

Getting Started: Healing Art Studio, Creating Space for (Re) Creation

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It's a Spring afternoon at ELCM Community Center as women and teen girls gather around tables filled with art supplies. Their hands and minds are busy creating colorful expressions of past experiences or current life situations. Some come for the art while others come for the chance to spend meaningful time with other people. Some come full of faith in Jesus while others come hurt by religion. Conversation flows. There is laughter and sometimes tears. People feel encouraged, seen, heard, and cared for in this community as their story is not only "allowed" to be unfinished, but encouraged to be shared in all of its messiness and complicated beauty. In the midst of the mess, the Holy Spirit is present in the sharing and receiving of each story through the vehicle of art. The love of God is shared with believer and non-believer alike and over time, community is formed, healing begins, and spiritual conversations have an opportunity to flourish.

When we open the Bible, the very first words we read are "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 1:21 says, "God created great sea creatures and every living creature that moves . . ." And in Genesis 1:27, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." And his acts of creation don't stop in Genesis. 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

If the very first act of God in the Bible is to create and faith in Jesus re-creates, and if God created us in his own image, it stands to reason that he instilled some of his creative nature into us. To create is to imitate God and to live into the character instilled in us by our creator.

Creative expression is a gift of God, intended to happen for community and in community – he instills in us artistic gifts like he gave to the Israelites in building the Tabernacle to make it a holy and awe-inspiring space. They were gifted with talent, but also with the ability to teach, to pass on what they knew to others, all for the glory of God.



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30 And Moses said to the children of Israel, ‘See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel . . . 31 and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, 32 to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, 33 in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship. 34 ‘And He has put in his heart the ability to teach, in him and Aholiab. . . . 35 He has filled them with skill to do all manner of work of the engraver and the designer and the tapestry maker, in blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine linen, and of the weaver—those who do every work and those who design artistic works.

God even uses art to teach lessons. Jeremiah 18 finds the prophet, driven by a word from God, to observe a potter at work creating a vessel, spoiling that work, and re-working it into another vessel. From this observation, breathed on by God’s word to Jeremiah, comes a prophetic message:

6 “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?” declares the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

God uses art to do his work in the world and in people’s hearts. And creating art is a process of telling a story – of seeing, of acting, of being, and of moving our bodies in form and fashion like God – of becoming alive as the new creation that Christ made possible for us. Art reflects how we view and respond to the world around us. When we view art this way, as a process, it becomes less about producing a beautiful, finished product to hang on the wall. It can become a ministry of community that births thoughtful, communicative, safe relationships that welcome questioning, thinking, wrestling, reflecting, encouraging, and becoming. Art can be a vehicle to explore the experiences we may not have words to express, to contemplate the emotions that sound fails to capture, and to connect with others in the midst of their own process who are also hoping for trusting community where feelings (even socially awkward ones or ones that are “all over the place”) are welcome. In the process of creating art in a group setting, often pain is lovingly and supportively witnessed, vulnerability is welcomed but not forced, and reality does not need to be re-packaged for social media or hidden behind a façade of a perfect “finished product.” This kind of ministry is about creating space – a physical space to be creative and explore new forms of expression and an emotional space to be (re)created through the same practice, being seen and heard by others who care, and by seeing and hearing others in their own messy process of becoming.

Rev. Amy Hall is a Baptist Chaplaincy Relations endorsed lifestyle chaplain. Two of the community ministries she has shepherded are The Healing Art Studio that met monthly ELCM Community Center in Madison Heights, VA (funded through a one-year WMUV Alma Hunt grant in 2022) and the Leadership Art Circle, a monthly gathering of women in church and ministry leadership roles. These ministries grew out of her healing journey and seeing how art is a valid (and validating) form of journaling and expression as color and images filled in the gap for the things she struggled to put into words. It quickly became obvious to her that it wasn’t about making something pretty but about expressing emotions, and this is where she often begins when she facilitates healing art workshops. Amy will teach people about “color mapping” their emotions (using tissue paper of different colors and tearing it and gluing it down in varying amounts, layers, and layouts to express emotion and the intensity of emotion) or collage (using pictures from magazines) and mixed media art.



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I don't lead a detailed art project...it's more about the process rather than the finished product. So I begin with an art prompt to focus participants' thinking and creating. Questions like, 'what are you thinking about in this moment?' or 'what blessings are you experiencing this week?' or 'what challenges are you dealing with this week?' are good starting places for collage art. People look through magazines and find pictures that illustrate their blessings or challenges whether it's children, homes, animals, flowers, etc. (it can be literal or symbolic).

We start with something light at first and begin building a relationship with the participants as they work through the art process. A lot of people think they can't do art, but breaking it down into small easy steps helps them to see they can create something and they begin to discover the benefits of art. Once we build a rapport with the participants, we begin moving into harder topics like collaging a timeline of your life or making a pie chart that is representative of life's notable seasons.

The Healing Arts Studio and Leadership Art Circle did not begin as full-fledged ministries. Much like the art that participants are led to create, there was (and still is) a process of becoming. Hall began by offering one-time workshops in her church and other churches in her area doing color mapping or collaging. She also shared her own personal art journals, teaching about how she processed her own experiences and the Bible and finding God's love and comfort through art. As she shares her story, people often find inspiration to think creatively about how to process their own spiritual journeys.

One of my favorite activities with color mapping is to bring in gingerbread men-shaped paper cutouts and ask participants to do some color mapping on them. When they are done, they will move to a quiet area and work through a list of questions like, 'Have you ever been bullied? Has anyone ever yelled mean words at you? Have you ever been scared? Have you ever experienced abuse?' For every wound or trauma they have experienced on the list, participants use a hole puncher to punch holes into their gingerbread man.

After everyone has finished this activity, they are handed a yellow gingerbread man-shaped cutout to glue to the back of their original gingerbread man cutout. When the gingerbread man is flipped over, all the holes associated with pain are now filled in with yellow. This represents Christ's light and how he comes in and cleans out our wounds and fills in those wounds with himself.

This is one sample of how art ministry helps people make that connection between what they've gone through and how God can meet them in that experience. It also helps them see that God is with them in the big emotions and the pain and that he is still there and wants to heal and redeem their pain.

Hall concludes this art time with a time of sharing which leaves room for the local ministry leader, pastor, or youth pastor to build on these concepts and insights in the weeks following.

In November 2021, while looking at a group of Angel Tree Christmas wish lists at a local library, Hall noted that many of the requests were for art supplies. She reached out to the community center director hosting the Angel Tree to inquire about their art program and discovered they did not have an art program. The Director had been praying that God would send someone to start one and from that, The Healing Art Studio was born. Out of that experience, Hall wrote a WMUV grant request that funded art supplies to pilot a year-long



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experiment: The Healing Art Studio at ELCM Community Center in Amherst. She's learned a lot about leading a group like this in the process and shared some pointers for churches or individuals who might be interested in starting a Healing Arts Ministry of their own:

1. Expect to learn by doing and adjust the "program" as you go. The goal is to learn and play together, not necessarily to produce beautiful works of art. Focus on being a faithful witness to what participants bring to the table, trusting the Holy Spirit to meet them (and you) in that holy moment.
2. Tailor your session to the abilities and comfort of the participants. Start with enough instructions to get early arrivals or those comfortable with artistic expression going, and then give more detailed instructions after everyone has arrived for those who need more support. Prepare an example of a similar, but not identical, project to help people understand the assignment without indirectly creating expectations for how they "should" express their own creativity. Towards the end of the workshop, give 20- and 10-minute warnings before wrapping up and if sharing hasn't naturally occurred during the project, consider offering a 10-15 minute time to share.
3. Start small with one-time workshops and events as you get a feel for creating this kind of experience and find the best location(s) and formats while identifying who and where you are called to serve. Once you are ready to do something on a more regular basis, once a month is generally a good rhythm.
4. A church building may be an obstacle to people who aren't already comfortable in a church – try to cultivate a partnership with another organization where the people you're trying to reach already go.
5. Be prepared for multiple generations to attend at one time and to recognize their different needs. Consider projects or prompts that are different for children or teens than for adults. For example, children and teens love to "play" and enjoy sensory or messy projects like making slime. Adults might be more drawn to projects that help them process emotions, current events, or life events. Some may not want to follow a particular prompt. That's OK too.
6. Remember, people are coming for art and to feel a sense of community. Honor how they express themselves without needing to spiritualize it right away. Growing trust and relationships will create authentic opportunities for sharing the gospel. Use plain language in conversation -- "church words" can be off-putting or even traumatic for some, depending on individuals' history with church and religion. Focus on loving and caring for them as God does, creating an environment that feels emotionally safe and where they are free to share (or not).
7. Be comfortable with natural conversation. Bringing an overtly spiritual agenda or even a brief "formal devotion" to the setting can be an obstacle to people opening up. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide the conversation and don't try to control it.
8. Be prepared for graphic sharing, especially if you are focused on healing art. Being visibly uncomfortable or shocked when someone shares a traumatic experience can stifle those genuine and important conversations, so practice moderating your reactions. But also recognize there are times when you might need to gently re-direct the conversation if it becomes triggering for others in the room or inappropriate for younger ears who may be present.



9. See your role as that of a facilitator. Learn to ask good, open-ended questions that get people thinking and talking. Asking a question in response to a tough question that helps people wrestle with the answer is often a better response than a pat spiritual answer. Be sensitive enough to draw those with questions into conversation rather than putting an uncomfortable spotlight on the person sharing. Recognize that everyone present brings something “to the table,” and that even those with little skill in art or who are deeply hurting themselves, have insights or comforts to share with others.
10. Consider that your metrics for success will look different for this context and will be based on the collaborative environment you are creating. You can't count on large numbers of people coming or even increasing numbers over time. Focus, instead, on the depth and openness of conversations around the table, people applying what they are learning to other areas of their lives, or people in the group caring well for one another over time. Observing the changes from session to session will inform where there is growth or areas that need to improve.
11. Consider additional training in things like coaching where you'll learn to ask better questions and facilitate people on their own spiritual journey, or Mental Health First Aid where you'll learn about warning signs and when and how to make referrals if people need more than a kind word and a listening ear (links to both can be found in the website list below).

Supplies Needed to Start an Art Ministry on a Budget:

- Colored pencils
- Crayons
- Glue sticks
- Large jug of Elmer's glue
- Paper plates for palettes (or inexpensive plastic pallets)
- Acrylic Paints / Crayola watercolor paints (hit the back to school sales and clearance aisles)
- Diaper wipes (they clean a lot of messes without water).
- Free magazines – from grocery stores, hair salons, doctor's offices, or call local magazine companies
- Inexpensive plastic tablecloths
- Scissors
- Paper
- Mixed media paper
- Paint brushes
- Cups for water
- Paper towels
- Pencils
- Pens
- Rulers



Helpful websites:

- www.shalomcreatives.org (Shalom Creatives – offers coaching and brainstorming sessions centered around starting an art ministry and community art studio as well as more information about Leadership Art Circle for female ministers and leaders)
- www.Godlovesart.com (God Loves Art - comprehensive art ministry training)
- <https://vergenow.org/> (Convergence Church – a faith community exploring the intersection of art, faith, and the human experience)
- [God Loves Art Channel](#) (YouTube channel about art ministry)
- <https://www.bgav.org/blog/empower-coaching-network-helping-others-move-forward> (Information on Coaching Training through the BGAV)
- <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/> (Mental Health First Aid training)
- [Created to Create: Art is Order](#) (YouTube video created by Convergence Church – “The mystery of God requires us to experience and trust something that needs more than intellectual understanding. Art is not luxury. Art is order.”)
- [Scripture Meditations](#) (YouTube video created by Convergence Church – music and images to help you meditate on scripture)

If you'd like to talk more with Amy Hall about her process or how she got started, you can reach her at shalomcreativesva@gmail.com or at www.shalomcreatives.org .

