

THIS is GOD'S TABLE FINDING CHURCH BEYOND THE WALLS

STUDY GUIDE BY REV. ALEX DARLING-RAABE

This study guide includes questions for individual reflection and questions for group reflection. You may find some of the individual questions to be appropriate for your group, and you may find some group questions edifying for yourself.

Use these questions as springboards for your own thinking and reflection.



HERALD PRESS
WWW.HERALDPRESS.COM

THE TABLE

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Anna has dreamed about the Garden Church for years. What are some things you have dreamed about? What would it take to make these dreams come true?
2. Karen is helpful in her initial support of Anna not only by championing the cause but also by asking questions that helped ground Anna's dream in reality. Who are the people in your life who help to bring your dreams to life by asking hard questions?
3. As the Garden Church table is anointed with oil, Anna prays "May this be a space of refuge and sanctuary, delight and abundance, honoring God and peace" (pg. 24). Where are the places in your life that give you refuge and sanctuary, delight and abundance, and that honor God and peace? What makes them special to you?
4. The dream of the Garden Church was to provide a place of refuge for people who might never walk through the doors of a traditional church. Have you ever felt like you aren't accepted at church? What would a church need to look like for you to feel able to be present with your whole self?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Are there places in your area like the vacant lot on 6th Street, places that people walk by every day without noticing but that are full of potential? They may not be empty lots, but park benches, bus stops, or town squares. What potential might these spaces hold for becoming a gathering place for community?
2. Dino became an accidental icon for the Garden Church. Does your faith community or wider community have anything like Dino, a fixture in the community that everyone knows and loves? What would it look like to transform it into a symbol of God's welcome?
3. The Garden Church is a place where all are welcome around the table, especially people who might not come to a traditional church. Does

anyone in your group have experience with being shunned from a traditional church? Make sacred space to hold their experience as they share it, and brainstorm together how to break down the barriers that exist in your own house of worship. What would need to change in your faith community for all people to feel they have a place at the table?

4. Anna felt temptation and pressure as a church planter to try to save the dying church. As church attendance declines, people often look to innovators to save them. Anna believes this is unhelpful and asks instead "How can we come together with others who are looking to be faithful in our generation? How do we be church, here and now, in our current cultural context?" (pg. 26 – 27). Reflect on these questions in your own context and dream together about what church could look like.

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Use olive oil to anoint something in your life, in your house of worship, or in your home that you seek to use to do God's work in the world. Maybe it's the kitchen you use to cook meals for people in need. Maybe it's your laptop that you use to connect to people near and far to break a sense of isolation. Whatever it is, dip your finger in the oil and trace a cross across it saying these words: "God, we set apart this (these) _____ to your glory. May it (they) show your love to all the world and bless everyone who uses it (them) to show your welcome in this world. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen."

Then pray together in these or similar words:

Holy God, your table extends from kitchens to altars to stumps in the garden. Wherever your people gather you are glorified. Whenever your people are fed, you rejoice. Give us courage to dream about the future you have in store for your church. Guide us as we listen for your voice speaking today and give us strength to follow you out of our doors to join with others in doing your work in the world. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

-2-

ROOTS

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Everyone has an origin story. *This is God's Table* is an origin story of the Garden Church, but also a story of how Anna came to the expansive faith that she has now. What is your origin story? How has it shaped who you are today and how/what you believe?
2. Anna writes about participating in family worship as a child. Did your family help form your faith or was it formed exclusively by Sunday School, church, or other extra-familial forces? How has that impacted your experience of faith?
3. In her experience with a faith community that offered a community of peers but was theologically uncomfortable, Anna felt she was living a double theological life. Have you had this experience? If so, what led you to remain part of the community in which you had to keep some of your beliefs under wraps in order to belong?
4. Have you had moments when your life calling widened in a way that made you break free of things that constrain you? What was it like for you?
5. Anna notices in her exploration of San Pedro that systemic limitations have left San Pedro with fewer grocery stores than the wealthier neighborhoods up the hill. What are some things you can do to address food scarcity where you live?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Anna developed a lot of skills and gifts through her childhood of living close to the land that became part of her inspiration for the Garden Church. What gifts did you gain as a child that help you with your current vocation?
2. What is your religious heritage? Has it changed? Anna draws on many traditions in her experience and understanding of faith. What parts of other traditions speak to you or inform your practice of faith? How does your community borrow from other traditions to enrich and enhance your spiritual life together?
3. The family tree of Swedenborgian faith that Anna describes is similar yet distinct compared to many

Christian denominations. What are the similarities and differences between your faith tradition and Anna's? Has your faith tradition split? What were the circumstances? Look online and see if there is a "family tree" of sorts for your faith group. What do you know about each of the branches?

4. Anna asks important questions about faith in this chapter: "How can we speak about spiritual nourishment when there are people with empty stomachs sitting in our pews? Where do justice and mercy fit in?" Anna shares her answers to these questions throughout the book. What are the answers to these questions for your community of faith?
5. San Pedro is a community with a sharp divide between wealthy and needy communities. Anna dreamed of being a bridge between the two. She discovered this divide by talking to people and walking the town with the board of her start-up church. Where are the dividing lines in your community? What are the invisible barriers people don't or won't cross?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Walk several blocks in your neighborhood either alone or as a group, or if the place you live isn't set up for pedestrian traffic, drive around town. Describe what you see as Anna did with her start-up board. Then, pray for the people, places, and things that you see. Ask for God's blessing on the place you live. Look for where God is already present, doing a new thing.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of new life, thank you for creating the world we inhabit and that has been entrusted to us to steward. We praise you for calling the Israelites to be your chosen people and we glorify you for Jesus who came from the root of Jesse, thus tying our faith to those of others. Strengthen the ties in our community and help us to deeply root ourselves in service to others. Keep us on the lookout for who is in and who is out around us and give us courage to invite everyone to the table. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

WHERE ALL ARE WELCOME

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Have you been part of a community that says it is welcoming? What were the markers that made you truly feel welcomed to the community? If you've never felt truly welcomed, what are some of the reasons why?
2. Anna finds herself planting a garden and a church right in the middle of an ongoing conflict between housed and unhoused people in San Pedro. Are there situations where you have discovered that you are in the middle of something you didn't anticipate? How did you manage? What was the outcome?
3. While assembling benches at the Garden Church, Denyse exclaims how good it feels to help make something. This extends into our faith life as well. What does it mean to be a consumer of faith or a producer of faith? Do you prefer one over the other?
4. Through her continued presence in the garden and through serving as a bridge to the unhoused community, Denyse comes to realize that the Garden Church is her home. Where do you feel most at home? What makes it home for you?
3. Anna learns a lesson about charity when offering a pot of leftover soup to one of her unhoused neighbors. Sometimes our best intentions make *us* feel good but are actually unhelpful to those we intend to help. How can your faith community better respond to people's needs and requests for help?
4. Anna found that her congregation was a real live one, not the fantasy she had in her head. Are there times when your faith community has expectations about what it is like that are purely aspirational and don't match what's actually going on? What happens when we realize that our communities of faith aren't the communities we wish they were? How do we transform our thinking to see God in the midst of real communities?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Anna writes that "welcoming all people around God's table is easy to say, and much harder to do" (pg. 51). Do you agree or disagree with Anna's first sentence of this chapter? Why or why not?
2. Sometimes a faith community that claims to be welcoming has an invisible asterisk next to the word welcome that says, "only if you look and act like us or are willing to learn to act like us." Is this true of your faith community? What would it look like to put yourself in the place of someone who is new to the community? Would you feel welcomed or not?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

The person who donated a picnic table remarked that he could feel love and God in the Garden Church. Go to a place where you feel love or where you feel God's presence and pause there. Light a candle to mark the place as sacred. Take a moment to reflect on God's presence, breathe slowly, and take in the presence of love in that place.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

Uniting God, we long to be together as one people as you call us to be, but we so often fall short and find ourselves separated. Forgive our need to create division and guide us toward your perfect unity so that we may be the body of Christ together for the sake of the world. Grant us faith that we might know how to welcome people to your table and bridge the distance between people. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

THERE IS ENOUGH

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Have you ever felt like you were the only one holding a project together? What did it take (or what would it take) for you to remember that you are not alone? How does this reminder change your outlook?
2. Anna reminds us about the importance of staying in the present when she is tempted to think about what she could have done better to keep someone at the Garden Church or how she might attract new people more robustly. When you find yourself not living in the moment, how do you bring yourself back to where you are currently instead of living in the past or future?
3. Karen was able to help Anna breathe and pray when she most needed it. What do you do to bring yourself back to center when things don't go as planned?
4. Anna asks, "What if everyone has something they are hungry for *and* everyone has something to offer?" (pg. 81) What are you hungry for? What do you have to offer the world?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. What societal sins are you actively participating in? What might you do to repent of them so that our neighbors can receive care?
2. Anna is reminded that the Garden Church was God's and not hers. It's easy to worship our own ways of doing things and our own ideas and get stuck thinking that we are the ones needed to transform the church. How is God transforming your community? Who is reminding you that the church belongs to God and not to any particular person, committee, or pastor?

3. There is an Arabic saying, "Trust in God but still tie up your camel." Trusting that God provides enough and some to share is easier said than done, and Anna still had lots of work to do in order to fund the church. How do you hold the tension of trusting in God's provision but also doing work to bring God's reality to life?
4. Brené Brown said, "We're a nation hungry for more joy: Because we're starving from lack of gratitude." What are you grateful for? Why are you grateful for it? What difference does gratitude make in your life and in your community?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Learn the song "There is Enough" by Kerri Meyer that Anna sang weekly at the Garden Church and sing together in your group every time you meet. You can learn it on YouTube at https://youtu.be/G7_HVOn2egw.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of abundance, when we fear there is not enough, break open our hearts of scarcity and replace them with hearts of abundant flesh. Show us that there is more than enough for all people—enough food, enough shelter, enough healthcare, enough love. Help us become advocates for those who are told they are not enough or not deserving by systems that seek to keep them oppressed. Guide us toward equity for all people and pour out your abundant love on us that we might in turn pour it out onto the world. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

GOD IS HERE

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Anna believes that God is everywhere and moving in all things. Where do you see God moving in your life today?
2. Faith combines spirituality with physical things and practices. What are some objects that help deepen your faith? What are some practices that help widen your understanding of God's presence in your life?
3. Swedenborgian heritage affirms that the entire natural world is infused with spirituality. Where in the created world do you experience the Divine?
4. Where do you fall on the religious spectrum Anna lays out—are you devout? Spiritual but not religious? Done with religion? Never had religion? Seeking religion? How did you get to be where you are, and what would make you change your spot on that spectrum?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Anna spent a lot of time reflecting on the essential parts of worship to create the Garden Church liturgy. What are the things you *need* to have for it to be truly worship? Are there things you'd rather let go of? What happens if something you love isn't in the liturgy?
2. Theology is contextual and has changed throughout history. Liberation theology was informed by Central and South Americans living under oppressive government. Feminist theology was informed by understanding God's divine feminine nature. Womanist theology was informed by the particular struggles of black women. The Garden Church's theology was shaped by the realities of the city of San Pedro. What are the things in your context that have shaped your theology?

3. Anna says that it's our job to pay attention to the love of God that is breaking into the world. Where do you see God's love breaking into the world? Who are the unlikely prophets sharing love with a hurting world today?
4. Anna shares the Orthodox tradition of saying "Wisdom attend" before the reading of scripture. Where have you found wisdom so far in your reading?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

The Garden Church had a baby Jesus that was brown, like the real Jesus who was born in the Middle East. We so often picture Jesus as a white man with flowing hair straight out of a shampoo commercial. Spend some time looking for different pictures of Jesus on the internet. How many can you find one that you resonate with? Are there images of Jesus that make you uncomfortable? Why is that?

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God-with-us, you sent your Word into the world to dwell with us and to be a light for all nations. Illuminate our path that we might more fully see your presence in the midst of everyday things. Help us to know that you dwell among us and in us as we seek to share your love with others. Rescue us from our desire to put you in a box, confined by traditions and held behind gates, and liberate us to see how your wild nature in the midst of the universe. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE WATER OF LIFE

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. As the seasons changed from winter to spring and Anna came off the high of baptizing Leia, she finds herself in moments of hopelessness. When you experience moments of great joy, how do you ensure they sustain you during moments of hopelessness?
2. Anna had a great pool of support people that felt like the water of life to her. Who swims in your support pool, helping you to experience refreshment and renewal in hard times?
3. A central tenant of the Garden Church is that everyone has something they are hungry for and something they have to offer. What do you need? What can you offer the world?
4. What systems do you benefit from? Which ones that you benefit from actively harm others? What systems are you harmed by? How do you plan to dismantle harmful systems?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. There was always more to do to keep things running at the garden. How do you practice slowing down when life seems like an endless to-do list? What are ways you practice sabbath so you don't burn yourself out?
2. Anna deeply connects water used in all its ways to the sustaining and lifegiving water used in Baptism. Watering the garden reminded her of baptism and connected her to water used on crops in the California valleys. How do you remember your baptism?
3. Volunteers always had something to do at the Garden Church, from weeding to watering. How does your community encourage people to share the gifts they have with your community?

4. There was a stark divide between parishioners with all their belongings in shopping carts and the thousands of shipping containers unloaded daily at the nearby Port of Los Angeles. Likewise, Anna explores the divide between treated water coming out of a pipe and polluted water that is unsafe to baptize in. Both of these examples show the reality of systems that promote inequity. How does your community battle injustice? What steps has your church taken to be more aware of its impact on the world around it?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Take some water and trace a cross on your forehead to remember your baptism. Remember that you are called to enter into the pain of the world as a child of God and help transform it into life, just as Jesus did on the cross. Let the water you use to remember your baptism propel you to take action advocating for environmental regulations that ensure clean water, not just in pipes, but in local waterways. You can do this by contacting your elected representatives and talking about why clean water is important.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of rebirth, cleanse us from the ways in which we pollute your Word by using it against people, against the earth, against you. Remind us that you give the water of life freely and that we can spread it to nourish the entire world. Guide us to break down systems of oppression and build systems that can disrupt toxic ones so that your whole creation can thrive in the way you intended. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

ASHES TO DUST, DIRT TO SOIL

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Leaving the Garden Church gates to take the ashes onto the street filled Anna with momentary anxiety. When you've experienced leaving your comfort zone, how have you found strength to do so, and have you ever found yourself later filled with joy and wondering why you were anxious in the first place?
 2. What are the things that separate you from other people? How can you help those things dissolve to be in deeper relationship with all those around you?
 3. Being in a garden gives an up-close look at the cycle of life and death—tiny seeds sprouting into plants, food scraps becoming compost, and compost helping to grow new plants. Where are there cycles of life and death in your life?
 4. Do you compost? How might you start, even in a small way, if you don't? What are the resources for composting in your community? Some places have municipal composting or rebates for composting bins. Are there community gardens near you that would benefit from your produce scraps?
 5. Not everything worked out in the way Anna thought it would, and some things worked that she never thought about at all. How have you been transformed by moments like these, when your ideas didn't work or when something you hadn't planned on did work?
2. Desmond Tutu talks about the concept of ubuntu. This concept, in part, acknowledges that one person's humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in the humanity of everyone else in the world. How does that concept feel to you? Do you agree with it or disagree? Why?
 3. Compost became a favorite metaphor for Anna. What in your community do you need to throw in the divine compost pile so that it can give new life?
 4. Anna characterizes the gospel as a picture that is defiantly hopeful. How do you characterize the gospel? Where do you see defiant hopefulness in its pages?
 5. How does God show up in your community? Are there times when God has shown up unexpectedly?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Anna bonded with Pastor Lisa from the local Methodist congregation because they both felt called to minister to the entire community, not just their own congregations. Rather than seeing each other as a threat, they saw each other as a gift. How does your faith community view the other faith communities near you? Do they feel threatening? Do they feel like a gift?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Grab some produce scraps and put them in your compost bin. Not a composter yet? Now is a great time to start! There are many different ways to compost—worms or no worms, active or passive, bins or barrels—you name it! If home composting isn't possible in your living situation, find out what resources exist in the area where you live. Are there programs that will pick compost up from your doorstep? Are there farms or gardens nearby that might like your compost? You never know how compost will transform the world until you see it in action!

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God, our divine composter, turn over our hearts of dry mud and break them open to reveal hearts of soft nourishing love. Help us see our face in the face of those we label as other and remind us of our common humanity. As we turn over our sins and failings and death-dealing actions, turn them into love for our neighbors, care for the earth, and new life for all that they may transform us as much as we transform your world to your glory. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

REMEMBER ME

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. What's the most eclectic dinner party you've ever been to? Or have most of your meals been with a similar group of people? What's it like to eat by yourself versus eating with others? Do you enjoy one more than the other?
2. Even if you get a pedicure, we all have parts of ourselves that are like dirty feet—parts of us that have walked through the dust of life. Which parts of you need to be washed, shown tenderness, loved?
3. Who would you rather not have to love? Who would you rather love instead? What would it look like to be able to show love to both?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. “*You are cordially invited*” (pg. 190). What role does invitation play in your community of faith? Do you expect people to show up uninvited or do you actively invite people into community? What happens when you invite someone? What happens when you invite 10 people?
2. Foot washing is often a foreign experience because it is not part of our social fabric. The feet at the Garden Church Maundy Thursday service were varied and yet all were washed. Who are the people whose feet your community would rather not wash? Is it unhoused people? Sex workers? People of other faiths? Democrats? Republicans? What would it take to wash their feet and show them love?
3. When our physical realities change drastically and quickly, our mental health can deteriorate rapidly. This can create a cycle that contributes to keeping unhoused people without homes. What can your community do to put a stake in the wheel of that system and start to bring it to a halt?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Brainstorm how you can show tangible signs of love to your neighbors this week. Maybe you will bake cookies for neighbors, or buy boxes of coffee for the Emergency Department workers near you. Maybe you will say hello to neighbors you don't know when you see them outside or find out the most urgent needs of your unhoused neighbors. After brainstorming, go out and share the love.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of love, you urge us to love all people and especially to love people who are not like us because that is how you love us. Open our hearts to all people, to people we can love easily and people we need to love even if it is difficult. Help us to love well so that we can be loved well in return by others. In all of this, remind us of the love of Jesus who washed the feet of his friends the day before he was given over to death and keep us focused on his sacrifice of love for our sake. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

BREAK BREAD, PASS CUP

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. We all have to eat. Both physical food and spiritual food are important for us to live. What are you hungry for right now? How might you be fed?
2. Have you been excluded from a community because of your race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or for another reason? Did you stick with that community to try to transform it, or did you leave and find someplace that welcomed your whole self? What are the benefits to each response? The downfalls?
3. Anna tells a story of people who might not seem to have much in common, all receiving communion—a flighty man, an architect, her beloved, college students, and more. What has communion looked like to you? Who has God brought around a table with you with whom you might not otherwise associate? How did that transform you?
4. Communion, Anna reflects, is a simple meal that we have elevated and put on gold and silver plates. Bread is available to almost every person in the world in some form and yet it is what Jesus chose to be the sacred food of his followers. What are some simple things in which you find sacredness?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. “What is broken is what makes us whole” (pg. 153). Do you agree with Anna’s idea? Why or why not?
2. Welcome goes both ways, in who is welcome to attend a spiritual community, but also in who is welcome to lead a spiritual community. How does your faith community’s leadership compare with your community’s identity in terms of welcoming? Think of pastors, deacons, elders, boards, etc. Are they heavily weighted toward a particular gender, race, or age? What would need to change to encourage more diverse leadership?

3. Leia yells “Mas! Mas!” indicating that she wants more communion bread. The prophets write that “a little child will lead them” in the journey of faith. How has your faith been shaped by those of different generations, and especially by the faith of children?
4. Anna’s grandfather said that “Love, by its very nature, must be doing something” (pg. 165). What does love look like in your community? What do you do as a community to show love to the world?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

As you reflect on the chapter today, bring loaves of fresh bread, butter, jams and jellies and share them together during your discussion. If time allows you might even consider coming together early to bake bread together and share it when it is finished baking. Maybe plan a time when you can come together and learn from a member of your group how to make bread if some of you are not familiar with the process. Share a simple loaf together and savor in the sacredness of simplicity.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

Nourishing God, you feed us with simple meals that join us with eternity. Nourish us with relationships with those who are not like us, quench our thirst for connection through those around us, and fill us with good things that we may proclaim your goodness across the table to all who hunger. Give us food for the journey so that we may run the race set before us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

IN THE SILENCE

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. The boy who wrote his brother's name on the wall of remembrance caught Anna off guard. Have you ever been in similar situations where you thought someone was self-serving, but ultimately was being genuine? What was it like once you realized the person's intentions?
2. How do you understand the difference between silence and quiet? Do you prefer one to the other? Are there benefits to both?
3. What do you need to shed in order to let new life grow in you? What's holding you back from fully experiencing the love of God?
4. When you have experienced loss, do you go straight to trying to fix it and feel better, or do you let yourself sit in grief? Why do you do one or the other?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Día de Muertos was a huge part of the cultural life of San Pedro due to the large Latinx population. Are there similar cultural celebrations in the area your faith community is in? How might you share God's presence during those celebrations?
2. Anna experienced silence and sacredness in the midst of the cacophony of a garden church in the middle of a city. Where have you experienced sacredness and silence in unlikely places?
3. Death brings new life. Has your faith community experienced this at all? What was it like to undergo the pain of death and find something new on the other side? What does resurrection look like in your context?
4. The Swedenborgian tradition has an extensive theology of the afterlife. What does your tradition say about the afterlife? What do you personally believe about it?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Plan together how to celebrate the lives of loved ones who have died as a community during All Saints day this year, or during Día de Muertos if that is culturally appropriate for you. What might you do as a community to remember the lives of saints, both famous and personal, that can enrich your community of faith? Keep a list of brainstormed activities to implement during the appropriate celebration.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of new life, you raised your son Jesus from the dead to new life. Grant us new life as well, let those things that need to die in us perish to make way for new life. Gather the saints around us to support us on our journey of life and faith, and bring us into communion with them so that they are never forgotten but live on in our hearts. Hold the host of heaven and the cloud of witnesses around us and keep us safe. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

SEEK THE PEACE OF THE CITY

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. On Palm Sunday the crowds shouting hosanna are literally shouting “save us.” What do you need to be saved from these days?
2. Anna’s mentor had only seen the Garden Church once before she came for Holy Week, and when she saw it again, she was amazed at its transformation. When we are close to something, it’s easy to miss how much we have accomplished. How have mentors been able to help you recognize the amazing things you’ve done when they see your work from afar?
3. Sara reminded Anna that she was called to plant a church, not to tend it forever. What are some things you’ve brought to life? Do you feel called to continue them, or do you feel called to let someone else tend their growth?
4. As Sara preached about the resurrection, Anna noticed that the acts of hospitality Connie was providing struck similar chords. The writers of Scripture tell us that sometimes we entertain angels unaware. When have you found yourself reflecting afterwards that you might have been interacting with angels sent by God?
3. Anna is grateful for Sara’s reflections as they hike together. How do you utilize other people in your community as sounding boards for difficult decisions? What support can you give one another when you have questions to which you don’t know the answer?
4. Peter is baptized on Easter morning to the delight of the entire community, but his baptism comes as a surprise when Anna jokingly asks if anyone wants to be baptized. As much as she knew and loved her community, there were still surprises to be had. What has surprised you about your community of faith as you do life together? How have you surprised your community?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. The Garden Church has a core identity of being the church in public because of their location. This translated to a Palm Sunday march around town where they very publicly waved palm branches, shouted “hosanna,” and bore witness to God in the public sphere. How does your community of faith engage the public? What might you do to make your community more public?
2. When Anna first walked the streets of San Pedro with her leadership team, they noticed possibility and need. On Good Friday, the church noticed the places of brokenness in their neighborhood. Where are the places in your area that have possibility and need? Where are the broken places in need of healing?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

At the strategic planning retreat, the leadership of the Garden Church focused on a desire to “take it outside the gates.” Grab a whiteboard or poster and brainstorm ways you can “take it outside the gates” (or doors) of your own community of faith. Pick one or two ideas that you can easily accomplish and plan to make them happen in the next 2 months.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of all creation, you call us to leave our comfort zones and seek your peace in all areas. Bring your peace to all parts of our world, and help us to see our role in bringing peace to all of creation. Grant us courage to seek to build bridges and tear down walls as we proclaim your reign of justice and work to make that reign a reality. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

TREE OF LIFE

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Anna finds herself in the dual role of bride and pastor as she she fills out incident reports after the celebration of her marriage blessing. When have you found yourself in a dual role like Anna? Did it take you out of the moment of one to step into the other, or could you easily combine the two roles?
2. When have you been called to transition? What were key moments of pain it brought? What were key moments of joy?
3. What was it like when you birthed something—a project, a piece of art, a church—and had to let it go? How did you cope? Where did you find space for new life?
4. People who entered the gates of the Garden Church often remarked that getting their hands in the dirt made them feel renewed and reconnected. What helps you feel renewed and reconnected to God, the earth, and your neighbors?
5. “What you celebrate grows” (pg. 237) is part of the Garden Church DNA. What can you celebrate in your life today? How can you nurture it and let that celebration grow?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. The tree of life symbolizes the vision of the New Jerusalem and Anna sees this as she looks at the Garden Church becoming part of God’s kingdom. Where do you see the tree of life taking root in your community and bringing it into the kingdom of God?
2. Members of the faith community worked to ensure that Anna could celebrate her blessing service without finding out about the things that had gone awry. While transparency is important, sometimes withholding key information till later is equally important. What is the line between transparency and secrecy? Why might a community choose to keep something hidden for a while?

3. The Garden Church engaged transition in a way that might be different from the way your community of faith engages pastoral transitions. How does your community of faith deal with the departure of a pastor? What is good about this method? What is good about the Garden Church’s method?
4. Anna describes the table as a magnet drawing all people together, rather than a fence meant to keep people out. Do you agree? Are there physical aspects of the table in your context that lend to a particular interpretation of who can and who can’t join?
5. Where have you found unexpected support when starting out on a new venture? Were there things that you expected to be solo projects that found unexpected support from others?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Gather some of the objects your community holds dear and uses in worship. Do you have a particular chalice that you use every week? Are there candle holders for special occasions? Do you have an offering basket made by someone in the congregation? Gather some objects that carry meaning for your community. Share the stories attached to them and use them to remind you of why your particular community is important. At the end, ask God to continue using those objects as blessings to your community.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of all time, you knit communities together and bring people from all ends of the earth into one body. You also make time and space for leave taking and re-membering the body of Christ. Help us to remember and to be remembered as we seek to love and serve you. Bring us ever into your circle of presence and help us celebrate being your children. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

CHURCH IN A BASKET

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. As the time for transition grew near, Anna found herself feeling tense and anxious, even though she knew the church would be in good hands. How do you handle transition? What helps you make it through tough transitions?
2. How do you remember important experiences? Do you keep certain objects around to remember events or people or places? What is the importance of remembering?
3. On Christmas, one of the Garden Church's unhoused neighbors reminds everyone that "It's people like you—people who actually see us—that we need here" (pg. 251). Who do you wish saw you? Who do you not see that might need seen?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Ritual is an integral part of human life. As Karen neared death, Anna brought the same ritual to her house that she brought to the garden every week, thanks to the portable tabernacle basket. What rituals are important to you? How do you practice them when you're not in the place you normally practice them?
2. Communities of faith go through different seasons. How has your community weathered those seasons? Have you moved forward, or have you spent a great deal of time saying, "that's not how the last pastor did it?" How have you grown as a community during various seasons?
3. Have you ever left a community of faith? What did leave-taking look like for you? Did you find yourself wondering how you could ever love a different community?

ACTIVITY AND CLOSING PRAYER

Throughout the book, rosemary plays a central role in its symbolic nature as a plant of remembrance. Today, plant some rosemary. If you live in a climate where you can plant it outdoors, do so. It also grows well in a pot on a windowsill. As you feel dirt between your fingers and the fragrant needles, infuse your plant with prayers of remembrance. What do you want this plant to remember on your behalf for the sake of the world? When you use the rosemary in your cooking or crafting, pause to remember the reasons you planted it in the first place.

Then pray together in these or similar words:

God of all goodness, together you take our plans and bring good fruit from them to nourish your whole creation. You fill the hungry with good things, lift up the lowly, nourish the brokenhearted, and charge us with continuing that work daily. As we seek the peace of the city where we are, give us hope to fill a world in need with good things and to proclaim loudly your desire that all are welcome at your table to feed and be fed. In the name of Jesus, Amen.