

Forum Young Theology

Taking responsibility – giving hope – being visible

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Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)
Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communión d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



About

In this Journal you will find the results of our work



Protestantism is a minority phenomenon in many regions of Europe and is therefore particularly challenged to address questions of identity, focussing on a perspective for the future. Young Protestants in particular experience a tension between this diaspora situation on the one hand and the identity-forming affiliation to European Protestantism and worldwide Christianity on the other.

At the same time, new formats of possibilities of participation – both digital and analogue - arise. Established formats of institu-

tional participation, such as parliaments and synods, are complemented by non-institutional activist movements. This leads to a pluralization of public discourse and an emergence of new spaces of discourse.

During a digital academy with 7 online lectures 2022/2023 and a conference in Sibiu in April 2023, young theologians from several European countries discussed in the Forum Young Theology in Europe (FYTE) how in the different European churches participation within society and also within the church itself can be enhanced and visibility of the churches can be achieved.

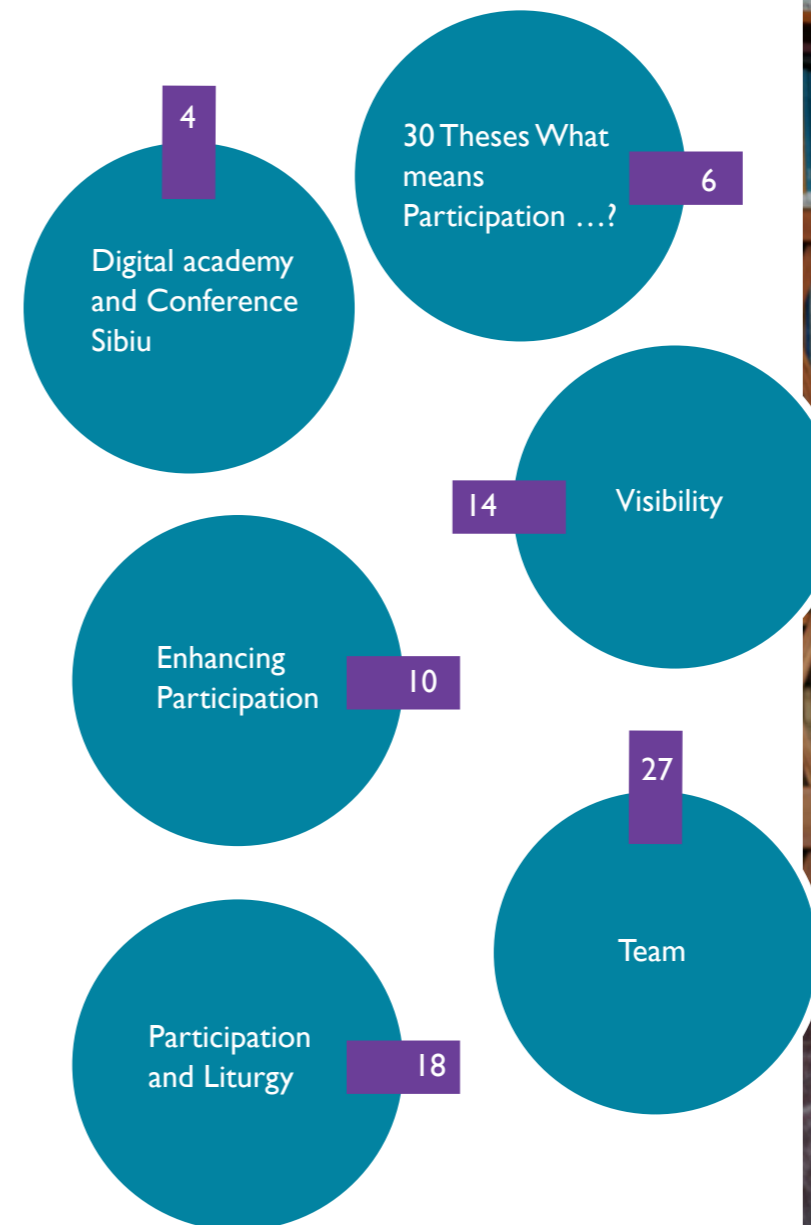
The FYTE aims at forming a European network of young theologians, to deepen the understanding of the challenges European Protestantism faces in different countries and to produce specific outputs for practice in school, parish and civil society debates.

The FYTE held two digital academies and two conferences

(the results of the first conference are published in a separate Journal): The Digital Academies bring together experts of different disciplines in order to provide deeper knowledge of the subjects discussed and to initiate discussions between the participants. During the conferences, the participants can profit from interpersonal exchange of experiences from different European countries and work together on the outputs mentioned above.

The project was initiated by PD Dr. Volkmar Ortman and Dr. Mirjam Sauer.

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Digital academy

Protestantism and Participation



7 Lectures – a multitude of insights

Only by participating in church and other social networks Protestants can share what they have, learn new things, celebrate life and ultimately put their theological insights into practice. This is one of the insights participants at the second digital academy of the Forum Young Theology in Europe shared. Mirjam Sauer, who was highly committed to developing the whole project and to execute the digital academies and conferences made clear during one of the

lectures how fundamental the idea of participation is within Christianity: "Everybody can contribute with his or her gifts and skills to our church and this is also a biblical demand." During the 7 lectures, held between November 2022 and February 2023, mainly young theologians from different European countries and churches met every fortnight via Zoom to listen to presentations on topics like participation in minority situations or Peace Ethics, to discuss these topics and to share their experiences.

During the lectures, it became clear that participation relating to Protestantism refers to both, participation within the church as well as participation of the church and its members within society; members of the church being interspersed in their mostly secular living and working contexts is a great opportunity for participation within society.

The participants added valuable insights from their respective contexts, presenting a vast spectrum of European Protestantism - from the Protestant Church A.B. in Romania living in close neighbourhood with the Orthodox Church to members of the Waldensian Church in Italy, existing in a society with a predominantly catholic background or Protestants living in (Eastern) Germany in a mainly secular society. But detached from any local background, the outcome of the lectures can be summed up by what Volkmar Ortman, one of the organisers of the Forum Young Theology in Europe concluded: „Participation is part of the DNA of Protestantism!“



Conference

Sibiu

12-15 April 2023

Taking responsibility - giving hope - being visible

was the title of the conference held in Sibiu, Romania from 12th-15th April. 12 theologians – all of them in early stages of their careers - from 9 European countries met to discuss where Protestant influences manifest themselves in European societies and where Protestantism becomes visible. "Theology unites Europe!" commented Volkmar Ortman, associate professor at the University of Giessen and one of the organisers of the conference, seeing the lively discussions between participants coming from very different backgrounds and regions.

In the keynote lecture of the conference, PD Dr. Christine Schliesser from the University of Zurich characterised a time of social crisis: increasing fears (e.g. facing war), a lack of solidarity and of grand visions for the society of the future. Schliesser developed possibilities to counteract this crisis along the lines of the title of the conference and the lecture: "Taking Responsibility - Giving Hope - Being Visible":

The responsibility that Christians are to take on in the world is above all a responsibility for others. (Christian) hope lives from a

radical picture of the future. It is based on God's reconciling action on human beings, emerges in unexpected places and resists false hopes. Both, taking responsibility and pointing to hope, are ultimately important in the visibility of the churches. Schliesser emphasises that the churches in Europe are facing the challenges of this time together. This gives rise to many approaches for ecumenical action.

In short presentations about their respective countries, the participants got to know each other and the churches and countries they were coming from. As André Stephany, a participant coming from Switzerland described it: "This conference has been yet another eye-opener for me how diverse and interesting the wider protestant family really is." The presentations deepened the understanding for the different backgrounds and laid the foundation for the following work in smaller groups.

On the following pages, you will find the results of these group works that can be used in school, parish and civil society debates.

30 Theses

What means Participation for us as Protestant Christians?

PREAMBLE and SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

- 1** Participation is essential and constitutive for Christian existence.
- 2** As human beings, we inevitably belong to our natural, social and spiritual environment. That is: We are related to God, ourselves, other human beings and the animate as well as inanimate nature.
- 3** As Christians, we understand ourselves as a part of creation in relationship with the ultimate Creator, who gave humans – made in the image of God – the capacity to likewise be creative, which enables us to be an active part of the environment as “creative co-creators” [Gen 1].
- 4** As Christians, we are called to mutually encourage and support one another to unfold gifts and talents, for the edification of the entire body of Christ and the benefit of the world, each one of us according to one’s individual vocation and capacity [Eph 4].
- 5** In the Holy Eucharist, God offers us to take part in him and his work of redemption. Receiving this grace, Christians naturally will share themselves and their gifts with the environment [1 Cor 11].
- 6** As life is always full of contrasting realities, the following theses bring together contrasting experiences and perspectives which are to be understood as complementary rather than oppositional. Therefore, alongside positive statements, the following theses also take into account the risk of ending up in one-sided positions.



I. TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

- 1** To understand life as a gift and the world as creation asks for a responsible interaction with the environment.
- 2** Becoming responsible is a process, which must be renewed always afresh. It involves personal inward examination of one’s gifts and talents and as well as attentive listening to the needs of the environment. Church can be the training area for such a process of learning and taking responsibility.
- 3** Participation necessarily oscillates between self-conscious assumption of a personal mission and the attitude of social humbleness. Empowerment is both an action of God as well as a mutual responsibility between humans.
- 4** In order to strengthen participatory responsibility, working effectively cannot be oriented exclusively towards a certain end-product, but must deliberately give space for participation. The impact this approach can have on individuals, society and church is to be taken into consideration.
- 5** There is a risk that taking responsibility ends up in intrusive paternalism, restricting the responsibility of one’s neighbour.
- 6** There is a risk that through hybris one tries to do and to bear everything alone, forgetting that God is always holding superior responsibility.
- 7** We are called and empowered to participate in God’s responsibility and to share it.

II. GIVING HOPE

- 1 Christian hope is unpredictable, inaccessible, and yet never far to us.
- 2 Christian hope is grounded in the Easter existence. In celebrating the Resurrection, Christians participate in the Easter laughter and learn to laugh defiantly and truculently – right in the face of evil.
- 3 The Church consists of ‘fools in Christ’, who, despite a supposedly hopeless existence, nevertheless answer to the needs of the world with the stubborn irony of faith.
- 4 Sense cannot be purchased, nor grasped nor guaranteed. Against a consequent but fatal frustration, faith relentlessly puts a counter-reality: God’s perspective.
- 5 The everyday existence full of paradoxes becomes the space for the Church’s participation in world and society. Instead of fleeing the world, Christians start acting with a paradoxical optimism.
- 6 There is a risk to mistake our own hope with the hope God has for us. As “We do not hold on hope; hope holds on us” in sharing in God’s communion, we can be touched by that hope and be encouraged to accept the challenge.
- 7 There is a risk that, in search of hope, one demands for guarantees. These, however, can only lead to an illusionary safety preventing one from accepting reality and building a counter-reality.
- 8 We are called and empowered to participate in God’s hope and to share it.

III. BEING VISIBLE

- 1 Responsibility and hope are invisible. Yet, the consequences of Christian faith do not necessarily have to be invisible as well.
- 2 The Church celebrates Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. In celebrating God’s incarnation, we share in the creator who became visible human flesh.
- 3 As the welcoming God suffered from not being welcomed in his own creation, he asks church communities to be welcoming, empathetic, safe, and participatory spaces.
- 4 God encourages his followers to be light and salt of the world. Because we often are dull and tasteless, he himself enables us to let our – that’s: his – light shine among the people. This encouragement applies also and especially to Protestants in fear of doing good works out of pride.
- 5 While in a missional church humbleness and a tactfulness remain important, it’s equally important that God as the source remains potentially visible in what Christians say and do.
- 6 There is a risk that we hide God’s light as source of our lives and try to make visible our own personal efforts and achievements.
- 7 We are at risk of putting the light of the Church’s good works under a bushel. This can happen in a diaconial church which fears to appear unprofessional when giving Christian testimony or in other cases of false adaption and self-abandonment. The Bible encourages us to not be ashamed of the Gospel but to confidently stand up for it.
- 8 We’re called and empowered to participate in God becoming visible and to share it’s visibly.



CONCLUSION

We, participating in God’s creation, are called by God to responsibly take part in his movement of hopeful counter-reality and to visibly share our trust with our environment, while thereby celebrating the foretaste of the hidden heavenly kingdom yet to be fully and visibly accomplished.

Enhancing Participation in the Congregation



“Taking Responsibility – Giving Hope – Being Visible” – these goals mentioned in the title of the 2023 meeting of the Forum Young Theology require a rethinking of the way we teach our doctrine in our communities. The experiences of the recent years show a great gap between the formation of the ministers and that of the church members, so that the engagement in the church is impeded by the lack of knowledge about the beliefs of the church and consciousness of the importance of liturgy. Our goal is to develop strategies to help church members in an ecumenical context to participate both in the life of the congregation and in the society as conscious Christians.

The following suggestions can be used to develop ideas to be applied in different contexts and churches.

1 Using our Strength
“For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance.”
(Mt 25,29)

- Learning by heart
- Taking advantage of our skills

2 Empowering Ministries
“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”
(1 Cor 12,4-6)

- Assigning roles
- Sharing knowledge

3 Education about Social Media
“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”
(John 4,24)

- Debunking fake news
- Educating members to an active and responsible use of Social Media.

1. Practical examples

The preceding biblical quotations can motivate further reflection on the relationship between our possibilities and the faith we confess. The following practical examples shall improve the involvement and internal formation of congregation members.

Building a stable foundation

Guiding Children (approx. age 4-12) to learn important biblical texts by heart builds a stable foundation for a Christian identity on which further participation and action within the community can be based.

Suggested texts for this age

- Our father
- 10 commandments
- Some important pericopes (examples: Jesus sayings from the canonical gospels; first verses of the Prologue of John; Rm 1,17 etc.)

Learning texts as part of a game helps children to stay motivated:

- Choose an appropriate text and read it out loud to children without saying anything about the following game.
- We should prepare the space and the material for the game in advance according to the following instructions:
 - Write the words of the chosen texts on some objects (stones; fish-shaped paper; leaves etc.).
 - Hide the objects in a prepared space and let the children find them.
 - Put the words together in order to reconstruct the text.
 - Ask the children to repeat the text assigning specific challenges (for example: covering some of the words and asking specific groups or children to fill the gaps).

Every further lesson you can repeat the same text and adding new words/texts to the previous ones.

The key of this exercise is developing attention and stimulating repetition, so it's necessary to plan this kind of game and goals to cover several months or even years. In some months you will already observe good and unexpected results in terms of knowledge in the children.



2. Taking advantage of our skills: what protestants are good at



The protestant churches have a strong exegetical tradition. Ministers are almost always required to learn biblical languages as part of their education and they are trained to read and explain difficult texts. The skills should be implemented in the everyday life of the congregation as a possibility for the interested, not only for church members but open to everyone.

This could mean:

an introduction to the grammar of a specific language structured as weekly appointment according to the needs of the participants. One of the most important aspects is to provide a good advertising of the course in advance taking advantage of social media, local newspapers, or local high

schools. Offering this type of course provides two fundamental opportunities: First, it can be an excellent way to provide exegetical foundations for committed lay people in the community thus supporting involvement in preaching (where provided for by church ordinances) or catechesis for younger people. Second, it allows a specific feature of the church to be shown that is often, especially in more peripheral settings, not present in other religious communities.

Accrediting oneself with the local population as an “expert” in the Bible can play an important evangelizing and witnessing role, as well as promoting the idea of a church that is active in its own specific field, without giving the impression of pursuing political agendas dictated by others.

Hold periodic monthly meetings on a specific ethical issue that may be felt as important by the community, inviting experts in the field who come from theological academic fields. In particular, it would be desirable to rebuild cohesion, where it does not already exist, between university chairs of systematic theology and biblical exegesis and local communities, fostering the idea that theological faculties are an active part of the church and play a unique and important role in preserving the thinking and skills necessary for effective witness to the gospel. Especially in contexts where there are not many cultural initiatives this would be a great way to showcase the specific skills of Protestant church traditions, sparking interest and even vocations.

3. Sharing Knowledge

This point is very similar to the previous one but addresses the practical training of church members. In every community there are people who are more committed than others, based on each person's free vocation. The pastor does not hold the monopoly of care in human relationships in a community, but rather a healthy church should also have internal support networks among its members.

Courses primarily aimed at the elders of the community, the church council or at any rate the people who show the most interest could cover subjects like learning how to handle conflict in relationships, or counselling and listening basics for community members. These courses can bear extraordinary fruit in helping and supporting ordained ministers and developing interest and involvement in people.

This could also mean creating a “grassroots” diaconal initiative in a given context. You might be surprised how similar initiatives can build commitment and involvement in people, and especially help to grow in specific skills.



4. Involving People

Distributing a meal to needy people in a given neighborhood, setting up food collections for large families, organizing an after-school program for children in the area who do not belong to the community, are all good, possible and realistic signs of increasing internal involvement of members. The biggest obstacle usually consists in the prejudice that people are not willing to get involved. Instead, asking what people think will help in that specific context, and proposing a specific plan to the community can have excellent effects, involving people in all age groups.

Pastors probably have more practical knowledge to share than they are often aware of. Each should ask themselves how to value what can be done with joy and competence that will help in the precise context in which they are called to work.

Conclusions

All of these examples and advice are motivated by direct experience of their active operation in the context of the Waldensian church in Italy and in the Hungarian Reformed Church of Transylvania. Each one should carefully evaluate his or her own context in particular, paying attention also to the prior training of church members and above all listening first to the needs already present in the community, and in general in the place and society in which it is present. We hope that by grace the ideas presented can be useful tools in the service of spiritual and material edification of faith communities.

István Tasnádi
Vittorio Secco

Visibility

Let's create a process!

Being a Christian is always expressed in concrete action, not only in the inner circle, but also in society in general. Therefore, we and our roots become visible.

The following outline offers a suggestion on how the church can get involved in a specific way in a neighborhood and become visible: During a storytelling café, a low-threshold format, different people can engage with each other. Community members, "witnesses"

(people affected by a chosen topic and/or their advocates), neighbours, activists and politicians from the district are invited. A very good moderator ensures that everyone is heard. Thus, the parish gives an impulse to society and ideally this leads to a series of storytelling cafés in other places in the district.

Beyond this event, results/ outputs can be online and offline solidarity campaigns, but also a handout that enables other congregations to con-

duct similar discussion processes in their neighbourhoods, whereby the format can be implemented in both urban and rural areas. The general outline of the project is completed by an example how the storytelling café could look like taking up the question of how climate injustice affects homeless people.

Math 5, 14-16: You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Biblical basis

Math 5, 46: For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

ACTING makes us visible: we are not helping only our friends

VISIBILITY: Not hiding us, being the light

Visible places

- Parish hall
- church
- other accessible places within the parish

Targetgroups

- our community
- our neighbourhood
- guests: witnesses, institutional and NGO's representatives, also politicians(!)

Goals

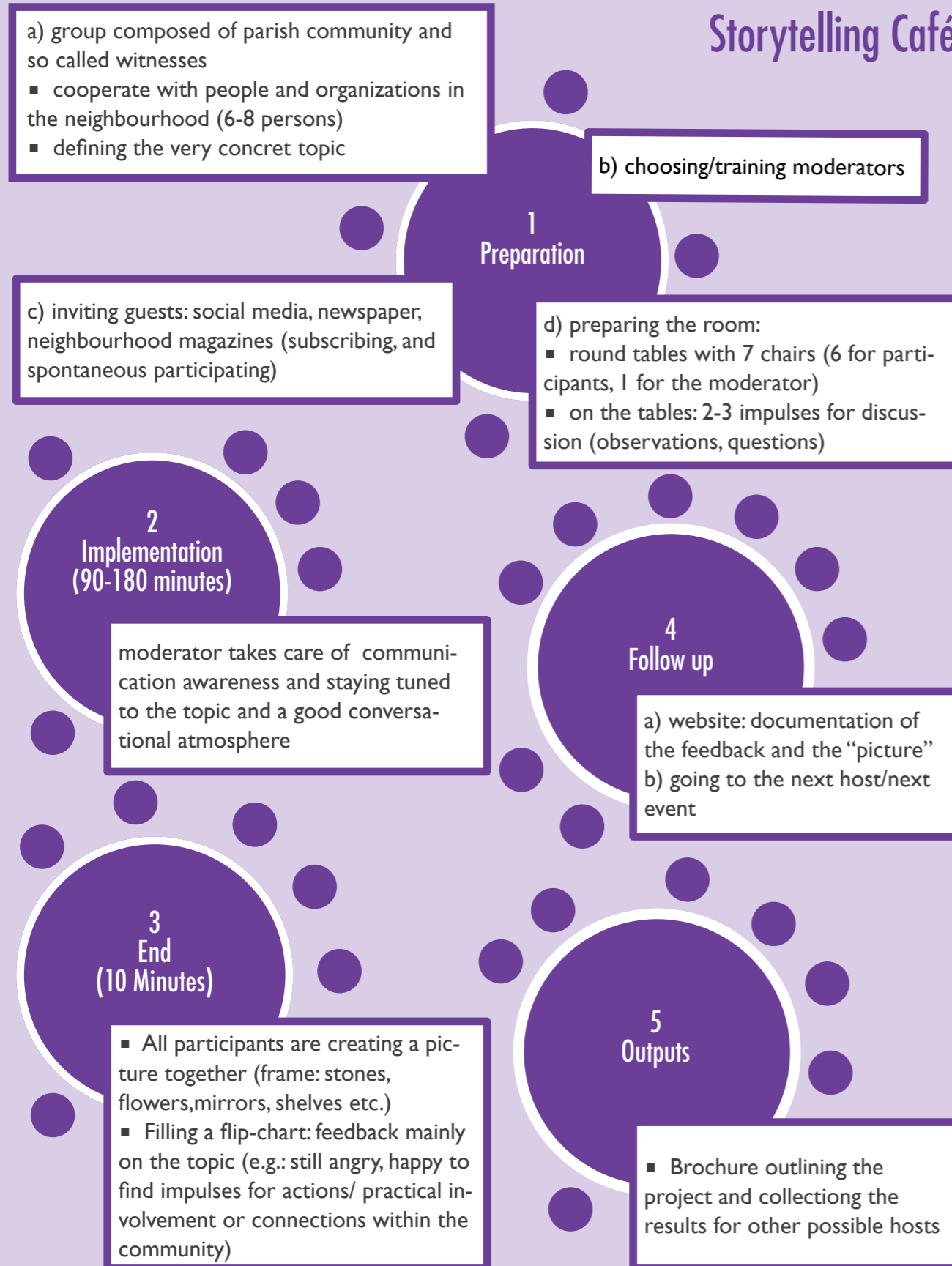
- 1 topic: protestant church is setting an agenda
- 2 creating awareness
- 3 encounter
- 4 start a process
- 5 filling blank places
- 6 participation: people get information how to act
- 7 giving hope
- 8 information
- 9 encouragement
- 10 being connected to our neighbourhood and contemporary issues

Topics

- contemporary issues
- subjectes that are relevant for people within the congregation and within the neighborhood



Storytelling Café



Topic

How climate injustice affects homeless people



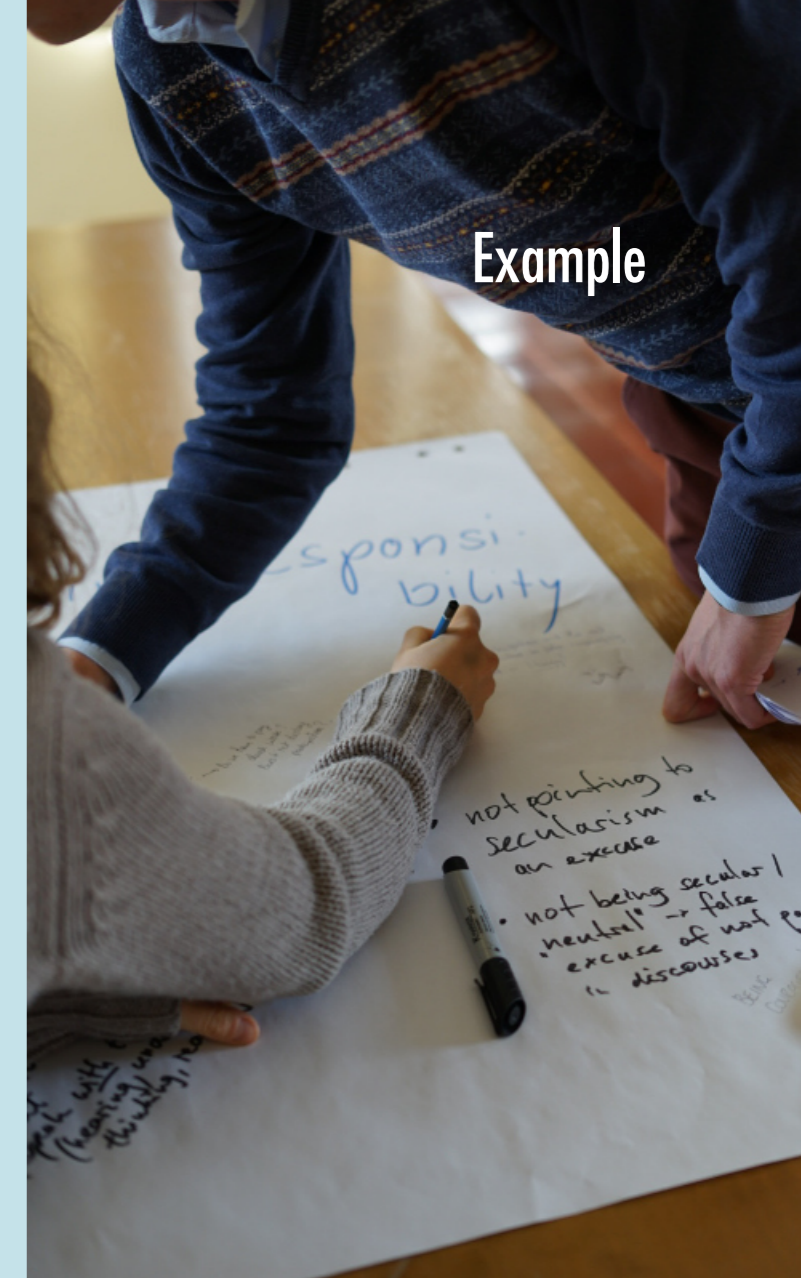
Preparatory group

- Preparatory group: organizing team from the parish, witnesses: actual and/or former homeless people, people working in shelters, soup kitchens etc.



Training Moderators

- Providing information on the topic: Data on the number of homeless people living in the area, charts showing the development of the climate in the region etc.,
- Having a first discussion on the subject within the group in order to collect points of discussion /impulses, e.g. awareness that the topic includes local aspects like "What can we do to help homeless people during a heat wave?" as well as global aspects concerning climate change,
- Make a plan how to react on attempts to digress from the topic, for example if people blame homeless people for living on the street, argue that other problems are more important etc.



Example



Impulses for discussion

- Observations of drought, e.g.: "The trees around the corner needed last year more water"
- Observations of homeless persons within the community, e.g.: "There are homeless persons every day looking for shadow, water and food in the church entry, sitting on the stairs."

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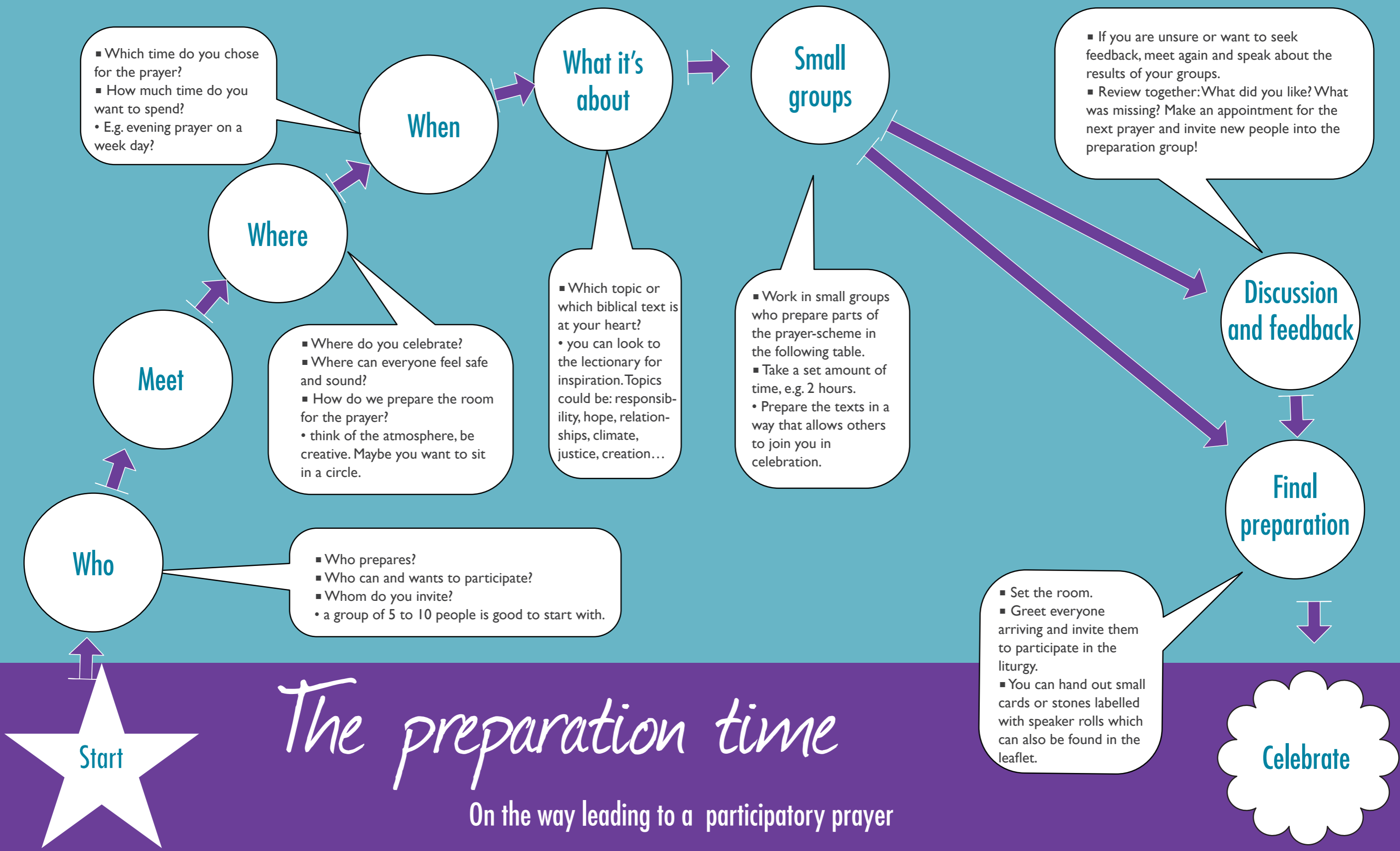
Participation and Liturgy

Why do we need a participative liturgy?

Liturgy is the backbone of our life of faith in community. In our different home churches, there are different liturgical forms because our cultural contexts and histories are different. But how can people engage with their own liturgy? How can they feel included in this effort of speaking about God and God's relation to humanity? How can they be called to participate more and not letting the entire liturgical work to pastors or theologians? In the following, you will find some liturgical propositions for the preparation of a common prayer in your community especially with teenagers and young adults.

We invite people who are interested in doing such a project to meet before to discuss their liturgy with the help of the documents below. We recommend that they meet at least one week before the event and that they organize the room in a circular disposition (chairs forming a circle) on the preparation day as well as on the prayer day. It is so nice to see each other! During both times it is also important, in order to be welcoming to everyone, to make sure that the place is not too noisy. Finally, it is important for us to make sure that everyone feels good with the roles they received. We want people to participate more but we want that they do so with consent. The prayer should be a safe space.

The most important role is the role of the person doing the greetings at the entry of the prayer room which is not necessarily the pastor's role. They have the task of welcoming the participants but also of allocating the different "liturgical roles" and explaining how the prayer will take place. About the allocation of roles: We suggest using coloured stones with one colour affiliated to one liturgical role. Example: the person who picked the red stone is going to read the Scripture. The stones are given by the "greeting person" at the entry.



The preparation time

On the way leading to a participatory prayer



Liturgical examples

Intercessions

We think that it is important to arrange some time of silence in the prayer of intercessions so that people can find time for themselves. Our advice is not to formulate a prayer in too much detail but to give some directions for the people so that they have ideas for their prayer. They are invited to stay in silence or to say something (for example, this can also be just a single name or a single word, e.g. "Peace", "my mother", "Martha" ...).

Example

God you know us and you know our needs. Thank you for accompanying us in our daily life and for never letting us alone.

We pray to you for:

- The Christian Church all over the world – silence
- Peace in the World – silence
- Climate Justice – silence
- Social and Economic Justice – silence
- Actual events and occasions – silence
- Suffering and deprived people – silence
- Young people everywhere – silence
- People we bear in our heart: here people can say names if they want to
- Our local community ...

It is also possible in the preparation time to ask people to write topics they want to pray about. They can write them on small sheets of paper.

We pray all these things in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, and now we all say the prayer we learned with him : Our Father in Heaven...

Greeting & Arrival

L1 (yellow stone): At this time and place, we gather in the name of God.

All In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

L1 (yellow stone): At this time and place, we come together seeking your presence.

All We are seeking your healing word.

L2 (green stone): We stand before you as we are, with our faults and wounds.

All Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy

L2 (green stone): We raise our voices to praise you and give you thanks.

All Holy, holy, holy Lord, God Almighty. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

Blessing

For the blessing, one option is to stand up in circle and to put the right hand on the shoulder of their right neighbour. Another option is to put one hand in the air for a collective blessing.

L1 (yellow stone): Your blessing makes us free to live.

All We ask for your blessing.

L2 (green stone): Your blessing sends us out to be lights in the world.

All We ask for your blessing.

L2 (green stone): God bless us and keep us.

All God make your face shine on us and be gracious to us. God look upon us with favour and grant us peace. Amen.

Small groups



In the place
In community
In the presence of God

What is it about?

Why have we gathered?
What do we bring with us to God
How is God receiving us?

What can you do?

Greeting (responsively)
Silence
Music
Hymn spoken responsively

How can many participate?

Different persons speak and everyone responds. See example.



To Gods word in the scripture
To Gods spirit in our hearts
To our communal creed

What is it about?

How does the bible speak into our everyday life?
What does it provoke in me?

What can you do?

Reading

How can many participate?

Share the reading between roles
Write your own creed ...



With our concerns

What is it about?

What is on our heart?
Where do we and our world need God – and God us?

What can you do?

Prayer of Intercession
Our father
...

How can many participate?

Combine silence, opportunities to say names, single intercessions, sing, collect concerns on small papers
See example



At Gods table

What is it about?

God meets us in the table community, in bread and wine

What can you do?

Ask your pastor to celebrate communion with you if you wish to do so

How can many participate?

Ask you pastor if someone can assist them during communion with the prayers, ...



What is it about?

How do you return to everyday with God at your side?

What can you do?

blessing

How can many participate?

Circle with hands
See example

What is it about?

Praising God with music, with our voices, experiencing community

What can you do?

You can use every (spiritual) song that fits.

How can many participate?

Songs and music can be added in each part of the liturgy. Think of the length of the prayer. Explore your abilities!



Team

To connect so much in such a short time



The Forum Young Theology in Europe is organized by the Evangelischer Bund Hessen together with the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the Center for Protestant Theology East (ZETO) and is co-financed by the Erasmus+ program of the European Union. PD Dr. Volkmar Ortmann and Dr. Mirjam Sauer from the Evangelischer Bund Hessen, Dr. Oliver Engelhardt and Kathleen Müller from CPCE and Gerhard Servatius-Depner from ZETO are significantly involved in the design and implementation of the project. Project managers Elisabeth Engler-Starck and Marcel Kehr take care of the administrative processes and consult together with Hans Genthe the public relations of the project.

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Published by
Evangelischer Bund Hessen e.V.
Ernst-Ludwig-Str. 7
D-64625 Bensheim
www.eb-hessen.de

Project responsibility:
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Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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