

ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE



St. Stephen's
College

NON-THEISTIC LITURGY RESOURCES

FOREWORD

Non-Theistic Liturgy Resources Working Group

As finite as we humans are, it may be arrogant to assume that we can contemplate the Infinite adequately enough to name it and speak truths about it. However, we humans have always tried to do just that. We have created religions and devoted our lives (and sacrificed the lives of others) to defending our concept of God and to do God's will. Some have ceased to trust in an omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, anthropomorphic deity (a theistic conception) and are seeking expressions to reflect their life experiences of the Divine Mystery. Others remain committed to monotheism, but challenge what they consider to be immaturity in its practice. All such persons are welcomed into the circle of seekers who are working to uncover and create non-theistic (or post-theistic) resources for worship and reflection.

We are currently looking at a number of ideas and are inviting others to join in our deliberations and activities. We welcome suggestions and offerings of materials (liturgical and educational resources) for the collection that we are building so that we can offer these back to our human community via this website or other means. Contributions can be sent to the [to the Coordinator](#).

Join the Circle in Conversation

Send an email to the Coordinator, Charles Bidwell at cbidwell@ualberta.ca indicating why you are drawn to this enterprise and what aspect connects with your passion. You will be added to our mailing list and invited to gatherings where we review submissions to the collection and proposals for projects that you and others have suggested.

Contribute to the Collection

If you are willing to have something relevant to our project posted on this site, please send it as the body of an email or as an attachment, [to the Coordinator](#). It will be reviewed at our next gathering and we will notify you if it gets posted.

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE NON-THEISTIC LITURGICAL RESOURCES PROJECT

This website is an indication of the sort of materials we are trying to create or find which present images of the divine as immanent, and inter-related to all living beings and all non-living entities.

Definition - What is post-theistic or non-theistic Christianity? Theism, simplified, is the image of God as a transcendent, omnipotent, supernatural being, who exists outside of and distinct from creation, though occasionally intervening in it to work miracles. Post-theistic or non-theistic Christianity strives to move beyond this image, and while not throwing out use of the symbol God, opens that term to broader concepts, and avoids the 'puppeteer' or 'Santa Claus' concept that chooses to grant our prayers or not or that needs our worship.

Spong interprets "non-theistic Christianity" as a faith that draws its inspiration from a "God who is not a being but Being itself." For Spong, God is not a supernatural entity, but the essence of life and love that is in the world and within each of us.

Project

To establish a collection of liturgical resources that are non-theistic in wording. These resources are grouped into these areas: 1 - rituals, sacraments, etc., 2 - hymns, statements of belief (credos), 3 - prayers, 4 - a suggested church calendar of seasons not primarily based on the Christ Myth, and 5 - a lectionary (including Now Testaments and non-canonical readings)

Outcomes

Replacing theistic images and language of God could lead to ecological images of the Divine or Sacred Presence expressed in the evolving universe. Relevance to the cosmos and ecology is needed.

Aside from sharing discoveries and creations among the working group members and correspondents, there is a publication via this website. Discovered works are appropriately credited to © copyright holders to the best of our ability to contact them and seek their permission.

There should be an educational component which might establish workshops on rewording petitioning and intercessory prayers and other ways to approach non-theistic liturgy as well as lesson plans for church school and youth/adult study group sessions.

Group Process

Members - Participants are invited based on interest and commitment to the project. Materials are gleaned from what has recently or anciently been created and others are created by the working group members and friends of the project.

Structure/Organization - There is a coordinator and there could be leaders of various task groups addressing the five areas under Project above.

Function/Operation - Team members communicate by email and fax and gather periodically (quarterly?) at St. Stephen's or elsewhere for a collegium to review and practice using the materials, to share experiences of using these materials in public worship in their own faith communities, and to make a wish-list of materials to find or create, next steps in revisions, trial usage, etc.

2. NON-THEISTIC LITURGY / LEARNING RESOURCES CRITERIA

We will be guided by these criteria as we select what will be added to the Collection. These criteria will also be used to guide the production and presentation of educational materials (church school curriculum).

Note: Progressive Christianity Criteria are sometimes couched in negative terms and so we have amplified ours to include the positive alternative for what we do not want to see or hear or do.

1. *Nothing that portrays God as judgmental or violent.*
We seek only what conveys the Divine as unconditionally loving and accepting of all creation. Messages of the Divine Spirit moving to bring all life into balance and a heavenly state of life for all people and life systems.
2. *No language of control (i.e.: sin, damnation, condemnation, Heaven/Hell promises, etc.).*
We seek words that stress cooperation, compassion, justice, interconnection, etc.
3. *No sacrificial theology (i.e.: Saviour, asking to be “Washed in the blood of Jesus”, Pascal Lamb, perfect sacrifice, God’s only begotten son who takes away the sins of the world or anything that produces guilt by saying how great a price Jesus has paid for us).*
We prefer references to Jesus as Companion, Sage, Window on Eternity, Mirror for humanity, an example of a compassionate, justice-champion, “Jesus the Just”, etc.
4. *Nothing that images the Divine in anthropomorphic terms (“safe in the arms of God”, etc.)*
We embrace images that are larger, more abstract, and suggest an awesome life force or force for life operating throughout the universe and within the atom (quantum functions).
5. *No implication of intervention (prayers of intercession) that suggest, or request, that God do something, or that God intervenes in some instances and not in others.*
We understand prayer as focussing on an intention to change ourselves so that we move ourselves to act to bring about the change we want to see, as long as it does not come at the expense of another’s freedom and just treatment so that we harm right relationship.
6. *Nothing that promotes divisive doctrine or dogma or barriers that produce divisions.*
We promote the high ethics and moral values of most faith systems as long as they endorse compassion and justice for all. Promotes diversity.
7. *Nothing that demands belief beyond reason; no more “only believe” (as if we had to check our brains at the church door). Nothing unbelievable or contrary to the laws of Nature.*
We seek words that at least suggest that questions are welcome and that we are all journeying in our understanding of the Divine and how it operates in our world and our lives. For us “faith” is equivalent to “trust” and not a blind acceptance of what any man tells us.
8. *Nothing promoting a literal understanding of the Bible as a flawless document of historical and scientific truths; nothing referring to the whole Bible collection of books as “the word of God”.*
We encourage an awareness of the literary nature of the Bible as a human document containing truths of our faith ancestors and the understanding of analogy and myth and story.

3. **BACKGROUND TO THE CRITERIA is Based on Principles of Progressive Christianity**

Progressive Christianity - Principles from Various Communities

Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity's 8 Points

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we:

1. *center* our faith on values that affirm the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life, the inherent and equal worth of all persons, and the supremacy of love expressed actively in our lives as compassion and social justice
2. *engage* in a search that has roots in our Christian heritage and traditions
3. *embrace* the freedom and responsibility to examine traditionally held Christian practices and beliefs, acknowledging the human construction of religion, and in the light of conscience and contemporary learning, adjust our views and practices accordingly
4. *draw* from diverse sources of wisdom, regarding all as fallible human expressions open to our evaluation of their potential contribution to our individual and communal lives
5. *find* more meaning in the search for understanding than in the arrival at certainty, in the questions than in the answers
6. *encourage* inclusive, non-discriminatory, non-hierarchical community where our common humanity is honoured in a trusting atmosphere of mutual respect and support
7. *promote* forms of individual and community celebration, study, and prayer which use understandable, inclusive, non-dogmatic, value-based language by which people of religious, skeptical, or secular backgrounds may be nurtured and challenged
8. *commit* to journeying together, our ongoing growth characterized by honesty, integrity, openness, respect, intellectual rigor, courage, creativity, and balance

4. PREPARING THE WAY: Readings and Quotes to Grasp the Problem and Vision

4.1 DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES [By various authors from various sources]

Post-Theistic?

We struggle with the negative aspect of the term "*Non-Theistic*" and wonder if we should be using an alternative, such as "Post-Theistic". They both require a person to be clear about what a theistic concept of the Sacred is, but the latter does suggest that we are trying to get beyond the image of an omnipotent, omniscient, anthropomorphic, transcendent deity and focusing on the Sacred Mystery in which we live and move and have our being.

From Images of God by Rev. Sharon Dittmar

[Source: http://www.firstuu.com/Sunday_Services/Sermon_Archive/2000/9-17-00.htm]

In her essay "The End of Theism", Dorothee Solle advocates for the end of this Greek Christian idea of God. She explains "Orthodox theology, often associated with a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, insists on a God of absolute transcendence . . . The God of orthodoxy . . . is the deepest symbol of an authoritarian religion. Power is more important to the authoritarian God than justice and love."

And this is why some of us are so angry with God. We have seen in history, in our churches, in our families, that power can be more important to religion, than justice and love. The very reason I became an agnostic in my early adulthood was because I could not reconcile the mass suffering of the crusades to the Holy Land and the Salem witch trials with the faith of Christianity. How could a faith who says it believes in a loving God organize and support such mass suffering? I had to agree with the Russian writer Bakunin who said "If God did exist, we would have to abolish Him." If God created and supported these injustices, I had to abolish him. If God created and supported the religion that created these injustices, I had to abolish it as well. This God and this church betrayed us all.

Who is this God? This is the Greek version of God, all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present. This is the transcendent, judgmental God who lives in the heavens and sends down thunderbolts of displeasure. This is the God of authoritarian religion. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm characterizes authoritarian religion with three structural characteristics

- 1) A God who controls fate and does not permit free will
- 2) A God who is not accountable
- 3) The people are powerless and insignificant yet their obedience is demanded.

This was the God of my grandparents. I do not believe in this God anymore.

I am a **panentheist**,

not a **pantheist** (who believes that God is all and everywhere),

but a **panentheist** (someone who believes that God is part of all yet still beyond what is known). In my image, God is both transcendent (beyond us, never wholly known), and immanent (a divine spark within all living things). The Rev. Forrest Church, Minister of All Souls in New York City, refers to God as a **presence that is "greater than all yet present in each"**. This is my image of God.

The words of writer Annie Lamott resonate with me, "Again and again I tell God I need help, and God says "Well, isn't that fabulous? Because I need help too. So you go get that old woman over there some water, and I'll figure out what we're going to do about your stuff." **My God is deeply involved in relation**, not always resolution or peace, but always, always **experience and relation**.

In his mystical, landmark book **I and Thou**, Jewish theologian Martin Buber explains relationship with God

"That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know also that God needs you-in the fullness of eternity, you? . . . You need God in order to be, and God needs you-for that which is the meaning of your life."

How much more empowering is this image than the omnipotent God. How much more comforting than the unaccountable authoritarian God.

"God needs you-for that which is the meaning of your life." You matter.

Buber emphasizes relationship with God, and knowing God through relationship. God comes much closer to us in the twentieth century.

The introduction of feminist theology in the 1960's and 1970's was another breakthrough. After two thousand years there was serious discussion about the gender of God. Could God be female, Goddess or She with a capital 'S'?

Instead of Lord, other phrases came into usage "Creator", "Companion", "Sustainer".

Could God *not be personified* at all; could God be rather *pure energy*?

For some people this was a diluted, emasculated God, for others it meant they could return to church.

4.2 A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Michael Morwood: A Christian Spirituality for the 21st Century

Notes by Emil Kutarna - Source: <http://www.corpuscanada.org/204/044morwood.html>

Everything and everyone is held in a relationship we call God.

For two millennia the belief was held that we exist on this earth separate from some place "up there" called "Heaven". This comes from the Old Testament view of creation, and the fall of Adam and Eve. That view had three tiers: 'heaven' up there where God dwells, 'earth' here below where we dwell, and 'hell' down there where the devil dwells. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were expelled and the gates of heaven were closed for them and all who came after them. So in our prayers we called ourselves "poor banished children of Eve".

We must let go of the concept of God of the last 2000 years.

Abraham and Sarah lived about 2000 BC. They probably believed in many gods just as the people of that time did. Around 1200 BC Moses brings in the concept of One God "I am Who am". Then appears the notion of a Chosen People who are led out of Egypt during the Exodus. After around 800 BC, the "Axial Age", saw the emergence of great religious leaders like Buddha, Isaiah, Zoroaster. Different concepts of God were evident when the Hebrew people split into the Northern Kingdom (God is Eloim) and the Southern Kingdom (God is Yahweh). After the Babylonian exile (587 BC) history shows two versions of God in: the priestly writer (P following the tradition of Moses) and the Deuteronomist (D following the tradition of the covenant and the commandments). So we note that the concept of God never was static, but evolved as time and circumstances changed. The question is: do we still believe that God is a legislator, a jealous Judge, who takes notes about our conduct and demands worship, as the early Hebrews did?

Jesus gave the crowd images to understand who and what God is.

The message of Jesus was to convert and believe. 'Convert' meaning to change their image of God from "out there" to God as "Father", Abba, right here. Jesus does not have a dualistic view. The Kingdom of Heaven is not "up there" and we are "down here". The Kingdom of God is here within you, because God is everywhere. We always gave lip service to that statement, but we didn't live it. So if we believe that we live in God now, at death we will be living on in God. What this means is a mystery still, but we can rule out images of a soul floating up into the sky and greeted by Someone who decides whether we can be admitted into a place called "heaven". Life is a journey IN God, not a journey TO God.

4.3 RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY

This is from a letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge in which he expresses his struggle with the questions of the future of the church and Christianity.*

Tegel Prison, April 30th, 1944

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience - and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by "religious."

Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the "religious *a priori*" of mankind. "Christianity" has always been a form - perhaps the true form - of "religion." But if one day it becomes clear that this *a priori* does not exist at all, but was historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression, and if therefore man becomes radically religionless - and I think that that is already more or less the case (else how is it, for example, that this war, in contrast to all previous ones, is not calling forth any "religious" reaction?) - what does that mean for "Christianity?" It means that the foundation is taken away from the whole of what has up to now been our "Christianity," and that there remain only a few "last survivors of the age of chivalry," or a few intellectually dishonest people, on whom we can descend as "religious." Are they to be the chosen few? Is it on this dubious group of people that we are to pounce in fervor, pique, or indignation, in order to sell them our goods? Are we to fall upon a few unfortunate people in their hour of need and exercise a sort of religious compulsion on them? If we don't want to do all that, if our final judgment must be that the western form of Christianity, too, was only a preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity - and even this garment has looked very different at different times - then what is a religionless Christianity?

Barth, who is the only one to have started along this line of thought, did not carry it to completion, but arrived at a positivism of revelation, which in the last analysis is essentially a restoration. For the religionless working man (or any other man) nothing decisive is gained here. The questions to be answered would surely be: What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? How do we speak of God - without religion, i.e. without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? How do we speak (or perhaps we cannot now even "speak" as we used to) in a "secular" way about "God?" In what way are we "religionless-secular" Christians, in what way are we the *ek-klesia*, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, but rather as belonging wholly to the world? In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean? What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation? Does the secret discipline, or alternatively the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between the penultimate and ultimate, take on a new importance here? The Pauline question whether *peritomi* [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from *peritomi* [circumcision] is also freedom from religion. I often ask myself why a "Christian instinct" often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious, by which I don't in the least mean with any evangelizing intention, but, I might almost say, "in brotherhood." While I'm often reluctant to mention God by name to religious people - because that name somehow seems to me here not to ring true, and I feel myself to be slightly dishonest (it's particularly bad when others start to talk in religious jargon; I then dry up almost completely and feel awkward and uncomfortable) - to people with no religion I can on occasion mention him by name quite calmly and as a matter of course. Religious people speak of God when human knowledge (perhaps simply because they are too lazy to think) has come to an end, or when human resources fail - in fact it is always the *deus ex machina* that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems,

or as strength in human failure - always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries. Of necessity, that can go on only till people can by their own strength push these boundaries somewhat further out, so that God becomes superfluous as a *deus ex machina*. I've come to be doubtful of talking about any human boundaries (is even death, which people now hardly fear, and is sin, which they now hardly understand, still a genuine boundary today?). It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously in this way to reserve some space for God; I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weaknesses but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man's life and goodness. As to the boundaries, it seems to me better to be silent and leave the insoluble unsolved. Belief in the resurrection is not the "solution" of the problem of death. God's "beyond" is not the beyond of our cognitive faculties. The transcendence of epistemological theory has nothing to do with the transcendence of God. God is beyond in the midst of our life. The church stands, not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village. That is how it is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we still read the New Testament far too little in the light of the Old. How this religionless Christianity looks, what form it takes, is something that I'm thinking about a great deal, and I shall be writing to you again about it soon. It may be that on us in particular, midway between East and West, there will fall a heavy responsibility.

*Source: http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/10/28_bonhoeffer/letter-19440430.shtml

The task of constructive theology is to listen to the voices of our collective past that lend wisdom to contemporary questions. Even if interfaith understanding was not an explicit theme of Bonhoeffer's early theology, the example of his political-resistance activity, the tenor of his prison correspondence, his reflections on a "religionless" or "nonreligious" interpretation of the gospel, and his demand for Christian solidarity with persons of difference, suggest an approach to interfaith encounter. Bonhoeffer's vision of "religionless Christianity" and vulnerable discipleship not only encourages interfaith encounter but also demands it as one aspect of the new life in Christ.

4.4 THE POSSIBILITY OF NO GOD and POWER WITH (Davis)

[Quote from Dr. Susan E. Davies, *Reflections on the Theological Roots of Abusive Behavior in Redefining Sexual Ethics*, Eleanor H. Haney and Susan E. Davies, Pilgrim Press, 1991, pp64-65.]

THE POSSIBILITY OF NO GOD

Perhaps there is not and never has been a God who controls all things. How then can we live? How can we live in a universe without an ultimate (omnipotent) God who controls all things? ... Is it not terrifying to think that we might be in a post-Christian world, in which God as we have known him, is truly dead and, more frightening, was never alive? Was never real? That all the tradition with which we, I, have identified, if only to war against, was wrong? Was it a misreading of the reality that made us the gift of the incarnation and resurrection? What if the (hierarchical) pyramid doesn't exist? Never has existed? What if the cross doesn't have a crown? What if "hearts open slowly, and sing the songs of the dove?" What if holding on will bring the seed to flower?

What would the world be, how can we live, if bringing the seed to flower depends not on a God who is conceived as the power at the top of the pyramid, whose will cannot be thwarted, but on ourselves and our participation in the purposes of a divine power that can only be power insofar as we participate? What if there is radical divine dependence upon human and animal and inanimate reality?

What if there is no divine plan, no great Puppeteer in the sky, who knows all things and controls all things, so that we can be assured that ultimately, the will of God will prevail, no matter how bleak it looks now? What if there is no alpha and omega, and we are not caught in the middle, beyond our birth

and before our death, simply trusting because we cannot see? What if the responsibility has been in our hands all these generations? What if we, both men and women, have misunderstood? And only now, as the greater terror reigns, and the skeletons line the valleys, only now as the future may disappear in fallout, can we see clearly.

POWER WITH

We, both women and men, are so completely enmeshed in an image of God as the controlling, defining Power out there and over us that it is very difficult to pull out new images, to conceive of power and the divine in different terms. If, however, we return the focus to Jesus, if we look at the revelation of God in the event of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we may find a new way of seeing....

It may be that the revelation is one of power not as force and coercion, but as matrix, **sybiosis, partnership**. It may be that everything is connected, and my power, our power, is a crucial part of the whole. If that is so, the responsibility lies with me, with us, not to submit but to act. Not to coerce but to move with, to shape, to form, to assist in freedom, out of passion, not self-denial.

It may be that we have a choice -- whether to continue in a falsified version of the Christian faith, which has at its core an understanding of ultimate reality as power over, or to reclaim the vision of the incarnation -- the vision of power that lives from the center. The first choice gives me, however derivatively, the possibility of my own sphere of power over others. Power over those I love. Power over the students, the parishioners, the animals, the ground I work in the growing months. Power over my recalcitrant car, over my body. The second choice overturns hierarchies of power over. It sings ancient songs and new ones, which croon of freedom and **mutuality and interdependence and circles and connections**. It sings of breaking shackles, rejecting all that which breathes death and doom and pyramids. It sings the enfleshment of the breathing, rejoicing, laughing future.

4.5 IT'S IN YOUR HANDS

This folk tale made me think about the quote from Susan Davies ... the possibility of no God that then moves to God as power with; God as matrix, partnership, of connectedness, our power as part of the whole. Responsibility lies with us to move with, to shape, to form, to assist in freedom out of passion. In some respects it can be scary - both challenge and invitation - as it speaks of *mutuality and interdependence*.

Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Prize winner for literature, began her acceptance speech with this story. She went on to say that she had heard the story in the lore of several cultures. In the version she knew, the old woman is the child of slaves, black, American and lives alone. She is also known to be clairvoyant. She can see through walls and read minds.

One day the old woman is visited by some young people who are bent on exposing her as a fraud. They enter her house and ask a taunting question. "Old woman," says one of them, "I hold in my hands a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead."

She does not answer. In her blindness she cannot see her visitors, nor what one of them holds in his hands. She only knows their motive. After a long silence that makes her visitors edgy and confused, she finally speaks. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Toni Morrison comments: "Her answer can be taken to mean: If it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility." IT IS IN YOUR HANDS.

Here is a version of that tale ...

Once upon a time, as most fables begin, there was an old, wise blind woman. The daughter of slaves, she lived alone in a small house outside of town. She had a reputation for wisdom and was honored far and wide.

One day some impudent young people decided to play a mean trick on the woman. They came to see her and posed a question. "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." She didn't reply, for she couldn't see them, much less what they are holding.

They repeated their question. "Is the bird living or dead?"

Her silence was her answer. She was thinking, because she knew their motive. If she said the bird is living, they will squeeze so hard that they would kill it to prove her wrong. If she said the bird is dead, they could throw it at her to prove her wrong. She waited so long to reply that the young people snickered, thinking that they have her stumped. When she finally spoke, it was slowly and her soft voice was a reprimand. She said, "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Another version goes like this ...

High on a hilltop overlooking the beautiful city of Venice, Italy, There lived a wise old man whom people called a genius. Legend had it that he could answer any question posed him. Two local boys decided they could fool the old man. Figuring they had a plan that was perfectly foolproof, the boys caught a small bird and headed for the hilltop. As they approached the wise old man, one of the boys held the little bird in his hands. "Wise old man," he said. "Could you tell me if this bird in my hands is dead or alive?" The old man sized up the two boys, and without hesitation, he answered, "Son, if i tell you that the bird is alive, you will close your hands and crush the bird to death. If i say the bird is dead, you will open your hands and he will fly away. You see, son, in your hands you hold the power of life and death." The boys looked at one another in total amazement. This old man truly is very wise, they thought. They had not fooled him for one minute. The old man then stroked his long white beard and smiled gently. "This I say to both of you without qualification," he explained with a sincere, caring voice. "In your hands you hold the seeds of failure -- or the potential for success. Your hands are very capable, but they must be used for the right things. They must be used to reap rewards that you are capable of attaining."

As the boys descended from the wise old man's hill, a new attitude overtook them, and they eagerly freed their captive bird. As they both watched the bird flap his wings and fly to freedom, the boys realized how very precious the old man's advice really was.

Still another reads ...

Once there was a wise old woman who lived in a small village. The children of the village were puzzled by her -- her wisdom, her gentleness, her strength. One day several children decided to test the old woman. They believed that no one could be as wise as everyone said she was, and were determined to prove it.

So the children found a baby bird and one of the boys cupped it in his hands and said to his playmates "We'll ask her whether the bird I have in my hand is dead or alive. If she says it is dead, I will open hands and let it fly away. If she says it's alive, I'll crush it in my hands and she'll see that it is dead.

So the children went to the old woman and presented her with this puzzle.

"Old woman," the boy said, "this bird in my hands -- is it dead or alive?"

The woman became very still, studied the boy's hands, then she looked carefully into his eyes. "It's in your hands whether the bird will stay alive or will die" she said.

Perhaps the bird represents the spirit, history, language and stories of our traditions, our justice-love movement, and our lives. Whether this spirit brings life or death is really a matter that is, to no small degree, strongly in our hands.

4.6 IMAGES OF A VIOLENT GOD

By Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer [From pages 60-62 of *Violence-of-God Traditions in the New Testament*, in *Is Religion Killing Us?: Violence in the Bible and the Quran*, NY; Trinity Press, 2003.]

The presumption of God's punishing violence lies at the heart of the New Testament that claims Jesus as Savior and understands the death of Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice. From what, we should ask, does Jesus save us? The classic answer is that Jesus saves us from the consequence of our sin. God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus to die for us (John 3:16-17).

Many Christians see in these words a gracious God who loves us enough to send his only son to die in our place so that we might avoid our deserved punishment, go to heaven instead of hell, and have eternal life. Brutal images of God remain hidden behind these rose-colored interpretations. If we believe that Jesus died for us so that we will not be condemned, then we should ask, "Condemned by whom?" The answer is, God. What remains unstated in classic Christian statements of faith is that Jesus dies in order to save us from God, not from sin. More precisely, Jesus' sacrificial death saves us from a violent God who punishes sin.

The idea that God sent Jesus to die for our sins makes sense only if we embrace violent and punishing images of God featured prominently in the Hebrew Scriptures. The violent God of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian New Testament requires appeasement, sacrifices, and holiness. Regina M. Schwartz argues that the "sacrifices of Cain and Abel suggest ... an offering to ward off divine wrath, to encourage the deity's favor, to invoke his blessings of prosperity." The image of Yahweh is not loving or compassionate but violent and unpredictable. Offerings and sacrifices are human attempts to appease a wrathful deity, but success is by no means assured. Abel succeeds. Cain fails. The text doesn't say why. It gives the impression that God is violent, petty, arbitrary, and to be feared.

Priestly writers say God orders disobedient children to be murdered (Lev 20:9, Deut 20:18-21) and a man who gathers sticks on the Sabbath to be stoned to death (Num 16:32-36) because they believe these actions are necessary to appease a violent deity. The overwhelming preoccupation with holiness in the priestly writings is rooted in fear that God will "vomit" unholy people out of the land (Lev 18:24-25).

The scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement, known as Yom Kippur, became a prominent frame of reference for sacrificial interpretations of Jesus' death. It is described in Leviticus 16 and became one of the most important of all Jewish festivals. The ritual involved two goats. One goat was slaughtered as a "sin offering" "for the LORD" (16:9, 15). The other goat was sent away "for Azazel" (a desert demon) and called "a scapegoat" because it was allowed to escape into the wilderness after having the sins of the people transferred onto it (16:8, 10 KJV). The scapegoat carried the sins of the people out of the holy land (16:20-22).

The Day of Atonement was a priestly response to exile understood as God's just punishment for sin, including insufficient holiness. This "annual observance [of Yom Kippur], so important in post-exilic Israel, is never mentioned in the pre-exilic literature." In other words, Yom Kippur was a desperate attempt to appease a punishing God in the context of exile. The consistency of violence-of-God traditions throughout the Bible is clear when we remember that the New Testament writers present Jesus as the ultimate sacrificial lamb or as the scapegoat on whom the sins of the world are placed. Jesus stands between a wrathful deity and sinful humanity. His death substitutes for our own.

The Christian Eucharist also presumes the punishing violence of God. The language "body" and "blood" of Christ places the Lord's Supper in a sacrificial context, reinforcing the continuity in violence-of-God traditions between Old and New Testaments. The Jews were saved from divine slaughter in Egypt by marking their doorposts with the blood of a perfect sacrificial lamb so that a violent deity could identify and pass over their houses. Christians too will be spared God's wrath by the perfect blood sacrifice of

Jesus. Understood in a sacrificial light, the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, ritualizes appeasement of a bloodthirsty, punishing deity. It commemorates Jesus' blood sacrifice in which Jesus stands between sinful humanity and God's violent judgment.

4.7 THEISM - THINKING ABOUT GOD

by Dorothee Soelle

From page 33, **Against the Wind, memoir of a radical Christian**; Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1999

.. All I wanted to say was that we need God, but not the "Mr. Fix-it" who manages everything "from above".

To be in need of God is the human being's highest perfection...

To me letting go of that claim seemed tantamount to betraying the pain that keeps us alive."

Her book, **Thinking About God: an introduction to theology**. ISBN 0-334-02476-5 SCM-Canterbury Press, London, UK, 1990 [Trinity Press Philadelphia, PA, 1991.] contains the following observations:

from Chapter 14 - The End of Theism

In this essay Dorothee Solle advocates for the end of the orthodox God of our parents. She explains

"Orthodox theology, often associated with a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, insists on a God of absolute transcendence . . . There is only a very limited adaptation to modernity . . . The God of orthodoxy is ossified and becomes an objectifiable fetish . . . From within psychology this God is the deepest symbol of an authoritarian religion. Power is more important to the authoritarian God than justice and love." [pp. 176-177]

Today the dispute of whether God can be thought of us as resulting in himself and unrelated, or whether God is the relationship itself and can be thought of as only relationship, seems to me to be one of the most important arguments between male patriarchal and feminist theology" [p 181]

One of the main difficulties of thinking of God consists in the fact that while embodies power in a sense which has still to be determined, this power cannot be that proclaimed by the authoritarian religion which we find at the top of a hierarchy. By hierarchy, I understand a 'hallowed order' behind which questions cannot be asked, in which the higher level in each case has power over the lower. [p 182]

from Chapter 15 - Who Is Our God?

...existential philosophy with its attempt to de-objectify people, process theology with its conception of God who develops further who cannot remain behind the ethical level of democratic consciousness, but above all feminist theology with its insistence on a relational, non-patriarchal language, which is in a position to communicate experience with God existentially - these are attempts to overcome the ontological lack of relationship and to think of God beyond theism and atheism. [p 186]

...outside the power of the imperium , there are yet other forms of power which arise out of being bound up with the ground of life... not power to command, to rule, to manipulate, but a power which comes to life from a relationship. How can we distinguish good power, the power of life, from the power of evil the power to dominate?... good power is shared power, power which distributes itself, which involves others, which grows through dispersion and does not become less ... Real relationship means that an

exchange takes place and that people gain a share in the creative, good, non-compelling power of God. [p 188]

I have had ... experiences with hope in which transcendence and immanence emerge at the same time, in many services and gatherings which were related to the Christian expectation of another peace and another social order. [p 190]

It is not the case, that we have to give meaning to life or produce the fulfillment. Rather, life gives us meaning, if we do not constantly get in its way [p 194]

4.8 WHAT JESUS TELLS US ABOUT GOD

[From *Jesus, the Silent Sage* in Robert W. Funk, **Jesus as Precursor**, Sonoma CA: Polebridge Press, 1994.]

Jesus does not speak about God in his parables, he does not develop a doctrine of God, he does not speak about himself, he does not proclaim his messiahship, he does not predict his passion and death, he does not claim that he is about to die for the sins of humankind, he does not predict that history will soon end, he does not depict a last judgment, he does not picture supernatural beings, or miracles, or even exorcisms, and he does not commission his disciples to form a church and conduct a world mission. On all these topics of burning interest to people in his day, to his disciples of the second and third generations, and modern readers of the gospels, he was and is simply and startlingly silent. (p.105)

It is true that Jesus speaks occasionally about God, for example, in the one-sentence prayers collected into what we know as the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:2). He refers to the Creator's care for the sparrows and lilies (Luke 12:6-7, 22-24, 27-28) and he compares God's graciousness to that of human parents (Matt 7:7-11). In these and other references to God, Jesus is not adopting a metaphysical creed--or preparing the way for one--but observing the world as he sees it--as though it were in an intensive care unit run by his Father.

That perspective, in fact, is the difference. In Jesus' world, God is not an object, not even a person, whom one can observe here and there by keeping one's eyes open. When Jesus speaks about God, he is only observing his unseen God at work, he merely notes what God does. God himself or herself does not enter his field of vision. (p.106)

4.9 AN EVOLVING IDEA OF THE DIVINE

by Rev. Dr. Charles M. Bidwell

The Immanent Divinity of Inter-relationship

I am coming to believe that the divine power throughout the universe in one of relationships -- relationships between and among people -- relationships between and among all living creatures -- relationships between and among the cells and micro-organisms within our bodies that form a microcosm of inter-dependent relationships -- relationships between and among the components of solar systems and galaxies in delicate balance. To a dynamic force that keeps us all in relation to one another, I can give deep respect and abiding gratitude. To such a keen sense of relationship, Jesus referred over and over by challenging barriers to being in just, egalitarian, kindred relationship with others.

Further, this concept is immanent, part of everything and all life depends on it. I am a part of the cosmic whole and kindred to all creatures. I disrespect the divine forces when I misuse the resources (other parts of divinity) available to me and when I disregard the welfare of other living things. Illness may, in

part, be the result of the pollution of my immediate environment including my internal environment (what I subject my body's systems and cells to). Some natural disasters may be the consequence of our abuse of the land (landslides resulting from denuding the surface of trees, water levels and flooding from icecaps melting because of the destruction of the protective ozone layer, etc.) not "acts of God".

The Dangers of the Traditional (Theistic) View of the Divine

Intervening God - The traditional concept of the Divine as an intervening (manipulating) being is misleading and has led and still leads to intercessory prayer pleading for something to happen without our having to act. The intercessory prayers are almost always begging that God do something to our enemies, while they are possibly praying for the opposite. Not only that but many intercessory prayers also include the strange plea "Lord, hear our prayer" as if we needed to wake up this being and beg 'him' to pay attention to us.

Omnipotent God - Omnipotence is a fallacious attribute to bestow on the Divinity. It leads to the belief that God can do all things and thus agonized questions about why does God allow tragedies. We pray for healing and death comes, so we wonder where the all-powerful nature is in that. We pray for God to do what we want; both side of a conflict pray for God to support them in overpowering the opponent.

Omniscient God - This is perhaps the most helpful concept of the traditional understanding of the Divinity. God knows everything that we do (because we are doing it within, and to, the interdependent system which is the web of life of which we are a part). God knows how much damage we humans have caused, and are causing, to the web of life.

Miracle-Making God - I cannot believe in 'miracles' that go against the laws of nature (against the order of Divinity). Reports of the Sun standing still and someone walking on liquid lakes are of no use to me. The miracles I believe in are those I experience or learn of which are unexpected favourable turns of events which operate within the laws of nature - such as benevolent synchronicity (but equally valid is the fact that some synchronicity can be harmful or fatal - a person or thing happening to be in the 'wrong place at the wrong time').

Naming Divinity

We are coming to realize that for centuries we have acknowledged that the Creator fashioned us in the Creator's image and that we in turn fashioned our concept of Divinity in our image; we refer to Divinity as a (superhuman) Being with all of our attributes magnified (anger, love, creativity, jealousy, etc.). We are coming to recognize that we cannot adequately name Divinity with a single name and no group can claim Divinity as exclusively theirs.

Y-H-W-H is not a Jew;

God is not a Christian;

Allah is not a Muslim;

Ahura Mazda is not a Zoroastrian;

Gitchi Manitou is not a North American Native;

Creator is more generic;

Fascinating and Tremendous Mystery (*Mysterium Fascinans et Tremendum**) seems closer to reality.

* from Rudolf Otto's **The Idea of the Holy**, London, Oxford University Press, 1923, see Chapter 7.

We need many names and they need to be less anthropomorphic and cosmic in nature. We need to use many names in our public discourse of Divinity.

Justice is Divinity; Compassion is Divinity; Creation/Rebirth is Divinity;

Destruction/Transformation is Divinity; Breath/Air is Divinity;

Energy/Fire is Divinity; 'The Ground of Our Being'/Water and Minerals is Divinity.

We can go on naming and on using a variety of names for the unnameable, unknowable, -- the tremendous mystery that gives and takes life. In the process, we will expand our understanding of the interconnectedness of all life forms and the ground/air/water that is our source and destiny.

5. NON-THEISTIC LITURGICAL WORDING: TRANSITIONING EXERCISES AND PRACTICES

5.1 INTRODUCTION TO NON-THEISTIC WORDING

by Rev. Dr. Charles M. Bidwell

I enjoy the double meaning of the title “Introduction” because it is not only an introduction of the concepts behind this section of the collection, but also deals with ways to introduce non-theistic words and images into public worship. I have tried to give practical approaches and I await the creative ideas of others to add to this section.

Worship leaders and seminarians are often afraid to introduce new wordings in worship areas where familiar words have long been so comfortably say and heard that they are almost a mantra that has become so sacred it is changed at the peril of complaints or reprimands by the congregants. When you find a theistic wording in an order of public worship, try to create alternatives that could be substituted periodically over time to ease the transition and to awaken attention and reflection among the worshippers. When words become so rote that we can say them from memory, we often fail to pay attention to their (original) meaning and impact and they become a mantra like the “Lord's Prayer” and in some faith communities the Nicene or Apostles' Creed.

Tragically, too often the worship leader or seminarian has studied and learned concepts of the Divine and Biblical literacy which go beyond the Sunday School learning of the worshippers, but the worshipers never become acquainted with them because the introduction of these newer concepts are experienced as too alarming (upsetting) to the boards of the congregations employing them. I say tragically, because that leaves the people in the pew behind in their spiritual development and expansion of their theological knowledge. Others in the pew have studied and reflected and are far beyond the familiar liturgical wordings and are increasingly finding worship wording to be irrelevant if not irrational and not conducive to a deeper spiritual connection with others or their world. Tradition must not become a mausoleum. As a worship or spiritual *leader* (clergy or teacher), you might consider that part of your responsibility is the challenge of leading your followers to more awesome concepts of the Divine that Jesus referred to in his images of the Kin-dom/Realm of God.

Examples of Practical Exercises and Changes in Practice

Below are some examples of wording shifts that could be used to nudge worshippers into a different understanding of God or least surprise them into paying attention to what is said and possibly lead to a conversation about meaning.

Transitioning - The first transition (T1) wording could be used intermittently with the familiar wording over a couple of months and as time goes on the frequency with which the familiar is used could be reduced until it is dropped altogether. Then the next transition (T2) could be introduced in the same way.

Caution - Don't expect dramatic shifts or quick awareness. We have found that being subtle gets unheard by many people. In one church, the words "body and blood" etc. have not been used in Communion for over 10 years and yet the church school teachers were certain that they were; people 'heard' what they expected to hear and had always heard. That being said, using this non-theistic wording will be welcomed by those how are aware and it may be more in harmony with your spiritual understanding as a worship leader and that is a stroke for integrity. Blessing on your journey to a more authentic and relevant corporate worship life.

Corporate Prayer Endings:

Traditional - "Lord, hear our prayer."

T1 - *Global/personal* - "This is my prayer." or "This is our prayer."

T2 - "May I work to make this so." or "May we work to make this so."

Traditional - "We pray in Jesus' name."

T1 - *Global/personal* - "We ask this in the spirit of Jesus."

T2 - "We seek this in the spirit of Jesus."

T3 - We agree on this as the spirit of Jesus touches us."

Traditional - "Amen"

T1 - *Global/personal* - "May it be so."

T2 - "May we make it be so."

Scripture Responses

Traditional - "This is the Word of the Lord."

T1 - "This is a Word from God."

T2 - "Herein we seek God's wisdom."

T3 - "Herein we seek Wisdom."

T4 - "May we find wisdom for our living."

After the Hebrew Scriptures

"This is part of our faith story."

Naming

Traditional - John, the Baptist

T1 - John, the Baptiser.

Traditional - Jesus Christ

T1 - Jesus, the Christ

T2 - Jesus, the anointed one

T3 - Jesus, an anointed one

Traditional - Jesus/Christ our Saviour/Redeemer

T1 - Jesus/Christ, our Companion on the Way

T2 - Jesus, our Window on Divinity

T3 - Jesus, our Beloved Sage

Traditional - God is love

T1 - "Love is God" and "Justice is Godly" and "Compassion is Divine"

[YHWH is not a Jew, God is not a Christian, and Allah (with his 99 names) is not a Muslim.]

Communion - Eucharist - Last Supper - Agape Meal - Passover Seder, etc.

An early Christian document, *The Didache* (Teaching of the Apostles), from the end of the first Century directs the faithful to celebrate the meal of thanksgiving (Chapters 9&10). There is no mention of sacrifice or blood shed or body broken. It might get away from the "sacrificial lamb" image for Jesus and the punishing, abusive father image of God within the doctrine of the

atonement, if we ceased to mention body and blood and in its place stressed the ideas and images of the Passover meal of *remembrance and celebration*. Jesus celebrated the Passover Seder with his friends just before he was executed. He knew that he was in for serious trouble from the authorities and that he might never again eat with them and so he well might have said something like whenever you gather to break bread and drink wine, I hope you will remember me and all that I have tried to teach you.

The words of institution and the Great Thanksgiving can be altered so that what the worship leader and the people say reflects remembering Jesus, his relationship with all people, his open table and eating with those others would shun, etc.

The words can refer to bread broken and wine poured to be shared among those who gather to be in solidarity with Jesus' teachings of compassion and justice.

Servers might say different phrases at different times of the year:

"Bread for your journey" and "Juice for your joy"

"Bread of Solidarity" and "Wine of Freedom"

"The Bread of Blessing" and "The Cup of Community"

Scripture Interpretation (a model for NT exploration)

Jesus said (aphorism) - "Man was not made for the Sabbath, but Sabbath was made for man." (Mark 2:27)

Inclusivized - "People were not made in order to observe the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for people."

Generalized/globalized - "People were not created in order to obey rules regarding a day of rest (or any other religious ordinance); the day of rest is a gift for all to enjoy."

Guiding Principle - That which is designed to be beneficial to everyone should not be dogmatically enforced upon anyone but it should be accessible by everyone who chooses it.

5.2 NAMING ULTIMATE REALITY

[From Robert C. Wild, **Sacred Presence: In Search of the New Story**, Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2004.

Source: www.trafford.com/4dcgi/robots/04-0945.html - no longer online, but

Revised here: http://ca.renewedpriesthood.org/page.cfm?Web_ID=503]

The terms [for the Divine] elude exact definition because they seek to point to Ultimate Reality which is beyond our ability to describe and can only be named through symbolic words and deeds. I see these terms as holding a 'continuum of meaning', moving from the most familiar to the most sublime.

GOD is the word most often used by us to name Ultimate Reality as we encounter it. But the word is used among us so lightly, casually and frequently that it is often difficult to know what meaning is intended. Sometimes the word carries heavy anthropomorphic overtones, which risks idolatry and false familiarity. On the other hand, I recognize that the word 'God' can carry a strong sense of spiritual communion with the universal Other. The word 'God' can signify our sense of a divine Companion who walks the dusty way of life's journey with us. I tend to use this word when none of the others below fits comfortably into what I am writing.

THE DIVINE is a name I use to point to our experience of a cosmic reality, conceived by human imagination and reason to be the indwelling force, power or energy which sustains the universe. Our experience of this reality can be so vivid that people speak of themselves as being in the presence of

the Divine. We say then that this relationship is 'personal'- but this does not mean that the Divine is a person reducible to human categories. Symbolism of all kinds has been used to represent the Divine in social life and in personal thoughts and feelings.

THE HOLY ONE pertains to the Divine as being morally and spiritually pure. Holiness is an attribute of the Divine, but can also stand for the Divine when that attribute is being accented. Thus, I speak of 'the Holy One' when referring primarily to the sublime righteousness of the Divine. But holiness is also a general category and can be used to refer to any person or thing which we regard as approaching moral and spiritual purity.

THE SACRED points to depths of the Divine beyond all human experience. That aspect of the Sacred which presents Itself to us as personal I name 'the Divine'. Sacred is the more diffuse term, Divine is the more specific term; and both refer to the same Reality. The Sacred and the Divine form a continuum, with the former signifying Ultimate Reality as remote, mysterious, ubiquitous, and the latter signifying Ultimate Reality as intimate, particular, specific, personalized.

MYSTERY signifies a postulate of faith. It is Ultimate Reality which lies beyond everything our faculties- spiritual, mental and physical- can access. Perhaps it is a way of saying that there is a limit to what we can experience, intuit, imagine, reason- that the full range of our human perceptions does not and cannot exhaust Reality. Mystery is opaque, obscure, postulated; but the Sacred shines, blinds, amazes, brings wonder.

6. RITUALS, SACRAMENTS, ETC.

6.1 CANDLES OF CELEBRATION, REMEMBRANCE, OR CONCERN

This is an element that may be used in any gathering with a spiritual focus.

In preparation, there should be a fire containment area such as a glass surface or sand tray or candelabra where votive or tea-light candles can be placed and lit safely. There may be a central 'source' candle and there may be extra candles, which could be lit "in solidarity with those who have not the freedom to express their concern or celebration for fear of discrimination or condemnation".

The purpose is to provide the opportunity to light candles regarding persons or things that are important to the people present. These "candles" represent a wide array of matters, from remembering a deceased loved one to announcing an engagement to showing solidarity with people in other countries. Whatever the content, the intention is to allow time for members and friends to share what's on their hearts with others in the faith community.

The theme of the lighting may be suggested by the leader, such as

- your griefs and fond memories at this time of remembrance,
- your concerns and celebrations for the Earth and all creatures,
- your dreams and wishes for the new couple, child, building, program, season, year, etc.

The invitation. Describe what is expected, such as:

"Anyone may come up, light a candle, and share a word, or a sentence or two, or you may pause in silence, if that feels better to you.

You may lift your candle and hold it sideways to ignite its wick from the flame of the central candle or you may light it from another's candle."

The conclusion may be at the end of the gathering with appropriate words of blessing for departure with the suggestion that we take our shared celebrations and concerns with us but that they are now shared with others and we do not go alone. Then the candles may be allowed to burn themselves out in their metal holders or they may be snuffed out (especially the central larger candle).

In some circumstances, people may be invited to take their candle, or any candle, and carry it away with them indicating that someone else is sharing your feeling or holding your concern in their hearts as they go out into the world.

6.1.1 CANDLE-LIGHTING FOR SPIRITUAL GATHERINGS

Some leaders seek wording for lighting a candle at or near the beginning of a spiritual gathering (Sunday, memorial, etc.) and then for transforming the light/energy at the close. The simple answer is that they are usually crafted almost on the spot with the focus of the gathering prompting the wording.

The same goes for the end of the gathering, when you transform the energy of the flame into the air for folks to carry away with them.

Although it is a ritual, there are no formulaic words - let the Spirit guide you.

The few below *are examples*, but please craft yours to suit the theme or situation. These are just reminders of how varied they usually are.

Memorial -

We have gathered to remember the life of ___ and too celebrate the impact ___ had on our lives. We light this candle as a symbol of the light / life energy / bright spirit that ___ shared with us.

As we transform the energy of this flame [blow out candle] into the air that we all breathe, may we carry with us the gifts of knowing ___ and honour them by trying to live the values ___ shared with us as we share them with those we encounter as we leave this time together.

Sunday gathering -

In the pause between getting here and being present, we light this candle to focus our attention on being the light that our community needs. A light that shines on darkness and distress and brightens it with our presence. We each hold a spark of the Divine within us and it is our privilege to share this with those who feel that they have lost touch with their inner light.

We go from this gathering to be a light in the dark places of others. We all come from light and yet are ever seeking it. As we change this candle light into another form that disperses throughout our space, so may we disperse to remind others of the light that is within each and every one of us.

Other examples based on themes are:

Generosity

Lighting

By gathering here we have created a spirit-filled space – it is in that spirit of recognizing the oneness of all, recognizing that we are part of that oneness – each of us together. We recognize that this is symbolized in the lighting of this candle – recognizing that it reminds us of the light that is within, among and beyond us all. We gather in the spirit of that oneness to be together.

Transforming

Living small and living stingy doesn't serve our community or our world. Let us work to reduce fear, live toward light and seek a generous spirit everywhere and in so doing we spread our light across all the lines that get drawn. Let us go from this gathering to live generously.

Making Changes

Lighting

Each week when we gather we light a candle that burns in our midst.

It burns as a symbol of our intentions to live in ways that seek light, that reflect light, and that honour the light in others.

We have before us the grace of a new week and the light of a new day before us calls us to name and forgive and be forgiven.

So we light this candle to call ourselves to a fresh start and a new beginning.
May its light draw us and turn us always toward better words and better ways.
May this light and all it symbolizes inspire us to deeper courage and greater compassion.
In this light, may we see ourselves and our world in a new way – in a way that only today can bring.

It is not yesterday's light and it is not yet tomorrow's, it is all we have – it is this present moment.

So in the gift of this light and in the gift of our being together in community today, may we share with each other in its light and its warm glow ... as we share in a song and join our voices in singing ...

Transforming

The light of course goes with us always, the light is always within and among us, but indeed the light changes as we take it into our days and into our world. [*blow the flame out*] And as the light changes so will we – we will be changed, we will seek change, and we will change the world around us. Let us take the essence of light into our lives ... and let us go with a song.

Easter Resilience

Lighting

Whenever we gather we light a candle as a symbol of our intentions to live in ways that seek light, that reflect light, and honour light in one another and in all others.

We light this candle on this Easter Day to call ourselves into newness – into the freshness of a new day, a new week and a new beginning.

May the light of this candle draw us to better words, deeper courage, greater compassion, more openness to accept what is and what will be.

In this light, may we see the world with Easter eyes, trusting in the resilience of life to bring forth life.

Transforming

As each of us takes this light into our life journey regardless of what it brings in the course of the next day, the next weeks, the months ahead may it remind us to be resilient. We take this light all of us into our lives – the light of resilience, the light of hope and the light of community and peace.

May it go with us – changing always and becoming stronger because we have shared it.

Hope

Lighting

Each of us is born into light and yet we are ever seeking it in our lives. Maybe that is why light is the symbol in so many religious traditions of our spiritual quest.

We are here with each other to honour the light in each life.

We are here to honour the spark of great spirit that has come into this world with each life, no matter how long or short the lifetime, no matter how gifted or challenged the circumstances of any life, no matter the limitations or potential of each life.

We come and light this candle learning the long story of the universe and that we are a spark of divinity from that great flaring forth.

We light this candle knowing that light is the great mystery in which we live and move and have our being. And we gather with each other to seek the light of wisdom for our living – to seek it in the songs we sing and the prayers we pray – in the long wisdom of our tradition, in the wisdom of poets and scientists and in the light we find within one another.

Transforming

As we extinguish this flame in our leaving, it is not about putting out our light but it is about changing that light – changing it from this form of energy [*blow it out*] to another. We take our light into the world that we might be about the work of hope, that we might cultivate that habit in our own living, in our families and in our communities, in this community of faith and all the places where we make our life.

Recognition

Lighting

The light of love shines in each face. We light this candle to remind ourselves of the gift of life that stems from the gift of light; that we are born into light and yet ever seeking it.

We gather here as a way of seeking light for our living – the light of wisdom from our faith tradition, the light of wisdom from our lived experience, the light of wisdom we find in the inspiration of artists and authors, sages and scientists, the light that we find within ourselves – and we come here to share with one another. We gather in this light.

So in this time between getting here and being present here, may we take this space to breathe deeply, to bring ourselves into this time in which we are gathered with one another.

Transforming

We go in the midst of all that life is – that we might recognize the things our hearts know to be true. We go in the courage of who we know we are together. We go in the embrace of love and light.

Unsettling

Lighting

Each day, fire gathers us – the fire of our nearest star, our sun, reminding us of our long journey through time and space – the long journey of becoming.

We gather as humanity in search of a new humanity – a humanity that can find its unity with all that is.

We gather in this day as those born into light and yet ever seeking light.

In this time we have now, we pause in the stillness to bring ourselves from the hustle of getting here into the quieting presence of being here as we quiet our minds and our hearts and bring ourselves into this time in which we are gathered. [*Pause for meditation – possibly with instrumental music*]

Transforming

We go to find light in one another.

We go never failing to see the light in one another.

We go in the light of forgiveness and in the light of seeking justice – as partners in the great sacrifice of building new and right relationships.

We go together in truth and reconciliation.

Curiosity

Lighting

We gather in the light of a new day.

We gather as those born into light and yet ever seeking it.

We come into places like this and times like this in order that we might find light within ourselves, light in one another, be renewed in our commitment to see light in everyone.

We come to this time and place to seek light in ancient stories, in contemporary wisdom, in words we speak and words we sing.

We come in search of the light we need to live truly and faithfully.

We take this time to bring ourselves to this moment, to this time, and to this place – quieting our spirits, centering our minds and opening our hearts.

Transforming

We go in the great light of curiosity and creativity – our gifts to build the world we dream of.

We go to use those gifts responsibly and wisely.

We go together in the good work of being the human expressions of spirit, expanding consciousness, with each experience we have on our quest to know and to discover this amazing and remarkable world in which we are travelling together.

6.2 COMMUNION AS A CELEBRATION OF THANKSGIVING AND REMEMBRANCE

An early Christian document, “The Didache” (Teaching of the Apostles), from the end of the first Century directs the faithful to celebrate the meal of thanksgiving (Chapters 9 &10). There is no mention of sacrifice or blood shed or body broken; there is also no mention of these in Gospel of Thomas either. The Didache was written and revised from about 50CE to 100CE and predates the wording in the later Gospels. The 'sacrificial lamb' concept of Jesus' execution and the doctrine of the atonement most likely was a construct of groups in the second half of the First Century who were struggling to justify why such a just and compassionate man had to die so horribly. Although centuries of tradition have held that Jesus actually said the words “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”, such wording does not appear in the earliest accounts, so it may be just as valid, if not more so, to use different wording for communion.

We might move away from the “sacrificial lamb” image from the doctrine of the atonement, if we ceased to mention body and blood and in its place stressed the ideas and images of the Passover meal of *remembrance and thanksgiving*. Jesus celebrated the Passover Seder with his friends just before he was executed. He probably knew that he was in for serious trouble from the authorities and that he might never again eat with them and so he well might have said something like 'whenever you gather to break bread and drink wine, I hope you will remember me and all that I have tried to teach you'.

6.2.1 THE AGAPE MEAL BASED ON THE *DIDACHE*

Although this is far from non-theistic, it does show that there was an ancient form (dating from the first century after Jesus died) that did not refer to atonement sacrifice (body & blood).

[over the cup]

We give you thanks, Creator, for the holy vine of your son David,
which You made known to us through Your Son Jesus; Yours is the glory for ever and ever.

[when breaking the bread]

We give you thanks, Creator, for the life and knowledge
which You made known to us through Your Son Jesus; Yours is the glory for ever and ever.

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one,
so may Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Your realm;
for Yours is the glory and the power through Jesus, the Christ for ever and ever.

[and after, give thanks]

We give you thanks, for Your holy name, which You have built into our hearts, and for the knowledge
and the faith and the immortality,
which You have made known to us through Your Son Jesus; Yours is the glory for ever and ever.

You, Almighty Maker, did create all things for Your name's sake,
and did give food and drink unto all for enjoyment, that they might render thanks to Thee;
but you also bestowed on us spiritual food and drink and eternal life through Your Son.
Before all things, we give you thanks that You are powerful; Yours is the glory for ever and ever.

Remember Your Church to deliver it from all evil and to perfect it in Your love; and gather it together
from the four winds into Your realm which You have prepared for it; for Yours is the power and the glory
for ever and ever.

May grace come and may this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David.
If any are holy, let them come; if any are not, let them repent. May it be so. Amen.

[SOURCE: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html> - Chapters 9 & 10.]

6.2.2 A Suggested Alternative Communion Wording

by Reverend Dr Nancy L. Steeves

INVITATION TO THE TABLE

We come to this table as friends once gathered around a table in an upper room.
We come as they came ... from different places, different experiences, different fears, different
hopes, different needs and we come with different names and different table traditions.
We come as they came ... rooted in their time, their culture, their faith ... in their Jewishness,
with their national and religious identity ...
to celebrate the table tradition of Passover ...
to share again the strength of that particular story about who they were and where they came
from ...
to touch the tapestry of their collective memory ...
to remember their liberation from Egypt, the defeat of oppression (at least for a time).

For some, that table in the upper room celebrated an event in history. Others came to the table for the togetherness born of a story spun to dispel the mystery of surviving a near death experience ... an exodus.

But I suspect, for all, regardless of how they perceived Passover, it was mostly a treasured time for table talk ... a time to rest, to reflect, to pause, to ponder, to give thanks, to despair, to dream, to laugh, to lament.

Tables are places of intimacy. To eat together is "to meet at the level of our most basic need. It is hard to preserve your dignity with butter on your chin or keep your distance as you ask for the ketchup." [Buechner, Fredrick. *Wishful Thinking; A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row, 1973, pp.52-53.]

This table has many names.

For some, it is the **Last Supper** or the **Lord's Supper**. The emphasis is on the symbol of memorial ... it is mostly a memorial meal: a time and place where memory reaches back to recall the last moments and last words of a beloved companion.

For others, this is **Eucharist** ... a feast of thanksgiving: a time and place to celebrate the gifts of life ... an opportunity to find bread for the journey and wine to spirit joy.

For others in the family, this is **Mass** ... the table where a sacrifice ends worship and service begins. It takes its name from the Latin words which conclude the liturgy: "*Ite missa est*" which is to say, "Go, this is your mission".

For others, this is **Communion** ... it is to come home, for home is where the table is, the table to gather around and eat and drink with friends; to know and be known. It is to meet where we need not just food and drink but each other and the Holy One who is beyond the walls of our words or our imaginings.

You are invited to this table of many names

not because you must come, but because you may;

not because you have it all together, but because you don't.

Come not because you understand its mystery, but because you embrace its mystery:

Come not to express an opinion, but to seek a Presence.

If you are hungry for more than bread and thirsty for more than wine, this table is for you.

These are the gifts of a good earth and a gracious God.

Come and celebrate the mysteries of our faith.

(Here a song like "Bring Many Names" by Brian Wren could be sung.)

CELEBRATION OF THE GIFTS

"Bread and wine tell a very special tale ... about women, about men, about life.

Bread has its beginnings in the earth: it is gathered, ground and kneaded by loving hands, tired backs, by sweat of toil.

Bread from field and mill and store.

Bread to break, to give and eat, shared from hand to hand.

Bread that must be broken open, to be used, to feed.

Bread broken to fill emptiness.

Likewise, the wine is of the earth, bitter and sweet.

From vine to glass, given and shared, of people's labour.

Wine of joy and pain, grief and gladness.

Wine to be spilled to slake thirst and enliven the heart just the way spirits can.”

[adapted from wording by Ruth Duck.]

With bread and wine, you are invited to see, hear, smell, feel and taste the mystery of grace.

(Break bread/Pour wine-juice)

We invite you to take a few moments to think about what this bread and wine might be for you. In a few moments, we will serve one another.

You may chose to offer words of peace or blessing as you share these gifts with one another, or you may choose to serve in silence.

If for any reason, you do not wish to receive the bread and the cup, please feel welcome to simply take the elements from your server and offer them to the person next to you in the circle.

As you offer the bread, you might say, “May this bread satisfy your spirit's hunger.”

As you offer the cup, you might say, “May this cup/drink bring gladness to your heart.”

A CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

by Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Steeves

One: May love be with you.

All: And also with you.

One: Let us open our hearts.

All: We open ourselves to love and to each other.

One: Let us give thanks for the gifts of life and faith.

All: Spirit of life, of grape and grain, we gather in gratitude:

One: We are moved with wonder as we consider the magnificence of this planet which is our home for the journey.

All: In creation, we engage mystery. The universe proclaims the great love story. Blessed be our lives. Blessed be our land. Blessed be the love in which all that is lives and moves and has its being.

One: We have been entrusted with responsibility in creation, respecting its systems, enjoying its beauty; studying its ways, repairing its wounds, tending its resources, loving it tenderly.

All: When we falter or forget, may our hearts be moved to fierce protection at the sight of mountains rising, a prairie sunset, a turning tide, a blooming desert, a breeze upon our face. May our hearts be opened to all the dwelling places of the holy.

One: In wind and fire, in rain upon dry land, in the song of sparrows, in storm and stillness, the sacred emerges.

All: In silence and speech, in disturbance and rest, in our nearest breath and in the farthest star, spirit is among us.

One: At this and other times, we remember Jesus of Nazareth in whose life and death we experience a vision of a new humanity and in whose story we are called...

All: To celebrate the sacred, to live with respect in creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil.

One: Spirit of Life, we are grateful for this bread and wine, gifts of grain and vine. May this bread nourish our capacity for compassion. May this cup strengthen our commitment to community. We pray in the spirit Jesus taught his friends to pray:

**All: Ground of all being,
we honor the many names for our experience of the sacred.
May we build a community faithful the dream of heaven on earth.
May there be food for all who hunger this day.
May we be forgiven for the falseness of what we have done
as we forgive those who have been untrue to us.
May we not feel abandoned in hard times
but find strength to meet each moment.
For the light of life, the vitality of being is within us and beyond us,
now and forever, AMEN.**

Sharing the “Bread of Compassion” and the “Cup of Community”.

Another form relative to a time of remembrance (Nov. 11, Easter, etc.)

CELEBRATING AROUND THE COMMON TABLE

One: In this sacred space, we are confronted with life and death.

All: Recognizing the reality, mystery, and grace of both life and death, we gather at this table.

One: We invite into our presence, the truth of our pasts and the mystery of our futures, recognizing that we are dancers on the very edge of things:

**All: where explosive energy births something new,
where something new is created by the coming together of two or more distinct elements,
where we take our place in the long story of becoming.**

One: Into this sacredness, we pour our whole selves ~~ what we know and what we don't, what we hope for and what we fear.

All: This table has long been a sign and symbol of this coming together ~~ of the creative energy shared among people sitting at a table. This is the place of community, of family, of conversation, of negotiation, of discerning values, dreams and strategies..

One: For Jesus of Nazareth and his friends, the table they shared affirmed connection and relationship in the midst of life and death. After their leader was executed, when the friends of Jesus shared bread and wine, they strengthened their intention to be a kin-dom, a beloved community, even in the midst of empire.

All: We eat this bread and drink this cup to deepen our compassion, broaden our hope, and share our quest for right relationship with all that is sacred. We come to this

table to build courage for our crossing over into death and to widen the love which transforms the dash between the date of our birth and the date of our death into purpose and meaning.

Sharing the “Bread of Compassion” and the “Cup of Community”

[Servers say the appropriate words as each person takes a cube of bread from the basket of one server and then dips it into the cup of juice held by the other server.]

6.3 BAPTISM - CONFIRMATION

[This is a rite of initiation into the Christian Community - the followers of Jesus. In the case of infants, it is also one of naming and claiming the infant-child as a beloved child in our faith community. In the case of adults, (whether baptism or confirmation of the vows their parents made for them) it is a declaration of their intention to follow the ways of justice and compassion exemplified in the life of Jesus. Most readers will refrain from referring to any ‘saving’ of a soul from exclusion by god achieved by completing this act.]

Gathering:

One: In water, we are born; of water, we are made; with water, we are refreshed; by water, we are sustained.

All: We gather before this water to celebrate the gifts of water and welcome.

Presentation: *[Someone from the church congregation presents the candidate.]*

Presenter: I present _____(full name)_____ whom we welcome to this sacrament of baptism.

Baptismal Vows:

One: Do you seek to put your trust in God, the all encompassing spirit in whom we live and move and have our being?

Candidate: I do.

One: Do you desire to learn and live the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth?

Candidate: I do.

One: Do you seek to live with an open heart, open to the spirit of life that is within you, among us and between us; open to the wounds and joys of creation and to the needs of the world?

Candidate: I do.

One: Do you seek to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in creation, to love and serve others and to seek justice and resist the distortions of goodness?

Candidate: I do.

One: Will you join in the life and work of this Christian family of faith, sharing our path and passions?

Candidate: I will.

Congregational Commitment:

One: Members and Friends of Southminster-Steinhauer United Church, do you commit yourselves to walk with this person who joins us now, supporting them with your companionship presence.

All: As a baptized and baptizing people of faith, we commit ourselves to support and walk with you within this community of faith.

One: May we all have the courage and conviction to live the promises of our baptism.

All: Amen.

Pouring the Water: *[a family member may do this from the pitcher into the bowl.]*

One: May the Spirit of Life be with us and these waters of daily use which we now use to baptize and to welcome.

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

One: For the Spirit which brooded over the waters in the beginning and brought forth life in all its many forms,

All: we celebrate the gift of life!

One: For the birthing waters of our beginning, for the grieving waters of a drenched earth, for the liberating waters of exodus, for the life sustaining water in the wilderness, for the healing waters in the stories of the generations gone before us and for this and every wet beginning which gives us life and life again,

All: we give thanks for the waters which bless our lives and water our hopes.

One: May we be joined to one another as a beloved community of water and word.

All: Amen!

The Act of Baptism *[by sprinkling or dabbing from the bowl or pouring from the pitcher]*

Laying on of Hands

One: Let us extend our hearts and hands to _____ who joins our journey.

All: May the power of love guide you, inspire you, and work within you all the days of your life.
Amen.

Blessing:

One: May you be blessed as you walk the path of faith with us.

May our faith grow and deepen as we share this path together. Amen.

6.4 A (SPRING EQUINOX) CELEBRATION OF CREATION

Prelude: Sounds of Nature (a recording)

Call to Worship

We gather in recognition that we are but one part of the Holy created whole.

We dwell within Creator's provident work of art.

Earth is home for all creatures and all people.

We live in a deeply inter-related world; we are not alone.

We share this life with the sky and the earth,

With the waters and the land,

With trees and grasses,

With fish, birds, and animals,

With minerals and creatures of every form,

And with all our brothers and sisters.

Life is good and everything of love is good.
Let us celebrate Creation!

Prayer for Attention

We are part of all that sustains or destroys life. Creation and destruction occur in continually unfolding ways. And so may we open our ears to the continually unfolding Word. Life speaks to us in new and vital and imperative ways. With all the power we have been given, let us be silent and open to listening . . . for nourishment, comfort, for challenge and new focus. May it be so.

[Begin quietly with the choir seated, softly singing or humming "For the beauty of the Earth". This sets the stage for the Bearer of Good News to step up and tell tales of Creation. In the background a drum slowly beats, an awakening, hypnotic pulse.]

Genesis 2:4b-15, Job 12:7-10, Psalm 148, Matthew 25:31-46

Litany for Creation

From the Beginning - Space and Earth ... and Creator said, "This is Very Good!"

[After the first reading the choir and then the congregation responds, "This is Very Good!" The choir then could sing something suggesting that divinity exists in all matter, a total belief in the spiritual realities beneath all physical realities. Each stage of creation was observed with song and the refrain, "This is Very Good!" echoed by the choir and then the congregation.]

Creation of Land and Water

[“For The Beauty of the Earth” sung by the choir to music from Paul Winter’s “Missa Gaia” (Mass for the Earth)]

For the beauty of the earth, sing, o sing today
Of the sky and of our world, sing, o sing always
Nature human and divine, all around us lies.
God of all to Thee we raise grateful hymns of praise

Creation of Plant Life

[Solo “Mystery” (In Praise of the Mystery of Life) words & music by Jeremy Geffen (as recorded in Paul Winter’s “Missa Gaia”).]

It lives in the sea or a tree as it grows.
You can hear it, if you listen, to the wind as it blows.
It’s there in a river as it flows into the sea.
It’s the sound in the soul of someone becoming free
And it lives in the laughter of children at play
And in the blazing sun that gives light to the day.
It moves the planets and all the stars that shine.
It’s been the mover of mountains, since the beginning of time.
Oh Mystery you are alive; I feel you all around.
You are the fire in my heart; you are the holy sound,
You are all of life; it is to you that I sing.
Grant that I may feel you, always in everything.

And it lives in the waves as they crash upon the beach.
I have seen it in the goals that we have tried to reach.
I feel it in the light and I know it means so much.
I know it in your smile, my love, when our hearts do touch.
But when I listen deep inside, I feel best of all,
Like a moon that’s glowing white and I listen to your call
And I know you will carry me, I feel like the tide

Rushing through the ocean, and my heart is open wide.
Oh Mystery you are alive, I feel you all around.
You are the fire in my heart; you are the holy sound.
You are all of life; it is to you that I sing.
Grant that I may feel you, always in everything.

Creation of the Heavens

[Saxophone playing "Icarus" (In Praise of Sun and Fire).]

Creation of Swimming and Flying Creatures

["Lemanja" (The Call of the Fisherman in Praise of Life in the Sea), sung by the choir. Throughout the service, images of the earth play on the screen above and behind the choir, a visual image to accompany the musical journey of Creation.]

Creation of Beasts of the Earth

[Song "Canticle of Brother Sun" (Paul Winter's adaptation of Francis of Assisi's canticle from *Missa Gaia*)]

All praise be yours through Brother Sun,
All praise be yours through Sister Moon,
By Mother Earth my Lord be praised,
By Brother Mountain, Sister Sea,
Through Brother Wind and Brother Air,
Through Sister Water, Brother Fire.
The stars above give thanks to Thee.
All praise to those who live in peace.

All praise be yours through Brother Wolf,
All praise be yours through Sister Whale,
By Nature's song, my Lord be praised,
By Brother Eagle, Sister Loon,
Through Brother Tiger, Sister Seal,
Through Sister Flower, Brother Tree.
Let creatures all give thanks to Thee,
All praise to those who live in peace.

Ask of the beasts and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth,
Ask of the trees and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth,
Ask of the winds and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth,
Ask of the flowers and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth.

Brother Sun, Sister Moon, (x3 then continuing as soloist and half choir sing the next)
For the beauty of the Earth, sing oh sing today,
Of the sky and of our World, sing oh sing always.
Nature human and divine, all around us lies.
Lord of all to thee we raise grateful hymns of praise - of song.

Creation of Human Beings

To be human is to be religious.
To be religious is to be mindful.
To be mindful is to pay attention.
To pay attention is to sanctify existence.

Passing the Peace Among Our Gathering

Offering our contributions and dedicating our gifts to good

Dedication

For the earth forever turning, for the sky, for every sea,
For all life, for all of nature, bring we our humble gifts to thee.

Meditation Dialogue: A Letter to All the People

Attributed to Chief Seattle (two people at opposite sides of the front space - contemporary statistics in italics below should be revised)

"The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky, the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air or the spark of the water, then how can you buy them? Every part of this Earth is sacred to my people; every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people. We know the sap that courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are a part of the Earth, and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle: these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and the man all belong to the same family."

Two and a quarter centuries have passed and our orientation toward God's sacred land has only become more sinful. Taking into account all of the productive land it takes to support our consumptive habits, we exploit an average of 12 hectares per person... while at the same time, those living in abject poverty in Bangladesh survive off of six tenths of a hectare.

"The shining water that moves from the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. Each ghostly reflection in the lakes tells of memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father. The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give to any brother."

Only ___ percent of our nation's rivers have been protected under law, yet fresh water is an essential to life. But our underground aquifers, upon which our modern economy is founded, is a more frightening story. Sixty percent of these and all aquifers the world over are now contaminated. Note that it takes an estimated one thousand four hundred years for an aquifer to fully replenish itself.

"If we sell you our land remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all of the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred as a place where men can go and taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers."

Despite gains in air pollution laws, today urban youth in _____ have only ??% of their average lung capacity. Our heavy reliance on personal vehicle use is our main cause of air pollution. The rate of asthma deaths in _____ has risen from _____ .

"Will you teach your children what we have taught our children: that the Earth is our mother? What befalls the Earth, befalls all the sons of the Earth. This we know: the Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the Earth, he does to himself.

"One thing we know: our God is also your God. The Earth is precious to him, and to harm the Earth is to heap contempt on its creator."

Not only do we continue to heap contempt upon our Mother of all life, despite all of our religiosity and hope for the coming reign of God, but we also heap millions of pounds of Carbon Dioxide and other global warming gases into the air. Temperatures and ocean levels have already risen, while our fellow

aquatic life forms experience rapid extinction. At this rate, more than 80 million South and South East Asians will be forced from their land as the sea level rises. Yet we continue to bank on developing larger parking lots, not on improving mass rapid transit.

"Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone. Where will the eagle be? Gone. And what is it to say good-bye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival!

"When the last red man has vanished and his memory is but the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, will these shores and forests still be here? Will there be any of the spirit of my people left?"

We never knew the Spirit was connected to other life forms. We as spiritual people stand aside as the Arctic national Wildlife Refuge goes up for sale. Our governments continue to increase exploration and consumption of oil, gas and coal. Conservation and alternative energy sources, already technologically available, are not on their radar screen, . . . nor are they on ours.

"We love this Earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your memory the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children and love it as God loves us all. As we are part of the land, you too are a part of the land. As the Earth is precious to us, so is it precious to you.

"One thing we know: there is only one God. No man, be he red man or white man, can be apart. We are brothers after all."

Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon

From Hosea 4:1-3 There is no loyalty or faithfulness, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing stealing, lying, murder and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. The land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.

Prayer: Bountiful Creator, in your gracious presence we confess our sin and the sin of this world. We celebrate your creation and yet we are still held captive by fear and doubt. We hold on to suspicions and jealousies that set neighbor against neighbor and nation against nation. We have neglected the poor and the hungry. In our pursuit of the "good life" we have gone along with injustice; we have ignored the cries of the oppressed. We pursue profits and pleasures that harm the land and pollute the waters. We have squandered Earth's resources on technologies of destruction. We are now aware of the errors of greed and over-consumption. May we have the passion and resolve to change our lives and make us new, that we and all your creatures may know the joy of life abundant in harmony with the health of Earth's systems. May it be so within us.

Blessing Song, "Blue-Green Hills of Earth" or "For the earth forever turning"

Words and music by Kim Oler © Hendon Music, Inc., 1986.

[The musicians, choir and congregation join in one resounding voice to fill the church and give thanks for the blessings of Creation.]

For the earth forever turning, for the skies, for every sea;
For our lives, for all we cherish, sing we our joyful song of peace.

For the mountains, hills, and pastures on their silent majesty;
For the stars, for all the heavens, sing we our joyful song of peace.

For the sun, for rain and thunder, for the seasons' harmony,
For our lives, for all creation, sing we our joyful praise to Thee.

For the world we raise our voices, for the home that gives us birth;
In our joy we sing returning home to our blue-green hills of earth.

6.4.1 SPRING EQUINOX CELEBRATION

(adapted from **Heartbeat of the Seasons: Earth Rituals for the Celtic Year**
by Kathleen Glennon, Columba Press, Dublin, 2005, ISBN 1-85607-485-4.)

[This ritual is ideally celebrated out of doors at twilight on or near 21 March.]

Opening

[Participants gather in a circle.

The leader places the lantern/lighted candle in a central, suitable place.]

Leader

We come this evening to be in harmony with the earth at this time of equinox when day and night are of equal length. Let us form our circle by calling on the blessing of the four directions.

[People are invited to face the direction named and call in the energy of that direction.]

Let us look to the south.

O spirit of the south,
the place of joy and happiness, the place of blossoms and flowers,
fill us with the joy, the fertility, the spontaneity, and the exuberance of summer.

Let us look to the west.

O spirit of the west,
the place of abundance and of harvest, the place of inner fulfillment,
put us in touch with to the fruitfulness and maturity of autumn.

Let us look to the north.

O spirit of the north,
the place of courage and commitment, the place of inner strength,
the place of inner rest, the place of winter,
attune us to the inwardness of winter.

Let us look to the east.

O Spirit of the east,
the place of the rising sun, the place of creativity and new beginnings,
align us to the renewal and restoration of spring.

Getting in touch with the energy of Earth

Leader

At this time the earth in the northern hemisphere experiences a sense of balance. The pendulum of the seasons rests for a brief moment.

The ebb and flow of life pauses for a moment,
a moment of harmony, a moment of rest,
a moment when the fulcrum of the seasons is in balance.

Let us get in touch with the earth and feel her pulse at this time. Let us attune ourselves to the twilight, to the magic of the in-between time.

Let us become aware of the struggle of light and darkness and the subtle blending of both.
Let us become aware of the shapes of things in the twilight - the mystique that envelops everything.

Let us become aware of the last rays of the dying sun.

Let us be in touch with a sense of loss.

Let us also be aware of another emotion - the feeling of anticipation for the first rays of moonlight.

At equinox time we have equal sunlight and nightlight.

Each of us is influenced by the rhythms of both the sun and the moon.

Sun energy influences our logical thought process, our analytical capacities, our decision-making skills.

Moon energy influences our intuitive capacities, and our aesthetic abilities.

We need both energies to be in balance - to be integrated, whole persons.

(Pause)

Hymn in Praise of Equinox

Response (Chant): Gently, gently into the silence.

Blessed is this time of Spring Equinox. Blessed is this time of balance.

Holy is the pause for rest. Sacred is the moment of equilibrium.

Sacred is the sunlight that balances moonlight. Holy is the moonlight - equal partner of the sun.

Holy is the cessation of ebb and flow. Sacred is the time of stillness.

Sacred is the journey inward to the still point, To the silence at the centre.

Balancing lighted nightlights/candles

[Tealights or votive candles are distributed. The leader lights a tea-light from the lantern and the flame is passed around until all have their candles lit.]

Leader

I now invite you to walk around in the circle balancing the light on the palm of your right hand. I invite you to become aware of your body and your sense of balance as you walk around.

[Participants walk around clockwise in a circle.]

I now invite you to walk in the circle balancing the light on the palm of your left hand. Become aware of your body and your sense of balance as you walk.

[Participants walk around clockwise in a circle.]

Now extend your arm with the light on it and place your other hand under it (palm upward).

Walk clockwise around the circle and experience your sense of balance as you walk.

[Participants walk around clockwise in a circle.]

Time for sharing reflections on the experience

Reflection

[Participants are asked to reflect on the following questions:]

Is there balance in your life between:

Work and play, *(pause)*

Activity and rest, *(pause)*

Logic and intuition, *(pause)*

Busyness and relationships, *(pause)*

Joy and sorrow? *(pause)*

What one area of your life needs balance at this time? (*pause*)

What steps will you take to introduce balance in this area of your life? (*pause*)

Invite folks to take a few moments for reflection and sharing.

Creative movement and Blessings

[Participants are encouraged to be creative in the gestures/movements they use.]

Leader

Let us call on the energy of the universe to support us in our efforts at balance and integration.

Let us call on the energy of the earth at this time - the energy of integration and harmony.

Let us call on the energy of the moon to re-align us to our intuitive, creative side.

Let us call on the energy of the sun to align us to our logical, analytical side.

Let us call on the energy of twilight to attune us to the balance of polarities.

Blessings - Participants are encouraged to bless one another with blessings appropriate to each one's sharing.

Chant

Blessings on us all today/tonight. Blessings on all others also today/tonight.

Parting Blessing

May the blessing of twilight integrate the light and darkness of all.

May the blessing of equinox balance and anchor all.

May the angel of balance support and strengthen all.

May all of creation be truly blessed with harmony and stability. Amen.

6.5 Summer Solstice Liturgy (Bonfire Night)

(adapted from **Heartbeat of the Seasons: Earth Rituals for the Celtic Year**

by Kathleen Glennon, Columba Press, Dublin, 2005, ISBN 1-85607-485-4.)

Preparation - Leaders meet beforehand to decide on:

The time and location of the celebration

Who does the cooking/shopping for the celebration (involve as many as possible)

(The garden/field to be blessed and who will carry the blessing)

(Who brings food to the housebound?)

Any musicians in the locality whose music would add to the celebration

For environmental reasons, keep the fire as small as possible and contained on stones or in a container so as not to disturb the creatures of the soil.

Materials Needed

Candles or tea-lights

Water from a local stream or body of water.

Musician(s), drums, or a CD player and Irish dance music

Movement/Dance

There are two opportunities for dance during the ritual:

A. When the fire is lit - decide beforehand on what steps/gestures the group will do.

(There are suggestions offered in the text).

B. At the end of the ritual - it is suggested that participants dance around the fire. Decide beforehand on the steps of the dance. Be creative in using steps, chains, etc.

THE RITUAL

[Participants gather around the unlit fire in a circle.]

Opening

Chant

We come to tell our story.
We come to sing our song.
We come to know our own place,
To know where we belong!

Leader

We gather on this the longest day of the year to praise the Life Force Energy which flared forth the kindling of time and space and continues to create.

We raise our hearts in gratitude for the mystery of the sun, the mystery of light and of fire.

[The fire is lit.

For environmental reasons, keep the fire as small as possible and contained on stones or in a container so as not to disturb the creatures of the soil.

Participants dance around the fire three times to the right as music is played.]

Litany and Gestures

[Participants are invited to sing the chant and to do creative gestures/movements. The following is merely a guideline:]

Fire of the sun - *[reach up to draw in the light from the sun]*

Fire of the stars - *[reach up to draw the fire from the stars]*

Fire of the earth - *[each down to draw the fire from the earth]*

Burning - *[cross your arms at your wrists and make dancing movements with your fingers]*

Fire of the rocks - *[join hands and sway to the music for this verse]*

Fire of the clay

Fire of the hearth

Burning

Fire in the heart - *[extend arms and place hands on your heart]*

Fire in the head - *[extend arms and place hands on you head]*

Fire in our veins - *[with your right hand gently rub the veins on your left arm]*

Burning - *[cross your arms at your wrists and make dancing movements with your fingers.]*

Blessing of the fire with water from a local source

Leader

We bless this fire with water from our holy well.

May the lighting of this fire inflame the hearts of all with love and passion.

May this fire bring blessings of peace and protection to all.

May this fire remind us of the first spark of light which flared forth at the beginning of time.

Amen.

Lighting of Candles

Candles or tea-lights are distributed. The leader lights a large candle from the fire and light is passed around the circle. The leader raises the candle and leads the hymn of praise:

Hymn of Praise

Response after each verse:

How beautiful the light! How glorious its splendour!

Sacred is this fire of midsummer's eve.
Sacred is the light of our sun.
Sacred is the Source of All Life,
Who kindles light and fire.

Sacred is the moment when you sparkled forth a fireball of love and creativity.
Sacred was that kindling fifteen billion years ago.
Sacred is the birthing of supernovas,
The fiery activity of stars,
The formation of galaxies,
The formation of elements.

Sacred was the calling forth of our Milky Way.
Sacred was the seeding of our sun aflame with brilliant energy.
Sacred was the blaze that whirled the planets and shaped our earth.
Sacred was the formation of Earth's crust and atmosphere.

Sacred are the trees, the plants, the flowers
All kissed into life by Sun.
Sacred are the fish that swim, and birds that fly,
All creatures that breathe the fire of creativity.
Sacred the creation of humankind
With Sun's burning love and passion.

Sacred is the spark of fire in all that is.
Fire that reflects your eternal light.
Each heart aflame with a flame of fire.
Each eye reflecting your burning love.
Sacred is this holy night
Aglow with star-light, moon light, fire light, candle light, Love light.

Blessing the Ground

Leader

Our ancestors believed that the coals from the summer solstice fire gave special blessings of healing and protection. They blessed each corner of their homes, their gardens/fields with coals from the summer solstice fire.

I invite you to take a coal from this fire when it has become a glow.

Participants are reminded to take home a piece of charcoal from the fire to bless their homes and gardens on their return home.

Leader

May the light of our Solstice celebration glow in our homes.

May the fire of blessing glow on our hearths.

May the fire of creativity ignite our imaginations.

May the fire of this celebration bring attention to our gardens/fields and their inhabitants.

May the fire of love drive out the darkness of hunger and poverty.

May the fire of passion enkindle in all a great enthusiasm for life.

May the fire of healing soothe and comfort all.

May the fire of God's passionate, eternal light encircle all. Amen.

Blessing the Food

Leader

Tonight, nature is full of blossom and promise.

In communion with the earth and its creatures, let us raise our hearts in thanksgiving for the wonderful gift of food and drink.

May the blessing of the midsummer sun caress our food.

May the fragrance of summer flowers encircle this food.

May the sharing of this food bring peace and protection to the lives of all.

(Food may be sent to the housebound at this point.)

Chant

Let us be glad and rejoice. Let joy and happiness in.

Let laughter ring in our homes. Let our celebrations begin!

[Quench candles or place them on the meal table.]

Dancing around the fire

Leader: Before food is served, let us express our joy, our happiness on this Solstice night in another dance around the fire three times to the right.

[Musicians play or a CD is played.]

Participants dance the dance already chosen and practiced. The food is served.]

6.6 A WINTER SOLSTICE CELEBRATION OF DARKNESS

cobbled together from various sources by Reverend Dr Charles M Bidwell

I will give you the treasures of darkness. (Isaiah 45:3)

Welcoming words

Now is the darkest and longest night of the year.

Now is the time of rest and restoration.

Now is the time to praise the darkness on Earth and within our bodies and in our life cycles.

In balance with the light, there is daily night and it is a blessing and right.

Now is the darkest and longest night of the year.

Now is the time of rest and restoration.

Now is the time to praise the darkness.

Response

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: It helps me fall asleep.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: Only when a seed is in the dark will it sprout.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: Some of my best visions come when I close my eyes.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: Only in the darkest parts of the country can I see the stars clearly.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: It brings relief from heat as I cross a desert.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: Only when it is really dark can our body produce the hormone melatonin which fights diseases.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: Many animals thrive within the protective cover of darkness.

One: Darkness is a blessing.

Many: We developed in the darkness of our mother's womb.

All: Truly darkness is a blessing.

[Major lights in the room may be extinguished if there are some light sources for people to negotiate movement or lights may be dimmed.]

A Reading

Solstice by the Reverend Gary Kowalski (gary@uusociety.org)

Night has its own kind of beauty, different than the beauty of day.

Night is a time of sleep and dreams and inward visions.

A time of pause within activity.

Darkness is an invitation to imagining and storytelling,

And to using ears instead of eyes to listen to the world in its stillness.

Darkness is the den of life in germination,

And darkness is the portal of death that opens to eternity:

The mystery of all time past and endless time to come.

At the center of our being there is light and there is darkness,

the known and the unknown, the named and the nameless, the finite and the infinite.

Light and dark are different, but not opposed to each other.

Like a mother and father, they are friends with one another, and with us.

Meditation

[Adapted from a sermon by the Reverend Lisa Doege, First Unitarian Church of South Bend, Indiana, 2000.

Source: <http://users.michiana.org/unita/sermons/20001210.html>]

In the darkness, seeds are drawn to germinate, flowers to prepare to bloom, and our dreams to unfold.

In the darkness, edges blur. Boundaries between reality and fantasy, between friend and stranger, become fluid, leaving open new possibilities.

In the darkness, undistracted by that which we see too clearly in the light, we can envision a different world—a more beautiful, peaceful, just world, perhaps—and when the light returns, inspired by that vision we can work to make it so.

In the darkness, when our eyes rest, our ears tune more attentively to the sounds of storytelling, of lullabies, of wind, of loved ones breathing in the night. And such sounds recall us from the often mindless busyness of errands and chores and obligations, and remind us of who we are and what gives our lives meaning.

In the darkness, we find the right condition for quiet reflection and deep, dream filled and refreshing sleep, and it is an invitation to allow the dark, unknown, nameless, infinite aspects of our very being free reign for a time.

For many of us, the search for the light has been our daily goal, but what might we discover if we were to trust the darkness, and allow the spaces it creates to remain “empty, tranquil, and quiet”? What dreams might come? What answers might be heard whispered in the stillness? What flowers might bloom within us? And if we allowed the wild darkness within us to emerge, for a time, what power might we discover in ourselves? What strength and heretofore unknown creativity?

In these darkest days of the year, we are invited to embrace the darkness, even as we prepare to celebrate the returning light. We can acknowledge that life is only complete in their alternating

presence. We can accept the blessings of the dark. We can offer a word of thanks in the early morning for the darkness that wrapped us in our sleep, that received our dreams, and that allowed us pause. We can notice the dark sky, dark window, dark room, against which, into which, the stars, the candles, the lights shine, and say that the darkness is no less holy than the light.

Winter Affirmation of Faith [Southminster-Steinhauer United Church, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 2004]

When the cold white ice of winter grips us,
and we doubt that anything can survive the extreme of this world's harshness,
We still believe; somewhere in the depths of the soul, despite the evidence, we believe.

We believe that the ruins of life can be rebuilt.
We believe that the tears we shed will water seeds of joy deeply buried.
We believe that the green shoots of God's justice will bear fruit.
We believe that the light that enlightens the world will pierce the winter's longest night and eclipse the sun's brightest moments.
We believe that in all circumstances Light radiates hope and joy, peace and love,
So that even in our darkest moments we can see. ,
Even in the palest light of faith, we can find our way through the shadows.

And for this, we give thanks. And for this, we give ourselves.
And for this, we wait with hope, peace and joy. May we make it so. Amen.

Suggested Songs: In the Bleak Midwinter and 'Twas In the Moon of Wintertime

6.6.1 A WINTER SOLSTICE GATHERING

contributed by Rev Dr Nancy L. Steeves

In this strange season when we are suspended between realization and expectation, may we be found honest about the darkness, more perceptive of the light. Jack Boozer

GATHERING WORDS:

One: In darkness seeds are drawn to germinate, flowers prepare to bloom and our dreams unfold.

All: Darkness is gift.

One: In darkness, the edges blur. Boundaries between reality and fantasy, between friend and stranger become fluid, opening new possibilities.

All: Darkness is gift.

One: In darkness, when our eyes rest, our ears become more attentive to the sounds of story, of lullaby, of wind, of loved ones breathing in the night.

All: Darkness is gift.

One: In the darkness, we find space for reflection; for deep, dream filled and refreshing sleep. We are bidden to journey into the unconscious.

All: Darkness is gift.

One: In the darkness of the womb, we were formed in great complexity. Under the cover of darkness, many creatures have their being. Only in the deepest darkness, can we see the star-studded sky.

All: Darkness is a gift of grace. On this longest night, we celebrate the many gifts of darkness.

SONG: Deep the Darkness

Words: C.hristopher New; Tune:VU 642

**Deep in the darkness of winter's long night
coming and going without sun for light;
As our good planet revolves in its course,
winter's starlight is our northern resource.**

These days of solstice in which we now dwell-
whether or not we can sing of Noel-
drive us to find the warmth of dear friends
love light to shine and the cold to transcend.

May we not hope for our summer too soon,
missing the blessings of dark night and moon,
May our long shadow not raise our complaint,
but stir our will to let inner light reign.

PRAYER:

Together we pause in the shadows to embrace the darkness of this long night, its enticing mystery and its intimate depths. May we be faithful in all our turnings, from shadow to sunlight, from season to season. As creatures of both the day and the night, may we love the beauty of life's fine balance; celebrating the gifts of darkness and light in their essential goodness, AMEN.

READING: *December 19 ... Chris Heeter*

A Time of Silence

READING: *To Know the Dark ... Wendell Berry*

A Time of Silence

READING: *Excerpt from "A Circle of Stones" ... Judith Duerk*

A Time of Silence

READING: *Sweet Darkness ... David Whyte*

A Time of Silence

READING: *You Darkness ... Rainer Marie Rilke*

A Time of Silence

SONG: Tune: 433 VU

While the moon her watch is keeping, all through the night
While the weary world is sleeping, all through the night
In our spirit gently seeding, visions of delight revealing
Breathes a pure and holy seeing, all through the night.

SHARING THE EXPERIENCES AND GIFTS OF DARKNESS

*When darkness has thrown the cloak of evening around me,
and drawn it's midnight hand across my face;
when my soul is as dark as the nighttime sky,
and the shadows are my only companions;
then, may I turn my face upward,
that I may know the grace of the stars
and give myself to rest.* Adapted from Jan Richardson

BLESSING

[If you have access to a portable labyrinth, it can be very meditative to walk it with candle-light and each person holding a candle sheathed in a clear plastic cup.]

WALKING THE LABYRINTH

Darkness can become the tending place in which our longings for healing, justice and peace grow and come to birth.
Jan Richardson

6.7 A BLUE CHRISTMAS GATHERING [Mid-December] contributed by Rev Dr Nancy L. Steeves

[*Preparation:* Have glass votive candle holders of these four colours (red, blue, green, white) on the centre table ready to light. Have orders and small candles inserted inot plastic cups for folks to fight near the end (and perhaps dim the lights at that time as well.)

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. -Chinese Proverb

Gathering Music

*As you arrive, you are invited to write on your paper candle
the name of the person(s), the situation of loss, or the challenge you face as you enter this season.*

Welcoming Words:

We gather to lean into the strength of who we are together, seeking comfort and courage. We grieve the state of our planet, the social and economic pain born of poverty and inequity. We lament the terror of war and the struggles born of abuses of power and powerlessness. Our hearts are broken open by the losses of those we love, the loss of health, identity or relationship. We come to share the spectrum of emotions we feel in this season. We come to kindle a flame of hope among us.

We bring all of who we are to this circle: our full humanity with hearts full of love and loss; our full selves, beautiful in our raw experience and our honest emotion. Let's lean in, and be welcomed into this circle of light and support...and speak words together:

Invitation:

We come to acknowledge the many colours of Christmas:

Colours of red in the shining ornaments and rosy glow of merriment;

-a time for meeting our memories and honouring favourite traditions.

Colours of green in the trees and boughs of holly;

-a time for seeing signs of new life in the depths of winter.

Colours of white in the snow blanketed fields and the icy breath of cold;

-a time for warmth and care of each other and dreams of longer days.

Colours of blue in the deep winter starlight;

-a time when the shadows of loss threaten to overwhelm us.

We gather in this time to find hope;

We come to open our spirits to the courage of living amid all the colours of this season.

Carol: O Little Town of Bethlehem (3 verses)

Prayer

In the spirit of courage and community, we pray together:

Where there is emptiness, may we find a fullness.

Where there is cold, may we find warmth.

Where there is guilt, may we know forgiveness.

Where there is grief, may there be comfort.

Where there are memories, may we find joy.

Where there are tears, may they be shared.

**Where there is fear, may there be courage.
In the broken and whole places within us, may we know light in our darkness.**

Song: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, vs. 1

Three Candles to Lighten the Darkness

Reading: Genesis 32: 23-28

Reflection: A Candle for Yesterday

Song: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, vs. 2

Reading: “Our true home is in the Present Moment”, Thich Nhat Hanh

Reflection: A Candle for Today

Song: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, vs. 3

Reading: Luke 1: 39-45

Reflection: A Candle for Tomorrow

Song: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, vs. 4

Lighting the Christ Candle

Song: Hope is a Star (4 verses)

A Spacious Time for Ritual

*We are invited to place our paper candles on the Blue Christmas tree
to acknowledge the pain of our world, lament our losses, and recognize our challenges.
After placing your candle, you may light a taper from the Christ candle
to hold through our prayers and closing carol.*

Bringing our Prayers to Light: our Shared Intentions

Carol: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (4 verses)

Words of Blessing

Music for Going On...

Sharing Support and Refreshments

7 CREATIVE WRITINGS, EXPRESSIONS OF BELIEF, POETRY, HYMNS, ETC.

7.1 SOMETHING WE BELIEVE

adapted* by Rev Dr Nancy L. Steeves

We believe light smothers darkness,
penetrates every shadow in our world,
and leaves clarity brighter than the sun;
and we cannot adequately name that Light.

We believe love breaks through hatred,
and leaves space for forgiveness
to re-build and re-create our world;
and we cannot adequately name that Love.

We believe truth exposes injustice,
revealing a different vision for our world,
a vision of freedom, fairness and future;
and we cannot adequately name that Truth.

We believe in a hope that rattles oppressors,
shaping the intent of creation
in a people destined for love;
and we cannot adequately name that Hope.

We believe in a time toward which all things journey
where all our lives will be held
and loved in an eternity;
and we cannot adequately name that Time.

With growing light,
with faltering love,
with glimpses of truth,
with rising hope,
upon time and beyond time,
we live and move and have our being
in that gracious mystery which is beyond all naming.

* from a statement in the Introduction to the [Seasons of the Spirit](#) curriculum found on page 11 of the [Introduction](#).

7.2 COSMIC CREATION

by Rev. Dr. Charles M. Bidwell

In the beginning, there was a big bang and an awesome flaring forth of energy, although there were neither ears to hear nor eyes to see them. Creation began and it was a very good thing.

That awesome energy continues to expand throughout the known universe. In time, a very, very long time, although there were no devices to measure the time, this primary energy formed into matter as gas.

Over eons of time, the gas drew together to form countless galactic clouds and in much more time each of these galaxies formed billions of clusters of hydrogen which began to glow as they grew into burning orbs we call stars like our sun. And so there was light within the darkness of space.

Now it came to pass in those eons that some of these stars were attracted to each other and they danced together as pairs until they merged and became so big that they exploded as supernova. Each supernova was like a furnace forging all the basic elements - everything that later combined to form everything we see today, including our bodies. These heavier elements enriched the remaining clouds of hydrogen and combined to form the next generation of stars.

It is a marvelous thing to realize that we are created of star dust and so is everything else in our world. In the galaxy we call the Milky Way, our star, the Sun, and perhaps other stars also, attracted matter in swirling circuits around it and these in turn collected together to form the planets.

In the beginning, our Earth was a collection of energy-matter that was a molten mass of elements. Slowly, the mass cooled at the surface and formed the rock shell we walk upon. That was a very good and necessary thing to evolve.

Gradually, the gases above the land formed the air we breathe and the water of the seas cooled near the surface. Those were also very good things for creation to have formed.

Within the soup of the seas, the universal creative force urged some elements to merge and form the cells we call bacteria. These ancient ancestor cells live on inside us to this day and our organs and systems require them to function. That miracle of life was another very good thing to evolve.

The life force forged ahead and cells gathered together to form multi-celled cooperatives we call plants and creatures. And we discovered that **cooperation is life-giving**.

The plants became a blessing to the creatures as they transformed gases and sunlight into oxygen to breathe and food to eat. And we discovered that we are dependent on plants. Creation blossomed into creatures in the sea, on the land and in the air and their diversity continues to amaze and delight us. And we discovered that **diversity is essential** for adaptation and survival on Earth.

The creatures continued the dance of self-evolving variety until there were billions of different creatures. Among those living on the land, there were a few who worked co-operatively to form families supporting and protecting those in the family. And we discovered that **working and caring together is a very good thing**.

Over billions of years, the awesomely creative life-force caused one or two lines of creatures to develop larger brains, to walk on two legs and to develop the ability to speak and to question. And finally, the evolving life-force of the universe was recognized by a creature and given many names. We have called this Creator God, Sacred Presence, Most Merciful Allah, and as many names as our imaginations have inspired us to create. And we are discovering that it is impossible to describe everything about this awesomely evolving creative life-force.

We sense that creation is an on-going and continually inventive and diverse process and that it is very good. We are also beginning to realize that there is order and chaos, stability and change, certainty and surprise operating within this marvellous cosmos as well as within all our companion creatures. Creation is awesome and this attempt to describe it is but one of many stories trying to describe the great mystery of life wherein the sacred reveals itself.

7.3 A COLLECTION OF HYMNS

HYMNS by Gayle Simonson

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Holy Mystery, Holy Wisdom (Tune: All The Way or Austrian, 8787D)

Holy Mystery, Holy Wisdom
Wholly Love who guides our way,
Loving Presence, Source of Being,
Now transform us day by day.
Words of Scripture tell our stories,
Voices rise in gifts of song,
Calling us to loving action,
Faith-filled as we journey on.

We are partners in creation,
Bound by love to all around,
Seeking justice and compassion,
Sharing truths that we have found.
Spirit - Source of Inspiration,
Love - our song along the way,
Holy Mystery, Holy Wisdom -
Source of hope with each new day.

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How Great Is Creation (Tune: St.Denio,11 11 11 11)

How great is Creation. In Love it is made;
How glorious the Spirit of Goodness displayed.
The power of its beauty pervading my soul
Refreshes my spirit and I am made whole.

From depths of my being, Creator I praise
The beauty of morning, Your glorious days.
The promise of birth in the spring's gentle sun,
The seasons unfolding, and new life begun.

The Song of Creation is our gift to share,
Our living a tribute to God's loving care.
The Spirit is present in all that we do,
In work and in worship, in Love ever new.

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God Is An Artist (Tune: original available from author.)

God is an artist, Creator of earth,
Shaping a world of immeasurable worth.
We share in creation, a gift to us all;
As stewards we each must respond to God's call.

Blue skies and water and winter's white snows,
Big orange pumpkin and fragrant red rose.
The green fields of summer turn gold in the fall;
Our God is a painter whose brush touches all.

Rumble of thunder and gurgling brook,
Loon's call and lark's song, the cry of a rook.
The laugh of a babe or a cry of despair,
Our God is a singer who calls us to care.

Clouds moving swiftly and birds flying high,
Sun-sparkled water with fish swimming by;
Bright leaves twirling earthward as wind passes through,
Our God is a dancer who moves in us too.

God is an artist in colour and sound,
Spirit that fills us and spins us around.
We know that, as partners, we're called on to share
In serving creation and handling with care.

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HYMNS by Rev. Peggy McDonagh

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Although some of these hymns have suggested tunes to use, they all have the metre indicated and you are free to select any tune with that metre that will suit the mood you want to establish.

The Voice Of God (Tune: Kingsfold, 8686D)

The voice of God I heard today
speak to my searching soul;
come forth into the mystery,
reach for your sacred goal.
Be one with self and whole in mind,
seek wisdom's truth inside;
use strength of will until you find
true courage as your guide.

I fear the shadowed realms of life,
my heart beats constant dread;
for want of peace and quiet days,
I dare not move ahead.

But thirst I do for change and light,
and joy to mark my day;
I'll journey with my finite sight,
and love will show the way.

If ever I should dare to risk
this sacred call to grow,
may courage be my spring of life,
a steady, bubbling flow.
If I but cling to freedom's grace
and trust my heart's true plea,
my soul will show its radiant face,
for I'll be whole and free.

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Seeking The Quiet Way (Tune: Beach Spring, 8787D)
[Sing the first verse from the hymn "Come and Find the Quiet Centre"]

As we walk the paths of living,
fears and heartache crowd our way;
hate and anger, anxious worry,
are the feelings we obey:
seek the pathways of the Spirit
that give hope to souls so torn;
love can free us as we journey,
so within us truth is born.

Honest choices bring sweet justice
to a soul entrapped in pain;
love and goodness feed the spirit,
greater strength and trust we gain:
breaking patterns that enslave us,
free the heart for wisdom's grace,
human souls find blessed freedom
through the courage we embrace.

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[These next two verses name the chaos of pain and the joy and freedom that comes from facing that chaos courageously.]

[Sing the first verse from the hymn "Come and Find the Quiet Centre"]

In the chaos of our living,
hurt and anguish find their place,
chasing joy and bright tomorrows,
into empty, silent space.
Met with weakness, chaos deepens,
threatens life's most gracious peace.
Empty longing, restless aching,
deepest doubt will never cease.

Chaos chains our lives in turmoil,
darkness reigns as days unfold.
Met with strength and faithful courage
chaos breaks its gloomy hold.
Courage frees the heart for living,
opens life to joy once more.
When we move beyond the chaos
hope and faith our joy restore.

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[Hymn for Adult Baptism]

In This Sacred Space (Tune: Abbot's Leigh or 8787D alternative)

In this sacred space of worship
standing here before us now,
men and women seeking knowledge;
learning, growing is their vow.
May their faith be rich in wisdom,
justice love with them abide;
as they seek to find new meaning,
truth and hope will be their guide.

We the church embrace these people,
care and courage, love we give;
with these gifts we bless their journey,
help them find the strength to live
faithful lives and true in service,
loving deeds to light the way,
through this sacred act of blessing,
joy and gladness touch our day.

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[Hymn for Child Baptism/Adult Confirmation]

Child of Wonder (Tune: Stuttgart, 8787 or Omni Dei)

Child of wonder, child so precious,
parents bring you to this place
to receive love's richest blessing,
filling you with holy grace.

Adults bring themselves before us,
on this joy-filled special day;
confirmation names their journey
as they seek to live love's way.

See our act of arms wide open,
reaching out, extending care;
may these children and these adults,
feel the love we freely share.

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[This hymn can be used to celebrate the beginning or the closing of a church year.]

Today We Celebrate (Tune: St. Peter, 8686)

Today we come to celebrate
the start of a new year.
With joyful hearts we dedicate
the faith we hold so dear.

With each new year our children grow,
they blossom in our sight.
They live with zeal and help to show
love's joy and deep delight.

With understanding and in trust
(we've built/we'll build) a sacred space.
Through learning, teaching, sharing too
our children we embrace.

In gratitude we name our thanks
for smiles and fun and play.
We pray for young hearts in our midst,
for love to guide their way.

With trusting hearts and eager minds
we welcome this new day,
to celebrate community
and love that guides our way.

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[Alternative words for "The Church is Wherever." All verses can be sung or just a few or split up throughout a service.]

The Church is Wherever (Tune: Old Cornish Carol, 12 10 12 11 D)

The church is wherever a spirit-filled people
offer ourselves through the love we impart.
The church is a people who walk with each other,
revealing love's presence alive in our heart.

The church is wherever the faithful know Jesus,
living his love, which is daring and free.

The church is wherever the faithful are open,
unveiling our hearts so with wisdom we see.

The church is wherever the vision of Jesus
stirs our compassion, infuses our care.
The church is a people communing together,
expressing our faith through the life that we share.

The church is a people embracing a mission,
living for justice, addressing deep need.
The church is the faithful who struggle together
to show love's compassion in work and in deed.

The church is a people who welcome each other,
elders and babies and youth we include.
The lonely, the lost and the hungry blend with us,
we cherish each spirit, not one we exclude.

The church is a people communing together,
seeking true wisdom and eager to live.
With service and vision, through learning and laughter,
we touch every heart with these gifts that we give.

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[The following words were written to follow a sermon about how we express the Christ spirit within. The sermon spoke of how the Christ Spirit is alive in a loving, caring community. Two verses can be replaced with two communion verses in a service in which communion will be shared.]

Christ of Compassion (Tune: Tenderness, 5 5 10 D)

Christ of compassion, Christ of all giving,
our hearts are full with your comfort and care.
Love's living presence, Spirit of Sharing,
nourish and strengthen the faith that we bear.

Love for our neighbor, friend to the stranger,
gently we open a place in our heart.
Peace to the fearful, hope to the lonely,
spirits renewed through the care we impart.

Traveling companions, friends on the journey,
sharing our kindness, our joy to increase.
Truth gives our faith its courage and wisdom,
shaping our world with the love we release.

Love from the heart, the sweetest expression,
tells of the Spirit alive in this place.
Spreading that love to people around us,
touching our living, with honor and grace.

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[Communion verses]

Grain of the land, and fruit of the planet,
gifts of Creation, we share in this place.
Feeding our courage, banish our failure,
bringing new life for the whole human race.

We who would hunger, thirsting for justice,
through faithful action our love is made real.
Bread of abundance, cup of renewal,
our lives seek meaning through this sacred meal.

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Move in the World (Tune: Sine Nomine, 10 10 10 with hallelujahs)

Move in the world, with kindness as your creed;
open your eyes to see its deepest need;
let peace and gladness be the truths we heed,
Alleluia, alleluia.

Move in the world, embracing its despair;
the poor and lonely seek our gracious care;
with outstretched hands the gift of hope we share,
Alleluia, alleluia.

Live in the world, strive for a better day,
let truth and fairness birth a better way,
where people, all, the love command obey,
Alleluia, alleluia.

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Stewardship/Offertory Hymns

God of Open, Honest Giving (Metre 8787)

God of open, honest giving,
stir our hearts that we may share
riches from our daily living,
free the world from its despair.

God who dreams a world of beauty,
shares our human struggling plight;
may our wisdom, truth and justice
save us from all narrow sight.

When we act as faithful stewards,
letting wealth and mercy flow,
all that rises from such goodness
shapes a world where love can grow.

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In Christ, We Gladly Share Our Gifts (Metre 8686)

In Christ, we gladly share our gifts
with those who come our way;
our mission is to show our love
to those we meet each day.

For some we're called to feed and clothe,
for others, teach and heal;
for some we listen to their pain,
their hope, their joy, their zeal.

This is the season of the heart,
the time to care is here;
the future will demand new ways
to serve this world so dear.

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Loving Spirit (Tune: All the Way, or another 8787D)

Loving Spirit, through our worship,
fill us with your pow'r and grace.
When our hearts are filled with goodness,
then with trust we leave this place
full of courage, joy and wisdom
for the living of your word;
take our lives and use their moments,
living well the truth we've heard.

May we dare to plant new meaning
into seeking, searching hearts.
We can pave a path to freedom,
when in faith we do our part
to rebirth a world of justice,
full of passion, grace and peace;
we can change a world of darkness,
when our fear and anger cease.

We give life to deep new vision,
when we see through Jesus' eyes.
Changing habits, altered living,
open minds will make us wise.
Acts of wisdom quell injustice,
stifle greed's most bitter face;

Wisdom's gentle, honest passion
leaves a world blessed by God's grace.

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(An alternative verse to encourage people to ask questions and to open their minds to the possibility of reframing Christianity.)

May we dare to plant new meaning
into seeking, searching hearts.
When we honor thoughtful questions,
truth and freedom we impart.
Grant us courage, grant us wisdom,
grant us strength to find a way
to reframe the church's story,
birth new life each blessed day.

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Honoring Life (Metre 8787)

God of courage, God of wisdom,
with our eyes we long to see
how to love each other fully,
honor our divinity.

Hurtful power, hate-filled living,
break the soul and rend the heart.
Ending human harmful action,
fear and tyranny depart.

Life is sacred, life is precious,
life of each, a gift of grace.
God's own beauty finds expression
in each cherished human face.

When we see all life has value,
healing stirs the heart awake.
Cherishing all human living,
bitter chains of hate we break.

When we claim the power within us
to uphold all human life,
we give birth to love's own kingdom,
peace and justice ease our strife.

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[The following two hymns are similar; one celebrates love and the other joy.]

Love's Creation (Metre 8787)

Praise the birth of Love's creation,
love with passion guides our way:
love that lifts the human spirit,
bringing hope with each new day.
Celebrate the gift of loving,
may it always with us stay.

Praise with gladness Love's creation,
human love we long to share:
love that stirs concern within us,
so each other's pain we bear.
Celebrate the gift of loving,
that infuses human care.

Praise with gladness Love's creation,
love for freedom, hope and worth:
love that conquers pain and sorrow,
love that gives the soul new birth.
Celebrate the joy of loving,
changing tears to wondrous mirth.

Praise with gladness Love's creation,
love that lifts the heart to sing:
love that frees the soul from bondage
soaring, as a bird on wing.
Celebrate the gift of loving,
joy and peace such love may bring.

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Joy's Creation (Tune: Lauda Anima, 878787)

Praise the birth of Joy's creation,
joy of wisdom, love and peace:
joy that lifts the human spirit,
joy so true it shall not cease.
Celebrate the joy of living,
giving hearts a glad release.

Praise with gladness Joy's creation,
joy of strength to guide our way:
joy that heals a grieving sadness,
leads the heart to dance and play.
Celebrate the joy of healing,
bringing hope to each new day.

Praise with gladness Joy's creation,
joy of laughter, hope and worth:
joy that conquers pain and sorrow,
joy that gives the soul new birth.

Celebrate the joy of goodness,
changing tears to wondrous mirth.

Praise with gladness Joy's creation,
joy to face despair and need:
joy that blesses hearts in action,
joy infusing all our deeds.
Celebrate the joy of kindness,
make it our most noble creed.

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[This hymn was written following a Jesus Seminar on the road held at Robertson-Wesley United church. The focus of one of the speakers was on the ancient stories of the Hebrew Testament. The speaker delivered the sermon on Sunday and this hymn seem to fit for the occasion.]

Stories of Faith (Tune: Lancashire, 7676D)

From scripture we have wandered,
compelled to drift away
from ancient, far-off stories,
lost to our modern day.
Their words and style confound us,
their messages unreal;
to modern minds that reason
such stories lack appeal.

In Ruth, we hear a story
of freedom from despair:
a love and deep compassion,
a woman's faithful care.
The wisdom of her action,
her courage, hope and zeal,
upheld the strength of friendship,
helped women's hearts to heal.

This poignant, loving story
of Jewish scripture fame
reveals a potent message
for modern faith to claim.
These stories test our courage
through truths that still survive;
though distant, yet persuasive,
they bring our faith alive.

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[A hymn to honor a woman's encounter with Jesus at a well.]

Hope and Peace Found at the Well (Tune: Promise, 8787D)

To the well the woman journeyed,
in the fullness of the day.
Parched and thirsty, seeking water,
so to soothe the sun's hot ray.
In her life the deepest longings
in her heart did sorrow swell.
Jesus spoke, the spirit blessed her,
hope and peace found at the well.

Living Water, quench the dryness
of our lives so full of pain.
Move within our empty spaces
so with you our hearts remain.
Give us wisdom, strength and courage,
for the healing that we need.
As we face our many struggles,
let not fear our quest impede.

Living Spirit, in our worship
may your goodness fill the space
in our hearts where we are longing
to enfold your holy grace.
We can change our lives of searching
when in courage we can dwell,
in our soul's most deepest centre
hope and peace found at the well.

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[This hymn was written in response to a sermon that focused on the destructive power of the modern myths of conventional wisdom that inhibit humans from claiming their goodness and wonder and how these myths promote inequality, poverty, self-loathing and mistrust.]

Healing Love (Tune: Lancashire, 7676D)

In all the world around us
we see strange imag'ry,
where beauty, wealth, and power
prescribe who we should be.
Though we regard perfection
the true and living Way,
through Jesus' truth and justice
such sin can hold no sway.

When searching for acceptance,
some find their hearts distressed
with poverty and hunger,
they feel their lives oppressed.
Love touches their deep sadness
with faith and truth and light;

they gain a clearer vision,
and free their inward sight.

The lost, the ill, the hurting
find living hard to bear;
their pain and hopeless struggle
are what they seek to share.
Our love can bring them healing,
relief from toil and strife;
their journey we must honor
that they might cherish life.

With joy we sing our praises
for life's most precious gift;
each person's human spirit
we value and uplift.
With hope and grace and courage
together we must face
the goodness and the splendor
within the human race.

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[A hymn reclaiming the historical Jesus]

Jesus, Mysterious One (Tune: Wroslyn Road, 655556)

Jesus, mysterious one,
who through time was named Son of God above,
to the realm below did you send your love.
Jesus, the one true God.

Jesus, the silent one,
scripture story tells of your godly fame,
images divine you would never claim.
Jesus, the undefiled.

Jesus, the hidden one,
should the truth be told of your earthly place,
challenge faith of old with your human face.
Jesus, reveal your truth.

Jesus, courageous man,
speaking daring words to the righteous proud,
how you suffered wrong by an angered crowd.
Jesus, the martyred one.

Jesus, reveal yourself,
flee the mythic shroud of a passing age,
see you rise again as a human sage.
We set your Spirit free.

[A hymn written in response to the lectionary reading during Lent about Jesus turning the tables in the temple.]

The Carpenter, in Anger (Tune: Lancashire, 7676D)

The carpenter, in anger,
raged through the Temple gate,
drove out the moneychangers,
their greed had set their fate.
The temple is for worship,
not selling merchant wares,
my Father's house stands firmly
a sacred place of prayer.

The angered One sought justice,
when others failed to see
the lost and lonely peasants
who longed to be set free.
The temple place was holy,
but in their urgent fear,
they challenged God's kind mercy,
and sold their souls with tears.

Our passion leads to freedom
when we respond and live
the loving acts of Jesus,
to challenge and forgive.
Though systems of oppression
may keep God's people down,
our anger, love and justice
set them on sacred ground.

These Lenten days remind us,
God's grace is never lost.
With passion and with purpose
we love despite the cost.
We move beyond the boundaries
that hinder us each day;
we honor peace and justice,
embrace love's living way.

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[This hymn was written in response to a sermon that focused on destructive vs. justice-love (term used by Carter Heyward) power.]

Justice-Love, God's Truthful Power (Metre 8787)

God of Courage, God of Wisdom,
clear our eyes, unstop our ears.

Justice-love, God's truthful power,
feeds our hope, dismantles fears.

Hurtful power, hate-filled living,
break the soul and rend the heart.
Move us God from harmful action,
fear and tyranny depart.

Life is sacred, life is precious,
life of each, a gift of grace.
God's own goodness finds expression
in each cherished human face.

Words of healing, sacred caring,
bless the wearied soul awake.
Cherishing our human living,
bitter chains of sin we break.

Justice-love, the power within us,
hallows God-blessed human life.
Justice-love and honest action
bring an end to human strife.

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[A hymn for Advent.]

Advent's Hope (Tune: Stuttgart, 8787)

Advent hope begins the journey
into this new Christian year;
may we enter this new season
with love's presence ever near.

Advent is a time of waiting,
waiting for our hearts to see
peace and justice, human loving
touch the world and set it free.

Fear and anguish shape our waiting,
dread can cause our souls to mourn;
Advent hope frees hearts from darkness,
human lives hope will transform.

God of Promise, bless this Advent,
bringing peace and joy our way;
fill our lives with hopeful waiting
for a new and better day.

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[Communion Hymn during the Christmas Season]

All Who Come With Hearts Confessing (Tune: Regent Square, 878787)

All who come with hearts confessing,
now approach this meal of grace.
Let us, with love's richest blessing,
Christmas hope and joy embrace.
Come with praises, come with praises,
celebrate the power of love.

To this table bring your vision
for a world of peace and love.
Where all people share their wisdom
truth and justice shall increase.
Come with praises, come with praises
Celebrate the hope of love.

May the bread and wine unite us
in our quest for peace on earth.
May our hearts be moved within us
to embrace our own new birth.
Come with praises, come with praises,
Celebrate the way of peace.

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[As is true for the all hymns, the following hymns were written because it was difficult to find hymns that fit with the sermon.]

In the Turmoil of Our Living (Tune: Nettleton, 8787D)

In the turmoil of our living,
hurt and anguish find their place.
Chasing joy and bright tomorrows
into empty, silent space.
Met with weakness, sadness deepens,
threatens life's most gracious peace;
endless grumbling, restless pacing,
deepest pain will never cease.

Suffering chains our lives in anguish,
darkness reigns as days unfold.
Met with strength and noble courage,
hardship breaks its gloomy hold.
Bliss awakes the heart for living,
opens life to love once more;
when we cease our troubled banter,
hope and peace our joy restore.

Gracious Spirit, in these moments
may our lives be blessed with grace.
We give thanks for treasured blessings,
love and joy, our hearts embrace.
Days of gladness brighten spirits,
tender smiles that set us free;
when we're happy, filled with pleasure,
all good things in life we see.

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Embrace this life (Tune: Sine Nomine, 101010 with hallelujahs)

Embrace this life and all its wondrous days,
let go of fear that in our heart betrays
the joy of life, the beauty and the praise.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

When truth becomes the gospel that we spread,
it lifts the shadows of our deepest dread;
with honest words our hearts are richly fed.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

The strength of truth creates a warming light
of peace and freedom, born when things are right;
an honest heart expands our inward sight.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

Give thanks for truth that opens ways to care,
to ease the struggles and the pain we bear;
the way of truth improves the lives we share.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

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To Love Each Other Fully (Tune: Omni Die [Dic Maria] or an alternative 8787D)

God of Courage, God of Wisdom,
with our eyes we long to see
how to love each other fully,
honor our humanity.

Justice was the power of Jesus,
feeding hope to those in pain;
loving actions, caring touches,
free the lives of those in shame.

As we live our lives with value,
healing stirs our soul awake.

Cherishing our human living,
bitter chains of sin we break.

Life is sacred, life is precious,
life of each, a gift of grace.
God's own goodness finds expression
in each cherished human face.

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Gentle Spirit, Calming Presence (Tune: Omni Die (Dic Maria) 8787)

Gentle Spirit, Calming Presence,
help our searching eyes to see
ways of living that compel us
to be bold and strong and free.

Pain and hardship mar the good life,
weigh us down in fear and grief;
with persistent hearts and actions,
strength and courage bring relief.

Gentle Spirit, Calming Presence,
touch our hearts with truth and grace;
days of darkness, endless worry,
loss and hurt we learn to face.

In our asking, in our seeking,
in our quest for inner peace,
may the door of wisdom open
and our trust in self increase.

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New Words for Old Tunes

Bring, O Morn, Thy Music! (Tune: Nicea)

Bring, O morn, thy music!
Night, thy starlit silence!
Oceans, laugh in rapture to the storm-winds coursing free!
Suns and planets chorus,
praise to all found holy.
Life was, and is, and evermore shall be.

Life, around, within us
witnesses our purpose,
rises full and holy in beast and bird and tree.
Watch all nature's beauty
rise in adoration.
Life was, and is, and evermore shall be.

Life nor death can part us
from this Love eternal,
shared amidst the beauty of our living, full and free!
Homeward draws each spirit
to one spirit yearning
Love was, and is, and evermore shall be.

Words: William Channing Gannett (1840-1923) public domain

7.4 Why We Change Words in Choir Anthems

Adapting lyrics allows us to use choir music at Southminster-Steinhauer United Church [SSUC] that we would otherwise not purchase and use in our faith community. The lyricists wrote either from their faith perspective or to please a wide purchasing audience. We need to be able **to express our faith understanding** and so we change words to authentically express our contemporary faith.

The guiding concepts are:

1. God, Divine Spirit, etc. is with us and within us and others;
and so we do not sing about Divinity being “above” and anything “descending” to us.
2. Divine Spirit is not a human-like being or super-human being
and so we try to avoid referring to that Spirit as a ‘being’ with a body, eyes, arms, etc. Instead we acknowledge the divine as the ‘more’ in which we live and move and have our being, as a ‘becoming’ emerging essence, as mystery
3. Jesus is central to our faith-story. He was one who was deeply spiritual; a sage, storyteller, teacher; he lived for justice with compassion. We avoid referring to Jesus as a Saviour who God required to be executed to allow God to forgive our sins (i.e., one who had to die for us to save us from a punishing God!),

and so we sing of Jesus who lived faithfully, seeking justice and life-giving community.

4. God does not require our praise or need our adulation. Our faith journey moves us to be grateful for life and love,
and so we sing of giving thanks for life and opportunity and freedom and peace as we strive to be agents of that love and justice and peace, etc.
5. Probably God does not intervene or contravene the laws of nature and the universe
and so we sing about living respectfully within creation and being agents of transformation and compassion within the world's social systems.
6. On our Christian journey, we engage the teachings and example of Jesus as a way to live faithfully in the world. We believe that there are many spiritual paths;
and so we do not sing about an exclusive "only way".
7. At the present time, we sing the lyrics of Black-Gospel anthems in their original wording and context as "soul-music" and historic reminders, much as we sing "heritage hymns" with their patriarchal wording;
and so we do not change those historical words.

Rev. Bob and Rev. Marg Hetherington, Rev. Nancy Steeves, Dr. Dawn Waring, Rev. Dr. Charles Bidwell, Rosemarie Cunningham, etc.

[This document grows out of SSUC's participation in an on-going Working Group on Non-Theistic Liturgy Resources at St. Stephen's College.]

7.5 Advent-Christmas-Epiphany Materials

Tidings of Comfort and Joy

Now is the season of the year in which we celebrate
The birth of one who taught that love has strength beyond all hate
Who through his life gave all of us examples good and great:
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy!
Not he alone, but sages all, the same great truths declare,
That if we work in harmony and have the will to dare,
Then we can make this earth a home and all of life more fair:
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy!
This is a time to celebrate that all have equal worth,
And to resolve to live in peace with all who share the earth,
For if with love we fill our lives, a new hope comes to birth:
O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy!

Robert E Hetherington, 2007
(Tune: God Rest You ...)

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL

[...Emmanuel means 'God-with(in) us' ...]

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And with your captive people dwell,
Give comfort to all exiles here,
And to each aching heart draw near:
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Hope to dwell.

O come, you Source and Ground of endless light
As strength that never yields to might,
O come and turn all hearts to peace,
That war and greed and hate at last shall cease,
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Truth to dwell.

O come, you Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by your presence here,
And dawn in every broken soul
As vision that can see the whole;
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Light to dwell.

O come, you Wisdom of the ages long,
And deepen all our thoughts as with new song,
Come, temper knowledge with our care
To render every act and deed a prayer;
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Love to dwell.

*adaptations from "Singing the Living Tradition" (Unitarian Universalists)
Scott Kearns & Gretta Vosper*

A CANDLE IS BURNING [*Sung to Away In A Manger tune*]

A candle is burning, a flame warm and bright,
a candle of hope in December's dark night.
While angels sing blessings from high in the sky,
our hearts we prepare now for Jesus is nigh.

We honour this baby with Christ-candle flame.
with Christmas time candles, good news we proclaim.
Come now all you faithful, rejoice in this night,
as love swells among us, a faithful true light.

SILENT NIGHT [*variation*]

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.
See young Mary - mother and child. Newborn infants so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing "Alleluia".
Hope and light in each birth. Hope and light in each birth.

Silent night, holy night, child of God, love's pure light.
Radiant beams from each human face, with the dawn of compassionate grace.
Jesus, light for our way. Jesus, light for our way.

Advent Table Celebration

One: May Love be with you.

All: And also with you!

One: May our hearts be opened.

All: We open ourselves to life.

*One: Creator of light, Bearer of life, Source of love, your ancient love stirs within us.
The sacred emerges for us everywhere: in the rhythm of the oceans, in the
magnificence of the stars, in the beauty of all beings.*

**All: We are grateful for the gifts of our story. In this season, we listen for the
voices crying in the wilderness. We sing the song of angels who quiet our
fears. We find ourselves in the company of shepherds and magi who
search for what is coming to birth in unlikely places among unlikely people.
In the company of courageous parents, we dare to birth the holy among us.**

*One: In the divine, we live and move and have our being. For all that is born of a
sacred love, we give our thanks and praise. The advent of the holy is among us
in every moment.*

**All: In Jesus of Nazareth, we see new possibilities, new ways of being in the
world.**

**He was moved by the plight of the poor. He made his home with the
homeless and shared his table with those who could not command a seat
at any table.**

**He dreamed of a world where enemies learned to love one another, where
the abundance of creation was shared fairly, and where love was the law of
every land.**

*One: Near the end of his life, Jesus shared a sacred tradition of his people and shaped
it into something new. Around a simple table, he celebrated the liberating story of
Passover. He dreamed of another revolution: a world without a Pharaoh or a
Caesar; a world governed by the love which brought it into being. Together with
his friends, Jesus broke the bread of freedom and shared the cup of compassion.*

Breaking the Bread of Freedom

[craft your words as you break open the loaf, etc.]

Pouring the Cup of Compassion

[craft your words as you pour the juice into the servers' goblets, etc.]

Praying in the Pattern of the Prayer of Jesus *(together)*

**Holy Being, whom we call by so many different names,
Blessed are you. Blessed are we in you.**

May we create with you a realm of mercy, peace and justice.

May love be done in the here and now as it is in the infinite.

May we share life in bread and hope.

For our failures to love, we need forgiveness.

May we find the paths of reconciliation.

**In the midst of evil's every incarnation,
From the powers that possess our spirits and our structures,
May we find liberation.
In the power that is love, we seek to live and move and have our being.
May it be so, now and forever, AMEN.**

Receiving the Invitation to the Table

One: Come from loneliness into the welcome of this table.

All: Come from anxiety into the peace of this table.

One: Come from tensions into the joy of this table.

All: Come from conflict into the love of this table.

One: Come and share the bread which leavens our hope.

All: Come and share the cup which strengthens our compassion.

One: Come to enliven our capacity to work for transformation.

All: Come, let us lay aside those things that shield our hearts.

One: Let us open to the holy we meet in the manger and in the mirror.

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Prayer (together):

Spirit of life, though we live in a world of need, here we have tasted hope and hunger for a world more just. Here we have glimpsed the dream of creation renewed. May we have the courage to be bread and wine for one another, in the name of love (or in the spirit of Jesus) we pray, AMEN.

Nancy L. Steeves, 2008

7.6 Holy Week and Appearances

7.6.1 The Challenges [Steeves, New, and Bidwell]

Unlike the Creation, Flood and Birth stories which are relatively easy to read as mythical and metaphorical, the accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection and the following appearances of Jesus at the tomb and on the road have been more challenging to read as metaphor. Our Christian tradition has raised these to such a prominence that they have become the litmus test for whether a believer can be considered a Christian.

Good Friday and Easter accounts have been viewed as literally historical for centuries and so it is very challenging to those who are seeking an expansive or progressive expression of Christianity to consider and present these accounts as metaphorical - presenting truths but not factual documents. One challenge is that the Easter account is tied into a belief in eternal life after death.

One move away from tradition and toward a more expansive understanding is to recognize and promote (in Bible study sessions and sermons) the fact that the crucifixion was an *execution*. Jesus was sentenced and put to death by humans. It was only later that his followers, probably in an attempt to make sense of why God had allowed their gentle, peace-loving leader to be killed, interpreted the execution as an example of a 'sacrificial lamb' or 'scape-goat' cleaning us of our sins. That was part of the Hebrew religious purification rituals. Work to convey the idea that this execution of

Jesus was a desperate act on the part of the religious and Roman authorities to squelch the growing popularity of this radical itinerant preacher. Rather than a God-required sacrifice for atonement or a soul-saving event, it revealed the fear that is often present when life is centered on radical inclusion, compassion, love and forgiveness – a threat to the authority of fear-based empires.

Another approach could be to re-image the cross as a symbol of all the cross-roads we encounter in life - the options we are faced with and the choices we make. What guides our choices? What causes would you be willing to die for and thus what are the causes you are willing to work and act and live for? What do you want to be known for?

Another re-imagining can be to recognize and promote the understanding of the resurrection as a revival, renewal of the spirit (rather than the physical body), and the resilience of the human drive for growth and evolution.

A similar approach can be taken for the appearances. On the walk along the country road the followers saw a vision of a 'person', which they only recognized as Jesus when he broke bread. Then he disappeared. It seems that they needed the corporeal vision in order to be minded of the vision/mission that Jesus was all about and to revive their passion for pursuing the kin-dom of heaven on earth. They became aware of a vision of the embodied Jesus and when they shared that they realized that the vision of the kin-dom could live on within and through them. This took time, and eventually, they internalized this vision of justice and compassion that Jesus taught for themselves, leading to their own leadership and hope for the continuation of the Jesus movement. Maybe rather than saying "He is risen." on Easter Sunday, we could start saying "We are rising" - rising to the challenges of bringing more of our dreams for humanity and the Earth to our reality in the present.

8. PRAYERS

8.1 NON-THEISTIC PRAYER (Bidwell)

I pray that I may be free:
from the Cowardice which keeps me from new truth,
from the Laziness that lets me accept half-truth, and
from the Arrogance that lets me believe that I know all truth.
United Methodist hymnal

If we can't bring ourselves to pray to a transcendent, omnipotent, anthropomorphic deity, then should we abandon prayer? No, there is no need to abandon prayer either privately or publicly. What we need to do is revise our understanding of prayer.

Positive Psychic Energy - Prayer may be conceived of being a form of psychic energy directed to a person or persons. It is our fervent wish that some good happen to someone. We concentrate on that person or persons. We imagine seeing them in our mind's eye. We send or transmit to them our best intentions. Somehow we sense that through the mysterious connection we all have with all other persons some force for good is transmitted or conveyed to those we concentrate upon during prayer. It may also be true that we can send negative impulses and wish the person harm, but I cannot recommend that in the spirit of Jesus.

Concentration of Resolve - Sometimes when we pray for a better world, a more peaceable *kindom*, a more just society, a safer community, an end to hunger and poverty, a reduction or end to loneliness and despair among some groups, what we are doing is focussing our desire to see some change occur. If we take a theistic stance and fool ourselves that we can call on God to intervene and make the change, then we will not direct much energy to being a force for that change. To believe in a non-theistic divine force, is to believe that we are a part of that life force and we are responsible for making the changes for which we pray. This is often the focus of public prayer when we pray that some change come about in our community.

With revision, I can still pray as Jesus indicated we could:

My Creator (soul's Source, spirit's Destination, Ground of Our Being, etc.)
in whom/which is heaven, or within which we can find heaven (as co-creators)
we revere/respect you

We will work to see your divine intent become a reality where we live.

We will work to see that everyone has the food they need to live and have health and energy to contribute to the welfare of Earth and its life systems.

We sense that we are forgiven for our admitted shortcomings to the extent that we are able to forgive others their failures.

We recognize the presence of evil in our world and strive to avoid being a part of it as well as pointing it out whenever we are aware of it.

We work for these changes in our lives and in the lives of others in the spirit of Jesus who cared for all those who were unjustly treated or oppressed.

May we make these things so.

Note that at no time does this indicate a petition to an external force to intervene and do the work which only we can do.

8.2 IRRELEVANCE OF A THEISTIC CONCEPT OF DIVINITY AND A REVISIONING OF PRAYER

[Synopsisized by Charles Bidwell from *Chap. 11 - But what about prayer?* in **A New Christianity for a New World**: Why traditional faith is dying & how a new faith is being born, John Shelby Spong, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.]

The Failure of a Theistic Deity

Spong relates a human interest news story of a top athlete at a Bible college who was struck with a disease that led to dual leg amputations. Initially the students believed in Paul's directive to "pray without ceasing" (1Thess. 5:17) and set up a 24/7 prayer vigil for the athlete's recovery. Believing Jesus' saying "Ask and it will be given to you." (Matt. 7:7) and "all things are possible" (Mark 9:23) they pleaded endlessly to the omnipotent protector God. They believed that prayer can produce miracles, even moving mountains (Mark 11:23; Matt. 17:20).

When their prayers had no result and the athlete's legs had to be amputated at the knees and when God had not won over the non-personal, amoral, theologically neutral process of the destructive and deadly bacterium causing meningococcal meningitis, then the students faced a crisis of faith.

Defending the Theistic Deity

The praying students came to the defence of their faith in a defender deity. Some altered their prayers to general petitions that "thy will be done" and thus whatever happened would be part of God's divine plan for individuals and humanity. That stance endorses a deity who wills (controls) all tragedy and destruction, suffering and death -- a God who seems to be manipulative and cruel. Some were fearful that the student might rage against God and further call down his wrath on the athlete for blasphemy -- a God who seems to be vindictive. Some experienced a bonding into a community of common concern during the prayer vigil and the fundraising for treatments; they felt part of a whole group dedicated to doing something worthwhile and projecting them into the edge of life's mysteriousness that few of us encounter on a regular basis.

Prayer as a Protection

Belief in a personal protector deity who is omnipotent and capable of defending us from forces that threaten us, has and is failing all the time. Our petitions and intercessions are addressed to a deity that is external to this world and capable of intervening to assist the one praying in a personal or social crisis. We have always believed that prayer to a protector deity is "a primary attempt to exercise control in those arenas of life where we sense ourselves to be out of control, ineffective, weak, victimized." (p.191) The Bible college students worked hard (as did the followers of Jesus after his unjust death) to discover a "divine or benevolent purpose ... to explain the irrationality of life or the suffering that appears so undeserved and so shocking." (p.191)

Nature is Amoral

Disease and tragedy are not punishments; they are natural facts of life. The HIV/AIDS plague is the result of a virus gone rampant and its encounter with a myriad of social beliefs and practices; it is not God's punishment on sexually irresponsible persons. The tsunami of 2005 was the natural result of the shifting of tectonic plates, not God's will that thousands should drown. It might be possible, even practical, to conceive of God's will and omnipotence as embodied in the laws of Nature - gravity, water-cycle, electromagnetic field, ozone layer, trade winds, solar energy, etc. The theistic security blanket is inadequate to provide what it so loudly promises.

Prayer Reconceived

If we abandon the omnipotent protector deity, then we will need to find another significance for prayer, perhaps understanding it as personal meditation or communal consensus. The activity of prayer is useful as an “awareness of a relatedness found in all of life and especially among those of us who share the glory and the anxiety of self-conscious humanity.” (p.193)

Spong senses an inner quest for being that goes beyond survival “a spiritual desire, an internal yearning, to be more deeply the person I am and thus to become one who is more capable of giving myself to others.” (p.193) He senses that he can give of himself without expectation of compensation and without a sense of loss; he can be an agent of God (altruistic good). To 'pray without ceasing' is to conduct your life with a passion for justice and compassion. We can conceive of God as within us, and among us, and with us in our words and actions toward justice and compassion and respectful caring for all life and the planet. We can be a walking prayer for more of heaven to be experienced on earth.

Spong suggests that we hold “a theological perspective that affirms God's power present at the center of our lives--a power that calls us more deeply into the mystery of Being and into a fuller humanity.... It is our shared being that binds us powerfully into a human community.” (p.195) He goes on to suggest that prayer is “that activity that enables each of us to be givers to and receivers from one another of the deepest meaning of life--a meaning I call God.” (p.196) Years ago his image of prayer was that a “power ignited by my prayers flowed outward to all of these recipients of my concern.” (p.196) Now his concept of prayer has shifted from the formal time of meditation to the way he lives his day. “My actions, my engagements with people, the facing of concrete issues--all these became for me the real time of prayer. My prayer came to be identified with my living, my loving, my being, my meeting, my confronting, my struggles for justice, my desire to be an agent of the world's transformation.” (p. 197) He goes on to affirm that love shared and concern expressed creates positive energy and that has a therapeutic power to enhance life and being. For him, prayer is an activity to focus on and change himself so that his living will be a blessing to others he encounters during the day. He uses meditation and contemplation to remind himself of who he is and what he values so that he enters his day dedicated to “working for the expansion of life, for the fullness of love, for the enhancement of being.” (p. 198) He experiences God when he acts as “an agent of life, love, and being to another. For the God I worship, the God I see in Jesus of Nazareth, is revealed in the personhood of everyone. This God calls me constantly to be the incarnation of this God's love ... by working to enhance the humanity of every person, to free the life present in every person, to increase the love available to every person, and to celebrate the being of every person.

8.3 A REVIEW OF "PRAYING A NEW STORY" BY MICHAEL MORWOOD

In **Praying a New Story**, a former Roman Catholic priest, Michael Morwood, challenges us to see ourselves as expressions of God's Spirit. We call this the spiritual practice of you.

In this invigorating, poetic and imaginative paperback, Morwood shares prayers that can be used in small groups that reflect a fresh and bold reframing of Christian views of God, the universe, Jesus, the Spirit, and holidays such as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. Here you will read about an everywhere God instead of an elsewhere God, who is present and active in every corner of the universe and in every dimension of our everyday life. Morwood gives plenty of concrete examples of this panentheistic perspective. He adds: "Prayer is not so much talking to or addressing God, but rather about deepening our awareness that God - the Breath of Life present throughout the universe - comes to visible expression in us."

Another part of the New Story for adventuresome Christians is the calling to be Jesus to loved ones, neighbors, and enemies. In many of these prayers, Morwood muses on the life and work of the man from Nazareth with "his extravagant generosity" and challenges us to do as he did by giving God human expression in our daily lives. This prayer form enables us to tap into our spiritual practices of imagination, wonder, hope, and joy. Or as Morwood puts it: "This is the Wow! of human existence from a Christian perspective." *Praying a New Story* is the perfect resource for small groups interested in exploring new avenues of devotion and spiritual practice (within the Roman Catholic stream).

----- another review [<http://www.sof-in-australia.org/Prayinganewst.htm>]

The 26 meditative prayers, for personal or group use, celebrate the traditional feasts of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost; they celebrate of events of marriage, wedding anniversary, death, and funeral; and they reflect on traditional Christian themes and images. An invitation to celebrate the Eucharist is incorporated in more than half of the prayers. This is perhaps a legacy of the focus on ritual in bygone days, when every priest would say Mass every day, often alone.

The constant theme of the book is the presence of God and his Spirit in Jesus and in everything and everyone in the universe. It aims to "raise our minds and hearts to the God always present to us rather than address prayers to an elsewhere God".

This re-defining of God, Jesus and Spirit has gone on at many points throughout Judaeo-Christian history and elsewhere, often to meet new insights, situations, frustrations and needs, both spiritual and political. There are many other contemporary prophets doing those things. Many of them may never have heard of Jesus, and may even be atheists: amused or bemused by people who feel a need to define them in terms of an everywhere or any other sort of God.

Excerpts from *Praying a New Story* by Michael Morwood

Moorwood, Michael, **Praying a New Story**, 2004, Orbis Books, ISBN: 1570755310

Being Jesus To Others

"Through Jesus we believe we are all 'sons and daughters' of one God. We believe the same Spirit of God that came to visibility in Jesus yearns for visible expression in us.

"This is our common dignity whatever race or creed, whatever our place or time.
We long to see our common dignity proclaimed and celebrated by all religions.
We pray that the one Spirit all people share may be given free and generous expression
for the betterment of humanity and our world. Amen."

Our Pentecost

"We give expression to the Spirit within us
and give thanks for the wonder of who we are
and for our conscious awareness of that Spirit at work in everything that exists.

"We give thanks for Jesus in whom that Spirit was able to work freely
and was able to articulate insights and convictions that open our minds
to the presence of the Spirit of Life in our midst.

"We give thanks, as Jesus gave thanks,
using bread to speak to us of earthen vessels holding a treasure.

"We break and share bread, as Jesus broke and shared bread,
committing ourselves to love generously as 'temples of God's Spirit.'

"We pledge ourselves to be the 'body of Christ'
loving God and neighbor with all our hearts, with all our minds, and in all our actions.

"We drink wine as Jesus shared wine with his friends,
mindful of our bonding with all that exists through the Spirit creatively present with us and within us.

"Pause for quiet reflection on being 'a temple of God's Spirit.'

"We see the presence of God in whom we believe, here now in us.
We acknowledge now to be our Pentecost time,
when God-with-us seeks expression in our actions and in new words and images.

"To being the presence of God in our world: Amen. Amen."

Source www.spiritualityhealth.com/newsh/excerpts/bookreview/excp_8231.html is no longer active.

8.4 PRAYER - WHAT IF ... HOW THEN WOULD WE PRAY?

by the Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Steeves

One of Jesus' story lessons to his followers was about a widow who had been unjustly treated or neglected. This widow persistently petitioned a judge to hear her case. She badgered the judge who refused to lower himself to deal with the peasantry. She hounded him, haunted him, bullied him, and stalked him; she gave him no peace until he gave in and did the right thing for the wrong reason -- to get her off his case. The lesson seems to be that if we persist we will succeed. Not that prayer is persistent begging and nagging the Divine, but that what we persistently walk and talk is a living prayer of intention that will lead us to be open to opportunities to implement that for which we so earnestly pray.

That story lesson can raise questions that might shine refreshing light on the concept and operation of prayer and perhaps of the Divine Spirit as well.

What if the Divine is the persisting and pervading Presence of justice, mercy, and compassion in which we live and move and have our being?

What if the Divine is persisting with all of Creation and with all of its creatures as the relentless energy that nudges us to what is just and merciful and compassionate?

What if prayer doesn't change a thing?

What if the power of prayer is its potential to change *us*?

What if prayer is a way for us to open to that persisting Presence of the Sacred in everything in the Universe -- a way to be open to a Universe that is saturated with the Sacred?

What if prayer is a path to consciousness -- a practice to strengthen our intention to work toward that for which we pray?

What if we pray for the sake of our hearts -- to keep our hearts in the right place -- to keep our hearts tender and broken -- broken open -- to keep our hearts from being shielded?

How then would we pray?

We would pray to be moved into right relationship with ourselves and with our community and with the More in which we live and move and have our being.

We would pray for the sake of our hearts -- to be open to the persistent presence of the Sacred.

We would pray to see clearly, to pay attention, to connect, to care about all around us, to correct our sense of alienation by creating conditions for communion with the Sacredness of all being. We would be a walking, talking prayer for justice and compassion.

8.5 SOME NON-THEISTIC PRAYERS

by the Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Steeves

WORDS OF INVITATION

One: In the beginning was diversity:

All: Puddle and pond, mountain and meadow, dandelion and daisy, raven and robin, cougar and cow, you and me.

One: And it was good!

All: From the beginning, diversity confused us.

One: We created categories: race, rank and religion; colour, class and creed; language, looks and learning.

All: And divisions came to be!

One: We gather to honour diversity:

All: To love creation, to celebrate difference, to embrace all within God's unending circle of love.

A PRAYER IN THE SPIRIT OF THE PRAYER OF JESUS

Holy Becoming, whom we call by so many different names,
Blessed are you. Blessed are we in you.
May we create with you a realm of mercy, peace and justice.
May love be done in the here and now as it is in the infinite.
May we share life in bread and hope.
For our failures to love, we need forgiveness.
May we find the paths of reconciliation.
In the midst of evil's every incarnation,
From the powers that possess our spirits and our structures,
May we find liberation.
In the power that is love, we seek to live and move and have our being.
May it be so, now and forever, AMEN.

CALL TO MISSION

One: Together and unafraid,

All: We will love beyond our fears.

One: Together and unafraid,

All: We will speak truth to power.

One: Together and unafraid,

All: We will stretch beyond tolerance to understanding.

One: Together and unafraid,

All: We will seek to embody an ethic of compassion.

One: Together and unafraid,

All: We will not settle for less than peace and justice for all.

One: Together and unafraid,

All: We go that it may be so.

PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES

O God, deepen our understanding of family,
that we may perceive the hidden hurts,
encourage the neglected gifts,
and answer the silent cries.

Widen our understanding of family,
that we may support the powerless stranger,
recognize our struggling neighbour,
and identify the lonely newcomer.

Heighten our understanding of family,
that your light may disperse our darkness,
your acceptance make holy our relationships,
and your Spirit renew our communities of faith.

8.6 PRAYERS IN THE PATTERN JESUS SUGGESTED

Although some wording in these may be considered theistic, or at least anthropomorphic, they are provided to give us ideas of how we can craft our own versions.

A Prayer In The Spirit Of The Prayer Of Jesus

Holy Becoming, whom we call by so many different names,
Blessed are you. Blessed are we in you.
May we create with you a realm of mercy, peace and justice.
May love be done in the here and now as it is in the infinite.
May we share life in bread and hope.
For our failures to love, we need forgiveness.
May we find the paths of reconciliation.
In the midst of evil's every incarnation,
From the powers that possess our spirits and our structures,
May we find liberation.
In the power that is love, we seek to live and move and have our being.
May it be so, now and forever, AMEN.

by the [Rev. Nancy L. Steeves](#)

A Version of the Lord's Prayer (Prayer at Night)

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-Bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be.
Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever. Amen

by Jim Cotter, Cairns Publications, Sheffield, England, and used in *A New Zealand Prayer Book and Voices United* (p. 619).

An Aotearoa/New Zealand Paraphrase

O Most Compassionate Life-giver,
May we offer you thanks and praise;
May we work with you to establish your new order
Of justice, peace and love.
Give us what we need for growth,
And help us, through forgiving others,

To accept forgiveness.
Strengthen us in the time of testing,
That we may resist all evil,
For all the tenderness, strength and love are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.

A Translation from the Aramaic

O Birther of the Cosmos,
Focus your light within us -- make it useful:
Create your reign of unity now.
Your one desire then acts with ours, as in all light, so in all forms.
Grant us what we need each day in bread and insight.
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of another's
guilt.
Don't let surface things delude us, but free us from what holds us back.
From you is born all ruling will, the power and the life to do,
The song that beautifies all; from age to age it renews.
I affirm this with my whole being.

by Neil Douglas-Klotz (Prayers of the Cosmos, Harper & Row, 1990).
May be reproduced if this citation is included.

Another Aramaic Version

O Divine Womb,
birthing forth the river of blessing which runs through all,
Soften the ground of our being,
and hallow in us a space for the planting of thy presence.
In our depths, sow thy seed with its greening-power
that we might be midwives to thy Reign.
Then, let each of our actions bear fruit in accordance with thy desire.
Impart to us the wisdom to bring forth the gifts of the earth
and share them daily according to the needs of each being,
And restore that which has been usurped
by injustice to its rightful owners,
as we restore to others that which is not our own.
Do not let us be seduced
by that which would divert us from our purpose
but make us sensitive to the moment at hand.
For from thy fertile soil is born the creativity
the life-energy, and the dance, from birthing to birthing. Amen.

As rendered by Mark Hathaway (www.visioncraft.org) based on the work of Neil Douglas-Klotz.
May be reproduced if this citation is included.

A Native American Interpretation by Jim Nuttall

O Great Spirit, the Source of our life, You created us all.
You live in the Heavens, in the Earth and in our hearts.
Your name is very sacred to us; we see it every day in the skies, in the rivers and in the

forests. You are a friend to the four-legged ones, the winged ones, the ones who live in the waters and to the two-legged ones.
Your eternal Ways bring harmony and strength, so the hoop of your people is unbroken as we gather around the council fires for wisdom.
You are the Source of our life. So, we rejoice each day for the food we eat, the shelter we live in and the companions we share.
Help us to remember that as we love all that is around us, Your love grows within us.
Lead our steps away from the trails of confusion and hurtfulness; place our feet on the trails of harmony and sharing.
For Your Ways direct our lives, Your Power ignites the campfires of our hearts.
Let us sing songs of joy to each other as we gather our logs.
Thank you, Great Spirit. Amen.

A Paraphrase from Latin America

Holy One who is with us and in us here on Earth,
sacred is your name in the hungry who share their bread and their song.
Your kin-dom comes in a generous land where confidence and truth reign.
May we do your will, standing up when all are sitting down, raising our voice when all are silent,
and so being a cool breeze to those who sweat.
You are giving us our bread daily in the song of the bird and the miracle of the corn, and when we manage to get back our lands or to get a fairer wage.
Forgive us for keeping silent in the face of injustice and for burying our dreams, for not sharing bread and wine, love and the land, among us now.
May we not be tempted to shut the door in fear;
to resign ourselves to hunger and injustice;
to take up the same arms as our enemy.
May we experience deliverance from the evil that disunites us.
May we have the perseverance and the solidarity to look for love, even if the path has not been trodden, even if we fail.
In doing that we shall have known your kin-dom
which is being built forever and ever, amen.

Original version from *Celebrating One World*, 1998.

Creator God, Ancient of days, Holy Parent of all worlds: may your sacred names be praised!
May your presence create a common wealth of mercy and, peace.
Your will for us always is love and so we pray:
may your love be done on earth as it is in eternity.
Give all of us each day the bread we need and hope for all who hunger for your life.
And as we share our bread along the way, pardon us the times we've broken faith.
Forgive our lack of love and move us quickly to forgiveness when wrongs are done to us.
Do not abandon us in the times of testing.
Save us from evil's every incarnation, from the powers that possess our spirits and our structures.
Infuse us with your liberating joy!
For you live in the grace of the power that is love, now and forever.
May it be so, AMEN

A Prayer in the Pattern of Jesus

Ground of all being,
we honor the many names for our experience of the sacred.
May we build a community
faithful to the dream of heaven on earth.
May there be food for all who hunger this day.
May we be forgiven for the falseness of what we have done
as we forgive those who have been untrue to us.
May we not feel abandoned in hard times
but find strength to meet each moment.
For the light of life, the vitality of being
is within us and beyond us, now and forever, AMEN.

Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Steeves, Edmonton

The following is an amalgam of different phrases restating The Jesus Prayer, gathered from Gretta Vosper, Nancy Steeves and Bob Hetherington

Deep mystery beyond our capacity to name,
sacredness at the heart of All,
that which we trust to be Love:
May we create together a kin-dom of mercy, peace and justice.
May love be done in the here and now.
May we share life in bread and hope.
May the harm of our loveless way be forgiven, just as we forgive
those who have been untrue to us; so may paths of reconciliation
be found and followed.
May we find liberation from the powers that possess our spirits and
our structures.
For it is the power of love that we seek to live and move and have
our being.
May this be so, now and forever.

and for an opening prayer ... Strengthening our Intentions: (Read/spoken together)

We open to the sacredness at the heart of all, called by many names.
We open to deep mystery we trust to be love.
May we be faithful to the vision of building heaven on earth:
that there be daily bread to nourish all hunger,
that we experience forgiveness for the harm we have done
just as we forgive those who hurt us.
May we not feel abandoned in hard times,
but find the strength to meet each moment
and the wisdom to walk in the light of deep gratitude.
For the light of love is with us, now and forever, Amen.

Bob Hetherington

9. SUGGESTED CHURCH YEAR CALENDAR CHANGES

9.1 ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS I SEEK

by Charles Bidwell

The current liturgical church year calendar starts with Advent (in November) and proceeds to Kingdomtide (the next November). It is based on the Christ myth with a lot of "ordinary" time between Pentecost and Kingdomtide that could be sprinkled with other observances. While we are looking at non-theistic wordings and rituals, we might engage in suggesting what alterations or additions might be appropriate to the current church calendar. We might even be adventurous enough to speculate on what other church calendars might be useful.

As with any calendar, we are all free to adapt and change with the exception of Christmas and Easter which are so deeply ingrained in our culture that they need to be recognized in some meaningful form. If we chose to not observe Ascension Sunday, I doubt that anyone would notice, so replacing designated days may be accomplished with relative ease. Some Christian denominations do not observe Advent or Lent (Baptists, for one) and others do not observe other liturgical calendar dates.

As *examples* of what I am talking about, I list below a few changes I would support and I encourage you to submit changes you would introduce:

ADDITIONS to the current calendar

[We welcome further suggestions for additions.]

Earth Day

I would welcome an Earth Day service where we encourage respect and caring for God's whole creation. There are theologians who consider the world/universe to be the body of God and Earth to be vital (for us) part of God's body. Certainly, the First Nations cultures incorporate deep respect for Mother Earth and make offerings of gratitude before they harvest anything.

Solstices and Equinoxes

I feel it is appropriate to recognize the changing seasons and life cycles by having special services at the equinoxes and solstices. Christmas is associated with one solstice.

The solstices and equinoxes are universal, whereas the Easter theme of new birth and renewed growth occurs when it is autumn and harvest time in the Southern Hemisphere. We are so Euro-centric and Northern Hemisphere oriented that we neglect to recognize that life is different elsewhere. Notice how we named them Vernal and Autumnal Equinoxes and assume that the Autumnal one is in September when in fact it is in March in Australia. The Solstices are named Summer and Winter - the North's Summer Solstice occurs when the South's Winter Solstice does. Perhaps we should shift to calling them the Mid-Year and Year-End Solstices. At the equinoxes and solstices, we could recognize the changes that are occurring in each half of the planet to remind us that we are part of a global community.

Blessing the Animals

A Sunday closest to October 4th, the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, would be an appropriate time for a Blessing of the Animals. Our pets who love us unconditionally should be recognized and people who care for pets also tend to care for other people (those who abuse animals tend to also abuse people). It can also be time to recognize (celebrate) our

interdependence with animal life from the microorganisms living, and sustaining our life systems, within our bodies to the animals that work for us and supply us with food.

Hallow Even?

I'd like to see something before or on All Hallows Eve and the Sunday(s) leading up to it. Historically, it was an enactment of getting rid of sins in preparation for All Saints Day. Folks dressed up a one of the seven deadly sins (can you name them?*) and went to their neighbours homes. The neighbours would give them something to send them away, thus symbolically ridding themselves and their household of that particular sin.

ALTERATIONS to the current calendar

[We welcome further suggestions for alterations.]

I would propose that we substitute a **Mardi Gras** celebration in place of the last Sunday before Lent.

I would like to see something replacing Ascension Sunday.

I would like to see something replacing Trinity Sunday.

Submit Your Suggestions [to the Coordinator](#).

* Anger, Arrogance, Envy, Gluttony, Greed, Lust, Sloth. Now there's seven services/sermons to fill September and October. Have a character (actor) represent each and hold a dialogue. And then there are the [7 virtues](#) ... but I digress.

10. SUGGESTED (LECTIONARY) READINGS

10.1 Now Testaments and non-canonical ancient Christian readings

Non-Canonical (Not In The Bible) Sources Check the New View [Gospel of Thomas](#) and many translations [here](#) or via <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/thomas.htm> for sayings of Jesus that are not widely known or used.

"Now Testaments" There are many recent and current sages who works can be relative to a sermon or reflection topic. If you find what you are currently reading inspiring, your congregation will probably find it compelling as well. Do not feel constrained to reading only from the Bible.

Consider using a quote for meditation as folks gather, either at the top of the printed order of service or projected on the screen as they gather.

11. SELECTED RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

11.1 A CHRONOLOGY OF BOOKS RELATING TO NON-THEISTIC CHRISTIANITY

Note: These books are listed by publication year to give a developmental order and then by author within that approximate time. They provide a theological basis for our explorations, but unfortunately none deal with praxis*.

In the beginning ...

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in some of his letters from prison(1944) wondered about "religionless Christianity" [letter to Eberhard Bethge, April 30 etc.]. **Letters and Papers From Prison**, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edited by Eberhard Bethge. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997

Later came two books by Bishop John Arthur Thomas Robinson: **Honest to God** (SCM Press, 1963) and **Exploration Into God** (Stanford University Press, 1967, ISBN 0804746362).

Then in the '80s there were more writers.

Towards a World Theology, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981. Rethinking Christian theological approaches to other religious traditions.

Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language, Sallie McFague, Fortress Press, 1982. To counter idolatry and irrelevance we can emphasize that our language regarding divinity is all analogy, metaphor and model - suggesting what divinity is like or that divinity acts as, rather than stating what divinity is. "We exist only in relationship and our lives and actions take place in networks of relationships. To the extent that we know ourselves, our world, and our God, that knowledge is profoundly relational and, hence, interdependent, relative, situational, and limited. The implication for models of God is obvious: we must use the relationships nearest and dearest to us as metaphors of that which finally cannot be named ... we are prohibited from absolutizing any models of God. ... when we try to speak of God there is nothing which resembles what we can conceive when we say that word." p.194

Late in the 20th Century we had theologians addressing the concept of God.

Tomorrow's God: How we create our worlds, Lloyd Geering, (originally 1994), Poleridge Press, 2000.

According to Geering, the world we inhabit is largely a product of our own making. We supply its meaning. Thus 'God', a central symbol of meaning, is entirely a human creation. For our own survival, we must consciously create new meaning for our lives. New systems of meaning can only evolve out of our cultural past. Geering shows how the Christian tradition may lead toward a new world of meaning.

Who Killed Jesus, John Dominic Crossan, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996 (pp.215-216) [also in his *A Long Way to Tipperary*, 2000 at pp.104-105]

On the topic of metaphoricity, he indicates that the "ultimate referent" or metaphor is imaged by all religions as one of these four models: power, order, state, or person.

The Power model suggests a natural force such as, wind, fire, sun, evolution.

The Order model suggests the mandate of heaven of Confucius.

The State model suggests the Nirvana of the Buddhists.

The Person model suggests the image of Goddess for some and Father for most Christians. He then observes that none of these metaphors is totally and exclusively correct, but together they give a more accurate concept than any one of them alone.

The World To Come: From Christian past to global future, Lloyd Geering, Poleridge Press, 1999.

We have come to the end of Christendom, the dissolution of Christian orthodoxy, the failure of modernism, and the end of old mythic certainties. We are entering a new era, the global era, which is

post-Christian. We must find some way to end humanity's war with itself and with the planet. Geering sketches a vision of a new global spirituality that incorporates the best of our legacy from the past and promotes care for all living creatures and the earth itself. Chap. 12 is *A faith for the future*.

Now in the 21st Century we have many more writers addressing the concept of God.

Christian Faith at the Crossroads: a map of modern religious history, Lloyd Geering, Poleridge Press, 2001.

After providing a tour of 400 years of modern religious history, Geering analyses the influences of the empirical sciences, sociology and psychology on religion. Chap. 8 is *To a religion without God*.

Emptiness and Brightness, Don Cupitt, Poleridge Press, 2001.

"... new religious thinking for a new era is urgently needed, but we don't know how to set about it.... What is religion, in a time when everything that we were brought up to think of as religion has disappeared? (p.2) "In the First Axial Age the ordinary person seeking salvation and blessedness typically asked 'What shall I do?' ... in the Second Axial Age religion will outgrow the old teacher/disciple relationship and will become democratized.... Truth is an emergent, continually shifting consensus, and everybody has in principle equal access to it and a contribution to make.... So in this book my concern is ... to show you what religious thinking is and how you can get involved with it and play your own full part." (*Introduction, p.4*)

Reforming Christianity, Don Cupitt, Polebridge Press, 2001.

Cupitt argues that it is possible to work towards a reformed and renewed Christianity, but that it will be difficult within the traditional framework of "Church Christianity". Church Christianity [as distinct from 'Kingdom Christianity'] is handicapped by two great errors: a mistaken interpretation of Jesus as having been the co-equally divine Son of God incarnate, and, the mistaken belief that there is a controlling supernatural world beyond this world. To escape these errors, we need to go back and start again from the historical Jesus and his message about the 'Kingdom of God' on this earth. We need to create a modern version of his 'kingdom religion', a religion that is immediate, beliefless, and entirely focussed upon the here and the now. Cupitt is calling for a revolution in theological thought, and warns that we need not expect much interest or support from the churches. They will continue to tolerate small doses of 'church' reform only; the more serious work of Christianity's reform will require another path entirely.

Life, Life, Don Cupitt, Poleridge Press, 2003

"You will begin to see how the whole of our worldview, our religion, and our morality are currently being reorganized around the idea of life. The new religion of life is simply of *this* life. Deep down that's what we already think; but it is only slowly coming to the surface and becoming explicit." (*p.x*)

A New Christianity for a New World: Why traditional faith is dying & how a new faith is being born, John Shelby Spong, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. ISBN 0-06-067084-3

Chap. 7 - Changing the basic Christian Myth

Chap. 8 - Jesus beyond incarnation: a nontheistic divinity

Chap. 9 - Original sin is out; the reality of evil is in

Chap. 10 - Beyond evangelism and world mission to a post-theistic universalism

* and approaching praxis ...

Chap. 11 - But what about prayer? - the perils of theism

Chap. 12 - The ecclesia of tomorrow

Chap. 13 - Why does it matter?: the public face of the ecclesia

Christianity Without God, Lloyd Geering, Poleridge Press, 2002.

Many Christians are no longer theists - believing in a personal, objective, thinking God 'out there' somewhere. Geering says Christianity should learn to exist without God - without an external authority figure who blesses and condemns arbitrarily. Instead, Christianity should continue on the ancient path it developed in the doctrine of the Trinity where God was humanized and humanity, together with all of

creation, was divinized; God and world were being rejoined as in primitive nature religions. In place of that deity, he challenges us to assume responsibility for ourselves and for the earth we have on loan from our grandchildren. By leaving God behind, we may hope to recover total human freedom, along with the affirmation of basic human rights. That move will do away with original sin and the stigmatization of sex. By forsaking the creation story in Genesis, we can restore respect for all of nature, thus enabling us to live in harmony with planet earth rather than raping nature for our pleasure (wealth). (*Foreword by Robert Funk*)

11.2 For REVISIONING JESUS and for RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

These books are listed by publication year to give a developmental.

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Marcus Borg, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994 - ISBN 0-06-060917-6

Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography, John Dominic Crossan, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994 - ISBN 0-06-061662-8

Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium, Robert W. Funk, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996 - ISBN 0-06-062758-1

The Zen Teachings of Jesus, Kenneth S Leong, Crossroad, 2001.

For this author, Jesus is "an artist of life and what he teaches is the fine art of living". He ignores the socio-political component of Jesus' teachings.

Is Jesus God?: Finding Our Faith, Michael Morwood, Crossroad, 2001.

A review from the Sea of Faith in Australia site http://www.sof-in-australia.org/blog.php?blog_id=169

Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, ISBN 0-06-061633-4

A review - <http://www.centuryone.com/1633-4.html#reviews>

The Lost Sutras of Jesus: Unlocking the ancient wisdom of the Xian monks. Ray Riegert & Thomas Moore, eds. Ulysses Press - Seastone, 2003.

"In 635 CE, a small band of Christian monks traveled from Persia to Xian, in Western China. Welcomed by the Tang Dynasty emperor, these missionaries set about translating into Chinese the sacred texts they had brought. Influenced by Buddhists and Taoist they encountered, the Persians "translated" their manuscripts into a collection of unique teachings of Jesus. When the political climate turned to menacing Christians and Buddhists, the scrolls were hidden in a desert cave. In 1990 they were discovered." (flyleaf)

11.3 FOR LITURGICAL USE

Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim: A Personal Manual for Prayer and Ritual, Edward Hays, Forest of Peace Books, 1989, ISBN 0939516101.

Chapters present rituals and celebration liturgies as well as daily prayers for each season; psalms for the 21st Century, psalms for each season, psalms for sacred seasons; psalms for personal seasons of change; interfaith prayers; and rituals for a planetary pilgrim. This work calls us out of a parochial way of praying into one that is truly global. It provides a pattern for prayer that responds to the compelling challenge of the Spirit to expand our religious

boundaries to embrace ever larger and wider worlds, to find a new and more expansive spirituality that keeps pace with the great scientific advances of the last century.

Prayers to an Evolutionary God, William Cleary, SkylightPaths, 2004.

Chapters present: Prayers of Listening, Prayers of Questioning; Prayers of Ambiguity; and Prayers of Intimacy. Excerpts can be read here:

<http://www.clearyworks.com/Books/prayerstoanevolutionarygod.html>

Heartbeat of the Seasons: Earth Rituals for the Celtic Year, Kathleen Glennon, Columba, 2005
ISBN 1-85607-485-4

The rituals in this book aim to celebrate and deepen our awareness of the heartbeat of the Eternal One pulsating throughout creation. The rituals revolve around the rhythms of the seasons (solstices and equinoxes) and their turnings. They are, for the most part, celebratory in nature. However, some rituals introduce an element of lament for the harm we are inflicting on our planetary home. We are invited to hear the cry of the earth, to envision a healed world, and to join others in the work of restoring health to the earth.

For example, the section on *Winter* contains these rituals: Winter: A Time of Rest; Wonder of Fire; Winter Solstice; Eco-Friendly Christmas; and January 6: Celebration of Wisdom. Each ritual follows the pattern of suggested chants, prayers, blessings, activity and sometimes movement /dance. They are suitable for youth as well as adults.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford **Women-Church** [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985].
She includes seasonal rites for the Summer and Winter Solstices.

In Memoriam: A Guide To Modern Funeral and Memorial Services, Edward Searl, Boston: Skinner House Press, 1993

Drawing on years of pastoral experience within the Unitarian/Universalist journey, Searl offers a wide range of modern resources for funeral/memorial situations. The Unitarian custom of engaging in inclusive, non-theistic language provides a wealth of resources for pursuing that approach within the context of grief, loss, death, and the celebration of life.

SONGS

Eternal Spirit: Songs of the Cosmic Spirit by Emily Kierstead

The songs/hymns in this booklet were born of Emily's "excitement around the grand vision of the evolving universe which is now emerging, and the need to express in music the resulting theology." This collection of 16 songs costs \$15.00. There is a special offer on the back page for choirs. A couple of songs have been written in four-part harmony and they are available by request when ordering the songbook from Emily Kierstead, R.R. # 2 Brookfield, N.S. B0N 1C0.

The Wonder of Life: Songs for the Spirit by Scott Kearns

This is a fresh new collection of spiritually uplifting songs suitable for use in congregations, community groups, and schools. Mingling the rich chords of the contemporary Christian music of his background with the deep and meaningful words of the progressive Christian movement, Scott Kearns sets a standard for the music of the church's future. You may order this book of music at \$30.00 per copy (including shipping and handling) by sending a cheque payable to Scott Kearns along with your return address. Mail to Scott Kearns, 62 Orchard Park Drive, Toronto, ON M1E 3T7.

11.4 SOME NON-THEISTIC WEBSITES

Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity is intended to provide a network for people pursuing non-theistic spirituality.

<http://www.progressivechristianity.ca>

[Living the Questions](#) - an engaging and thoughtful course of 12 DVD sessions with web-based guides giving expressions of the progressive approach to Christianity. People who have taken this course were astonished that we're allowed to talk about these things in church, allowed to ask questions.

Ground of Being: An Earth-Centered Liturgy for Christian Churches - neo-pagan rituals for 8 seasonal festivals at <http://www.inhumandecency.org/christine/8festivalsX.html> Imbolc/Candlemas – February 1 or 2, Ostara/Spring Equinox – March 21 or 22, Beltane/May Day – May 1, Litha/Midsummer/Summer Solstice – June 21 or 22, Lammas – August 1, Mabon/Autumn Equinox – September 21 or 22, Halloween/Samhain/Day of the Dead – October 31-November 2, Yule/Winter Solstice – December 21 or 22.

A review of Lloyd Geering's *Christianity Without God* - <http://sof.wellington.net.nz/sfbr0112.htm>

another review - <http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/265.0.html>

another review - http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_2_64/ai_114049672

Being a Christian without God is both possible and necessary for the survival of Christianity as a viable religious option for many among us who find the life and teachings of Jesus compelling but have difficulty with the concept of God. This essay will argue in favor of a non-theistic form of Christianity that could reasonably be called Christian Humanism.

http://www.broadhurst-family.org/christian_humanism.htm

For the unconventional Christian, there aren't many places to find group support. The Jesus Seminar affirms that there are an increasing number of unconventional Christians with widely differing viewpoints who feel out of place in the traditional Christian churches that continue to ignore everything we know (and think we know) about the origins of Christianity and who Jesus actually was.

http://www.broadhurst-family.org/018_Christianity_without_god.htm

Can One Be a Christian without Being a Theist? - article by John Spang

<http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/vox21096.html>

Forum for progressive Christianity, philosophy and social issues, as well as personal life and faith matters by St. Matthews-in-the-City Anglican Church, Auckland

<http://www.stmatthews.org.nz/smaca022.htm>

A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God by G. Dharmasiri

<http://www.uq.net.au/slsoc/bsq/budchr9.htm>

Humanist paper *Religion or Conviction* stating that

"Recognition and implementation of the equality between theistic and non-theistic life stances is blocked by those who seek to retain the privileges of religion, and the fundamental way in which they do this is by rejecting the idea that non-theistic life stances have the deep significance of religion. But the significance of a religion, which endows it with special fundamental human rights, lies in its being a life stance: a life stance is a person's relation with what he or she accepts as of ultimate importance (for theists, that which is of ultimate importance is God; for Humanists, it may be expressed simply as the natural world, with human beings as a part of it, with their powers, values and responsibilities) - the commitments and presuppositions of this and the theory and practice of working it out in living. A religion is (typically) a life stance which accepts a Divine Being. Fundamental human rights do not

depend, on the acceptance or the rejection of The Divine."

<http://www.hsnsw.asn.au/lifestance.html>

"Panentheism vs Pantheism" points out that Pantheism (all IS God) differs from Panentheism (all is IN God). Panentheism suggests that God is like the ocean and we are fish in it. If one considers what is in God's body to be part of God, then we can say that God is all there is and then some. The universe is God's body, but God's awareness or personality is greater than the sum of all the parts of the universe. All the parts have some degree of freedom in co-creating with God. Everything is within God.

[Biblical Panentheism site](#)

<http://www.websyte.com/alan/pan.htm>

<http://www.friesian.com/donner.htm> - mysticism

<http://www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth10.html> - advice to Christian philosophers

A-THEISTIC THEOLOGY SITES

<http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/e.pm.minim.religion.html> - "minimal religion", an attempt to found faith in the midst of worldly life.

<http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/srp/arts/STTH.html> - a review of Science, Theology and the Transcendental Horizon: Einstein, Kant and Tillich, Roy D. Morrison, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.

<http://www.christiananswers.net/q-sum/sum-r002.html> - secular humanism

<http://www.christiananswers.net/summit/fourmodl.html> - chart of theologies

12 KINDRED SPIRIT WEBSITES

[Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity](#) What you will find here is a safe place to explore those questions with others who, like you, are willing to brave the unknown--a place where every idea, concept, ritual, and belief can be examined, where that which keeps us from living life freely and fully can be set aside, and where that which is worthy of our highest ideals can be upheld and celebrated.

[The SnowStar Institute of Religion](#) was created to bring together both scholars and non-academics interested in reclaiming their religious heritage, to advance contemporary religious reflection and challenge, to forge national and international links with organizations of similar interest, and to promote religious literacy and tolerance in Canadian society.

Rex Hunt's website www.rexaehuntprogressive.com has a wealth of Sermons, Liturgies, Prayers, and Articles from a progressive/post-liberal theological perspective.

STUDY RESOURCES

[Living the Questions](#) DVDs and discussion guides for progressive Christian study groups.

FAITH COMMUNITIES

[West Hill United Church](#) in Toronto

[St. John's United Church](#) in Stratford

[Southminster-Steinhauer United Church](#) in Edmonton (with Reflections posted)

3C Exchange <http://www.c3exchange.org/> (formerly Christ Community Church) in Michigan (with related links)

If your faith community would like to be listed, please [contact us](#) with some indication of how you are progressive-friendly or how you express an evolving understanding of Christianity and the Divine.