

**WITH GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS:**  
**Epiphany Series for Local Church Partnerships**  
**A Guide for Leaders**

Why should our church enter into a partnership with another local church? This four session series is designed to help parish members answer this vital question. There are several good reasons for local church partnerships – more effective outreach to the community, combined financial resources, more volunteers to undertake mission work, and a deeper connection to the wider community through service. Sadly, these good reasons may not be compelling enough to bring about such partnerships. Having a local mission partner means being in relationship with another faith community. Time and energy must be invested in the other community in order for a joint mission to work. Mutual goals must emerge and responsibility must be shared. For some communities, these aspects of a local partnership seem daunting rather than appealing.

Perhaps the biggest objection to entering into partnership with another church is something much dearer than time, money, and responsibility. By entering into a partnership, each church is admitting that the other is necessary, that the communities need each other. That is a bitter thought to many who would prefer to understand themselves as self-sufficient and self-contained. It is this letting go of the ideal of self-sufficiency that is the greatest obstacle to church partnerships. No one, as an individual or as a community, likes to admit to needing others.

The wonderful and usually unwelcome truth is that we as individuals and we as communities of faith are not self-sufficient, are not self-contained, are not self-defining. We are the Body of Christ, bound together in the Spirit with all other faith communities. Our communal life is called into existence so that we can become Christ in the world, to live lives conformed to Christ's life – not to live according to our own inventions. We need each other if we are to recognize Christ in the world; we need each other if we are to serve Christ in this world. It is a great relief to come clean about our need for others. Living in relationship with other churches is a gift of grace, not an added burden. One of the primary goals of this curriculum is to help participants embrace the grace of living with others. From this willingness to open ourselves to other churches will come a deeper sense of communal identity and a greater love for serving Christ through mission.

The series itself is one of both action and reflection. The lessons assume that we learn best when we learn through a combination of action, discussion, and quiet reflection. Each session has particular activities that are as important to the learning process as the discussion questions. The participation and engagement of all learners is vital and should be fostered throughout the sessions. These activities are corporate in nature, requiring the participants to work together rather than in isolation. This encourages deeper conversation because there is a deeper connection among the learners. It also reflects the reality

of mission work: many must work together to serve Christ in the world and to live ever more deeply into the Spirit of God.

Each session has a particular Biblical focus, grounding the discussions in Holy Scripture. Each session has questions that highlight the particularities of the community and its individuals. There are suggestions for encouraging discussion and for exploring the Bible text. These are meant to be a starting point and should be altered to fit the context. A list of materials needed for each session can be found at the beginning of each lesson.

The series finds its foundation in the Gospel, but it is not Gospel itself. Changes can and should be made to create the best learning experience for all involved. This series is not the last word concerning mission partnerships: it is the beginning of the conversation. Leave open the possibility of new directions in light of the Spirit's presence.

This series is designed as an Epiphany series. It begins with the Magi's journey to the Christ child, and with their journey home by another road. While Epiphany is usually the time this text arises, this series could easily be done at other times of the year. Journeying to Christ is a daily reality, not one reserved for four weeks of the year.

As you begin preparing for this series, there are specific points to consider:

1. All learning in faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Begin and end each session in prayer to encourage participants to expect the guidance of the Spirit.
2. There is more material included than need be used in any one session. It is more important to spark conversation and questioning than to do everything suggested in this curriculum.
3. The lay people of the church must be actively involved as leaders if a local church partnership is to work. Let the ideas for forming a partnership come from them. The clergy involved should support and encourage, but not govern the process. The relationship must be between communities, not primarily between the clergy leading the communities.

Churches in partnership have the opportunity to grow in new and wonderful ways, and to sustain lasting bonds with other churches. These are gifts of the Spirit. It will take time, prayer, energy, and vision to join in a local partnership. It will cost each community their isolation. It will bring each community a greater sense of themselves and one other as Christ's body in this world. That is worth everything.

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## Session I: BY ANOTHER ROAD

### The Journey of the Magi

#### Materials for this Lesson

Paper, pens or pencils, maps of a country that has royal families (England, Jordan, etc.)

#### Scripture Text

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'*

*Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

*(Mt. 2:1-12NRSV)*

## Opening Prayer

Gracious God, be with us as we study your word. Open our hearts and minds to your love and wisdom. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## Finding a Child

Divide group into smaller groups of three to five people. Give each group a map, paper, and pens. Tell them that they have been hired to find a child. This child, born in the past few months, will become the ruler of his or her country. How can this child be found? The groups should come up with a plan to locate the child. After five to ten minutes, bring the groups back together to discuss their plans. Where did they go (the capital, other important locations)? Whom did they seek to help them locate the child (royal family members, government officials, public records, etc.)? How easy or hard would it be to find a nameless child from another country?

This exercise will bring into focus the task facing the three Wise Men, and help the participants gain a greater appreciation for the many difficulties that faced them as they searched for the Christ child.

## Hearing the Story

Before reading Matthew's account of the Wise Men's visit, ask the participants **what they remember about the story**. Many will remember the general points, if not all the details. After reading the text, ask **what parts had been forgotten**.

Points to Remember about the Text:

1. Magi, or wise men, were astronomers and astrologers who studied the heavens for signs and also for charting seasons, etc. There was no separation between religion and science at that point.
2. The visit of the Magi is a symbolic way of noting that Jesus came for all people, and will be recognized as holy by all nations. Jesus was born king of the Jewish people, but not born exclusively for the Jewish people. Matthew's inclusion of this story points toward Jesus as universal savior from his birth forward.

## Journeying into the Story

A good way to approach the text in a meaningful way is to ask questions. Rather than give answers or points of note, ask those participating for their thoughts. This makes the answers more meaningful and often brings surprising insights into the discussion.

Questions about the text (add those that the participants ask, too):

1. **How easy was it for the three Magi to find the Christ child?**
  - a. No Mapquest or roadside atlases available
  - b. The language and customs of their home country were different from Israel's.
  - c. Travel in the ancient world was dangerous – bandits, desert hardships, no motels at convenient intervals.
  - d. Travel took a long time and a lot of money. It is likely that the Magi had others with them for the trip – a retinue that provided safety for all travelers.

**2. Why stop in Jerusalem?**

- a. Jerusalem was the political and religious center of Israel, and its major metropolis.
- b. The current king resided in Jerusalem and might know where the baby born king was located.
- c. The priests and scribes who would know sacred texts could reveal something as important as the birth of a king whose star shone brightly.
- d. If the baby happened to be elsewhere, someone in Jerusalem should know his location.
- e. The Magi could also tell the leaders of Israel about the signs they had read concerning Jesus; this would add great prestige to the child's birth.

**3. Why would Herod be afraid of the birth of the Christ child? Why would all of Jerusalem also be afraid?**

- a. Herod was originally a decent ruler, but illness and paranoia caused him to fear others with power (this included his own children).
- b. If another claimed kingship, then the many factions that did not support Herod would have a leader, making rebellion likely.
- c. In the case of civil war, the Roman army would occupy the land and put down all rebellion; the Jewish people would lose what autonomy they possessed.
- d. All of Jerusalem might fear uprising, and might fear the brutal tactics that Herod would use to eliminate a political threat (Herod did order all male children under age two killed to do just this thing).
- e. Any change in leadership is risky – things could be better, things could get worse. Stability would disappear and those who were wealthy would fear for their fortunes and their lives.

**4. Why would a sign be given to three astrologers/astronomers from a foreign country rather than to Jewish wise men?**

- a. Astrology/astronomy was more commonly practiced in the other countries than in Israel.
- b. Sometimes it is easier for an outsider to see and accept an extraordinary sign than for those who are closest to it.
- c. Perhaps others did see the sign, but they did not make the journey to greet the child born king.

**5. Were the Magi surprised to find that the child born king was Jesus?**

- a. Jesus and his family were poor, not part of the ruling class.
- b. Bethlehem is an insignificant place, not highly regarded as the birthplace of kings.
- c. Mary and Jesus were not extraordinary in any way that most could see – they were peasants like most other people.

**6. If the guiding star rests over a humble home, does it make it easier to accept Jesus as the one born king?**

**The Magi and Their Journey**

The three (traditional number) Magi traveled a great distance to find the one whose star they had seen. They may have been acquaintances or fellow workers before the journey, but there is

no way to know. All three would be changed by their travels together, becoming well aware of each other and their gifts, shortcomings, likes and dislikes. They were on a sacred journey and that bound them together. The sign was given to all three (perhaps others who did not follow it) and Jesus was sought by all three, even though they were not Jewish. The gifts they gave were costly, the time and cost of the journey very significant. In facing the dangers of the road, they risked their lives to follow a sign and a vision of someone not even of their own nation.

Questions:

1. **Why would the three Magi be overwhelmed with joy when the star rested over Jesus' and Mary's home? Why weren't they disappointed in its poverty and ordinariness?**
2. **Would any one of them have made the journey if the other two did not also see the sign and make the trip?**
  - a. One person with a vision might doubt its validity; three with a shared vision give one another an anchor to reality.
  - b. Because all three risked so much to find Jesus, perhaps they did not mind the humble nature of his birth – a pilgrimage gives pilgrims a different perspective, perhaps making it easier to see God's divine and royal king in an unexpected place and with a rather plain appearance.
  - c. All three chose to interpret reality in light of their vision rather than try to fit their star vision into their preexisting reality; they chose to reorder their expectations instead of rejecting the vision.

### **Going Home by Another Road**

After finding the one born king, and with a warning not to return to Herod, the Magi return to their own land by another road. This indicates that the Magi trusted their own dreams and wisdom, even when defying Herod put them in danger. The Magi trust their collective wisdom and vision rather than what is customary. By doing so, they did not give the Christ child over to Herod and certain death. They did not discount their dreams and visions, even though the king they found was a peasant.

When we follow a vision, when we seek Christ in the world, we must rely on others who are seekers, too. The journey is not a solitary one, but one meant to be traveled with others. The very act of traveling together binds us to each other and to following God's signs, and gives us strength to believe in the holiness of the vision and the sanctity of the pilgrimage. After such a journey, it is not possible to return home by the same road: we are irrevocably changed and cannot retrace our steps back to our old lives. Another road home is necessary because all things have been transformed by starlight and the Christ child.

Ending Question: **As people of faith, we are asked to seek Christ in the world. Whom will we take along as companions on the journey?**

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious Lord, thank you for your presence with us as we study the Gospel and seek your direction for our lives. Bless us as we leave this place and bring us together again. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## Session II: SENT OUT TOGETHER

### Companions in Ministry

#### Materials for this Lesson

Paper, pens or pencils, whiteboard and marker

Task supplies – one or more of the following:

Lego bricks, Sudoku puzzles, crosswords (small), jigsaw puzzles, Upwords word game, origami paper and directions, blocks, magnetic building pieces, mazes, scavenger hunt lists and items, components for a fruit tray or crudités, etc.

#### Scripture Text

*The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way." (Luke 10:1-3, NRSV)*

#### Opening Prayer

God, you are with us in all our comings and goings. Be present with us in this place as we seek your wisdom in our lives. Amen

#### Two Heads are Better Than One

Jesus did not send people out alone, but in pairs. This session explores why companions in ministry are necessary. The gifts of two help with the discerning of needs and the work of meeting them. Companions keep each other grounded in reality both by questioning and affirming each other's thoughts and actions. Because the harvest is plentiful and the laborers few, companions can encourage each other when tasks seem overwhelming. Companions also keep each other from going crazy. The disciples often had companions as they spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. This lesson and its activities bring into focus the need to have partners. This is true on an individual basis – two heads are better than one. It is also true in a corporate way – two faith communities working together in mission can accomplish more together than either on its own.

#### Together or Alone?

Before reading the scripture text, assign pairs of participants with a task to perform in a limited amount of time – 10 minutes is sufficient. This can be the same task for each pair or several different tasks divided among the pairs. The discussion will be more interesting if the tasks

differ, but a single task may result in the various pairs joining up spontaneously. These tasks could be completing crosswords, word searches, Sudoku puzzles, folding origami animals, building a Lego figure or something with blocks or magnets, or creating a snack tray with a variety of fruits or vegetables. If space permits, a scavenger hunt to find items or locate certain symbols or figures in the church (or look up what the symbols mean) could be a good activity. The tasks should require problem-solving skills or advanced thought.

When done, bring the group together to share what was done and to discuss the experience. **Was the task easier, more enjoyable, more meaningful, done better because it was done by two rather than one? Why?** This exercise is most effective if the participants are given tasks that they do not do in their daily routines. Give the group sufficient discussion time rather than supplying answers about why two working together is advantageous. Write their ideas on a large piece of paper or whiteboard so that everyone can see them. (If space permits, these responses can be left up for the duration of the series. This would allow participants to review previous sessions and see the four separate lessons as part of a larger whole. It may also spark the interest of the wider congregation if left in an area of high traffic.)

A second exercise may be done if time permits. Ask this question: **What activities are better done with others, not alone?** Take five minutes to answer and then share the ideas with the whole group. If there are enough people, pair some up for the writing part and leave some on their own. These comments can be added to the ones from the first exercise. (An added benefit of these exercises is that the participants will get to know each other by working and talking together.)

Some participants might mention sailing, swimming, constructing houses, raising children, solving problems, eating meals, learning a new language, etc. Many life-giving or life-enhancing activities are best done with others because humans are intrinsically social. Babies are born incomplete, requiring others to help them develop fully. To develop fully in faith, to serve Christ in the world, requires an *other* to remind us that we do not define reality (God does) and that we are called to transform reality (through the Spirit) into Christ's kingdom.

### Reading the Scripture Text

Have someone from the group read the Luke passage. In light of the activities just done in pairs, **why was it best to send out the 70 in pairs rather than alone?** If sent alone, twice as much space could be traversed, twice as many towns visited. Let the group come up with ideas rather than give out possible answers immediately. This will encourage deeper thought and engagement with the text and with the group. Other questions to encourage discussion:

1. **Have you ever traveled alone? How was the experience different than traveling with a companion?**
2. **What does Jesus mean when he says that the harvest is plentiful and the laborers few?**
  - a. The harvest is often interpreted as the people who have yet to meet Jesus Christ.



- b. The harvest may be understood as the result of working for Christ in the world; the labor, while difficult, will reap plentiful results.

**3. Who are these 70 others?**

- a. These 70 are not following Jesus as the named disciples, but they are followers of Jesus.
- b. The 70 are sent into the world to announce Jesus' coming to the nearby towns and villages; their work is vital.
- c. The 70 others are the equals to the lay people in the church – they are vital to Christ's ministry and they are given a ministry by Jesus.
- d. No specific requirements are noted that separated these 70 from others – their willingness to go out for Jesus is what makes them different from those who listened to Jesus but did not take an active role in his mission.

**Other Points to Note:**

- 1. Two are sent out to be support for each other, for company along the way, encouragement when the task seems too great, and as a reality check to keep both from going crazy.
- 2. Two sent together with tidings of Jesus' coming will be taken more seriously than one alone – those who have delusions about Jesus are not likely to be traveling in pairs.
- 3. Often, God's presence is felt more profoundly in the presence of other believers. (Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.")

As with the first exercise and discussion, let the answers emerge from the participants. When the discussion is winding down, any points not raised through the discussion can be brought into the conversation. This helps the group think creatively and invest their ideas and energy into the process. If local church partnerships are going to be formed, the lay people must be excited about them and invested in their possibilities.

**Sent Out Together – Our Commission**

All people are given gifts for ministry by God. At baptism, these gifts are blessed by the Holy Spirit. All believers are called to ministry, just as the 70. We are all sent out into the world to be laborers for the Lord of the Harvest. It makes sense that we are also given partners for our mission to the world, as individuals and as faith communities. Just as two individuals can accomplish more together than they could separately, churches can do more with a partner.

Points to ponder throughout the coming weeks:

**What gifts for ministry do I offer?**

**What is Christ sending us out (as a group) to accomplish?**

Ask the participants to be in daily prayer about these questions.

### **Closing Comments**

At the end of the session, leave five minutes for any final thoughts or questions that the group wants to raise. These may be practical (what kind of mission work is needed in our community, what other church might be interested in a joint mission) or more theoretical (how do we live out our commission in this time and place, do we take Jesus' sending of the 70 others as a paradigm for our own mission). If there are no questions or comments, allow at least a half minute of silence before closing in prayer.

### **Closing Prayer**

God, we thank you for your presence with us in this time and place. Send us out into your world with your blessing. Help us to see the face of Christ in others. Help us to be the hands of Christ in serving others. In his name we pray, Amen.

## Session III: A SECOND LOOK

### Seeing Jesus in our World

#### Materials for this Lesson

Markers, pens, color pencils or crayons, paper, large roll of paper (at least three feet long) or posterboard, magazines, glue or tape

#### Scripture Text

*'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'* Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:34-40 NRSV)

#### Opening Prayer The Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, Make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, love; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, in dying that we are born to eternal life.

#### What Do We See?

There is a big difference between looking at something and actually noticing it. *Looking* at something does not mean that we pay attention to it, or really comprehend what it might mean. *Seeing* involves not only visually noticing something, but actively relating to it. Seeing something allows us to put it into its larger context and to relate to it. Seeing requires an awareness of our surroundings; looking is something we do to avoid bumping into other people or objects. This activity is designed to bring this difference into sharp relief. The hope is that those who participate will begin to see what is going on around them, and respond in ways that reflect Christ's love for the world.

As with many things, noticing the people and objects in our world involves time and energy. Sometimes, what is right in front of us disappears – it is so familiar that it ceases to capture our attention. With a second pair of eyes, we are more likely to see what we look upon.

### **Seeing the World Around Us**

Divide the group into smaller groups of two to four people. (Try to put people together who are different in age, home location, occupation or interest, and length of time within the community. This will make the exercise more interesting and will yield better results.) Give each group a large piece of paper, pencils, crayons, markers, glue, magazines, etc. On a whiteboard or other large surface within plain sight of all groups, write these directions:

***Draw a map of the area surrounding the church, adding in as many buildings, roads, landmarks, and other features as you can. You may use any of the materials provided to create your map. When your map is complete, answer these questions and add to your map:***

- 1. Where do the teenagers spend time?***
- 2. Where can you find retired citizens gathered?***
- 3. Where are the homeless people located?***
- 4. Where do Brownies, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, etc., meet?***
- 5. Where can a hungry person get a free meal? Find shelter?***
- 6. Is there public transportation in the area?***
- 7. Are there group homes or residential facilities for groups with special needs?***
- 8. Where are beautiful places that are a joy to see?***
- 9. Are there ugly spaces, derelict buildings, or other places in need of care?***

Give the groups at least 20 minutes to work on their maps. The time is well spent. It will be surprising to many what is remembered in detail and what is not. This activity can be altered in many ways to fit the group. For example, if the church is not in a central location within the town or city, a downtown location can be mapped. Other options would be to provide maps and ask the participants to place markers on the locations of churches, shelters, schools, libraries, retirement homes, homes of parishioners, and other places of note. Any of these variations will accomplish the same thing: helping participants see what they look at every day in their own neighborhood. Ironically, relative newcomers to a community can usually fill in as many things on the map as long-time residents. Ask the members of the group if they as individuals could have produced such detailed maps of their own neighborhood.

### **Our Impact**

When the maps are fairly well detailed, put them on display for the entire group to see. Bring everyone together to discuss what details were most difficult to place, what was easily marked, and those things that could not be placed or answered. This will give the group as a whole a good idea of the extent of its communal community knowledge. Depending on the location of the church, and its ministry to the local community, the feelings of the group will range from

relative satisfaction (Our faith community has knowledge of our local context.) to slight dissatisfaction (Shouldn't we know more about what goes on in our own back yard?) to dismay (Yikes! I am a stranger in a strange land!). Without too much discussion of the general feelings of the group, have someone read the Scripture text.

### **Seeing Jesus in Our Midst**

Depending upon the location of the church, the discussion will take different directions. Those churches that are located in towns with a fair number of needy citizens may have a clear sense of the local mission needs. Those communities that are removed from obvious poverty have a different set of questions that must be asked. For any group in any location, a list of needs in the local area should be easily made, whether the needs are literally down the street or several miles away. No group escapes seeing poverty and need in the world. These questions, and others tailored to the specific group, may spark conversation:

- 1. Where do we see “the least of these who are members of my family” within our town?**
- 2. What is it like to see people in need? Does it make us uncomfortable to see homeless people, mentally ill men and women, or other specific groups?**
- 3. Do we see our own neighborhood and its needs more clearly because we came together as a group? Are there needs that the group may not see?**
- 4. If we do not see people in need in our town often, where are they? (This may lead to a longer discussion at another time: if we live in an area where there are no obvious needs to fill, was that a conscious or unconscious choice?)**
- 5. Who can help us see “the least of these” more clearly?**

### **Hope or Overwhelming Need?**

One of the reasons that we may not “see” the needs of our communities is that it is painful. The need is great and our resources paltry. Making a dent in the needs of the world, even locally, seems like a Herculean task, without much satisfaction or impact. Despair at the world's need can sap the life out of us. But the Scripture text gives us not only a glimpse into how Christ judges our actions – it also gives us great hope. *No matter how dire the needs of the poor are, Christ's presence is always in the midst of it. When we look upon great suffering and need, when we minister to the poorest among us, we do not drag Jesus along for the ride: Jesus is already present when we arrive. Our service to others, our mission to bring Good News to the poor, is our journey to Christ's side. In this way, it is our homecoming- a foretaste of the communion of all saints in heaven.*

### **Taking a Partner**

Just as a group of people can discern the contours and needs of their community better than any individual, two communities of faith working together can see more clearly the needs

surrounding them. With this sight, and with the encouraging presence of a church partner, the work and blessing of mission become hope-filled.

As the session comes to a close, ask the participants to **dream about the possibilities for seeing and serving “the least of these.”** Ask them all to pray for wisdom and courage in seeking a local church partner to seek the face of Christ in meeting the needs of the world.

### **Closing Prayer**

For the closing prayer, play or sing a favorite hymn or other sacred music. The music of Bruce Cockburn, U2, or Sweet Honey in the Rock would be good choices, among others.

## Session IV: ALL THINGS IN COMMON

This final session should take place during a meal. If the group is small enough, sit everyone at a common table. If the group must be divided, do so in as few tables as possible, and set the tables in a way that allows participants to see one another. The discussion, if possible, should take place during the meal.

The meal should be simple, and something that requires the group to work together. While setting up the tables should be done in advance, let the participants place food and water on the tables. The meal should be served family style, allowing everyone to share and pass food to each other. Crudités, sandwiches, fondue, cheese and bread trays, and soups or stews would work well. The food should require a minimum of preparation and should not be overly filling or fancy. An alternative to the family-style meal is a potluck, with everyone preparing a dish at home to share with the group. When everyone is seated, begin the meal with the opening prayer.

### Materials

Tables set for a meal, trays of food, pitchers for beverages, markers, whiteboard or posterboard, the maps and discussion ideas from the first three sessions

Questions for the table (posted on the wall or printed at the table):

1. **Have you gotten to know others in your church during this series?**
2. **What ideas were new or surprising to you?**
3. **What was the most meaningful discussion you had?**
4. **Do you see your neighborhood in a different way now?**
5. **What hopes do you have for your church and its mission?**
6. **What was the most fun during these sessions?**

### Scripture Text

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)*

## Opening Prayer

God, we thank you for this food, for rest and home and all things good;

For wind and rain and sun above, but most of all for those we love. (Maryleona Frost)<sup>i</sup>

## Breaking Bread Together

After the blessing, ask the participants to choose a question or two from the list for their dinner discussion. This should be a relaxed, casual discussion rather than a quiz session. The point is to bring up elements from the past sessions while also engaging in a communal discernment process. This is much more meaningful and productive when the participants know each other enough to feel comfortable together.

When the meal is winding down, bring the group together to review some of the main points of the past three sessions, writing them so that everyone can see the list. Among those things should be:

1. The journey of the Magi was possible because they went together, supported one another, and trusted their vision. After meeting Christ, no one returns home by the same road – everything changes because everything is now related to being in Christ's presence.
2. All Christians are sent by Christ into the world, but they are not sent alone. We should take partners with us as we work for Christ by serving others. Partners keep us sane, provide mutual support and companionship, and are a gift that deepens our faith lives.
3. There are needs in our local community that we do not see as individuals, but which become apparent when we seek to discern them in a group. We are more likely to see what has become invisible to us when we work with others. We see "the least of these" more often and respond more readily and effectively as a group. We help one another live in hope when the needs seem too great – we don't drag Jesus behind us, but meet Jesus in every situation of need.
4. When we join together with other local churches to meet the needs of the world, we are blessed with other ways to see Christ in the world and new opportunities to be Christ's presence for the world. Our hope and joy grow with our awareness of the great need in the world. We are not discouraged, but encouraged in our faith.

## Local Church Partners

As members of the same diocese and same denomination, local Episcopal churches share common resources, bishops, and geographical location. This does not mean that each church community is exactly like the other. The needs and gifts of each church are different from other churches' needs and gifts – this is true on the individual and communal levels. Within this commonality and these differences exist many ways to serve Christ. By coming together with other local churches, mission work becomes more effective and more spiritually satisfying. Sharing common ministry goals, pooling resources, and working together to accomplish the tasks involved bring us closer to each other and to God. But these are not the only reasons that local partnerships between churches are a blessing to all involved. By sharing time, talent, and treasure, the churches become places of gladness. As in Acts, glad and generous hearts come of such communions – a surprising and wonderful gift of the Spirit.



## Where Can We Serve Jesus?

By looking over the texts of the past three sessions, we can see how Jesus points us in the right direction.

1. The Magi found Christ in Bethlehem, a poor town with no great honor, yet destined to give the world Jesus. When we trust our visions and bring companions, we find Jesus – usually in an unexpected place. Seeking to place our gifts before Christ takes us away from our usual paths and draws us into humble places. In those places, we see Jesus and are filled with joy.
2. After being drawn to Jesus, we are sent out into the local towns and places to serve Christ. Every place needs the loving presence of Jesus, and we will find ways to prepare for Christ’s transforming spirit wherever we go. Taking a local church partner along makes the ministry more effective and the experience more meaningful. Choosing a local partner is the best way to remain hopeful, effective, and sane in our mission work.
3. It is easier to see needs that are far away than those at our doors. Once we are drawn to Jesus and sent out in ministry together, we will see and serve Christ best when we serve “the least of these.” It is easier to recognize Christ’s presence with the poor among us when we have two sets of eyes and two discerning spirits. A second opinion and a second set of hands give us courage to face the need which surrounds us every day in our own backyard, and to meet that need with joyful hearts. When we draw near those in need, when we serve the least among us, we are really coming before our Lord, Jesus Christ.
4. With the Acts text, we return to our own homes. When we pool our time, talents, and treasures, we can give to all according to their needs. We may have less for our own wants, but we receive peace – something that having material goods beyond our needs cannot provide.

## Ministry in Our Neighborhood

These questions may be brought into the conversation during this session, or saved for the meetings of those who will work toward establishing a local church partnership. Asking them during this series takes time, but their concrete specifics may spark great discussion and interest in future local partnerships.

We are called to go into the places around us, following Christ’s commission. For the many reasons already discussed, it is better to take a local church partner. There are as many ways to have a partnership as there are churches and community needs. We are called to Christ’s side in unexpected places, in the humblest of circumstances. We are sent out by Jesus together to serve. Together we see Jesus in all those whom we help. To find a church partner requires time and a willingness to work together. The following questions may be helpful in beginning this process:

1. **Who will lead our church’s local partnership ministry?**
  - a. This could be a separate task group or committee, an outreach team, the vestry, community life, etc. The people of the church must be involved and take responsibility for leadership. The partnership is between congregations, not between priests. The work should be supported and

encouraged by the ordained ministers, but should be a lay-directed ministry. This may take some time, but without community support a partnership will not survive a change in priests.

2. **What local ministry needs do we see?**
  - a. Do we want to meet a need in our own town, which will be met with our resources and facilities? Do we want to become a partner to an already established ministry at another church in the diocese?
  - b. How do we best use our time, talent, and treasure in conjunction with another parish?
3. **Do we choose our local church partner by geographical location (literally in the next town) or by specific ministry (we want to start/support an afterschool program, soup kitchen, etc., and partner with another church with the same ministry interest)?**
4. **How will our church and our local partner church know about our common mission?**
  - a. Will there be monthly updates in the church newsletters?
  - b. Will the joint ministry be added to the weekly prayers during worship?
  - c. Will there be adult education opportunities, bringing more adults into the common ministry?
  - d. How will our youth and children participate in this common ministry?

### **Coming Home to a Meal**

Local church partnerships will lead to more effective ministries in our own communities. They will help us use our resources wisely and help us see Jesus in the great needs around us. They give us hope when we are discouraged, vision when we are blind, and the honor to encourage another church and help another church see Christ more clearly. But we miss out on a great gift of the Spirit if our partnerships remain working relationships only. We are called to “hold things in common,” to share who we are through service, worship, and the breaking of bread.

If we want “glad and generous hearts” as well as a fruitful ministry, we must come together. Just as there is a difference between two children playing alongside one another and two playing together, there is a qualitative difference between two parishes that work alongside each other toward a common goal and two parishes that work together. Both are good and serve Christ in the world, but the second brings the greater sense of Christ’s presence in the Spirit. **But how do we hold things in common, how do we share more than our common ministry goal? How do we develop a deep connection with our local parish partner?** Put this question to the group and add the suggestions to the other responses. Some of these points should emerge from the group:

1. We belong to each other because we share a common Eucharist (we already break bread together on Sunday morning, even when we are not physically together). We can join our local partner congregation in joint worship services (e.g. special Maundy Thursday services, pulpit and worship leader exchanges).
2. We can come together for common meals such as joint potluck dinners.
3. We can have special adult education for both parishes (Lenten series with sessions led by both parishes and held in both churches, bringing in guest speakers that can inform our common ministry, etc.)

4. Our youth can come together in joint mission trips (local and distant), lock-ins, and diocesan events.
5. Our newsletters can include what is happening with our local church partner.
6. The prayer needs of both congregations can be brought before God through sharing prayer lists during worship services and in prayer groups throughout the week.

When a local church partnership takes root, the relationship between the two churches enriches both and becomes integral to the identity of both. These partnerships will continue beyond the tenure of any particular priest or other church leader, providing an ongoing parish identity that is not dependent upon any particular leader.

Entering into a local church partnership takes courage. It takes strength to admit that we need the help of another church, and wisdom to know that we are necessary to the other church. Church partners are equals, not a needy church and a self-sufficient one. The cost is high, but the blessings beyond measure. When we join with others, we move into the world to meet and serve Christ in new and challenging ways. When we return to our church homes, we are willing to hold our time, treasure, and talent in common with one another. When we break our bread, together physically or in spirit only, we do so with the glad and generous hearts we never knew we had.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, we came together to meet with you. We leave to serve you. Send us out into the world together to love and serve you by serving the least of these among us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Taken from: Alexander, Martha, *Poems and Prayers for the Very Young* ( New York: Random House, Inc.), 1973