

6

Alabaster by John Haines

LESSON PURPOSE

This lesson looks at one of the NMI's Five Areas of Impact, Alabaster, and some "out of the box" ways in which Alabaster funds are making a difference around the world. Though one of the oldest missions giving approaches of the Church of the Nazarene, Alabaster is nimble and able to address current challenges around the world, to provide places of worship and ministry, thanks to the faithfulness of all who give.

SCRIPTURE: Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on. (Mark 12:41-44, NIV)

FAST FACTS

- Alabaster is a soft mineral that can be carved into shapes. It resembles marble, but is translucent, and can be easily damaged. During ancient times, it was often shaped into something that would hold perfume or oil that has been used in traditional medicine or religious ceremonies. Because the alabaster was so delicate, and the oil came from plants grown far away, they would be considered very costly.
- In 1948, Rev. Elizabeth Vennum [VE-nuhm], Global NMI Council member, was asked to think and pray about a challenging project for NMI. (Read Elizabeth Vennum's story in the Handouts.)
- The Alabaster offering, she said, was God's idea modeled after the sacrifice of the woman who anointed Jesus' head with expensive perfume poured from an alabaster jar (Matthew 26:6-13). She gave something she didn't need, because of her love for Jesus.
- At the 1949 Global Council meeting, the plan was unanimously adopted, and the first offering was received later that year. The Board of General Superintendents approved the plan for Alabaster funds to be used exclusively for buildings and properties in cross-cultural ministries.
- As of 2019, more than US\$117.5 million had been given to Alabaster, an increase of US\$2.54 million, or 1.55% over the previous year, resulting in almost 10,000 projects for churches/chapels, Bible schools/school buildings, mission/district centers, hospitals/clinics, missionaries'/national workers' homes, and properties.

LESSON INFORMATION

The story of the widow's mite (two small copper coins worth only a few cents in Mark 12:41-44) easily relates to the story of the woman who broke the alabaster gift of oil over Jesus' head (Matthew 26:6-13), with the similar story of the oil poured over Jesus' feet (John 12:1-8). These are the only times such extravagance is mentioned in the Gospels. The lavish "waste" of the precious oil or ointment, in the opinion of the disciples, and the self-denying generosity of the little widow at the temple treasury, mark out for us the principles out of which Alabaster as a missions offering was conceived—giving for others by denying ourselves! Offerings of grace (an action of love and adoration) and offerings of gratitude (an action or reaction of thanksgiving and awe-struck humility that has no words to sufficiently express a heart full of praise). In neither case is there a hint of withholding the gift, or of seeking to control its use. There was just lavish self-surrendering love being poured out, and Jesus noticed and called it to our attention.

John Wesley reflected on this generous gift, and said: "See what judgment is cast on the most [superficial and self-centered], outward actions by the Judge of all! And how acceptable to him is the smallest, which springs from self-denying love!"

From the beginning of the Alabaster offering tradition in the Church of the Nazarene, there has been an intentional focus on sacrificing something *not needed* so that what is needed around the world: churches, hospitals, schools, centers of ministry, and pastors' housing, could be built with the help of the sacrificial giving of Nazarenes everywhere.

Alabaster at the Founding of Missions Work in Hungary

One of the greatest privileges of my missionary career was to help lay the foundations for the work of the Church of the Nazarene in Hungary, as district superintendent. My role was to help establish the work of the church, and to prepare those who would lead that church into the future. When we first started the work in Hungary, we had no churches in any of our ministry locations. We squeezed congregations into living rooms, and sometimes into rented school rooms or town halls. These new Nazarenes were curious about many of the things they would hear me talk about as "typically" Nazarene, one of which was Alabaster offerings. I explained the history of this wonderful Nazarene tradition of sacrificial giving for the sake of building churches around the world. There was great excitement at the thought that they, being new to the church, could participate in something that would immediately mark them as part of the global Nazarene family.

Now, bear in mind, we had no church buildings in Hungary at the time, and there was a question that arose again and again. "If we give to Alabaster offering, does that mean we will have church buildings here in Hungary for worship and ministry?" I had to explain that our giving would go into the work of Alabaster around the world, and it may be some time before we'd see an Alabaster church in Hungary. But, if we were faithful to give to others whose need may be even greater than our own, the day could come when their gifts might help us build churches for Hungarian congregations. Every church jumped in, creatively imagining how they might participate, out of their limited resources. There was great enthusiasm in every age-group. Hairdressers gave their tips, farmers gave a portion of their produce, and families sacrificed all they could. Out of their little, they gave so much. They were lavish in their giving. It was humbling to see. People who were not even a part of the churches would give because of their neighbors and friends who asked: "Would you like to help us build a church in places where they have no church?" Some would reply, "But, there is no church in this town...you meet together in a house." "Yes, but someday, we'll have a church here!" came the confident reply. Their first ever Alabaster offering exceeded US\$1,000. Within a couple years, their Alabaster church was under construction. It now stands in the center of their village, like a bright yellow sunburst of hope (see photo in Resources), attracting those around them to enter in and meet the Christ who drives away every dark shadow in their lives.

Alabaster was in the DNA of the Hungary Church of the Nazarene from the beginning. In due course, dreams were realized, and now, every Church of the Nazarene in Hungary was made possible, in large measure, because of your Alabaster giving. And other churches around the world have been made possible, because of theirs. The church in Hungary is still giving faithfully to Alabaster!

PRESENTATION IDEAS

Here are three presentation options that can be used in a traditional church setting, at home, or using video conferencing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all had to sacrifice some things that were normal in our lives, simply because they were not available, or we could not get to them with the “shelter in place” orders. Are there things you’ve realized are not necessary? Things you could do without for a longer-term, the cost of which you could contribute to Alabaster? Remember, every gift you contribute is helping to build hospitals, clinics, schools, and churches—all of which may look quite different from those built in the past with Alabaster funds. They may be located in high-rise apartments; they may be moveable structures that can serve a community and then be transferred to another, or they may be new sections of schools and hospitals that will be designed for the new normal after COVID-19.

Option 1—for a small group setting

Prepare

- Have Bibles ready or print out the attached to read Mark 12:41-44.
- Have **Handout 1** ready for someone in the group to read aloud.
- Use **Handout 6** to complete the Word Search Puzzle and see who completes it first.

Present

- Unpack the two principles of “grace” and “gratitude,” using **Handout 2: “Grace and Gratitude,”** as markers for why we take Alabaster offerings in the Church of the Nazarene.
- Read the **Handout 1, *The Alabaster Lie***. Ask your group to respond to the piece. Have you ever thought your giving was “a waste” or that the money you put in your Alabaster Box or container could be used in a more productive way? Put those doubts aside. Alabaster is irreplaceable in achieving the purposes for which it was established, and every time you give, you expand the reach of the Kingdom of God through the Church of the Nazarene.
- Ask what each participant might “give up” on a weekly or monthly basis to put that money toward Alabaster. What will drive that sacrifice: “grace” or “gratitude”?

Option 2—for groups that include children

Prepare

- It may be useful to have all the types of Alabaster containers you have used (old boxes, jars, bottles, bags, etc. to help participants imagine the limitless options in this exercise).
- You’ll need items like scissors, paper, tape, glue, colored sharpie pens, or paint.
- Use **Handouts 3, 4, and 5** to assist in this exercise.

Present

- Instruct the children on the cycle of imagination, design, creation, and use (See **Handout 3: Imagination-Design-Creation-Use**). Allow time for them to think about what kind of Alabaster box, jar, can, bag, etc., they might make to hold their Alabaster offerings. Every member of the group may do this individually.

Option 3—for groups of all ages

Prepare

- Print out enough copies of the **Handout 2: “Grace and Gratitude”** for each member of the group. Provide pens for writing.

Present

- We all have unique perspectives because of what we have experienced in life. Using **Handout 2: “Grace and Gratitude,”** have each person write under the headings examples from their own lives of what an offering of grace and an offering of gratitude might look like. Have each describe what they think they could do to make such offerings, for others, by giving up something precious to them.

ACT ON IT (practical ideas for personal involvement)

- Involve every member of your group in filling Alabaster boxes, jars, or other created containers.
- Since Alabaster giving is about sacrificing something you may want, but don’t necessarily need, make a list of the things in your weekly life that you could do without, giving that money to Alabaster instead. Tally up the value of those things you could do without. How much money could you give to Alabaster if you did not spend it on these items?
- If your group doesn’t want to create an Alabaster container, then order your Alabaster boxes from The Foundry Publishing (www.thefoundrypublishing.com/catalogsearch/result/?q=Alabaster; call toll-free—1-800-877-0700; Order number—O-5; cost—\$13.99 for a package of 25). You can do this from the NMI website by going to www.nazarene.org/alabaster.
- Think about how and why you give. Are your gifts filled with grace and gratitude? Try to identify one thing for which you wish to express grace or gratitude with every deposit into your Alabaster box or container. Name your blessings as you give, and name your sacrifices as you give. Be intentional.

RECIPES

PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD

Alphabet Soup

Purchase dry alphabet pasta, and make your family’s favorite soup recipe. Shortly before serving the soup, add the pasta and let it cook until done. Then have a race to find out who can spell “ALABASTER” the fastest. (If you purchase canned alphabet soup, there may not be enough letters for everyone.)

Alphabet Cookies

This recipe is one that groups can do together. Spell out “ALABASTER” with the cookie dough. www.verybestbaking.com/recipes/144763/spell-it-out-letters-of-love

Build an Edible Building

Below is a link to ideas of making edible buildings from vegetables to graham crackers. After everyone builds his or her “Alabaster project” (church, house, school, etc.), vote on the “most creative,” “healthiest,” or any other awards you can think of.

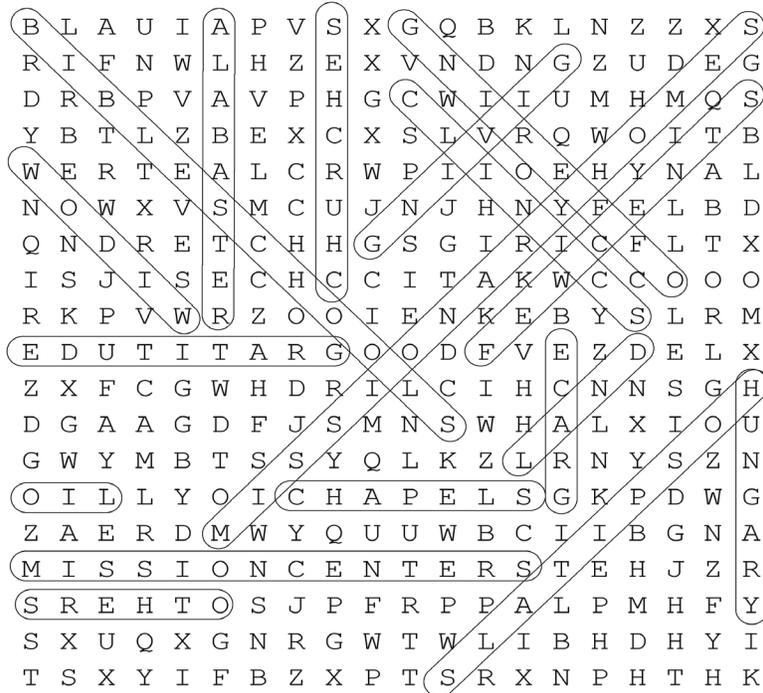
www.homestratosphere.com/gingerbread-house-alternatives

RESOURCES (“handy helps” for the leader)

- **Websites**
 - NMI website, Alabaster page: www.nazarene.org/alabaster
 - Culbertson, Howard. Alabaster offering and Elizabeth Roby Venum—more detailed story of the Alabaster offering: home.snu.edu/~hculbert/vennum.htm
 - Culbertson, Howard. Alabaster offerings: International building and property-purchase fund: home.snu.edu/~hculbert/alabaste.htm
- **Articles/blogs**
 - Church of the Nazarene Eurasia. “Alabaster offering funds used to purchase Spain parsonage,” *Nazarene News*. Posted: 11 May, 2017. www.nazarene.org/article/alabaster-offering-funds-used-purchase-spain-parsonage
 - Bartle, Neville. “Alabaster Giving Has Big Impact on Seabrook Church in New Zealand,” Asia-Pacific Region’s website. Posted: 24 June, 2015; modified: 14 February 2020. www.asiapacificnazarene.org/alabaster-giving-has-big-impact-on-seabrook-church-in-new-zealand
 - Armstrong, Clark. “At Seven Years Old...He Saw an Alabaster Miracle!” Asia-Pacific Region’s website. Posted: 6 December, 2014; modified: 14 February, 2020. www.asiapacificnazarene.org/at-seven-years-old-he-saw-an-alabaster-miracle
 - Eurasia Region. “New Nazarene Auditorium in Razgrad is City’s Largest” *Eurasia Region SnapShots*. Posted: 21 June 2010. www.eurasiaregion.org/new-nazarene-auditorium-in-razgrad-is-citys-largest
- **Books**
 - Johnston, Lillian. *The Alabaster Adventure*. Nazarene Publishing House. Kansas City, Missouri, USA: 1990. (Available on Amazon.com.)
 - Crutcher, Tim (editor). *Building on God’s Foundation: 50 Years of Alabaster*. Nazarene Publishing House. Kansas City, Missouri, USA: 1999. (Available on eBay.)
- **Videos**
 - Hungary Alabaster Video from 2001 www.bit.ly/HungaryAlabaster
 - Nazarene Media Library. Numerous Alabaster videos from the past in multiple languages. Go to medialibrary.nazarene.org and search for “Alabaster.”
- **Photo of first Alabaster Church of the Nazarene in Hungary**
 - www.bit.ly/Foldes-Hungary



Solutions for Handouts 5 and 6



All images are Alabaster Buildings

Select all images with
Alabaster Buildings

**Hadjuhathaz Church
Hungary**



**Nazarene
Theological College
Manchester Library**

**Reynolds Memorial
Hospital
India**



**CIS Field
Ministry Center**

**Bangladesh
Ministry Center**



**Eurasia Regional
Education and
Literature Office**

**Navajo Nation
Church and
Parsonage**



**Whitefield Church
Bangalore, India**

(Handout 1)

The Alabaster Lie

I remember that April morning in 1949 in Miami, Florida when it happened. I was reading a letter: "Today we placed an order for \$1,000 worth of Alabaster boxes." This was the last hurdle before launching Alabaster giving. After the general church approved the plan, 14 months of painstaking preparation followed. I had been keenly conscious that it was given of God.

Wouldn't you think that would bring joy? Before I had time to rejoice, the pious voice of the devil said, "Now...the General (NMI) Council is all excited about this. Today they have invested \$1,000 of God's money in boxes that will never bring in \$1,000. What a shameful waste!"

His lie was overwhelming. Indescribable darkness closed in. I found myself on my knees saying, "Lord, You know this is not my plan; it's Yours. I now commit the outcome of Nazarene Alabaster giving to You forever." God's presence dispelled the darkness and silenced the contradicting voice.

Through the years, Alabaster dollars numbering millions—and miracles of grace flowing through Alabaster channels—have underscored God's faithfulness!

Has Satan ever lied to you before or after an Alabaster breaking?¹ Has he ever insinuated a better use for the amount the Holy Spirit has suggested you place in your box? Remember, his suggestion echoes the first Alabaster lie to Mary of Bethany. When she anointed the Master, Satan asked through the voice of an indignant disciple, "Why this waste? It could have been sold...and given to the poor" (Mark 14:4-5). Poor who? The subtle suggestion is usually "Poor you...you need this for yourself."

What a privilege to increase the enormity of his Alabaster lies! As we do, we increase Alabaster aroma, Alabaster buildings, and Alabaster miracles around the world!

—Rev. Elizabeth Venum
1989, Adapted by Gail Sawrie

¹ In the early days of Alabaster offerings, boxes (or the seals on them) were broken, and the contents poured out into a larger Alabaster container (sometimes a model church or a wheelbarrow, etc.). In many parts of the world, this is still the practice, and Alabaster jars or clay containers are "broken" for the offering.

(Handout 3)

Imagination - Design - Creation - Use

Imagination: the ability to produce or simulate novel ideas or concepts in one's mind.

What do you "imagine" an Alabaster container to look like? It doesn't have to be a box.

Design: to draw or plan or produce something to show the look and function or workings of what one imagines.

How would you "design" your own Alabaster container? See other Handouts for symbols and words.

Creation: the action or process of bringing something into existence, giving form to what has been imagined and/or designed.

Time to create! What words, symbols, colors, etc., will you use to make your Alabaster container unique?

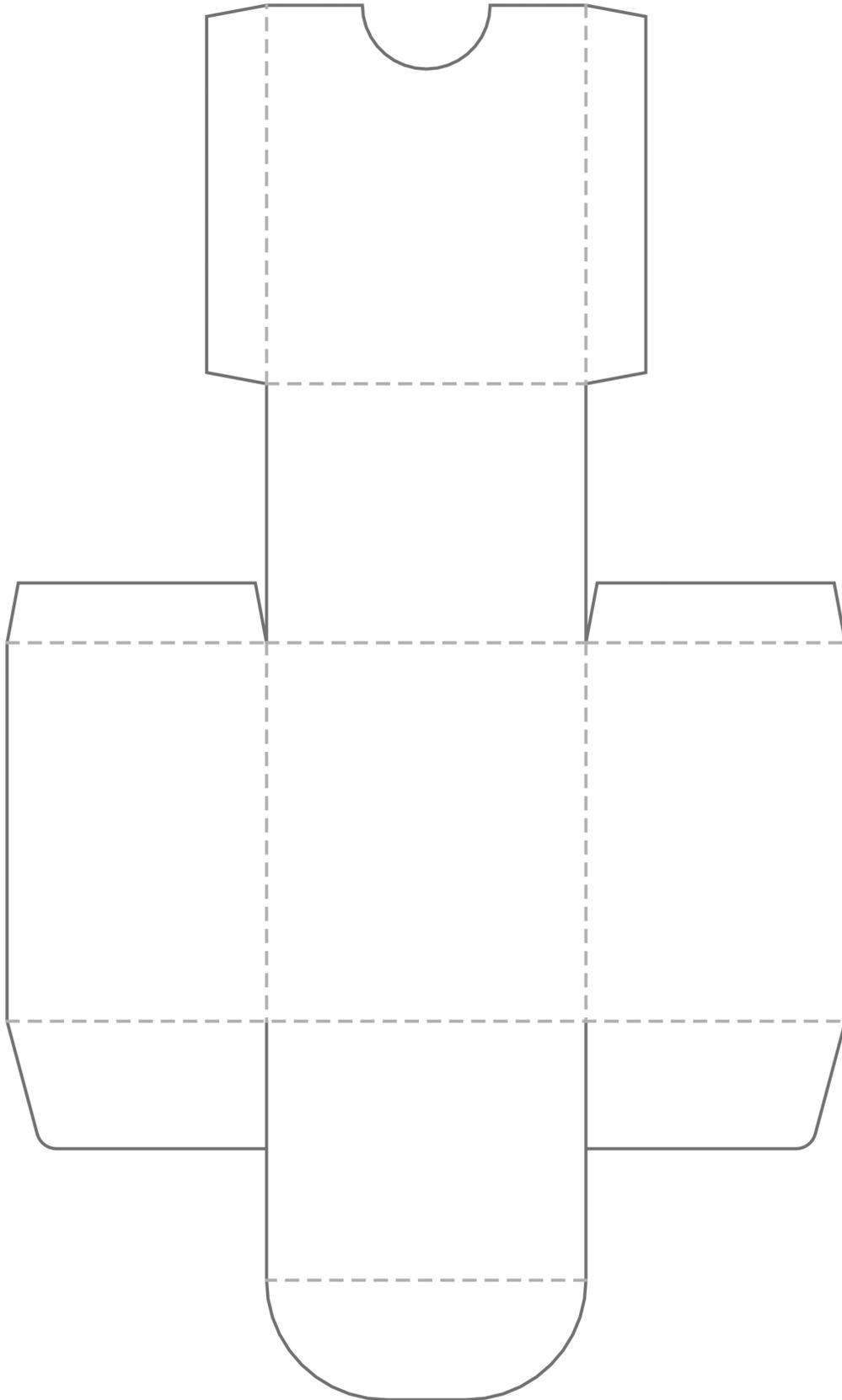
Use: to give function to that thing which one has created, fulfilling its purpose based upon design.

How do you "plan to use" your Alabaster container? (Hint: plan to put something in it every week!)

(Handout 4)

Alabaster Designs

(Use cardstock for best results)



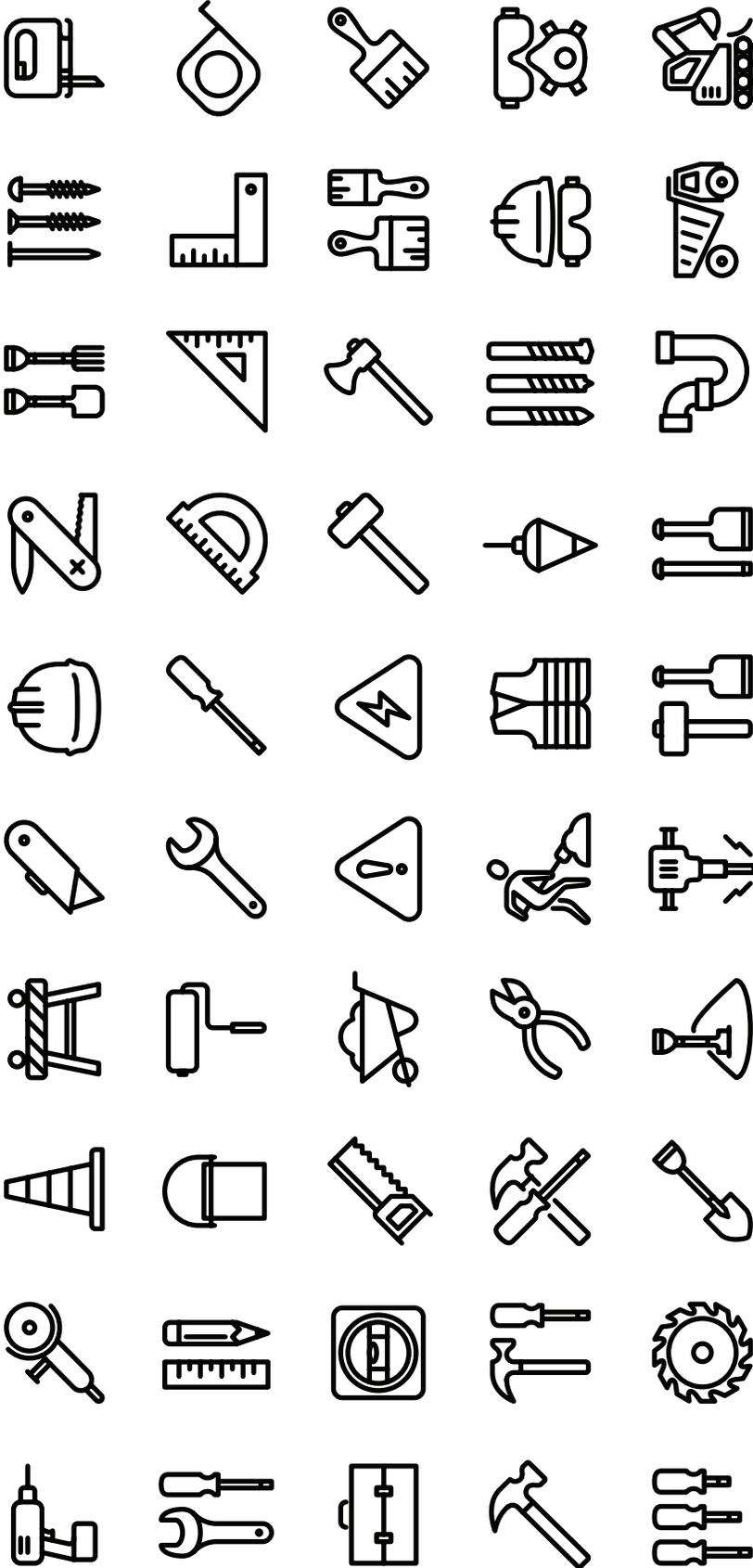
Instructions: Cut out and color. Then paste or tape onto the offering containers you have created.

ALABASTER
ALABASTRO
ALBÂTRE
옥합헌금

ALABASTER
ALABASTRO
ALBÂTRE
옥합헌금

ALABASTER
ALABASTRO
ALBÂTRE
옥합헌금

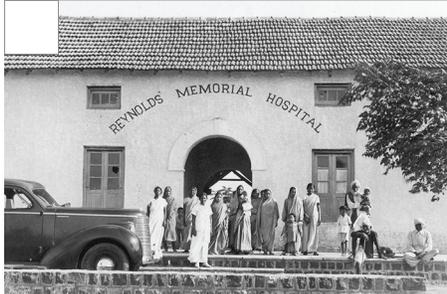
Instructions: Cut out and color any or all. Then paste or tape onto the offering containers you have created.



(Handout 5)

Identify all the places where Alabaster funds are at work

Select all images with
Alabaster Buildings



I'm not a robot

(Handout 6)

Alabaster Word Search Puzzle

B L A U I A P V S X G Q B K L N Z Z X S
R I F N W L H Z E X V N D N G Z U D E G
D R B P V A V P H G C W I I U M H M Q S
Y B T L Z B E X C X S L V R Q W O I T B
W E R T E A L C R W P I I O E H Y N A L
N O W X V S M C U J N J H N Y F E L B D
Q N D R E T C H H G S G I R I C F L T X
I S J I S E C H C C I T A K W C C O O O
R K P V W R Z O O I E N K E B Y S L R M
E D U T I T A R G O O D F V E Z D E L X
Z X F C G W H D R I L C I H C N N S G H
D G A A G D F J S M N S W H A L X I O U
G W Y M B T S S Y Q L K Z L R N Y S Z N
O I L L Y O I C H A P E L S G K P D W G
Z A E R D M W Y Q U U W B C I I B G N A
M I S S I O N C E N T E R S T E H J Z R
S R E H T O S J P F R P P A L P M H F Y
S X U Q X G N R G W T W L I B H D H Y I
T S X Y I F B Z X P T S R X N P H T H K

ALABASTER
HOSPITALS
BIBLE SCHOOLS
HUNGARY
CHAPELS
LAND

CHURCHES
MISSIONARY HOMES
CLINICS
MISSION CENTERS
FEW CENTS
OFFERING

GIVING
OIL
GRACE
OTHERS
GRATITUDE
WIDOW