

**2024 ACYOA  
Fall Retreat Guidebook**

**“The GIFT of Forgiveness”**

*Growing In Faith Together*



**DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH (EASTERN)**  
*Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries*

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October 14, 2024

Dear Pastors, Parish Council Chairs, Youth Advisors, and ACYOA Seniors Chairs,

We are pleased to share this ACYOA Fall Retreat Guidebook with all of our parish leadership across the Eastern Diocese. The content is based on the sessions that will be conducted at the ACYOA Seniors Fall Retreat in Lakeside, CT the weekend of November 8-10. We realize that not all young adults will be able to attend the retreat, so we welcome you to plan and execute your retreats using this guidebook for both the ACYOA Juniors and Seniors of your parish community.

In this guidebook, we have provided the nuts-to-bolts instructions for planning and running a retreat to equip you with the resources needed to hold a retreat for your ACYOA. The lessons in this guidebook are also easily adaptable for both teens and young adults. You will find three sample schedules, a registration form, a sample Code of Conduct, detailed icebreaker lesson plans, engaging group discussions, and more. We hope this will assist you in executing a retreat that can be organized and led by your parish leadership. *Please keep in mind that this guidebook contains the raw materials of each presentation; clergymen and facilitators should feel free to add their personalities and modify the sessions to meet the specific needs of their audiences!*

We are available throughout the retreat planning stages if you have any questions or need additional guidance. We hope that this guidebook will lead you to fruitful discussions, fun fellowship, and a deepened strength within your ACYOA.

We look forward to hearing all about your ACYOA Juniors Fall Retreats!

Jennifer Morris, Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries  
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(INSERT PARISH OR REGION NAME) **ACYOA FALL RETREAT**

**SATURDAY, (INSERT MONTH, DAY, YEAR)**

11:00 - 11:30 AM	Registration and Welcome
11:30 - 11:45 AM	Morning Prayer Service
11:45 - 12:30 PM	Icebreakers
12:30 - 1:30 PM	Lunch & Group Photo
1:30 - 2:30 PM	<b>Session 1: Forgiveness 101</b>
2:30 - 3:30 PM	<b>Session 2: Forgiving Others</b>
3:30 - 3:45 PM	Break
3:45 - 4:45 PM	<b>Session 3: Forgiveness Rocks</b>
4:45 - 5:15 PM	Evening Prayer Service
5:15 - 5:30 PM	Clean Up & Depart

(INSERT PARISH OR REGION NAME) **ACYOA FALL RETREAT**

**DAY 1 - FRIDAY, (INSERT MONTH, DAY, YEAR)**

5:00 - 5:30 PM	Registration and Welcome
5:30 - 6:00 PM	Evening Prayer Service
6:00 - 6:45 PM	Icebreakers
6:45 - 7:45 PM	Dinner
7:45 - 8:00 PM	Group Photo
8:00 - 9:00 PM	<b>Session 1: Forgiveness 101</b>
9:00 - 10:30 PM	Movie**/Board Games/Snack Time
10:30 - 11:00 PM	Prepare For Bed/Quiet Time
11:00 PM	Lights Out

**DAY 2 - SATURDAY, (INSERT MONTH, DAY, YEAR)**

8:00 - 8:30 AM	Wake Up
8:30 - 9:00 AM	Breakfast
9:00 - 9:15 AM	Morning Prayer Service
9:15 - 10:15 AM	<b>Session 2: Forgiving Others</b>
10:15 - 11:15 AM	<b>Session 3: Forgiveness Rocks</b>
11:15 - 11:30 AM	Break
11:30 - 12:30 PM	<b>Session 4: Forgiving Ourselves Through God's Love</b>
12:30 - 1:30 PM	Lunch
1:30 - 2:00 PM	Pack Up, Clean Up & Depart

(INSERT PARISH OR REGION NAME) **ACYOA FALL RETREAT\***

*\*if following this schedule, be sure to remind participants to bring a church-appropriate change of clothes for Sunday Badarak*

**DAY 1 - SATURDAY, (INSERT MONTH, DAY, YEAR)**

2:00 - 2:30 PM	Registration and Welcome
2:30 - 2:45 PM	Midday Prayer Service
2:45 - 3:30 PM	Icebreakers
3:30 - 3:45 PM	Group Photo
3:45 - 4:45 PM	<b>Session 1: Forgiveness 101</b>
4:45 - 5:00 PM	Break
5:00 - 6:00 PM	<b>Session 2: Forgiving Others</b>
6:00 - 7:00 PM	Dinner
7:00 - 8:00 PM	<b>Session 3: Forgiveness Rocks</b>
8:00 - 9:00 PM	<b>Session 4: Forgiving Ourselves Through God's Love</b>
9:00 - 10:30 PM	Movie**/Board Games/Snack Time
10:30 PM - 11:00 PM	Prepare For Bed/Quiet Time
11:00 PM	Lights Out

**DAY 2 - SUNDAY, (INSERT MONTH, DAY, YEAR)**

8:00 - 8:30 AM	Wake Up
8:30 - 9:00 AM	Prepare for Badarak
9:00 - 9:30 AM	Guided Meditation/Personal Prayer
9:30 - 12:00 PM <i>(depending on when Badarak is in your parish)</i>	Divine Liturgy/Badarak
12:00 - 1:30 PM <i>(depending on when Badarak ends)</i>	Attend Fellowship/Coffee Hour
1:30 - 2:00 PM	Pack Up, Clean Up & Depart

**\*\*Suggested list of movies on the topic of forgiveness:**

<b><i>SPIRITUAL (for an older audience)</i></b>	<b><i>FAMILY-FRIENDLY (all ages)</i></b>
<b>The Shack (2017)</b>	<b>Encanto (2021)</b>
<b>Blue Miracle (2021)</b>	<b>Despicable Me (2010)</b>
<b>Mass (2021)</b>	<b>Toy Story (1995)</b>
	<b>Lion King (1994)</b>
	<b>The Emperor's New Groove (2000)</b>

**Session Video Clips:**


**Impact Ministries**

**How to Forgive (2024)**

 [How to FORGIVE others](#)


**The Chosen, Season 4, Episode 2**

**Peter Forgives Matthew (2024)**

 [The Chosen Ep 4.2 | Peter Forgives Matthew | Michael Herbert](#)

**The Kindness Rocks Project**

**YouTube·The Studio by the Sea·Jun 20, 2017**

 [The Kindness Rocks Project](#)

(INSERT PARISH OR REGION NAME) **ACYOA Fall Retreat** (INSERT MONTH, DAY, YEAR)

**Sample Registration Form\***

*(Please modify questions and fields based on the age group of participants)*

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Birth:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sex:** Male Female

**Parish:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mailing Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**City:** \_\_\_\_\_ **State:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Zip Code:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Home Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Cell Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>PRIMARY PARENT/GUARDIAN</b>	<b>SECONDARY PARENT/GUARDIAN</b>
Name:	Name:
Cell Number:	Cell Number:
Email:	Email:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, my *Code of Conduct* has been read and signed by me (and a parent, if applicable).

*\*Please note: If you'd like to go completely digital with your retreat, you may create an online registration form using [Google Forms](#). Participants can submit their registration using the registration link you send them.*

**CODE OF CONDUCT**

1. As members of the ACYOA, we are part of a Christian youth organization and expect Christian standards of behavior at all times. Therefore, all participants and chaperones shall be treated with respect and dignity at all times.
2. We are a community – we all need to clean up after ourselves, share the facilities, and treat the facilities with respect. The destruction, misuse, or abuse of property will not be tolerated. Those found responsible for such behavior will be held financially liable.
3. Be on time and follow the schedule! You are expected to participate in all activities.
4. Participate in discussions, share your ideas, and remember to listen to others. Everyone deserves a chance to speak, and everyone deserves to be heard.
5. Proper dress and language are expected at all times. Participants will not use foul or abusive language, including words of a sexually explicit or violent nature.
6. No weapons of any kind, firecrackers, or inappropriate audio/video recordings are permitted.
7. Participants will not partake in any form of drugs and/or alcohol while participating in the retreat. This includes but is not limited to alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, illegal drugs, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, cigars, snuff, chewing tobacco, vaporizers, hookahs, etc. (and their accompanying paraphernalia).

Any serious violation of these rules by participants will be evaluated on an individual basis and dealt with quickly and firmly and may result in expulsion from the retreat. Parents and pastors will be contacted after the retreat to discuss any inappropriate behavior.

**I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE CODE OF CONDUCT,  
AND AGREE TO ABIDE BY THE ABOVE INFORMATION.**

**Participant Name PRINT:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant SIGNATURE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent/Guardian SIGNATURE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Introductions and Icebreakers

**A NOTE TO FACILITATORS:** *Be sure to go around and have everyone introduce themselves with their name, age, and their answer to the special question (i.e. favorite ice cream, favorite hobby, personal hero, etc.). Select one or more of the icebreakers below, based on your registration numbers, group dynamics, and time available.*

**Interview:** Divide participants into pairs. Ask them to take three minutes to interview each other. Each interviewer has to find 3 interesting facts about their partner. Bring everyone back together and ask everyone to present the 3 facts about their partner to the rest of the group. Do as many rounds as you have time for, so the participants can meet as many people as possible.

**Neighbors:** Break up into groups of 5 or more, and have everyone stand in a circle with one person in the middle. Give each team 3 minutes to memorize the first, middle, and last names of their neighbors on either side of them. The designated middle person will point to someone randomly and say either “left neighbor” or “right neighbor”. The person who is pointed at must say the full name of their neighbor. If they get it wrong, then they must trade places with the person in the middle. Continue the game until everyone knows everyone else's name.

**Body English:** Split the group into two groups. Have a bag filled with words on pieces of paper. One group will draw a word out of the bag and spell the word(s) out. Each group must work together to spell out the word(s) by using their bodies only (no hand signals or signs). The other group must figure out what they are spelling. Start with single words and move on to phrases as the groups get better at spelling in this fashion.

**Back to Back:** Every person must find a partner of approximately equal height and size, if possible. The partners will lock arms with their backs to one another. With arms remaining locked at all times, the partners will sit down on the ground, kick their legs out straight, and try to stand back up. Then groups of four will try the same thing. Then groups of eight, sixteen, and eventually, the entire group together. This is the perfect activity to begin a trust sequence.

## **SESSION 1: Forgiveness 101 (One Hour Session)**

**PREP:** Order one large rock for each participant on Amazon or purchase from your local store, order a drawstring bag with the ACYOA logo on it or purchase a reusable bag from the store, confirm AV equipment with audio, watch the “How To Forgive Others” video, and print prayer bookmarks for each participant (see attachment).

**SUPPLIES:** Laptop, laptop charger, projector/HDMI hookup, speakers; rocks & drawstring bags; prayer bookmarks, pens/pencils, paper, handouts

**ROOM SET-Up:** Classroom style with chairs facing the screen

**OVERVIEW:** All participants will receive one large rock and one drawstring bag. Participants will then be instructed to put their rock in their bag and wear the drawstring bag throughout the retreat until they are told to take it off during Session 3. Participants should be aware throughout the day that they are carrying a weight on them and be mindful of their feelings and experiences. In Session 3, participants will be able to take the rock out of their bag and decorate it during a group discussion. The significance of taking the rock out and decorating will be explained in Session 3.

### **LESSON PLAN:**

(10 Minutes) Pass out a large rock and drawstring bag to each participant. Ask them to hold the rock in their right hand and extend their arm as you talk. Let them feel the weight of the rock and discomfort. Once you realize that they are feeling the weight of it, then ask them to switch to the other hand, extend their arm above their head, and continue talking. Finally, ask them to hold the rock in both hands out in front of them. During this time you can talk through the schedule of the day, share information about your facility, try to see who knows and can recite everyone’s name...just idle chit-chat so they can feel the weight and discomfort of the rock.

Ask them...

- What did it feel like to hold the rock for an extended period?
- Were you tempted to put it down?
- What do you think the purpose of this activity was?

Tell them that the rock represents “things” we hold onto in life...arguments, pain, grudges, etc, and that throughout the retreat we are going to work on learning how to let go of those “things.” But for now, we want you to feel the weight of your rock.

Instruct participants to put their rock in their bag and carry it with them wherever they go and whatever they do...bathroom, meals, discussion groups, etc. Their rock and bag should always be on them throughout the retreat.

(10 Minutes) Next share and discuss the information below.

What is forgiveness: the act of intentionally letting go of anger and resentment towards someone who has harmed you, even if they don't deserve it. It's a process that involves changing your feelings, attitudes, and behavior to move past the hurt and express compassion.

What is repenting: the act of showing sincere regret or remorse for one's actions. Repenting in the bible means more than just saying "sorry". It is to rearrange your entire way of thinking, feeling, and being - to be released from conscious and unconscious wrongdoings. It is a change of heart and a turning toward God.

How to forgive: pray to God and tell him what is in your heart: what happened that led to the hurt and resentment, as well as your desire to forgive yourself or someone else and be at peace about the situation.

What leads us to feel to forgive: we forgive because the other person involved has shown remorse for the wrongdoing or harm they have caused. God wants us to forgive when the opportunity arises. We can be led to forgive on our own accord when we realize carrying resentment is weighing us down.

What does the Bible say about forgiveness: God forgives us regardless of our worthiness. Having a change of heart and mind brings us closer to God.

Ephesians 4:32 "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Matthew 6:12 (Lord's Prayer) And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

(15 Minutes) Video: How to FORGIVE Others by Impact Video Ministries (YouTube)

 [How to FORGIVE others](#)

After the video ask participants what stood out to them from the video and what can they take away and apply to their lives.

(20-25 Minutes) Pass out a handout with the discussion questions below. Give participants 5 minutes to independently free-write their responses. Then break up into small groups of 3 or 4 people and ask them to share their responses. Give them 10 minutes to share in small groups before returning to the whole group to share some highlights from the small group discussions.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What does forgiveness mean to you?
2. How do you deal with forgiveness in your daily life?
3. Are you quick to repent and allow yourself to turn to God? Explain.
4. Are you quick to forgive? Explain.
5. What factors need to be present for you to do either?

**IN CLOSING:** Participants should be wearing their rock-filled drawstring bags and have a greater awareness of forgiveness and repentance.

## SESSION 2: Forgiving Others (One Hour and 30 Minute Session)

**SUPPLIES:** Blank paper, pens, and handouts with small group questions

**ROOM SET-UP:** Classroom Style with chairs facing the screen

**OVERVIEW:** The session will begin with a whole group prompt and brief discussion. Then they will watch a twenty-minute clip from *The Chosen*. Next, they will break up into small groups for discussions. The session will end with a clergy-led portion.

### LESSON PLAN:


(5 minutes) **PROMPT:** Opening Group Question: Why should we forgive others? What do we do if we have to keep forgiving the same person? How many times must we forgive someone?

- Share the following Bible verse that describes forgiving others
  - “Then Peter came to Him and asked, “Lord, how many times will my brother sin against me and I forgive him and let it go? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered him, “I say to you, not up to seven times, but seventy times seven.”  
- Matthew 18:21-22
- Share that forgiveness is often difficult, but we need to forgive others to ultimately live in peace within ourselves.
- Discuss what forgiving someone can look and feel like. Explain that forgiveness does not look the same for everyone.

(25 Minutes) **WATCH:** Chosen Video

Share that *The Chosen* is a series available on Netflix, Amazon Prime, Peacock, and Disney+ focused on the life and teachings of Jesus. This is a twenty-minute clip from the second episode of season 4.

*The Chosen, Season 4, Episode 2 - Peter Forgives Matthew (2024)*

 [The Chosen Ep 4.2 | Peter Forgives Matthew | Michael Herbert](#)

After the video ends, have everyone sit with their thoughts and ask if anyone would like to share any thoughts from the video. Then divide the group into small groups of 6-8 people.

(20 Minutes) **DISCUSS:** Forgiving Others

- In small groups, facilitators will guide participants as they discuss the following:
  - Describe a time when you forgave someone. How did you feel after?
  - Describe a time when you apologized to someone. How did you feel after?
  - Is there someone in your life that you have difficulty forgiving and if so how have you dealt with that or how are you dealing with that?

(40 Minutes) LISTEN: Forgiving But Not Forgetting (Clergy led the session)

- Start off the session by asking participants to close their eyes. Raise your hand if you haven't forgiven someone or yourself. Hands down. Raise your hand if you are finding it difficult for you to forgive that person or yourself. Hands down. Open your eyes.
- Clergy Talking Points:
  - How to forgive when someone has caused you a lot of pain
  - How forgiving someone you might not want to forgive is beneficial for you
  - How God is with you when you forgive others
  - How to forgive even when you can't forget
  - Passages to turn to when we struggle with forgiveness
  - Teachings of our Spiritual Fathers to help guide us through the process of forgiveness
  - Who can we turn to when we are facing challenges (ie. priest)

### SESSION 3: Forgiveness Rocks (One Hour Session)

**SUPPLIES:** Colored Sharpies, rocks from session 1, and paper plates to work on.

**ROOM SET-UP:** Classroom style facing the screen and tables with chairs to work on

**OVERVIEW:** After the introduction and video, participants will then work independently or as a group to decorate their rocks. The session will end back together as a whole group for a closing discussion.

#### **LESSON PLAN:**

(10 Minutes) Whole Group Discussion: Once everyone is seated, ask participants to take their rock out of their bags, and to share some words to describe their rock and experience with their rock so far.

Explain the symbolism of the rock: From being weighed down to feeling lighter and liberated  
\*this is what it feels like to let go and forgive!\*

Share the Video

[The Kindness Rocks Project](#): YouTube·The Studio by the Sea·Jun 20, 2017

 The Kindness Rocks Project

Tell everyone that they will now be decorating their rock with a positive message. Anything that speaks to them. They can choose a word, a passage, a quote, a picture, anything! When they leave the retreat they will then pass on their rock to someone else. It can be given to a person they think can use it, or they may leave it somewhere on campus or give it to a random person, hoping the rock will continue to spread joy.

Tell the participants that while they decorate they should think about what the rock means to them and how it felt to carry the rock around compared to now.

Have everyone think about the burden they carry around, decorate their rock to release that burden, and finish the activity by allowing participants to share their experiences.

(30 Minutes) Rock Decorating Activity:

After the explanation, have the participants pick a space where they can work on their rock and suggest it may be better to do it alone quietly (so they can sit with their thoughts).

(15 Minutes) Closing Discussion:

Have participants come back to the large group and sit in a large circle.

Ask participants to share their thoughts about the rock from the moment they received it until right now.

- What does the rock represent to you?
- How might the "rock" represent forgiveness and the burden of holding on to pain?
- How has the rock activity shaped your view on the gift of forgiveness and how it impacts you?

Finish the session by having everyone in the group stand while holding their rock and say one word describing their feelings.

## SESSION 4: Forgiving Ourselves Through God's Love (One Hour Session)

**SUPPLIES:** Prayer Bookmarks

**GOAL:** To further explore the topic of forgiveness with pastoral guidance and discussion.

### LESSON PLAN:

(10 Minutes) "At the very end of your day, when you are about to fall asleep, have you ever thought, "Why did I say that to that person" or "I shouldn't have said that out loud". It can be difficult to fall asleep when your thoughts keep you awake. Why do we find it so difficult to give ourselves grace? How can we learn to forgive ourselves the way that God forgives us?"

Here is a beautiful prayer from St. Ephrem the Syrian to help us in those times.

Prayer of Repentance: O Lord, our God in Your goodness and love for mankind forgive me all the sins I have committed today in word, deed, or thoughts. Grant me peaceful and undisturbed sleep. Send Your Guardian Angel to guard and protect me from all evil. For You are the guardian of our souls and bodies, and to You we ascribe glory, to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Distribute bookmark.

Here are two more examples of prayers that speak to those concerns:

Prayer For Forgiveness: "Lord, God our Father, if during this day I have sinned in word, deed, or thought, forgive me in Your goodness and love. Grant me peaceful sleep, protect me from all evil, and awaken me in the morning that I may glorify You, Your Son, and Your Holy Spirit now and forever and ever. Amen."

Orthodox prayer from "Call Unto Me and I will Answer You"

Prayer of Repentance: Searcher of secrets, I have sinned against you, willingly and unwillingly, knowingly, and unknowingly. Grant forgiveness to me who sins, since from my baptism of the holy font through today I have sinned before your Divinity with my senses and all members of my body. Have mercy upon your creation, and on me, a manifold sinner."

St. Nersess Shnorhali "I Confess With Faith"

(20 Minutes) Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. What does forgiving yourself look like? How is it different from forgiving someone else?
2. Why do you think it is so difficult for us to forgive ourselves?
3. Is there a time that you haven't been able to forgive yourself and if you still haven't, how have you dealt with being unable to forgive yourself?

4. Is there a time you can think of when you have forgiven yourself and how did you accomplish that?

(30 Minutes) Clergy-Led Session

Talking Points:

- Why should we forgive ourselves?
- Highlight God's unconditional love, emphasizing God's love as the basis for forgiveness.
- Forgiving ourselves as God forgives us can be a healing experience.
- God loves us so much that there is nothing he won't answer when we call unto him.
- Knowing how much God loves us should give us the confidence to love ourselves inside and out, rather than be anxious.
- The power of confession and the ability to request personal confession
- Who can we turn to when we are facing challenges (ie. priest)
- Teachings of our Spiritual Fathers to help guide us through the process of forgiveness
- Passages to turn to when we struggle with forgiveness
  - **Adam and Eve** – God clothes Adam and Eve after they sin (Genesis 3:21)
  - **Cain** – God places a mark on Cain for protection despite his sin (Genesis 4:15)
  - **David** – After his sins with Bathsheba, God forgives David when he repents (2 Samuel 12)
  - **Nineveh** – God forgives the people of Nineveh when they repent (Jonah 3)
  - **Israelites** – After making the golden calf, God forgives Israel (Exodus 32-34)
  - **Peter** – Jesus forgives Peter after he denies Him (John 21)
  - **The Prodigal Son** – The father forgives his returning son (Luke 15:11-32)
  - **The Woman Caught in Adultery** – Jesus tells her to go and sin no more (John 8:1-11)
  - **Paul (Saul)** – God forgives Paul, a persecutor of Christians, and transforms him (Acts 9)
  - **Jesus on the Cross** – Jesus asks God to forgive His executioners (Luke 23:34)