

LIVING IN COMMUNITY LEADER'S GUIDE

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LIVING IN COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

What is a Christian? More important, how is a Christian to be distinguished from the general population? The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, in a sermon on Easter Sunday, 1995 said, “We do well to remember that Christianity is not essentially about believing a series of doctrinal beliefs or adhering to the tenets of a particular Church. It means encountering a person who has overcome death and who is the Resurrection and the Life.” Or, as Thomas Merton observed in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, “Not simply one who believes certain reports about Christ, but one who lives in a conscious confrontation with Christ in himself and in other men.”

This encounter, this living in a conscious confrontation, is the theme of *Living in Community*. There is always the temptation to put Jesus on a pedestal, to worship rather than follow him, to turn him into a sort of Superman. As the small boy in a convent school said when asked who invented the steam engine, “I suppose it was Jesus Christ again.” To look at the human side of Jesus is to encounter him in a new way.

Living in Community examines our lives as Christians in today’s world. In this segment, we will not be looking so much at our stories and that of Jesus, but at how we might more intentionally behave as Christians in today’s world.

The story is told of the 19th century critic, essayist and historian, Thomas Carlyle. He was standing with a friend looking out of the window of his house on Hampstead Heath in London. It was dusk and it was the time of the lighting of the street lamps. This was before the days of electricity and the gas lamps had to be lighted by hand. As they watched, one by one the lamps winked into light across the darkened Heath as the lamplighter made his rounds. “That is what I mean by a real Christian,” Carlyle remarked to his friend. “You may never see him, but you will tell where he has been by the lights he leaves behind him.”

Centuries ago, a remarkable man arose whose brief book gave rise to a culture which lasted over a thousand years. It lasted throughout the so-called Dark Ages, maintaining the flame of a civilization and world order that almost passed away. His name was Benedict of Nursia. He lived from about 480 to 547. The book—or, rather, booklet—he wrote was the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which has governed much of monastic life for the past 1500 years.

In *Living in Community*, participants will study some elements of the Rule of Saint Benedict, seeking to use it as a guidebook to intentional Christian living in the waning years of the twentieth century—and the waxing years of the twenty-first. Benedict calls his Rule “a little rule for beginners.” In it are directions for all aspects of monastic life—the role of the abbot, the hospitality to be provided to strangers, the psalms to be used for prayers, measures for the

correction of faults, clothing, food and drink, hours for sleeping, etc.

We tend to find the word “rule” off-putting. We think of rules as somehow constraining. However, we need to understand more clearly the Latin word Benedict used—*regula*. This was literally “a rod for measuring and drawing lines.” From this we get the words “regulate” and “regulation.” The Rule thus conforms to the dictionary definition of “a principle or regulation governing conduct, procedure, etc.”

Benedict never wanted his Rule to become tyrannical. He writes: “Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. . . . But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the paths of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” (*Rule of Benedict* [RB] Prologue: 45-46, 49. Note: Generally throughout this work, the abbreviation RB refers to the *RB 1980, The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, with citations according to the notation used there. For instance, RB 35:1-2 refers to chapter 35, verses 1 and 2, as in scripture citations.)

So it is with *Living in Community*. Like Benedict, “we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.” By carefully reading each section, the persons leading the section will have pretty much all that is necessary to teach it. But that person is not intended to be the expert. The experts are the whole group. Everyone in the group has skills and insights, and it is in the bringing together of these that wisdom emerges.

We trust that in this course of study, the participants will find out much about themselves—particularly much that is good—and will be encouraged to live more intentional Christian lives in a world that increasingly rejects these values.

SUMMARY OF THE PROGRAM

Each section of *Living in Community* is divided into 25 one-hour sessions for use on Sunday mornings. However, it is also possible to offer the program in twelve evening sessions, each lasting about two to two-and-a-half hours. You can choose either of these formats for your use of the program. Either format may be expanded or shrunk, both in numbers and time, depending on the church’s schedule. The one-hour sessions can be combined into the longer evening sessions by linking two sessions together. However, it is not recommended that the one-hour sessions be offered in less than 50 minute segments. To do so will compromise the intent and quality of the program.

Living in Community uses a Benedictine model to look at our own lives and communities. The program addresses the questions:

- What does it mean to be part of a Christian community in a secular world?
- How might we behave more intentionally as Christians?

Sessions 1-3: Understanding Community

The first sessions of *Living in Community* introduce the basic concepts of community that the group will be working with, and offer participants an opportunity to get to know each other if they have not previously worked together as a group. Activities include:

- Clarifying group norms and understanding their relationship to the development of a community
- Discussion of differences between secular culture and the Christian community
- Learning to discern what constitutes a false or synthetic community versus a true community

Sessions 4-5: Building Community

These sessions focus on the elements of Christian community, and offer participants a chance to analyze a fictional community using the knowledge they've gained so far. Participants will:

- Study the qualities of early Christian communities
- Explore their responses to their own church community
- Watch and discuss the video *The Apostle*

Sessions 6-8: Developing a Rule of Life

Participants explore the concept of living by a Rule of Life, and begin to develop their own rules for living, both personally and in community.

- Participants explore the rules, both intentional and unintentional, by which they live their lives, and begin keeping a journal to help them discover hidden rules.
- Discussion of the essay by Margaret Guenther, *Crafting a Rule of Life*
- Exploration of Rule of Life categories on personal and community levels

Sessions 9-13: The Benedictine Vows

The Benedictine Vows are introduced and compared with our culture's standards and expectations.

- The vows of Obedience, Stability and Fidelity are explained and discussed
- Participants choose one Rule of Life and begin a "road test" it in their own lives
- Discussions: Disobedience and Obedience in Community
- Watch and discuss the movie *Forrest Gump*

Sessions 14-17: Understanding the Benedictine Approach

The Benedictine approaches to work, study, leisure and prayer are explored and discussed in these sessions. Activities include:

- Small-group discussion of personal experiences with work and leisure
- An exploration of work as identity
- Discussion on learning in community

- The Personal Prayer Inventory exercise is completed, followed by a discussion of prayer
- Participants form small groups and spend time writing a community prayer

Sessions 18-22: Relationships

Participants explore their relationships with God, with others, with self and with creation by looking at:

- Their personal images of God
- What constitutes a balanced day
- Benedictine hospitality versus modern conceptions of neighborliness and hospitality
- Their own relationships with themselves, with others and with creation
- Participants watch and discuss the movie *Babe*

Sessions 23-24: Commitment to a Rule of Life

In the last two work sessions, participants set and commit to a personal Rule of Life, and begin to identify ways to build a Rule of Life with others.

Session 25: Dessert and Closure

Participants meet for one last time to celebrate the journey to this point, and energize for the continuing journey ahead.

Following are some suggestions which we hope will help to prepare you for this journey.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PREPARATION

We would never go on a trip without packing at least a few essentials in an overnight bag. *Living in Community* is something like going on a trip, and before you begin, let us make a few suggestions for getting ready and getting started.

Getting Ready

- Establish when and where you are going to meet. Schedule all the meetings in advance, and do your very best to stick to the schedule. Everyone functions better in a group if they can plan ahead and feel secure with the schedule. Last-minute changes can cause real problems in a group. There are a couple of movie nights in this program—make sure you plan to rent the video far in advance of the date. If you are meeting in someone's home for that session, make sure that people know this well in advance and that they have directions to the meeting site. (It doesn't hurt to post a note on the door of your regular meeting place for those who forget!) Remember as you plan that you will need to break into small groups every so often and you need enough space for groups to meet apart from each other without having to spend a lot of time getting to and from their meeting places.
- Prepare a schedule for all participants, indicating the times and the subject matter for each session. Have copies on hand for distribution at the first meeting.

- Decide on the size of the group. Between 16 and 20 persons is ideal for a group, although you can do it with far fewer. In choosing your meeting room, remember to consider the size of the group. If the room is too large, people will feel lost and distanced from one another; if it's too small, they will feel cramped and unable to move and breathe. Look for a meeting space which is comfortable. Tables are not necessary but they are not problematic as long as you can set them up in a semi-circle (avoid a schoolroom lecture arrangement). Much of the work is done in small groups which do not need tables.
- Advertise the program in the church leaflet and/or newsletter. Post a sign-up sheet in the church hall. Announce the program outline, including meeting times and places. Stress the expectation that participants will be present for *all* meetings.
- After the sign-up sheet is filled, contact each participant by mail, sending them the schedule and asking them to be sure to bring a small notebook (unless you provide Participant Books with extra blank pages) and a Bible to every session. If they have a Prayer Book, ask them to bring that as well. Always have extra Bibles and Prayer Books on hand for participants to use.

Choosing the Number of Sessions

- Read the material carefully and decide what number of sessions best fits your group and congregation's needs, schedule, etc.
- Short sessions: If you will be using this course as part of your Sunday morning adult education program, you probably can use it "as is." You will need a full hour, so urge participants to arrive promptly and begin at the designated starting time even if everyone is not present. (the later you start, the later they will arrive!) If you only have 50 minutes, you will need to watch your time very closely and trim minutes here and there. Remember the basic principles of timing:
 - Use smaller groups (even one group of three will slow down ten other groups of two so make sure you do not have a group larger than the size indicated).
 - Limit total group size to sixteen; if you have more than that interested in the course, divide into two groups. Two groups of ten will move much quicker than one group of twenty.
 - Make sure all the small groups can meet in the primary meeting room or just around the corner—travel from one room to another is one of the things that adds a great deal of time to a session.

The shorter format makes it harder for participants to engage each other or the material in as great a depth. However, in some churches, this format makes it accessible to many more people. After beginning the program, you may choose to extend the number of sessions. Many groups have decided to slow down and work with the material in depth, even though it then takes longer to complete the program. If you find that your group is often running out of time, you can ask the participants if they want to cut sessions short, extend the meeting time, or extend the length of the program.

- Longer sessions: If you use longer meeting times, simply combine two (or three) sessions into one. Schedule a break between the sessions and eliminate the extra closing and opening prayers. You will also need to remember to complete the homework assignments for all the sessions you plan to cover at the next meeting.

**Additional preparatory materials are included in the resource.
The first two sessions of the program are included below.**

SESSION ONE

OUR WORLD—ARE WE WELCOME?

*There are two ways to live in the world—
as if we were connected to it like a leaf to a tree
or as if we were a universe unto ourselves.¹*

Purpose of This Session

To introduce the purpose and direction of *Living in Community* to participants, and the participants to each other

Preparation

For this session you will need the following:

- Name tags (perhaps in a leaf shape or with a leaf sticker or design added)
- Participant books
- Newsprint, variety of colored markers, tape
- A sheet of newsprint on which you have drawn the outline of a tree trunk and branches. Above the sketch, write the quote from the top of this page. Post this in an accessible place
- Copies of the schedule of sessions, so participants will know what is due for each meeting date

Opening Prayer

Use the following prayer, or some other suitable one, to begin the session:

O God of peace and justice, of holiness and love; knit us together in mind and flesh, in feeling and in spirit, and make us one, ready for that great day: the fulfillment of all our hopes, and the glory of Jesus Christ. Keep us in the spirit of joy and simplicity and mercy. Bless us and those you have entrusted to us, in and through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen. (*New Zealand Prayer Book*, p. 162)

Opening (2 minutes per participant, *i.e.*, 10 people, 20 minutes)

Participants introduce themselves by writing their first names on the branches of the tree. In one or two brief sentences, each shares with the group one thing that no one in the group knows about them. It might be an award received as a child, an athletic or academic achievement, a connection to a famous person, or a unique, hidden hobby or talent, etc. The leader(s) go first in order to model the process, and to indicate the depth of sharing expected at this point.

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*, p. 55.

Looking at the Journey Ahead (5 minutes)

Present the following in your own words:

Parker Palmer says, “Community tends to form in reaction to the larger society.”² In our journey together we will explore the dimensions and dynamics of true Christian community in our post-Christian society. We will try to reach some conclusions about what makes community durable and desirable, and we will take some steps toward improving our own experience of Christian community.

The special aid we will use to help us on our journey will be Benedictine spirituality—the rules and principles established by St. Benedict for monastic life. Although the monastery is an ordered system of life which few of us will have a chance to experience except as visitors, the structure of this special kind of Christian community has much to offer us on our own journey.

In the weeks ahead, we will look at and experience the elements of the Benedictine **vows** of obedience, fidelity, and stability; and the **pattern** of living established by Benedict that addresses work, study, leisure and prayer. We will examine what the Benedictine vows and pattern may have to teach us about our **relationships** in living—to God, to other people, to our inmost self and to the whole community. And we will move toward developing and following a **Rule of Life** each participant can make for him- or herself, and the possible shape of a Rule that would be suitable for a Christian community—a family, a study group or even for our whole congregation.

Some sessions of *Living in Community* will contain a presentation on a theme followed by questions or exercises for discussion and reflection. Some sessions will consist mainly of discussion and reflection on work done as homework. Some will be movie nights. Each participant’s book includes instructions for what to do to prepare for the next session.

Distribute the participants’ books and the schedules for the group’s meetings. Explain whatever the local rules are concerning changes in the schedule that might become necessary, and how people will be informed of a time change or a meeting cancellation. Ask people to bring any schedule conflicts they notice to your attention at the end of the meeting.

As part of *Living in Community*, it is important for us to take time to look at and develop the ways we will work together. An integral part of authentic community is honesty. One way to foster honesty is to establish a safe and realistic process so that participants will trust each other enough to risk speaking honestly. We do that by establishing the **norms** or ground rules by which our group will operate.

Exercise 1: Setting Group Norms (15 minutes)

² Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 118.

Develop a list of norms for your group to use. The list need not be exhaustive, nor should it be set in concrete. Be specific and ask questions to clarify anything that isn't understood. A typical list of norms may contain some of the following elements:

- We will begin and end sessions on time.
- We speak from our own experience or learning, using “I” statements rather than making generalizations about what others think. We will not speak for others who are present and who can speak for themselves.
- We have the freedom to *not* speak.
- We practice confidentiality; outside of this group we are free to discuss our own thoughts and feelings but not the thoughts and feelings shared by others, by name or other identifier.
- We listen as well as speak. Differing views will not be argued, but will be honored as valid for that person.
- We each have responsibility for taking care of our own comfort needs.
- We will/will not have refreshments at each session.

The group develops a list of norms or ground rules by calling out suggestions which are listed on newsprint. It may be necessary to edit suggestions for clarity, or to combine two similar suggestions. When the group feels it has an adequate set of norms, post the newsprint in a visible place. Keep it there, or re-post it before the start of each meeting; type out and reproduce the list so you can distribute it to group members at the second meeting. The group can modify the list during the weeks ahead when it seems useful and appropriate.

Unspoken Norms (15 minutes)

Present the following in your own words:

We now have a good list of norms for this group. Now let's look at the **unspoken norms** that can affect our behavior and the behaviors of people we know. Unspoken norms are those things that people who “know” try to communicate to—or conceal from—the people who don't “know.” Knowing, and operating under, a group's unspoken norms help us feel included and involved. Knowing or sensing they exist, but not knowing what they are, can make us feel excluded and unworthy.

All communities and groups have unspoken norms: some are imposed artificially, like the secret handshake of a fraternal order; others have developed with the growth of the community, so gradually and organically that it is hard to say where they came from. For example, if you are not an actor, you may not know that it is considered very bad luck to quote from *MacBeth* backstage at any show; as a new actor you would need to be taught the magical gestures and phrases you have to make and speak in order to remove the bad luck once the quote is made. The actor's union did not make up and impose this unspoken norm; it just exists, and anyone who is “in the trade” knows it. If you do not know it, it is clear you do not yet belong to the theater community.

In a Christian congregation, unspoken norms govern who sits in what pew. How is the peace passed during the Sunday service—through quiet and sedate nodding, or by enthusiastic hugging in the aisles? Perhaps you just “know” that it’s okay to arrive ten minutes late for a vestry meeting, because it is an unspoken norm that the meeting will begin then.

Exercise 2: Unspoken Norms (15 minutes)

Break into small groups of no more than six people each and discuss:

- What are some unspoken norms of behavior that you just “know” in your congregation? At your place of work? In your social or sports group?
- Describe a time when “you knew that you didn’t know.” How did you feel?
- What does identifying those unspoken norms mean to you now?
- What might you do to discover those norms when you find yourself in a new situation?
- How do unspoken norms help or hinder the development of community?

Bring the whole group back together, and ask each group for one example of unspoken norms they discussed.

The quotation for this session is

*There are two ways to live in the world—
as if we were connected to it like a leaf to a tree
or as if we were a universe unto ourselves.*

Ask: How does this division apply to your worshiping community? Do “your” people (the group you identify with) tend to feel more connected or more isolated?

Preparation for the Next Session

Over the next week, consider the life of your worshiping community, your work place and your social group(s). Try to identify some unspoken norms held by each group, and how they help support the group’s sense of itself as a community. See if you notice any unspoken norms that seem to contradict the spoken norms of the group.

Closing Prayer

Let us say together Psalm 95, verses 1-7. This passage, when used in Daily Morning Prayer (BCP, p. 37 ff), is known as the *Venite*. It is a covenant psalm, one that celebrates God making community with God’s people.

1. Come let us sing to the LORD; *
let us shout for joy to the Rock of our Salvation.

2. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving *
and raise a loud shout to him with psalms.
3. For the LORD is a great God, *
and a great king above all gods.
4. In his hand are the caverns of the earth, *
and the heights of the hills are his also.
5. The sea is his, for he made it, *
and his hands have molded the dry land.
6. Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, *
and kneel before the LORD our Maker.
7. For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. *
Oh that today you would hearken to his voice.

Let us go forth to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God! Amen.

Collect name tags as people leave so they can be used for the next session.

SESSION TWO

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

*This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through.
My treasures and my hopes are all beyond the blue,
Where many Christian children have gone on before,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.*

—song popularized by the Carter Family

Purpose of This Session

To explore the challenges our culture poses to Christian community

Preparation

For this session you will need the following:

- Name tags
- Participant materials
- Newsprint, variety of colored markers, tape
- The quote above, printed on newsprint and posted in a prominent place
- Enough copies of the norms established at the last meeting to give one to each participant. One large copy on newsprint for posting on the wall.

Opening Prayer

Use the following prayer, or some other suitable one, to begin the session:

Draw your Church together, O Lord, into one great company of disciples, together following our Lord Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving him in his mission to the world, and together witnessing to his love on every continent and island. We ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

(The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada, p. 676)

Opening (15 minutes)

On newsprint, list the unspoken norms participants have observed in their worshipping community, work place, and social groups. Ask particularly for those that seem to contradict the spoken norms of the group in question.

- Is there a common thread among these norms?
- When there is a conflict between spoken and unspoken norms, which do members of the group tend to observe?

Secular Culture and the Christian Community

Present the following in your own words:

In 1934, T.S. Eliot, in *Choruses from 'The Rock'* wrote the following:

“ . . . the Church does not seem to be wanted
In country or in suburbs; and in the town
Only for important weddings.

and

In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels
The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,
The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,
And the wind shall say: “Here were decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls.”³

Here we are, deep in the information age, blessed with the advanced technologies of computers, organ transplants and cloning. We have cell phones, pagers, voice mail, e-mail and personal satellite navigation systems. We have remote controls for TVs, VCRs and CD players, as well as for car doors and engines and even for window shades. Our children or grandchildren are busy with soccer practice, music lessons, Little League, dance class, gymnastics and scouts. Life is very full.

So, where is the Church, our Christian community, in all of this fullness of life? Perhaps our church attendance is pretty regular—with occasional time off for the kids’ sports activities, bad weather, good weather and vacations. But what place does the Church have in our everyday life and actions? Where is the community of Christians we need to support us in living out the promises made at our Baptism? What does the culture we live in have to say about being a Christian? Consider the following:

- “Sundays are no different from any other day of the week.” (Television commercial for Federal Express, 1998)
- “It is perhaps our finest technical achievement ever—a Volvo that can save your soul.” (Television commercial for Volvo, 1998)
- “Christians see power in the crucified Jesus; popular culture defines power as winning in athletic or commercial combat. A Christian learns about hope from the resurrection; our culture sees hope in a new-car showroom..” (Ellen T. Charry, in *The Christian Century*, February 16, 1994)
- “How many pastors have been told by altar servers, ‘I can’t serve Sunday. I have a Little League game’? This is the constant erosion, the constant secularization of

³T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from The Rock*, pp. 97, 103.

our culture, that I strongly believe to be a serious mistake.” (John Cardinal O’Connor, in *Catholic New York*, as reported in *The New York Times*, May 15, 1998).

- “There are probably dozens of religions that are represented in Little League. So it became impractical and improper for us to mandate one day being more special than all others.” (Lance Van Auken, a spokesman for Little League Baseball, *idem*).
- “When Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a weekend, it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see the heavens.” (Pope John Paul II, as quoted in *Newsweek*, July 20, 1998).

Christianity is facing a serious threat. We have faced, and still face in far too many countries even today—the horrific persecution of Christians by rigid and intolerant adherents of other faiths or by state-sponsored atheism. The threat we face now, though, is quite different: Christians in developed nations live in societies where Christianity is being marginalized, being made irrelevant. “The way things are shaping up where most of us live,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “the Great Tribulation is not likely to be a massive persecution of the Christian faith, but a massive dismissal of it as an irritant or an embarrassment or, worse, as something that does not even register on people’s screens anymore, as outdated as alchemy or the map of a flat world.”⁴

“What does it mean,” asks Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, “for us to live in a culture of unbelief, a culture which does not even know it does not believe because it still lives on the residue of Christian civilization?”⁵ They go on to claim that:

“Paganism is the air we breathe, the water we drink. It captures us, it converts our young, it subverts the church. The writer of Ephesians did not have to be convinced that the world was a hostile, inhospitable place for discipleship....His world recognized the subversive nature of the Christian faith and put him in jail. Our world recognizes the subversive nature of the Christian faith and subverts us either by ignoring us or by giving us the freedom to be religious—as long as we keep religion a matter of personal choice.”⁶

Paganism is a range of beliefs that claims that there are many mysterious sources of power arrayed about us on every side, sources that can be placated or manipulated—but that there is no one, all-powerful God with whom a person can covenant a loving and loved relationship. Paganism believes there is nothing beyond this life, and no overall purpose to life. Paganism never disappeared completely, even at the height of the Christian era (relying on horoscopes, not speaking the name of a dead relative and not walking under ladders are all pagan norms), but pagan influences are becoming more prevalent every year. Have you driven around your

⁴Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Christian Century*, August 12-19, 1998.

⁵Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 115.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 151-2.

neighborhood during the month of October in recent years? Hallowe'en has nearly supplanted Christmas as the most decorated and celebrated holiday, with a proliferation of films, television specials and local outdoor events at specially constructed horror houses to honor it. And how many of those who celebrate Hallowe'en either don't know or don't care that it is the eve of All Saints' Day? The pagan festival has overshadowed the Christian feast.

Perhaps the dilemma for the Church today is stated even more clearly in the following passage:

Paula is 19 and a sophomore at a well-respected private university....On this particular day, she splashes on a bit of French perfume after putting on her grunge clothes, jumps in her Toyota and turns on a tape of reggae music as she drives to school. After attending classes in Eastern religion and the 19th-century English novel, she walks down the main street of this small university town with her new friend, Helen Kim, to one of their favorite eating spots, Hoagie Haven, which is owned by Greek immigrants and run by Guatemalans. While raised in her Presbyterian church back home and confirmed just four years ago, Paula no longer believes that Christianity is the only way to God. She is not even sure that it is the best way to God....While we do not know where Paula's journey will take her, we do know that as she enters young adulthood the church does not mean much to her. She lives in a world of intellectual relativism and cultural eclecticism.⁷

The writer goes on to say: "Paula's context is the church's context." How do we respond as Christians to the position that a largely indifferent secular world places us in? Do we try to compete? Do we simply surrender?

This is essentially the theme of *Living in Community*: How do we live as faithful Christians in an increasingly secular, highly materialistic and largely indifferent world, a world that simply does not share our Christian values even as it claims to embrace them? How do we find community? How can we create community?

Exercise 1: A Culture of Unbelief (15 minutes)

Break into small groups of three or four and discuss (have the questions written out on newsprint ahead of time):

- Do we live in a culture of unbelief? What are its signs?
- If society does not share Christian norms, what are the norms it does share?
- Do any of society's norms affirm Christian belief and practice?
- Are any of these norms in conflict with Christian norms?
- In your lifetime, are there Christian norms that have been abandoned to bring the Christian community more in line with society?

⁷Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox*, pp. 53-4.

A Response from One Part of Our Christian History

Present the following in your own words:

In the year 410 C. E., the Visigoths captured and plundered Rome, breaking the power of the Roman Empire. Some Romans blamed the Christians for this disaster on the grounds that the Christian religion had somehow sapped the strength of the Roman army and its ability to withstand the assaults of the barbarians. To counter this charge, St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote his greatest work, *The City of God*. In this he wrote: “Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by love of self, even to the contempt of God, the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self....in the one, the princes, and the nations it subdues, are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and subjects serve one another in love.”

About a century later, Rome had collapsed; a world had ended. Where there had been a single system binding many different peoples and cultures into one community, now there were fragmented kingdoms warring with each other. Where there had been order, now there was chaos. Where the Church had been at the center of the governance of empire, now power had moved into other hands and the Church was threatened with dissolution and collapse.

As the old order dissolved, Benedict of Nursia, much sought-after as a spiritual director, moved from his self-imposed isolation in the desert and formed a community—and then a community of communities—of Christians with a Rule to guide and govern them. Parker Palmer writes: “In the early middle ages, in the midst of cultural decline, the church took monastic form, becoming a community of withdrawal to preserve an endangered tradition.”⁸ Benedict’s network of monastic communities provided a renewed structure that in some ways replaced the vanished Imperial system. His Rule of daily living in community became an instrument of evangelization when the pope sent another Augustine (later the first archbishop of Canterbury) with a group of Benedictine monks to England in 596 A.D. to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons. The system they set up formed an integral part of life in England for a thousand years, until the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. The Benedictine system helped form the worship and governance of the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion. This system will guide us on our journey even now as we look closely at the ways the spirituality of Benedictine monasticism can be applied to our own lives individually and in community.

Exercise 2: Two Cities (15 minutes)

In small groups of three or four, discuss(have the questions written out ahead of time):

- Augustine says the earthly City is formed by love of self, even to the contempt of God, and loves to rule. Do you see examples of this in our secular society?
- Augustine says the heavenly City is formed by love of God, even to the contempt

⁸Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 118.

of self, and loves to serve. Do you see examples of this in our Christian community?

- How do the two Cities deal with questions of sin, crime, reconciliation, need, hope, danger, injustice, misfortune, and wealth?
- The last line of the quote for this session is, “I can’t feel at home in this world any more.” Why would the writer feel that? Do you feel that?

Preparation for the Next Session

Read through the section on Holy Baptism in *The Book of Common Prayer*, beginning with the rubrics on p. 298 through the alternative endings and additional directions concluding on p. 314. If your time is limited, read through The Baptismal Covenant, pp. 304-306. Think about what Holy Baptism and particularly the Baptismal Covenant mean to you now in this stage of your journey. Collect name tags so they can be used for the next session.

Closing Prayer

Let us say together Psalm 146:

1. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord, O my soul! *
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.
2. Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, *
for there is no help in them.
3. When they breathe their last, they return to earth, *
and in that day their thoughts perish.
4. Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the Lord their God;
5. Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;
6. Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.
7. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; *
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
8. The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.
9. The Lord shall reign for ever, *
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Hallelujah!

Let us go forth to love and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

End of Sample Materials

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