



## On your marks

Each of the three pilgrim festivals of the Jewish faith - Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles - has an association with harvest. At Passover the first offering of the year's harvest was presented at the temple as a sheaf of barley. Pentecost - *Shavuot* - marked the harvesting of the grain, and Tabernacles came at the completion of that harvest, when traditionally the people of God made temporary shelters outdoors (*Sukkahs*) to remind them of their time in the desert

These three harvest-linked festivals also speak of God's covenant love to his people, linked as they are to the story of the great rescue from slavery in Egypt; the giving of the law at Sinai and to God's protection and provision of his people on their way to the Promised Land.

Harvest for Christians can also carry these connections as we remember Jesus Christ, who was our Passover Lamb at Easter; the gift of the Holy Spirit, who writes God's laws on our hearts, at Pentecost; and the sheltering presence of God, who promises to be with us on our journey of faith. So it is that our harvest festival services are not only an opportunity to be thankful for the fruit of the earth but also a time to celebrate the character of God.

## Get set

The following outline is for an activity and talk at a harvest festival service at which all ages are present. It celebrates these three aspects of harvest.

The idea is that the leader, with invited help up at the front, builds a 'harvest shelter' that will represent each aspect of the harvest talk as it progresses. A more daring approach, which will depend on the space available, would be to invite a number of all-age groups to create shelters around the church, following guidelines from the front. If you chose this option, then it will be helpful to ask some group leaders beforehand to arrange that appropriate shelter-building items are brought ready for this service.

A key Bible passage for this whole exercise is Exodus 23:14-17, in which Moses gives instructions to celebrate the three key three festivals during the year. This could be read to introduce the activity/talk.

## Go!

1. Our own harvest festival has its Jewish roots in the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) celebrated in September or October. At this, families would build shelters out of greenery and branches, decorated with flowers, to remember that God had sheltered them and kept them safe on their travels in the desert.

Explain that you are now all going to build a shelter together to remind us of God's sheltering love during the past year and his promise to continue to be our refuge in the year ahead. God has



promised never to let us go or give up on us. Either begin to create from various pieces of greenery and branches and flowers a simple shelter at the front of the church or invite the all-age groups to make their own around the church.

*Our Lord, in all generations you have been our home* (Psalm 90:1, CEV).

Psalms 113 - 118 (the *Hallel*) are chanted during the days of *Sukkot*, climaxing in the 'great Hosanna' of praise. Invite everyone to end this section of the activity by singing or saying out loud the verses of Psalm 117, accompanied by much branch-waving and celebration!

2. The start of harvest was celebrated at the festival which Christians call Pentecost, when the first fruits of the land were offered to God in thanksgiving.

Invite everyone now to fill either the central 'harvest shelter' or the individual group shelters with a selection of different sorts of fruits. Placing these on cardboard trays from the (super)market might be a good way of containing this aspect of the display.

God longs to see a harvest of good things in our lives and has given us the Holy Spirit to make this possible.

*God's spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled* (Galatians 5:22).

Now use some of the fruit as a way into prayer, either all together or in small groups, for example:

(Jesus said) *You did not choose me. I chose you and sent you out to produce fruit, the kind of fruit that will last* (John 15:16).

3. At Passover a sheaf of barley was cut as the first sign of the coming harvest and it became a 'cereal offering to the Lord'.

Invite everyone to complete their 'harvest shelters' by adding in items linked to grain crops such as cereals, pasta, matzo, bread, and so on. This reminds us of the central place that bread still holds in our lives today and also that Jesus used this as an important picture of himself.

[Jesus said:] *I am the bread that gives life!* (John 6:35).

As Christians this particular part of our 'harvest shelter' reminds us of Jesus and how he allowed himself on the cross to be broken, like bread, for us so that God could open up the way to mend a broken world. Encourage everyone to share and eat some matzo bread from the shelter, as they celebrate God's goodness in giving Jesus - a vital part of this harvest thanksgiving service.

4. Once the central or individual 'harvest shelters' have been completed, you could bring the talk to an end by inviting everyone join in a harvest Psalm (67). On the final day of the *Sukkot* celebration, people used to make processions around the synagogue. If possible, try



to build this into your final section, inviting everyone to march around the church, either to come closer to the central 'harvest shelter' or to visit the different shelters that have been made in the church.

Here is a simple version of Psalm 67 using the tune 'London's burning', so it can be sung as a round during the procession:

*God has blessed us; God has blessed us  
Blessed the whole earth; blessed the whole earth  
Sing praise; sing praise  
Learn of God's love; learn of God's love*

*God will guide us; God will guide us  
Put all things right; put all things right  
Sing praise; sing praise  
Celebrate God; celebrate God*

*God is faithful; God is faithful  
Gives the Harvest; gives the Harvest  
Sing praise; sing praise  
Worship God now, all his people*