

Powerful Witness

Readings from Acts in the Season of Easter relate accounts of the earliest Christian community. This body is formed by Christ and nourished by the Spirit through teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Such daily actions continue to bring the Body of Christ to life and shape its powerful witness to its neighbours.

Focus Scripture: Acts 2:42–47

In Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the community of disciples: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The Greek word translated here as “witness” can mean a person who testifies at a legal trial. In the book of Acts, it also means one who was with Jesus during his earthly life or one who declares the truth of God’s saving love. The power to be such a witness comes from God’s Spirit.

As noted in verse 42, the rituals and practices of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer define these early Christian witnesses. Their life together sets the stage for the Spirit’s continuing work of empowering witnesses to proclaim, in word and deed, God’s saving love that comes through Christ.

This community of Jesus’ followers is gathered and waiting for Christ to return in glory. To some extent, this is the reason they can sell everything and live sharing all that they have. Their common faith leads to the holding of goods in common. Possessions serve the common good and respond to any in need. Leviticus 25 taught the tradition of Jubilee – an appointed time when debts would be forgiven and slaves would be set free. The redistribution of goods in this community embodies Jubilee and is a witness to their neighbours. The things that give life are shared.

Imagine the questions the neighbours of this group might have asked when observing the way they lived together! Then, as today, the church’s witness is not limited to the words spoken by its members or their deeds of mercy. Sometimes, the most powerful witness of the Christian community is in the testimony of the way it conducts its life together.

Acts 2:47 reports that this community of Jesus’ followers enjoyed the “goodwill of all

the people.” “Goodwill” is a translation of a Greek word that also means “grace.” Perhaps such feelings of goodwill made it easier for the Body of Christ in that place to make God’s grace known to their neighbours.

In closing, the passage notes the community’s growth. The writer declares that such transformation comes from God through the power of the Spirit. This is a witness to the church in all times about how growth is a gift of God’s provision of grace, nurture, and feeding.

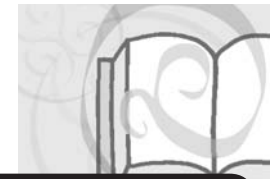
The psalmist who wrote **Psalm 23** offers a powerful witness to the ways that God – our shepherd – provides an overflowing abundance of what is needed for life: sustenance, water, safety, and direction. God’s people can move with trust and faith into such abundant life.

In **1 Peter 2:19–25**, there is a powerful witness to Christ as “the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” Written to Christians who were being persecuted, 1 Peter does not discount the reality of suffering. Even when facing such challenges, the example of Christ guides and the community of Christ sustains.

A powerful witness to the closeness of the relationship between shepherd and sheep, between Christ and the church, is at the heart of **John 10:1–10**. This relationship leads to abundant life.

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Communities of Jesus’ followers in all times and places experience transformation through God’s shepherding. The Spirit accomplishes great things in lives that are lived together in Christ and empowers witness to such love. What transformation have you personally experienced from living as part of the Body of Christ? In what ways is your church a powerful witness to God’s abundant love?



May 15, 2011

Focus Scripture
Acts 2:42–47

Additional Scriptures
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19–25
John 10:1–10

**Spirit of God,
stir our hearts to
grow in faith, and
encourage our
hands to work
for the good of
community and
life together in
the Body of Christ.
Enrich our lives
though the grace
and presence of
others. In Christ
we pray. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Whether or not the children are involved in many activities outside school, they all are included in a variety of groups. They are in a family, in a town, in the church, in a nation, and so on. Some children will find great fun in trying to think of all the groups or communities to which they belong. Talk about such communities in ways that include rather than exclude children.

This session offers you an opportunity to see how the children identify themselves with

the church. Pay close attention to what they say. This could be helpful information for the church committee responsible for planning for children. If the children describe congregational life in a way that it is something they do when they are older, you and the committee might think about ways to include children (and their families) in congregational events.

Pray that the children in your group will recognize that they are important participants in the church community.

May 15, 2011



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Acts 2:42–47, and biblical background material (p. 75). We live in a different time; how would you describe the life of your congregation?
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see "This Season, So..." on p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from www.spiritseasons.com.
- ❑ Bring songs "Alleluia" and "I Send You Out" (pp. 1 and 10–12 in *Music Section*, also #8 and #23 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *white or gold cloth*, *pillar candle*, *matches*, *offering basket*, and *Bible*. Place *bookmark* at Acts.
- ❑ Bring *Easter gather words* (p. 116) on *newsprint*.

Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell the story on *today's resource sheet* "The Goodwill of All."
- ❑ For early church group, bring *copies of today's resource sheet* "Introducing the Early Church" and *directions* (p. 78).

Respond

- ❑ **Outreach zone:** *handprint pattern* (p. 120), *construction paper*, and *poster board*. Make templates of the handprint pattern on heavy paper or copy the pattern onto construction paper.
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *copies of today's resource sheet* "My Church" and *directions* (p. 78)
- ❑ **Art zone:** *poster* "Questioning Children," *poster board* or *cardstock/heavy paper* and *balsa strips* (optional)
- ❑ **Music zone:** *song* "Pass It On" (p. 8 in *Music Section*, also #7 on *Seasons Music CD*)
- ❑ **Surprise zone:** *ingredients* for snack. Make any necessary arrangements for sharing the snack.



Powerful Witnesses

Scripture

Acts 2:42–47

FOCUS To identify the strong community of Jesus' followers.**GATHER**

1

Welcome Greet the children as they arrive. Welcome children who have been absent or who are new. Introduce yourself to new children and them to the group. Invite everyone to join you at the worship table.

Song Light the pillar candle, noting that this is the Christ candle. Play the song "Alleluia" (p. 1 in *Music Section*, also #8 on *Seasons Music CD*). Invite the children to sing it with you. During the song, have a child receive the offering.

Litany Lead the group in the Easter gather words (p. 116).

Extinguish the candle as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

Connecting with the focus

Community Although they may not think in these terms, children are included in several communities or groups of people. Ask:

■ **What groups are you a part of?**

If they have trouble picking up on the meaning, ask them to stand if they are part of a family, any kind of family. This will get them started. They may name scouting groups, the church, this church school group, a sports team, a musical group, a dance group, and so. Select a group, such as the church school group, which all the children have in common. Ask:

■ **What does this group do together?**

Explain that the story today is about the group of followers of Jesus who became the first church and what they did together.

2

ENGAGE**Preparing for the story**

The Acts of the Apostles Have a child get the Bible from the worship table and open it to the bookmark. Invite the child to read the name of the book of the Bible. If necessary, explain that the apostles are the twelve disciples who travelled with Jesus. Matthias was selected to replace Judas, who betrayed Jesus. Point out that this book is commonly known as Acts.

The Bible story

Their life together Have a child turn to Acts 2. Keeping the Bible open, tell the story on today's resource sheet "The Goodwill of All," based on Acts 2:42–47. After the story, ask:

■ **How did the followers of Jesus care for each other?**

Exploring the story further

To enable the children to explore the story further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.

Rhyme group The rhyme for this group will provide a review of life in the early church. Print it on newsprint or poster board for children who can read to follow along. You can also use it as you say it with the children so that you are looking at the children rather than a paper in your hands. Read the entire rhyme; then read a line at a time for the children to echo.

Day by day the numbers grew.

Some knew Jesus; some were new.

Apostles spent night and day,
teaching of God's loving way.

In the temple they did pray,
and praised God at home each day.

They helped others with glad hearts,
and won praise from all sorts.

After leading the rhyme a couple times, invite the children to add movements to it. They can perform the verse for the others.

Writing group This group will write a paragraph describing the early church. Provide copies of today's resource sheet "Introducing the Early Church," Bibles, writing paper, pencils, and these directions:

- 1 Take a copy of "Introducing the Early Church" and a Bible.
- 2 Find Acts 2:42-47 in the Bible and read it.
- 3 Read about the early church on "Introducing the Early Church."
- 4 Working together or with a partner, use the information in Acts and "Introducing the Early Church" to write a paragraph describing the early church. Pretend that you are writing it for someone who hasn't heard about it.
- 5 Compare your paragraphs. Select one or two to read to the others. Or combine your paragraphs to make one to read.



The Bible story and us


Play the song "I Send You Out" (pp. 10-12, *Music Section*, also #23 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal for the children to gather together. Invite the rhyme group to say their rhyme together as they echo the leader, adding the movements they chose. Then ask the early church group to read their paragraph(s). Ask:

■ **How do you think the church today is like the early church?**

3

RESPOND

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Outreach zone: Helping hands**  Everyone in the early church worked together for the goodwill of all. When church members work together today, good things happen for everyone too. Begin a collage of hands with ways to help one another. This collage will be continued in future sessions. Use the handprint pattern (p. 120) to cut out handprints of many colours, or to make a template for the children to trace around on colourful paper to cut out. Help the children list things they can do, such as "sort through clothes to see what you don't need," "send a card to someone who is housebound," "bake a treat and take it to someone who is alone most of the time," and "contribute time or money to a local helping project." Make the list as community or congregation-specific as you can.

Have the children write things they can do on the handprints and glue them to a large sheet of poster board.

Save the poster collage and templates or extra handprints for the children to add more ideas in the next two sessions.

- **Quiet zone: The church then and now** The church today continues to do some of the things that the early church did, even though our lives are quite different. For this zone, provide copies of today's resource sheet "My Church," Bibles, pencils, crayons, and these directions:

- 1 Take a copy of "My Church" and a Bible.
- 2 Read Acts 2:42-47.
- 3 Follow the directions on "My Church."



❑ **Art zone: Mural** The children will create individual murals that represent the variety of ages and people in the congregation, along the style of the poster *Questioning Children*. Look at the poster together to see how the artist constructed it. Instead of large pieces of wood, the children will layer construction paper onto card stock/heavy paper or balsa strips on poster board. They can draw figures on the strips with markers and glue them to the background. Encourage them to be daring in their creativity.

❑ **Music zone: Song of joy** The early church was excited about passing on the love, peace, and teachings of Jesus to others. Sing the song "Pass It On" (p. 8 in *Music Section*, also #7 in *Seasons Music CD*) together. Sing each stanza and talk about how to pass on the words (love, peace) of Jesus.

❑ **Surprise zone: Shared snack** Surprise another group or the congregation by taking a snack to the group of fellowship time to eat together. Check with the leader of the group in advance, but keep the plan quiet from the members of that group. Involve the children in the preparation of a simple snack. Possible snacks are raw vegetables and a dip, or anything else that can be prepared in a few minutes.



Gather Play "I Send You Out" (pp. 10–12 in *Music Section*, also #23 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather in a circle around the worship table.

Sing the song "Pass It On" (p. 8 in *Music Section*, also #7 on *Seasons Music CD*). If you have time, invite the children from the music zone to name some things they can do to pass the love, peace, and words of Jesus to others.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

God, we will try to remember each day that we are a part of a loving community, the church. Amen.

Blessing To a child next to you, say, "(Child's name), go out, knowing that you are included in the church community." Continue the blessing until each child and leader has been blessed.



From your conversations with the children about the church, how would you describe their understanding of how they are included? How did the children describe the church today?

Save the poster collage and handprint templates or extra handprints from the outreach zone to use in the next two sessions.



The Goodwill of All

based on Acts 2:42–47

Using a picture that doesn't restrict the children's imagination can help them visualize the conversation of the story.

(Display the poster On the Road where everyone can see it. Before you tell the story, invite the children to imagine that the three people in the picture are talking together.)

Three people who joined the followers of Jesus in the weeks after the Resurrection were talking together about the amazing community of believers in Jesus.

"Did you hear about Ruth?" asked one of them.

"Do you mean Ruth whose husband Jeremiah died recently?"

"Yes, that's the one. Stephen and some others fixed the hole in her roof," said the first follower to the other two.

"That's good. Ruth could not manage to do that on her own," said the third follower.

(Step in front of the poster to tell about the early church.)

God's love is shown by us in many ways. One of the best ways is to live in God's ways as Jesus did and taught.

Jesus' followers met together often after the Resurrection. They gathered in homes to remember what Jesus had taught them. They also prayed and often ate a meal together. They continued to go to the temple to pray too. The friendships within this community of believers were special. When someone needed something, everyone helped out. Some people sold their belongings and shared the money with everyone. No one was to go hungry.

People outside this strong community were amazed at how they took care of each other. Such a generous people, they thought. Some of those who watched them wanted to be in this community too. Every day someone new joined the followers of Jesus. They were welcomed just as Jesus had welcomed people. I wonder what else they did.

(Step aside to reveal the poster.)

"Rebekah said she was going to visit Mary and John. You know their daughter is sick again, don't you?" said one of the followers.

"I didn't know that. I am so sorry. I will certainly pray for them. I wonder if there is anything else we can do."

"Well, I am sure some food would be helpful. Since Mary is tending to her daughter, she doesn't have time to bake bread or cook porridge."

"Good idea. When we help people like this, we keep Jesus alive in our hearts. I wonder how else we can show God's love as Jesus taught and showed us."



Introducing the Early Church



They lived just after the time of Jesus and some of them were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life.

The number of believers in Jesus grew every day.

Some had seen Jesus teaching and healing, but others had not. The apostles taught them about Jesus and God's way.

These first believers thought that Jesus would return soon to bring God's peace and way to the whole world.

Some of the first believers sold what they had and put their money together. In this way, everyone would have enough.

The first believers met often to talk about Jesus' teachings.

They prayed together, but they also went to the temple to pray.

They read from the scriptures just as they had done before.

They told the story of Jesus, God's child, to others.

They generously shared all that they had.



My Church

In this space, write or draw what you know about the way the believers in Jesus the Christ lived together in the early church.

Think about your church. What would you put in a paragraph or a drawing to describe how we live as followers of Jesus?

Gather Rituals

Lenten gathering litany

(Place the purple cloth on the worship table.)

One: During Lent we think deeply about God and how we are living in God's ways.

All: And God is with us.

(Place the purple ribbon as a path across the cloth on the table.)

One: As we move through Lent, we ask questions of God and of ourselves.

All: And God is with us.

(Place six stones on the purple ribbon.)

One: During Lent, we hear and explore stories of journey, close relationship with God, challenge and opportunities, needs met, and strength.

All: And God is with us.

(Place six votive candles on the purple ribbon and light them.)

One: With every question and every story, we learn more about God and God's ways.

All: And God is with us.

Easter
gather
words

**In the Easter season,
we celebrate Jesus
alive in a new way.**

*(Invite the children to repeat each
line after you.)*

Together we show Jesus' love
to each other
And show Jesus' love
to the world.
We gather in love
to be the church.



Handprint Pattern

