

Living the Rhythm Through Action-Reflection

The following is a section from *Living the Mission Prayer as Way of Life Field Guide*. It explores how we can go deeper in living the rhythm of Awaken, Risk, and Bless as disciples and communities.

Prior to reading this section you are invited to review the video **Let the Spirit Breathe** at www.missionalleaders.org and consider the following questions:

- How has the Spirit moved you to respond in situations?
- How has your reflection on those experiences led to new understandings and actions?

We have all sensed that impulse to respond, a movement deep within to take action in response to what we experience. Perhaps it was a moving message, a moment in nature, or an encounter with human suffering. What do we do with these impulses? How do we move from encounter to action? Is there a way to take one faithful step at a time, learning and growing as we go?

Reflective practice has roots in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus often reflected with the disciples after an encounter by asking them questions to uncover the deeper meaning behind his actions. Reflective practice also has roots in Ignatian spirituality. Ignatian spirituality teaches us to discern the imprint of the Holy in our daily experience. This requires an ongoing practice of reflection.

In Action-Reflection we take small but significant steps as we move through the rhythm of Awaken, Risk, and Bless. After each step we pause to reflect or look back on the meaning of what we just experienced and how it might reveal the next faithful step.

Action is about choice . . .

- ***to be fully awake.***
- ***to risk something new.***
- ***to become a blessing.***

A choice requires a level of intention on our part. We sense an impulse to go deeper in our interior life or respond in compassionate action to human suffering. Viktor Frankl reminds us, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

As disciples, we understand this “space” to be sacred and the opportunity before us as spiritual freedom.

Reflection is about deep listening and sharing . . .

- *with God.*
- *with One Another*
- *with Our Neighbors.*

In reflection we look back to reenter our experience in order to uncover the meaning of events in our lives. These insights can lead us to new and deeper levels of response as disciples and communities. Patricia O'Connell Killen reminds us in *The Art of Theological Reflection*:

“Most of our life experience go by unnoticed. Sooner or later, however, something happens that causes us to become more aware of our experience.”

In Reflection, we intentionally hit the pause button, so we don't miss the meaning of what we are experiencing and how it calls us into the future.

In western societies we have often placed significant emphasis on reflection before action. According to Maria Cimperman in her book *Social Analysis in the 21st Century*, “In action and reflection we are ultimately contemplatives in action, reflective persons working together in solidarity to bring about the just world we are offered in peace, hope, and love.”

Cimperman is suggesting there is a more wholistic way of missional engagement that integrates reflection along-side action. For example, we can learn about love by first acting in ways that care for the needs of others. If I help a person in need of shelter by offering them a place to stay, I can see the direct impact of my love in action. I can then pause to reflect on my experience. What I am learning? I may learn in working with the homeless that more is required than a few nights of shelter. I may learn that love requires a certain tenacity to help find a longer-term solution to the problem.

What might my next faithful step look like? This reflective question helps turn my learning toward action. Is there a next step I can take as a result of what I have learned?

Action and reflection is less focused on getting the initial step just right and more on being willing to step out and give it a try.

This is what it means to risk something new! Reflection provides the space to learn as we go.

We find this same pattern in many passages of scripture. In Luke 24 (i.e. Road to Emmaus), it was in the action of the breaking of bread that Jesus was revealed. The

two disciples then reflected on their entire experience with Jesus as their hearts burned within them. They then envisioned and took their next step – they immediately returned to Jerusalem to tell the others.

Choosing to be more fully awake, to risk something new, and become a blessing is about a series of small but intentional actions. We then pause in between each action to reflect and explore two primary questions:

- What am I/we learning and discovering?
- How might the Spirit be inviting me/us into the next faithful step?

Taking time for reflection is a critical part of the process. Things always look different when we pause to look back and reflect. We can do this individually on a daily basis (see **Prayer of Examen** under **Initial Practices** on page ____). We can also participate in the reflection process in community. We call this Reflective Conversation. When we do this with receptive listening and open sharing the Spirit blesses us with new insights.

Reflective Conversation is a spiritual practice where we listen deeply for how the Spirit is moving in the life of an individual as they reflect on the two questions above. In this practice we intentionally create the time and space to listen and share with one another each time we gather. The point is not to fix or provide answers but to clarify, ask questions, share impressions, and support one another on the journey. It is about learning as we go.

Before we can engage in meaningful Reflective Conversation, we must explore and address two important questions:

- Have we established a foundation of safety and trust in our community?
- Do we have a shared understanding of what safe and supportive community looks like?

If we don't feel it is safe to share authentic and open sharing will be next to impossible. Many small groups and congregations often skip over this step assuming there is a level of trust and safety. This is often the number one reason groups never make it to share or risk anything new.

See Circle of Trust Touchstones for Safe and Trustworthy Space under Resources for Further Exploration on Page _____. Review and affirm these important shared commitments each time you meet. In addition, review The Listening Lens under Initial Practices on page ____.

What does Reflective Conversation look like in practice?

Reflective Conversation Process:

- ⊙ Often practiced in groups of three or four, each person has an opportunity to reflect on a specific action(s) or experience(s) during the past week. These experiences may include a spiritual practice, new conversation, experiment in ministry, compassionate action, or unexpected encounter.
- ⊙ We begin with 2-3 minutes of silence so each group member can focus on what they desire to share. This enables group members to be fully present with each other while other group members are sharing.
- ⊙ Individual experiences are shared one person at a time by responding to the two questions below:
 - What am I learning and discovering?
 - How might the Spirit be inviting me into the next faithful step?

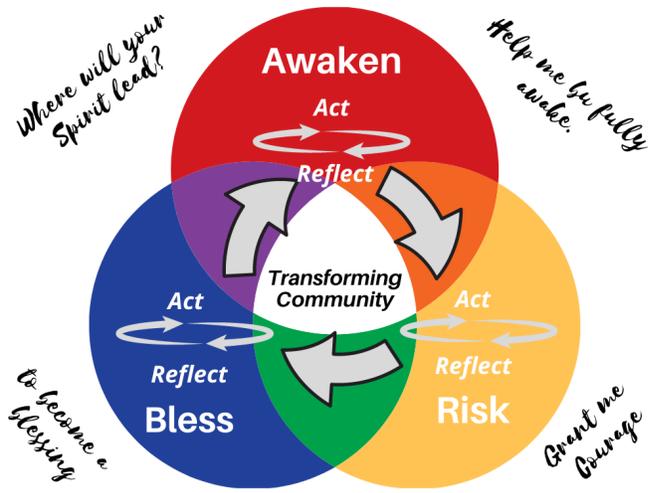
In general, provide each group member 3-5 minutes to share. Before moving to the next person provide a time for group reflection and clarifying questions. We are not solving problems and prescribing solutions. We are sharing impressions, uncovering insights, and exploring potential next steps.

- ⊙ The process for three people to share and have group reflection typically takes about 30 minutes.

This process of Reflective Conversation can become an important opportunity for sharing each time you gather. This sharing and group reflection then becomes the fertile ground to risk new ideas and actions. Consider adding a time for Reflective Conversation as part of what you do under **Living into a Simple Form of Gathering** on page _____. Consider placing this time of sharing under Risk.

If a small group or congregation is living the rhythm of the mission prayer together there will be experiences to share each time we gather. Over time individuals will look forward to this opportunity to share how God is moving in them and ahead of them in their neighborhoods. They will also look forward to hearing and being strengthened by the sharing of others. This is the essence of authentic and loving Christ-centered community.

The graphic below illustrates how acting and reflecting together moves us through the rhythm of Awaken, Risk, and Bless. Although we may initially move through the rhythm sequentially, Awaken, Risk, and Bless is not linear. We of course don't control how and when the Spirit will move in us, among us or ahead of us. We seek to adopt a posture of openness and willingness to risk something new any time the Spirit moves.



As you can see from the diagram, we engage in actions as we move through each step of the rhythm. We always pause to reflect after each action and ask:

- ⊙ *What am I/we learning?*
- ⊙ *How might the Spirit be inviting me/us into the next faithful step?*

Let's go a little deeper by exploring potential actions under Awaken, Risk,

and Bless in the form of some questions:

Awaken - Engage in Individual and Group Spiritual Practices
 (See Initial Practices Below)

We support one another as spiritual companions by engaging in practices that help us awaken to God's movement in us, among us, and ahead of us.

- *How can we adopt a posture of spiritual openness as individuals and communities of Christ's love and peace?*
- *What is one inward and one outward spiritual practice I will engage in?*
- *What is one inward and outward spiritual practice we will engage in as community?*

Risk - New Questions, Conversations, Relationships, and Compassionate Actions

Practices both inward and outward help us become fully awake to diversity, beauty, and human and environmental degradation. We reflect on insights and potential next steps as individuals and gathered community. We then support one another as we risk something new one step at a time.

- *As I reflect on my experiences individually and in community what new insights or questions are challenging my/our status quo? Where am I being led to alleviate physical or spiritual suffering?*
- *How might the Spirit be prompting me/us to risk a new or deeper conversation, relationship, compassionate action, or form of community?*
- *How will we support one another as we engage in missional experiments or compassionate actions? Specifically, how will we be companions for one another, so no one walks alone?*

Bless - Explore and Celebrate Learnings, Clarify Core Identity and Purpose, Discover and Live a Sustainable Future

We gather together to celebrate the blessing of our experiences, clarify our core identity and purpose, and then explore how we sustain this way of becoming a blessing to others.

- *How will we create opportunity to pause and celebrate each faithful step taken and all the insights we have gained?*
- *How have we received blessing as we have risked new conversations and relationships?*
- *As we look back on our journey, what is at the very center of who we are and are becoming? Is our journey leading us beyond ourselves to new relationships and opportunities to alleviate human suffering and heal the earth?*
- *Are there actions or experiments that have the potential to become ongoing and sustainable ministries?*
- *Are there activities or ministries we need to discontinue to make room for what is emerging? (See Evaluating Our True Capacity for Mission on page___)*

At the heart of living the mission prayer is a willingness to experiment our way into the future one faithful step or action at a time. We create an open posture of discovery vs. a rush to implement the next best solution or program. This openness to discovering our future, God's future, is at the heart of what it means to be a prophetic people. We act, we experience, we reflect and learn, and we take the next step because in liminal space (i.e. the space in between the present and future) the next step is often all that is clear.

JR Woodward and Dan White in the Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities remind us of the critical importance of each small step:

We'd rather have fast, furious, fantastic growth. Yet we must pay attention to the small if we want to recover our movemental beginnings. It's within the small that disciples are formed and are sent into neighborhoods for the sake of God's mission. Within the small, communities learn to gather under the essentials of being the church. We need to water the small, over and over, and allow God to bring fruitfulness. The power of movement is in the power of God's Spirit blowing on the smallest embers.

Sometimes we have difficulty seeing the significance of small steps taken. As we reflect back over time, we can see how we have been shaped by the Spirit to become who we are called to become – spiritually formed communities of compassionate action locally and globally. We become a people who don't just speak and sing of Zion but live, love, and share as Zion one faithful step at a time (Doctrine and Covenants 165:6a)

Questions for Reflection and Action:

- Review the video **Open Your Eyes** at www.missionalleaders.org . How can a simple spiritual practice shape what unfolds during our day? Why is this essential to our journey as disciples and authentic and loving Christ-centered communities?
- Review how action and reflection applies to each step of the rhythm of Awaken, Risk, and Bless. What actions are you drawn to explore?
- Explore the significance of Reflective Conversation. Why is it important to create opportunities to talk about what we are experiencing when we gather? How can conversation lead to deeper relationships, new insights, and new compassionate actions?

- How can we create more time and space for Reflective Conversation in our times of gathering? What do we need to consider suspending for a while to more consistently engage with one another as companions on the journey?
- Is our community a safe place to share, envision, and risk new actions and experiments? If not, how can we begin to build trust and a willingness to risk sharing?
- How can we engage children and youth in our conversations? (See Spiritual Practices for Children under **Initial Practices**)