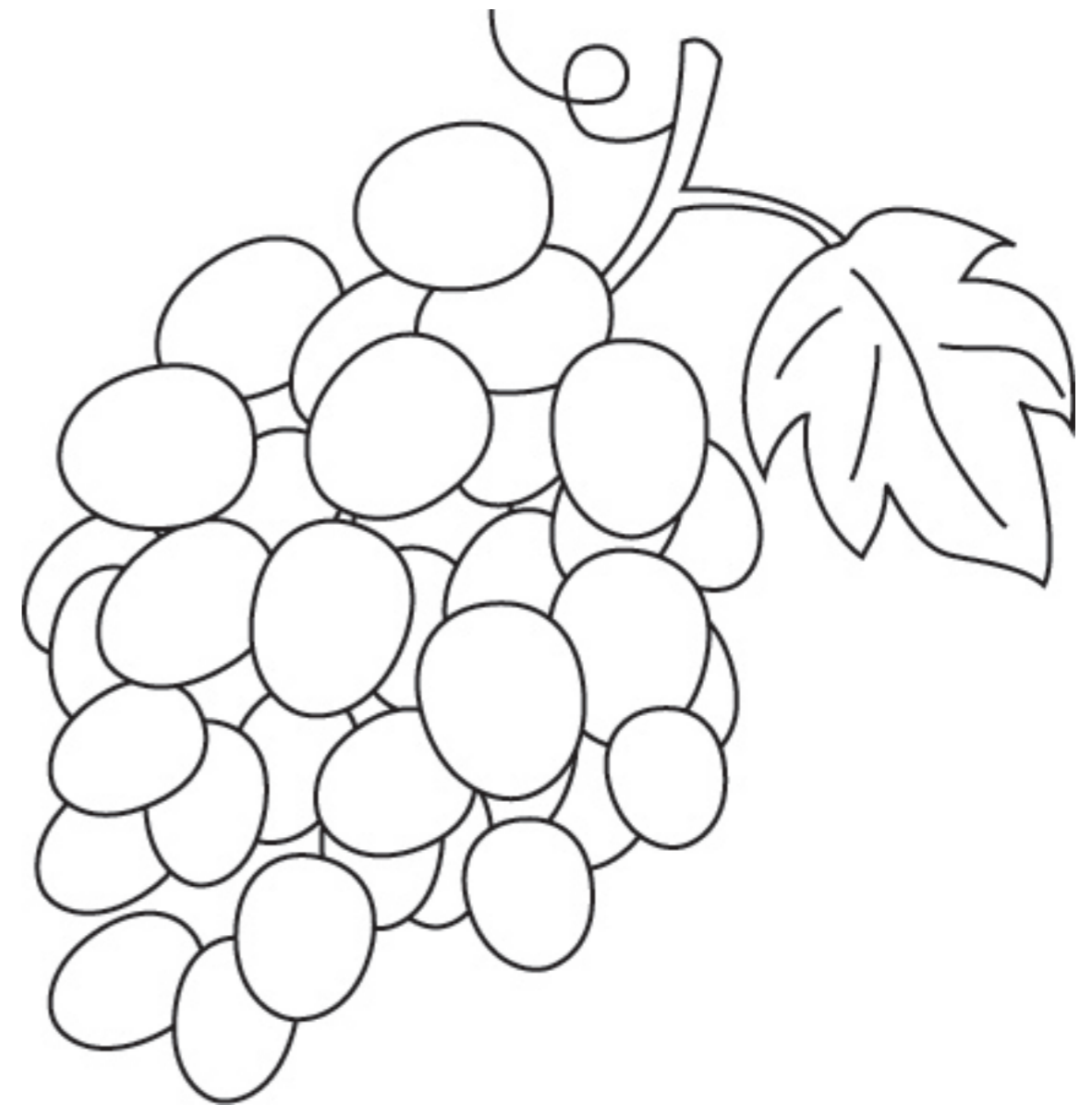
- Activity 2.10 Talk about the experience of creating the collage. What role did you play in your team? Who led? Who organised? Who came up with the ideas? Who provided enthusiasm? Who focused on the task and got it done? How important was it that all of you worked together?

What does all of this suggest about everyone's role in the life of your church?

 To conclude, sing together 'Longing for Light' by Bernadette Farrell.

Take a few minutes to think about the nine fruit that are listed in this passage. They are all concerned with our character. Which ones do you find easy? Which ones are more difficult?

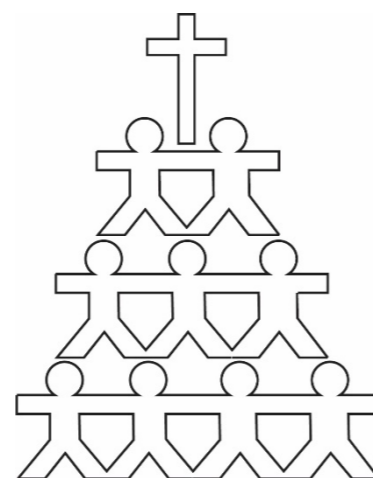
Draw or write your thoughts on this drawing of grapes:



Eat the grapes!

To understand the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit, it is helpful to think about the Old Testament temple. The temple was visible to everyone. It said to everyone who saw it, 'God is here in the midst of these people'.

- Activity 3.4 As the temple of the Spirit, God's people are a sign of God's presence in the world. The world may deny that God exists, but the church proclaims that there are still people on earth who follow God.



What are the implications of this for your church community?

Because the temple is the site of God's presence, it is holy. As the temple of the Spirit, the church is holy.

To be holy is to be set apart for God. We, God's people, are holy when we live in a way that reflects God's character. The Holy Spirit makes this possible.

- Activity 3.5 Place the bowl of grapes in front of the group. Read Galatians 5.22-25. Use the grapes to talk about how the Holy Spirit produces fruit within us. What enables fruit to grow? How long does it take? What would happen if some of the grapes on the bunch grew and others did not?

Session 3

The Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit

**The Holy Spirit dwells in God's people.
What does this mean for your church?**




Resources

For this session you will need:

- The words and music to a number of praise songs, such as: 'Lord I Lift Your Name on High' by Rick Founds, 'Jesus, Be the Centre' by Michael Frye, or 'In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful' by Jacques Berthier.
- One Bible per person
- A large bowl of grapes, or a bowl of assorted fruit.

Welcome and Worship

 Begin by singing one or two simple praise songs. Some suggestions include: 'Lord I Lift Your Name on High' by Rick Founds, or 'Jesus, Be the Centre' by Michael Frye.

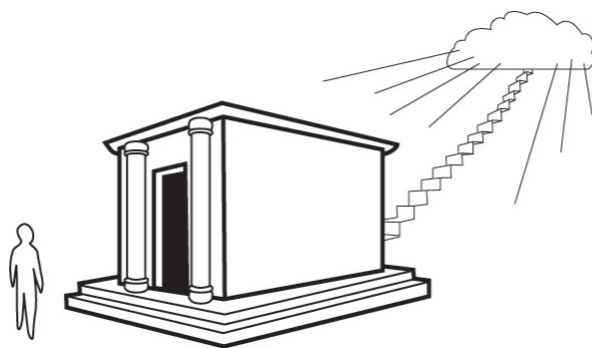
Alternatively, you may want to sing a Taizé worship song such as 'In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful' by Jacques Berthier.

Give thanks to God for his presence with you.

Reflecting Together

Where does God live? If someone asked you this question, you would probably say 'heaven'. But what if someone asked, does God have a home anywhere on earth? The Old Testament provides a clear answer to this: the temple.

- Activity 3.1 Read aloud 1 Kings 8.10-29. Solomon has just built the Israelite temple. In this passage, he dedicates the temple and calls it God's house. What strikes you in this story?



What do verses 27-29 suggest about where God dwells?

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost changes things.



- Activity 3.2 Read 1 Corinthians 3.16-17. The word 'you' in these verses is plural. It refers to the whole people of God.

Based on this passage, where does God dwell?

What are the implications of this for your church community?

- Activity 3.3 Now read 1 Corinthians 6.19-20. The 'you' in this passage is singular. It refers to each individual in the church. Each person is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells in you.



What are the implications for your own life with God?