



On your marks

A successful harvest is important for all communities but especially for those people in the majority world, who are totally dependent on growing crops and keeping livestock for their food. Prolonged drought or disastrous flooding can mean the difference between life and death.

In the New Testament, we read how Christians in one part of the world sent financial help to their brothers and sisters elsewhere who were experiencing a bad harvest – see Acts 11:27-29. This care across cultures and continents is something that Christian aid and relief agencies still facilitate today – you can read more about their work on their individual websites, such as [Christian Aid](#), [CAFOD](#), [Tearfund](#) and [Oxfam](#). Many of these organisations also provide resources for churches and schools at harvest time.

For Christians everywhere, harvest services are not only an opportunity to be thankful for the fruit of the earth but also a time to imitate the character of God by showing compassion towards those in need.

Get set

Bible link: In Isaiah 58 the prophet challenges those who say they are religious to prove it, not by their acts of devotion in formal worship but by compassion for those in need:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood. Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Isaiah 58:6-8 (NIV)

You will need:

- a variety of coloured items from your church harvest display or, as an alternative, coloured balls or bean bags that you can throw out to the congregation (see the eight colours needed below)
- large boards with the fictional web addresses as suggested below

Some of the following ideas first appeared in [Where in the World?](#) (BRF, 2012).

Go!

1. Around the world, many Christian churches may give the impression that every Sunday service is harvest, as 'the collection' is not always about giving money, which can be in short supply,



but about offering goods, even animals, that can be redistributed. So, rather than a plate being passed round for cash gifts, chickens in a cage, fruit in baskets and home-made foodstuffs are offered up and blessed, then given out to people in need in the local community. In the Western world, harvest is an echo of this as we bring foodstuffs in tins or maybe fruit for a display that is then distributed to local hospitals, hospices or care homes.

2. Following Jesus isn't just about what we believe in our heads but what we do with our hands to show compassion towards others. Harvest Thanksgiving is a good time to remind ourselves of this and to focus on some of the big and pressing needs of our world.
3. The following version of Isaiah 58 sets the scene for a focus on a harvest of compassion. The prophet says he will shout his message, so you could perform a dramatic version of this text using both children and adults from your congregation shouting the message out:

*Are you here to worship?
Are you keen to learn about God?
Do you want to do the right thing?
Do you enjoy God's love?
We'll get this one thing straight!
God won't enjoy your worship;
God won't be interested in your prayers,
If you're only thinking about yourselves
And about what a good time you're having;
All your singing and all your praying;
All your services and all your praises;
Even your finest harvest thanksgiving,
Is empty of meaning if you don't care for the poor!*

So, help those who are being unjustly treated;
Share your food with those who are hungry;
Open your homes to those who are in need of shelter;
Lend out your goods to those who have fallen on hard times.

This is the way to shine with God's light.
This is the way to earn God's 'well done'.
This is the way you will grow in your faith.
This is the way you'll discover God's presence.
And this is the way God's love will flow like water from your life into the desert of the world.

This is the way to know the Lord.
This is the way to experience God's blessing.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.



4. Harvest ought to be a colourful time for everyone. Use coloured items from your harvest display to give thanks for the following positive associations with harvest. (Alternatively, throw out coloured balls or bean bags.)

For example:

Black = the colour of a seed of hope

Red = the colour of shiny ripened fruit

Yellow = the colour of crops ready to be harvested

Green = the colour of the bright leaves of healthy trees

Orange = the colour of juicy fruit

White = the colour of the blossom that carried the hope of fruitfulness in the spring

Brown = the colour of good fertile soil

Blue = the colour of clear healthy water

However, in our world, the same colours could stand for things that show how we have not looked after God's world and not cared for those facing poor harvests because of climate change or those suffering from unfair trading practices. These are the very people that Isaiah said should be a focus at harvest if our faith is real. For example:

Black = the colour of burned tree stumps from deforestation

Red = the colour of debts impossible to pay back

Yellow = the colour of human skin poisoned by exposure to pesticides

Green = the colour of mould on vegetables that can't be sold because they aren't good enough for Western supermarkets

Orange = the colour of areas turned into desert in a drought

White = the colour of mildew when fruit is diseased

Brown = the colour of the dirty water of a flood

Blue = the colour of cloudless skies when the rains don't come

Take a moment to pray for those facing such hardships at this harvest time, using each of the colours in turn and asking God to show us how we can react with compassion at harvest not just thanksgiving.

5. Nowadays, we are deeply aware of the fact that everything that happens globally is linked: poor harvests in one place often mean higher prices for goods elsewhere; unfair trade rules in one part of the world mean poverty for innocent sufferers in another. Christians are involved in these global issues on every continent and are at the forefront of the Fair Trade movement.

As each of us is a world citizen, you could say that our generic email address could be me@theworld.com but what might the **com** stand for? Introduce some possibilities, as suggested below, for the outline of a short talk as part of your harvest service.

Might it be?



[me@theworld.com](#) *comfortable* - Are we like the worshippers Isaiah referred to, too comfortable with looking inwards on ourselves and not outwards into the world?

[me@theworld.com](#) *placent* - Are we like the worshippers Isaiah referred to, complacent with the way things are and not wanting to notice all that is wrong with our world?

[me@theworld.com](#) *plicit* - Are we like the worshippers Isaiah referred to, complicit with the way things are because it suits us, our finances and our need to be in control and on top?

[me@theworld.com](#) *passionate* - Or will we pay attention to what Isaiah is saying to the worshippers and adopt a new attitude of compassion to those in need, wherever and whoever they are?

What will it mean for us to share the gift of compassion this harvest time?

6. In the New Testament, St Paul describes the sort of harvest our lives need to produce so that we can be God's hands and feet of compassion in the world today. This harvest is produced by God's Holy Spirit working inside each of us.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV)

7. Just as Isaiah the prophet challenged congregations in his day, maybe this harvest service is the opportunity to encourage everyone to respond - not just with financial giving - nor just with bringing their harvest produce - but to pledge to:
 - find out more about Fair Trade
 - take seriously the support of a Christian aid agency working in the developing world
 - visit and help with a local food bank
 - get involved with a local project that serves the needy, the vulnerable or the homeless in your community
 - write to a local councillor or MP about an issue of the moment where Christian compassion is needed
 - commit to pray regularly for a charity or a particular area of need.
8. A final prayer taken from Isaiah 58:10-11:

Give your food to the hungry and care for the homeless and then your light will shine in the dark and the Lord will always guide you.

By the grace of God we will.