**Integrating the Rhythm of Life into the Life of the Church**

Hazelnut Community launched our Rhythm of Life at the start of Advent 2024. We decided to look at how we could integrate practices into our activities and worship, building these around the church year, seasons and the festivals and traditions shared by those who make up our community. The first thing we noticed is that there are already many connections between our existing worship, activities and practices and our Rhythm of Life. This is to be expected, as a Rhythm of Life should be rooted in the values and life of our church community. It is helpful to identify these, encouraging people to see that we are not starting from scratch – there is much that is familiar, and we are already doing well. We hope that our seasonal pattern will help us to do this, giving attention to the different parts of our Rhythm of Life and helping us to embed it more deeply into our community life. It gives us permission not to have to do everything at once, and encourages us to work at our practices together, rather than expecting individuals to go it alone. We are still experimenting and recognise that the life of our church community is shaped differently from most Anglican churches but share with you some of our plans and ideas in the hope they may be helpful in developing your own patterns and practices.

*[The connection to our Rhythm of Life is noted in italics for each heading]*

**New Year**  *[Discerning priorities from the Rhythm of Life]*

In UK culture, New Year is naturally a time for reflection. Using a worksheet, we encourage individuals to take time at the start of the year to reflect on the year that is past, to look at the opportunities and challenges the new year brings and to think about what aspects of the Rhythm of Life they might want to explore in the coming year. This, we hope, will encourage gratitude, recognises achievements, helps people to dream, to recognise their needs and make good choices about how they use their time and energy.

As a community – we plan to review our Rhythm of Life at the start of each new year, using structured small group conversations, with pens and paper tablecloths to record discussions. We want to notice and celebrate what we are doing well and identify we want to work on in the year ahead. We hope this will be encouraging and will help us to focus on what is most important, rather than feeling overwhelmed by trying to do everything at once.

**Winter Season** *[Balance and Rest, Prayer, Practising Community, Sharing our Stories]*

Our Winter season runs from the middle of January through until the end of March. As winter drags on, it can be a gloomy time for a garden-based project. We wanted to use this time to give space to our Rhythm of Life. Our pattern includes storytelling and community meals, both great ways of growing relationships and building connections with our wider community. We also offer ‘Unplugged’ Sundays, which gave the opportunity for rest, recreation and contemplative prayer. We hoped this would provide a balance to our busier times of planting and harvest, when it can be harder to include quiet prayer opportunities, rest and conversation. We recognise this pattern is rather specific to a context, but it might help to think about the times in the church’s year that are quieter – those long weeks of ordinary time for example, and to see how you might use these to engage with areas of your communal Rhythm of Life.

**Lent**  *[Prayer, Living Sustainably, Justice & Peace]*

Lent is an ideal opportunity to encouraged shared practices or practical action. Psychologists tell us that six weeks is the time it takes to develop a habit, so it’s a good time to work on something you want to encourage your community to continue. Last year we offered several options of different ways of engaging with caring for the earth or taking action on climate breakdown. This felt a bit diffuse, and we didn’t get a high degree of engagement, so this year we are just suggesting one single prayer activity for everyone. This aims to increase our sense of wonder at the world around us and gratitude to God and is something simple enough for everyone to join in. There will be an opportunity each week to share how the practise has been going. Next year we might look for something that links to justice and peace, to connect to a different section of our Rhythm of Life.

**Mothering Sunday** *[Loving the Earth, Creating places of beauty and peace]*

Mothering Sunday can be complicated – lovely for many families but also a painful time, which can exclude people for many reasons. We are refocusing this year on Caring for Mother Earth, giving the opportunity to think and pray about how we live sustainably and bless the planet God has given us. This will include a practical task of creating a beautiful, nature-friendly space within our garden.

**Growing Basics Course** *[Sharing our Learning, Skills and Faith, Welcome and Hospitality]*

Every year we offer a free Growing Basics course to our community. This wasn’t deliberately set up to link to our Rhythm of Life but offers excellent opportunities to offer welcome to our community, to share our skills, stories and faith. Connecting it to our Rhythm of Life will help us be more intentional in getting to know people and thinking about how we make our prayer times welcoming and accessible to people with little or no experience of faith.

**Easter Season**  *[Cultivating Hope, Committing to our Rhythm of Life]*

One of our sections in our Rhythm of Life is about cultivating hope. The season of Easter seems an ideal time to explore the hope that our faith in the risen Jesus brings, and to look at how we live hopefully in these turbulent times of climate and political breakdown. It is also the time we have chosen to invite people who wish to commit to living the Rhythm of Life during the coming year. We hope this annual service of commitment will encourage people to engage and to give us a corporate sense of living out our Rhythm of Life together.

**Lammas** *[Making Connections, Hospitality, Justice, Prayer & Worship]*

This celebration of the first wheat harvest at the beginning of August has largely vanished from our churches, and yet bread is such an essential part of life and such a rich metaphor within the Christian Tradition. We are thinking how we can celebrate this. Maybe one year we will organise an interfaith bread festival, bringing together people of different backgrounds to share their food and faith stories. We have already tried our hand (not very successfully!) at growing and harvesting wheat, which gave us a deeper appreciation of the struggles of farmers across the world. We might add to this a thread about justice and food poverty. Another year we might focus on the bread of life and connect to how we sustain ourselves spiritually. These can be added to our annual making of a Lammas loaf and sharing of holy communion together.

**Summer** *[Balance and Rest, Practising Community, Growing in Wisdom and Faith]*

March to June is a busy time in the garden, but July and August are quieter, both from a growing perspective and because people are often away on holiday. We take the opportunity of smaller numbers to focus on enjoying the peace and beauty of the garden, using reflective spiritual practices that work well outdoors. We also put aside time for having fun, with games, outdoor cooking, picnics and time to relax together. We suggest a summer book for everyone to read, which might focus on eco-theology or themes around living simply and hopefully.

**Harvest** *[Gratitude and Wonder / Welcome & Hospitality / Justice & Peace]*

Traditionally Harvest Festival is celebrated by churches and is often a time that the wider community engages with church. For Hazelnut, we hold our harvest thanksgiving prayers as part of a community focused festival, with crafts and activities, music and food, making it a time to grow links with our wider community. We also focus on giving away food we have grown to the local community (we have a community kitchen a few streets away) and think about themes of inclusion and justice that link to our community.

**Advent** *[ Prayer, Growing Community]*

Advent has largely vanished outside of the church, beyond an excuse to eat chocolate. It is for many a busy time of year. At Hazelnut we have embraced two practices which have become part of our advent tradition. We encourage people to buy an advent candle and commit to spending a few minutes in silent prayer and reflection each day whilst their candle burns. The response has been very positive and is accessible to people at different stages of faith or none. For the past two years we have also done Posada, with knitted figures of Mary & Joseph staying with different members of our community each night, eventually returning for our Christmas service. We encourage people to take the opportunity to spend time together getting to know each other better and try to include those who are on the fringes of our community, as a way of deepening friendships.

**Final thoughts**

Some aspects of our Rhythm of Life are already part of Hazelnut’s DNA, but by having identified them in a more visible way, we have become more intentional in our practice and pay more attention to doing them well. Other things are already becoming traditions and will remain as part of our life together, revisiting them each year. But it is important going forward to have space and flexibility to try new things, so that we can work on things we are doing less well at or respond to changes in our community or the world around us. This feels as if it takes off some of the pressure to ‘succeed’ at everything and allows us to enjoy where we are and what we are working on right now.

For your own church community, you might want to think about what opportunities there might be to connect your Rhythm of Life to the church’s year, patronal festivals, local events or the natural seasons. These can help your Rhythm of Life to become something shared rather than just individual and will hopefully help those who are unlikely to participate on their own. It can help you as a church to look at the balance of what you do and can give room for new practices and traditions to enrich your relationships with God and one another.