

Framing Christian Community

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PRE-LESSON INFORMATION:

SESSION DESCRIPTION:

This lesson will present a way of walking alongside individual young people, communities and families as we help them frame their lives by learning through relationships with surrounding community, learning from an intentional community and learning about yourself through community. We will explore practices of faith that help us frame our lives in solitude and in community.

BIBLICAL TOUCHSTONES:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1

I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:10

Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. Matthew 18:20

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Acts 2: 17

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- 1) Explore how we live out Luther's name (meaning freedom) with the world.
- 2) Introduce tools for self-reflection and honoring those we meet, so that we may be more fully in relationship with them.
- 3) Understand the art of listening carefully to another person's story is counter-cultural and strengthens Christian community.
- 4) Introduce practices that help us see Luther's "priesthood of all believers", by drawing out the abundance of faith practices, gifts, and wisdom already present within our communities.

MATERIALS:

Whiteboard/Easel pad
Pens/pencils
Handout 1: "Rhetorical Triangle"
Handout 2: Questions and Resources
Video Introductions from Josh

LESSON OVERVIEW:

This lesson will introduce tools to help participants re-imagine Christian community through deepening an understanding of self and discovering of the gifts revealed in Christian community.

LESSON PLAN:

RHETORICAL TRIANGLE

Video Introduction 1 (5 minutes)

(Play video segment or use the text below to introduce the session.)

Hello, I'm Pastor Josh Graber and I am the mission developer for a new ministry in the ELCA called ALT Year. It's 9-month experience of "abundant life together" for young adults age 18-25, with our pilot site currently up and running in Toledo, Ohio. I'm thankful for the opportunity to introduce some ideas and practices with you today.

In this session we'll use an ALT Year tool for self-reflection and meeting others, in order to develop practices to help us to share the stories of faith and to witness to the gifts, talents, and practices at work in the communities we are a part of.

What does the word Lutheran mean to you?

When Martin Luder changed his name to "Luther" he did so because he wanted it to sound like the Greek word for "Free."¹ When he signed his name he wanted to show that the gospel had changed him and had freed him in a powerful way. In our lives simple practices, even the signing of our name, can remind us of what Christ has done for us and shape our perspective on the world.

Our church is named for "freedom" but what does a church named "freedom" look like, a church that with Paul in Galatians can proclaim "for freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1)? How can our practices remind us of what Christ has done for us and help us share that freedom with others?

Many people see Christianity as a boring way to live. They assume being a Christian means ascribing to someone else's understanding of how you should live life, rather than experiencing freedom to see things differently than the surrounding culture. A church named "freedom" could be an alternative to values of the dominant culture that allow for creative experiments, sharing of passions, and living into the promise that Jesus came to bring us abundant life (John 10:10). These characteristics can be key to meeting younger generations where they are at. But to live together in freedom takes some intentional framing.

In the ALT Year ministry, young adult participants live in an intentional community of shared values and commitments. That doesn't mean life together is convenient or comfortable, but it's an experience that offers an opportunity for the kind of personal reflection through relationships that help these young adults frame their own lives as they experience life together.

¹ Wengert, Timothy J. *Introduction to Freedom of a Christian*. Christian Spirituality: The Classics, Ed. Arthur Holder. New York, Routledge, 2010. p. 184.

Video Introduction of Theory and Tool:

In ALT Year we use a tool called the “rhetorical” triangle to frame our life perspective and to help us value the lives and perspectives of others. Rhetoric is a way of understanding and interpreting others, often in order to influence them. It can also be used as a way of honoring the other and learning to respect them.

The following exercise starts with reflecting and increasing your understanding of your self.

- One point of the triangle represents the **cultures, communities, and traditions** that are a part of your background that shape how you view the world.
- The second point represents the **experiences and relationships** that have had the greatest impact on your life and shape how you see the world.
- The third point is your **context**. “Context” represents an understanding that your immediate surroundings and experience can impact your perspectives and opinions.

(If playing DVD, press “pause.”)

ACTIVITY: [5 Minutes]

Take a few minutes to reflect on the Rhetorical Triangle as a tool for understanding your own life. On your handout, list entries for each point of the triangle.

- For the **Cultures/Communities/Traditions** point, list the communities and cultures you grew up in, the traditions you honor, and how these have shaped you and how you view the world.
- For the **Experiences/Relationships** point, list the experiences and relationships that have had the greatest impact on your life and how they shape how you see the world.
- For the **Context** point, list how you are feeling, things that have happened recently that might affect how you hear or process events and meetings. You could also list how news events and the current setting you find yourself in affect your perspective.

PUTTING THE TRIANGLES TOGETHER

VIDEO INTRODUCTION 2 (2 minutes)

(Continue DVD or use the text below)

When we put a tool like the Rhetorical Triangle into practice, and we have done this reflection, we recognize that an increase of self-awareness can prepare us to honor another person and hear their story. We are more able to identify the cultures, communities, traditions, and stories that shape their background and the experiences

and relationships that have helped frame how they interact with the world. This is a way of living out the principle of loving your neighbor as your self (Mk. 12:31). The third point, the “context”, is also the place where individuals’ triangles meet. This place of meeting is where we have an opportunity to celebrate the uniqueness of the other, remembering that Paul in Ephesians 2:10 calls us God’s “masterpieces” (NLT) and that Jesus says, “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt: 18:20).

Meeting another person can be Holy Ground, but it is also a skill that young people and older people often struggle with. Issues of your own identity can come to the surface when you meet someone new. Anxieties and fears can get in the way of deeper relationship. What are some things that might get in the way of when you meet someone new? Maybe trying to impress them? Looking at meeting a new person as a task to get done with? Anxieties about not being interesting or “cool” enough? These are the types of issues that young people live with constantly. Gaining a more spiritual understanding of how to meet a new person can be incredibly freeing and empowering for any of us.

(Stop video.)

ACTIVITY: [10 Minutes]

Now we are going to talk with someone else. Before we begin, let’s take a moment to pray silently (*or leader may pray for the group*) to receive a mindset of trust and openness to God’s presence in this new meeting.

Find a partner, who we will call your Relational Meeting partner. This works best if participants remain in groups of two. Ask each other about what you wrote on your triangles. Be listening for what the other person seems to value the most about what shapes their perspective on life.

Give participants 10 minutes to discuss the points on their triangle.

Chances are that in this exercise the people you were talking to came up with some more entries on the triangle during the course of the conversation. Maybe in hearing another person’s story you remembered something from your own life. While self-reflection goes a long way to help us understand ourselves and hear the other, we also need others to help us frame what is most important to us. It is in the meeting and interaction with another person that the Spirit can move and reveal more than we can see for ourselves.

It’s in meeting with another person that we are able to help each other frame our lives.

HELPING TO FRAME ANOTHER'S LIFE

ACTIVITY: [5 MIN]

Has anything new or surprising come up through this process of reflecting and sharing your own story or listening to the other persons through the “rhetorical triangle” exercise? Share some new insights that came from the process with the larger group.

BEYOND GETTING COFFEE: GOING DEEPER WITH RELATIONAL MEETINGS

Making time to hear another person's story is counter cultural. Western consumer culture moves extremely fast and doesn't often make time for reflection. Using others, rather than honoring them and helping them, can feel like the norm. But for a Christian meeting with another person can be a service to them and the wider community.

An important first step in empowering leadership and creativity in a community is establishing a practice of meeting other people in your community and being intentional about hearing their story and helping them discover their gifts, passions, and goals.

The practice of community organizing has become a key tool for relational ministry in the ELCA. This adaptive and powerful tool for empowering communities is founded on a very simple practice of one-to-one relational meetings. These meetings are a setting for deeper exploration of a person's hopes, fears, and dreams.

In hearing people's stories within a community, and asking questions that go deeper than a normal conversation, community organizers are able to hear shared needs, goals, and passions and to introduce new ways of connecting them in a common purpose. They listen in order to help another person frame their story, so they can see it as valuable and powerful to share.

This practice is not only a great way to minister to another person and get to know about a community, it also can empower a community to take leadership and ownership of its future.

In an expert driven world, we are making a shift from looking for individuals with all the answers and the “new program” for success, to sharing practices that give everyone a voice and create opportunities for leadership for everyone. Relational Meetings are a tool that fits well with this understanding, which reflects the Lutheran idea of the “priesthood of all believers”, in which all Christians have important calls within the body of Christ.

There are many ways to use this practice in communities. I want to suggest three:

- 1) Relational Meetings by a pastor or leader with people in your congregation
- 2) Relational Meetings between youth directors, youth leaders, and youth
- 3) Relational Meetings between youth and older congregation members [For example, giving youth a post-confirmation assignment to do a video interview with another older member of the congregation]

Let's explore how an intentional meeting with a group of people within a community, congregation, or youth group could help create that type of environment. Look at the list of questions in your handout (*see Handout 2: "Questions and Resources"*). These will help you listen to the way the person you are meeting with frames their life, and what practices, hobbies, and stories most shape their lives as disciples. It's important to let the person you are meeting with know that this meeting is intended to go deeper than a normal conversation. Knowing which questions to ask is a skill you learn with practice in Relational Meetings but these questions will give you a starting point.

ACTIVITY: (15 minutes)

Read through the list of questions with the group:

- 1) What's a moment in your life where you felt God's presence?
- 2) What are some of your hobbies? Do any of them connect with your faith or your understanding of God?
- 3) What's a scripture passage that has spoken to you in your life? Why?
- 4) Do you think of yourself as a creative person? Do you want to be?
- 5) What does freedom mean to you? Are you free? What holds you back? How do you remind yourself you are free?
- 6) What's a moment when you questioned God's presence?
- 7) When do you hear the voice of Jesus in your life?
- 8) How do you experience the love of God in your life?

What are other questions you might ask to help someone think about what is most important in their life and how their passions connect with the gospel? (*List additional questions the group brainstorms on flip chart paper.*)

Connect back with your Relational Meeting partner. Based on your initial conversation with this person choose a question that you think could take you deeper in understanding this person and their faith. Be sure that each partner has a chance to ask a question and listen to the response.

THE LAST STEP: PRACTICES OF WITNESS: (5 Minutes)

Listening for the sake of listening is an important part of the philosophy of relational meetings. It should never seem like you are using the meeting to get something out of the other person. However, when gifts, interests, and needs are revealed through these meetings it can be very helpful to have a means of expressing and exploring them. In congregations or youth groups the deeper gift of relational meetings is the benefit they can have in framing faith in our own lives and the life of the community.

Have participants share responses to the following questions with their Relational Partners:

- As you listen to your partner's responses and stories, which ones seem to most capture who this person is and what matters most to them?
- Is there a place where faith and this person's daily practices meet?
- Of the things that have been shared, what most captures your imagination, interest, curiosity, and wonder?

ACTIVITY: COMMUNITY PRACTICES TO PRACTICE WITNESS (10 minutes)

In the large group, ask:

- Are there parts of this person's story or this person's practices that the rest of the community could benefit from hearing? Share examples [with permission].
- How can you create a venue for these people to share their stories and practices (practice witness)? List ideas on a white board or flip chart. Some examples:
 - A blog, website....
 - A church service...
 - An education hour series...
 - A Lenten series...
 - A youth group session...
 - Video interviews after an initial one-to-one...shared in church, YouTube, etc..
 - Other ideas...

Not every person you talk to will want to share their story, and that's okay. However, when we have ways to tell our stories as a community and to share our gifts, talents, and practices with each other we live into the promise and vision of Pentecost when the Spirit is poured upon all flesh, and our sons and daughters shall prophesy, and our young men shall see visions, and our old men shall dream dreams (Acts 2: 17).

I hope this brief experience inspires you to use and find practices that help reveal this vision in your community.

Collective Closing Prayer: *(See Handout 2)*

God you have created and shaped amazing people and I am one of them. Never let us lose our sense of wonder when we meet another of your children. As we hear another person's stories of pain, fears, courage, hope, and faith let us grow closer to each other and closer to you. Help us share your love, the freedom we know in Jesus, and the abundance of gifts we know in you! Amen.



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