



## Christian Formation Celebration Sunday

### Worship and Liturgy Suggestions

The Presbyterian Church (USA) planning calendar recognizes a week of Christian Formation in churches and faith communities. This week begins the Sunday after Labor Day, but churches may choose different weeks or split up some of the celebration over several Sundays depending on their church and school calendars. When considering all the ways in which formation happens in our faith communities, we can use this time to kick-off a new program year for Christian education, commission faith formation leaders or start ministries. We encourage you to recognize the importance of Christian Formation and your leaders in worship.

The following worship and music suggestions are based in part on the Revised Common Lectionary readings for *Year A, Proper 18*. For 2023, Christian Formation Celebration week begins September 10.

The Scripture passages in the lectionary for this day are: *Exodus 12:1-14 and Psalm. 149, Complementary Ezekiel 33:7-11, Psalm. 119:33-40, Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20.*

#### **Call to Worship**

*Ps 119, Rom 13, Matt 18*

Teach us, oh Lord, your ways of grace and mercy,

**And we will observe them to the end!**

Remind us, God of our minds, that even if only two or three gather,

**You reside among us with your whole self.**

Guide us into the love of all people and things,

**For love is the fulfillment of your covenant.**

**Let us worship the rabbi, teacher, Christ.**

#### **Opening Prayer**

Lord,

We remember how you taught us by the sea, on a mountain, on a plain,

And we ask that you come teach us now— through the ordinary things –

About how we are to live as your people,

So that we might be your witnesses of love in the world

That cannot keep quiet.

In the name of Christ we pray,

Amen.

#### **Prayer of Illumination**

God,

Send your Holy Spirit upon us,

That through your Word read and proclaimed

We might gain a new vision

Of how we might be one body,

Filled with new brain-wrinkles of hope

And eyes attuned to your love in the world.

In Christ's name we pray,

Amen.

### **Affirmation of Faith**

**We believe in the holy manifestation of God as a human in Jesus Christ, whom his friends called Rabbi, Teacher. We believe in the power of his words to set the world aright. We believe in his fulfillment of the law and in the calling upon us to love; deeply, unashamedly, unreservedly.**

**We rejoice in the callings of those who follow in his footsteps: teachers, helpers, encouragers, supporters. The ones for whom there is no higher calling than to bring up the faithful in the ways of Christ. The ones who follow us from birth to death with the love of Jesus stamped upon their hearts. We give thanks to the God of all of us who calls, equips, and guides them so that they may guide us.**

**We believe the gathered body is one in Christ Jesus. No matter how many or how few, when two or three gather in Jesus' name, he is there. His presence, his body, his words guide us into all faithfulness. We believe, holy One. Help our unbelief.**

### **Litany for Leaders**

One: We give thanks to God for the gifts these leaders bring to this church community.

**All: We give thanks for each one of you, and your dedication to Christian formation.**

One: God called Moses to deliver the Israelites from captivity. God called Deborah to judge the nation. God called Elijah to prophesy to the nation. God called Amos and Jonah and Daniel to deliver unwelcome news. God called Isaiah to comfort the people. God called Paul and Priscilla and Lydia and Phoebe and Junia.

**All: Today God calls you in the tradition of these guides in the faith.**

One: Jesus taught us how to care for one another, how to judge one another, how to love one another. We follow in his footsteps as his disciples, showing one another the way of Christ from our first breath to our last.

**All: This community looks to you, our teachers, leaders, guides, to walk with us as we continue along the path of faithfulness in our Lord Jesus Christ.**

One: Friends, as we celebrate God's call on your lives for the benefit of God's people, we now commission you to service in this place of love and care. Your gifts that you share with us are given by God, and we open ourselves to hearing what God is doing through you.

One: As God says through the prophet Isaiah: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Friends, God is making a way. Let us rejoice in this good news and go to listen, learn, and love the Lord and one another.

**All: May it be so. Amen.**

### **Prayers of the People**

Consider offering the prayers creatively.

- String a clothesline in the chancel with a basket of clothespins. Before the prayers offer time for people to write or illustrate their joys and concerns with provided 8 1/2x11 or 11x17 paper. Then invite them forward to clip across the line. Be sure to particularly lift up Education, Christian Formation.
- Find a small tree to light up and place in the chancel or center of worship space. Have people figures and writing/drawing pens available as people enter. Ask them to write down or draw prayers for the community, church, and world particularly those involved in education or formation and invite them to clip to the tree or hang off if ribbons are attached. OR provide paper leaves of different colors instead to attach to a bare tree branch, thus adding color as well as prayers.
- During the time of prayer hold up large pieces of paper with written or illustrated prayers for people to see without comment or explanation and weave into the spoken prayers.
- Plan for a series of prayer stations. 1) Write notes for backpacks or lunch boxes of children, youth, and educators. 2) Write notes of encouragement to teachers at a neighborhood school. 3) Put together a school kit for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. 4) Write or illustrate prayers and add to clothesline or tree as mentioned above. 5) Color a card with a blessing to take home.

## **Hymn Suggestions**

*(The following congregational songs are related to the ministry of Christian formation or to Year A, Proper 18)  
GTG = Glory to God (WJKP, 2013); PH = The Presbyterian Hymnal (WJKP, 1990)*

|  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| What is this Place? (Where We Are Meeting) | GTG 404              |
| Called as Partners in Christ's Service     | GTG 761              |
| Blest Be the Tie that Binds                | GTG 306              |
| Send Me, Jesus (Thuma mina)                | GTG 746              |
| Be Thou My Vision                          | GTG 450; PH 339      |
| Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation         | GTG 394; PH 416, 417 |
| Earth and All Stars!                       | GTG 26; PH 458       |
| God, My Help and Hiding Place              | GTG 813              |
| Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading         | GTG 287              |
| Help Us Accept Each Other                  | GTG 754; PH 358      |
| Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak         | GTG 722; PH 426      |
| People of the Lord                         | GTG 632              |
| Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord             | GTG 707; PH 392      |
| These Treasured Children                   | GTG 487              |
| We Give Thee but Thine Own                 | GTG 708; PH 428      |
| Come, Now, O Prince of Peace               | GTG 103              |
| Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love         | GTG 203              |
| Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether             | GTG 529              |

*(Some hymns suggestions come from [Christian Formation Week Liturgy Resources](#) and [A Year with Matthew 2022-2023](#)).*

## **Sermon Helps**

The lectionary this week is tricky because it's a whole lot of smiting and killing and blood all around. And yet, the thrust of the texts is really faithfulness and reconciliation. Remembering that the God of Israel is also the God of Christians, hold all of this in the tension it creates and with the care it deserves. Even before the time of the Passover, there were the legends of God wiping wickedness from the earth (see: Gen. 6-9) or punishing evil harshly (Gen. 3). The problem, though, with saying such things about God is that we create for ourselves an easily understandable system of justice. "Bad thing happens, God punishes." However, from the story of Joseph, we know it is much more nuanced and righteous than that. Joseph, after having been sold into slavery by his brothers, ultimately winds up saving them from famine. He says to them, "You planned something bad for me, but God produced from it something good, in order to save the lives of many people, just as [God's] doing today" (Gen. 50:20, CEV). Here we begin to understand that in many instances we either don't get the full picture, or simply cannot reliably and consistently analyze God's justice. Or both.

As the passages for today are read, consider them through a hermeneutic of love. If Jesus' entire message is "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34-35) then it follows that it could be used as a guide here (and anywhere!). What is the goal of each of these passages? Is it punishment? Is it vengeance? Is it racism (be REALLY careful with the Romans text)? Or is it about the human drive to be at odds with each other and to just remain there, and how God is calling us to do something different? Matthew 18 is especially prescient because it is the basis for all efforts at reconciliation in the PC(USA). But Ezekiel and Exodus have great value in showing how it is love that triumphs over evil, not vengeance or retribution.

As the Christian formation year starts, isn't this exactly the kind of thing we want to impart on the faithful? A) Not everything is as it seems and it's okay to be bewildered. B) God is love. There are two big things to accomplish here. First, set your faith formation leaders up for success by offering encouragement and grace upon grace, which they will then offer to their students. And second, get right at the heart of Jesus' message by going through some of the Bible's most difficult texts. It's a tall order, but important!

## **Additional Ideas and Resources**

- For Back to School and Backpack Blessing ideas see [this](#) Quicksheet.
- [A Blessing for Learners](#) – Here is a prayer from UMC Discipleship Ministries  
*Gracious God: As we gather today, we remember our role as learners and seekers of the faith. We give thanks for all those — present or away — who support the teaching and learning that takes place through our congregation. Be with all — children, youth, and adults — who will be participating this year in our church school and Christian formation groups. Bless our times of study so that we may grow in faith. Bless our times of fellowship so that we may truly live as brothers and sisters in Christ. Bless our times of prayer and worship so that we may be enriched in our spirits. Amen.*
- Create a special liturgical art display for worship. Perhaps it could be created at an intergenerational event, by youth, or children. This could be symbols of Christian Formation and education around the communion table or a colorful parament.
- For the Offering, consider collecting school supplies for a neighborhood school, church weekday childcare, or outreach program and bring them forward in a wagon for the offering. Invite an education connected mission partner to offer Moment for Mission.
- As people leave worship give out pens, bookmarks, prayer card, or some other reminder to students and education leaders of all kinds and of all ages.
- Be intentional to include worship leaders of all generations and Christian Formation Leaders as well as students.
- Consider inviting Church Day School Teachers, Partner Community School teachers, or mission partners involved in Education to be present for worship.
- See also from the [Book of Common Worship](#) (WJKP, 2018) the service for Recognition of a Certified Christian Educator (BCW 492–493), the Litany of Gifts (BCW 503), and the resources for Commissioning to Ministry within a Congregation (BCW 516–521).
- If Bible presentations to elementary children are part of your celebration, [here](#) are ideas for presentation and suggested Bibles.
- For additional ways to celebrate Christian Formation week see [Faith Practices At Home](#) to start the new school year, [Blessings around the New School Year](#), [Kick Off Sunday and Intergenerational Ideas](#), and [Social Media Posts](#) for download. There are also Spanish language versions of several Quicksheets. See all the Quicksheets [here](#) and look for new ones to be added.

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