Service outline

Practical Action is delighted to offer these worship resources to your church family. It is a chance to focus on fellowship with some of the poorest people across the globe, and the ways they can transform their lives. The ideas are suitable for all ages, and can be adapted for particular audiences. You can find more service ideas, and materials, at www.practicalaction.org/churchservices

Note that this service is especially suitable for Winter.

Introduction to this service

In a remote village in Zimbabwe lives Thulani Sibanda. She is a widow who survives by growing sorghum, maize, ground nuts and vegetables. This season she was able to only harvest 40kgs of maize, enough to last 2 months. She used to get 300kg, but the unpredictable droughts and floods are killing plants and destroying the soil. Her family now only eats once a day, and Thulani said, “It hurts me as a mother not being able to feed my family, I don’t have time to rest. Even at night I’m always thinking about how I can provide for my family”.

The charity Practical Action will harness the sun’s power to help Thulani and her neighbours. Electricity from solar panels will raise water from low-lying rivers and aquifers, and irrigate her fields when they are dry.

Practical Action will also supply seed cultivars which can withstand extreme weather, and build market gardens that protect plants and livestock from seasonal floods. And Thulani said she will seize the opportunity;

“If I can only get water through solar power, I can grow more vegetables to eat and sell!”

If the service is in the winter: We are in the grip of winter, and our own ground is cold, and nothing is growing in our fields and gardens. It is hard to imagine a sun which can strip moisture from fields so that healthy maize withers in just days. But it is happening, and it can be stopped with simple technology, and every penny your church is able to give will help Practical Action to beat poverty for women like Thulani.
Welcome and explanation

Welcome the congregation and explain that this is a service with a special focus on the slow, sure way God’s love transforms our lives, when we invite Him in. Explain that you will be using the example of Practical Action, and their work in Zimbabwe, to explore this topic. Read them the introduction on the front of this sheet, which tells the story of Thulani.

The problem Thulani faces isn’t the sun and rain – these are what her seeds need to grow! The problem is the changing weather pattern which has made the sun and rain very unpredictable, and more extreme. Every year the dry season starts earlier, and lasts longer, and is hotter. The rains, when they finally come, are torrential and destroy the villagers’ market gardens. So together with her community, Thulani is helping build Practical Action’s simple, innovative solar irrigation system, and they are rethinking their planting methods, to overcome climate change.

Small, simple changes like the ones Thulani is making can bring about long-term change – in her example, to feed a whole community. When we start a journey of faith, we don’t know what our destination will be, we just take that first step. In this service, we think about the changes that happen when we let God’s word enter our hearts.

Opening prayer

The Church of England Collect.

Loving God, as we gather together, we give thanks for Your word, for Your son, and for Your grace.

Your word through the gospels that guide and instruct us. Your son who showed us how to walk in the light. Your grace which enfolds us, now and forever.

Loving God, as we stand before You, we ask for the courage to let You change our lives.

For our hands to do Your deeds
For our tongues to speak Your words
For our hearts to fill with Your praise

Loving God, open our eyes to Your presence within us, and around us, and beside us, every day of our lives.

Through the Grace of Christ our Lord, Amen.

Opening song suggestions

Lord for the Years – Timothy Dudley Smith
Our God Reigns – Leonard E Smith

Confession

God of love and light,

Forgive us when we close our ears, eyes, and heart to You. Forgive us when we turn away from those who need us. Forgive us when we are arrogant and selfish

We are sorry when we ignore the beauty of Your world, When we are too busy to admire the sunset, When we fail to care for Your creatures and Your creation.

Help us let go of grudges, and remember that we are all Your children, And that what divides us is shallow, and what unites us is eternal. This very moment, let us take a step towards You, and towards our salvation.

Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Bible reading

Mark 4:30-32
Romans 12, 1-12
Talk

Start with Thulani Sibanda, who will take part in Practical Action’s project. The small, practical steps she is taking now – learning about new seed types planting techniques, and watering systems – will help her and her neighbours grow enough food for everyone in the village. There is enough water, and sunshine, and Practical Action can help get the farming conditions right. Together, they have a vision of what the future could bring.

The reading from Mark is a beautiful vision of the Kingdom of God – a mustard seed which is tiny at the start, then takes root, and becomes huge, and transforms everything.

Ask people what visual images come to mind when they think of the Kingdom of God? Are they influenced by particular paintings, or writings, or films, or memories?

The second reading has Paul exhorting his Roman readers to become living embodiments of God’s will, to bring the Kingdom of God closer through their daily work and everyday actions, to treat love as a verb, as well as a noun. So far, so good. But then it gets harder – can I never take revenge? Do I have to care for my enemy? How can I overcome evil with good, when there is only one of me?

The answer might be found within the text: if we invite God to transform our minds, we will not be alone when we strive to build His Kingdom on earth – we will be living parts of His will, bringing God’s message into the world through our every word and action.

Sometimes this transformation can be startling. Research and talk about the life of St Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans. As a man who had persecuted Christians, his own conversion on the road to Damascus was a startling example of someone whose life was utterly transformed by Christ.

More often, we are transformed over a lifetime, through accepting God’s guiding hand. You can research and tell the story of John Newton, the slaver who, over the course of many years, embraced the abolition movement and gave us the hymn Amazing Grace as a testament to God’s transformational power.

If you can get hold of some cress seeds, you can end the talk by giving them to people, to plant them when they get home. The seeds should be scattered in a few layers of wet tissue paper, kitchen roll, or cotton wool, and then covered with cling-film to keep the moisture in and put in a warm place. They will germinate in a day or two. As they sprout, they can be used as a prayer focus for Thulani and her fellow gardeners who are transforming their futures through small, powerful changes.

If we invite God into our lives, whether it happens quickly like St Paul, or over a lifetime like John Newton, He will transform us with His love and like the mustard seed, His Kingdom will spread into all the corners of our hearts. We just need to take that first step, and ask.
Song/hymn suggestions

Amazing Grace - John Newton
Bind us together - Bob Gillman

Closing song suggestions

Ride on! Ride on in majesty - Henry Hart Milman
You shall go out with joy - André Kempen

Activities

• Give out cress seeds. Invite people to think about farmers growing crops in difficult conditions when they plant them at home. They need to be planted in layers of wet tissue paper – you can set a competition to grow them in the most unusual container!

• Hang up a picture of a tree outline (a mustard tree). Use post-it notes to represent seeds and hand one to each person. Ask them to draw a ‘smiley’ face, and to come and stick it on the tree, saying one thing that they are thankful for in God’s creation.

• Hold a ‘talents’ auction where members of the congregation offer a skill like making a cake, or ironing, and others bid for it. Donate the proceeds to Practical Action.

• Print out the schematic of Practical Action’s solar garden project in Zimbabwe (www.practicalaction.org/solarservice) and ask for help in labelling the parts.

Blessing

One night I dreamed a dream. As I was walking along the beach with my Lord, across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and one to my Lord. After the last scene of my life flashed before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that at many times along the path of my life, especially at the very saddest times when my steps were heaviest, there was only one set of footprints. This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

“He whispered, “My precious child, I love you and will never leave you. When you saw only one set of footprints, I was carrying you.”

Prayers of intercession

Stay with us Lord, open our eyes and set our hearts on fire,
as You open Your word,
as You break Your bread,
as we live Your life.

Enrich us with your grace,
empower us by Your Spirit,
enfold us in Your love,
as we walk the journey of faith with You.

Amen

Thank you for sharing Practical Action’s work with your church. We are an international charity which uses technology to challenge poverty in some of the world’s poorest countries. We help men and women to find practical solutions to the hardships they face, without damaging the world.

For more service topics and resources, visit www.practicalaction.org/churchservices