

Faithfully Simple Living

*“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy.”
-Isaiah 55:2a*

The simple living movement has gained much popularity in the past few years, though it is neither a new concept nor a united movement. The simple living movement asks what Isaiah asked so long ago, “Why do you spend your time, money, and energy on that which does not satisfy?” Movements towards simple living, which focus on removing excesses in order to more fully focus on God, began just decades after Pentecost. Desert mothers and fathers would retreat from the busyness of cities to find a closer walk with God in ascetic lifestyles in the deserts.

They would wear very simple clothes and eat plain food. Many even lived as hermits. Although Christian simplicity movements have looked very different throughout the centuries, a core value has remained: removing excess to help people focus more on God. Above all, living simply and realistically is not about living in scarcity, rather it is about living in God's abundance.

Although the lifestyles of desert fathers and mothers are not necessarily practical for young people today, below are suggestions of tangible and practical ways youth may practice simple living.

Media Fast

Read 1 Kings 19:11-12 aloud. Challenge youth to spend a few hours, or even a full day, without using any electronics. As a group, discuss all of the activities that could be done during their media-free time. This would be an excellent idea to do as a group during free time at a youth conference or during a mission trip. Essential to this particular practice is talking together about why it might be helpful, healthy, and faithful to “step away from the cell” even if for a day.

Practice Sabbath (this practice requires a simple “station” environment)

Read Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 aloud. Then, invite youth to explore the stations around the room as they reflect on the Scriptures. Include the following stations in your meeting space:

- Music with songs inspiring youth to think about the nature of God.
- Art where youth may color, draw, write or paint their prayers.
- Meditation with candles and various pieces of art for silent meditation.
- Inspiration with Scripture verses and other quotations about rest.
- Dance with liturgical dance and guided body prayers to offer praise to God.

Gratitude and Grace

Part of faithful and simple living is being thankful for the gifts of God. Each time your youth group participates in a meal together, invite each participant to express 5 things they are thankful for as the grace/blessing before the meal.

Manna and God's Providence

Read and discuss Exodus 16. Then ask the following questions:

- How did God provide for Hebrews in the wilderness?
- What happened when they took more than they needed?
- How does God provide for our needs?
- How does God instruct us to share our goods?

Bake and Break Bread

Prior to the next communion Sunday at your congregation, bake bread together as a youth group. Bake various types of bread based on cultures, textures, and dietary needs. While the bread is baking, read and discuss 1 Kings 17:7-16. Invite young people to write a brief description of the experience to be shared with the congregation during communion. After the bread is finished baking, properly store it so that it may be used in worship.

Eat Simply

Assist youth in preparing a meal from start to finish. Encourage them to buy food from local farmers at a farmers' market or get it from their own gardens. In fact, take a youth group field trip to a local farmer's market or farm. Talk with the farmer(s) about their work, their day, their vocation. While eating discuss the experience of growing, shopping, cooking, and eating together. Also discuss where food in local grocery stores comes from noting that much of the produce in supermarkets are grown far away with pesticides and shipped to the USA. Help youth become mindful about what they eat by discussing that many foods contain high amounts of preservatives, etc. Close by reading 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 together, before all sharing the chores of cleaning up after the meal.

Eat Justly

Host a meal where food is unequally distributed in unequal portions and proportions. Explain that the food in the world is also unequally distributed; some have more than their fill while others are starving. Read and discuss James 2:14-20.

- How does it feel to be one of the participants who have huge portions of the best foods?
- How does it feel to be one of the participants who have small portions of the more plain foods?
- How can we as a group make this meal fairer?
- How can we put those fairness practices in place in daily life?

Living Water

Buying bottled water is wasteful for people who have readily available. As a group, purchase and/or decorate reusable water bottles to use on a retreat, mission trip, and daily life. Utilizing reusable water bottles rather than disposable water bottles helps the environment by reducing the need for production and disposal of plastic water bottles. During your discussion of water bottles, show a video of how water is treated at water treatment plants. (You may search online for various practical and short videos).

Then read the following Scriptures aloud:

- John 7:38
- Revelation 21:6
- Proverbs 5:15-20
- Psalm 42:1-2

As a group, discuss practical ways of reducing water usage daily such as taking shorter showers. For additional information, incorporate www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/sustaining-waters¹

Second Time Around

Visit local thrift and consignment stores and discuss the benefits of buying items second hand. This reduces waste and saves money. It may also be fun for youth to see vintage styles. Many thrift stores donate profits to a charitable causes and shopping there helps the larger community. After you visit stores, challenge the group to remove clutter from their lives. An easy way to start is by cleaning out closets. Encourage young people to gather clothes, shoes, accessories that no longer fit/they no longer use, and donate them to local shelters or thrift stores. (Encourage participants to obtain permission from their parent/caregiver prior to donating items.)

Waste not; Want not

Commit to use cloth napkins instead of disposable paper napkins, and dishcloths instead of paper towels at youth events. This will not only reduce waste, but also save money. Also commit to reducing the amount of trash produced at youth events. As a group, plan a meal where there will be no trash. In order to achieve this, use reusable plates and silverware instead of paper/disposable plastic. Then, pack leftovers to eat later and compost any food scraps. (If your congregation does not already compost, start a compost pile as a way of education others in the church about reducing landfill waste and creating rich soil for gardens). Consider, as a youth group, making meal kits. A meal kit is a reusable plate, cup, and cutlery set that each person uses at youth group meals.

Power Outage

In the Fall or Spring when the weather is nice, host a youth group meeting without using any electricity. Turn off and collect all electronic devices and meet outside. Cook a meal by grilling or building a fire and making s'mores. As a group, discuss what everyone likes about meeting outside instead of in typical indoor meeting space.

¹ Trenholm, Joanne R., Sustaining Waters

Simple Gifts

During the holidays, encourage students to give alternative gifts. Rather than buying items for friends and family, encourage youth to give acts of service. For example, youth may make and clean up dinner for their parent/caregiver, run errands for a grandparent, or offer to baby-sit for free one night for a church member. These gifts build relationships rather than encouraging the accumulation of more material items.

Examine Finances

Encourage youth keep track of every penny that they spend for a couple of weeks. Gather together and read 1 Timothy 6:17-19. Use this passage to frame a conversation about how we spend our money. What does it look like you value based on how you spend your money? Who or what gets the most money? Who or what gets the least? Then, look at the church's budget and ask the same questions. Invite the church treasurer to attend this meeting to assist in answering any questions young people may have about the church budget.

Upcycle

Rather than throwing something away or recycling it, find a way to give it a new purpose or repair it. Examples include paper towel and toilet paper rolls can be painted and attached to a base and turned into pencil holders, old jeans can be sewn into denim bags, old magazines can be turned into collages, etc. Ask youth for other ideas they may have or have seen online and have an upcycle night at your next youth event.

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