

Care, Compassion, and Forgiveness

Session Focus

This session on living a moral life explores the role of forgiveness and compassion in moral living. It offers a moral decision-making process for participants and challenges participants to live lives of compassion and forgiveness modeled on the compassion of Jesus Christ.

Learning Objectives

This session on Care, Compassion, and Forgiveness guides learners of all ages to...

- Comprehend Christian teaching on the formation of conscience
- Value and appreciate the role of compassion and forgiveness in moral living
- Live the Gospel by bringing compassion and forgiveness to the world

Session Overview

Part 1. (10 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (30 minutes) All Ages Learning: The Prodigal Son

Part 3. (90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: Compassion, Forgiveness, and Moral Living

- Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Groups Format : Participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (10 minutes) Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (10 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering and Prayer

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service and Bible

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Handouts #1, #2

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Colored paper, scissors, markers
- Handouts #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering and Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

Preparation

Prepare a newsprint sheet or handout that lists the order of the activities or create a PowerPoint presentation that guides people through the session.

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute the handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In-Depth Learning program at the beginning of the activity.)
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, using the words below or your own words.

This session explores the role of forgiveness and compassion in moral living. It offers a moral decision-making process for participants and challenges us to live lives of compassion and forgiveness modeled on the compassion of Jesus Christ.

Present an overview and the schedule of the program.

1. Group Formation

Organize all participants into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3) organize the participants into three types of table groups or break-out sessions: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults.

2. Opening Prayer Service: Hands of Compassion and Forgiveness

Preparation

Surround the meeting room with large images of hands, hearts, and posters of people who have or have had a compassionate presence in the world—Mother Teresa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and so on.

Set up a prayer table with a Bible open to the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11), a candle, and the Ten Commandments “tablets.”

Gather

We begin our prayer in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Compassionate God, your love is constant and persistent. Jesus showed us the way of compassion and invites us to be his compassionate presence in the world today. Help us to respond to his call and to bring his love to the world. Amen

Listen

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.' For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5: 43-48).

Respond

Leader: Jesus' command to love our enemies is a hard one and a message that the world so desperately needs to hear. Love, forgiveness, and compassion are needed to bring our homes, communities, and world to healing and fullness of life. So we pray....

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Leader: "As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to Jesus; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them" (Luke 4:40).

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Leader: "On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!'" (Mark 6:2).

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Leader: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'" (John 11:44).

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Leader: "Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead'" (Luke 10:30).

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Leader: "Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray" (Matthew 19:13).

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Leader: "Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'" (Luke 23:46).

Response: **May our hands be instruments of compassion.**

Our Father, who art in heaven. . .

Response: **May we witness to your truth.**

Amen.

Go Forth

May the love of God help us to love. Amen

May the compassion of Christ help us to serve. Amen

May the wisdom of the Spirit help us to make compassionate decisions. Amen

We close our prayer in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: The Prodigal Son (25 minutes)

The focus of the All Ages Learning Experience is to help the participants remember and experience anew the power of God's compassion and forgiveness as described by Jesus in the story of the Prodigal Son.

Preparation

Recruit a reader for the Prodigal Son Story (Luke 15:11-32) or prepare a simple drama to share it with the participants.

Recruit and prepare the "cast members" of the prodigal son story (Handout #1) who will share some insights about the gospel passage from their character's perspective: a member of the audience, the Father, the prodigal son, the older brother, the farmer, and "you." Prepare a small sign with the character's name on it, that the cast member will hold up while speaking.

Materials Needed

- Handout #1 for cast members
- Handout #2, one per table group

The Story of the Prodigal Son

Invite the reader to proclaim the Prodigal Son Story (Luke 15:11-32).

Invite the "cast members" of the prodigal son story to share their reflections.

Audience

I was there that day listening to Jesus. What a story – to imagine that a son would be so bold as to disobey our laws, traditions, and customs by asking his father for his inheritance before his father passed away. By law, the firstborn son receives a double share of the inheritance, and the second son only a third—*after* the father dies. With the younger son gone and his inheritance too, the older brother and father would have to work that much harder to care for the estate. That son did not deserve anything from his father. His father should have just told him to go away and make it on his own. I, for one, was not surprised to hear that the younger son ended up penniless and broke—that would be a just punishment for his sinful choices.

Farmer

I am a farmer. The younger son worked on my pig farm. I knew he was lost and desperate. No Jew would work with pigs because they are seen as unclean in their culture. I thought for sure he would be around my farm for a long time because his family certainly would not want him back.

The Father

I can see why people have a hard time understanding why I welcomed my youngest son back. I know they thought for sure I would disown him, but he was my son! I bent social customs by running to see him, and I hugged him even though he was not clean and needed a cleansing ceremony to become pure again. In my joy and desire to offer him forgiveness, I kissed him. I wanted him to know that I was ready to forgive him. I gave him shoes, so he would know that he was to be a free man and not a barefoot slave. I gave him a ring and a robe to re-establish his sense of self-esteem and to help him feel good about himself again. Of course we killed the fatted calf! I needed the whole community to know of my love for my son, to let them know that he was home!!

Younger Son

I know that no one really likes me and most people think I deserve punishment, not a party. I needed to go home, I needed to make amends with my father, and I was tired and hungry. I didn't think my father would welcome me back as his son, but I hoped that at least I could be one of his slaves. What an incredible gift of love my father gave me. He warmly welcomed me home as if I had never done anything wrong.

The Older Son

I bet many of you can relate to me the most. When I heard that my brother had returned and how my father had welcomed him, I became angry. I had faithfully stayed and worked with my father while my brother ran off to play. It just did not seem fair to me that Father was treating him so well. I don't care that my father was treating me the same way; it just did not seem fair to me that my brother got such a great welcome home. He should have at least had to earn his way back into our lives.

Everyone

I am one of you, someone trying to understand how this story is asking me to respond. Jesus ends the story with a positive message of forgiveness, which flows from the bountiful and unconditional love of the father. However, Jesus does not resolve the anger felt by the older son. Each of us must decide for ourselves how to handle God's incredible acts of forgiveness. One's condemnation of another's sin will not change how God decides to forgive that person. God embraces each of us in our sinfulness, and models for us how we are called to forgive one another as well as ourselves.

Invite participants in small groups to discuss some or all of the following questions:

- Which character in the story do you identify with most? Why?
- Why does our society tend to see forgiveness as a "foolish act"? What is gained by not reconciling with another?
- If you could make forgiveness happen anywhere in the world, what situation would you apply it to? Why?
- How is compassion part of forgiveness? What role does it play?
- What is the connection between moral living and forgiveness?

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experience: Compassion, Forgiveness, and Moral Living (75-90 minutes)

Families with Children Learning Experience: Compassion, Forgiveness, and Conscience

Preparation

Select at least three movie clips depicting people who model compassion in today's world. Choose clips for an all ages audience. Some recommendations include: Dorothy Day as portrayed in the movie *Entertaining Angels*; Father Mychal Judge, as portrayed in the documentary *Saint of 9/11*; and Dr. Patch Adams, as portrayed in the movie *Patch Adams*.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #3, #4, #5, #6, #7
- Pens and paper
- Equipment needed to show movie clips
- Markers, crayons, scissors, a few staplers
- Colored construction paper
- Staplers

1. Compassion and the People Who Met Jesus

Give each table group one copy of Handout #3. Ask them to divide the pages so that each biblical story will be explored by at least one person at the table. There are six stories. If there are more than six people at the table, some persons can pair up to explore a story. If there are fewer than six persons at a table, some persons can take two stories.

Instruct them to read the background of the person who met Jesus, then read the story from Scripture, and lastly respond to the questions.

When all are ready, ask each person to summarize their Gospel story for the small group, and share their responses to the questions.

In your own words or using the words below, explain the following:

Jesus gives us clear indicators of what compassion is all about. Fundamentally compassion involves two things:

First, compassion involves the ability to be with another person in their time of need, distress, or "passion." The Latin root of the word "compassion" means to have the same passion, or to enter into the experience of another's passion. We can never say that we know exactly how another feels, but we can be present to them and their emotional and physical realities in their time of need.

Second, compassion involves the desire to alleviate, to change if possible, the cause of distress for the other, or to support the other as he or she moves through the distress. There are many times

that we cannot “fix” another’s situation, but we can support them through our resources of time, energy, and financial aid.

Using Handout #4 as a guide, invite participants to integrate their discussions on Jesus’ compassion by creating an examination of conscience to review how compassionately they are living. While adults may want to work on this individually, families with children should work together.

Remind participants:

An examination of conscience is a series of questions used to review one’s day before retiring at night.

When participants have finished creating their Examination of Conscience, direct them to the latter part of the handout which offers seven steps for using it. Encourage participants to take the handout home and keep it in place where they will use it often.

2. Faces of Compassion

In your own words or using the words below, explain the following:

There are people who model for us what compassion in today’s world looks like. We are going to spend some time with them so they can challenge us to live more compassionate lives and to make choices rooted in love and compassion.

Using Handout #5 and the movie clips that you have prepared, present examples of people who incarnate compassion. From Handout #5, invite participants to read about people of compassion.

Once the participants have either experienced the movie clips or read about the people of compassion, invite them to integrate their learning using **one** of the following activities:

1. **Create a want ad or Old West “Wanted” Poster**, advertising for a person of compassion. The people of compassion we just met showed us many attributes and qualities of compassion. What qualities would you look for?
2. **Create a chain of compassion.** Invite participants to trace their hand on a piece of colored paper and cut it out. On each finger of their hand have them draw ways and places they can be people of compassion and forgiveness. Using a stapler, join all the hands together by stapling the thumb of one hand image to the thumb on another’s hand image, stapling all the group’s work together to create a long chain of hands reaching out to bring compassion to the world. Place the chain of hands in the closing prayer space.
3. **Write a letter of gratitude** to someone you know who shares compassion with the world, thanking them for who they are and what they do to make the world a more compassionate place.

3. Conscience—Our Guiding Star

Distribute Handout #6 to all participants.

In your own words or using the words below, explain the following:

At the heart of all moral decision-making is the compassion and forgiveness of God. Making moral decisions is all about helping our conscience choose actions that are of God. Our conscience is that space inside us in which we listen with all our being to the voice of God. God calls us to love, to do what is good, and to avoid evil. Have you ever heard the phrase “informed conscience”? Each baptized person is called to form their conscience. How does one do that?

Imagine your conscience is like a star. The neat thing about stars, and their placement in the sky, is that you can use them as a guide so you do not get lost. We are going to use the image of a star to help us to understand conscience and making moral decisions.

At the heart of our conscience is God’s love and compassion for us, and a part of God’s love and compassion for us is his gift of freedom. God created us in God’s image, and we are called to choose to love, care for, and forgive others so that all may have life. To symbolize God’s love and our freedom being at the heart of moral decision-making, in the middle of your star I would like you to draw a heart and write the word “FREE” inside the heart.

Just like a star in the night, shining brightly to the world around it, we too are called to shine brightly by keeping our conscience in good shape. The star on your handout has five points on it, and we are going to use those five points to remind ourselves of five things to keep our consciences healthy.

The first point of the star symbolizes the Bible. When we read and learn about Scripture, it helps us to know who God’s people are called to be, and how we are called to act. On one point of your star, either draw a Bible or write the word “Bible” in it.

Ask participants to discuss how Scripture is a part of their lives using these questions.

- Do you only listen to or read Scripture at Sunday liturgy or do you take time for Scripture during the week?
- How could you make Scripture more a part of your life?

The second point on the star symbolizes the teachings of our church. The church helps us to understand our faith and provides us with necessary information to make good decisions about the many issues in our lives and world. On one point of your star, draw the church or write the word “church” in it.

The third point on our stars symbolizes prayer. If we really want to hear God’s voice so that God may help us to respond with love and compassion, we need to spend time alone and in community praying and listening to God. The more we open our hearts to God’s love in prayer, the more capable we become of making compassionate decisions. On one point of your star, draw a candle as a symbol of prayer or write the word “Prayer.”

Ask participants to discuss how prayer is a part of their lives using these questions.

- How do you pray?
- How is prayer part of your moral decision-making?

The fourth point on our stars symbolizes openness. The only way our consciences will be able to grow is through open hearts and minds that look at situations from all angles. Sometimes we have to take time to seriously learn about something before we can make a good choice in a situation. To symbolize openness, draw a key on one point of your star or write the word “Openness.”

The fifth point on our stars symbolizes community. It represents the community of our family, the community of our church, the community of the world. Every decision we make, even when we think it only involves ourselves, has an effect on somebody else. If we steal something we hurt the person whom we stole it from. If we don’t reach out in love and support to those around us, they, in turn, will be less able to love those around them. To symbolize community on your star, I invite you to draw some happy faces or stick people, or to write the word “Community.”

We know that stars do not hang in the night sky alone. They are surrounded by other stars, sparkling and bringing light to the world. Around your star, I invite you to take a few minutes to draw some stars. Draw them large enough so that inside each star you can write the initials of the people who help you make good decisions, the people who help you to fill the world with the love and compassion of God.

When participants have completed their stars, invite them to take them home and post them in a prominent place.

4. Steps for Moral Decision Making

Provide a copy of Handout # 7 to the families and participants.

Illustrate the moral decision-making process outlined in the handout by giving the group one or two typical children and family-related examples of moral choices and how to reflect on them using the process.

Step 1. REMEMBER God’s Commandments.

- Honor and love God always. Pray.
- Speak God’s name with reverence and respect.
- Worship God every week on Sunday.
- Love, respect, and obey your parents.
- Show respect and kindness to all people.
- Be honest. Tell the truth.
- Be faithful and loyal to your family and friends.
- Forgive people who hurt you. Ask for forgiveness when you hurt others.
- Share what you have with others.
- Serve people in need.
- Respect what belongs to others.

Step 2. LEARN from Others.

- Draw upon what you have learned from your family, from adults you respect, and from your church community about right and wrong behavior.

Step 3. LISTEN to Your Conscience.

- Let your conscience, the voice of God inside you, tell you what is right and wrong.
- Think about why you want to do one thing or the other. Pay attention to your feelings as well as to your thoughts.

Step 4. PRAY to the Holy Spirit.

- The Holy Spirit will guide you in forming your conscience. Pray for help in doing what your conscience tells you is right.

Step 5. ACT.

- Make your decision, live the decision, and then think about how the way you live affects others such as your family, friends, and classmates.

Ask each family to identify several typical moral choices or dilemmas they face as a whole family, and that children face each day at home, school, or activities. Parents should ask their children to identify moral choices (choices between right and wrong, good and bad) they have to make. Parents should write all the choices on a sheet of paper.

Tell each family to select one or two typical moral choices from daily life and to use the moral decision-making process to help them choose the best response to the situation.

Adolescent Learning Experience: Compassion, Forgiveness, and Moral Living

Materials Needed

- Pencils or pens for each participant
- Handouts #3, #4, #6, #8, #9

1. Compassion and the People Who Met Jesus

Give each table group one copy of Handout #3. Ask them to divide the pages so that each biblical story will be explored by at least one person at the table. There are six stories. If there are more than six people at the table, some persons can pair up to explore a story. If there are fewer than six persons at a table, some persons can take two stories.

Instruct them to read the background of the person who met Jesus, then read the story from Scripture, and lastly respond to the questions.

When all are ready, ask each person to summarize their Gospel story for the small group, and share their responses to the questions.

In your own words or using the words below, explain the following:

Jesus gives us clear indicators of what compassion is all about. Fundamentally compassion involves two things.

First, compassion involves the ability to be with another person in their time of need, distress, or “passion.” The Latin root of the word “compassion” means to have the same passion, or to enter into the experience of another’s passion. We can never say that we know exactly how another feels, but we can be present to them and their emotional and physical realities in their time of need.

Second, compassion involves the desire to alleviate, to change if possible, the cause of distress for the other, or to support the other as he or she moves through the distress. There are many times that we cannot “fix” another’s situations, but we can support them through the use of our resources of time, energy, and financial aid.

Using Handout #4 as a guide, invite participants to integrate their discussions of Jesus’ compassion by creating an examination of conscience to review how compassionately they are living. Participants should work individually on this task.

Remind participants:

An examination of conscience is a series of questions used to review one’s day before retiring at night.

When participants have finished creating their Examination of Conscience, direct them to the latter part of the handout which offers seven steps for using it. Encourage them to take the handout home and keep it in place where they will use it often.

2. Forgiveness in Our World

Invite participants to discuss with one another the question:

- Do you think there are situations in which forgiveness is humanly impossible? Cite some examples and reasons why you think forgiveness might be impossible.

Invite participants to read together Handout #8 that describes an incredible act of forgiveness. Have them discuss these questions:

- In light of what you have read in this article, what does forgiveness look like? What values, actions, and attitudes does it include?
- What do you think makes it possible for people to offer forgiveness to another? For example, how is compassion a critical element of forgiveness?

In your own words or using the words below, communicate the following:

If it is true that forgiveness is born of love and love is the flip side of forgiveness, we might ask how we come to this love. And what does it look like?

First, we come to love by loving. A simple answer, and perhaps not very helpful. Nevertheless, it expresses a basic truth of the moral life. We cultivate virtue by performing virtuous acts. If we wish to become a courageous person, we learn to act courageously. If we are to become chaste, we must perform chaste actions. In like manner, if we are to be people who love, we must perform loving acts.

So, if we are to be people of forgiveness, we must practice acts of compassion and acts of forgiveness, intentionally choosing to be present to another and intentionally choosing to participate in forgiveness.

Sometimes it's hardest to forgive the ones we love the most. Often those are the ones we find ourselves in conflict with the most. Families who heal and reconcile well show some similar characteristics. Consider these points:

- They recognize conflict is inevitable. Better to deal with it than to deny it.
- They spend their energy seeking solutions rather than laying blame. Playing the blame game goes nowhere.
- They distinguish the person from the act. While some behaviors are reprehensible, each person is good and to be valued.
- They understand the difference between excusing and forgiving.
- They ritualize and celebrate their healing. They hug, laugh, eat . . . they do something to acknowledge that the hurt is gone.

Which of these characteristics does your family have? Which ones do you need to work on?

3. Compassion and Moral Living

Distribute Handout #6 to all participants.

In your own words or using the words below, explain the following:

At the heart of all moral decision-making is the compassion and forgiveness of God. Making moral decisions is all about helping our conscience choose actions that are of God. Our conscience is that space inside of us in which we listen with all our being to the voice of God. God calls us to love, to do what is good, and to avoid evil. Have you ever heard the phrase "informed conscience"? Each baptized person is called to form their conscience. How does one do that?

Imagine your conscience is like a star. The neat thing about stars, and their placement in the sky, is that you can use them as a guide so you do not get lost. We are going to use the image of a star to help us understand conscience and making moral decisions.

At the heart of our conscience is God's love and compassion for us, and part of God's love and compassion for us is his gift of freedom. God created us in God's image, and we are called to choose to love, care for, and forgive others so that all may have life. To symbolize God's love and our freedom being at the heart of moral decision-making, in the middle of your star I would like you to draw a heart and write the word "FREE" inside the heart.

The word free can be explained as:

- F faithful. God's love is faithful and we are invited through our freedom to be faithful in return.
- R responsibility. We are response-able, able to choose how we will respond in any given situation.
- E equal. Created in the image and dignity of God, all are created equal in God's eyes and our freedom includes respecting the rights and dignity of others.
- E evolving. We are called to grow and learn, to keep our consciences informed. Living, loving, and learning are unending as we evolve to be the best we can be.

Just like a star in the night shining brightly to the world around it, we too are called to shine brightly by keeping our consciences in good shape. The star on your handout has five points on it, and we are going to use those five points to remind ourselves of five things to keep our consciences healthy.

The first point of the star symbolizes the Bible. When we read and learn about Scripture, God's word helps us know who God's people are called to be, and how we are called to act. On one point of your star, either draw a Bible or write the word "Bible" in it.

Ask participants to discuss how Scripture is a part of their lives using these questions.

- Do you only listen to or read Scripture at Sunday liturgy or do you take time for Scripture during the week?
- How could you make Scripture more a part of your life?

The second point on the star symbolizes the teachings of our church. The church helps us to understand our faith and provides us with necessary information to make good decisions about the many issues in our lives and world. On one point of your, draw the church or write the word "church" in it.

The third point on our stars symbolizes prayer. If we really want to be able to hear God's voice so God can help us respond with love and compassion, we need to spend time alone and in community praying and listening to God. The more we open our hearts to God's love in prayer, the more capable we become of making compassionate decisions. On one point of your star, draw a candle as a symbol of prayer or write the word "Prayer."

Ask participants to discuss how prayer is a part of their lives using these questions.

- How do you pray?
- How is prayer part of your decision-making?

The fourth point on our stars symbolizes openness. The only way our consciences will be able to grow is by having open hearts and minds that look at situations from all angles. Sometimes we have to take time to seriously learn about something before we can make a good choice in a situation. To symbolize openness, draw a key on one point of your star or write the word "Openness."

The fifth point on our stars symbolizes community. It represents the community of our family, the community of our church, the community of the world. Every decision we make, even when we

think it only involves ourselves, has an effect on somebody else. If we steal something we hurt the person whom we stole it from. If we don't reach out in love and support to those around us, they, in turn, will be less able to love those around them. To symbolize community on your star, draw some happy faces or stick people or write the word "Community."

We know that stars do not hang in the night sky alone. They are surrounded by other stars, sparkling and bringing light to the world. Around your star, I invite you to take a few minutes to draw some stars. Draw them large enough so that inside each star you can write the initials of the people who help you to make good decisions, the people who help you to fill the world with the love and compassion of God.

When participants have completed their stars, invite them to take the stars home and post in a prominent place.

4. Steps for Moral Decision Making

In your own words, or using the words below, present the basics for making a good moral decision. Ask teens to follow along using the information on Handout #9. Illustrate the process by giving the group two examples of typical adolescent moral choices and how to reflect on them using the process.

"Moral decision-making is like preparing for a football game. Attention to the many factors involved in a football game results in a better overall game. Similarly, if we were seriously ill we would seek as much information, advice, and guidance as possible to help us make the best decision about how to treat the illness. If we were faced with other decisions, such as what kind of car to buy or whether to go to college, we would take steps to ensure that our decisions are thoughtful and responsible.

"...the decisions that affect our moral life should not be made quickly or without forethought. Being alert to the many factors involved will improve our moral decision-making.

"We have the freedom and the wisdom to judge whether an act is good or bad. That wisdom comes from God the Father, who has placed his natural law within us, endowed us with conscience, and given us the Ten Commandments, the witness of his Son, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. And if that isn't enough, God has given us the church to teach us about faith and morals. The church identifies three traditional sources of morality—the object chosen, the intention, and the circumstances surrounding the act—to help us judge the goodness or evil of an act.

"The **object chosen** refers to what we do. Good acts involve something we know is good—feeding the poor, refusing to ridicule a classmate, visiting the sick, telling the truth, and so on. Bad acts involve matters that we know are bad—selling drugs, killing an innocent person, stealing, deliberately harming another person's reputation, and so on.

"The **intention** refers to our motive or intention in performing an act. Giving a blanket to a homeless person because we are concerned for his well-being is a good act with a good intention. Cleaning a neighbor's house because we want to steal from that neighbor is an example of a good act done with an evil motive. Murdering a tyrannical dictator because we want to free a nation from oppression is an evil act for what appears to be good reasons. But we cannot justify an evil act performed for good reasons.

The *circumstances* of an act refers to conditions surrounding the act that affect its goodness or evil. This includes things like the amount of damage caused or the reason for the act. There are factors that come into play when judging the goodness and evil of an act. Fear, ignorance, and pressure are some examples of these mitigating factors.

While a morally good act requires the goodness of its object, of its intention, and of its circumstances, there are certain acts that are always wrong to choose, such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery” (*Morality*, p. 123).

A well-formed conscience will guide us to do what is right and good, and we can make good decisions if we have the help of Christ’s teachings in Scripture, the faith tradition, the Holy Spirit, prayer, and wise people.

Step 1: CONSIDER the Situation.

- What moral values and moral choices are at stake in this situation?
- What are the consequences of the different choices?

Step 2: INFORM Your Conscience.

- What is God saying through the Bible and especially the Ten Commandments about this moral choice?
- What would Jesus want you to do? What is he teaching you through his words and deeds in the Gospels?
- What is the faith tradition teaching you about this moral choice?
- What are your family, adults you respect, and your church community teaching you about right and wrong behavior in this situation?

Step 3: LISTEN to Your Conscience.

- What choice would be most faithful to God’s commandments and teachings?
- Let your conscience, the voice of God inside you, tell you what is right and wrong.
- Think about why you want to do one thing or the other. Pay attention to your motives, feelings, and thoughts.

Step 4: PRAY to the Holy Spirit.

- The Holy Spirit will guide you in forming your conscience. Pray for help in doing what your conscience tells you is right.

Step 5: ACT.

- Make your decision, live the decision, and then think about how the way you live affects others such as your family, friends, and community.

At table groups ask the adolescents to identify typical moral choices or dilemmas they face in life. Then invite them to use the moral decision-making process to choose their response to the situation.

Conclude by engaging the young people in a discussion of the moral decision-making process using the following questions:

- How does the moral decision-making process help you in making moral choices?
- How can teenagers use this process in making moral choices?

- Do you see yourself using this process when facing a moral choice? How can this process become so natural that it becomes a part of your everyday life?

Adult Learning Experience: Compassion, Forgiveness, and Formation of Conscience

Preparation

Prepare these sentences on a PowerPoint or on newsprint.

- The most difficult thing about making moral decisions is...
- When I make a moral decision, I usually consult...
- I believe my conscience is important in making a moral decision because...
- The tough moral issues people today are struggling with are...

Prepare these questions on a PowerPoint presentation or on newsprint.

- Think back over the past year. Recall issues or struggles that required you to make a moral choice or decision.
- As you review the choices and decisions you made, recall the influences (people, values, faith) and factors (thoughts, feelings, actions) that helped you know how you should decide.
- As you think back on the moral choices and decisions you have made (both the good ones and the ones that proved unwise), how have you known that your decision was right or wrong? What criteria did you use to make a moral choice or decision? What thoughts, feelings, or actions went into your decision-making process?

Prepare these questions on a PowerPoint presentation or on newsprint.

- What did you find helpful in the teaching? What will be challenging or difficult for you?
- How do you feel about the Christian belief that Christian morality is determined by objective standards?
- How do you feel about the emphasis placed on developing an informed Christian conscience and being faithful to one's conscience?
- What are the implications of the teachings for your moral decision-making?
- In what ways are forgiveness and compassion inherent in the teaching on moral living?

Materials Needed

- Pens or pencils for participants
- Handouts #3, #4, #8, #10

1. Compassion and the People Who Met Jesus

Give each table group one copy of Handout #3. Ask them to divide the pages so that each biblical story will be explored by at least one person at the table. There are six stories. If there are more than six people at the table, some persons can pair up to explore a story. If there are fewer than six persons at a table, some persons can take two stories.

Instruct them to read the background of the person who met Jesus, then read the story from Scripture, and lastly respond to the questions.

When all are ready, ask each person to summarize their Gospel story for the small group, and share their responses to the questions.

In your own words or using the words below, explain the following:

Jesus gives us clear indicators of what compassion is all about. Fundamentally compassion involves two things.

First, compassion involves the ability to be with another person in their time of need, distress, or “passion.” The Latin root of the word “compassion” means to have the same passion, or to enter into the experience of another’s passion. We can never say that we know exactly how another feels, but we can be present to them and their emotional and physical realities in their time of need.

Second, compassion involves the desire to alleviate, to change if possible, the cause of distress for the other, or to support the other as he or she moves through the distress. There are many times that we cannot “fix” another’s situation, but we can support them through our resources of time, energy, and financial aid.

Using Handout #4 as a guide, invite participants to integrate their discussions on Jesus’ compassion by creating an examination of conscience to review how compassionately they are living. Participants should work individually on this task.

Remind participants:

An examination of conscience is a series of questions used to review one’s day before retiring at night.

When participants have finished creating their Examination of Conscience, direct them to the latter part of the handout which offers seven steps for using it. Encourage them to take the handout home and keep it in a place where they will use it often.

2. Forgiveness in Our World

Invite participants to discuss with one another the question:

- Do you think there are situations in which forgiveness is humanly impossible? Cite some examples and reasons why you think forgiveness might be impossible.

Ask participants to read together Handout #8 that describes an incredible act of forgiveness. Have them discuss these questions:

- In light of what you have read in this article, what does forgiveness look like? What values, actions, and attitudes does it include?
- What do you think makes it possible for people to offer forgiveness to another? For example, how is compassion a critical element of forgiveness?

In your own words or using the words below, communicate the following:

If it is true that forgiveness is born of love and love is the flip side of forgiveness, we might ask how we come to this love. And what does it look like?

First, we come to love by loving. A simple answer, and perhaps not very helpful. Nevertheless, it expresses a basic truth of the moral life. We cultivate virtue by performing virtuous acts. If we wish to become a courageous person, we learn to act courageously. If we are to become chaste, we must perform chaste actions. In like manner, if we are to be people who love, we must perform loving acts.

So, if we are to be people of forgiveness, we must practice acts of compassion and acts of forgiveness, intentionally choosing to be present to another and intentionally choosing to participate in forgiveness.

Sometimes it's hardest to forgive the ones we love the most. Often, they are the ones we find ourselves in conflict with the most. Families who heal and reconcile well show some similar characteristics. Consider these points:

- They recognize conflict is inevitable. Better to deal with it than to deny it.
- They spend their energy seeking solutions rather than laying blame. Playing the blame game goes nowhere.
- They distinguish the person from the act. While some behaviors are reprehensible, each person is good and to be valued.
- They understand the difference between excusing and forgiving.
- They ritualize and celebrate their healing. They hug, laugh, eat . . . they do something to acknowledge that the hurt is gone.

Which of these characteristics does your family have? Which ones do you need to work on?

Invite participants to share with one another a way they feel called to practice compassion and forgiveness,

3. An Informed Conscience—Path to Compassionate Living

Organize the adults into table groups of six to eight people. Ask them to think about their personal responses to the following sentences displayed on a PowerPoint presentation or on newsprint.

- The most difficult thing about making moral decisions is...
- When I make a moral decision, I usually consult...
- I believe my conscience is important in making a moral decision because...
- The tough moral issues people today are struggling with are...

After several minutes ask group members to share their responses, question by question. Ask one person at the table to moderate the sharing.

Have participants reflect individually on moral choices they have had to make in the past year, and how they have gone about making those choices. Display these questions on a PowerPoint presentation or on newsprint.

- Think back over the past year. Recall issues or struggles that required you to make a moral choice or decision.
- As you review the choices and decisions you made, recall the influences (people, values, faith) and factors (thoughts, feelings, actions) that helped you know how you should decide.
- As you think back on the moral choices and decisions you have made (both the good ones and the ones that proved unwise), how have you known that your decision was right or wrong? What criteria did you use to make a moral choice or decision? What thoughts, feelings, or actions went into your decision-making process?

After sufficient time, ask group members to share their reflections on what makes a decision right or wrong for them. Remind groups that this is a sharing experience so they should be sure to give each person time to share his or her story without interruptions or discussion.

Use the following information to communicate to participants. Provide them with Handout #10 to follow along.

Handout #10 identifies key elements of moral decision-making and personal discernment, including...

- openness to God’s wisdom as revealed in the Bible, family, church, communal and private prayer, data from the physical and social sciences, etc.
- objective standards, core principles, values, and norms for behavior that are basic to human nature.
- the ability to exercise “prudential judgment” in the process of moving from absolute values to general norms to specific judgments in issues of morality.
- attentiveness to the faith tradition.
- faithfulness to one’s conscience: “With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one’s own heart.”

Moral decision making is a particular type of discernment process. To decide the right course of action, particularly about matters that may be complex or controversial, Christians must be open to the wisdom of God manifest in all these sources – the Bible, one’s family, the church, communal and private prayer, and the example of holy people throughout the ages. At the same time, data from the physical sciences, information from the social sciences, and the insights of human reason can all contribute to one’s discovering moral truth.

Critical points to remember include:

The Christian tradition has generally accepted a tiered or sequential approach to Christian ethics, as reflected in the traditional levels of natural law theory. Certain values and derived norms remain timeless and absolute. The belief that “good is to be sought and evil avoided” is one such fundamental principle.

Basic values such as life, love, and truth are indisputable. Each is a crucial part of human well-being. People of all races, nations, and times have been able to discover and affirm these as true.

Values imply certain actions. For example, we know that human life is a value. Therefore, in literally all cases, human life must be respected and honored with dignity.

In some cases, linking behavior to values is more difficult to discern. While we agree that one should always do the “loving thing” or the “life-respecting thing,” determining what that means in a given case may not be so self-evident. For example, when, if ever, is it “loving” or “life-respecting” to cease life-sustaining treatment for a terminally ill patient?

A person of sincere conscience may have perceived and acted on a moral situation in a manner inconsistent with the teaching of the church. Still, provided she or he did so with no intentional malice or desire to do wrong, the Christian tradition recognizes “mitigated subjective culpability” for a decision that objectively is wrong and ought not to have been made. Subjective culpability is determined by how diligently one strives to form correctly his or her conscience and how sincerely one follows that conscience.

In the end, whether choosing one’s vocation or making a moral decision that relates to or affects one’s vocation, each person is bound to live with and to stand by his or her own discernment or perception of God’s will.

Ultimately, each person must discern his or her own moral decisions and wider vocational calling. With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one’s own heart.

Ask the adults to discuss the following questions as a table group. Display the questions on a PowerPoint presentation or on newsprint.

- What did you find helpful in these teachings? What will be challenging or difficult for you?
- How do you feel about the belief that Christian morality is determined by objective standards?
- How do you feel about the emphasis placed on developing an informed Christian conscience and being faithful to one’s conscience?
- What are the implications of the teachings for your moral decision-making?
- In what ways are forgiveness and compassion inherent in the church’s teaching on moral living?

4. Steps for Moral Decision Making

Ask each table group to identify several typical moral choices that each person faces and several important moral choices facing our society. Tell each table group to select one typical personal moral choice people face and one important social moral choice.

Explain the moral decision-making process below. Participants will find the process outlined on Handout #10.

Step 1: CONSIDER the Situation.

- What moral values and moral choices are at stake in this situation?
- What are the consequences of the different choices?

Step 2: INFORM Your Conscience.

- What wisdom can you discern from the Bible, the Ten Commandments, the message and deeds of Jesus Christ, the faith tradition, and the lives of holy men and women?
- What wisdom can you discern from the significant people in your life: your family, your church community, your colleagues, people with moral integrity that you respect?
- What objective standards, core principles, values and norms for behavior can you identify from your discernment?

Step 3: LISTEN to Your Conscience.

- What are your intentions? Think about why you want to do one thing or the other. Pay attention to your motives, feelings, and thoughts.
- Be faithful to your well-informed conscience: “With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one’s own heart.”

Step 4: PRAY to the Holy Spirit.

- The Holy Spirit will guide you in forming your conscience and making a moral choice. Pray for help in doing what your conscience tells you is right.

Step 5: ACT.

- Exercise “prudential judgment” in moving from the wisdom of the Bible, the faith tradition, and significant people in your life to your moral choice.
- Determine the impact of your decision on you, and your family, friends, colleagues, and community.

Ask each table group to work together using the moral decision-making process to discern Christian moral choices for the two situations they chose. Tell them to take the first situation and move through each of the five steps, discussing the questions and identifying potential moral decisions. Then do the same with the second situation.

Give the groups sufficient time and then, using the following questions, ask them to discuss what they have learned from applying the moral decision-making process to the two situations:

- What was easy about making a moral choice using the process? What was difficult?
- What are the benefits of applying moral values from the Bible and Christian tradition to a moral choice?

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (15 minutes)

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they have learned with the entire group. Ask the participants to rejoin their intergenerational groups from the All Ages Learning Experience.

Present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to explore compassion, forgiveness, and moral decision-making. Please share your reflections on the following questions.

- What is the most important lesson you have learned?
- Why do you think compassion and forgiveness are important for our world today?
- How will the moral decision-making process help you to make good decisions?

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service: Compassion and Forgiveness— Gifts for the World (5-10 minutes)

Preparation

Recruit a reader for Matthew 5:43-48.

Materials Needed

- Bible

Gather

Listen

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.' For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5: 43-48).

Respond

Please respond to the petitions with...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When we see someone in need...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When we have hurt someone we love...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When we are with the sick and the dying...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When we serve the poor...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When someone asks for more than we think we are capable of giving...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When peace seems impossible...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When despair and apathy are present ...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

When God calls our name ...

May we bring compassion and forgiveness to the world.

Go Forth

May God bless us with compassionate hearts to help those in need. **Amen.**

May Jesus bless us with forgiveness to create a world of peace. **Amen.**

May the Spirit give us wisdom to make loving decisions. **Amen.**

And we close our prayer in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**