



Foundation Paper

Faith Practices:

Worship, Learning and Serving for Vital Congregations

Over the last several decades, significant cultural changes have impacted the way we work, play, communicate, learn, gain information, network socially, and even worship. Today congregations find themselves faced with challenges to their familiar styles of education and faith formation. Since the early days of the Sunday school movement, churches used the education model, which focuses primarily on head knowledge, for religious instruction. We've held onto that schooling concept right up to today, with children still sitting around tables, still doing fill-in-the-blank worksheets and still memorizing scripture verses. Those models no longer seem suitable and do not necessarily fit the needs of people searching for a deeper relationship with God and Jesus Christ rather than facts and dogma. Even schools moved away from that "traditional" way of teaching as they create more interactive classrooms and rely on research related to styles of learning, multiple intelligences, and brain functioning.

For nearly twenty years many congregations experienced lectionary-base education that helped them connect education and worship in new ways. Other churches began creating their own curriculum or used workshop rotation models to enliven the learning environment and stimulate interest and imagination. For these churches, the old language about school is no longer adequate to describe the way faith matures for individuals and in the life of the church community.

Eager to provide nurture appropriate for today's learners, congregations sought new language and new approaches to Christian faith formation and transformation. Many searched for resources that would weave together what happens in worship with what happens in the church's education program. Both education and worship were changed, reformed in this approach.

There has been a resurgence of interest among adults as they seek new experiences that connect them with the Holy. For example, as the United Church of Christ pursued its identity through the *God Is Still Speaking* program, more and more adults became interested in learning about their faith. Particularly after a natural disaster or national crisis, adults look for meaning and connection – and a relationship with God.



These streams converge to lead us to consider a different model for learning about and growing in faith. We believe that the language of practicing faith might give our churches a vocabulary they need to describe this new world of learning, worship, and serving as they seek to be vital congregations.

The scholarship of Dorothy Bass and her colleagues around practicing our faith spurred a growing conversation that focuses on deepening one's relationship with God through shared activities that form a way of discipleship, a way of Christian living. While many understand practicing the faith to be an individual pursuit, we affirm that communities of faith develop patterns of living that reflect their faith. "Faith development does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is cultivated intentionally by a community of faith-filled people" (Woolever and Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations*, p. 55)

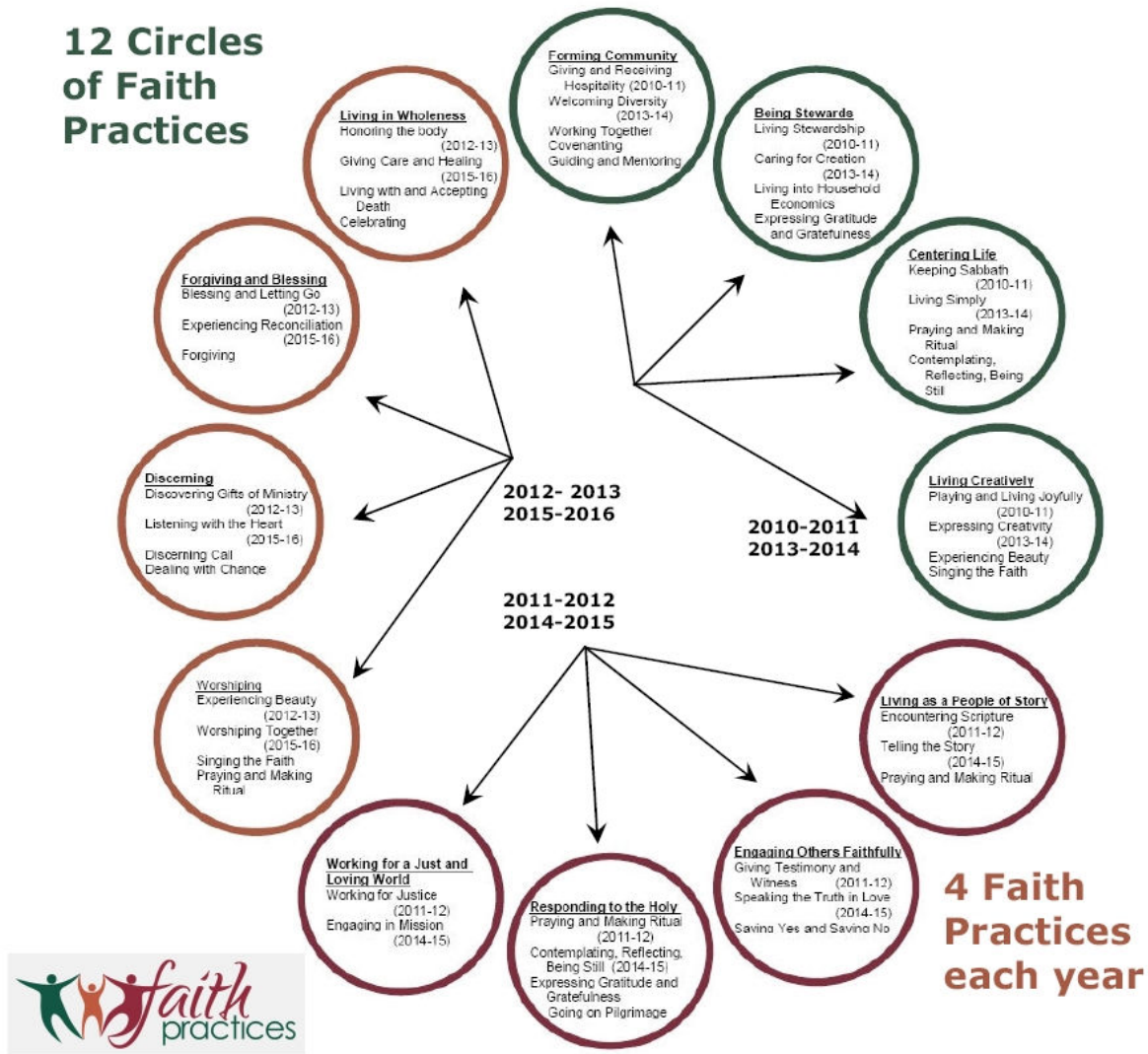
Living out the faith, exercising our faith, practicing our faith is a lifelong process. "At every turn and in every stage of life, the stories of our biblical heritage take on new meaning, our relationship with God grows and changes, and discernment about our life's journey shifts and transforms as a result of both our physical and our spiritual maturation." (Gline Allen).

Practices of Faith for *Faith Practices*

There are many, many different lists of faith practices, some ancient and some contemporary. Through a process of group discernment we identified twelve circles of practices for congregations to explore and to immerse themselves in as they seek a deeper, stronger relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and with one another. This series is not linearly progressive, not chronological, and not organized by the church year or calendar. None of the practices of faith are exclusive to any one circle. Some fit easily into several circles. These faith practices are not practiced in isolation; they relate to one another. *Faith Practices* presents resources for four circles of practices of faith each year for six years. Each circle will be visited twice in the course of the series. For instance, "Forming Community" is introduced in 2010-2011 through the lens of Giving and Receiving Hospitality and visited again in 2013-2014 through the lens of Welcoming Diversity. See the chart below.



12 Circles of Faith Practices



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Nine Characteristics of Christian Practices

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Each Christian practice of faith:

1. Involves us in God's activities in the world and reflects God's grace and love
2. Is a complex set of acts, words, and images that addresses one area of fundamental need
3. Is learned with and from other people
4. Comes to us from the past and will be shaped by us for the future
5. Is thought-full; it implies certain beliefs about ourselves, our neighbors, and God
6. Is done within the church, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home
7. Shapes the people who participate in the practice, individually and communally
8. Has good purposes, although it often becomes corrupted
9. Comes to focus in worship

from

www.practicingourfaith.org

http://prctingourfaith.org/prct_what_are_practices.html

Practices of Faith in *Faith Practices*

(At each Writer's Conference the writing teams develop statements of understanding and clarification about the practices of faith in the faith circles [see above]. These statements create a framework out of which the components are developed. Thus, this section of the Foundations Paper will continue to emerge throughout the development of the resource.)

Forming Community: Giving and Receiving Hospitality

Hospitality begins when we perceive ourselves and others as strangers in a community of welcome. Seeing Christ's presence in the other enables us to welcome Christ into the midst of the community, with all of the costs and joys of discipleship. Gentle, attentive, potent, and consistent care is required to create a community where members are intentional about seeking and welcoming all, especially those whose abilities, experiences, and cultural traditions are different from the mainstream of the current community. A community of hospitality is aware, sensitive, and open to divergent cultural practices. It reaches far beyond the limits of the familiar in a highly mobile world, transforming both the newcomer and the established community.

Being Stewards: Living Stewardship

As a way of life, expressed in gratitude, living stewardship is a practice that involves all that it means to live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. It grows out of a deep caring for and joy in who we are as God's created people and the natural world in which we live. Living stewardship is about how we live our lives and how our lives express our values. It affects all of our decisions, especially the ones we make about the natural and human resources entrusted to us for care. Living stewardship is shalom: living in harmony with others and the world. It is about our relationships, liberation, grace, justice, peace, and



mutuality as well as our material possessions. As faithful stewards, we are joined by our common gift of life and the reality of finite resources. We recognize that each of us is a mixture of neediness and fullness and so have responsibility to care for each other as we honor the holy in creation and ourselves. As faithful disciples, we are called to live as generous creatures created by a generous God who mutually shares responsibility with us for all creation. Stewardship involves all people because all are connected in mutually covenanted stewardship within God's original intent for creation.

Centering Life: Keeping Sabbath

Sabbath is intentional time taken by individuals and faith communities to integrate the Divine with humanity and creation. Jesus models how to keep Sabbath both inwardly (through prayer, solitude, silence, and meditation) and outwardly (through communal ritual and acts of justice). Our inward movement toward a life centered in the Spirit indicates the reign of God within us. Jesus embodies the depth of sabbath-keeping experiences through outward action to followers and to those he encounters who have specific needs. Our practice of Sabbath is informed by God resting on the seventh day after laboring for six days to create the world, establishing a day of Sabbath. Building on this biblical tradition, some faith communities dedicate a specific day of the week to rest, worship, and work for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

Living Creatively: Playing and Living Joyfully

In today's world people of all ages need to give themselves permission to play. We believe God seeks to awaken a playful spirit among us. We invite God into this process as we seek recreation and re-creation. While it can lead us into other things, play is inherently its own reward; the experience of playing and living joyfully is – in its essence – pure hope, delight, celebration and song. Playing and living joyfully moves beyond prescribed forms and places. It includes ways of doing justice and moves us outside ourselves into sharing one with another. Joy is contagious; come and play!

Living as a People of Story: Encountering Scripture

Christian scripture includes books from the Hebrew tradition as well as New Testament stories of Jesus and the early church. Some Christian traditions also include the Apocrypha. Through a divine and human process, scripture is gathered in the Bible. As Christians, we believe that scripture is the living word of God. It is central to our faith as individuals and as a community. In our encounter with scripture, God meets us and we meet God. Scripture is our family story, holding us together in Christian community. These sacred texts help us to listen in our diversity and to find common language amid controversy. We actively engage with the Bible—sometimes we challenge and struggle with scripture and sometimes scripture challenges and unsettles us. Because the Bible has been used to judge, condemn, or hurt, we have a responsibly and a calling as God's people to remove fear, distrust, and disempowerment and to move toward confidence, empowerment, and love.



Engaging Others Faithfully: Giving Testimony and Witness

Testimony involves recognizing God's action in our lives and finding ways to express it meaningfully with others. This can take as many forms as the gifts that God has given us. It takes courage to give witness because of the deeply personal nature of faith journeys. For some this comes easily but for others it may be more difficult. To share our experiences in a public way involves the risk of becoming vulnerable. However, choosing to share our story creates opportunities for relationship and growth even in the face of resistance. Sharing our faith celebrates and honors encounters with the Holy and gives us a chance to deepen our awareness of God's work in our lives. Giving testimony invites others to do the same. Giving witness and listening to others' stories joins us to the universal story of God's ongoing transformative work in creation.



Faith Practice Affirmations

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The *Faith Practices* resources:

➤ Affirm these theological principles:

- We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:
- God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.
- God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.
- God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.
- In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.
- God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.
- God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.
- God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

➤ Seek to participate in God's mission and to follow the way of the crucified and risen Christ.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called and commit ourselves to:

- Praise God, confess our sin, and joyfully accept God's forgiveness;
- Proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our suffering world;
- Embody God's Love for all people;
- Hear and give voice to creation's cry for justice and peace;
- Name and confront the powers of evil within and among us;
- Repent our silence and complicity with the forces of chaos and death;
- Preach and teach with the power of the living Word;
- Join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation;
- Work for justice, healing, and wholeness of life;
- Embrace the unity of Christ's church;
- Discern and celebrate the present and coming reign of God.



In addition, these statements guide the development of *Faith Practices* resources:

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- Collaboration is essential to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).
- Involvement of the whole church community is not only invited, but imperative in creating the resources.
- The use of scripture is fundamental.
 - Scripture from both the Old and New Testaments will be used in each practice
 - Scripture selection is not confined to the lectionary
 - We will use inclusive language in our presentation of the texts
 - Scripture will be used as a catalyst for helping learners explore the faith
 - Scripture is both formative and informative
 - No text is exclusive to any one practice – one text can open up many practices
 - We will not proof text, but will use verses in context
 - Scripture will be selected that is appropriate to each age level
 - All learners will work with a Compass scripture, a text common to all Components in each practice
- There are many styles of learning, and there are multiple intelligences.
- The role of the leader is to be a pilgrim guide.
- The community of faith is transformative.
- Learners of all ages need opportunities to experience practices of faith individually and in community, not just to engage in academic study.
- Art is used to open up reflection, not to illustrate a text.
- Portrayals of diversity include examples, stories, art, music, names, settings, rituals, and traditions that represent the world in its fullness: diversity of cultures, backgrounds, abilities, orientation, classes, and race. While these may be visible differences, we acknowledge there are also invisible diversities, such as learning disabilities.
- We honor the ability of all learners to be interpreters of the faith and the stories of faith.



Age Groups and Settings

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In *Faith Practices*, a component is understood to be either a specific age level or context in the life of a congregation. We have identified twelve such age groups and settings for this resource:

- Worship, Music, Art, and Story
- Adults
- Seekers, New Church Participants
- Young Adults
- Older Youth
- Youth
- Older Children
- Young Children
- Multiage and Intergenerational
- Living Practices in Daily Life
- Workshop Rotation
- Denominational Identity and History

These resources for worship, learning, and serving may be used in varied settings such as: Sunday morning, discussion groups and seminars, workshops, retreats, small group meetings, all church events, leadership meetings, as well as household and home and community settings. While each individual component provides enough activities for up to twelve (12) weeks of study, congregations may choose to use *Faith Practices* for shorter time blocks of four to six weeks. The resources are designed to be flexible in order to meet the needs of many congregations.

Worship, Music, Art, and Story

This component provides material for worship: suggestions for creating liturgies, suggestions for the use of music, hymns, and art images. Engagement with the faith practice is grounded in twelve Bible stories. Those who plan Sunday morning services of worship and other corporate worship experiences, or those who seek worship elements for programs, groups, and activities will find this component helpful.

Adults

We acknowledge that there is a wide age range for adults, usually from age 35 and above, and that there are many stages of life and faith maturity in adulthood. In *Faith Practices*, the adult resources are aimed at those adult church members and leaders who actively practice their faith in the life of the congregation over time and who help a congregation live according to particular practices of faith. However, these adults may need assistance in naming their habits and customs as practices of faith. *Faith Practices* also presumes that participants want to learn more. Adults who use these resources describe themselves as belonging to the church community and searching for more depth of understanding and practice.



Seekers and New Church Participants

Seekers and new church participants have not had extensive experience in the faith community. Often the language and activities of the church may present a different way of thinking, acting, and even speaking for them. They may not have developed a frame of reference for biblical and theological references. Activities in this component assume that everything about the practice of faith is new or that participants may have prior experience of the faith issues from other settings in daily life or in another faith tradition. This component applies to adults and youth of all ages.

Young Adults

Young adults are twenty-something or thirty-something (sometimes defined as ages 18-35). They are the first generation born and bred in the digital era, but they are also plugged into relationships rooted in off-line reality: text messaging, instant messaging, MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook enhance and continue relationships from the non-digital world. Young adults are the most self-confident generation ever, but they face a reality of crumbling institutions: educational, financial, health and religious. They may have encountered personal disappointments and failures.

They embrace and expect diversity of background, opinion, and experience, but can sometimes be overly relativistic. Young adults are accustomed to having many options all the time. They live in a multitasking environment, but many are also yearning for simplicity beyond these complexities and yearn for a life unplugged. Some young adults are seekers, while others grew up within a faith community.

Older Youth

Older youth (ages 15-19) have growing experiences of faith and faith practice. Today's youth are products of an esteem-driven system of learning. They are shaped by the team experience whether at school, on the playground, in sports, or at work, but they can also be very alone. Often they have entered the stage of searching faith. As they grow into relationships with others, they test their sexuality and consider life commitments. Some have discovered talents that take much of their time to practice and express. They distrust being marketed to and bombarded with commercial messages, yet they can be loyal to trusted brands. Older youth are developing a faith vocabulary that gives voice to their feelings, ideas, and emotions. While they may engage in some practices of faith, they eagerly explore others and seek to become more practiced in the disciplines of faith practices both individually and corporately.

Youth

Youth (ages 11-15) still depend on parents and/or caregivers for guidance, nurturing, and transportation. It is likely that if the adults in their lives relate to a faith community, they may too. Some youth connect to the faith community through their peers rather than through their family. They sometimes think and behave as older children and sometimes as older youth. Life is a mixed bag for them. They need to experience being grounded in a nurturing congregation that allows room for questioning and doubts. As



they learn to manage their time, they can begin to incorporate more personal as well as community faith practices.

Older children

Older children (ages 7-11) express a need to belong to the faith community and to participate fully in its life. As they grow physically and intellectually, they want to contribute to the life of the church. Activities in this component assume that the children have at least beginning reading level capabilities. Their experiences of the practices of faith may be mostly through their participation in the life of a congregation.

Young children

Young children (ages 3-7) lead the church into new experiences of faith. Many studies demonstrate that young children have significant faith. These children are often most ready to practice the faith with us, to participate in our rituals, to engage us in loving and caring ways. Practice activities for these children assume that they have not yet developed reading skills.

Multiage and Intergenerational

The resources in this component offer activities and suggestions for ways children ages 5-14 can experience practices of faith together. These activities take into consideration the needs and abilities of all the children involved and recommend steps for leading and learning across the age span.

Intergenerational resources assume groups that include people of all ages: children, youth, young adult, and adult. There are many benefits from learning to practice one's faith in a group where there are a variety of levels of faith maturity. Leaders are encouraged to remember that each person in an intergenerational group has gifts to offer and to receive from others in the group.

Living Practices in Daily Life

While the setting for the use of *Faith Practices* is most likely within the life of a congregation, people don't live at the church. This component offers resources that can strengthen one's practice of faith through household and family activities, individual and personal activities, work place and community activities.

Workshop Rotation

This component offers resources and activities for Drama, Computer, Nature and Science, Art, Food, Games, Music, Video. While these activities are not particular to the Workshop Rotation model, the presentation of the activities follows the rotation model of centers with a variety of leaders rather than just one or two leaders for a group. Age level groups may meet in a single space in the church; activities for the workshop rotation may happen in the kitchen, the parking lot, or multiple rooms.



Denomination Identity and History

This component focuses on introducing the history and current identity of the United Church of Christ. Resources will include information from all the covenanted ministries (Local Church, Wider Church, Justice and Witness) and will help participants develop a deeper understanding of how their congregation, conference, national church, as well as other churches like theirs in the denomination and churches across the world practice the faith.

Session Development

Material for 6-12 sessions of worship, learning, and serving		Types of Activities		
		Exploring and Engaging (3 activities)	Discerning and Deciding (3 activities)	Sending and Serving (3 activities)
Explorations	Discovery	1-2 Sessions		
	Scripture	1-2 Sessions		
	Discipleship	1-2 Sessions		
	Christian Tradition	1-2 Sessions		
	Context and Mission	1-2 Sessions		
	Future and Vision	1-2 Sessions		

To create a session, or a series of sessions, select activities for each *Exploration*. We recommend that each session includes at least one activity from each of the three types. There are a total of 54 activities provided for the study and experience of each practice of faith.

As an example of a six-session study of a practice of faith, for the first session to Discovery (*Exploration*) a leader may choose one activity from each type (Exploring and Engaging, Discerning and Deciding, and Sending and Serving). For the next session, focused on what we learn about the practice from Scripture (*Exploration*), the leader may choose two activities from Exploring and Engaging, one activity from Discerning and Deciding, and one activity from Sending and Serving. Each session uses activities to investigate a different *Exploration*.

In each type one activity is designated for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church).



One session:

30-45 minutes (Choose 1 activity of each type)

45-60 minutes (Choose 4 or 5 activities, at least one from each *Sphere*)

Two sessions

Using all 9 activities provides enough resources for two 45-60 minute sessions.

Explorations

“Exploring” means to investigate, to study, to analyze in order to become more familiar with the territory. “Exploring” also means traveling over new territory for adventure or discovery. The *Faith Practices* resources provide six ways to explore each faith practice. Bible stories give shape to each Exploration. Art images, music, poetry, and prose provide inroads for our journey.

Discovery

In this Exploration we encounter the practice and explore how it intersects with human needs in community and personal life. For those for whom the particular practice is a new concept, the activities offer ways to “get to know” what it is all about. For those who have had more experience with the practice, the activities present a time of storytelling about their experiences and reflection on the impact of the practice in their lives, in the life of the church, and in the world.

Scripture

Christian faith practices grow out of the biblical story of the people of faith. For each faith practice, twelve Bible stories (two for each Exploration) inform and give direction to practicing our faith. One of these Bible stories, the *compass story*, is a guiding story out of which the faith practice grows. In the Scripture Exploration we study this story and see how it relates to all the Bible stories selected for the practice. In addition, *Faith Practices* provides connections to Bible stories found in the Revised Common Lectionary used by many congregations in worship.

Discipleship

Discipleship is about following. Just as navigators follow a star, whether in the northern or southern hemisphere, we follow Jesus, the leader of our faith. In the Discipleship Exploration we consider what prompts people of faith to become disciples and probe how the Spirit leads us in the communal life of the Christian community and in our personal lives in the world.



Christian Tradition

Practices of faith have been shaped by those who have preceded us in the history of the Christian church. The future will be shaped by the way we practice our faith today. Just as a map provides the landmarks we need to follow when we navigate in the world, this rich history of the Christian tradition guides us as we practice our faith today. In the Christian Tradition Exploration we seek to make the resources of the church available to those who practice faith today.

Context and Mission

In order to claim a role in the mission God gives to the church, you have to know where you are, your local context. Just as modern global positioning systems (GPS) help locate us in the world and guide us to a destination, so we need to know both the needs and realities of our local community and the direction for ministry that God gives us and the church. In the Context and Mission Exploration we consider ways to practice faith in our community and world.

Future and Vision

Practicing our faith leads us into the future. Sometimes we need to gaze through a telescope to see the distant point to which we are headed. Sometimes we need to peer through a microscope to see the details that are not clear to us with our normal vision. We seek to move into the future with a vision of where we are headed. In the Future and Vision Exploration we consider what impels us into the future. We know that we are still practicing our faith; we won't do it perfectly. We are empowered to keep practicing.

Types of Activities

Each Exploration can be probed through three types of activities. These are the things we do, ways we live out each Exploration that help us move into practicing our faith with more depth, experience, and understanding.

Exploring and Engaging

Whether we are new to a particular faith practice or an old hand with much experience, all of us benefit from new opportunities to explore the shape of the faith practice and to engage the issues of faith that the practice offers. Sometimes this is a matter of learning new ideas about the practice. Sometimes this is more about reflecting on what we have done in our practice. The activities in the Exploring and Engaging Sphere help us figure out how a faith practice intersects with our life and the life of the community of faith.

Discerning and Deciding

Practicing our faith always involves discernment: naming the realities of our community and world, and seeking the will of God for our lives and for the world. We then decide how we will act, what we will do, what values move us forward, what faith has called us



to do. The activities in this Sphere give us opportunity to practice by discerning and deciding.

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Sending and Serving

Practicing our faith involves serving others and being sent out as empowered disciples of Jesus Christ. We need time in our exploration to plan how we will serve. We need moments that send us forth blessed by the community from which we venture out. The activities in this Sphere offer opportunities to practice our faith through sending and serving.