



The Thrive Project:
a season of celebration



Summer: a season of celebration

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

It's Brad Munroe again. I remember with great joy listening to the radio as a boy. The blessed music box played the same song throughout the day. My friends and I would act like maniacal banshees whenever we heard it: "School's. Out. For. Summer!" It was a communion of joy, the shared experience of summer's glory awaiting us: expecting nothing, expecting everything, and most of all being thankful.

It is easy to lose such joy as we mature—and with our loss comes the loss of being thankful as well. Some propose adding to the seven deadly sins a modern eighth: busyness and distraction. Modernity's demonic use of watch, clock, calendar, and schedule too often prevents us from noticing the gifts of God and one another in our lives. We are too easily distracted from being thankful.

The Thrive Project's fourth season recommends a remedy: Summer, a season of celebration. For each season there is a purpose, and every purpose deserves some metrics:

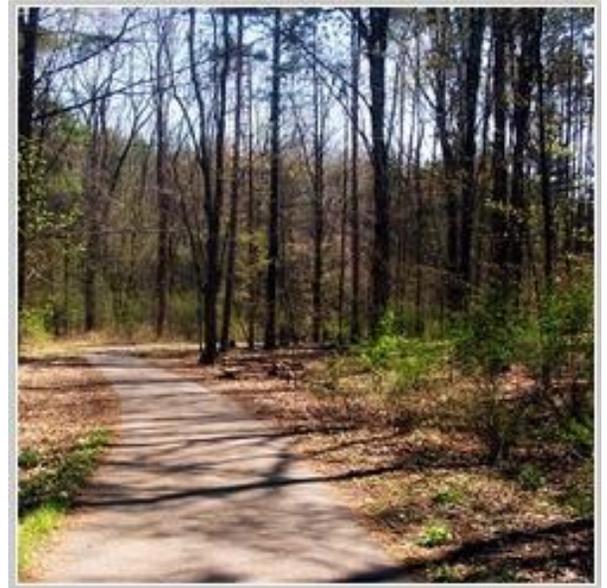
Summer /Celebration proposed purpose statement: to articulate and celebrate together what God has done and is doing in individuals, the congregation, and the community, as well as articulate and celebrate that toward which (and those toward whom) God appears to be guiding the congregation for ministry and mission.

Summer/Celebration proposed metrics statement: By the conclusion of the Season of Celebration, 100% of our staff and officers, 80% of our committee/team members, and 50% of all church participants will have shared a story related to this season of congregational revitalization and know how God has been engaging/teaching/calling/challenging them.

During the season of celebration there are a variety of options for inviting congregational discernment. For instance, consider the following ideas:

(1) *"Tell Your Story" campaign:* This is similar to a faith-sharing focus. The difference here is a nuanced change in focus from "share your perspective or

experience" to "share what new song God is teaching you to sing" regarding the practice of one of the six Great Ends. Here are some possibilities:



- Have a "speak out" during the worship service in which the sermon time is used to tell stories. These stories can be prepared and invited in advance or, for more adventurous worship leaders, experienced as "open mic" reporting.
 - Host a Town Hall with the theme of storytelling on the Six Great Ends of the Church.
 - Devotional book: Write brief essays and publish the book online or as a printed handout.
 - Record a video response or personal sharing in the midst of the worship service each week: one theme per week.
- (2) *"Lord, Deepen Our Praise" prayer concerts:* in which the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the Great Ends, using similar times and groups described above, but specifically targeted toward:

- Celebrating where we see God working in our community, even though we may not have anything to do with that work.
 - Celebrating where we see God working in our congregation, both through us and in spite of us.
 - Celebrating where we sense God’s leading, guiding, and calling to each one as an individual and to the entire congregation as a faith community.
- (3) *Avoid “peacocking”*—defined as being so worried about appearing positively or negatively, that we distort honest self-evaluation and deepening personal awareness. This will suffocate congregational health. The twin evils of peacocking include:
- “Woe is me/us,” with too great a focus on the negative, which drains us of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.
 - “I’m not just okay, but a real rock star,” with so little ego strength that we pretend to be something we are not.
- (4) The opposite of “peacocking” is to be “who we are in Jesus.” The value of being who we are in Jesus includes:
- A healthy self-awareness that “I’m not okay and you’re not okay, but we’re all alright in Christ Jesus.”
 - A sense of energy and joy that comes when honesty kisses grace.
 - A shift in focus from ourselves (the spirituality of narcissism) to a focus on what God is up to in, with, around, through and sometimes in spite of our faith community (the essence of Reformed faith)!

The call to give thanks is both gift and command. We are called to be like the Samaritan leper, who returned to Jesus to give thanks for being healed (Luke 17). In obedience to God’s gift and command, we name the source of our strength, the foundation of our true hope, and, as importantly, that our hope rests in God, not in us. Could it be that tolerating the sin of busyness prevents us from giving thanks, from giving God proper due? What might be unlocked within us, were we to become people of celebration?

If you’re ready for the Thrive Project, please be ready to celebrate!



The Power of Thanksgiving: john calvin vs. gratitude research

We all have heard the moniker describing Presbyterians as “the frozen chosen,” which insinuates we lack fervency in faith, lack passion in prayer, lack wildness in worship. It is as if others think of us as a mirror to our dour, Scottish ancestors. When I hear the moniker I think, “Perhaps there is *some* truth, and...we are so much more.”

John Calvin described Christian ethics as a response of thanksgiving to God’s grace in our lives. We live and we love as an act of gratitude. We seek to be faithful as an appreciative response to the faithfulness of God. We may not be quite as expressive as our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, but we are just as thankful.

Gratitude and thanksgiving, gratitude’s accompanying behavior, are foundational to Christian spirituality, ministry, and mission. Biblical examples abound. The psalmist gives thanks, for the love of the Lord endures forever (Psalm 118). Paul instructs us to pray with rejoicing and with thanksgiving (Philippians 4:4–6). Jesus said to the Samaritan leper, who returned to give thanks, “Your faith has made you well” (Luke 17:19).

There is wellness and wholeness, healing and even salvation that accompanies thanksgiving. The Greek word Luke places upon Jesus’ lips in Luke 17:19 is *σωζο*, which is translated using any of these four English words. To the leper who returned, Jesus said his act of trust, expressed as thanksgiving, made him well/whole/healed/saved. This is an amazing verse in that it links thanksgiving with the fulfillment of the kind of well-being we all seek and which all churches seek.

It is not surprising that Jesus’ wisdom is being confirmed by modern research into what is known as “positive psychology” or “gratitude research.” Gratitude is being scientifically linked to all manner of health benefits, from an increase in “pro-social behaviors” (e.g. being more generous, kind, and helpful) to greater psychological

health (e.g. decrease in mood disorders, depressive traits) to relational benefits, both at home and in the workplace.¹ Gratitude even changes the physical structure and neural pathways in the brain!²

It is with some pride we may remember it was our spiritual ancestor, Calvin, who taught thanksgiving as a foundational practice for our personal and communal faith. What science is discovering is our ideal, historical practice.



Researchers articulate six habits of highly grateful people, which are recounted below in adapted form to connect them with our Presbyterian practices.³ Grateful people:

1. Take time to notice and appreciate blessings.
2. Receive blessings as gifts, not birthrights.
3. Reflect upon life and death, and remember we belong to God.
4. Are grateful *to* people and not just *for* things.
5. Are specific when expressing thanksgiving, not merely general and abstract.
6. Are thankful for *all* things, even life’s difficulties, as they remember that God did not leave nor forsake us in our most trying moments.

¹ Summer Allen, *The Science of Gratitude* (Berkeley, CA: Greater Good Science Center, May 2018), 28–50.

² Joel Wong and Joshua Brown, “How Gratitude Changes You and Your Brain,” *Greater Good*, June 6, 2017, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain.

³ Jeremy Adam Smith, “Six Habits of Highly Grateful People,” *Greater Good*, November 20, 2013,

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_habits_of_highly_grateful_people.

One of the striking findings from gratitude research is how closely it approximates the Reformed faith's emphasis on truth-telling about the brokenness of the world and our need for God and one another, as well as personal and communal healing. Related to the sixth habit listed above, researchers have discovered that gratitude is different from "happiology," or what older generations might recall as a "Pollyanna" mind-set. Neither Reformed faith nor gratitude research suggest life is easy nor that our difficulties should be ignored. Rather, both theology and the social sciences argue that a robust connection to reality is necessary for well-being.

Leading gratitude researcher Robert Emmons argues that wrestling with mortality is needful in a healthy life, as is the willingness to reflect upon life lessons learned through difficult circumstances. Emmons' research demonstrates that those who reflect upon past difficulties, be they inconveniences, challenges, or tragedies, are more grateful and have the consequent health and relational benefits of gratitude if the reflection is done in such a way as to answer the questions, "What have I learned from that situation? How have I grown as a human being?" Emmons cements the connection between theology and science by quoting German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy."⁴

This is germane for churches in that we minister in a post-Christian culture, in which the "Nones" and "Dones" are growing faster than mainline congregations, and the temptation is to feel as if there is no hope for moving forward. Emmons and Calvin would disagree. Rather, both Calvin and gratitude researchers such as Emmons might recommend we reflect upon our difficulties in light of the question, "How has God been present in our past to shape us for this moment, this challenge, and the opportunities that will present themselves to us?" Certainly Calvin, and perhaps Emmons, would argue that a necessary part of the church's renewal will be for us to look and to listen, to ask and to seek, to discern what God is doing in our midst, and then be thankful, express thanksgiving, and grow in gratitude to God.

Thanksgiving warms the hearts of even the frozen chosen! How are you personally becoming aware enough to notice what God is doing in your life? How are you cultivating the practice of growing in gratitude and giving thanks as a spiritual habit? How is your church, as a spiritual community, cultivating gratitude and practicing the spiritual habit of thanksgiving?

God is on the move, seeking, inviting, luring, coaxing...our noticing is the first step to *sozo*.

⁴Robert Emmons, "What Gets in the Way of Gratitude?" *Greater Good*, November 12, 2013,



The Power of Celebrating: noticing God alive, active, and in our midst

There is a management axiom that says, “What gets counted gets done.” The notion behind this axiom is there is a natural tendency to focus effort and energy on things that can be evaluated numerically. Even if we articulate a mission, vision, and ministry values that prioritize faith, hope, and love, we may unconsciously prioritize countable things.

Churches have a love-hate relationship with this axiom. We love the axiom when it comes to annual reports: How many members do we have? What is our average Sunday School attendance? How big is our budget? We hate the axiom when it comes to anything that actually matters: How do we count spiritual growth? Is trying to measure transformation toward the image of Christ good management or a fool’s errand, filled with hubris?

Believing the folly that only what can be counted matters, churches have succumbed to a spiritual malaise called “The 3 Bs Heresy.” It goes something like this: “We need more Butts in the pews to get more Bucks in the plates in order to better care for the Bricks of our crumbling building.” This statement is, admittedly, a caricature of our actual thoughts, anxieties, and verbal articulations, yet with enough truth to sting. What stings even more is that, in today’s church environment, our numbers don’t look so great.

What if we changed the axiom to conform to our Reformed theology? What if, instead of saying, “What gets counted gets done,” we said, “What gets *celebrated* gets done”?

In Luke 15, Jesus’ parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost sons demonstrate the Gospel primacy of *qualitative* metrics over *quantitative* metrics: “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (Luke

15:7) Might our collective anxiety as congregations connect to our over-focus on Butts, Bucks, and Bricks? Would we move toward a healthier expression of personal and communal spirituality if we learned to notice where God is showing up in our lives and the life of our congregation—and, when we notice, give thanks? Could gratitude be the path toward congregational revitalization?

Gratitude researchers differentiate between “episodic gratitude (feeling grateful in response to a particular experience)” and “persistent gratitude (a stable tendency to feel grateful within a particular context” and suggest gratitude builds upon itself, becoming a pervasive, collective perspective.⁵ Gratitude research has a caveat, however: Such thanksgiving needs to be specific rather than general, connected to an experience, thoughtful in expression, and neither forced nor faked.⁶ In the lives of our congregations, noticing and giving thanks to God cultivates episodic gratitude and builds toward persistent, collective gratitude if we avoid allowing our ritualized thanksgiving to become mere platitudes⁷ that undergird the practice of “morally, therapeutic deism.”⁸

Theologians Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton coined the phrase morally, therapeutic deism (MTD) to describe a kind of benign belief among American youth: God exists but remains aloof, though God wants us to be happy and good. As a belief system, MTD is what results when thanksgiving is general rather than specific, divorced from specific experience, speaking words with little meaning, expressing neither heart nor soul nor mind nor strength. MTD is definitely not worth celebrating.

So, do you know what is worth celebrating? Seeing God at work in our midst. Noticing the way God is challenging us, as individuals and congregations, to do justice, love

⁵ Summer Allen, *The Science of Gratitude* (Berkeley, CA: Greater Good Science Center, 2018), 49–50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ The danger of platitudes lurks in both liturgical and non-liturgical churches. Platitudes may sprout as easily from a

less-than-thoughtful liturgy as from the tendency of small groups to practice group-think.

⁸ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

mercy, and walk humbly. Hearing the voices of those beyond our faith community say that God has blessed them and kept them and made God's face shine upon them through the tender mercies of our love. Wondering what God is up to in the world and being awed to

discover God is at work through us. We may not be able to count any of this, but we can celebrate all of it—and what gets celebrated gets done.

And the angels of God rejoice.





The Thrive Project:
tools for the season of celebration



...To Sing God's Praise!

Editor's note: Each of the exercises below can be adapted for the Thrive Project. The descriptions below are written generally, in the form researchers call "gratitude interventions." However, each exercise can also be applied specifically to what is happening in, among, and through the congregation because of its participation in the Thrive Project. Such adaptations of the exercises that follow are especially appropriate as a response to the season of experimentation when the congregation is attempting new rhythms of ministry or taking a leap of faith in mission.

10,000 Reasons: count your blessings exercise



Use Psalm 103 as the theme for this "Count Your Blessings" exercise and challenge the congregation to express their thanksgiving in

a forum that is public and easily viewable by the entire congregation. The purpose of making the forum visible is to build a sense of collective or communal gratitude within the entire congregation as well as within each member. Some churches use yellow sticky notes to cover the walls of the sanctuary or fellowship hall. Other

churches create an online forum for members and friends to post their expressions of gratitude to God.

The exercise finds inspiration from the Matt Redmon song, "10,000 Reasons," whose lyrics include the lines: "...ten thousand reasons for my heart to find / Bless the Lord, O my soul."⁹ A congregation may set their goal at 10,000 expressions of thanksgiving or set a lower, more realistic number (e.g. 1,001, one for every year you have been a church, etc.). The exercise is best suited as a seasonal activity such as Lent, stewardship season, Eastertide, etc. It is appropriate to use throughout the season in worship services, fellowship events, Bible studies, and any other event or activity hosted by the congregation.

How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways

The "How Do I Love Thee?" exercise is a variation on "Count Your Blessings," yet with a twist. Based on the research of Martin Seligman, who found that gratitude deepens when one connects the good in one's life to the cause of those good things,¹⁰ this exercise asks participants both to express their thanksgiving and to identify how God was good, kind, and/or faithful in their life.

The "How Do I Love Thee?" exercise requires participants to be more thoughtful and reflective than in the above, "Count Your Blessings" exercise, so church leaders will want to reflect upon the best way for members and friends to share their thanksgivings. More space for grace will be required for this exercise to feel as if it has the appropriate rhythm and feels neither hurried nor rushed.

⁹ Matt Redmon, "10,000 Reasons," © 2011 Thankyou Music (PRS) (admin. worldwide at EMICMGPublishing.com, excluding Europe, which is admin. by Kingswaysongs) / sixsteps Music / worshiptogether.com Songs / Said And Done Music (ASCAP) (Admin. at

EMICMGPublishing.com) / Shout! Publishing (APRA) (admin. in the U.S. and Canada at EMICMGPublishing.com.

¹⁰ Summer Allen, *The Science of Gratitude* (Berkeley, CA: Greater Good Science Center, 2018), 51.

The George Bailey

The name for this exercise comes from the Jimmy Stewart character in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* and is based on the research of Koo, et. al., who coined the phrase “mental subtraction.”¹¹ In “The George Bailey,” members and friends are asked to reflect upon what their life would be like without their faith and their connections with one another as the Body of Christ. Participants may also be invited to reflect upon what their community would be like, now and throughout the years, without their church’s presence in the community.

This exercise is designed for “long-form” sharing—that is, the kind of sharing and expressions of thanksgiving “The George Bailey” is likely to produce will require giving the speaker or writer sufficient time or space to develop one’s thoughts, feelings, and imagination. This exercise will work well in a small group setting, an extended fellowship gathering, or one person per week

offering a moment of faith-sharing during worship. The key to “The George Bailey” is for those who are expressing their faith to make the transition from “What might life be like if...?” (the mental subtraction), to “How am I thankful because...” (the expression of thanksgiving).



Gratitude Road Trip!

The “Gratitude Road Trip!”¹² asks members to write a letter to a person whom they have never properly thanked and then hand-deliver the letter to them. The act of writing and delivering the letter, and then engaging in conversation with someone whose actions have led one to be personally grateful builds relational connection and collective gratitude and reinforces thanksgiving as a powerful spiritual practice. This is an excellent exercise to encourage during the holiday or summer vacation season and can be an intimate experience of homebound and nursing-home ministry within the congregation.

It is less obvious how a congregation might effectively adapt the “Gratitude Road Trip!” to the Thrive Project. One possibility would be to use a variation on this theme at the end of the season of experimentation by having members and friends write letters to one another, community members, or others with whom they have interacted while experimenting with a different rhythm or form of ministry. What kind of gratitude power might be unleashed by noticing that which was good and kind and faithful in one another, and then confirming what we notice in thanksgiving?

The Romans 8:28

This exercise is based on Romans 8:28: “In all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” “The Romans 8:28” recognizes that life is difficult and that God accompanies us in and through the midst of our

difficulties, including loss, grief, and death. Gratitude research shows there is healing and growth when we reflect upon our difficulties in light of the questions:

- What lessons did the experience teach me?

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Based on the research of Martin Seligman as quoted in Allen, *ibid.*

- Can I now find ways to be thankful for what happened to me, even though I was not at the time?
- What ability did the experience draw out of me that surprised me?
- How am I now more the person I want to be because of it?
- Has the experience removed a personal obstacle that previously prevented me from feeling grateful?¹³

“The Romans 8:28” may connect to the Thrive Project in at least two ways. First, it is useful in helping individual members recognize and appreciate their own strengths and to be assured of God’s providence throughout their lives. Second, it is useful in helping the congregation as a whole to recognize its giftedness and to frame the challenges it has faced and is facing in light of the strength and hope that comes from the assurance that God’s providence is also offered communally and not merely to individuals.

Worship Options

Prayers of Thanksgiving – Just like the prayer of confession and assurance of pardon, Reformed worship is deepened when prayers of thanksgiving are highlighted weekly.

Popcorn Prayer – Worshipers are invited to speak out their thanksgivings, even while others are also speaking, like the sound of popcorn popping throughout the sanctuary.

Faith Sharing – One person stands and shares her or his experience of grace, relating their story to the theme of the day in Scripture and sermon.

Video Alternative – In congregations where it is difficult to find people willing to stand in front of others to speak, videotaping of congregants expressing thanksgivings is a comfortable, less threatening alternative.



¹³ Robert Emmons, “How Gratitude Can Help You through Hard Times,” *Greater Good*, May 13, 2013,