

The Practice of Celebrating Life

Session Focus

Life is meant to be celebrated in all its many forms. God created the earth in generosity and love, to be a place of goodness: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). In the broadest sense, every moment of life is an opportunity for celebration. Certainly, the big moments—a birth, reception of the sacraments, graduation, a promotion, becoming a citizen, retirement, anniversaries—are all times we are accustomed to celebrate. Even the end of life is an opportunity to celebrate, as we take time to be grateful for the life of the one who has died, recognizing how that person graced our lives with their presence and fulfilled a special purpose in the world. We celebrate life through rituals—be they simple or more involved. Some rituals occur daily—in the morning, before and after meals, or at bedtime—while others come along weekly, yearly, or once in a lifetime. Rituals celebrate special days, such as Christmas and birthdays, as well as the more routine times in life. They celebrate life as well as loss.

Session Activities

There are six activities for the Practice of Celebrating Life.

- Activity 1. Stories of Celebration
- Activity 2. Rituals in Our Lives
- Activity 3. The Christian Practice of Celebrating Life
- Activity 4. Celebrating Life through Rituals: Daily, Seasons, Life Transitions & Milestones
- Activity 5. Creating a Ritual Celebration
- Activity 6. Living the Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

Children’s Activities

There are four children’s activities to use with children and family activities.

1. Celebrating Life in My Family
2. Jesus Celebrates Life
3. Times to Celebrate Life
4. Celebrating Life

Celebrating Life Rituals Collection

Also include as a separate handout is a reproducible collection of rituals for the home: daily, milestones, and through the year.

A Learning Process for Christian Practices

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice incorporates four movements, which become the template for designing Christian practices learning programs.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Our Lives

The first movement, *Reflecting*, taps into a basic area of human need that can find meaning and purpose in a Christian practice. Reflecting gives people an opportunity to become aware of how they experience a basic human need and hunger for the Christian practice in their own life. Reflecting also provides space for people to become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that distort or hinder the practice.

Oftentimes this first movement begins with real-life stories (presentations, print, audio, and/or video) of people who seek meaning and purpose for their lives through a particular practice. This helps spark people's reflection and storytelling.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

The second movement, *Exploring*, grounds the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story deepens our understanding of the Christian practice and connects to people's human needs and hungers. We present the wisdom of the Christian tradition on a particular Christian practice, describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—how people or communities live the practice with exceptional grace and skill. By connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers, people can identify how and why a practice is important to living a meaningful life.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

The third movement, *Experiencing*, immerses people in the actual practice—opportunities to experience activities that lead them into the Christian practice. This immersion can take place in programs, within the life of the Christian community (such as worship and ministry activities), and/or out in the community (serving people, providing hospitality, etc.). The key is that people actually experience the practice.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

The fourth movement, *Living*, includes reflecting on the experience of the practice activities (Movement 3); showing people how to make the Christian practice a part of everyday life; and providing people with a variety of tools and activities to integrate the Christian practice into their daily life—at home, at work, at school, and in the world. Here are the learning activities for each movement of the Practice of Caring for the Body.

Learning Activities through the Four Movements

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Activity 1. Stories of Celebration
- Activity 2. Rituals in Our Lives

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Activity 3. The Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

Activity 4. Celebrating Life through Rituals: Daily, Seasons, Life Transitions & Milestones

Activity 5. Creating a Ritual Celebration

Movement 4. Living the Practice

Activity 6. Living the Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

Session Plan

Intergenerational Design: Whole Group with Age-Appropriate Table Groups

This session works best with the whole group in the same room and a presentation/facilitation team that guides people through the activities in age-appropriate table groups. Guide the table 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. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Part 1. (5 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer

- Open the session with a reading from Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4-7, 10-13.

Part 2. (20-25 minutes) All Ages Learning: Stories of Celebration

- Distribute the handouts for Activity 1 and 2 to each table group. Distribute **Celebrating Life in My Family** handout to children or families with children groups.
- Use **Activity 1. Stories of Celebration** to begin the session by celebrating a simple ritual such as a daily ritual, seasonal ritual (liturgical year or calendar year), or life transition and milestone. For example if you are beginning your program with a meal, conduct a table ritual before or after the meal (see the table rituals in the Celebrating Life Rituals Collection document). Have your ritual experience model the key elements of a celebration that will be introduced in this session: symbol(s), Scripture reading, prayer or blessing, music to sing or listen to, and decoration of the environment.

Share with the group the four stories about celebrating life in the Activity. Use a different reader for each story. You can illustrate the stories with photos in a PowerPoint presentation.

- Using **Activity 2. Rituals in Our Lives** ask people to complete the reflection questions on the "Rituals in Our Life" worksheet. Children and families with children groups can use the **Celebrating Life in My Family** handout in the children's activities.

Part 3. (75-90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: The Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

- Use **Activity 3. The Christian Practice of Celebrating Life** to create a presentation with the examples of celebrating rituals in the Bible. Create a presentation, illustrated with photos of the content, that includes reading the key biblical passages and presenting the commentary. Conclude your presentation with small group discussion using the questions.

Children or families with children groups can use the handout, **Jesus Celebrates Life**, in the children's activities.

- Use **Activity 4. Celebrating Life through Rituals: Daily, Seasons, Life Transitions & Milestones** to give people direct experiences of ritual celebrations and the opportunity to create their own ritual celebration. Three types of ritual celebrations are presented: **daily ritual**, **seasonal ritual** (liturgical year or calendar year), and **life transition and milestone**. In Activity #1 you celebrated a simple ritual from one of these three categories. In this part of the session you will offer two more ritual experiences, so that participants experience all three types.

Children or families with children group can use the handout, **Times to Celebrate Life**, in the children's activities.

- In the spirit of TV cooking shows conduct a demonstration of how to create a ritual celebration with the example of your own celebration, while people create their own version of the celebration for their personal use. Use **Activity 5. Creating a Ritual Celebration** to guide people through the process.

Part 4. (20-25 minutes) Applying the Learning

- If time allows in your design, conduct **Activity 6. Living the Christian Practice of Celebrating Life** which helps people identify ways that they can integrate the Christian practice of Celebrating Life into their daily and yearly life by developing a daily rituals plan and a yearly rituals plan.

Children or families with children group can use the handout, **Celebrating Life**, in the children's activities.

- Review the resource "Celebrating Life Rituals Collection"

Part 5. (5 minutes) Closing Prayer

Materials Needed

Check each activity for the materials that are needed.

Additional Celebrate Life Activities

Celebrating Life Activities from Vibrant Faith at Home

(www.vibrantfaithprojects.org/vibrant-faith-home.html)

There are Vibrant Faith at Home activities for families with children, teens, young adults, and adults. Each age group has a **Ritual and Tradition** category which includes a variety of celebrations. Check out the Ritual and Tradition activities:

- Families with Children: <https://www.vibrantfaithprojects.org/families-with-children.html>
- Teens: <https://www.vibrantfaithprojects.org/teens--families.html>
- Young Adults: <https://www.vibrantfaithprojects.org/young-adults.html>
- Adults: <https://www.vibrantfaithprojects.org/adults--couples.html>

All of the activities are in PDF files with a simple formatting to make it easy to use and download. You can provide these to people in variety of ways through age group programming, family or intergenerational programming, on a website, in an e-newsletter, on social media, etc. Vibrant Faith grants permission to use these activities in print or digital formats.

Activity 1. Stories of Celebration

Plan

Opening Ritual

Begin this activity by celebrating a simple ritual such as a **daily ritual**, **seasonal ritual** (liturgical year or calendar year), or **life transition and milestone**. For example if you are beginning your program with a meal, conduct a table ritual before or after the meal (see the table rituals in the Celebrating Life Rituals Collection document). Have your ritual experience model the key elements of a celebration that will be introduced in this session: symbol(s), Scripture reading, prayer or blessing, music to sing or listen to, and decoration of the environment.

Experience the ritual.

Conclude with this quote:

Rituals are a central part of life whether it be in how meals are shared together, or how major events are marked... Rituals give us places to be playful, to explore the meaning of our lives, and to rework and rebuild family relationships. They connect us with our past, define our present life, and show us a path to our future as we pass on ceremonies, traditions, objects, symbols, and ways of being with each other, handed down from previous generations.

(Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts, *Rituals in Our Times*)

Stories of Celebrating Life

Share with the group the four stories about celebrating life in the Activity: "The Red Tree," "The Big Boy Bed," "Graduation and Beyond," and "Walking with Mary and Joseph." Use a different reader for each story. You can illustrate the stories with photos in a PowerPoint presentation.

Activity

I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

The Red Tree

A few months ago, in the golden crackle of fall, I woke up early on a Friday morning. I was getting a cold. That month, we hosted a baby shower, a wedding shower, and a rehearsal dinner at our house. I made a job transition at the church, which we all know means you work two entire jobs for a while, and call it a transition.

A good friend got married, another celebrated her thirtieth birthday, another found out she's pregnant, and another adopted a newborn. My husband had his wisdom teeth removed, and on this particular Friday morning, I was two weeks from teaching at an event and had no idea what I was going to say or what I was going to wear, both of which were causing me just a teeny bit of stress.

My husband needed more gauze for his teeth, and more ice cream, and more soup, and while I was going, more strawberries. Okay.

I threw a coat over my pajamas, flew out the door, and raced through the store, throwing things in the cart. On the way home, I had a phone conversation that totally stressed me out about one of the upcoming events. When I got home, my husband told me that I bought the wrong gauze. You would think I could get the right gauze because I had already bought it seven times that week, but it was indeed the wrong gauze.

I didn't even let him finish what he was saying. I stomped out the door, back into the car, still in my pajamas, and as I opened the garage door again, I stopped in my tracks. In the park across the street, one of the tallest trees, twice as high as a two-story house, was the brightest, most insane, lit-from-within red I have ever seen. And it took my breath away, for two reasons.

First, because it was so beyond beautiful, and second, because I had not noticed one step of its turning. I had been in and out of my driveway a zillion times in the last two weeks and could not have told you if the tree was even still standing or not. As I stood there in the driveway, I realized that I had stopped seeing the most important things to see.

I saw the to-do list, the accumulation of things in the house that would have to be shoved in closets for the parties. I saw the stack of half-finished ramblings and Post-its all over my desk that were not turning themselves into a brilliant talk like I hoped they would. I saw the pile of things to go to the dry cleaner and the pile of work to be done and the pile of promises I had made and couldn't possibly keep. I saw the long list of meetings and projects at work and the long list of phone calls to return. I had gifts to buy and flights to schedule and oil to change and people to celebrate. But I wasn't seeing the people or the celebrations. I wasn't seeing anything beyond the chaos of my life and my home and my calendar.

It looked like a full calendar, a whirl of events and to-do lists and grocery lists. But underneath it all, the month was a greatest hits album, a collection of stories, one after another, of the rich and gorgeous ways that God tells his stories through our lives. What looked like a shower or a dinner or one more night to clean up after was actually one of God's best gifts, worth celebrating, worth seeing.

What looks like a plain old city street is just that until you lift up your eyes and see the red tree, and then you realize that this is not a plain city street. This is a masterpiece just here for the week, our very own wonder of the world, and I just about missed it.

(Shauna Niequist in *Cold Tangerines*)

The Big Boy Bed

A young woman I know called me recently to tell me this story of her youngest son, Paul. Paul had been sleeping in a portable crib the whole of his two and a half years. As can be expected, he has gotten rather long for the little bed, but plans for transferring him to a larger one were met with wailing

resistance. Little Paul was still very attached to his bed. He'd know it all his life, after all, and it had served him well as a cozy resting place and warm haven. It smelled like him. It was his. A change of beds was still not something he looked forward to.

Wisely, his mama knew that the transition would have to be surrounded with some awareness and ceremony. She explained to Paul exactly what was going to happen. Every night and nap time, she showed him how he poked through his too-little bed. More than that, his mama was not afraid to talk about his angry and sad feelings that the change would invoke. She frequently reminded Paul that he wasn't going to love the change and that he might feel sad. He responded with drooping head and lowered eyes and said, "and I cry."

On Wednesday his mama took him shopping and allowed him to pick out a bedspread. One caught his fancy and he clutched it to himself with delight. He hurried over to the cash register and pushed it toward the lady, saying, "This is for my big boy bed!" And he and his mama took the package home and left it in its wrapping until Friday.

Each Friday this family—Paul, his parents, and an older sister and brother—had a special family night, their own little tradition. So Paul's parents decided that Friday would be the day of the great bed exchange. Paul's mother planned a special meal and she made Paul's favorite dessert. She carefully thought through the process.

After dinner the family gathered around Paul's old, little bed. They touched it and smelled it and patted it and thanked it. They said it was a good, fine bed, but now it was old and tired. Now it needed to be brought away. Oh, they said, how sad they all were to see it go. They took off the sheets and unscrewed its sides and piled up the parts and brought it out to the garage and said goodbye and covered it up.

Then they carried in the parts to the "big boy bed." They all helped screw it together and put the mattress in place. Then they all circled around it and each took a corner of sheet and "sprread the sheet and smooothed the sheet" with exaggerated gestures and chanting voices. They made a big game of it. They made the bed and put on it his wonderful old pillow and his bright new spread and his toy lamb, and then they piled Paulie in the middle of the big boy bed and cheeered! Paul wanted to crawl in right then, so they readied him for the night and he was tucked in by all of them and prayed with and sung to.

Paul's mama had worked out a ceremony, a ritual to help her little son make a transition that was more important to him than one might ever have guessed. His mother was conscious of how important the moment was and how difficult it was for Paul. The ceremony she devised was a little bridge for Paul, a safe path to take as he went from something old and warm and familiar to something new and cold and big and unknown to him.

Furthermore, it struck her suddenly, how fraught with feelings the whole occasion was for her and her husband. It was another little transition marking the end of Paul's babyhood, another transition in a whole long line of graduations to come.

(Gertrud Mueller Nelson in *To Dance with God*)

Graduation and Beyond

Julie and her peers at All Saints were called forward during worship to receive a blanket as a high school graduation gift from the congregation. These were not just any blankets; each young person's name was embroidered on one corner, and a symbol of the cross and the words All Saints appeared on the other.

As the blankets were wrapped around the shoulders of Julie and each graduate, a blessing was given: "The arms of the congregation are wrapped around you as you go out into the world. This blanket is a reminder of our love for you, and that you are covered in God's grace and wrapped in the arms of Jesus. You are God's child and marked with the sign of the cross forever." There wasn't a dry eye among those assembled during this service, which is a highlight of the year for the congregation. But there was also a twinkle in the eye of the small group of wise elders known as the "Cut Ups," whose experienced hands and hearts lovingly contributed their time, talents, and prayers to making each blanket.

But this is not the end of the story. In the fall, Julie wrote to me:

Dear Linda,

Months have passed since I graduated and left for college. I want to thank you for coordinating the graduation milestone. The blanket lies on the end of my bed. It does more than add color to my room and keep me warm. The adjustment to college has not been easy, finding new friends and freedom from the watchful eyes of my parents—and you! Every time I have a tough decision to make about what to do or how to fit in, all I need to do is look at the blanket and I remember who I am and whose I am. I am reminded of all who care and pray for me.

Gotta go!

Love, Julie

(Written by Linda Staats)

Walking with Mary and Joseph

On this December evening, children of every age process down Twenty-Fourth Street (in the Mission District of San Francisco), some with lighted candles in hand and others carrying on their shoulders statues of Mary and Joseph. Each Advent, the young and the old enact the story of Joseph seeking lodging for his young wife, Mary, who is weary from travel and heavy with child. For nine nights in a row, children and adults assume the identity of the weary couple or of the innkeepers, processing around the inside of the church or throughout the neighborhood, moving from one designated site to the next. This is the beloved ritual of *Las Posadas*.

At each station, an ancient exchange is repeated. Those playing the role of Joseph approach the inn, knock on the door, and say in a loud voice, "En nombre del cielo, buenos moradores, dad a unos viajeros posada esta noche" ("In the name of heaven, good innkeepers, give these travelers rest for the night"). From inside, a chorus of voices responds, "Aqui no es meson sigan adelante; yo no abrir no sea algun tunante" ("This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel"). As Joseph moves from one inn to the next, the innkeepers grow angry and even threaten violence, while the night grows colder and the young couple's weariness turns to exhaustion. "Venimos rendidos desde Nazareth yo soy carpintero de nombre Jose" ("We are tired traveling from Nazareth; I am a carpenter named Joseph"),

the anxious husband implores. Finally, he even reveals his wife's true identity, begging for *posada* (lodging) for just one night for la Riena del Cielo, the Queen of Heaven—to no avail.

For eight days, the scene is reenacted. Finally, on the ninth day, the eve of Christmas, Joseph's request moves the heart of an innkeeper, who offers the young couple all that he has left—a stable. Yet the stable is enhanced by the love with which the innkeeper offers it, and this humble place becomes the birthplace of Jesus. In an outpouring of joy and festivity, those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph in song and dance, food and drink. Candy and treats from the piñata shower the children, and the community recalls anew how the stranger at one's door can be God in disguise.

(Ana Maria Pineda, "Hospitality," in *Practicing Our Faith*)

Activity 2. Rituals in Our Lives

Plan

Present or review the “Rituals in Our Lives” Activity with the group.

Ask people to complete the reflection questions on the “Rituals in Our Life” worksheet. Families can work together on the activity. Invite people to share their experiences of celebrating in small groups. Remind people that this is a storytelling experience so be sure to give each person/family time to share their story without interruptions or discussion.

Activity

Today is a day for celebration, no matter what your religion or your culture. Learn to celebrate today: celebrate the fact that you are alive, that you are breathing, that you have friends, family, and spiritual guides in your life. (Margaret Neylon, *An Angel a Day*)

Life is meant to be celebrated in all its many forms. God created the earth in generosity and love, to be a place of goodness: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

In the broadest sense, every moment of life is an opportunity for celebration. Certainly, the big moments—a birth, reception of the sacraments, graduation, a promotion, becoming a citizen, retirement, anniversaries—are all times we are accustomed to celebrate. Even the end of life is an opportunity to celebrate, as we take time to be grateful for the life of the one who has died, recognizing how that person graced our lives with their presence and fulfilled a special purpose in the world.

We celebrate life through rituals, be they simple or complex. Some rituals occur daily—in the morning, before and after meals, or at bedtime—while others come along weekly, yearly, or once in a lifetime. Rituals celebrate special days, such as Christmas and birthdays, as well as the more routine times in life. They celebrate life as well as loss.

How do you celebrate life through rituals? Reflect on the following questions:

- ◆ What are some of the rituals you already practice—in your daily life, on a seasonal basis, or for special occasions? What are some of your family or household rituals?
- ◆ How do I, alone or with my family, mark holidays and holy days?
- ◆ What celebrations were important to you as you were growing up? Which of these would you like to continue and how can you do this?
- ◆ How do you experience God through rituals?

Celebration connects us to our deepest levels of humanness, and helps us form community with one another. It allows us to transcend our ordinary experiences, blending our physical nature with the cosmological whole. As we celebrate, we allow ourselves to experience a range of emotions that express who we are and what we are in God’s creation—joy, sorrow, longing, pain, hope, gratitude, grief, guilt, wonder, and generosity, for example. Through this expression, we can create a safe environment and an appropriate forum for sharing those emotions that are often kept inside as we go about our lives.

Activity 3. The Christian Practice of Celebrating Life

Plan

The Activity essay presents several examples of celebrating rituals in the Bible. Create a presentation, illustrated with photos of the content, that includes reading the key biblical passages and presenting the commentary. Be sure to use the quote from Payden and Loving at the end of the essay.

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4-7, 10-13 (A time to...)
2. Deuteronomy 30:19-20 (Choose life)
3. Leviticus 16:29-34 (Day of Atonement)
4. John 2:1-11 (Wedding Feast at Cana)
5. Luke 15:22-24 (Prodigal Son)

Conclude your presentation with small group discussion using the following questions. Give people an opportunity to think about the questions and then invite people to share their responses.

- ◆ What insights about celebrating life did you gain from the biblical examples?
- ◆ Can you think of other examples of celebrations in the Bible?
- ◆ How do you see God at work through these biblical celebrations? How do people experience God through these celebrations?

Activity

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

*I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with....I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.
—Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4-7, 10–13 (NRSV)*

Christianity is a joyful religion, and celebration provides us with the most tangible way to express that joy. But the roots of our celebration go back to our Hebrew forebears. Just before he dies, Moses tells the Israelites to “choose life,” to love and obey the Lord and prosper in the Promised Land.

I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life. Love the Lord your God, obey

him and be faithful to him, and then you and your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Deuteronomy 30:19–20)

To choose life is to celebrate life. It is accepting all that comes with being alive and human, the good with bad, the work and play, the fast and feast, the ordinary and extraordinary. Our faithful living acknowledges our awareness of God's presence among us and helps us respond to God's gracious gifts to us, given as they have been since the time of the creation of the world.

Judaism was—and is—a highly ritualistic religion. Our Jewish forebears used Scripture and seasonal celebrations to remind them of their identity as God's chosen people. From dietary laws to mandates about work and worship, Hebrew law proscribed the practices that Jews were to live by if they were to be faithful to God. In the Book of Leviticus, the content of which is almost entirely rules for rituals and practices, the ritual for observing the day of atonement is described:

On the tenth day of the seventh month the Israelites and the foreigners living among them must fast and must not do any work. On that day the ritual is to be performed to purify them from all their sins, so that they will be ritually clean....The High Priest, properly ordained and consecrated to succeed his father, is to perform the ritual of purification. He shall put on the priestly garments and perform the ritual to purify the Most Holy Place, the rest of the Tent of the Lord's presence, the altar, the priests, and all the people of the community. This ritual must be performed once a year to purify the people of Israel from all their sins. (Leviticus 16:29–34)

Many of our Christian rituals have their roots in Jewish practice. For example, Jesus' last supper took place when he was gathered with the apostles at the Seder supper, part of the annual Passover celebration. Jesus used this occasion to give new meaning to the ancient Passover ritual. From that point on, it was to be a commemoration of his passion and death: "Do this in memory of me."

Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine, took place during a celebration, a wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1–11). At the conclusion of the story we read that when Jesus "was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing" (John 2:23).

One of the best examples of the place of celebration in Christian practice comes in the parable of the prodigal son. The father, who represents God the Father, rejoices that his son has returned, and says to his servants:

"Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:22–24)

"Ritual and prayer put us in touch with the transcendent nature of the divine. Time set aside for ritual and tradition gives us sanctuary from daily struggles and routine. The words, symbols, and actions of rituals provide tangible ways of expressing the intangible mystery of life and death. We are able to act out what is of ultimate value in our lives. Traditions connect us to our history and give direction to our present and future. Ritual and tradition help us to interpret the meaning and purpose of life. Celebrations move us through times of change and transition. They offer a perspective about life's journey. Ritual and tradition help to form our identity as God's people. They tell us who we are and what God intends for us." (Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving in *Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families*)

Activity 4. Celebrating Life through Rituals: Daily, Seasons, Life Transitions & Milestones

The “Celebrating Life through Rituals” Activity serves as a guide for helping people celebrate rituals for each daily, the seasons of the church year, and transitions and milestones. The goal of this Activity is to give people direct experiences of ritual celebrations and the opportunity to create their own ritual celebration.

Three types of ritual celebrations are presented in the essay: **daily ritual**, **seasonal ritual** (liturgical year or calendar year), and **life transition and milestone**. In Activity #1 you celebrated a simple ritual from one of these three categories. In this part of the session you will offer two more ritual experiences, so that participants experience all three types. Be sure to present the type of ritual you conduct in the opening and the content from the essay in the Activity.

Guide all of the participants in groups through the following process. For the ritual the group experienced at the opening of the session, present the understanding of that type of ritual and then explain each element of the ritual celebration. (Note: If you group is large, you might want to conduct this part of the session in smaller groups by dividing the group into 2 or 3 groups and assigning them to separate rooms. It will help with the demonstration and design experience.)

Process

1. Present the introduction and example.
2. Present the variety of Daily Rituals and the example.
3. Conduct a Daily Ritual celebration.
4. Conclude by reviewing other types of Daily Rituals.
5. Present the variety of Seasonal Rituals.
6. Conduct a Seasonal Ritual celebration.
7. Present the variety of Transition and Milestone Rituals.
8. Conduct a Transition and Milestone Ritual.

A great resource for Milestones is Milestones Ministry (<https://milestonesministry.org>). There are several examples of their milestones online in Celebrating Life section of Lifelong Faith.

Activity

Nurture your rituals and they will provide sustenance to your family all your life. Chances are, your best rituals will outlive you, sending your love into generations to come. Bend yourself to the honest hard work of ritual, and the bountiful crop you harvest will be joy.

(Meg Cox in *The Heart of the Family*)

Celebrating Rituals

Rituals are the daily patterns and practices that help us celebrate life. Whether ordinary or extraordinary, rituals keep us rooted to what is necessary to life. How we rise in the morning and

prepare for our day; the way we eat, or don't eat, meals: our routines of work or school; the activities we take part in outside the home: all of these establish the signs of our lives and our living.

"Rituals help us to say yes to life's experiences, unify and give meaning to life, maintain and transmit our faith, cope with life, and transform life." (Peter Young in *Celebrate Life: Rituals for Home and Church*)

Ritual helps shape our celebrations, giving them form and function within the course of our lives. Rituals are as simple as having a cake and singing "Happy Birthday" on one's special day or serving a favorite meal when an important project is completed, or as complex as a wedding day or funeral celebration. Bedtime prayers, regular family talks, the way we get ready for work or school in the morning, even walking the dog are all common ritual experiences that give meaning and purpose to our lives.

The form that a ritual takes comes from its purpose. Our simplest daily rituals happen without much, if any, planning or thought. Rituals for special occasions, however, require time to prepare, usually with others.

Celebrations and rituals can be done alone, but often we celebrate with others. Orchestrating these occasions, however, isn't always easy, as this writer relates.

After the holidays were over, on New Year's Day, I was sitting at the breakfast table in a stupor. My husband asked if I was all right. "I'm exhausted," I answered. "I'm totally exhausted." He looked puzzled. "Why do you do this to yourself every year?" I have to admit that part of what I do around the winter holidays seems almost involuntary, innate. It's as if I'm driven by the ancient need to mark the darkness of winter with my little bit of light.

My answer to my husband's question is that I believe one of the most important things I can do while I'm on this planet is honor those I love through celebrations, and the older I get, the more I believe it.

I believe that in this world there is and always has been so much sadness and sorrow, so much uncertainty, that if we didn't set aside time for merriment, gifts, music and laughter with family and friends, we might just forget to celebrate altogether. We'd just plod along in life. As my family's "designated celebrator," I may be tired and I may not have done all I set out to do, but I believe that this year, I celebrated the ones I love, and I hope with all my heart that I celebrated them well. (Melinda Shoaf, "The Designated Celebrator," in *This I Believe*, www.npr.org)

Celebrating Daily Rituals

Rituals throughout the day help us to recognize and celebrate God's presence each day. Daily rituals provide stability and regular touch points with God. Think about the many opportunities in your daily family life for celebrating a ritual of faith:

- ◆ Prayer in the morning
- ◆ Table blessings (before and after meals)
- ◆ Telling or reading and discussing Bible stories and how they relate to everyday life
- ◆ Blessings for leaving times (school, activities, work, a date)
- ◆ Times of decision-making, thanksgiving, joy, sorrow, failures and successes

- ◆ Times of accomplishment (improved grades, a new job, sports or music achievement)
- ◆ Times of forgiveness and healing
- ◆ Bedtime rituals: prayers, stories, blessings

Daily rituals do not have to be complicated. They can occur during any time of day, whenever you feel the need to transcend the mundane.

Standing at the kitchen sink, we can garner all kinds of wisdom. We have plenty of opportunities to practice mindfulness, doing dirty dish after dirty dish. Recently, I've begun practicing a new ritual at the kitchen sink, one I adapted from Rachel Naomi Remen's book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*. She adapted it from a ritual a Tibetan nun taught her.

Each morning I take a small empty bowl and fill it slowly to the brim with running water. As the water fills, I reflect on the particulars of my life, for example, the people with whom I share my time, my health, the problems in my life, my skills and strengths, my disappointments and successes, my worries, gifts, limitations, my home and family, possessions, and my history as a human being. As the bowl fills, I open my heart unconditionally to what the day will bring.

When the bowl is full I set it on a shelf above the sink, where I can see it throughout the day. There it reminds me of all I have been given in my life. At the end of the day, I empty the bowl and turn it upside down until the next morning, offering a prayer of gratitude for the blessings of the day. (Denise Roy in *My Monastery Is a Minivan*)

Here are some ideas for rituals you can do with your family. Most can be adapted to suit your particular situation, whether you are a family of ten or just one.

- ◆ *Family meal*: Commit to a family meal at least one night each week. The meal can be as simple or as fancy as you would like; the point is to spend time together enjoying food and conversation. And please, no TV during this meal!
- ◆ *Celebrate the seasons*: Plan a special activity for the first day of every new season. Notice changes in weather and patterns of nature. Make a meal from the foods of the season.
- ◆ *Make a birthday book*: Each year on each family member's birthday, fill a few pages of a scrapbook with photographs, greeting cards, lists of favorite things, names of friends, special events of the year, and other notable info. Have the birthday person write down a few thoughts about this day.
- ◆ *Donation day*: Put out a jar into which everyone can throw their spare change. Set aside a day—either once a month or a few times a year—where you gather together, count the money, and decide to whom you would like to donate it.
- ◆ *Ceremonial bath*: Once a month or so, take the time for a relaxing bath in the evening for you, as well as your children. Use a nice bath oil, or bubbles for the kids, and simply take the time to enjoy being in the water.
- ◆ *Explore ethnicity*: Designate a meal every so often where you try out a different ethnic cuisine, whether it's something you make yourself or get from a restaurant; Mexico, China, Italy, or India are good places to start. As a family, look up the country whose food you are featuring, and learn a few things about the people and culture.
- ◆ *Have a "first" fest*: A child's first haircut, a visit to a new doctor, the opening of Little League season, a new job for Mom or Dad, or a first date are all occasions to celebrate. Take some pictures of the occasion, write down some thoughts and comments about the event, collect a few momentos, and put them all in a special album where you can keep a record of all your family's "firsts."

- ◆ *Nature day*: Once a week or so, take time to go outside and celebrate nature. Take a long walk, go to a nearby park, ride bikes, or simply play outside together. Look for shells along the shore, bugs in the woods, or interesting foliage in the park—even in your own yard or neighborhood. And don't let the rain or snow stop you from enjoying all the beauty of God's creation.
- ◆ *Embrace quiet time*: Ideally once a day, but at least once a week, take some time to sit quietly with your family. Practice deep breathing by having everyone inhale slowly, briefly hold their breath, then exhale slowly.

(Adapted from Barbara Biziou, "The Power of Family Rituals," *Parents* magazine.)

Celebrating Seasons of the Church Year

The Christian church provides us with a framework for understanding who we are as a community of believers. The seasons of the church year walk us through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and call us to discipleship in today's world. Each church season—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time—is filled with particular stories, songs, images, colors, and festivals. Centering our lives on the church year is a powerful reminder of our identity as disciples of Christ. From Sunday to Sunday, day in and day out, from season to season, from holy day to holy day, we are called to be God's people.

The possibilities for celebrating the seasons of the church year at home are numerous. For example, one household's ritual for Advent involves creating and displaying an Advent wreath. Prior to the evening meal, the house is darkened. One person lights the first candle on the wreath and reads a short Advent Scripture passage and prayer. Each week an additional candle is lit, and the light around the table grows. In this way the household prepares for the coming of the Messiah at Christmas.

Each season offers opportunities for celebrating rituals at home:

- ◆ Advent: daily Advent prayers, daily Scripture readings, Advent wreath
- ◆ Christmas: blessing for the Christmas meal, prayer while sharing Christmas gifts
- ◆ Lent: Ash Wednesday prayer and simple meal, blessing a lenten cross or altar, daily lenten prayers and Scripture readings, a Holy Week seder meal, Holy Week Scripture readings

Reflect on celebrating the seasons of the church year in your life.

- ◆ How do you currently celebrate the seasons of the church year?
- ◆ What are new possibilities for celebrating the seasons of the church year?
- ◆ How can you introduce new church year celebrations into your household?

Celebrating Life Transitions and Milestones

"There are significant times of transition in our lives. Some of these transitions happen on a yearly basis. Others occur only occasionally, while still others happen only once in a lifetime. These occasions of transition and accomplishment are important to recognize. We cannot forget that God's presence is with us in all of these events. We need to set aside opportunities to affirm an individual's gifts and achievements, to celebrate the joys of life, and to accept the struggles and disappointments we face. In doing so, we recognize the presence of God in all times in our lives." (Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving in *Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families*)

A faith milestone is a marker along life's journey that says, "This is something important, and God is here too." It's a time to pause, to celebrate, to share the joys and sorrows, to give and receive support, to reflect on where and how we have found God in our story. We can begin today being deliberate about looking for opportunities to name and claim God's presence in the new and changing times in our lives.

What are faith milestones?

- ◆ There are milestones we celebrate in the life of our *faith community*—baptism, baptism birthdays, receiving a first Bible, starting Sunday school, learning to pray, first communion, confirmation, a mission trip, wedding, funeral.
- ◆ There are milestones that are part of the *yearly rhythm* of our life together—birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day and Father's Day, graduations, family gatherings, holidays, vacations, starting school.
- ◆ There are milestones that rise up in our *daily* life together—getting a new pet, burying a pet, celebrating a pregnancy or birth or adoption, getting a driver's license, grieving the anniversary of the death of a beloved friend or family member, starting a new job, leaving home for college or the military or work, moving into a first house or moving Grandma into assisted living.

Reflect on milestones and life transitions in your life

- ◆ How do you currently celebrate transitions and milestones?
- ◆ What are new possibilities for celebrating life transitions and milestones?
- ◆ How can you introduce new rituals for life transitions and milestones into your household?

Activity 5. Creating a Ritual Celebration

In the spirit of TV cooking shows conduct a demonstration of how to create a ritual celebration with the example of your own celebration, while people create their own version of the celebration for their personal use.

Preparation

1. Choose an occasion or event in advance that will apply to your participants. Keep this simple so that the demonstration is easy to conduct.
2. Collect the resources that you will need in advance.
3. Prepare materials that the participants will need, e.g., a Bible, a hymnal or song list on the theme of your celebration.
4. Prepare a list of potential Scripture readings that people can use in creating their ritual for the occasion or event that you have selected.
5. Prepare a presentation that guides people through the demonstration with each step of the process and your ritual design.
6. Participants can use the worksheet, *Creating Your Own Ritual*, to record their work.

Process

1. Present the occasion or event that you have chosen and explain that everyone will create a ritual around this occasion or event.
2. Identify a central symbol for the celebration. Present the symbol(s) that you have chosen and ask the participants to identify a symbol(s) that will be central in their celebration.
3. Select an appropriate Scripture reading. Present the Scripture reading that you have chosen and ask the participants to select a reading that expresses the meaning of the event.
4. Find or create an opening prayer and blessing. Present your prayer or blessing and ask the participants to write a short prayer or blessing for their celebration.
5. Select music to sing or listen to. Play the song you have chosen and ask the participants to select a song that reflects the celebration.
6. Include any ritual actions or movement (gestures, hugs, blessing signs). Share your actions or movement and have the participants identify any ritual actions appropriate for their celebration.
7. Decorate the environment for the celebration (artwork, photos, candles). Share how you have or would decorate and then ask participants to develop ideas for decorating for their celebration.

Reflecting on the Experience

In small groups ask people to reflect on their experience of the ritual celebrations using the questions below.

- ◆ What did you learn about the Christian practice of Celebrating Life from this experience?
- ◆ How did you feel God's presence through these ritual celebrations?
- ◆ Which ritual celebrations do you see yourself or family using at home?
- ◆ How can you use what you learned about creating your own ritual in your own life?

Activity

In her book *To Dance with God*, Gertrud Mueller Nelson outlines several key elements involved in creating special rituals for celebrations:

- ◆ a leader, someone to oversee and orchestrate the ritual
- ◆ a theme that defines the moment
- ◆ a transitional event, marking a passage from one place to another
- ◆ a framework that gives the celebration a beginning, middle, and end
- ◆ models and resources, including our traditions, with which to build the content of the ritual
- ◆ tools for creating the celebration, such as music, gestures, works of nature, poems and prayers, creative activities, and so on.

Ritual is most meaningful when everyone is involved in planning for the ritual event. Regardless of age, everyone can play a role in planning for, and celebrating life through rituals. If celebrating ritual moments is new to you or your household, start small. Choose an event or occasion that marks a real turning point in your life and mark it with a simple but festive meal that includes a prayer or reading, reflection or storytelling, and a short blessing. Keep the sharing and ritual simple and straightforward. If the events you celebrate are central to your life, God's presence should not be too hard to identify. Do not force participation. Schedule the celebration for a time that is convenient for all family members. Make the experience as attractive as possible.

Plan your ritual celebration using this simple process:

1. Choose an occasion or event together.
2. Check with friends or your church community to see how others have structured rituals for the same occasion or event.
3. Decide on the components of your celebration:
 - Symbols (water, oil, cross/crucifix, art, bread, candle) or a milestone symbol
 - Scripture reading
 - Prayers and blessings
 - Music
 - Movement (gestures, hugs, blessing signs)
 - Environment (artwork, photos, tablecloth, plants).
4. Plan your celebration to fit your life, not the other way around. Involve each person in at least one element of preparation and celebration.
5. When you're ready, celebrate.

Music is a beautiful way to celebrate, and is a time-honored part of Christian rituals. Raising your voice in song as you go about the work of your day can make that work into a celebration. Teach your children to sing with you; it doesn't matter if your voice is not great or even if you can't carry a tune very well. Our song praises God in a most pleasing manner, as evidenced by over 600 references in Scripture.

Creating Your Own Ritual

- ◆ Choose an occasion or event.
- ◆ Identify a central symbol for the ritual celebration (e.g., water, oil, cross, artwork, bread, candle).
- ◆ Select an appropriate Scripture reading that expresses the meaning of your ritual celebration.
- ◆ Find or create an opening prayer and blessing for your ritual celebration.
- ◆ Select music to sing or listen to that reflects the ritual celebration.
- ◆ Include any ritual actions or movement appropriate for your ritual celebration (e.g., gestures, hugs, blessing signs, anointing).
- ◆ Decorate your environment for the celebration (e.g., artwork, photos, candles).
- ◆ Involve each family member in at least one element of the ritual celebration.

Celebrate!

Activity 6. Living the Practice of Celebrating Life

Help people identify ways that they can integrate the Christian practice of Celebrating Life into their daily and yearly life by developing a daily rituals plan and a yearly rituals plan.

Developing a Daily Rituals Plan

Review the variety of daily prayer rituals that can be part of an individual's or household's plan using the essay in Activity #5. Share with the group one or two examples of what a week of rituals might look like.

Give each individual or household time to create a daily rituals plan using the worksheet, *Developing a Daily Rituals Plan*. Review the two tasks:

1. Add all of the daily rituals of faith already present in your household now to your plan.
2. Identify new daily rituals you want to begin in your household and add them to your plan.

After people have created their plan, invite them to share with their group one or two current daily rituals and one or two new rituals they want to begin.

Tell people to put their plan on the refrigerator or prominent place in the house as a reminder of the types of rituals that are going to celebrate throughout the week.

Developing a Yearly Rituals Plan

Review the variety of seasonal and milestone/transition rituals that can be part of an individual's or household's plan using the using the essay in Activity #5. Share with the group one example of year rituals plan might look like.

Give each individual or household time to create a yearly rituals plan using the worksheet, *Developing a Yearly Rituals Plan*. Review the two tasks:

1. Add all of your ritual celebrations to the calendar: church year seasonal celebrations, calendar year seasons, and milestones celebrations.
2. Identify new ritual celebrations that you would like to add to your yearly plan and write those in the appropriate month. Underline the new ritual celebrations.

After people have created their plan, invite each them to share with their group one or two current yearly rituals and one or two new rituals they want to begin.

Tell people to put their plan on the refrigerator or prominent place in the house as a reminder of the types of rituals that they are going to celebrate.

Ritual Scrapbook

Suggest to the group that they might want to begin a "rituals scrapbook" using drawings, photos, explanations, poems, and reflections (in digital or print format). Everyone can add to the book by sharing their feelings about the event or simply recording the who, what, when, where, and why of the event. This is a great way to pass on rituals to the next generation. It is also fun to see and read about them as time turns them into memories. They can do this in print or digitally.

Creating a Daily Rituals Plan

- ◆ What are the daily rituals of faith already present in your household life now?
- ◆ What are the possibilities for daily rituals of faith in your household life?
- ◆ How can you introduce new daily rituals into your household life?

Daily Rituals Plan

Sunday	
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	

Developing a Yearly Rituals Plan

Think about the many opportunities for celebrating seasons of the church year, calendar seasons, and milestones. Identify rituals that are already a part of your life and new rituals that you can would like to incorporate into your year. Use the chart as a guide for planning your year. Add the dates for milestones.

January	
February	
March	
April	
May	
June	
July	
August	
September	
October	
November	
December	

Begin a “rituals scrapbook” using drawings, snapshots, explanations, poems, and reflections. Everyone can add to the book by sharing their feelings about the event or simply recording the who, what, when, where, and why of the event. This is a great way to pass on rituals to the next generation. It is also fun to see and read about them as time turns them into memories.

Prayers for Ritual Times

Blessings Before Meals

Lord God and giver of all good gifts,
we are grateful as we pause before this meal,
for all the blessings of life that you give us.

Daily, we are fed with good things,
nourished by friendship and care,
feasted with forgiveness and understanding.

And so, mindful of your continuous care,
we pause to be grateful for the blessings of this table.
(Pause for silent reflection)

May your presence be the “extra” taste to this meal
which we eat in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

Birthday Prayer

For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. (John 18:37)

God of all creation,
bless N..., whose birthday we celebrate today.
You gift us with life and talents,
to enrich our lives
and the lives of those around us.
May this new year bring N...
much joy and many blessings,
and give him/her the opportunity
to grow in your grace and love.
Amen.

Anniversary Prayer

God of enduring love, we give thanks to you for (*Names of couple*), and the marriage they share. In a world where so much seems disposable and human relationships expendable, their marriage provides an example of mutual respect, endurance, and fidelity. We give thanks for the home they have made together, a home where love, grace, and forgiveness abound, and where hurt and brokenness are mended. A home where sacrificial love is made apparent; where children have been born and raised to be loving and compassionate. A home where hospitality abounds and visitors are made to feel welcome. Continue to be present and bless (*Names of couple*), O God. May future years be as rich and fulfilling as those that have passed. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.
(Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving, *Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families*)

Daily Thanks and Praise

Gracious God,
giver of all life and goodness,
we thank you
for your many gifts and blessings.
Help us to continue
the mission of your son, Jesus,
bringing light and truth,
hope and love into the world.
Amen.

A Parent's Prayer for a Child

Lord, bless this child.
As you have filled his/her day with sights and sounds, activities and relationships, bless his/her night
with restful sleep and pleasant dreams.
May he/she be strengthened by tonight's sleep for the new life and growth that tomorrow are sure to
bring.
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.