

Small Groups

Over the last few decades, Lent has become a beloved time (even for Protestants!) for reflection. And for some of us, when we can share that journey with others, it is a special time of deepening our spiritual lives in community. The pandemic has been difficult in this regard–so many of us miss being with others greatly. This isolation is something that needs healing, just as much as physical ailments.

This series on healing touches many kinds of healing needs: physical, communal and economic, mental, intellectual, and environmental. We are offering some suggestions about how you could formulate groups that is a bit different than one book study for the whole church. Of course, you can choose to have everyone study one resource, but I invite you to think out-of-the-box for a moment.

In this document, you will be introduced to some resources under each of the categories of healing I just mentioned. There may be some people who are more interested in a small group journey about physical health. They would group together to look at one of the resources we have listed (or others you may know about). Another grouping of people might be interested in learning more about mental health so they would choose from the resources on that page. Still others may be passionate about the health of the environment, and so on. It is a kind of grouping based on “interests.” They would use the Suggested Small Group Format page to guide their time, no matter what resource they are studying.

Another option would be for groupings of people to meet to share what they have been journaling in their Individual Reflection pages. This would be more a time of personal sharing than a study of a book. You know your folks and what will work best! Take a look at our suggested small group format:

Suggested Small Group Format - Leader Guide

[see the separate WORD version "Small Group Guide" handout in your downloads that you can use to send out to group members or adapt to create your own]

Opening Circle *(2-3 minutes)*

Once people are gathered together (likely Zoom at this date), everyone lights a candle, and someone (a leader or volunteer from the group) reads a prayer (or prays their own).

Let us pray.
Help us, Healer.
Show us our ability to grow and change.
Forgive our inaction.
Move us to move
one step at a time toward greater care.

In this silence, we sense and acknowledge our yearning for wholeness.

[a few moments of silence]

Amen.

Sharing "Snippets" *1-2 minutes for each person*

Leader: "I invite each one of us to identify a paragraph that stood out to us as we studied our resource this week. When I call on you, please simply announce the page it is on and read the paragraph aloud. We won't discuss it yet."

[the group shares - if you are not studying a book, you can adapt this to "In one minute, please share something you encountered this week that stood out to you about (subject)]

Personal Reflection *3 to 5 minutes of quiet*

Leader: "We will take a few minutes of quiet to reflect. You can journal your thoughts if you like. What needs healing? What is becoming clear as a way to participate in that healing?

Discussion *20-35 minutes*
Help establish the safe space by reading this invitation aloud:

Leader: “In our conversation, everyone is invited to share, but sharing is not required. Please make room for all voices, keeping your contribution to a respectful time limit so everyone has a chance. Whatever is said here stays here – not because we are telling secrets but because we honor that what a person says here is their story to share. Here are some questions to help start our sharing, but we can also just talk about whatever is coming up.”

1. What about the “snippet” you shared got your attention?
2. Have you discovered something this week about being restored to heath?
3. What feels difficult right now?
4. What feels hopeful right now?
5. What could this church do to become a “health hub” for our community?

Closing Prayer

May be said by the Leader or by the whole group. If you all have beach glass pieces, you are invited to hold them at this time.

“Holy Healer,
we give you thanks for our time together.
Let us hold one another in love
like the Holy–though sometimes broken–Vessels that we are.
Let us hold all of Creation as precious works of your divine grace.”
Amen.

Resources to Consider for Small Groups

The next few pages offer some suggestions based on the categories of healing in this series. There are books and activities and suggestions for learning about what other churches are doing as “healing hubs.”

Please note: most of these suggestions have not all been read by me personally, although I’ve spent a great deal of time vetting, researching, looking at reviews and skimming some of them. If you are interested in any of them, please do further research to see if they would be a good fit for your congregation.

You know your congregation best. I’ve curated a lot here: you will want to focus in on what you think will be of most interest and help. These pages could also serve to help you **find out where the passion lies in your congregation so you can discern a direction of action** based on some of the inspirational things churches are doing in each of these categories.

Many blessings, I am praying for you!
Dr. Marcia McFee

Healing Physically

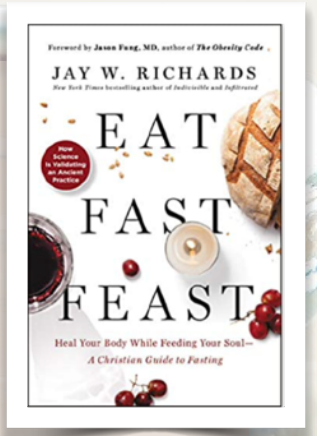
There are many ways that a group could focus on physical healing:

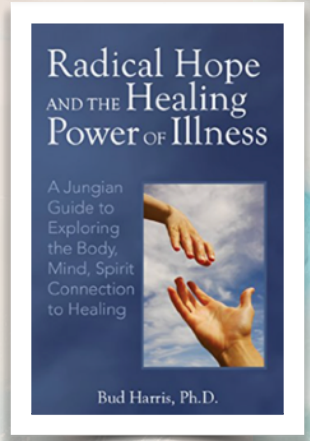
- Follow a particular health program during Lent, such as THIS book on intermittent fasting from a Christian perspective.

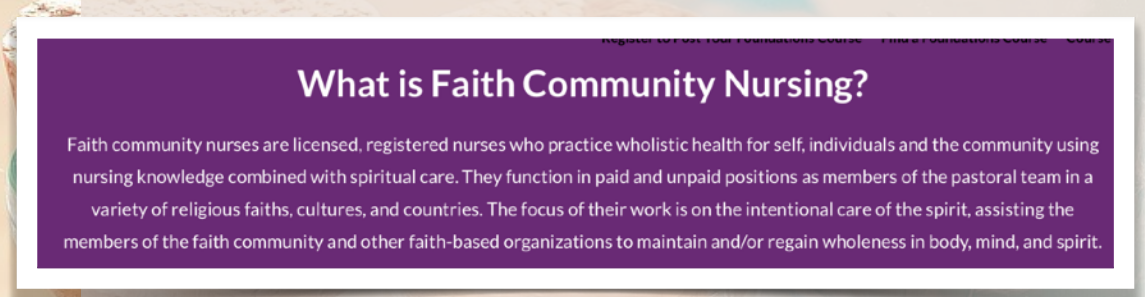


• Meet together to exercise (online or socially-distanced, of course), getting the blood and joy flowing. I'm "walking" the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage right now through THIS program that allows groups of people to do a challenge together.

• Study the connection between mind/body/spirit in healing through a book about the subject. Here is one EXAMPLE.







Inspirational Example for Churches to Consider

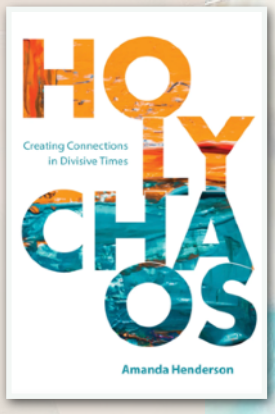
If you are a *Call the Midwife* Netflix series fan, you know that community nurses have a long history. Did you know there is something called **Faith Community Nursing** (also called **Parish Nursing**)? Some people are called into a vocation of nursing specifically based in faith communities. They connect their medical training and their Christianity to serve the community.

Check out THIS 10-minute video and be inspired!
Another another short inspirational video HERE
HERE is an article from a United Methodist publication.
A WEBSITE with lots of links for further research from the Parish Nurses of ELCA
A WEBSITE for the Westberg Institute that offers courses for Faith Community Nursing

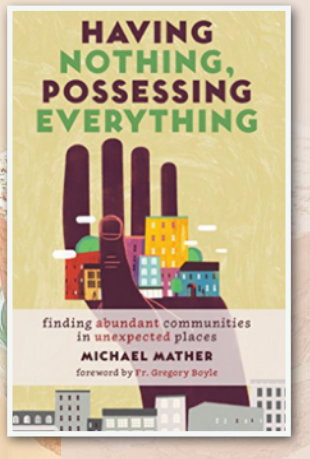
Could your church partner with others in your area in a way that offers some aspect of this kind of ministry? Are there nurses you know who might be interested in this kind of ministry? Could you simply offer yourselves as a site for blood drives and neighborhood health screening days?

Healing Communities, Healing Economically

This topic is fairly broad and so can encompass many different angles. Paying attention to the health of our communities, our relationships, our inequities, our divisions invites many directions. You will need to discern what might be most important for your community to address in study. Here are some ideas that will likely spur you to more research.



- *Holy Chaos* is a book that was written recently so is timely and acknowledges the brokenness of our communities, religious and political, that we must move to healing. You can see a good preview HERE to further discern.



• Mike Mather wrote *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything* about his experience of transformation in a downtown neighborhood church where abundance surfaced out of material poverty. Read an excerpt from the book HERE. Watch a 4 minute video of Mike's Mather's story HERE. See what happens out of changing the question from "how poor are you?" to "what three things do you know how to do that you could teach others?" What gifts already reside in your neighborhood that you could partner with?



• Watch the documentary movie, *The Antidote*, that includes stories of kindness, decency, and the power of community HERE

Inspirational Examples for Churches to Consider

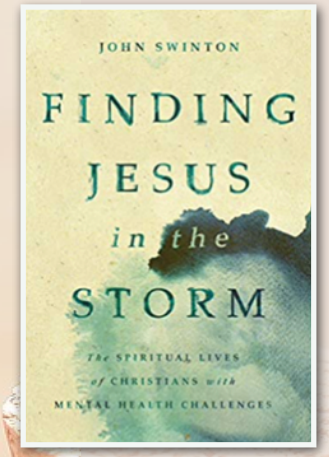
How could the physical-plant you have now become a "health hub" for the community? Pandemic has shown us that the true church is alive regardless of our buildings… we knew that but now we really know it. While we may revere our sanctuaries, we might also reimagine how some re-design could allow for multiple uses, especially a use during the week that would serve the community in some way. That's the best argument for removing pews I've ever heard.

Here are some stories about re-imagined, **"**adaptive re-use**"** of churches. Some are closed churches completely redone for other purposes. But let these ideas spur your imagination. What can you imagine… even if it is just one room of the church? examples from Philadelphia HERE and examples on a Pinterest board HERE.

Or what about a **piece of land** the church sits on or has access to? Check out "Holy Goats" ministry HERE. What about community gardening or beekeeping?

Healing Mentally

The topic of understanding, and therefore destigmatizing, mental illness is one of the most important things we can do. It is particularly important because so many have, and will be, affected by depression and other mental difficulties as a result of the challenges and grief brought on in recent years, but especially this last year. Many in our congregations already live with it, whether themselves or a family member. The church is not always perceived to be a safe place to talk about this. A small group setting could provide a much-needed outlet to learn and to shift perspectives.



• *Finding Jesus in the Storm* is a fairly new publication written by a pastor who is also a psychiatric nurse. It is a "a call for the church to be an epicenter of compassion for those experiencing depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and related difficulties." Check out THIS interview with author John Swinton.

• The Mind & Soul Foundation is a faith-based organization helping churches in the UK deal with mental illness in healthier ways. They have many articles that could offer readings for a small group (check out THIS and THIS example) as well as several BOOKS available on Kindle on specific issues if there are groupings of people who want to hone in on one of them.

• Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries, another UK organization, has made their course available for free online. See more about their video course HERE and more about their mission of preparing "communities of faith around the world to raise awareness, reduce stigma, support mental health, and promote mental wellbeing" HERE.

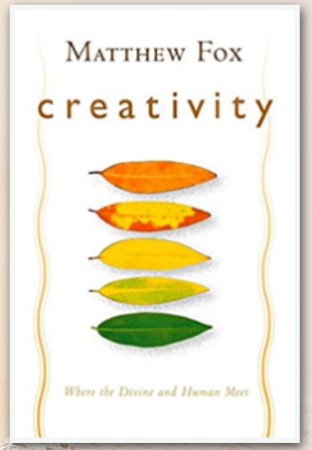
Inspirational Examples for Churches to Consider

Following the example of Mind & Soul's project of creating cards that are appropriate for those suffering emotionally, are there artists or crafters in your church who could take on this **ministry of making cards**, or could you partner with an artist to support this work?

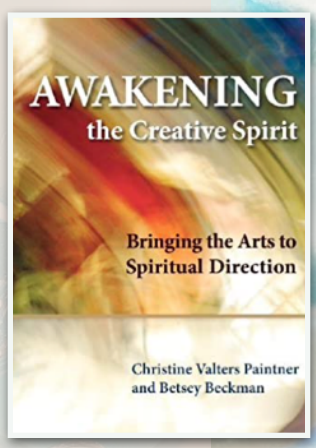
This example is not from a church, but it is so poignant. it provides a powerful example of something very simple being a healing agent. Check out the "Telephone of the Wind" HERE. What **rituals of healing and comfort** could your church provide as we deal with the emotional fallout of pandemic?

Healing Intellectually

Our intellectual health is our vigor, our charge for life, our ability to create and problem-solve. With a lack of this energy, we suffer. This may feel somewhat blurred with mental health in that a lack of intellectual curiosity is often a side effect of depression. However, a focus on recovering a vigorous and interested mind is a kind of healing that is needed whether we suffer from mental illness or not. Indeed, it is part of the demise of many a church that has lost its zest for innovation.



• Theologian Matthew Fox wrote *Creativity: Where the Divine and Human Meet* as an urgent call for our species to reclaim our God-given creativity in order to heal the damage we are doing to earth, to ourselves, to each other. Watch THIS 30-minute video to hear Fox talk about the book and see if this is something you want to suggest to your church for study.



• Christine Valters Paintner and Betsey Beckman offer THIS book which includes artful, meditative practices as well as theory of creativity and spirituality. *Awakening the Creative Spirit* includes a chapter on "Embracing the Arts During Grief and Loss" which could be especially helpful in this time.

Inspirational Examples for Churches to Consider

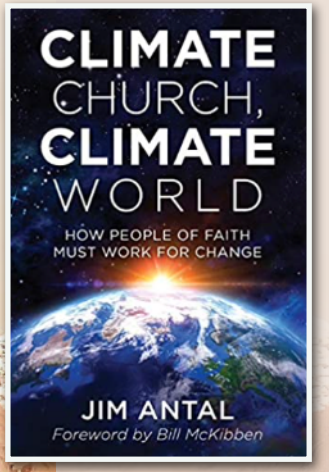

Art and meditation space provides guests a creative space to discover calligraphy, origami, collage makings and other art supplies to explore their own soul work through artistic expression.

The Santa Sabina Retreat Center is the home of a Dominican order of nuns. They offer retreat space for groups all year long. What a joy to discover one of the most magical art studios in their basement with various stations set up for many kinds of art-making simply open and ready for anyone to meditate and create. Do you have space in your church to set up a **community art center**? Also see this wonderful example of a cancer hospital's art program. What about partnering with a hospital in your area?

• Consider setting up a **tutoring program** like THIS one at White Bluff Presbyterian Church. HERE is an informational how-to checklist. Starting with a summer program is a good incremental step. Tutoring and mentoring any age range of folks can be a wonderful exchange of intellectual capital! What do your members or folks in your neighborhood know how to do that they can **teach others**… business, cooking, technology, etc.? A "health hub" is also a "learning hub!"

Healing the Environment

It is likely that you have some folks who are especially committed to learning more about how the church can respond to the need for healing of the environment. This deeply important issue of caring for our home has been far too divisive rather than seen as an existential threat that concerns all of humanity. Here are some resources to consider for a small group focus on this type of healing and recovery.



• Rev. Jim Antal calls for the church to embrace a new vocation so that future generations might live in harmony with God's creation in his BOOK, *Climate Change, Climate Church.* It includes very concrete steps for churches. See more about Rev. Antal HERE and discover links to many organizations to become part of creating change.

Jim's book really is "the" choice for a small group on this topic. But here are links to some other interesting resources for topics of conversation (and no doubt your group will find many more on their own):



• Young activist and *Time* magazine's 2019 "Person of the Year," Greta Thunberg, offers a helpful perspective of the "positive tipping point" – in order to change everything we need everyone HERE

• An ARTICLE and VIDEO about the impact of COVID-19 on the environment.

Inspirational Examples for Churches to Consider

"Scraps KC" is a non-profit STORE and community center that has several deeply good interests in mind: materials reuse (they have diverted 12 tons of material from the landfill since 2016), community development and education, and homeless renewal. Find out about this amazing place and consider how your church might incorporate aspects of this in your own context!

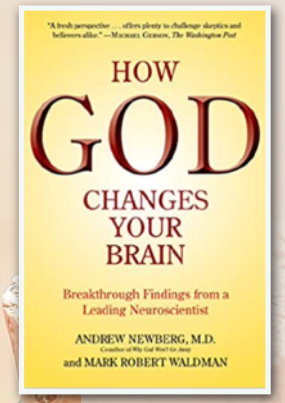


Learn about how you can become involved in Greenfaith, a worldwide, multi-faith climate and environmental network at www.greenfaith.org. Organize a local event for "Sacred People, Sacred Earth" launch on March 11, 2021.

Integrated Health

All throughout this worship series, we have been highlighting the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit. So really, any of the resources above are also about "integrated health." We've highlighted both study and action because, as we say in the Palm Sunday service, we need both words *and* actions for healing. This is a hallmark of all the healing stories of Jesus.

Here are a couple more resources to consider for study that offer a sense of how practice (body) can influence mind and spirit.



• For the neuroscience "nerds" (I'm one of them), this book offers descriptions of how scientific research is helping us explain the effects of spiritual practices on our brains, as well as the neural physicality of our spirituality. Check out Andrew Newburg and Mark Andrew Waldman's *How God Changes Your Brain* HERE. Get a taste of the topic in THIS video in which Newburg says that medical professionals are beginning to really take seriously the integrative nature of our body, mind, spirit connection.



• "Mindfulness" has been around for a long time in history but is becoming more of a common phenomenon in recently in mainstream culture. Professor of Church History and Spirituality, Amy Oden, describes it this way in her highly-acclaimed book, *Right Here, Right Now*: "Many Christians practice mindfulness outside of church and believe it does not belong to our faith tradition. This book reveals the Christian roots of mindfulness and the actual practices that, when reclaimed, deepen the life of faith and the power of our mission of love in the world." This book has a group study guide.

Inspirational Examples for Churches to Consider

Get some ideas for how you might incorporate contemplative ministries at your church by visiting Contemplative Ministries at Claremont Presbyterian HERE and reading THIS article about starting this kind of ministry at your church.

Now is a good time to visit the mindfulness practices led as part of some churches. Here are some links to see what churches are offering (you can find many more online):
Mindfulness Meditation: St. David's Episcopal Church HERE
St. Mark's Episcopal Church Meditation Center HERE
Online Interfaith Meditation Chapel HERE