

3. What are the impediments to deeper relationships? How have you experienced issues of time and fear as impediments? How have you gotten around those impediments?
4. Who have you gotten to know from another culture, class, religion or race? What have you learned or discovered? How can we as a community expand our ability to meet and interact with those from another culture, class, religion or race who may have a very different life story? What steps would you like to take?
5. Reflect on the story that ended with the question, "Will you still be my friend if I never convert to Christianity?" Are there any deal breakers for you in relationships? Do you think there are deal breakers for God in relationship with us? If so, what would they be?
6. When you think of God's relationship with us, what is something you'd like to carry forward or reflect in your relationships with others?

Closing Question & Discerning Your Next Practice

(10-15 minutes)

Explore how the chapter themes can make a difference in your life by considering these questions:

- In your current life, what is draining or depletes your energy? Are there ways to release or re-think those activities/relationships?
- Did you try one or more of the faith practices? If so, how did it go? What are you discovering about yourself or about God?
- What faith practice would you like to try in the coming week or two? See pages 88-89 and 102-103 for ideas from this session's chapters in the book.

Closing Prayer

(2-3 minutes)

Holy Spirit, you are the way we experience God's creative energy for renewal. Help us to release whatever drains our energy. Help us to release our striving. Open our hearts and minds and lives to be filled by you, the wellspring of God's energy. Until we gather next, give us grace to receive what you offer as you renew our lives and bless us to be a blessing in the world. Amen.

©Incarnation Lutheran Church. All rights reserved. Scripture texts are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the national Council of Churches of Christ in the United States. This small group guide is designed to be used in conjunction with reading the book *Renew Your Life: Discovering the wellspring of God's energy* by Kai Mark Nilsen (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, ©2015). Most questions in this guide come from the book and are transcribed here for the convenience of small group discussion. This guide has been developed with permission from the author.

Renew Your Life

Session 3: Chapter 5 and Chapter 6

The Energy of the Natural World

The Energy of Relationships



Opening Questions

(10 minutes)

Introduce yourself and share your responses to one or more of these questions:

- What is one of your favorite places in nature in Minnesota?
- Who is someone who has encouraged you? What did they do to offer encouragement?
- What did you do this week that was life-giving?

Group Prayer Practice

(10 minutes)

Spend a few minutes in quiet as a group. With a calm, meditative voice, the leader will use these instructions to guide the group in this practice:

- Sit in a way where you feel held by your chair as God holds you in life. Close your eyes, if that is helpful.
- Inhale deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. Focus on your breath as it slows.
- If there are thoughts or responsibilities that are distracting you, set them aside or release them for this time. Focus on simply being present in this moment. After some silence, I will give you some prompts for reflection in the continuing quiet.

Allow for a minute or two of quiet before continuing:

- As you think about the past day or week, what did you experience that was life-giving? *Pause for time to reflect.*
- As you think about the past day or week, what has been energy depleting for you? *Pause for time to reflect.*
- Now, imagine yourself being held in the expansive energies of God's love.

Breathe deeply of God's presence and peace and conclude by saying Amen.

Scripture Text

(2-3 minutes)

Psalm 148 (NRSV)

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were
created.

He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be
passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Reading Recap

(2-3 minutes)

God offers us a renewable energy through the natural world. The intimate connection humankind has with creation is inherent in the creation story. Life lessons provided by the natural world include *beauty* (a lesson on how God inspires), *dormancy* (a lesson on how embracing the natural life cycles of the created world expands our souls) and *coexistence* (a lesson on the need for interdependence).

All people, created through the gracious design of God, reflect the image of their Creator. Imagine what that idea might do for us as we consider what it means to live in a world immobilized by cultural suspicion, deadened by political backstabbing, and torn apart by conflict. Can God's grace release us from the misdirected desire to create life in our own image and open us to the possibility that God's image is present in us, in our communities and in all communities? Will we allow ourselves to enter deeply into relationship with others, acknowledging our limitations and brokenness, and be open to having our horizons expanded by their presence as we together step into the flow of the renewable energy of relationships?

Essential Life Questions

(5 minutes)

Read through the essential life questions. Pause for a few minutes of silent reflection on the questions. You may also write a few notes responding to the questions below.

- How can I allow the beauty of creation to inspire me?

- How can I honor my interconnectedness with the natural world through the choices I make each day?
- How does affirming that all people are created in the image of God affect how I see and treat them?
- What keeps me from desiring and developing deeper relationships?

Questions for Discussion & Individual Reflection

(40 minutes)

Start with these 3 questions, adding in other questions to supplement

- What struck you about the opening stories? How do these stories connect with yours?
- What concepts in the chapters were life-giving for you to think about or integrate into your life?
- What concepts or stories were difficult or challenging for you to think about or integrate into your life?

The Energy of the Natural World

1. What parts of God's creation are most beautiful to you? How often do you get to see or experience them? What do they teach you about God? About yourself?
2. The seasons of the natural world remind us of the hidden beauty in seasons of dormancy. What do those seasons tell us about life? About how God works?
3. Seasons of growth and dormancy remind us of the spiritual gift of waiting. Share a time when you had to wait for something. When, if ever, have you experienced waiting as a spiritual gift? What did you learn in those times?
4. In a normal day, in what ways do you attempt to care for the natural world (what you eat, throw away, drive...)? What would you like to rethink or change because of the potential impact on the natural world?

The Energy of Relationships

1. When you think of yourself as created in the image of God, what thoughts or feelings come up? Is this a new idea or something you've thought about before?
2. Describe a relationship you have now (or a relationship from the past) that you "do deep." What makes that relationship energizing? What has helped to bring about or sustain the depth?