



Back-to-School Blessing

A Prayer Service for the Beginning of the School Year

OVERVIEW

This blessing ceremony celebrates the beginning of school and helps the young people welcome a new school year. It is ideal to use for the first meeting of a group in a new school year.

Suggested Time

10 to 20 minutes, depending on the size of the group

Group Size

The ideal size for this activity is a group of ten to thirty.

Special Considerations

Some of the young people in your group may be starting in a new school this year. As with any change in life, they may experience a wide variety of feelings, such as excitement, nervousness, and fear. Be sure to pay attention to their anxieties and help them to focus on the positive aspects of a new school and school year.

Materials Needed

- ☀ a backpack
- ☀ items that represent mind learning, such as school supplies, textbooks, a calculator, a globe, and musical instruments
- ☀ items that represent body learning, such as sports equipment, dance or gymnastics supplies, and physical education attire
- ☀ items that represent spirit learning, such as a book of prayers, a religious symbol or icon, a flower, a flyer for a service project, and a journal
- ☀ a pillar candle and matches
- ☀ a Bible
- ☀ a clear bowl of water
- ☀ a small branch from an evergreen tree
- ☀ new pens or pencils, one for each person

PROCEDURE

Preparation. Before the young people arrive, establish a prayer space with a backpack; items that represent mind-learning, body learning, and spirit learning; a pillar candle; a Bible; a clear bowl of water; a small branch from an evergreen tree; and a new pen or pencil for each person.

1. Gather the young people in the prayer space. Make a comment about the gift of new beginnings as the school year opens. Acknowledge the participants' anxieties, particularly if some of them are starting classes at a new school. Tell them that together they will begin a new school year with a blessing.

2. Invite the young people to observe in silence the items in the prayer space that can be considered tools for school. Point out that some of the items are for "mind learning"—things like textbooks, a calculator, a globe, and musical instruments. Other items are for "body learning"; sports equipment and dance supplies fall into this category. The last category is "spirit learning"; it includes items like a religious icon and a personal journal.

3. Light a pillar candle. Then read 1 Tim. 4:12–16. Return the Bible to the prayer space and pick up a bowl of water. Dip an evergreen branch in the bowl and sprinkle the items in the prayer space. As you do so, say the following prayer:



O God, we ask your blessing on these symbols of a new year. May they help us to learn, and to enjoy and to share the special talents that you have given to us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

4. Ask the young people to move toward you one by one, with their hands in front of them, palms up. As each person reaches you, dip your thumb in the water and make the sign of the cross on her or his forehead, palms, shoulders, and feet as you say, "[Name of young person], use your mind and body this school year to learn, to serve, and to grow." Then give the person a pen or pencil before the person returns to her or his place.

5. To conclude the blessing service, make a few comments as follows, in your own words:

- ⊙ Remind the young people that they represent the Christian community in their school, and that they should offer hospitality to others. Encourage them to look for and befriend younger and new students.
- ⊙ Note how important it is for all young people to feel like they are wanted and that they belong to the school community. Challenge the participants to include all fellow students in social gatherings, reach out to people at lunch-time, and pay attention to people who seem to be alone a lot.
- ⊙ Tell them that the beginning of a new school year means a chance to start anew. Challenge them to establish good study habits right from the start, especially if that has been a problem in previous years. Encourage them to work at staying focused so that they can succeed academically and know that they are doing their best.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

- ⊙ If you have extra time, allow the young people to express their feelings about beginning a new school year.
- ⊙ Consider putting all the mind, body, and spirit items in the backpack when you set up the prayer space. In step 2 ask the young people to take turns removing one item at a time and explaining what it represents and how it can help a person develop brain learning, body learning, or spirit learning. Note that many of the items can address more than one type of learning.

NOTES



Use the space below to jot notes and reminders for the next time you use this strategy.