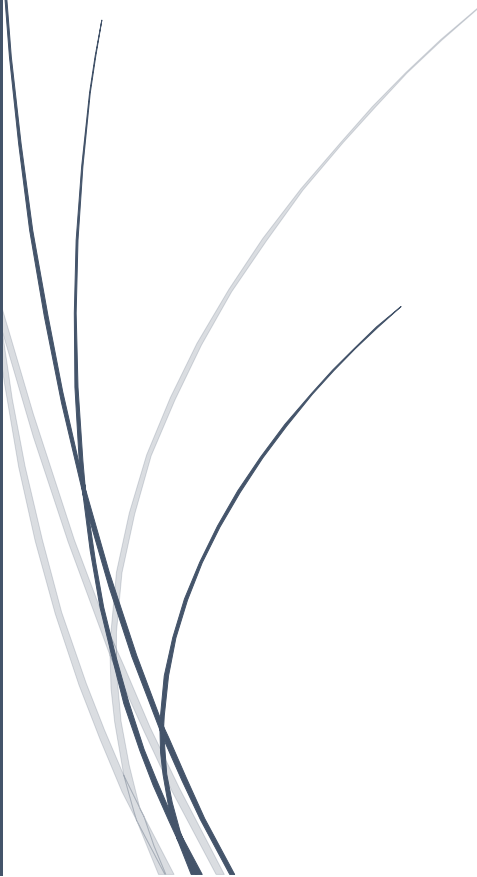


A dark blue vertical bar on the left side of the page. A blue arrow-shaped graphic points to the right from the bar, containing the year 2026.

2026

Several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey originate from the bottom left and curve upwards and to the right, resembling stylized grass or reeds.

**RETURN TO THE
LORD**

**A Lenten Journey
of
Repentance and
Renewal**

Workbook for Lent

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF COMMUNITY CHURCHES

RETURN TO THE LORD

A Lenten Journey of Repentance and Renewal

Workbook for Lent 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Acknowledgments
2. Introduction: The Gift of Lent
3. How to Use This Lenten Guide
4. What Is Repentance? A Biblical and Theological Foundation
5. Daily Lenten Practice: A Five-Step Pattern
6. Weekly Lenten Journey (Weeks 1–6)
 - Week 1: Return to God
 - Week 2: Confession and Truth
 - Week 3: Turning from Old Patterns
 - Week 4: Renewing the Mind
 - Week 5: Bearing Fruit
 - Week 6: Walking in Grace
7. Repentance Habit Tracker
8. Youth-Friendly Version: Getting Back on Track with God
9. Family Practices: Lent at Home
10. Holy Week and Easter: From Sorrow to Joy
11. Recommended Resources and Bibliography

1. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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All theological perspectives, biblical interpretations, and pastoral applications reflect the values, mission, and ecumenical spirit of the International Council of Community Churches. The content has been reviewed for alignment with ICCC's commitment to Scripture-based faith, inclusive community, and the transformative message of the gospel.

The use of AI technology in this project represents an innovative approach to ministry resource development, demonstrating how emerging tools can serve the timeless work of spiritual formation when guided by faithful pastoral leadership and theological discernment.

Special thanks to the ICCC leadership and member congregations whose commitment to "Rediscovering the Values of Jesus" inspired this resource for the 2026 conference year.

Soli Deo Gloria

2. INTRODUCTION: THE GIFT OF LENT

Lent is a gift.

For forty days (plus Sundays), the Church invites us to walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward the cross, and toward the empty tomb. We are invited to slow down, to examine our lives, to turn away from what harms us and others, and to turn back toward the God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).

This is not a season of self-punishment or religious performance. Lent is a season of *grace*—an opportunity to realign our lives with the values of Jesus and to rediscover the freedom that comes from living in God's love.

The theme of this workbook is *repentance*. But repentance is not what many of us think it is. Repentance is not groveling or wallowing in guilt. The Greek word *metanoia* means "a change of mind" or "a turning around." It is the decision to walk in a new direction because we have encountered the mercy of God.

This Lenten journey invites you to:

- **Notice** where you have drifted from God
- **Confess** honestly and without shame
- **Turn** toward new patterns of life
- **Trust** that God's grace is sufficient

Whether you are walking this path alone, with your family, or with a small group, may this season bring you closer to the heart of God.

3. HOW TO USE THIS LENTEN GUIDE

This guide is designed for flexibility. You can use it:

- **Individually** for personal devotion
- **In families** for shared spiritual formation
- **In small groups** for weekly discussion and accountability
- **In congregations** as a churchwide Lenten emphasis

Daily Practice (5–10 minutes)

Each day, set aside a few minutes for:

1. **Scripture reading** (provided for each week)
2. **Reflection question** (one per day)
3. **Prayer** (use the daily pattern provided)

Weekly Practice (30–60 minutes)

Each week focuses on one theme and one practice:

- Read the weekly reflection
- Engage the practice throughout the week
- Journal or discuss with others

Sundays

Sundays are "little Easters" and are not counted in the 40 days of Lent. Use Sundays as a day of rest and celebration, even during this penitential season.

4. WHAT IS REPENTANCE? A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The Hebrew Understanding: *Shuv*

In the Hebrew Bible, the word for repentance is *shuv*, which means "to turn" or "to return." It is the image of someone walking in the wrong direction, realizing their mistake, and turning around to head back home.

The prophet Joel proclaims:

"Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." (Joel 2:12-13)

Notice that God does not say, "Grovel before me" or "Prove your worthiness." God says, "*Return to me.*" The emphasis is on relationship, not performance.

The Greek Understanding: *Metanoia*

In the New Testament, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means "a change of mind" or "a transformation of perception." It is not merely feeling sorry for something you did; it is seeing the world—and yourself—differently because you have encountered God's truth.

When Jesus begins his public ministry, his first words are: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news*" (Mark 1:15). Repentance is the doorway into the kingdom of God.

Repentance Is Not Shame

Shame says, "I am bad."

Guilt says, "I did something bad."

Repentance says, "I can turn around and go a different way."

Shame keeps us stuck. Repentance sets us free.

Repentance Is an Invitation, Not a Demand

God does not threaten us into repentance. God *invites* us. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), God is already running toward us with open arms, ready to welcome us home.

Repentance is the joyful realization that we are loved, forgiven, and free to begin again.

5. DAILY LENTEN PRACTICE: A FIVE-STEP PATTERN

Each day during Lent, use this simple five-step pattern:

1. EXAMINE

Ask yourself: *Where have I drifted from God today?*

Take a few moments to review your day. Notice moments of disconnection, harm, or selfishness.

2. CONFESS

Bring those moments honestly before God.

You do not need to minimize or justify. Simply name what you see.

Prayer:

"God, I confess that today I..."

3. RECEIVE GRACE

Hear God's word of forgiveness.

Read or speak aloud: "*If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9).

4. TURN

Ask: *What new direction is God inviting me toward?*

Repentance is not just about stopping something; it is about starting something new.

5. HOPE

Trust that tomorrow is a new day.

God's mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Closing Prayer:

"Thank you, God, for your grace. Help me to walk in your way tomorrow. Amen."

6. WEEKLY LENTEN JOURNEY

WEEK 1: RETURN TO GOD

Scripture: Joel 2:12-13

Theme: Coming Home

Reflection

The journey of repentance begins with a simple invitation: *Return to me.*

God does not say, "Fix yourself first" or "Earn your way back." God says, "*Come home.*" This is the scandalous grace of the gospel—that God welcomes us not because we are good, but because God is good.

The prophet Joel makes clear that God is not interested in outward displays of religiosity ("rend your hearts and not your clothing"). God wants authenticity. God wants *you*—with all your brokenness, confusion, and failure. God wants relationship.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, when we are marked with the sign of the cross and reminded: "*You are dust, and to dust you shall return*" (Genesis 3:19). This is not meant to be depressing. It is meant to be freeing. We are finite. We are frail. We are human. And God loves us anyway.

To return to God is to stop pretending we have it all together. It is to stop performing and start being honest. It is to let ourselves be loved.

Daily Reflections (Week 1)

Day 1 (Ash Wednesday): What does it mean for you to "return to God"? Where have you wandered?

Day 2: Read Joel 2:12-13 slowly. What word or phrase stands out to you?

Day 3: God is described as "gracious and merciful." How have you experienced God's grace in your life?

Day 4: What does it look like to "rend your heart" rather than your clothing? Where is God inviting you to be more authentic?

Day 5: Reflect on a time when you felt far from God. What brought you back?

Day 6: What is one small step you can take this week to "return" to God?

Day 7 (Saturday): Review your week. Where did you notice God's invitation to return?

Weekly Practice

Create a "Come Home" ritual.

Each evening this week, light a candle and say aloud: *"God, I am coming home to you."* Sit in silence for two minutes, simply being present to God.

WEEK 2: CONFESSION AND TRUTH

Scripture: 1 John 1:7-9

Theme: Walking in the Light

Reflection

"If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

Confession is the practice of bringing our lives into the light. It is the opposite of hiding, pretending, or covering up. When we confess, we are saying: *"This is the truth about me. I am not perfect. I have sinned. And I need grace."*

The beauty of confession is that it leads to fellowship—both with God and with one another. When we stop hiding, we discover that we are not alone. We are all broken. We are all in need of grace.

First John promises that *"if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1:9). Notice the emphasis: God is *faithful* and *just*. God's forgiveness is not arbitrary or conditional. It is rooted in God's character.

Confession is not about earning God's love. It is about receiving what has already been freely given.

Daily Reflections (Week 2)

Day 8 (Sunday – rest and celebrate)

Day 9: What is one thing you have been hiding from God or others? Why?

Day 10: Read 1 John 1:7-9. What does it mean to "walk in the light"?

Day 11: Have you ever experienced the freedom that comes from honest confession? What was that like?

Day 12: Who is a person you trust to hear your confession without judgment?

Day 13: Reflect on this: God's forgiveness is not earned; it is received. How does that change the way you approach confession?

Day 14: What is one area of your life where you need to walk more honestly?

Day 15 (Saturday): Review your week. Where did you experience the grace of confession?

Weekly Practice

Write a confession prayer.

Set aside 15 minutes to write a prayer of confession. Be specific and honest. Then, write God's response to you using the words of 1 John 1:9. Burn or tear up the confession as a symbol of God's forgiveness.

WEEK 3: TURNING FROM OLD PATTERNS

Scripture: Luke 19:8-9 (Zacchaeus)

Theme: Making Amends

Reflection

When Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, his life changes immediately. He declares: *"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much"* (Luke 19:8).

This is repentance in action. Zacchaeus does not just feel bad about his past. He takes concrete steps to make things right.

Repentance is not complete until it leads to changed behavior. The Apostle Paul writes, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*" (Romans 12:2). Transformation requires both inner change (a renewed mind) and outer change (new patterns of behavior).

This week, we are invited to ask: *What old patterns do I need to turn away from? What new patterns do I need to embrace?*

Maybe it is a pattern of gossip, dishonesty, overwork, avoidance, or self-neglect. Maybe it is a pattern of holding grudges or refusing to forgive. Whatever it is, God invites us to turn around and walk in a new direction.

Daily Reflections (Week 3)

Day 16 (Sunday – rest and celebrate)

Day 17: Read Luke 19:1-10. What stands out to you about Zacchaeus's response to Jesus?

Day 18: What is one old pattern in your life that you know needs to change?

Day 19: Is there someone you have wronged who deserves an apology or amends?

Day 20: What makes it hard for you to change? Fear? Pride? Habit?

Day 21: Reflect on Romans 12:2. What does it mean to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind"?

Day 22: What is one new pattern you want to establish in your life?

Day 23 (Saturday): Review your week. Where did you take a step toward change?

Weekly Practice

Make one concrete amend.

Identify someone you have wronged or a situation where you need to make things right. Take one concrete action this week—write a letter, make a phone call, return something, or give restitution.

WEEK 4: RENEWING THE MIND

Scripture: Romans 12:1-2

Theme: Transformation from the Inside Out

Reflection

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

Repentance is not just about changing behavior. It is about changing the way we *think*. It is about renewing our minds so that we see the world—and ourselves—the way God sees us.

The world tells us we are only as valuable as we are productive. God says we are beloved.

The world tells us to hoard and compete. God says to give and share.

The world tells us to seek power and control. God says to serve and love.

Renewing the mind requires intentionality. It requires us to pay attention to what we consume—the media we watch, the voices we listen to, the narratives we believe about ourselves.

This week, we are invited to ask: *What lies have I been believing? What truths does God want to replace them with?*

Daily Reflections (Week 4)

Day 24 (Sunday – rest and celebrate)

Day 25: Read Romans 12:1-2. What does it mean to offer your body as a "living sacrifice"?

Day 26: What is one lie you have believed about yourself? What is the truth God wants you to know?

Day 27: What voices or influences in your life shape the way you think? Are they helping or hindering your spiritual growth?

Day 28: How can you be more intentional about renewing your mind this week?

Day 29: Reflect on Philippians 4:8: *"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."* What does this verse invite you to focus on?

Day 30: What is one spiritual practice that helps you renew your mind? (e.g., Scripture reading, worship, silence, journaling)

Day 31 (Saturday): Review your week. Where did you notice a shift in your thinking?

Weekly Practice

Memorize a verse.

Choose one verse from this week's readings (Romans 12:2, Philippians 4:8, or another) and memorize it. Repeat it to yourself throughout the day, especially when you notice negative or unhelpful thoughts.

WEEK 5: BEARING FRUIT

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-23

Theme: The Fruit of the Spirit

Reflection

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Repentance is not just about stopping bad behavior. It is about cultivating good fruit. Jesus says, *"You will know them by their fruits"* (Matthew 7:16). What we believe about God will eventually show up in the way we live.

The fruit of the Spirit is not something we produce through willpower or effort. It is something that grows naturally when we are connected to the vine (John 15:5). Our job is not to manufacture love, joy, or peace. Our job is to stay connected to Jesus.

This week, we are invited to ask: *What fruit is growing in my life? What fruit is missing?*

If we find ourselves lacking in patience, kindness, or self-control, the solution is not to try harder. The solution is to draw closer to God and allow the Spirit to do the work of transformation from the inside out.

Daily Reflections (Week 5)

Day 32 (Sunday – rest and celebrate)

Day 33: Read Galatians 5:22-23. Which fruit of the Spirit is most evident in your life right now?

Day 34: Which fruit of the Spirit do you struggle with the most? Why?

Day 35: Reflect on John 15:5: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."* What does it mean to "abide" in Jesus?

Day 36: How can you stay more connected to Jesus this week?

Day 37: Think of someone in your life who embodies one of the fruits of the Spirit. What can you learn from them?

Day 38: What is one small way you can practice patience, kindness, or generosity today?

Day 39 (Saturday): Review your week. Where did you notice the fruit of the Spirit growing in your life?

Weekly Practice

Practice one fruit intentionally.

Choose one fruit of the Spirit to focus on this week. Look for opportunities to practice it in your daily interactions. At the end of the week, reflect on what you learned.

WEEK 6: WALKING IN GRACE

Scripture: Romans 6:4

Theme: Newness of Life

Reflection

"Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life"
(Romans 6:4).

The culmination of repentance is resurrection. We die to our old selves and rise to new life in Christ. This is not a one-time event; it is a daily practice. Every morning, we are invited to say: *"Today, I will walk in the newness of life that Christ has given me."*

To walk in grace means to live as a forgiven person. It means to stop carrying the weight of guilt and shame. It means to trust that God's mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

As we approach Holy Week, we are reminded that death is not the end of the story. Resurrection is coming. And because of Easter, we can live with hope, knowing that God is always making all things new.

Daily Reflections (Week 6)

Day 40 (Sunday – rest and celebrate)

Day 41: Read Romans 6:4. What does it mean to be "buried with Christ by baptism"?

Day 42: What does "newness of life" look like for you?

Day 43: Reflect on 2 Corinthians 5:17: *"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* What old things in your life have passed away? What new things are emerging?

Day 44: How have you experienced God's grace this Lenten season?

Day 45: What is one way you can extend grace to someone else this week?

Day 46 (Saturday): Review your entire Lenten journey. What has God been teaching you?

Weekly Practice

Write a testimony.

Reflect on your Lenten journey and write a brief testimony (1-2 paragraphs) about how God has met you during this season. Share it with a trusted friend, small group, or your congregation.

7. REPENTANCE HABIT TRACKER

Use this simple tracker to build a daily habit of repentance throughout Lent.

Week Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Daily Pattern:

- ✓ Examine
- ✓ Confess
- ✓ Receive Grace
- ✓ Turn
- ✓ Hope

8. YOUTH-FRIENDLY VERSION: GETTING BACK ON TRACK WITH GOD

What Is Lent?

Lent is a 40-day season (not counting Sundays) when Christians prepare for Easter. It's a time to slow down, think about our lives, and get back on track with God.

What Is Repentance?

Repentance means admitting when you've messed up and choosing to go in a new direction. It's like when you're walking somewhere and realize you're going the wrong way, so you turn around and head back.

The cool thing is, God isn't mad at you. God is like a loving parent who's just happy you're coming home.

Your Daily Challenge (5 minutes)

1. **Notice:** Where did I mess up today?
2. **Say it:** Tell God honestly (no need to be fancy).
3. **Hear it:** God says, "I forgive you."
4. **Do it:** What's one thing I can do differently tomorrow?
5. **Believe it:** Tomorrow is a new day.

Weekly Themes

- **Week 1:** Coming back to God
- **Week 2:** Being honest
- **Week 3:** Changing your habits
- **Week 4:** Changing your mindset
- **Week 5:** Showing God's love to others
- **Week 6:** Living as a new person

Try This

Pick one fruit of the Spirit to focus on each week: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control. See if you can practice it every day.

9. FAMILY PRACTICES: LENT AT HOME

Lent is a great opportunity to practice faith together as a family. Here are some simple practices you can do at home.

Weekly Family Check-In

Set aside 20-30 minutes once a week for a family check-in. Ask:

- What's one thing you're grateful for this week?
- What's one thing you need to say sorry for?
- What's one way we can show God's love to someone this week?

Lenten Family Rituals

1. The Gratitude Jar

Each night at dinner, have each family member write down one thing they're thankful for and put it in a jar. On Easter morning, read them all together.

2. Acts of Kindness Calendar

Create a calendar with one small act of kindness for each day of Lent. Examples: write a thank-you note, help a neighbor, donate to a food bank, etc.

3. Simplicity Challenge

Choose one thing to give up as a family (e.g., screen time after dinner, fast food, complaining). Use the time or money saved to do something meaningful together.

4. Family Prayer Walk

Once a week, take a walk together as a family. As you walk, pray for your neighborhood, your church, and the world.

Holy Week Family Activities

Palm Sunday: Make palm crosses together and talk about Jesus's entry into Jerusalem.

Maundy Thursday: Wash each other's feet (or hands) and talk about what it means to serve one another.

Good Friday: Read the crucifixion story together (Luke 23:26-49) and sit in silence for a few minutes.

Holy Saturday: Bake hot cross buns or Easter bread together.

Easter Sunday: Celebrate with a special breakfast, an egg hunt, and a joyful reading of the resurrection story (Luke 24:1-12).

10. HOLY WEEK AND EASTER: FROM SORROW TO JOY

Holy Week is the culmination of the Lenten journey. It is the week when we walk with Jesus through his final days—his entry into Jerusalem, his last supper with his disciples, his arrest and trial, his crucifixion, and his resurrection.

Palm Sunday (April 13, 2026)

Scripture: Luke 19:28-40

Theme: Triumphal Entry

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds shout, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 19:38). But within days, those same crowds will call for his crucifixion.

Reflection: Where do you see Jesus as king in your life? Where are you tempted to turn away from him?

Practice: Wave palm branches (real or paper) and shout, "Hosanna!" as a family or congregation. Then sit in silence, reflecting on the cost of following Jesus.

Maundy Thursday (April 17, 2026)

Scripture: John 13:1-17, 34-35

Theme: The Last Supper and Foot Washing

Jesus shares a final meal with his disciples and washes their feet, demonstrating radical servanthood. He says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

Reflection: Who in your life needs an act of humble service from you?

Practice: Participate in a foot-washing service or serve someone in a tangible way.

Good Friday (April 18, 2026)

Scripture: Luke 23:26-49

Theme: The Crucifixion

Jesus is crucified. He dies a painful, humiliating death, taking on the sins of the world. His last words are, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Reflection: What does the cross mean to you? How does Jesus's death bring you life?

Practice: Attend a Good Friday service. Sit in silence before a cross. Fast or abstain from something as a way of entering into the sorrow of the day.

Holy Saturday (April 19, 2026)

Scripture: Matthew 27:57-66

Theme: Waiting

Jesus is buried. The disciples are in hiding. All seems lost. This is the day of waiting—the day between death and resurrection.

Reflection: Where are you waiting on God right now? What does it mean to trust in the midst of uncertainty?

Practice: Spend time in silence. Do not rush to Easter. Sit with the grief and the waiting.

Easter Sunday (April 20, 2026)

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Theme: Resurrection

The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive. Death does not have the final word. The women run to tell the disciples, "The Lord has risen indeed!" (Luke 24:34).

Reflection: What needs to be resurrected in your life? Where do you need to experience new life?

Practice: Celebrate! Gather with your church family. Sing hymns of praise. Feast together. Declare boldly: *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!*

11. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

This section provides resources for further study and reflection on repentance, Lent, and spiritual formation.

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"Lenten Devotions and Practices." *The Work of the People*. <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com>.

"Sacred Seasons: Lent." *Illustrated Ministry*. <https://www.illustratedministry.com>.

"Lectionary Reflections and Worship Resources." *Sermon Brainwave*. Luther Seminary. <https://www.workingpreacher.org>.

End of Workbook

Both documents are now complete with proper acknowledgments! You can copy and paste these into separate Word documents. The memo includes the development process disclosure, and the workbook has a full acknowledgments section that properly credits both your pastoral leadership and the AI collaboration.