



## **The Thrive Project:**

engaging renewal one congregation at a time

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## **The Thrive Project:**

**introductory essays on engaging congregational renewal**



# Four Seasons of Discernment

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

I sometimes get asked the question, “Brad, I like what I’m hearing about the Thrive Project, but what will it look like in reality?” The answer will be unique to each congregation. The Spirit blows where it will—howling in one church, whispering in another—yet the work of discerning God’s call is present in all. Simply put, though each church will traverse their seasons of discernment at their own pace, there is a common calendar to the seasons for all churches.

We might think of the seasons as flowing from one to another as do the seasons of nature.

**Fall:**  
season of education

**Winter:**  
season of examination



**Summer:**  
season of celebration

**Spring:**  
season of experimentation

For each season there is a purpose.

- *Fall/Education:* to broaden and deepen congregational awareness and articulation of the biblical foundations of congregational revitalization so that all leaders and the majority of members can name and describe the biblical vision of the Six Great Ends of the Church—what it looks like to be a healthy congregation.

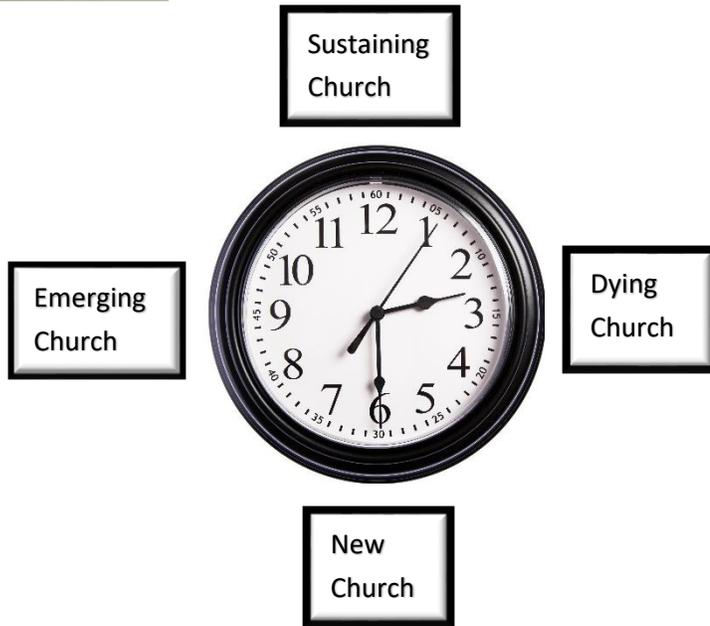
- *Winter/Examination:* to enter a process of discernment that leads to the congregation’s becoming aware of the connection places between the above studied Great Ends of the Church as they relate to (1) the congregation’s unique, spiritual giftedness, (2) the congregation’s deep, abiding passions for ministry, and (3) the community’s significant need(s).
- *Spring/Experimentation:* to engage in ministry and mission as a congregation with sufficient “newness” (e.g. in new ways, for new people, amidst new relationships, with new voices, toward new goals, etc.) that members are required to trust in the Lord with all of their hearts.
- *Summer/Celebration:* 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.

The following sections of this handbook will highlight each of the seasons and suggest possible activities and metrics appropriate to each season. The suggestions I make regarding metrics are mine, not yours, and certainly not your Session’s. The role of my suggestions is to plant seeds for your own discussion and discernment. The key metric is the one *you* name—or, more correctly, the one *all y’all* in your church name—which guides your ministry toward accountability. Likewise, the suggested activities are irrelevant, for it is not me, but *all y’all*, who will be living out this season in which you seek to discern the Spirit’s call upon and through your church. The ideas in this handbook are suggestions, but God’s ideas will plant seeds and cause growth, and your living into them will be the harvest.



## The Church Life-Cycle

discerning the time for renewal



**The Church Life-Cycle is like a clock.**

**Every church begins at 6:00 a.m.**

**At 6:00 p.m. every church closes its doors.**

**What time is it at your church?**

The life of every church community has a beginning, a middle, and an end. For each church in the Thrive Project, we hope the end is many years into the future. Yet it is easy to become complacent, to imagine *our* congregation will always be on the corner of First and Main—closing is what other churches do. The unfortunate truth is that denominations close congregations every year. However, there is hope. By understanding the church life-cycle, congregations can become motivated to do the work of renewal and “reset” their congregation’s clock.

Imagine a typical church. Every church has a supply of Members, Energy, Money, and Organization (MEMO). A church’s MEMO quotient can be described through its stages. A new church has its beginning at 6:00 a.m. Members are few, but energy is high. Money is sparse and organization lacking. For the new church, energy is their best asset, and their energy launches them forward in contagious ways as they grow in numbers, move forward in ministry, and begin to define who they are for the sake of Christ’s mission to the world.

The emerging church is the congregation at 9:00 a.m. As the congregation has grown, members have been added.

Energy remains high, though not quite as frantic an energy as is found in the new church. The energy of the emerging church is channeled in more focused directions to support the congregation’s experiments in ministry and mission. Money, too, though still tight, is sufficient and used to support experiments in congregational ministry and community mission. All the needed experimentation of the emerging church creates some ministry “wobbles” in communication, coordination, etc., so the emerging church must also work hard to develop its administrative, financial, and leadership policies and practices—so the organization also develops.

The sustaining church is the congregation at high noon. In some ways, the sustaining church is the congregation at its peak; however, in other ways, high noon is also the beginning of the church’s decline. The sustaining church is at or near its height in members and organization, but energy and money begin to decline. The sustaining church knows who it is and how to perform internal ministry with efficiency, as practices have evolved and stabilized over time. Everyone knows that “this is how we do it.” However, while efficiency is valued, new vision is minimized, and new experiments get lost amidst the clutter or clamor of established ministries. Long-

established and valued relationships with mission partners don't allow space for responding to new mission possibilities. In the sustaining church, leaders know who they are, what they do, and how to do it, but may find it difficult to discern the Spirit's leading toward a new opportunity or an adaptive challenge.

The dying church is the congregation at 3:00 p.m. It is at this point that church members begin to notice there are less members, less energy, and less money, but the organization is still robust. It is common for a congregation's administrative procedures to lag behind the new reality of fewer people. A dilemma emerges as congregations begin to exist for the sake of institutional survival rather than missional thriving. The anxiety of the dying church becomes focused on the "Three Bs"—butts, bucks, and buildings. The dying church tells itself they need more butts in the pews to get more bucks in the offering plates in order to take better care of the buildings that are their legacy.

### **The Thrive Project and Renewal**

There is hope.

The Thrive Project exists to help congregations enter into a Season of Discernment that focuses on responding to this question: What time is it at our church and what time do we want it to be? Church renewal specialists suggest the optimal time for a congregation to enter into a season of revitalization is somewhere between 1:30–2:30 p.m. It may be earlier or later at your particular congregation, but the key question for every Session is whether or not God is leading you to decide that *now* is the time for you to seek renewal together. If it is 12:06 p.m. or 4:12 p.m. at your church, you can still participate in the Thrive Project. Renewal is easier for the congregation at 12:06 than at 4:12, but all things are possible with Christ who gives us strength (Philippians 4:13).

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The Greek word for "time" used in Mark 1:15 is *kairos*, which



denotes the key moment, the nodal moment, the decisive moment. *Kairos* time is the nine-months-pregnant wife who says to her husband in the middle of the night, "Honey, it's time." *Kairos* time is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. calling our nation to account, declaring the time has come for people of good faith to stand for civil rights. *Kairos* time is contrasted with ordinary, chronological time (Greek: *chronos*). *Kairos* and *chronos* are two very different perspectives on time.

This essay has been talking about the church life-cycle using *chronos* language, which helps a congregation understand where they are in this given moment. It is important to know, chronologically, what time it is at your church. However, it is even more necessary to know if it is "time" for your church to enter into a season of discernment. Mainline denominations are littered with congregations that, in the *kairos* moment, chose hospice rather than surgery. One choice leads to continued decline and eventual death; the other choice offers the possibility of renewal. Therefore, the Thrive Project<sup>1</sup> asks congregational leaders this question:

**Given where your congregation**

**is in *chronos* time,**

**is it God's *kairos* time**

**for you and your congregation?**

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<sup>1</sup> The Thrive Project is a ministry of Grand Canyon Presbytery and Presbytery de Cristo (PCUSA). The two presbyteries are not participating in the Congregational Revitalization pilot project of the Vital Congregations Unit of the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

All Thrive Project materials have been written by members of Grand Canyon and de Cristo Presbyteries and any similarities are coincidental and intrinsic to the topic of church renewal. Permission is given to copy and distribute all Thrive Project materials.



## Jesus, Humility, and Vision Casting:

“without a vision, the people perish”

Jesus is the ultimate leader; I think it is safe to say we all agree on this evaluation. “King of kings and Lord of lords” is a pretty good resume for a leader. We all can agree also on the statement that Jesus lived out his leadership with humility. Jesus once told his disciples, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

It seems as if Jesus was a great leader *precisely because* he was humble. Humility and true leadership are organically linked. This truth seems counter-intuitive and counter-cultural as examples from modern politicians to business Goliaths leap to mind. However, recent literature on leadership research suggests that Jesus was correct all along and understood the truth about true leadership.

Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*, describes the characteristics of “Level 5 Leaders”—those who have helped their companies grow from mediocre toward excellence and then continue learning in order to further their journey ever deeper into excellence. Collins’ research suggests that two, seemingly paradoxical qualities of great leaders are that they are profoundly humble yet with an ego sufficient to stand for her or his values in the face of fierce opposition<sup>2</sup>. Such leaders, suggests Collins, resist the temptations of control and unilateralism for the deeper effectiveness that comes from clarity of purpose coupled with community reflection, engagement and respect for process; letting go of one’s own agenda for the sake of the health and well-being of the organization. What Collins describes is the ideal of Presbyterian leadership.

The Book of Proverbs tells us that “without a vision the people perish.” The corollary to this scripture is that the clarity of a community’s vision often correlates, and rather directly, with the health and wellness of the community’s faith-life, internal communication patterns, financial commitment and missional effectiveness. Simply put: clarity of vision is the non-negotiable job of leadership.

Jesus was a first-class “vision caster.” In the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus cast a vision of the kingdom. References to the kingdom abound in the Synoptics: 54 times in the lengthy Gospel of Matthew, 20 times in the shorter Gospel of Mark, and 43 times again in Luke. Interestingly, the Gospel of John refers to the kingdom only four times; evidently John’s vision is somewhat different. Indeed, for the Jesus revealed in John, believing is referenced an astounding 54 times. Again and again Jesus shows us that repetition is a spiritual gift; redundancy for the sake of clarity is the path forward. The same message delivered 54 times is powerful—54 messages each delivered once are watered down to the point of irrelevancy.

Studies in how groups function indicate the peculiar genius of vision casting. What seems to happen in churches with a clear vision is that everyone points in the same general direction, and, even if not everyone is heading in the *exact* same direction at a given time, the trajectory of the group, organization or church is moving forward together. One might think of a swarm of bees; lots of flying around in multiple directions yet somehow the swarm stays in community. What seems to happen in churches without a clear vision is more akin to the push and pull of a tug-o-war; eventually one side ends up in the mud and everyone is exhausted.

It is the job of leaders to cast a vision for their people. Please notice that I said “leaders,” which is plural. The peculiar and particular genius of Presbyterian leadership

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great*. (New York: HarperBusiness, 2011), 30.

is that we believe in *shared* vision casting: teaching elders and ruling elders together, for the sake of the faith community, agreeing to a common vision, communicating a common vision and living into a common vision. Pastors take the lead in vision casting, of course, by nature of their position in the community, yet without ruling elders the pastor is ineffectual in her or his leadership. Pastors: you must be on the same page as your elders! Elders: you must be on the same page as your pastor(s)!

Jesus, the Master Vision Caster, leveraged the powerful experience of his physical, bodily resurrection to be clear about our work as the Body of Christ: once – “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) – twice – “preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15) – three-times – “be my witnesses to...the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) – and four times – “As the Father sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21), Jesus cast a vision of how we are to live into the sunrise of Easter morning. He is risen! Alleluia, He is risen indeed!

The Thrive Project uses the Six Great Ends of the Church to build its foundation for ministry toward the vision of healthy congregations serving their own people, serving their communities, and inviting others into the harvest Jesus has prepared. There are other, Biblically based foundations. The Methodists talk about five vital signs for Growing Healthy Churches. The Presbyterian Mission Agency talks about seven marks of a healthy church. Paul Borden, an American Baptist consultant, talks about ten principles of healthy church governance. Stan Ott, a Presbyterian consultant, talks about 12 principles for churches transitioning from being “attractional” to “missional” in their ministries. Five, seven, ten, twelve, or six, there are many ways to imagine ministry. The important thing is not the number of “values,” “marks,” “vital signs,” or “Great Ends.” The important thing is to connect Scripture and life, church and community, the living of the Body of Christ to the world for whom Christ died.

Now let’s get busy.



## The Power of the Elevator Speech

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

I have been asked, “Brad, I’m not entirely sure what the Thrive Project is all about. Can you summarize it in a few words? Can you give me an elevator speech on it?” If you have not heard the term before, an elevator speech is a thirty-second description you can give to a stranger while riding an elevator between floors. An elevator speech must maximize focus on the key points because you do not have much time before the doors open and your conversational partner exits the elevator. Here are three versions of an elevator speech for the Thrive Project.

**Elevator Speech #1** – God ordinarily brings God’s love into the world through the Body of Christ. When the Body of Christ is healthy, we can fulfill our calling most fully and most faithfully. The Thrive Project helps churches dig into what Scripture says about being a healthy congregation and leads them through a process of prayer, discussion, reflection, evaluation, experimentation, thanksgiving, and (once again) prayer toward becoming the healthiest church they can be—in, with, and for their communities in the name of Jesus.

**Elevator Speech #2** – The Thrive Project is an opportunity to focus a congregation’s attention on foundational things—to focus the entire Body of Christ, at both depth and breadth levels, toward God’s calling for a church. Then, fortified with knowledge and awareness, a congregation is invited to engage in courageous conversations about *their* strengths and weaknesses, *their* hopes, fears, and dreams, toward rediscovering God’s unique calling for *them* to be instruments of grace, mercy, and peace in their communities in the name of Jesus.

**Elevator Speech #3** – The Thrive Project is a series of directed conversations—pastor to pastor, pastor to elders, Session to congregation—in which a congregation (1) studies the Six Great Ends of the Church as expressions of congregational health proclaimed in Scripture, (2) examines and evaluates their ministry in light of these Great Ends, (3) explores and experiments with new ways of being the church, and (4) celebrates what God is doing in the community through the church.

These directed conversations follow an “action-reflection-action” model and are intended to focus the congregation on connection with the community for the sake of bringing the Good News of Jesus to all of us who need to experience God’s love.

Which elevator speech most clearly speaks to you? How do you describe the Thrive Project? More importantly, can you give an elevator speech for *your* church? When friends, neighbors, or colleagues inquire about your church, can you describe your faith community in a compelling way in thirty seconds? Can you develop a description of your congregation’s life together, its sense of purpose, and its impact upon your life and the life of the community? Can you leave your listeners wondering, wanting more, and ready to ask more questions? Go ahead and experiment with crafting an elevator speech that describes your church.



What will you say? Hurry now...the doors are opening...please, before I exit...tell me Good News!





**The Thrive Project:**  
a season of education



## Fall: a season of education

The first season in the Thrive Project is the season of education. For each season there is a purpose and every purpose deserves some metrics:

*Fall/Education proposed purpose statement:* to broaden and deepen congregational awareness and articulation of the biblical foundations of congregational revitalization so that all leaders and the majority of members can name and describe the biblical vision of a healthy congregation as expressed by the Six Great Ends of the Church.

*Fall/Education proposed metrics statement:* By the conclusion of the Season of Education, 100% of our staff and officers, 80% of our committee/team members, and 50% of all church participants will be able (1) to name and (2) to describe the Six Great Ends of the Church.

Can you imagine the dynamic energy that would flow throughout your church if all staff, all officers, the vast majority of your other lay leaders, and at least half your congregation operated from the same playbook? It would lead to holy lunacy! Huzzah! Huzzah!

So what is the playbook? Here are the Six Great Ends of the Church:

1. The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind
2. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
3. The maintenance of divine worship
4. The preservation of the truth
5. The promotion of social righteousness
6. The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

What would it take for your congregation to be able to affirm and articulate these core biblical values of congregational life? During the Season of Education, there are a variety of options for inviting congregational affirmation and articulation. Options are based on the tried and true principles of *deep immersion and broad*

*dissemination* (like the kids' song: "Deep and Wide"). For instance, consider the following ideas:



- (1) *Choose a theme* that promotes the Six Great Ends as a means to becoming a healthier congregation.
  - Examples include, "The Big Six," "The Ends Are Just the Beginning," "Make the Church Great Again," "Six Signs of Health" (with an accompanying medical image), or a theme of your own imagination. Be creative...be provocative...be evocative...have fun together to create anticipation!
- (2) *Sermon Series:* a seven-week series (one per week with an introductory sermon).
  - Alternative sermon series: dig into each of the six Great Ends for 2–3 weeks for a 13–19-week series.
  - "Extend the Sermon" notes: Include in-bulletin and online notes that create a six-day follow-up study.

(3) *Congregation-wide study focus:*

- Sunday morning studies: theme classes at child, youth, and adult levels
- Six-week small group initiative that use existing groups and/or create time-limited groups. Each of these groups can use the essays and Bible studies included in this handbook.
- All-church retreat
- Wednesday night program: use the existing program and/or experiment for six weeks

(4) *Faith-sharing focus:* Invite congregants to share their perspectives and/or experiences on one of the Great Ends as an expression of a healthy congregation.

- 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.

(5) *“Lord, Deepen Our Hope” prayer concerts:* in which the church hosts a dedicated time of prayer for each of the Great Ends. The Prayer Concert can be conducted amidst:

- All small groups and committees throughout the 7, 13, or 19 weeks of education
- As a Sunday morning gathering
- By organizing “prayer triads” or “prayer quads” of people willing to pray the theme for each week
- As part of each week’s worship service—it could be *both* a joy *and* a concern!

As noted above, these ideas are only suggestions. Your ideas matter, for they form the kernel of a covenant that God will plant. That seed, with the Holy Spirit’s help, will cause growth. Your living into the covenant you make, with God and one another, will be the harvest.



## The Power of Immersion

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

I grew up on the beach in San Clemente, California. I swam and played water polo from junior high through college (along with a little club polo during my first call) and lifeguarded during the summers.

I have a love-hate relationship with water. Too many mornings were spent in the pre-dawn light, standing on a pool deck, watching the mist rise from the water—a cloud of unknowing that promised to shock my body’s system. Standing on the deck in just a suit was cold, but was it worse than actually plunging into the icy depths? Okay, perhaps a minimally heated pool in Southern California, even in winter, hardly constitutes “icy depths,” but at 5:59 a.m. the difference seemed subtle.

At 6:00, on the dot, my coach’s baritone would ring like an overcaffeinated alarm clock, “Let’s go! Do it!” We would dive in, immersing ourselves for the next 150 minutes into a world that hardly seemed plausible mere seconds before. Sure, there were teammates who had already taken the plunge; these were the early adopters. The rest of the team, us early majority folks, waited until the last second, until we heard the coach bark his orders.

What fascinates me as I recollect these tortured moments of my youth and young adulthood is how common the experience was of hating getting into the water but loving being in the water. There is something about being immersed in water, (and I don’t mean in a sacramental sense, but actual water for recreation’s sake), that bespeaks an otherworldly existence: simultaneously fresh, invigorating, challenging, exhausting, and liberating. Once in the pool, we loved the water.

It strikes me that many of us fear immersion even as we discover it to be life-giving. The morning routines of an aquatics team are played out, throughout the nation, in the lives of our churches. We hate something until we don’t. We are reticent until we aren’t. We are uncertain until the moment comes and, together, we dive in, only

to discover that which we feared is both true (It’s *COLD!*) and life-giving (Time to *PLAY!*).

The Thrive Project is a form of congregational immersion for the sake of renewal. Thrive is a Season of Discernment for a congregation that requires:

- **broad participation** – not just pastor and elders, but a wide swath of the congregation,
- **depth participation** – not just showing up to meetings, but the honest work of perseverant prayer and dynamic dialogue with God’s Spirit and one another, and
- **invested participation** – not just wanting to “tinker with how we do things” but seeking the mind, heart, and will of Christ.



No half-steps will carry us where we want to go on this journey. No half-measures will suffice to lead us to the place of being a

church clear about our mission in Christ, focused on using our spiritual gifts in service of our neighborhood, cultivating disciples that—individually and corporately—are growing together and learning how to be salt and light in our world.

I imagine that all who choose to covenant together for immersion into a Season of Discernment through education, examination, experimentation, and celebration will need to overcome internal trepidation in order to discover God’s joy. As you stand by the water’s edge, waiting, please know the water will not grow any warmer, yet neither will it ever be any less life-giving. So, come on—let’s dive in together!



## The Power of Transformational Education

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

I was first introduced to the phrase “banking model of education” by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. I understood Freire’s phrase immediately and intuitively, for I had spent the majority of my life (to that point) having knowledge “deposited” into my brain by mind-numbing lectures: information overload in 50- or 100-minute lectures. It was Freire who pointed me toward a better way, a deeper truth, a path to life: education as transformation.

Freire sought to transform the way Brazilian educators engaged their students. Rather than merely dumping knowledge from teacher to learner, Freire advocated for engagement with one another and the world. Freire argued that information must be married to action and action be married to reflection.

When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating “blah.” It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.<sup>3</sup>

Freire wrote persuasively that teachers must abandoned their “circles of certainty” to facilitate students and teachers together becoming “co-investigators of reality,” able to transform their surroundings and allow themselves to be transformed through ever deeper engagement.

The more fully he or she enters into reality..., knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them.<sup>4</sup>

Freire sparked passion within me. I knew, from my own life and the lives of my parishioners, that we Presbyterians make great Christians—from the neck up. We know how to think critically and expansively, concisely and incisively. We know how to argue our point into a sharp, two-edged sword and use it with brute force to compel our enemies into submission. Our knowledge is our glory.

And it is our shadow side, too.



The temptation to inflict a banking model of education upon our churches is ever-present. We possess such a wealth of information in the Scriptures, our confessions, and our pastoral, personal, and church libraries, as well as our personal and communal experiences, that we are each a localized mini-seminary. We can access any or all of these sources through the touch of our fingertips and yet remain undereducated. We will believe ourselves to be educated because we possess much knowledge. However, without also experiencing the engagement of action and reflection in community, we are merely overstuffed deposit boxes. True education seeks transformation of self, community, and the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1986), <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon2/pedagogy/pedagogychapter3.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon2/pedagogy/pedagogypreface.html>.

As your congregation seeks to enter into the Season of Education, the temptation before you is subtle. What follows this essay are six essays and six Bible studies on the six Great Ends of the Church. How short a step is it to move from reading these essays to believing you understand what “church” is all about? How quickly can you travel from doing a Bible study to believing you have (all) the right answers? Such thinking is conditioned by the habits formed through a lifetime of experience: Once you make the knowledge deposit, then you know what you need to know, right?

Life doesn’t work that way, of course. College students need an internship. College graduates need a first job. Trade school graduates need an apprenticeship. Heck, even medical school graduates (who are called doctors), need an internship, residency, and sometimes more! So it is with the Christian faith. Reading the Bible and studying one’s theological tradition are essential first steps, but, on their own, they lack the ability to transform.

Education as transformation comes in community as, together, we wrestle with information, prejudice, and perspective. Transformation comes as majority voices are

heard in their shouts and their minority-voiced siblings are heard in their whispers.<sup>5</sup> Transformation comes as all voices are heard at the same volume, heard with mutual respect, and heard as those seeking understanding of God’s will—not just for oneself, but for everyone in the community. As you engage the Season of Education, are you wanting to know a wee bit more information, or are you open to being challenged, persuaded, compelled, and, therefore, liberated by what you hear?

Do you have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to *your* church?



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<sup>5</sup> The words *majority* and *minority* are specifically used here to highlight racial, gender, and power differentials and also the common phenomenon of a homogenous group having a

popular, assumed position and another, less-considered opinion.



**Essays on the Six Great Ends of the Church:**  
toward a common sense of our purpose



## The First Great End of the Church:

### the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind

Few Presbyterians want to be called a “Jesus Freak.” Even worse would be to be called a “Presbyterian Jesus Freak” – wouldn’t that be a contradiction in terms?

No one wants to be called a “Christian Hypocrite.” As Presbyterians, we tend to recoil at the disparity we too often see between profession and confession, that we too easily allow between the thing we want to do and what we actually do (c.f. Romans 7).

No one believes evangelism is best done by a committee. Even as Presbyterians, we must admit the disconnect found in outsourcing the sharing of our faith to a group of two volunteers and three others who felt bad saying no to the poor nominating committee folk.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God” (2 Corinthians 4:7). *We* are the jars of clay; to *God* belongs the extraordinary power. How do we share the Good News of what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ? How are we sharing Jesus because our life is shaped and formed by the rhythms of his life, death, and resurrection? How is it that who we are—in our core identity—seeks to reflect the overflow of Christ in our life? How do we share faith through relationship rather than program, as a conversation rather than a lecture, as breathing rather than compulsion?

The first Great End of the Church is the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind. This first Great End raises several questions:

- What does it mean to proclaim?
- What is the Gospel?
- What is salvation?
- Does your congregation have a common, consistent definition for these terms?

An example of a divergence of opinion about the definition of proclamation is found in the interchange between a pastor and elder following the worship service where the pastor had just preached on the need to tell

people about Jesus. The elder thanked the pastor for a good sermon and then said, “Of course, you know, St. Francis said, ‘Preach the Gospel always, and, if necessary, use words.’” While most Presbyterians love St. Francis and agree with him on the need to live one’s faith—to walk the walk and not just talk the talk—is it appropriate to use his quote to recuse oneself and one’s congregation from the obedience to speak the Gospel message? What is to distinguish a Presbyterian from a committed supporter of the United Way?

In a similar fashion, congregations sometimes assume all their members agree about the content of the Gospel. The Greek word for Gospel is *euangelion*, which literally translates as “good news.” But what news? Is the news merely a reductionist version of Christian faith such as the Four Spiritual Laws or Romans Road made popular by parachurch organizations like Navigators? Or, more expansively, is the news confined exclusively to the historical Jesus as conveyed in the canonical Gospels? Or, even more expansively, does the news incorporate a wider perspective that includes the Old Testament? Where does the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit—what some call the work of the Universal Christ—fit into the news a congregation is sharing with the world? What is the Story a congregation shares?

Finally, a congregation must define salvation. Is salvation limited to the afterlife or is there a sense that salvation is intended for “earth as it is in heaven”? Is salvation motivated by a fear of eternal torment or amazing grace or both? Is salvation limited to those who believe a certain dogma or practice particular rituals or live a lifestyle that conforms to a set of standards? How does the church express the reality that in Christ God reconciled Godself to humanity, creating a new humanity, deepening intimacy with our Creator, and calling both individuals and communities to work for the healing of communities as a foretaste of God’s eternal restoration of all creation? Without a shared vision of proclamation, Gospel, and salvation a congregation cannot move forward together in ministry and mission.

The verb in the first Great End of the Church is instructive, and it is necessary to focus special attention there: proclaim. While all Presbyterians agree that proclamation can and should be done in deed as well as word and in work as well as worship, and with apologies to St. Francis, there is a Story to tell to the Nations. The first Great End, therefore, invites us to practice an intentional, authentic, and relational evangelism. Healthy congregations move people, even Presbyterians, beyond a fear of evangelism that has been formed by caricatures of the street-corner preacher. Healthy congregations create an ethos of being *invitational and relational, encouraging the natural telling of God's calling and care amidst the relationships of our lives.*

What does it look like to practice intentional, authentic, and relational evangelism? The answer will be different for individuals and congregation, but individuals observe the following practices:

1. Invites a friend to church to hear the Gospel.
2. Tells another person their story of coming to faith.
3. Tells another person what God means to them in their life.
4. Tells another person how Scripture declares God's love for all.
5. Is described by others as having at least three of the following characteristics *while sharing her or his faith*: authentic, personal, warm, honest, open, inquisitive, empathetic, and humorous.
6. Understands that the integrity of her relationships, actions, and words serves as a basis upon which her witness to faith will be judged.
7. Has conversations about God or faith with people outside of the church.
8. Demonstrates genuine concern through acts of love and justice before inviting someone to faith.
9. Is present with people in difficult situations as a witness to God's care and justice in the world.
10. Says to another, "What can I do for you in the name of Christ today?"

Alongside the life of the individual Jesus follower stands a congregation. What does it look like for a congregation to live into faithfulness toward the first Great End of the Church by promoting and training their flock in the practice of intentional, authentic, and relational

evangelism? The congregation who lives the first, great end with faithfulness practices the following:

1. Encourages its members to share their faith story with others.
2. Trains its members in how to share their faith story with others.
3. Has members practice sharing their faith story with one another in worship, small groups, at Session/Deacons and its committees in both verbal and written form.
4. Teaches/wrestles with the meaning of salvation and has a clearly defined, broad-consensus definition of salvation that is understood and regularly articulated within the congregation.
5. Generates members who demonstrate a willingness to offer mercy, to speak the truth in love, and to look beyond their own good to the concerns of a wider world with humility and joy.
6. Equips its members to invite personal faith and have conversations that nurture a relationship with God when those who are without faith, those seeking faith, and those of fragile faith come to worship or another church event.
7. Talks about the difficult questions about faith and the Bible.
8. Performs acts in the world that bear witness to God's love for the world as proclaimed in scripture.
9. Shares faith-based posts on social media.
10. Baptizes adults at least several times a year

Most Presbyterian churches will wrestle with cultivating the above values; indeed, this may be the most difficult of the Six Great Ends for a church to practice. This wrestling is not with the angels, but with our own demons of memory, embarrassment, and mortification that have often come from evangelistic encounters which were focused on harsh judgmentalism. Too seldom have we experienced faith sharing borne of love, filled with wonder, that invites us to notice the Spirit at work among us. This is the kind of evangelism to which we refer when we talk about intentional, authentic, and relational evangelism. Some may suggest that growing in healthy evangelism is not necessary in order for the Presbyterian Church to discover God's revitalization. Others would respectfully suggest that the scriptures, especially the New Testament, would disagree. Here's an invitation to

prayer: If you resist *healthy* evangelism, how interested are you, *really*, in revitalization?

As a final note, it has been observed that the first Great End of the Church is meaningless without the other five Great Ends being lived out by the Church through robust practice. As one presbyter who responded to the Presbytery Pastor wrote, “It would seem to me that the first Great End of the Church is actually the end of the cycle not the beginning. People do not come to faith and

then go do something. People of faith do something and other join them.” That is, congregations who practice intentional, authentic, and relational evangelism also *proclaim* in works what is said in words regarding God’s love for the world. Maybe St. Francis was correct after all. Then again, maybe St. Francis spoke a valuable word for his day and age that only partially applies to today’s social and spiritual context.

What do you think?



THE BOOK REPRESENTS THE SCRIPTURES. THE DOVE IS RISING FROM THE SCRIPTURES INDICATING THE SOURCE OF BOTH THE ORIGINAL WITNESS AND OUR PRESENT UNDERSTANDING. THE SAME SPIRIT THAT INSPIRED THE ORIGINAL WRITERS ENABLES US TO RECEIVE THE GOSPEL. THE CROSS BEHIND THE BOOK AND DOVE REMINDS US THAT THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IS GOD WITH US AND FOR US.

**We will share the Good News of Jesus in our words and deeds.**



## The Second Great End of the Church:

### the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the people of God

At the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Jesus’ words connect our faithfulness as disciples to our care for one another in a straight, direct, and continuous line. An elder once commented during a Session meeting that our best outreach was the way we cared for one another. The pastor flippantly responded, “No, that would be called in-reach.” At the time, he wanted to push against the tendency to care only for “our own” without engagement with the community. However, there is truth in the elder’s words: How we care for each other matters.

How caring is your congregation?

The second Great End of the Church is likely at or near the top of the list for what most Presbyterian churches do well: the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the people of God. The Biblical call to care is what drives us to elect deacons, to form Stephen Ministries, and to be intentional in our welcome and hospitality toward visitors. But the work of caring cannot be outsourced to a committee. It is the work of all the Body of Christ.

Often, the greatest obstacle to the full expression of our care is busyness. For most Presbyterians (and perhaps all folks), overburdened schedules limit our capacity to notice needs and diminish our ability to stop and heed the cry of the one whom God has placed before us. It may be that our sanctification—our growing into holiness—in caring relationships is connected to our willingness to allow margins to exist in our calendars!

#### **Noah and the Narrative Arc (pun intended) of Salvation**

Carol Schurr, a ruling elder at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Tucson, wrote to the Presbytery Pastor,

...to the best of my knowledge, there is nothing in Scripture and nothing in the Book of Order that defines “children of God” as only “Christ followers....” For any individual, the shelter, nurture,

and spiritual fellowship in the Church should feel welcoming, accepting, and reassuring regardless of one’s current beliefs. One should feel like one has come home. One can relax and be oneself. The recognition of belief, and the profession thereof, may well likely follow the actual receiving of shelter, being nurtured, and feeling part of a fellowship that professes some sort of spiritual sense of being.

Carol’s insights raise a salient question. She is correct that a Christian theology of God as Creator claims all people are children of God. However, from the perspective of a Christian theology of God as Redeemer and God as Sustainer, a congregation must ask, “What is the relationship between the church’s responsibility toward those within the congregation and those beyond the congregation?” Put another way: Is there a distinction to be made between the good to which the church is called in the second Great End from the good to which the church is called in the fifth Great End—the promotion of social righteousness?

When the Presbytery Pastor asked people what it looks like to live out the second Great End of the Church to provide shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship to the people of God, his email inbox was flooded with amazing examples of congregations supporting migrant, refugee, and homeless hospitality, orphanages in Uganda or sales of fair market products from Kenya, as well as disability ministries in the Ukraine and relief efforts in Indonesia. All of these projects are to be commended as examples of the powerful Presbyterian urge to embrace all people as God’s children! However, for the sake of operational clarity, it is necessary to distinguish between the second and fifth Great End, between our inward glance and our outward gaze.

Former General Assembly Moderator Jack Rodgers used the symbolism of Noah’s Ark and comparing it to the narrative arc between the second Great End—the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God—and the fifth Great End—

noting the confessions of the early Church and Reformation Church “depict the church as an ‘ark of salvation’...the primary functions of this church are to bring people to salvation—a right relationship with God—and to guide them in living a Christian life.”<sup>6</sup> What this implies is there is a relational arc that connects the second Great End, with its inward glance, to the fifth Great End, with its outward gaze. For the purposes of this study, therefore, attention will be focused on those within the church and our privilege to shelter, nurture and provide spiritual fellowship.

What, then, does it look like for an individual to practice the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the people of God? Such an individual practices the following:

1. Prays for other church members on a regular basis.
2. Shares one’s life experiences and God experiences in conversation with other church members.
3. Instructs children and youth on the nature and practices of the Christian life.
4. Visits church members who are in the hospital, homebound, or confined to an institution.
5. Participates with deacons or pastors in ministries of care.
6. Notices when someone is in grief, pain, or discomfort, and then stops, inquires, listens, cares, and responds to that person with prayer or action.
7. Learns people’s names whenever possible and is not afraid to ask for someone’s name if they forget it.
8. Seeks out visitors to offer welcome and greeting, and to invite them to other events (e.g. lunch, potluck, Bible study, etc.).
9. Provides full-time caregiving and nurture to an elderly husband or wife and ensures their continued quality of life.
10. Encourages the presence of children and youth in church through tolerating noise or commotion while yet modeling and guiding young ones toward learning the ways of respectfully being church together.

The congregation who practices the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God does the following:

1. Regularly communicates to all members how to request prayer for oneself or others and then prays for one another in worship and throughout the week.
2. Organizes, trains, and sends deacons, Stephen Ministers, and pastors to visit those in the hospital, homebound, or confined to an institution.
3. Educates its members in how to refer people to and utilize community services (e.g. memory care, low vision, low-income housing, etc.).
4. Promotes care groups (e.g. 12-Step groups, Divorce Recovery).
5. Ensures its building structure and administrative practices emphasize accessibility.
6. Celebrates life events (e.g. births, graduations, anniversaries, achievements).
7. Creates opportunities for church members to share life experiences and God experiences in smaller, more intimate settings.
8. Instructs and trains younger disciples in the practices of the Christian life.
9. Organizes mentoring relationships between older adults, youth, and children.
10. The following types of events/experiences are the norm:
  - a. A member suffers from a spinal deformity. She doesn’t like to go out at all because people point and stare. At church, we see her for who she is and she feels “sheltered” from the mean actions of others.
  - b. One of the church’s official photographers is legally blind. He is still a part of the team—his sense of worth is nurtured even though his contribution may be “fuzzy.”
  - c. Each week about 50–80 people regularly sign a “thinking of you card” for one of the members who is unable to attend. While the recipient may not know every signer, the sheer number of individual signatures wraps that person in a spiritual fellowship.
  - d. A committed foster parent brings children born with special needs into her home, particularly infants who need constant nurture. These

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Rogers, *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox), 1996, p.52. Quoted in Joseph D. Small and Frank T.

Hainer, *The Great Ends of the Church: Short-Term Study Course for Adults*. (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press), 2003, p. 9.

children are welcomed in worship and church events by the entire congregation.

- e. Members handknit blankets which are then prayed over by deacons and other congregants and given to people in need of prayer and blessing, such as those facing surgery, those who are in hospice, or those who have made a decision to move to a home closer to family.
- f. A longtime member handknits blankets which are then prayed over by deacons and other congregants and given to people in need of prayer and blessing, such as those facing surgery, those who are in hospice, or those who have made a decision to move to a home closer to family.

It is surely narcissistic for a congregation to focus only on “in-reach,” only on the care and needs of its own members to the exclusion of one’s neighbors—there remains a narrative arc between the inward glance of the second Great End and the outward gaze of the fifth Great End. However, it is also true that in a busy, frantic, anxious, and polarized world dominated by technology how we love one another matters. Human connection is essential. So I ask again: How caring is your congregation?



**MULTI-HUED HANDS REPRESENT ALL THE CHILDREN OF GOD. THE DOVE’S WINGS ARE TIPPED DOWNWARD, SHELTERING THE PEOPLE OF GOD. THE TRIANGLE OF LIGHT LINKS THE DOVE TO THE PEOPLE.**

[Cite your source here.]

**We will love and care for one another.**



## The Third Great End of the Church: the maintenance of divine worship

Clergy often have pet peeves regarding the worship of God. Here are a few examples.

*Pet Peeve #1* – Using “worship” as a synonym for “music” or “the emotional feel I receive from a particular string of chord progressions” as opposed to its Reformed and historical usage: the retelling of the divine narrative of God’s salvation.

*Pet Peeve #2* – Prayers of invocation at Reformed churches. God is always present! Why would one invoke the presence of God if God is already here?

*Pet Peeve #3* – Narcissistic focus—in prayers, hymns and songs, and some sermons—rather than the expression and appreciation of a corporate faith. Enough said.

Clergy—and laity—naturally feel strongly about worship. It is through the worship experience that many come to life in Christ. Personal stories connect to God’s Story through worship. As a result, we all have prejudices on the subject. But what if our prejudices are getting in the way of experiencing the Living God?

If our congregations are going to discern the call of God upon us, we will, of necessity, need to embrace the Reformed faith’s gift of “both/and” worship that is:

- *both* rooted in history *and* expressive of contemporary meaning,
- *both* embracing a communal expression of faith *and* inviting personal encounters with the Living God,
- *both* respecting the narrative form of worship as the retelling of God’s salvation *and* inviting opportunities for each individually and all collectively to connect their story to God’s Story.

Beyond the “worship wars,” with arguments about musical styles and prayer forms, Spirit-filled worship seeks to integrate heart and mind and be guided by the whisper of the still, small voice, as spoken into and through faith communities by the Holy Spirit. How is your congregation listening to where God is leading you in worship?

This vital sign of congregational health calls for worship in which the focus is on God and the experience is of coming onto holy ground: an encounter with God, leading to an experience of wonder. This vital sign presumes an active participation in the living relationship of the triune God, in which all people feel welcome to come as they are, yet also expect to go forth as those touched and transformed for God’s purposes. This vital sign suggests worship that challenges, teaches, transforms, encounters, convicts, and sends people into the world to be the blessing of Christ Jesus in human form. Such worship moves beyond self-gratification or consumeristic entertainment, yet also breaks through the calcification of rituals divorced of meaning. Such worship is *both* hard work *and* high calling, *both* personal offering *and* holy promise that God will be upon us, within us, between us, and through us.

The individual who lives the maintenance of divine worship,

1. Participates regularly in the gathering of the worshipping community to observe Sabbath.
2. Prays on a daily basis.
3. Prays praise, adoration, and thanksgiving (focus on God) as well as confession and petition (focus on us).
4. Prays with a time set aside for silence in order simply to be with God, listen, and experience God’s presence.
5. Reads Scripture devotionally.
6. Studies Scripture in-depth.
7. Practices the Prayer of Examen/Reflection at the end of the day to connect one’s daily life to God.
8. Seeks in one’s experience of worship to glorify God in thought, word, and deed.
9. Is open in one’s experience of worship to move beyond education to transformation, beyond “What am I getting out of this?” to “How can I bless God and those around me?” and beyond mere words to becoming like Jesus.
10. Sings like she or he means it!

The congregation who lives the maintenance of divine worship,

1. Centers all worship on the person, character, and saving actions of God in Jesus Christ.
2. Crafts worship around the Word—music, prayer, and all other elements point to the Word.
3. Crafts worship in ways that:
  - a. engage the mind yet allow times for silence, personal reflection, and personal response;
  - b. connect the Word proclaimed to God’s call upon us to live as instruments of God’s grace, mercy, and peace in the world;
  - c. bring awareness of ancient liturgical rhythms and modern, contemporary expression;
  - d. balance “Presbyterian wordiness” with creative, multi-sensory rituals that engage the whole person;
  - e. make room in worship for mystery and awe, and expect to encounter the Holy Spirit; and
  - f. incorporate intentionally designed “sending” rituals.

4. Trains liturgists in the practice of leading and trains ushers and greeters in the art of hospitality.
5. Creates opportunities for members to use their spiritual gifts in worship.
6. Remembers and responds to those who cannot be in worship either because of health (e.g. homebound, nursing home residents) or vocation (first responders).
7. Generously finances the maintenance of divine worship.
8. Provides and prepares creative and appropriate worship spaces.
9. Nurtures the congregation’s worship life through elements they have memorized and can repeat together.
10. Enjoys a large and varied repertoire of congregational songs.

How does the worship at your church reflect the above?



THE CHALICE, A REMINDER OF THE TRINITY, REPRESENTS THE LORD’S SUPPER, AND THE THREE DROPS OF WATER, BAPTISM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. THE DOVE REMINDS US THAT THE SAME SPIRIT IS PRESENT IN THE SACRAMENTS AS IN THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL. THE SACRAMENTS ENACT THE GOSPEL. THE RAISED ARMS SIGNIFY OUR RESPONSE OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING; OUR WORSHIP OF THE LIVING GOD.

**We will gather as a community to worship the triune God.**



## The Fourth Great End of the Church:

### the preservation of the truth

#### (discipleship as the living experience of Jesus, the Truth)

Truth is in short supply: fake news in politics, opinion masquerading as fact, actual facts being framed in such a way the message created distorts into parody, debates about science vs. pseudo-science. Is truth a function of power? A function of philosophical ideas? A function of scientific empiricism?

The Hebrew people perceived of truth as a lived reality, which may help us understand Jesus' words, "...I am the truth..." (John 14:6). Jesus is not merely an idea (though he is the eternal *Logos*), nor is Jesus' Way merely a set of rules for behavior (though one can argue the Sermon on the Mount is a particularly compelling summary of ethics). Rather, to say Jesus is the truth is to acknowledge an organic interconnection between head and heart and hands, between one's beliefs and one's behaviors, and between the personal and the public, that lead toward the creation of God's *shalom* on earth as in heaven. Truth is a lived reality.

Presbyterians have always been strong on education, and it is tempting to view this fourth Great End exclusively through an educational lens. To do so would be a lost opportunity. Seeing the fourth Great End exclusively through an educational lens might cause us to see only that with which we are most comfortable seeing (using our intellects) and, like a Clydesdale with blinders, limit our vision. Truth, according to Jesus, is found incarnate in a person. It is intended to be lived incarnate in a person as well.

Healthy congregations have some common traits that encourage, nurture, and lead people toward discipleship that lives the truth rather than merely knowing correct doctrine. One common trait is that they move people beyond mere piety, simple morality, and offering the latest programs to invite, encourage, plan, structure, and live out their communal life toward the goal of becoming Christ-like. Healthy congregations plan their discipleship ministries in ways that nurture folks' ability to discover

their core identity in Christ: daily and with depth; at home, work, and in the community; "in season and out of season." Healthy congregations understand Christian discipleship as a journey of spiritual intention and support each other in making the intention a practice and the practice a habit.

The individual who preserves the truth, in the sense of promoting a lived experience of Jesus, does the following,

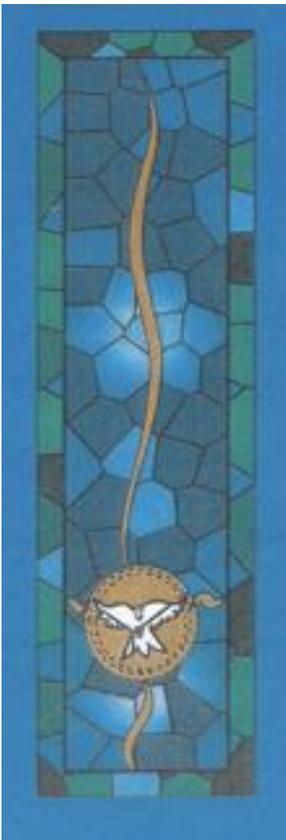
1. Listens to the sermon and allows God to influence them through it.
2. Reads Scripture, studies the historic confessions, and reads contemporary works that connect faith to life.
3. Prays, then ponders, contemplates, and converses about what one is hearing, reading, and doing, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide one's actions.
4. Sets life goals that conform to Biblical values.
5. Acts in ways such that what one does publicly and privately express a unity, a life of integrity, where one's reputation, character, and behavior are integrated.
6. Practices the faith in daily life beyond the politically popular/correct issues, including also the practices of humility and hope, justice and joy, a willingness to seek and offer mercy, and looking beyond their own good to the concerns of a wider world.
7. Courageously yet politely calls out prejudice, injustice, and distortions of the Christian faith, verbally and in writing, through interpersonal conversations, in small groups, and on social media, always remembering to speak the truth in love (especially on social media!).
8. Thinks globally and acts locally.
9. Treats other people—all other people—according to their being created in *imago dei* (the image of God).
10. Responds to seasons of spiritual blandness—aka, "The Wall," "The Dark Night of the Soul"—with patience and perseverance, continuing to practice the faith and seeking deeper means of hearing God's Word and Spirit.

The congregation who lives the preservation of the truth, again, in the sense of promoting a lived experience of Jesus, does the following:

1. Teaches Scripture, the historic tradition, and contemporary application of faith to life.
2. Trains people in both ancient and contemporary practices of prayer.
3. Trains people in living one's faith in daily life.
4. Offers discipleship curricula with different entry points: seeker, beginner, intermediate, and advanced.
5. Offers discipleship curricula on ways to get unstuck in one's spiritual journey—aka, beyond "The Wall" or beyond "The Dark Night of the Soul."
6. Facilitates discussion of personal, local, national, and global events through the lens of Biblical values to offer insight, critique, and affirmation as appropriate.

7. Creates opportunities for members to express Biblical values through service in the church and in the community.
8. Encourages the sharing of diverse perspectives as a means of seeking God's truth.
9. Participates in, financially supports, and promotes activities that advocate Christian values in the public sphere.
10. Expects to be kept apprised of denominational positions on current events, including potentially divisive subjects.

There is so much more that could be said about discipleship training that focuses on helping people live and experience the living, resurrected Jesus but this is enough for now. All is well! God is Sovereign in love! Let's be the Church God is calling us to be!



THE BANNER REPRESENTS THE LIGHT OF TRUTH SHINING IN THE DARKNESS.  
THE DOVE REMINDS US THAT THE TRUTH WE PROCLAIM TO THE WORLD IS  
THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, GOD WITH US AND FOR US.

**We will live in ever-growing obedience to the truth discovered in Jesus Christ.**



## The Fifth Great End of the Church: the promotion of social righteousness

The fifth Great End is beloved of Christians for whom Matthew 25 is their life verse, “I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink...” The fifth Great End points back to the prophets, “Do justice...” and, “Let justice roll down like a river” (Micah 6:8 and Amos 5:24). It reminds us of James’ wisdom, “...I will show you my faith by my deeds” (James 2:19).

Presbyterians *love* the fifth Great End.

What stumbles *some* Presbyterians, however, is the peculiar phrase “social righteousness,” which was born out of the “Social Gospel” of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its emphasis on radical, social transformation in society (e.g. the implementation of child labor laws). While everyone now agrees with the need for child labor laws, the critique of “social righteousness” is that it can seem to bifurcate the Gospel into a social Gospel and a spiritual Gospel as an either/or choice when, in our Reformed faith, there is only one Gospel, and it is both/and: both spiritual and social

If “social righteousness” was the buzz word of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “missional” is the buzz word from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that essentially means the same thing. For pastors, missional is familiar territory, as it is a theological word, a seminary word. For others, “missional” sounds like the kind of buzz word preachers love but which creates distance between pulpit and pew: “Come on, preacher, get real!” Here is an easy way to think about it:

Mission + Relational = Missional.

“Missional” is the Church’s attempt to convey the unity of the Gospel, to call for “social righteousness” while also remembering the Christian faith is relational: loving God and loving neighbor – both/and rather than either/or.

What does it mean, then, to say the Church, the Body of Christ, is to promote social righteousness/be missional? For starters, it means our focus needs to be outward, not inward. The motto of some churches is: “Outwardly focused, inwardly strong.” The insinuation of such churches is they balance their outward ministries and

their inward ministries in roughly a fifty-fifty manner. Ministry experience suggests, however, there will always be gravitational forces pushing leaders toward inward-focused ministries. When the choice for a pastor is between getting to the hospital to visit the beloved matriarch or spending her or his time in the church parking lot listening to a panhandler wend a long tale of woe, the panhandler usually is ignored in favor of the matriarch.

What does it mean to say the Church, the Body of Christ, is to promote social righteousness/be missional? Churches are the Body of Christ for the world, to the world, and in the world, so we must sustain a commitment to being the Body of Christ in the world. Theologians call this being “incarnational” (another buzz word). Incarnational means we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ, to be Jesus with meat (*en carne*), in the flesh, not just a skeleton but an enfleshed Jesus whose presence is felt because Jesus’ people are at work in the world.

What does it mean to say the Church, the Body of Christ, is to promote social righteousness/be missional? Churches that live according to our calling to be missional adopt the motto: “Go and Show the Gospel.” Such missional thinking is in contrast to the dominant methodology most of have experienced throughout our lives. Most of our shared experience is with attractional ministry, the motto for which is: “Y’all Come to the House of the Lord.” While there is nothing wrong with having people come to the House of the Lord, in the missionary context that is 21<sup>st</sup>-century North America, attractional ministry alone is insufficient to fulfill our calling.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Greater works shall you do” (John 14:12). Surely the works we do are greater in quantity, not quality. These greater works happen because of a willingness to act with missional intent, to incarnate Jesus in our communities. So, what does it look like to promote social righteousness/be missional?

The individual who promotes social righteousness,

1. Participates in the congregation's *passive* ministries of compassion (e.g. donating canned goods and gently used clothes, or writing a check, etc.).
2. Volunteers in the congregation's *active* compassion ministries (e.g. reading to school children, serving at a soup kitchen, or helping Habitat for Humanity build a home, etc.).
3. Prays for those whom Jesus called "the least of these, my brothers and sisters," whether in one's community, the nation, or around the world.
4. Seeks *cooperative* mission engagement, asking those one seeks to serve, "What is it that you would find helpful?" Then, only after listening to the answer, responding as one is capable.
5. Seeks *mutual* mission engagement, serving "with" rather than "for" others, building relationships of mutuality that break down hierarchical, "Big Brother/Sister" interactions in favor of "We, together...."
6. Seeks to become more educated about the history of religious protest and historic issues that impact today's events (e.g. Doctrine of Discovery, Abolitionists, Great Reforms of the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Women's Suffrage, Civil Rights, etc.).
7. Seeks to become more educated about economic, social, cultural, and political issues that impact minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
8. Advocates for just and humane policies and laws in the public square, especially those policies and laws related to the protection of minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
9. Kindly and consistently confronts actions and attitudes of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and ageism, first looking to oneself and then to the actions and attitudes of others.
10. Practices good stewardship through living responsibly, disavowing consumerism in favor of generosity.

The congregation who promotes social righteousness,

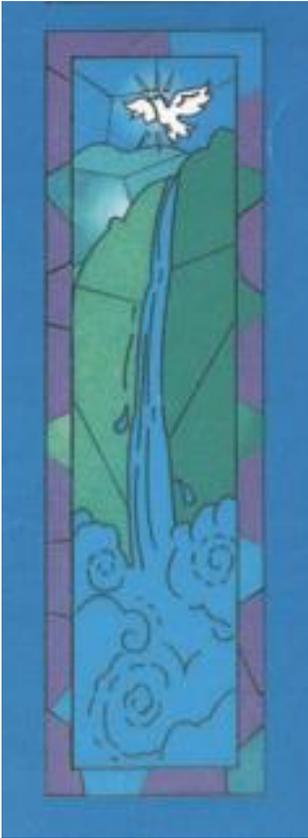
1. Provides opportunities for members to express care for others through *passive* compassion ministries (e.g.

food drives, clothing drives, and financial giving, etc.).

2. Provides opportunities for members to express care for others through *active* compassion ministries (e.g. Habitat for Humanity, school reading programs, Family Promise, etc.).
3. Works with existing community organizations who provide care in the community.
4. Organizes and promotes new ministries that provide care in the community.
5. Includes in worship opportunities for prayer and other liturgical elements that uphold social righteousness.
6. Educates the congregation on social ethics by connecting Scripture to real-world issues confronting our communities, state, nation, and world.
7. Educates the congregation about the history of religious protest and historic issues that impact today's events (e.g. Doctrine of Discovery, Abolitionists, Great Reforms of the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Women's Suffrage, Civil Rights, etc.).
8. Educates the congregation on sociological, economic, and political complexities that impact minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
9. Advocates for just policies and laws, especially for minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
10. Educates the congregation on the values and practices of good stewardship, living responsibly in the world, and the importance of disavowing consumerism in favor of generosity.

Do we know our neighbors? Do we have actual relationships with the lowly, with strangers, with the marginalized—not just ministries to them, but actual relationships? Do we see Christ beyond our church walls, and, when we do, do we dwell there as well? The opposite of missional action is inward and institutional: closed communities of exclusion, seeking assimilation rather than encounter and engagement, safe and secure, dying.

Please, for the love of Jesus, don't be that kind of church.



THE BANNER REPRESENTS AMOS 5:24, "BUT LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE AN EVER-FLOWING STREAM."

We will live in ways that reflect compassion,  
seek justice and work for God's Shalom.



## The Sixth Great End of the Church: the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world

The Scottish reformer John Knox remarked about Calvin's Geneva that "it was the most heavenly city." Knox' words were neither commentary on the cleanliness nor the precision of the Swiss but on the quantity of nationalities represented among the city's population. While Luther started the Reformation, Calvin conveyed it to the nations, which is why there are over 150 Reformed denominations throughout the world.

The sixth great end of the church is the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world and arguably is the most all-encompassing, mysterious, and difficult to do of the six Great Ends. All of the first five great ends are encompassed within this sixth end, and it points toward a reality beyond what the church currently is, currently does, currently looks like, currently expresses. The sixth great end is as much inspirational and aspirational as it is real and actual, for it asks us to imagine what the kingdom of heaven will look like when the New Jerusalem descends from God to earth (Revelation 21:2). Here are two, brief vignettes that capture the spirit of the sixth Great End.

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The pastor spent two of the last three weeks in bed; illness zapped her strength and vitality. In the "You know you're sick when" department, she knew she was sick when, after taking a long nap, she was able to get out of bed but, prone on the couch, found watching Netflix too difficult to watch because they required too much concentration! She went back to bed.

The sixth Great End shows a church its congregational health. Healthy congregations are healthy communities, and a healthy community is one that can embrace diversity of race, culture, and perspective. Healthy communities engage in difficult discussions with respect rather than rancor. Healthy *Christian* communities imagine what it will be like in heaven and then seek to relate to one another "on earth as it is in heaven." How is your congregation's health?

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A pastor once served a congregation in a small, rural community that was undergoing a transformational shift: the completion of a major highway from a top-five metropolis had made this region of rustic charm and beauty accessible to commuters and retirees. The town, and all of its churches, were growing, changing, and dealing with the rupture of new wine in old wineskins.

The dynamic within the community's congregations was common to all: "Insider" versus "Outsider," "Town Folk" versus "Country Folk." Not surprisingly, the established church members sought to hold on to their power and position. Within that Presbyterian church, over a ten-year period, 86% of ruling elders came from one of four families. Life-long Presbyterians were being stifled in their desire to work for Jesus; vital ministries were blocked, not on merit, but because of the birthplace of those proposing an idea. It was the pastor's wife who helped him put words to his frustration when she commented over dinner, "It's as if they have forgotten it's about ministry, not dynasty."

Ministry, not dynasty. Her words unlocked for that pastor the necessary verve, patience, and perseverance to break through the stalling tactics of those seeking to prevent others from using spiritual gifts to serve the church, the community, and our Lord. Yet "ministry, not dynasty," ironically, also gave him compassion for the country folks and helped him understand their pain at the changes happening all around them, the loss of their former community. It was during this season that he learned the gift of acceptance of those who were not yet able to embrace the changes toward which God was calling the congregation.

Here are some ways to imagine what it looks like to live toward the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world: The individual who exhibits the kingdom of heaven to the world,

1. Practices hospitality and welcome toward strangers.

2. Cultivates friendships with all people regardless of social, economic, racial, national, or sexual status/orientation.
3. Practices equality and protects the human dignity of all people.
4. Lives in ways that affirm faith, hope, and love and that reject fear, despair, and judgment.
5. Lives with humility before God and others, demonstrating respect toward all people.
6. Cultivates the practice of civility and respect with intentionality, especially toward those with whom they disagree.
7. Practices active listening and the use of “I-language” as a means of creating connection through communication.
8. Refrains from seeking control over others through “having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5–11).
9. Demonstrates care toward every part of God’s creation.
10. Lives the first five Great Ends fully, wholly, completely, and utterly (Greek: *telios*)!

The congregation who exhibits the kingdom of heaven,

1. Trains its members in the ministry of welcome and hospitality.
2. Has an official, written policy of openness and inclusivity that is communicated to members.
3. Discusses ways its congregational customs either create welcome or convey unwelcome, making changes as needed.
4. Contextualizes their worship, fellowship, and educational ministries for the people living in their neighborhood.

5. Serves the community more than it serves itself, toward the motto: Be a helper, not an obstacle; Be a giver, not a taker; Be a friend, not an adversary.
6. Promotes and trains congregants in healthy communication best practices (e.g. active listening, I-language, etc.).
7. Promotes and trains congregants in conflict reconciliation best practices (e.g. empathy building, interest-based negotiation, etc.).
8. Discusses issues of the day, regardless of how sensitive the topic, with courage and kindness because members possess a spirit of love, grace, and humility toward one another.
9. Has an intentional focus on both friend and stranger, both neighbor and the world, both the Kingdom now and the Kingdom to come.
10. Participates together as a congregation in ministries of creation care.

The great challenge to the full expression of our exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world will likely be extending our care beyond the inner circle of those who look, think, and act like us. We are called to embrace larger and wider circles; to include those who appear as stranger, as other, as “the least of these,” but who are surely also those for whom Christ died. In a nation whose demographics are evolving by the hour, whose projection is that soon the Anglo population will be a plurality, yet not a majority, the need to offer welcome and hospitality for all, the need to care for those who differ from us, will be a necessity.

It is already a Gospel imperative.



THE DOVE IS IN FLIGHT OVER THE GLOBE, CARRYING AN OLIVE BRANCH, ECHOING THE NOAH STORY. THIS REPRESENTS THE EIGHTH DAY OF CREATION, GOD’S GRACE COMING INTO THE WORLD, THE REIGN OF GOD PROCLAIMED BY JESUS CHRIST. THE LIGHT RISING BEHIND THE EARTH REPRESENTS THE DAWNING OF GOD’S KINGDOM.

**We will live in ways that reflect God’s heart and God’s eternity—  
on earth as it is in heaven.**



**Bible Studies on the Six Great Ends of the Church:**  
engaging scripture as a mirror for our life together



## Thrive Bible Studies – The First Great End: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind

### *Opening Prayer*

O Lord of the Good News, make us instruments of your grace,  
where there is judgment, let us sow clemency;  
where there is hypocrisy, let us show integrity;  
where there is clamor, let us speak the truth gently and in love;  
where others are broken, let us sow blessing;  
where others are crushed in spirit, let us sow conviction of soul;  
where others scorn, let us speak of the sacred with humility and hope.  
O Divine Sower, let us not so much seek to be heard as to hear,  
to argue against as to be with,  
to avoid darkness as to shine light.  
For it is in sharing with others that we learn of our own need,  
it is in sharing good news that we learn to become it,  
it is in offering grace that we finally and fully learn how to embrace eternal life.

—A Prayer of St. Andrew, patron saint of evangelism<sup>7</sup>

### *Scripture Reading*

**John 4:1-41; John 1:35-50; Acts 8:26–39**

### *Commentary*

- (1) The Samaritan woman “represents the ultimate outsider, whom Jesus transforms into an informed insider.’...” This happens because Jesus is willing to cross “three barriers—socioethnic, gender, and moral.... Jesus...did not seek out members of the religious elite; even open-minded Nicodemus had to come to Jesus; but Jesus went to great lengths and took serious risks to reach the Samaritan woman....’ [Jesus opens the conversation with his request for water; as always...the initiative lies with Jesus....’ Our Samaritan woman may be appropriately called the *prima apostola*.”<sup>8</sup>
- (2) The best evangelism is one friend sharing with another about a personal encounter with Jesus. This passage from the Gospel of John is a ladder of such sharing: John the Baptizer told Andrew (and another, unnamed disciple), Andrew told Simon Peter, Andrew or Peter presumably told Philip and so prepared him for Jesus’ command to “follow me,” and then, finally, Philip told Nathanael about Jesus. On this ladder of sharing, we see that each one speaks of Jesus in a different way, to help the hearer listen and accept the good news. John spoke to his own disciples about Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Andrew spoke quite simply when he told his brother Peter that Jesus was “the Messiah.” Philip, speaking to Nathanael, highlighted the connection between the Law and the Prophets and Jesus: “the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote.” Bruner says of this kind of evangelism: “We most naturally want to approach people at their point of greatest interest.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Brad Munroe, “O Lord of the Good News,” 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 253–254, 277.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

- (3) “Jesus, the one who hated righteousness, loved making wine for parties, always stood up for the underdog, and gave the stuck-up and self-righteous hell[.] How do we learn to talk about that real Jesus?”<sup>10</sup> That’s the Jesus I want to follow!
- (4) “The simple program of Christ for winning the whole world is to make each person he touches magnetic enough with love to draw others.”<sup>11</sup>
- (5) “Preach the Gospel always; if necessary, use words.” –St. Francis of Assisi

### *Questions to Ponder and Discuss*

- (1) Jesus was prompted by the Spirit to go through Samaria. When have *you* witnessed or experienced the power of obedience to Spirit drawing someone toward living water?
- (2) Jesus chose to cross the socioethnic, gender, and moral barriers before him. When have *you* witnessed or experienced courageous choices unlock doors for the Gospel?
- (3) Notice the progression in the way Jesus speaks with the woman: requests, banter, (gentle) challenge, and direct statements. What does Jesus’ conversational style tell us about evangelism as a relational and invitational process?
- (4) The word “evangelism” comes from the Greek word *euangelio*, which means “good news.” What is the good news in your life from living as a Jesus follower? Write down five bits of “news” you believe are good and are reasons you find joy, purpose, and meaning in following Jesus.
- (5) The spiritual gift of the evangelist is given to some but not all; however, every Christian is called to evangelize. The progression of evangelism (1) begins with being salt and light in our words and deeds, (2) continues as we learn the grace of inviting someone to join us at activities that will lead to their encounter with the Jesus Story, (3) deepens as we begin to share with others our personal story as it connects us to God—both daily events and the re-telling of grand moments of spiritual encounter, and (4) culminates in our ability to tell how Scripture proclaims the beautiful narrative of God at work in calling people into loving relationship through Jesus Christ. We do not need to be at the fourth stage in order to learn, grow, and live more faithfully the first three stages. Where are you now? Where are you going? How might your church train people to become more comfortable in practicing relational and invitational evangelism?



### *Application*

- (1) Five Golden Rings of Evangelism
  - Be a *spiritual* friend
  - Be ok with not knowing all the answers

<sup>10</sup> Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism*, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Charles Laubach, *Man of Prayer: Selected Writings of a World Missionary* (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), 217.

- Speak with humility and grace
- Pray
- Invite

(2) Which of the above rings sparks a “Spirit nudge” within you?

(3) To which of the above rings are you willing to commit this week as a spiritual practice?

### *Closing Prayer*

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Thy fragrance everywhere I go.  
 Flood my soul with Thy spirit and love.  
 Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly  
 that all my life may only be a radiance of Thine.  
 Shine through me and be so in me  
 that every soul I come in contact with may feel Thy presence in my soul.  
 Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.  
 Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine,  
 so to shine as to be a light to others. Amen.

—Daily prayer of Mother Teresa<sup>12</sup>

### *Additional Resources*

- <http://www.uscongregations.org/resources-for-congregations/> (scroll down to the section on Evangelism and Church Growth).

### *Videos*

- **Adam Hamilton: Christians and People of Other Religions:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMu8HRl9lVY>
- **Foundations of Presbyterian Discipleship 1: A People of Grace:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcr2OAcZqNo>
- **Skit Guys—Bad Ways to Witness:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7Ek9jvDge4>  
**Skit Guys—Awkward Invites: Goulash:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXSihlfcQUA>

### *Books*

- Office of Evangelism, *Engage: A Curriculum on Congregational Evangelism*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 2013. Available from [pcusastore.com/curriculum](http://pcusastore.com/curriculum).
- Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008.

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<sup>12</sup> ThoughtCo., “The Daily Prayer of Mother Teresa,” August 28, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/daily-prayer-of-mother-teresa-542274>.



## Thrive Bible Studies - The Second Great End: the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the people of God

### *Opening Prayer*

Give us, O Lord, steadfast hearts which no unworthy affection may drag downward;  
give us unconquered hearts which no tribulation can wear out;  
give us upright hearts which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside;  
and then bestow on us, O Lord our God, such passion of purpose to serve your will  
that all people will know that we have been with Jesus.

—A Prayer of Thomas Aquinas<sup>13</sup>

### *Scripture Reading*

**John 13:1-17; John 21:1–17; Galatians 6:1–10; Philippians 2:5-11; Acts 2:42–47**

### *Commentary*

- (1) John tells us that Jesus, having loved his own that were in the world, now showed them the full extent of his love. Let's pause for just a moment to wonder about that phrase: "the full extent of his love." What is the full extent of *Jesus'* love? It has never, ever, not even a little bit, occurred to Peter that what Severian of Gabala, a fourth-century Syrian bishop wrote about Jesus might be true: "He who wraps the heavens in clouds wrapped round himself a towel. He who pours the water into the rivers and pools tipped...water into a basin. And he before whom every knee bends in heaven and on earth and under the earth knelt to wash the feet of his disciples."<sup>14</sup>
- (2) "Most foot washing in the ancient world was a menial task. It involved washing off not just dust and mud but also the remains of human excrement (which was tipped out of houses into the streets) and animal waste (which was left on country roads and town streets). The task of doing this as an act of hospitality to honor guests was therefore normally assigned to slaves or servants of low status, particularly females, so much so that foot washing was virtually synonymous with slavery.... What makes the Fourth Gospel's account so extraordinary is that there is no parallel in extant ancient literature for a person of superior status voluntarily washing the feet of someone of inferior status. Jesus' act therefore represents an assault on the usual notions of social hierarchy, a subversion of the normal categories of honor and shame.... It is not just an honored teacher who is performing a shameful act but a divine figure with sovereignty over the cosmos who has taken on the role of a slave."<sup>15</sup>
- (3) Virtually all Bible commentators see a Eucharistic allusion in John 21:13: "Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them." Raymond Brown comments that "in primitive [Christian] iconography, meals of bread and fish (rather than of bread and wine) were the standard pictorial symbols of the Eucharist."<sup>16</sup> There is, therefore, a powerful reminder here of the importance not only of Christian community but of Christian communion. We are designed to be with and for

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<sup>13</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, 829. Adapted.

<sup>14</sup> Bruner, *Gospel of John*, 748.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: Continuum, 2005), 367.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 1221.

one another, and our togetherness as Christian community must be centered in Christ; indeed, only Christ-centered community brings healing and the forgiveness of sins. This is a truth Peter was about to learn most profoundly.

- (4) Commentators do not see any significance between lambs and sheep, nor between directives to feed and take care; these phrases are synonymous with one another. What is significant is the cumulative weight of the three-fold commissioning: care, concern, and compassion; grace, gentleness, and generosity are to be the hallmarks of Peter's leadership and, by extension, all Christian leadership. The most important thing Jesus wanted Peter to know was that those he was entrusting to Peter's care belonged to Jesus; they were, said Jesus, "my lambs" and "my sheep."<sup>17</sup>
- (5) In Galatians 6:2, what translation one reads is significant. The NIV translates 6:2 as "carry each other's burdens," while the NRSV translates 6:2 as "bear each other's burdens." The difference may seem slight, but therapists and clinical social workers see a difference. The rule of thumb among practitioners of the helping professions is to "bear each other's burdens but carry your own load." This means the caregiver's job is to support, encourage, and guide, but not to take over another person's problem. To carry another's burdens (load) is to prevent them from experiencing the freedom and joy of growing stronger, healing, and living into their capacity to handle difficult things.
- (6) When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing...not healing, not curing...that is a friend who cares."<sup>18</sup>
- (7) When Philippians 2:7 says Jesus "made himself nothing" (NIV) or "emptied himself" (NRSV), the Greek word is translated *kenosis*, which denotes the manner in which Jesus, with forethought and intention, let go of both his divine power and divine prerogative to grasp the mantle of humanity and the life of servanthood. Scholars marvel at the notion of a "self-emptying God." Jürgen Moltmann declared, "When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God,' the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than Jesus is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity."<sup>19</sup>
- (8) "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."—Martin Luther<sup>20</sup>



### *Questions to Ponder and Discuss*

- (1) When have you received the blessing of another's care? When has someone borne your burdens while simultaneously allowing you to carry your own load? Recall as many specifics as possible, regarding what was said and the manner in which the words were spoken. If there was a prayer offered, can you remember it? What made the experience a moment of grace or growth?

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1228.

<sup>18</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Brainy Quote*, [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henri\\_nouwen\\_131151](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henri_nouwen_131151).

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 295.

<sup>20</sup> *Martin Luther: Three Treatises*, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 277.

- (2) When have you experienced someone love *you* enough to “wash your feet”—either literally or figuratively? Describe the experience and how it affected you. When have you demonstrated Jesus’ love by “washing the feet” of another?
- (3) It is worth noticing that Jesus (a) washed Judas’ feet, too, and (b) broke and shared bread with Judas, a cultural symbol of friendship and brotherhood, immediately preceding Judas’ betrayal. What is startling or remarkable about these details? When have *you* experienced reconciliation and peace with one who has betrayed you?
- (4) How comfortable are you with silence when listening to another person’s pain? As you listen to another, what would help you grow more comfortable with *not* having answers, *not* being able to “do something,” and *not* feeling the need to fill the void of silence with words, chatter, and verbiage?
- (5) What are ways that your entire church feeds Jesus’ lambs and takes care of Jesus’ sheep? How is this an act of the entire congregation and not just the pastor or designated leaders?

*Application*

(1) Practice praying for another:

- *Beginner version* – Person A shares about a need they have, a specific prayer request, and person B only listens, without asking any questions. When person A is finished, person B prays for person A.
- *Intermediate version* – Person A shares a story from the last 24 hours without highlighting a specific prayer request, and person B only listens, without asking any questions. When person A is finished, person B prays for person A based on the concerns and longings they heard in the story.
- *Advanced version* – Person A tells about what has been happening in their life recently. Person B listens, offers concern, asks questions only to get clarity and understand, but *not* to offer guidance, *not* to make suggestions, and *not* to mention how the story affects them or is similar to an experience that occurred to them. When person A is satisfied that they have told all of the story they want to tell, person B will pray for person A based on the hopes and heartache, the joy and sorrow, the cares and concerns they heard.

Repeat the appropriate prayer practice(s) above with other people whom you trust and who trust you.

(2) Comparison between servanthood and servitude:

Servanthood

Calling  
 Liberty  
 Energizing  
 Grace  
 Own Desire  
 Being Good  
 Healing

Servitude

Obligation  
 Bondage  
 Fatiguing  
 Guilt  
 Other’s Expectation  
 Looking Good  
 Hindering

In the columns above, put a check next to each word that describes you. Circle the words that describe your congregation. Choose a word from the Servanthood list to which you will commit this week as a spiritual practice—first in prayer, then in action.

(3) Write a brief, specific prayer for another person. Include the following:

- address the person and character of God,
- offer praise and thanksgiving to God,
- lift to God a request for help,
- express confidence in God's care, compassion, and desire to draw others to Christ Jesus.

### *Closing Prayer*

Almighty God, we pray for your blessings on the church in this place:  
here may the faithful find salvation and the careless be awakened,  
here may the doubting find faith and the anxious be encouraged,  
here may the tempted find help and the sorrowful comfort,  
here may the weary find rest and the strong be renewed,  
here may the aged find consolation and the young be inspired,  
here may we all encounter Jesus. Amen.<sup>21</sup>

### *Additional Resources*

- [www.stephenministries.org](http://www.stephenministries.org)

### *Videos*

- **Stephen Ministry Care Receivers Share Their Stories:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OoTjIa-D-c>
- **Simon Sinek: Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe,** : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmyZMtPVodo>
- **Rod Beckstrom—The Starfish and the Spider (Decentralized Networks):**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wc1ZFTnSSVM>
- **Ordered Ministry 2—Being Leaders:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VICZ4qownvI>

### *Books*

- Kenneth C. Haugk, *Christian Caregiving: A Way of Life*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
- Kenneth C. Haugk, *The Quest for Quality Caring: Improve Your Ability to Relate to Others*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990.
- Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Doubleday, 1979.
- Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Heart*. New York: Random House, 2018.

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<sup>21</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, 19. Adapted.



## Thrive Bible Studies - The Third Great End:

### the maintenance of divine worship

#### *Opening Prayer*

Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient, O Beauty so new. Too late have I loved you!  
You were within me but I was outside myself, and there I sought you!  
In my weakness I ran after the beauty of the things you have made.  
You were with me, and I was not with you.  
The things you have made kept me from you—  
the things which would have no being unless they existed in you!  
You have called, you have cried, and you have pierced my deafness.  
You have radiated forth, you have shined out brightly, and you have dispelled my blindness.  
You have sent forth your fragrance, and I have breathed it in, and I long for you.  
I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst for you.  
You have touched me, and I ardently desire your peace.

—Prayer of St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 27, 38<sup>22</sup>

#### *Scripture Reading*

**Isaiah 6:1–8; Psalm 46:10; Psalm 95:1–7; Psalm 100; Psalm 150**

#### *Commentary*

- (1) If our congregations are going to discern the call of God upon us, we will of necessity need to embrace the Reformed faith's gift of "both/and" worship—worship that is *both* rooted in history *and* expressive of contemporary meaning, *both* embracing a communal expression of faith *and* inviting personal encounters with the Living God, *both* respecting the narrative form of worship as the re-telling of God's salvation *and* inviting opportunities for each and for all to connect their story to God's Story. Beyond the "worship wars" with arguments about musical styles and prayer forms, Spirit-inspired worship seeks to be guided by the whisper of the still, small voice as spoken into and through faith communities, which is to say, "How is your congregation listening to where God is leading you in worship?"
- (2) In Christian worship, the focus is on God. That is experienced as a coming onto holy ground, an encounter with God, leading to an experience of wonder. Christian worship presumes an active participation in the living relationship of the Triune God, in which all people feel welcome to come as they are, yet also expect to go forth as those touched and transformed for God's purposes. Christian worship challenges, teaches, transforms, encounters, convicts, and sends people into the world to be the blessing of Christ Jesus in human form. Such worship moves beyond self-gratification or consumeristic entertainment, yet also breaks through the calcification of rituals divorced of meaning. Such worship is *both* hard work *and* high calling, *both* personal offering *and* holy promise that God will be upon us, within us, between us, and through us.
- (3) Henri Nouwen on solitude: "As soon as we are alone...an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore,

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<sup>22</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions: Book X, Chapters 27, 38*. Translated by Henry Chadwick, 1991. Accessed online at <http://www.deeper-devotion.net/augustine-confessions.html>.

does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use the outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises.... This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important.”<sup>23</sup>

- (4) Blended worship has been trivialized to mean “a compromise in the worship wars” in which both contemporary and traditional music are used. In its original intent, however, blended worship was described as the organic convergence<sup>24</sup> of the four classical worship traditions: high liturgical (e.g. Catholic), mainline (e.g. Presbyterian), praise and worship (e.g. Vineyard), and creative (e.g. Orthodox and minority streams within the other three traditions). Robert Webber proposed that churches blend the strengths of each of these traditions: the poetic rhythms of the liturgical tradition, the intellectual clarity of the mainline tradition, the emotional immediacy of the praise and worship tradition, and the artistic opening of the creative tradition. By blending the different traditions into a coherent whole, churches could create new rhythms for worship that would be both ancient and modern, receiving the spiritual gifts of multiple or even all traditions.

### *Questions to Ponder and Discuss*



(1) Isaiah 6 is the template for the historic catholic (universal) four-fold rhythm of Christian worship: (a) coming into the presence of God with praise, (b) responding with confession and being forgiven of our sin, (c) hearing the voice of the Lord, (d) responding to God’s Word by being sent into the world to do God’s work. This four-fold rhythm of Christian worship is a rehearsal of the larger, meta-narrative of Scripture: God acts in the world to redeem and such action demands a response of awe, lament, faith, and obedience in the world, by God’s people, to God’s creation. How does your congregation’s worship convey the rhythm of historic Christian worship?

(2) Isaiah 6 invites readers to imagine the throne room of God, to imagine the experience of what Rudolph Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*, that sense of awe and wonder that comes from being in the direct presence of God. Worship that does not lead us to an experience of the Almighty misses the mark. What are the rituals and rhythms of your congregation’s worship life—both in ordinary time and on “high holy” occasions—that lead you to experience God as majesty and mystery, and also as immediate and intimate?

(3) Psalm 46:10 links solitude with deeper faith: “Be still” and “know that I am God” are inseparable. Moreover, the knowledge of the Lord, in the psalm, is not an intellectual cognition but a lived experience. How do your congregation’s worship rhythms encourage you to be still? How does worship help you know the Lord is God?

<sup>23</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New and Other Classics* (London: HarperCollins, 1982), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995). See also Brad Munroe, *Blended Worship in PCUSA Congregations* (unpublished dissertation, San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1995).

### *Application*

(1) Brief descriptions of Sabbath:

- Rocking Chair Discipleship—“Sometimes I jus’ sets and thinks an’ sometimes I jus’ sets.”
- Anybody can observe the Sabbath; making it holy takes the rest of the week.
- “Last in creation, first in intention.”<sup>25</sup>

(2) Choose one of the above Sabbath descriptions upon which to meditate, live, and experience this week as a spiritual intention.

### *Closing Prayer*

O Gracious and Holy God,  
give us diligence to seek you,  
wisdom to perceive you,  
and patience to wait for you.  
Grant us, O God,  
minds to meditate on you,  
eyes to behold you,  
ears to listen for your Word,  
hearts to love you,  
and lives to proclaim you—in word and in deed—  
through the power of the Spirit and to the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord.

—A Prayer Attributed to Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–547)<sup>26</sup>

### *Additional Resources*

- [www.worshipdesignstudio.com](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com) (Marcia McFee)

### *Videos*

- **Come to the Table: A Winter and Warm Videos:** <http://vpc.church/ministries/music/#videos>
- **Ordered Ministry 10—The Dynamics of Worship:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYg-3cBOd5E>
- **Ordered Ministry 12—The Sacraments in Worship:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HV9fd5RK-4w>

### *Books*

- Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, *Book of Common Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- Ruth C. Duck, *Flames of the Spirit: Resources for Worship*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009.
- Howard Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Solomo Alkabez, *Lechab Dodi*, as quoted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, 29. Adapted.



## Thrive Bible Studies - The Fourth Great End:

### The preservation of the truth

(discipleship as the living experience of Jesus, the Truth)

#### *Opening Prayer*

God, grant me the Serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And Wisdom to know the difference...  
Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right  
if I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.

—A Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>27</sup>

#### *Scripture Reading*

**Matthew 28:16–20; Romans 12:1–2; Deuteronomy 6:4–9**

#### *Commentary*

- (1) Between “make disciples” and “teach them to observe all I have taught” is a curious step: baptize. Why baptism? Why is baptism the intermediate link between helping another become a disciplined follower of Jesus through observance of Jesus’ teachings? It is because baptism is the sacrament of identity—in baptism, we learn our true name: Beloved of God. Jesus’ commission, then, is for us to make folks able to know, able to practice, able to live into and become their truest, God-intended selves, fully and eternally loved. This is the Great Commission.
- (2) In Romans 12, Paul contrasts conformity with transformation. Disciples without spiritual intention find themselves too often being poured into the mold *de jour*, created by culture. It requires spiritual intention for disciples to place themselves in the position of having their minds renewed—not just knowledge but wisdom, not just facts to recite but truth to live, not just occasionally but daily—and so allow God to perform the work of transformation. The Greek word Paul uses is *metamorphusthe*, from which we get our English word metamorphosis, the change within and without, from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly.
- (3) Dr. Mike Johnson of Ascending Leaders describes four stages of discipleship in the Gospels:<sup>28</sup>
  1. Come and see (John 1:38-39) – introduced to Jesus, observing and considering faith

<sup>27</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Serenity Prayer,” Wikipedia.

<sup>28</sup> Mike Johnson, *Disciple Forward I*, Ascending Leaders, ascendingleaders.org, conference in Tucson, Arizona, October 14, 2017.

2. Come and follow (Matthew 4:19) – listening to Jesus, accepting friendship, beginning obedience
3. Come and be with me (Mark 3:14) – asking questions, actively seeking, attempting deeper obedience
4. Abide/remain in me (John 15:4) – intimacy with Jesus, experience of enduring presence, living as an ambassador

- (4) “Piety in our church tradition is focused upon a kind of safe morality that deals only with private conduct, especially sexuality, which in turn nurtures an excessive scrupulosity where personal conduct become the be-all and end-all of morality. What is needed is an ethic that unlocks the emergence of genuine human life, a morality that has less to do with purity issues and more to do with energy, courage and freedom.”<sup>29</sup>
- (5) “Although spiritual consumerism seems like a great deal, at the end of the day it leads to self-absorption, self-centeredness, self-futility and, ultimately, death at the core of our being... If spirituality doesn’t get us beyond self-centeredness and self-absorption into a bigger life and a larger perspective, I think it’s a bad spirituality.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Questions to Ponder and Discuss*

- (1) Notice the *verbs* (action words) in the Great Commission. What do these verbs suggest to you about what it means to be a disciplined follower of Jesus?
- (2) Jesus bookends the words of the commission with a claim (28:18) and a promise (28:20b). How do Jesus’ claim and promise impact how you read the words of the commission?
- (3) What are common, ordinary, easy-to-fall-into molds our culture has waiting for those who live without spiritual intention?
- (4) In your experience, when is God’s transformation of a Christ-follower noticed? What are the “symptoms” that someone is being transformed?

### *Application*

- (1) **L.I.G.H.T.**<sup>31</sup>

**L**isten to the Holy Spirit: follow Spirit promptings; practice one hour of silence per week.

**I**nvoke others to share a meal: spend time; don’t rush; give the gift of time.

**G**ive a blessing: a kind word, a civil gesture, the gift of another’s humanity.

**H**ear from the Gospels: learn to live the Way of Jesus; read the same Scripture verse every morning for a week (narrow reading) and several chapters of Scripture every night (wide reading).

**T**ake inventory of the day: where did I see God and respond? Where did I miss God? (Prayer of Examen)

- (2) Which element of the L.I.G.H.T. acronym above makes your heart sing?



<sup>29</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, describing Therapeutic Moralistic Deism, [www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mtd-not-just-a-problem-with-youth-ministry/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mtd-not-just-a-problem-with-youth-ministry/), accessed January 31, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 117, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Brad Brisco and Lance Ford, *Missional Essentials: A Guide for Experiencing Gods Mission in Your Life*. (The House Studio: Kansas City, MO), 2012, pp. 89-90.

- (3) Which element of L.I.G.H.T. sounds like too great a challenge?
- (4) To which element of L.I.G.H.T. will you commit this week as a spiritual practice?

### *Closing Prayer*

May the strength of God pilot us,  
may the power of God preserve us,  
may the wisdom of God instruct us,  
may the hand of God protect us,  
may the way of God direct us,  
may the shield of God defend us,  
may the host of God guard us.  
May Christ be with us,  
Christ before us,  
Christ in us,  
Christ over us.  
May your salvation, O Lord,  
be always ours this day and forevermore. Amen.

—A Prayer of St. Patrick of Ireland<sup>32</sup>

### *Additional Resources*

- [www.ascendingleaders.org](http://www.ascendingleaders.org)

### *Videos*

- **Disciples in the New Testament: Disciple-Growing Part 1:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zmc3RRAqro8&t=26s>
- **Defining “Disciple” and “Discipleship”: Part 2 in Disciple-Growing:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDX13KhvCRY>
- **The Continuum in Churches Today: Part 3 of Disciple-Growing:**  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDcH\\_LfTXdM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDcH_LfTXdM)
- **Group Sizes and the Continuum: Part 4 of Disciple-Growing:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVhrOxIhzqE>
- **Foundations of Presbyterian Discipleship 4: Update Your Faith System:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OAk17hxRz8>

### *Books*

- Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*. Westmont, IL: IVP Connect, 2019.
- Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.
- Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.

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<sup>32</sup> “St. Patrick’s Prayer,” traditional. Adapted.



## Thrive Bible Studies - The Fifth Great End:

### the promotion of social righteousness

#### *Opening Prayer*

Lord make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
And where there is sadness, joy  
O divine master grant that I may  
not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
to be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—The Prayer of St. Francis

#### *Scripture Reading*

**Luke 4:18–21; Matthew 25:31–46; Jeremiah 29:4–7**

#### *Commentary*

(1) Evolution of the word “missional”:

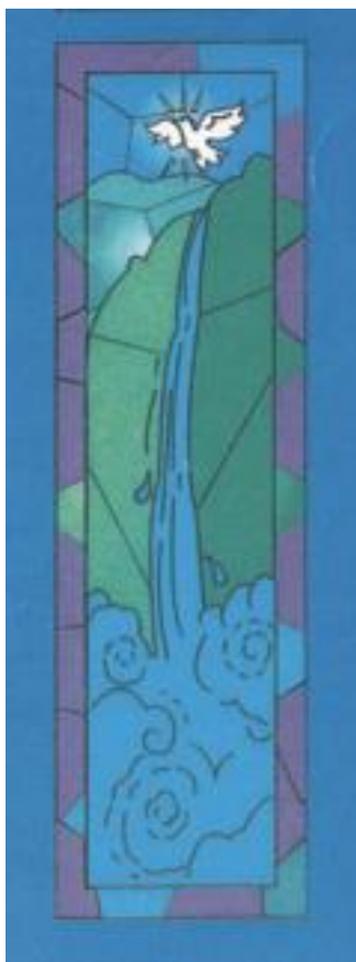
- *Apostoleo* = Greek (from which we get the word “apostles”)
- *Missio* = Latin (from which we get the word “mission”)
- *Sending* = English (c.f. Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 6:8; Luke 4:18; John 3:16; John 20:21)

(2) *Outwardly Focused*: There is an axiom that states that thriving churches are Inwardly Strong, Outwardly Focused. This axiom, while true, is problematic because too often Inwardly Strong overpowers Outwardly Focused. The reasons why an inward stance is elevated over an outward focus is easy to imagine: The people who pay the bills comprise the inward half of the axiom. The theology of Butts and Bucks exclusively favors the inward glance; that such exclusivity ultimately kills the church does not seem to matter. This dilemma is why missional churches prioritize the Outwardly Focused half of the axiom. Inward things will always get attention; therefore, outward things must take priority. Missional ministry understands this; missional churches live accordingly.

(3) *Asking Beyond the Room*: Former Texas Governor Ann Richards is supposed to have said, “When you miss a meeting, you’re not there.” Too often, churches accept that those who are not present at our gatherings do not have a voice in what we do and how we do it. This leads to a bevy of problems: insider-outside language, irrelevance, and a complete disconnect from the community. The classic example of this is a church mission study that does not extend beyond its walls to ask the simple question, “How can we be of service?” Missional churches, however, intentionally and actively

seek out those beyond their faith family in order to hear *their* views, *their* desires and to encounter *their* lives. Missional ministry understands this; missional churches live accordingly.

- (4) *Questioning Culture*: While it is difficult to question our own customs in a church, to see as if from the outside while we live on the inside, much more difficult is it to question our own culture. Yet churches that seek to be “in the world but not of the world” question our culture of consumerism and consumption, our ideals of individualism and self that reject community and sharing. Missional churches are relentless in this pursuit because they understand that “those for whom Christ died” are immersed in this culture. Unless we understand the patient, we cannot enter into conversation about the disease. Similarly, unless we understand the false deities presumed by our society, we cannot enter into dialogue about the kind of Spirit that makes us whole. Missional ministry understands this; missional churches live accordingly.



#### *Questions to Ponder and Discuss*

- (1) Scholars call Luke 4:18–21 Jesus’ Programmatic Speech, which is a scholarly way of saying Jesus articulates his agenda or personal mission statement in these verses. Would you describe Jesus’ personal mission statement more in terms of compassion actions or advocacy for justice? Explain your answer, using the text.
- (2) How does Matthew 25 call for followers of Jesus to show compassion to others? In what ways does Matthew 25 move beyond compassion to call for a deep, abiding sharing of our humanity with others? In what ways does Jesus identify with the least of these?
- (3) An old proverb says, “Give a person a fish, you feed them for a day. Teach a person to fish, you feed them for a lifetime.” This proverb has been extended to add, “It’s also necessary to ask why the person has not already learned to fish—is there something wrong with the educational system? Are the nearby rivers and lakes environmentally satisfactory? Does the person have fair and adequate access to a fishing pole?” These two proverbs, old and new, display a continuum from compassionate actions to advocacy for justice. Where along the compassion/advocacy continuum do Luke 4 and Matthew 25 call for you to stand?
- (4) “Missional” ministry (Go and Show the Gospel) is often contrasted with “attractational” ministry (“Y’all Come to the House of the Lord!”). In reality, most churches have a bit of both missional and attractational ministry. What about your congregation? Where is your congregation currently living the Gospel outside the walls of your church, building a better community, and connecting with others in the name of Jesus?

#### *Application*

##### (1) Four Marks of Missional Living

- Beyond the church walls: “Go and Show” rather than “Y’all Come!”
- Service-oriented: Building a community of justice and joy through compassion and service.
- Creates community: Seeking mutuality, knowing and being known, working “with” and not “for.”
- Builds bridge to the church: Including some kind of invitational connection back to the Christian community.

- (2) Which of the above marks of missional living does your *church*, as a unified body of Christ, do best? With which mark does your *church* most struggle?
- (3) Name one thing you can do this week that engages you in missional living to which you will commit as a spiritual practice.

### *Closing Prayer*

Come, Holy Spirit.  
Come as Holy Fire to burn within us.  
Come as Holy Wind to cleanse us within.  
Come as Holy Light to lead us from darkness.  
Come as Holy Truth to lead toward wisdom.  
Come as Holy Power to enable us in our weakness.  
Come as Holy Life to dwell within us.  
Convict us! Convert us! Consecrate us!  
And then, O Holy Spirit, unleash us upon a world  
in need of love,  
in need of compassion,  
in need of justice.  
Come, Holy Spirit, and set us free from service to ourselves  
that we may be your servants in the world. Amen.<sup>33</sup>

### *Additional Resources*

- [www.missionalchurch.org](http://www.missionalchurch.org) (Center for Parish Development)

### *Videos*

- **The Missional Church...Simple:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arxfLK\\_sd68](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arxfLK_sd68)
- **Start with Why—How Great Leaders Inspire Action:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZojKF\\_VuA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZojKF_VuA)
- **Foundations of Presbyterian Discipleship 5: Blessed to Be a Blessing:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S14oyv97gwY>
- **“Mama Used to Say”—Love An Other:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBohnt8WO3Q&list=PLJRSb3sWofj3TNTcy-mEnwnUsxyUs-Tdj&index=4>

### *Books*

- Anthony B. Robinson, *Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008.
- Allan Roxburgh and Frank Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.

Allan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West*. New York: Church Publishing, 2018.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 22. Adapted.



## Thrive Bible Studies – The Sixth Great End: the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world

### *Opening Prayer*

God beyond all that is good,  
Lord beyond all that is fair,  
in you is calmness, peace, and concord.  
Heal all that divides us from one another and bring us back to a unity of love,  
that we may more fully bear the image and likeness of your divine love.  
Through the embrace of love and the bonds of godly affection make us one in the Spirit,  
By your peace that makes all things peaceful,  
And by your mercies which are new every morning.  
We ask all this through the grace, mercy and peace of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Dionysius of Alexandria<sup>34</sup>

### *Scripture Reading*

**Matthew 18:15–22; 1 Corinthians 13:1–8, 13; 1 Corinthians 12:4–12, 27**

### *Commentary*

- (1) Jesus compares the spirit of Lamech (Genesis 4:23–24) with the spirit of mercy (Matthew 18:21–22). Missing the reference to Genesis in Jesus’ words makes the work of mercy into a math problem. It is *not* a math problem, but a heart problem that requires a heart solution.
- (2) *Crucial Conversations*: A crucial conversation is defined as something that needs to be said in the moment it needs saying, yet without rancor. An important component to a crucial conversation is the ability to see and to understand both the story we *are* telling ourselves about someone’s motivations and other stories that *could be* told about someone’s motivations. Listening to the other person with an empathetic ear and open heart helps us hear their story through the lens of their motivations rather than our own assumptions. Listening in this manner offers enough grace that the conversation may lead toward healing.
- (3) *Family Systems*: Healthy congregations practice direct and open dialogue, which becomes more difficult during anxious times. Unfortunately, the prevailing currency in families and congregations, as emotional systems, is anxiety. Healthy congregational practice, therefore, encourages leaders to be a “non-anxious presence” in the midst of change or stress, a practice that is made possible through self-differentiation. Self-differentiation is a combination of defining ourselves (being who we are as *individuals*) while remaining connected (being who we are as a *community*). The mantra of non-anxious, self-differentiated leaders is “calm, clear, consistent, and connected.”

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<sup>34</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, 812. Adapted.

- (4) *God Alone is Lord of the Conscience*: Theologian Paul Ricœur had a concept he called “second naïveté.”<sup>35</sup> It defines that place we come to in healthy spirituality when, after coming to terms with our own sense of core convictions, deeply held values, and sense of identity before God, we are able to sit with others who have a different understanding. Historic Presbyterian principles mirror Ricœur’s second naïveté by insisting on the rights of faithful, intelligent Christians to sometimes disagree, and, therefore, encouraging mutual forbearance toward one another.

### *Questions to Ponder and Discuss*

- (1) What specific steps does Jesus direct his disciples to take when confronted with a difficult relationship problem? How does Matthew 18 express the principles articulated above to describe family systems practices?
- (2) What, for you personally, makes a crucial conversation difficult? When have you experienced someone else misunderstanding your intentions—telling the wrong story? When have you understood someone more deeply by hearing their story more fully?
- (3) *Silence or Violence*: The typical response to encountering conflict of any kind is “violence” (fight) or “silence” (flight or freeze). This is equally true of relationship “violence” that is marked by elevated tone and volume and, perhaps, physical-space or personal-boundary violations. To which are you most prone: silence or violence? What story are you telling yourself that leads you toward violence or silence? What story might you tell yourself that will help you communicate in a calm, clear, consistent, and connected manner?
- (4) *Second Naïvete*: How far along are you on the journey toward second naïvete? How much further would you like to journey or need to journey along this path? How present within you is the urge to label others?
- (5) When have you encountered someone you respect but with whom you do not agree? What internal or external struggles did you experience in being comfortable living with this dissonance?
- (6) Father Brennan Manning asked congregations to imagine the one question Jesus will ask them when they get to heaven. Go ahead and think of your one question. What do you think Jesus will ask? (Then Father Manning would give his answer to the question: “Jesus will ask us, ‘Do you know how much I love you, how much I have always loved you?’” How does this compare to your question?



### *Application*

- (1) *Active Listening Tools*: Which of the following active listening tools do you use on a regular basis? Choose one to practice this week as a spiritual intention.
- Mirroring: convey back to someone their words, tone, and meaning
  - Empathy: convey to someone that/how you understand their feelings

<sup>35</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 351.

- Validation: convey to someone that/how you understand the logic of their thought process
- I-statements: speak what you, as a self-defined individual, think or feel
- Preference statements: speak what you, as a self-defined individual, would prefer
- Impact statements: speak what impact another's actions had or has on you

### *Closing Prayer*

Eternal God, you have called us to be members of one body.

Join us with those who, in all times and places, have praised your name,  
that, with one heart and one mind, we may show the unity of your Church and bring honor to your name.

Grant, O Lord Jesus,

that the ears which have heard the voice of your songs may be closed to the voice of dispute;  
that the eyes which have seen your great love may also behold your hope;  
that the tongues which have sung your praise may speak the truth in love;  
that the feet which have walked in your courts may walk in the region of light;  
that the bodies which have received your Spiritual Presence may be restored to newness of life;  
and that all these things may be done with gratitude for your inexpressible gift.

—Liturgy of Malabar, 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>36</sup>

### *Additional Resources*

- [www.houseunitedmovement.org](http://www.houseunitedmovement.org) (Allen Hilton—reconciliation ministries)

### *Videos*

- **“You People”: Love an Other, Episode 1:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OR85dCEQgg&list=PLJRSb3sWofj3TNTcy-mEnwnUsxyUs-TdJ>
- **Women in Peacemaking:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RykXo3sZn0w>
- **Embodied Peacemaking:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTLsF7y8QQow>
- **Good/Bad: A Simple Message** (scroll down to watch): [www.dixiletta.com](http://www.dixiletta.com)
- **Radical Hospitality for the REST of Us:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj-ztamQa5Q>

### *Books*

- Ed Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*. New York: Church Publishing, 2017.
- Brad Munroe, *Waging Peace: Developing Interpersonal Skills for Conflict Transformation*. Self-published, 2017.
- Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. Lanham, MD Rowan and Littlefield, 2006.

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<sup>36</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, 26. Adapted.



**The Thrive Project:**  
a season of examination



## Winter: a season of examination

As Fall turns into Winter, so a season of education turns into a season of examination. Dynamic energy is unleashed within congregations when everyone is living and serving according to the same, foundational, biblical principles. When our core understanding of God's purpose for our life together is shared in common, we become like the churches described in the Book of Acts!

However, before this hyperbole goes too far, let me add that the church in the Book of Acts includes not only the Apostolic Church at its best, but also churches in Ephesus, Corinth, Galatia, and Rome. Not all of these churches had the same vitality—Rome was the seat of Empire, Galatia wrestled with the relationship between Christ and Judaism, Corinth experienced major conflict, and Ephesus was home to cultural icons that conveyed that the divine could be had for a price.

What is the unique challenge your context presents, and what spiritual gifts have you been given with which to overcome these challenges?

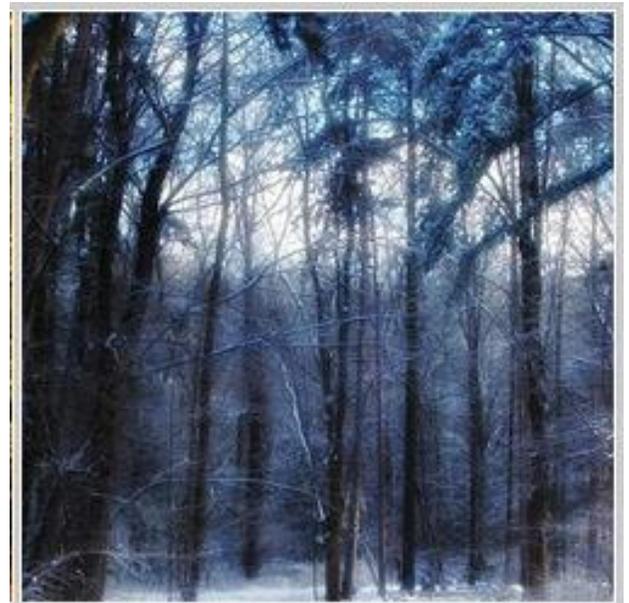
For the Thrive Project's Winter: a season of examination, there is a purpose and every purpose deserves some metrics:

*Winter / Examination proposed purpose statement* – to enter into a process of discernment that leads to one's becoming aware of the connection places between (1) the congregation's unique, spiritual giftedness, (2) the congregation's deep, abiding passions for ministry, and (3) the community's significant need(s).

*Winter / Examination proposed metrics statement* – By the conclusion of the Season of Examination, the congregation will have discerned, and the leadership will be able to articulate verbally and in writing, (1) three, congregational spiritual gifts, (2) three abiding passions that energize the congregation for ministry, and (3) three significant community needs which, if met, would bless the community.

We cannot be ourselves if we do not know ourselves; indeed, the journey toward maturity consists of stripping

away layer after layer of our *False Self* to embrace the truth that it is our *True Self* that is known and beloved of God. What is true for individuals is likewise true for congregations. What would it take for your congregation to be able to affirm and articulate its True Self?



During the Season of Examination, there are a variety of options for inviting congregational discernment. Consider the following ideas:

- (1) *Congregational Survey on Seven Vital Signs*: The survey in the tools section is intended to stimulate discussion, dialogue and discernment among pastors, elders and congregants regarding the current being and future journey of their congregation.
- (2) *Neighborhood Exegetical/Prayer Walk*: Use one of these tools to deepen and broaden your congregation's awareness.
- (3) *MissionInsite Database*: Request from the presbytery a MissionInsite report that provides demographic, economic, educational, lifestyle and religious preference information on the people that live within a defined vicinity of your church.

(4) “*Lord, Deepen Our Wonder*” *prayer concerts*: in which the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the six Great Ends, using similar times and groups described in the season of education, but specifically targeted toward,

- *Repentance*: Lord, how have we failed to live with courageous and generous faith?
- *Discernment*: Lord, what would you have us to know, to do, or to become?
- *Wonder*: Lord, show us your Providence and provision beyond our ability!

(5) *Journey Walk*: Create a timeline in the fellowship hall using butcher paper. At a fellowship event (or series of events), ask congregants to share their stories related to the Great Ends:

- The approximate time (by decade or year) when they *personally* experienced God’s love and grace through a church whose ministry was guided by

the Great Ends. (This can be at the same or a different church.)

- The approximate time (by decade or year) when the church *as a faith community* experienced spiritual insight, deepening, or blessing through one of the Great Ends. (This is, of necessity, an exercise that will be dominated by longer-term members and will help others to hear the congregational story of God’s love and grace through the decades.)
- What *themes* emerge from the narrative told in this journey walk? What core values emerge?
- What *chapters* are written by this narrative? How do the different church epochs differ from one another?

For each of the above discernment tasks, the presbytery can provide resources through its Thrive Project facilitators. We have tools to share, and we are in this together. In the Kingdom of God, there is no need to DIY. In the Kingdom of God, we are better together.



## The Power of Community

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

I learned the power of community at a young age. I was in my late twenties, in my first solo pastorate, participating in a Lily Endowment-funded pastors' cohort: nine newbie leaders and five seasoned leaders from three presbyteries met monthly for eighteen months. The experience molded me in ways I cannot count.

We were at our third meeting and all of us were checking in: "How is it going with your church and with your personal life?" One by one, each of us newbies told about how well our churches were doing, how smart and gifted and pretty we were! I now call this stage of our group life "peacocking," for the ways we tried to pretend we were more than we were.

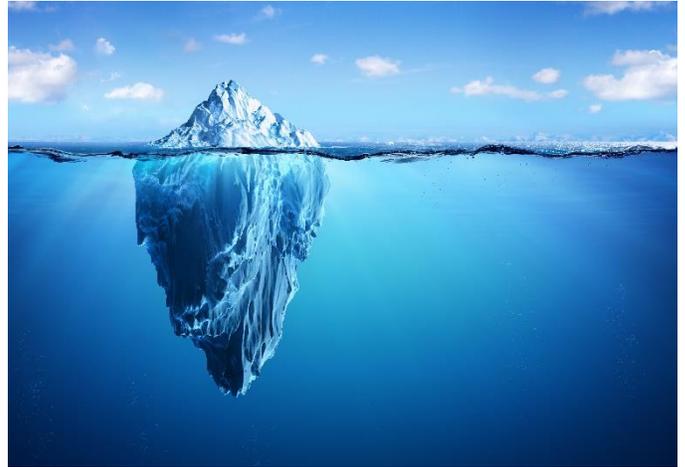
It was Marty who broke the ice: "Hey, I'm glad none of the rest of you ever have problems, but me, I'm struggling." Marty went on to describe a situation that was familiar to us all, and included his failings as a pastoral leader. We could all relate. The ice had been broken. It was time to get real with one another, to be humble and honest and authentic, to repent and discover God's mercy covered us, too.

Humble, honest, and authentic community is powerful because it invites us to live before, with, and into the divine fellowship of the Triune God. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that God's eternal nature and character is expressed as Trinity, as three-in-one, as an ever-loving, ever-flowing dance of loving community. The ancient fathers and mothers even coined the term *perichoresis* to describe this dance of loving community.

There is an old saying that goes, "We is smarter than me." As we consider the Trinity, we might amend this saying, "We is smarter than me, and they—God in Christ, in the power of the Spirit—make us smarter than we will ever be." We need more than *my* wisdom, more than *your* wisdom, more than *our* wisdom; we need the wisdom that comes from above (James 1:5).

This wisdom is ordinarily discovered in community.

One of the hoped-for outcomes of the Thrive Project is that church leaders will avoid the mistake of all top-down leadership: the mistake of believing we have all the answers. Such leadership is like the part of the iceberg visible above the water line—the ideas may be fine, well, and good, but are only a fraction of the wisdom to be found within the entire congregation.



In contrast to all top-down leadership, the Thrive Project is designed to stimulate wider and wider circles of conversation. It is designed for pastors and elders to engage the entire congregation in communal discernment: Who are we in Christ? To whom and for what are we being called? How does God desire to bring blessing to our community through our living together as the Body of Christ? Such wide conversations are like the part of the iceberg found below the surface—embracing a depth of experience, understanding, and wisdom.

One of the lessons I learned during that first pastoral cohort is that an isolated pastor is an unhealthy pastor. I learned other lessons as well: We are stronger together, and smarter and more perseverant, and have more fun. I learned I don't have to have all the answers or be the perfect pastor, just as the church I was leading wasn't the perfect church. I was reminded then, and I remind you today, that we are called to faithfulness. Faithfulness is much easier to find when it's played as a team sport.

One other thing you might find interesting: I'm still friends with Marty.



## The Power of Discernment

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

I wish to share two scenarios.

In the first, as I listened to the pastor discuss her ministry, I recognized the look in her eye. I have had that look, shared that look, been blessed and cursed by that same look throughout my ministry. It was the look of a leader simultaneously excited and despairing; justifiably proud of her accomplishments to date yet questioning of herself regarding future challenges. Would she have the “right stuff” to lead her people?

In the second, as I listened to the gathered elders around the Session table, their anxiety was palpable. They understood I was visiting with them because others suspected they were a church in trouble: the familiar tune of downsizing, the rhythm of decreased energy and deficit budgets, with lyrics describing the discordant note of difficulties paying their pastor. What should they do?

Both of these congregations were confronting Pentecost Questions. Whether one hears the story of the Church’s birth through God’s sending the Holy Spirit in John 20 or Acts 2, the essential message of Pentecost is the same: God in Christ sends the Holy Spirit and sends us for the sake of God’s mission in the world. We are never alone on this journey. We are always being empowered by God’s presence, acting through the Holy Spirit.

The writer Frederick Buechner famously defined God’s call and our vocation as “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately for most of us, finding the intersection between our deep gladness or passion and the world’s deep hunger or need can look something like the figure below on the left.

Sorting out the intersections of our lives requires the Pentecost Questions of “Do we have the right stuff?” and “What should we do?” Moving forward requires discernment: listening together to the guidance, conviction, and liberating and so-crazy-it-just-might-



work ideas given through the Holy Spirit. God’s giving of the Holy Spirit to the people of God is not a one-time event, but a continuous connection of God-Life, God-Breathing, and God-Visioning for the sake of God’s community, the Body of Christ, the Church—you and me and us together.

Seeking the discernment of God’s Holy Spirit in community helps us engage our Pentecost Questions in meaningful dialogue until we are able to *see* and to *know* and to *trust* God is calling us forward in faith.

Although I love Buechner’s definition of God’s call and our vocation, I want to add a third point of intersection: our spiritual giftedness. It is often said “God doesn’t call the gifted but gifts the called,” which is true but does not mean God’s gifts only come *after* the call. Sometimes God’s calling has been at work through many years and much spiritual growth, and finding the intersection of our gladness and passion, the world’s deep hunger and need, and our spiritual giftedness can look something like the figure on the right. Then we discover:

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<sup>37</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 118.



- Our identity and purpose. To whom do we belong and what is our great passion, our joy in ministry? How can we best express God's calling upon us?
- Our spiritual giftedness. What do we do well/best and what unique resources do we possess with which we can bless our neighborhood?
- Our neighbors. What are the physical, social, and spiritual needs of our neighbors?

Pentecost Questions cannot be answered through a one-size-fits-all program, but only responded to through congregation-wide, prayerful, spiritual discernment. An essential component of the Thrive Project is Spirit-led, Session-guided, congregational discernment. If you ask

me, "Brad, what can my church do to thrive?" my answer would be, "Don't ask me, ask the Holy Spirit!" Each of our churches has a unique identity, formed in the image of God, and a sense of giftedness, character, personality, and vocation. Helping an entire congregation recognize and trust the Spirit's naming of your identity comes through discernment. Each of our churches has a unique calling to impact the world for Christ. Helping an entire congregation recognize, trust, and act upon the Spirit's sending of us into our communities comes through discernment.

I invite you to discern together your participation in the Thrive Project. Pray and discuss, discuss and pray, then listen. Do you notice an inner longing? Do you sense an inward blocking? Are others around you opening to God singing a new song among you? Is God presenting new possibilities, opportunities, and challenges for life anew and life abundant? I cannot answer any of these questions for you and would not dare to try. However, I will be so bold as to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this missive. Do you have the right stuff, and what should you do? With God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, you do have the right stuff and, as you open yourself to God's new Pentecost, you will know to whom and for what Christ is sending you. We are never alone. We are always being empowered.



**The Thrive Project:**  
tools for the season of examination



## Congregational Survey: The Six Great Ends of the Church

INSTRUCTIONS: Circle the number that most corresponds to your opinion: 1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Moderately Disagree, 3 – Moderately Agree, 4 – Strongly Agree, or 5 – No Opinion.

### This behavior describes me:

1. I invite friends to church to hear the Gospel.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

2. I have conversations about God or faith with people outside of the church.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

3. I demonstrate genuine concern through acts of love and justice before inviting someone to faith.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

4. I pray for other church members on a regular basis.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

5. I notice when someone is in grief, pain, or discomfort, and then stop, inquire, listen, care, and pray for that person.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

6. I seek out visitors to offer welcome and greeting, and to invite them to other events (e.g. lunch, potluck, Bible study, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

7. I participate regularly in the gathering of the worshiping community to observe Sabbath.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

8. I read Scripture devotionally.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

9. I seek in my experience of worship to glorify God in thought, word, and deed.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

10. I pray, then ponder, contemplate, and converse about what I am hearing, reading, and doing, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide my actions.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

11. I act in ways such that what I do publicly and privately express a unity, a life of integrity, where my reputation, character, and behavior are integrated.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

12. I study Scripture, the historic confessions and read contemporary works that connect faith to life.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

13. I participate in the congregation's *passive* ministries of compassion (e.g. donating canned goods and gently used clothes, or writing a check, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

14. I volunteer in the congregation's *active* compassion ministries (e.g. reading to school children, serving at a soup kitchen, or helping Habitat for Humanity build a home, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

15. I seek *mutual* mission engagement, serving “with” rather than “for” others, building relationships of mutuality that break down hierarchical, “Big Brother/Sister” interactions in favor of “We, together....”

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

16. I practice hospitality and welcome toward strangers.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

17. I cultivate the practice of civility and respect with intentionality, especially toward those with whom I disagree.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

18. I demonstrate care toward every part of God's creation.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

19. The numbers of the three behaviors described in the section above (#1-18) that I do most often are:

#\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_

20. The numbers of the three behaviors described in the section above (#1-18) that I do least often are:

#\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_

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**This behavior describes our congregation when viewed collectively:**

21. We train members in how to share their faith story with others.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

22. We generate members who demonstrate a willingness to offer mercy, to speak the truth in love, and to look beyond their own good to the concerns of a wider world with humility and joy.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

23. We equip members to invite personal faith and have conversations that nurture a relationship with God.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

24. We regularly communicate to all members how to request prayer for oneself or others and then pray for one another in worship and throughout the week.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

25. We organize, train, and send deacons, Stephen Ministers, and pastors to visit those in the hospital, homebound, or confined to an institution.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

26. We ensure our building structure and administrative practices emphasize accessibility.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

27. We center all worship on the person, character, and saving actions of God in Jesus Christ.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

28. We craft worship around the Word – music, prayer and all other elements point to the Word.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

29. We create opportunities for members to use their spiritual gifts in worship.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

30. We teach Scripture, the historic tradition, and contemporary application of faith to life.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

31. We facilitate discussion of personal, local, national and global events through the lens of Biblical values to offer insight, critique, and affirmation as appropriate.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

32. We create opportunities for members to express Biblical values through service in the church and in the community.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

33. We provide opportunities for members to express care for others through *passive* compassion ministries (e.g. food drives, clothing drives and financial giving, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

34. We provide opportunities for members to express care for others through *active* compassion ministries (e.g. Habitat for Humanity, school reading programs, Family Promise, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

35. We advocate for just policies and laws, especially for minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

36. We serve the community more than we serve ourself, toward the motto: Be a helper, not an obstacle; Be a giver, not a taker; Be a friend, not an adversary.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

37. We discuss issues of the day, regardless of how sensitive the topic, with courage and kindness because members possess a spirit of love, grace, and humility toward one another.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

38. We have an intentional focus on both friend and stranger, both neighbor and the world, both the Kingdom now and the Kingdom to come.

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>

39. The numbers of the three behaviors described in the section above (#21-38) that we do most often are:

#\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_

40. The numbers of the three behaviors described in the section above (#21-38) that we do least often are:

#\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_, #\_\_\_\_

41. Are you currently serving as an officer (elder, deacon or pastor) of the church?      Yes      No

## Instructions for Using the Survey

### *Purpose*

The purpose of the survey is to discern those places where there is a common vision or divergent opinions among leadership and the congregation and help accomplish the following:

1. Encourage self-examination toward healthy self-awareness, honesty, and accountability.
2. Identify those topics where leadership and the congregation have agreement/hold common values vs. those topics where there is significant divergence of opinion/perspective among leadership.
3. Focus leadership discussions on those topics most in need of clarity and shared vision.
4. Suggest possibilities for fruitful exploration toward growing deeper into faithfulness to God's call.

### *Process*

1. Have respondents return their completed forms to a designated person at the church. One person/committee should be tasked with compiling the data.
2. Sort surveys into two groups: current officers of the church and not currently an officer.
3. Score each response as follows: group responses #1 and #2 (strongly and moderately disagree) into one group, responses #3 and #4 (moderately and strongly agree) into a second group, and response #5 (no opinion) into a third group. Note these responses in a graph.
4. The questions in both sections (individual and congregation) are ordered in groups of three according to the order of the Great Ends (e.g. the first three questions refer to the first Great End, the second three questions refer to the second Great End, etc.). Create a graph that compares current leadership with non-leadership members and compares each of the six Great Ends to each other.
5. Prior to the meeting at which the survey results will be discussed, send the compiled data to participants (usually elders, though you may choose to include a wider group of folks).
6. The topic of conversation will be to review the results and ask the following questions:
  - a. What do we do well? What are our strengths?
  - b. What needs work? Where might we need to grow?
  - c. Where do we share a common vision, values, and/or self-evaluation?
  - d. Where do we have divergent views regarding our vision, values, and/or self-evaluation?
  - e. Are we being called to emphasize our strengths or nurture our growth areas?
  - f. What might be some short-term goals for growing toward deeper faithfulness or a more united vision for our ministry?
  - g. What resources do we have that help us in our faithfulness?
  - h. What resources might we need to cultivate as we grow toward deeper faithfulness?
  - i. What are the gaps in our ministry that need to be addressed immediately? Over time?
  - j. How are we discerning the call of God's Spirit?
  - k. What is the horizon toward which God seems to be calling us to grow?



## Congregational Focus Groups: the six great ends of the church

### INSTRUCTIONS

#### Event Coordinator

##### Pre-Event Role

1. Invites congregation and explains how participation will help ministry and what's in it for them
2. Recruits and trains facilitators and helpers
3. Arranges venue and coordinates set up
4. Coordinates check in registration process and staffing

##### At Event

1. Welcomes and thanks everyone
2. Introduces facilitators and helpers; explains their role
3. Requests cell phones be put on silent and stored out of sight
4. Explains what's going to happen today
5. Explains what results will be used for
6. Describes guidelines for small group conversations
7. Indicate there are no right or wrong answers
8. You don't need to agree with others
9. Need to listen respectfully as others share their views
10. Leads closing plenary session

#### Characteristics of the Small Groups

##### Participants

1. All congregants, officers and church staff invited
2. Preregistered if possible to assign to conversation groups prior to day of event
3. No more than 8 people per group, including facilitator and helper

##### Environment

1. Room set up in advance with at least six tables or chair circles for eight people each
2. Comfortable room temperature; good air circulation
3. Circle seating; round tables if possible
4. Iced water readily available

##### Facilitator

1. Skillful in group discussions; establishes permissive environment
2. Uses pre-determined questions
3. Does not participate in discussion except to get clarification from participants

## **Helper**

1. Seated at table or chair circle prior to participants arrival; welcomes participants as they are seated
2. Takes selected notes throughout the discussion; not meant to be a comprehensive recording of everything said;
3. Do not use a computer or electronic device for note taking
4. Makes sure iced water is replenished between group shifts
5. Sees that notes are given to Event Coordinator either on day of event or on next day if they need to be rewritten or word processed
6. Does not participate in discussion except to get clarification from participants
7. One or more of the helpers need to take notes of the closing plenary session

## **On Being a Good Facilitator**

### **The good facilitator**

1. Exercises mild unobtrusive conversation management
2. Has prior knowledge of topic; has carefully read and studied Great Ends questionnaire

### **Use pauses and probes**

1. Don't worry about empty space in conversation; 5 second pause OK
2. Probes: "Would you explain further?" "Would you give an example?" "I don't understand."

### **Be mentally prepared**

1. Alert and free from distractions
2. Has the discipline of listening?
3. Familiar with probing route

### **Control reactions to participants**

1. Be careful about your own verbal and nonverbal reactions
2. No head nodding or head shaking
3. No short verbal responses (don't say "that's good" or "excellent")

### **Use purposeful small talk**

1. Create warm and friendly environment

### **Use subtle group management of the**

1. "Experts;" dominant talkers; shy participants; and ramblers

### **Make a smooth and snappy introduction**

1. Event Coordinator has already spoken; don't repeat
2. Along the way, dynamics of the group may require reminder of ground rules

## **Note Taking**

**Note taking is the responsibility of the helper.**

**Notes need to be given to Event Coordinator.**

**Notes need to be read by others.**

1. May need to rewrite or word process after event and before giving to Event Coordinator. Notes sometimes are interpreted days or weeks following the conversations when memory has faded.

**Record quotes.**

1. Not everything said needs to be recorded. Listen for statements that illustrate an important point of view. Listen for phrases that are particularly enlightening or eloquently express a point of view. It is impossible to capture the entire quote. Capture as much as you can.

**Record key points and themes.**

1. Participants will talk about several key points in response to each question. Several different participants will identify the same points. Don't need to repeat everything. Sometimes they are said only once but in a manner that deserves attention.

**Follow-up questions.**

2. The facilitator may fail to follow-up on an important point or seek an example of a vague but critical point. The helper may need to follow-up with these questions during or at the end of the conversation.
3. Big ideas, hunches, or thoughts of the helper.
4. Occasionally the helper will discover a new concept. A light will go on and something will make sense when before it did not. These insights need to be recorder, but not interjected into the conversation.

## **Conducting the Small Group Discussion**

1. Divide participants into groups (divisive of six) and randomly assign each group one of the Great Ends to discuss. The group size may vary but must not exceed eight persons per group, including the facilitator and helper. Assignment to groups can occur prior to event and/or upon arrival at event.
2. Each group has a facilitator for the conversation whose job is to ensure everyone's voice is heard. Each group also has a helper whose job is to take notes and be a friendly presence. Neither the facilitator nor the helper shares their opinions during the conversations. They need to focus their attention on facilitating and recording the discussion.
3. Pass out the list of individual and congregational observable behaviors found on the following pages of this handbook.

4. Give participants five minutes of silence to read the ten individual and ten congregational behaviors that express faithfulness toward a Great End. (Extroverts, please remain silent for the full five minutes, even if you have finished reading the list – your Introvert friends will thank you.)
5. At the end of five minutes, give each group fifteen minutes to respond to the following questions:
  - a. What do we do well at our church regarding this Great End? What are our strengths?
  - b. What needs work at our church regarding this Great End? Where might we need to grow?
  - c. What are tangible ways we express faithfulness at our church to this Great End?
6. Have each group move clockwise to a different table to repeat the process, discussing a different Great End. The process can be repeated as many times as desired, depending on the church's schedule and participants' willingness to continue the conversation.
7. Leave enough time in the schedule to allow the final 20 minutes to be a plenary discussion that ranks the six Great Ends into three categories: (a) the two to which we are most faithful, (b) the two about which we are working but have room to improve, and (c) the two to which we are least faithful.
8. Share the results of the conversation groups with the Session so that they may engage the following questions:
  - a. What do we do well? What are our strengths?
  - b. What needs work? Where might we need to grow?
  - c. Where do we share a common vision, values, and/or self-evaluation?
  - d. Where do we have divergent views regarding our vision, values, and/or self-evaluation?
  - e. Are we being called to emphasize our strengths or nurture our growth areas?
  - f. What might be some short-term goals for growing toward deeper faithfulness or a more united vision for our ministry
  - g. What resources do we have that help us in our faithfulness?
  - h. What resources might we need to cultivate as we grow toward deeper faithfulness?
  - i. What are the gaps in our ministry that need to be addressed immediately? Over time?
  - j. How are we discerning the call of God's Spirit?
  - k. What is the horizon toward which God seems to be calling us to grow?

# Great End #1 - The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind

Individual Observable Behaviors – The individual who lives the first Great End with faithfulness:

1. Invites a friend to church to hear the Gospel.
2. Tells another person their story of coming to faith.
3. Tells another person what God means to them in their life.
4. Tells another person how Scripture declares God's love for all.
5. Is described by others as having at least three of the following characteristics *while sharing her or his faith*: authentic, personal, warm, honest, open, inquisitive, empathetic, and humorous.
6. Understands that the integrity of her relationships, actions, and words serves as a basis upon which her witness to faith will be judged.
7. Has conversations about God or faith with people outside of the church.
8. Demonstrates genuine concern through acts of love and justice before inviting someone to faith.
9. Is present with people in difficult situations as a witness to God's care and justice in the world.
10. Says to another, "What can I do for you in the name of Christ today?"

Congregational Observable Behaviors – The congregation who lives the first Great End with faithfulness:

1. Encourages its members to share their faith story with others.
2. Trains its members in how to share their faith story with others.
3. Has members practice sharing their faith story with one another in worship, small groups, at Session/Deacons and its committees in both verbal and written form.
4. Teaches/wrestles with the meaning of salvation and has a clearly defined, broad-consensus definition of salvation that is understood and regularly articulated within the congregation.
5. Generates members who demonstrate a willingness to offer mercy, to speak the truth in love, and to look beyond their own good to the concerns of a wider world with humility and joy.
6. Equips its members to invite personal faith and have conversations that nurture a relationship with God when those who are without faith, those seeking faith, and those of fragile faith come to worship or another church event.
7. Talks about the difficult questions about faith and the Bible.
8. Performs acts in the world that bear witness to God's love for the world as proclaimed in scripture.
9. Shares faith-based posts on social media.
10. Baptizes adults at least several times a year



## Great End #2 – The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the People of God

Individual Observable Behaviors – The individual who lives the second Great End with faithfulness:

1. Prays for other church members on a regular basis.
2. Shares one's life experiences and God experiences in conversation with other church members.
3. Instructs children and youth on the nature and practices of the Christian life.
4. Visits church members who are in the hospital, homebound, or confined to an institution.
5. Participates with deacons or pastors in ministries of care.
6. Notices when someone is in grief, pain, or discomfort, and then stops, inquires, listens, cares, and responds to that person with prayer or action.
7. Learns people's names whenever possible and is not afraid to ask for someone's name if they forget it.
8. Seeks out visitors to offer welcome and greeting, and to invite them to other events (e.g. lunch, potluck, Bible study).
9. Provides full-time caregiving and nurture to an elderly husband or wife and ensures their continued quality of life.
10. Encourages the presence of children and youth in church through tolerating noise or commotion while yet modeling and guiding young ones toward learning the ways of respectfully being church together.

Congregational Observable Behaviors – The congregation who lives the second Great End with faithfulness:

1. Regularly communicates to all members how to request prayer for oneself or others and then prays for one another in worship and throughout the week.
2. Organizes, trains, and sends deacons, Stephen Ministers, and pastors to visit those in the hospital, homebound, or confined to an institution.
3. Educates its members in how to refer people to and utilize community services (e.g. memory care, low vision, low-income housing, etc.).
4. Promotes care groups (e.g. 12-Step groups, Divorce Recovery).
5. Ensures its building structure and administrative practices emphasize accessibility.
6. Celebrates life events (e.g. births, graduations, anniversaries, achievements).
7. Creates opportunities for church members to share life experiences and God experiences in smaller, more intimate settings.
8. Instructs and trains younger disciples in the practices of the Christian life.
9. Organizes mentoring relationships between older adults, youth, and children.
10. The following types of events/experiences are the norm:
  - g. A member suffers from a spinal deformity. She doesn't like to go out at all because people point and stare. At church, we see her for who she is and she feels "sheltered" from the mean actions of others.
  - h. One of the church's official photographers is legally blind. He is still a part of the team—his sense of worth is nurtured even though his contribution may be "fuzzy."
  - i. Each week about 50–80 people regularly sign a "thinking of you card" for one of the members who is unable to attend. While the recipient may not know every signer, the sheer number of individual signatures wraps that person in a spiritual fellowship.
  - j. A committed foster parent brings children born with special needs into her home, particularly infants who need constant nurture. These children are welcomed in worship and church events by the entire congregation.
  - k. Members handknit blankets which are then prayed over by deacons and other congregants and given to people in need of prayer and blessing, such as those facing surgery, those who are in hospice, or those who have made a decision to move to a home closer to family.



## Great End #3 – The Maintenance of Divine Worship

Individual Observable Behaviors – The individual who lives the maintenance of divine worship:

1. Participates regularly in the gathering of the worshiping community to observe Sabbath.
2. Prays on a daily basis.
3. Prays praise, adoration, and thanksgiving (focus on God) as well as confession and petition (focus on us).
4. Prays with a time set aside for silence in order simply to be with God, listen, and experience God's presence.
5. Reads Scripture devotionally.
6. Studies Scripture in-depth.
7. Practices the Prayer of Examen/Reflection at the end of the day to connect one's daily life to God.
8. Seeks in one's experience of worship to glorify God in thought, word, and deed.
9. Is open in one's experience of worship to move beyond education to transformation, beyond "What am I getting out of this?" to "How can I bless God and those around me?" and beyond mere words to becoming like Jesus.
11. Sings like she or he means it!

Congregational Observable Behaviors – The congregation who lives the maintenance of divine worship:

1. Centers all worship on the person, character, and saving actions of God in Jesus Christ.
2. Crafts worship around the Word—music, prayer, and all other elements point to the Word.
3. Crafts worship in ways that:
  - a. engage the mind yet allow times for silence, personal reflection, and personal response;
  - b. connect the Word proclaimed to God's call upon us to live as instruments of God's grace, mercy, and peace in the world;
  - c. bring awareness of ancient liturgical rhythms and modern, contemporary expression;
  - d. balance "Presbyterian wordiness" with creative, multi-sensory rituals that engage the whole person;
  - e. make room in worship for mystery and awe, and expect to encounter the Holy Spirit; and
  - f. incorporate intentionally designed "sending" rituals.
4. Trains liturgists in the practice of leading and trains ushers and greeters in the art of hospitality.
5. Creates opportunities for members to use their spiritual gifts in worship.
6. Remembers and responds to those who cannot be in worship either because of health (e.g. homebound, nursing home residents) or vocation (first responders).
7. Generously finances the maintenance of divine worship.
8. Provides and prepares creative and appropriate worship spaces.
9. Nurtures the congregation's worship life through elements they have memorized and can repeat together.
10. Enjoys a large and varied repertoire of congregational songs.



## Great End #4 - The Preservation of the Truth

### (Discipleship as the Living Experience of Jesus, the Truth)

Individual Observable Behaviors – The individual who preserves the truth:

1. Listens to the sermon and allows God to influence them through it.
2. Reads Scripture, studies the historic confessions, and reads contemporary works that connect faith to life.
3. Prays, then ponders, contemplates, and converses about what one is hearing, reading, and doing, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide one's actions.
4. Sets life goals that conform to Biblical values.
5. Acts in ways such that what one does publicly and privately express a unity, a life of integrity, where one's reputation, character, and behavior are integrated.
6. Practices the faith in daily life beyond the politically popular/correct issues, including also the practices of humility and hope, justice and joy, a willingness to seek and offer mercy, and looking beyond their own good to the concerns of a wider world.
7. Courageously yet politely calls out prejudice, injustice, and distortions of the Christian faith, verbally and in writing, through interpersonal conversations, in small groups, and on social media, always remembering to speak the truth in love (especially on social media!).
8. Thinks globally and acts locally.
9. Treats other people—all other people—according to their being created in *imago dei* (the image of God).
10. Responds to seasons of spiritual blandness—aka, “The Wall,” “The Dark Night of the Soul”—with patience and perseverance, continuing to practice the faith and seeking deeper means of hearing God's Word and Spirit.

Congregational Observable Behaviors – The congregation who lives the preservation of the truth:

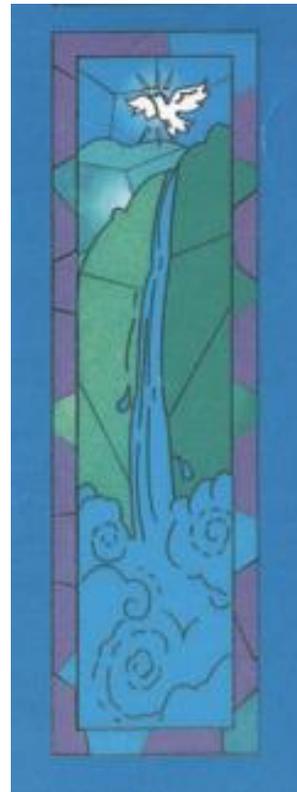
1. Teaches Scripture, the historic tradition, and contemporary application of faith to life.
2. Trains people in both ancient and contemporary practices of prayer.
3. Trains people in living one's faith in daily life.
4. Offers discipleship curricula with different entry points: seeker, beginner, intermediate, and advanced.
5. Offers discipleship curricula on ways to get unstuck in one's spiritual journey—aka, beyond “The Wall” or beyond “The Dark Night of the Soul.”
6. Facilitates discussion of personal, local, national, and global events through the lens of Biblical values to offer insight, critique, and affirmation as appropriate.
7. Creates opportunities for members to express Biblical values through service in the church and in the community.
8. Encourages the sharing of diverse perspectives as a means of seeking God's truth.
9. Participates in, financially supports, and promotes activities that advocate Christian values in the public sphere.
10. Expects to be kept apprised of denominational positions on current events, including potentially divisive subjects.



## Great End #5 – The Promotion of Social Righteousness

Individual Observable Behaviors – The individual who promotes social righteousness:

1. Participates in the congregation's *passive* ministries of compassion (e.g. donating canned goods and gently used clothes, or writing a check, etc.).
2. Volunteers in the congregation's *active* compassion ministries (e.g. reading to school children, serving at a soup kitchen, or helping Habitat for Humanity build a home, etc.).
3. Prays for those whom Jesus called "the least of these, my brothers and sisters," whether in one's community, the nation, or around the world.
4. Seeks *cooperative* mission engagement, asking those one seeks to serve, "What is it that you would find helpful?" Then, only after listening to the answer, responding as one is capable.
5. Seeks *mutual* mission engagement, serving "with" rather than "for" others, building relationships of mutuality that break down hierarchical, "Big Brother/Sister" interactions in favor of "We, together...."
6. Seeks to become more educated about the history of religious protest and historic issues that impact today's events (e.g. Doctrine of Discovery, Abolitionists, Great Reforms of the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Women's Suffrage, Civil Rights, etc.).
7. Seeks to become more educated about economic, social, cultural, and political issues that impact minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
8. Advocates for just and humane policies and laws in the public square, especially those policies and laws related to the protection of minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
9. Kindly and consistently confronts actions and attitudes of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and ageism, first looking to oneself and then to the actions and attitudes of others.
11. Practices good stewardship through living responsibly, disavowing consumerism in favor of generosity.



Congregational Observable Behaviors – The congregation who promotes social righteousness:

1. Provides opportunities for members to express care for others through *passive* compassion ministries (e.g. food drives, clothing drives, and financial giving, etc.).
2. Provides opportunities for members to express care for others through *active* compassion ministries (e.g. Habitat for Humanity, school reading programs, Family Promise, etc.).
3. Works with existing community organizations who provide care in the community.
4. Organizes and promotes new ministries that provide care in the community.
5. Includes in worship opportunities for prayer and other liturgical elements that uphold social righteousness.
6. Educates the congregation on social ethics by connecting Scripture to real-world issues confronting our communities, state, nation, and world.
7. Educates the congregation about the history of religious protest and historic issues that impact today's events (e.g. Doctrine of Discovery, Abolitionists, Great Reforms of the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Women's Suffrage, Civil Rights, etc.).
8. Educates the congregation on sociological, economic, and political complexities that impact minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
9. We advocate for just policies and laws, especially for minorities, people living in poverty, and any other group that has the potential to be marginalized or disenfranchised.
10. Educates the congregation on the values and practices of good stewardship, living responsibly in the world, and the importance of disavowing consumerism in favor of generosity.

## Great End #6 – The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World

Individual Observable Behaviors – The individual who exhibits the kingdom of heaven to the world:

1. Practices hospitality and welcome toward strangers.
2. Cultivates friendships with all people regardless of social, economic, racial, national, or sexual status/orientation.
3. Practices equality and protects the human dignity of all people.
4. Lives in ways that affirm faith, hope, and love and that reject fear, despair, and judgment.
5. Lives with humility before God and others, demonstrating respect toward all people.
6. Cultivates the practice of civility and respect with intentionality, especially toward those with whom they disagree.
7. Practices active listening and the use of “I-language” as a means of creating connection through communication.
8. Refrains from seeking control over others through “having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5–11).
9. Demonstrates care toward every part of God’s creation.
10. Lives the first five Great Ends fully, wholly, completely, and utterly (Greek: *telios*)!

Congregational Observable Behaviors – The congregation who exhibits the kingdom of heaven:

1. Trains its members in the ministry of welcome and hospitality.
2. Has an official, written policy of openness and inclusivity that is communicated to members.
3. Discusses ways its congregational customs either create welcome or convey unwelcome, making changes as needed.
4. Contextualizes their worship, fellowship, and educational ministries for the people living in their neighborhood.
5. Serves the community more than it serves itself, toward the motto: Be a helper, not an obstacle; Be a giver, not a taker; Be a friend, not an adversary.
6. Promotes and trains congregants in healthy communication best practices (e.g. active listening, I-language, etc.).
7. Promotes and trains congregants in conflict reconciliation best practices (e.g. empathy building, interest-based negotiation, etc.).
8. Discusses issues of the day, regardless of how sensitive the topic, with courage and kindness because members possess a spirit of love, grace, and humility toward one another.
9. Has an intentional focus on both friend and stranger, both neighbor and the world, both the Kingdom now and the Kingdom to come.
10. Participates together as a congregation in ministries of creation care.





## Exploring Your Neighborhood: An Exegetical Walk<sup>38</sup>

The word *Exegesis* literally means a *critical interpretation* and is commonly applied to the study of literature. As readers of the Bible, we exegete the text with a view to discerning its truth for our lives. In this exercise, you're invited to undertake an exegesis—a critical interpretation—of your neighborhood. Through careful, sensitive, and critical observation, your task is to discern the truth of God's presence where you live. Quite simply, it's about reading your neighborhood as one of the primary texts of daily life—one through which God speaks.

To do this properly, you need to set aside two hours of uninterrupted time. Before you head out, think about how you define your neighborhood and how it's physically laid out. Draw yourself a map, including your own home, basic street patterns, and any landmarks, commercial or community buildings, schools, or parks. Be sure to include those boundary markers or natural borders that give your neighborhood definition. For some, the neighborhood will be larger than for others. It's a very personal thing; no one else can define it for you. The only criteria are that it includes where you live and is walkable. Once you've got a rough idea in mind of what area to include, grab a notebook and pen and head off.

Be sure to include time along the way to stop, buy a drink somewhere, sit in a park or at a bus stop, and linger outside public buildings or places of interest. There's no hurry. Here's a list of question to help you as you go:

1. As you stand just outside your house or apartment—by the front gate or on the footpath—what do you see as you look in each direction? What do you hear or sense? What activities do you notice?
2. As you walk the neighborhood, what do you notice about the architecture of the houses or apartment complexes? On average, how old do you think the

houses or apartments are in the area? How much renovation or rebuilding is going on?

3. What do you notice about the front gardens or entrance ways to each of the houses or apartments? Does your neighborhood feel like a cared-for place?
4. How many houses or apartments for sale do you see? What indicators of transience do you observe? Does the neighborhood have a feeling of permanence or change?
5. Is there a freeway or major highway close by? If so, try to imagine this area before it existed. Who has gained or lost by its introduction?



6. Stop—sit if you can—in a tree-lined street or quieter spot, then at a busy intersection. What are the smells and sounds of the neighborhood? How quiet or noisy is it?
7. How many community or civic buildings do you see? What are their purposes? Do they look inviting, well-used, deserted?

<sup>38</sup> Adapted from Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighborhood* (Brunswick East, Victoria, AU: Acorn Press, 2007), 103–104. Taken from the Center for Parish Development, *Joining God in the Neighborhood: Resources for Field Trips* (Chicago: Missional Church, DATE), 3–5). Used with permission.

8. What public spaces are provided for children, teenagers, or adults? Are they being used? If so, in what ways?
9. If there is a local park, what do you notice about it? Does it feel like a welcoming or inhibiting place? Who is there? How is it used?
10. Do you pass churches or religious buildings? What does their design or appearance communicate to you?
11. What kinds of commercial buildings are there? Walk around a supermarket or local store and identify who makes up the clientele.
12. If your neighborhood includes a shopping area, is there provision made for people to sit, relax, or relate?
13. Excluding the areas of business, how many people did you pass while walking? What age, race, and gender are they? How pedestrian-friendly is the neighborhood?
14. Imagine yourself as an old, infirm person with no car, or as a young child, living in the middle of this neighborhood. How disadvantaged or advantaged would you be with respect to shops, churches, parks, or schools?
15. What evidence is there of public transport? Who uses it?
16. Are there places in your neighborhood that you wouldn't go?
17. Where are the places of life, hope, beauty, or community in this neighborhood?
18. What evidence of struggle, despair, neglect, and alienation do you see?
19. What sense of connection do you feel to your neighborhood as you walk through it?
20. In what ways do you sense God's presence where you live?



## Prayer-Walking Guide<sup>39</sup>

What is prayer-walking? One simple definition: “Praying on-site with insight.” The purpose of prayer-walking is to seek God’s blessing, mercy, and transforming power, for the community and ourselves, and to become more aware of what we see by connecting prayer-walking with structured observation.

### General Guidelines for Prayer-Walking

- Meet at an assigned time and start with group prayer.
- Walk in groups of two or three. Plan routes ahead of time to cover as much of the designated area as possible.
- Pray aloud in a quiet, conversational voice, if you feel comfortable doing so, or pray silently. Don’t call attention to yourselves. As WayMakers puts it, “You can be on the scene without making one.”
- If anyone asks what you are doing, be prepared to respond: “We’re praying God’s blessing on this neighborhood. Is there any way we can pray for you?”
- Although it is not the primary purpose of prayer-walking, be open to opportunities to interact with and bless people.

*As you pray God’s promises with specific homes or work sites in view, you’ll find that hope for those people begins to grow. You’ll begin to see people as God might view them. You’ll likely find yourself becoming more interested in the welfare of the people you are praying for. Watch for the ways God impresses you to display Christ’s love in practical acts of kindness.*

- Plan to walk for about half an hour. If anyone in your group is not comfortable with walking, they can prayer-drive around the neighborhood instead.

- Gather to share your prayers, observations, and experiences. What did you learn about the neighborhood? Where was God in this experience?
- Encourage people to continue praying for the community during the week.

### How Do You Pray?

- *Pray for discernment*—seek the gift of seeing the community through God’s eyes, and to discern what God is already doing among the people. Ask God to reveal what you need to know to inform your prayer for the people, events, and places in the community.
- *Pray for blessing*—for every person, home, and business you encounter; for God’s grace in each life; for God’s will to be done in this community “as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).
- *Pray with empathy*—see and feel what residents live with. Pray for those things that express brokenness and grieve God’s spirit and give thanks to God for the blessings and gifts that exist in the community.
- *Pray from scripture*—prayers based directly on God’s word can be especially powerful. You may want to bring a Bible with key passages highlighted or copy verses onto note cards.
- *Pray in God’s power*—allow for silence (Romans 8:26), yet be bold, too (John 14:12-14).



<sup>39</sup> Inspired by WayMakers, “What is Prayerwalking?” [www.waymakers.org/prayerwalking.html](http://www.waymakers.org/prayerwalking.html).



## MissionInsite Database

MissionInsite<sup>40</sup> is a database tool that culls data from the U.S. Census, the Gallup Poll, Barna Research, Pew Foundation Research, and other sources to paint a picture of your community. The information included in a MissionInsite report includes:

- demographic data,
- lifestyle preferences (e.g. hobbies; how a household accesses the news; use of social media; top concerns in a household, community, or of national interest, etc.), and
- religious preferences (e.g. denominational affiliation, reasons for not participating in a church, reasons why one might stop participating in a church, most attractive programs, etc.).

Churches requesting a MissionInsite report will receive a “snapshot” of the neighborhood surrounding the congregation. The information from these data reports can be used to help congregations accomplish objectives outlined in the Thrive Project’s Season of Examination:

- Understand who your neighbors are and where different neighbors live.
- Identify the possible connection points between your congregation and your neighborhood.
- Help a Session and congregation make more informed decisions about where to focus ministry.

To request a MissionInsite report, contact Kevin Oxnam by email ([kevinenam@gmail.com](mailto:kevinenam@gmail.com)). <sup>41</sup>You will need to provide the following information to Kevin:

- Your name, telephone number, and email address.
- Your church’s name, your pastor’s name, and pastor’s email address.
- The search parameters desired in order to focus the report. Options include (a) specific zip codes, (b) an *n*-mile radius around the church, (c) an *n*-mile drive from the church, or (d) specific parameters of your choosing.

When the MissionInsite report is completed, Kevin will email it to you—and then the work begins! The “snapshot” will be a 30-page document flooded with data. Thrive facilitators recommend the report be handed to members of the congregation who love playing with data. Assign a group of 2 – 5 “data junkies” to read, pray over, discuss and discern what they see in the report, and then provide the Session with a one-page summary:

- What are 2–5 possibilities?
- What are 2–5 challenges?
- What are the 2–5 places where the congregation’s passion and giftedness overlaps with the neighborhood’s concerns and needs?

Now for the fun part: What do *your* pastor, elders, and church members, together, hope and dream? How do *all y’all* hear the Spirit’s leading? What, then, shall you do?

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<sup>40</sup> See <https://missioninsite.com/> for more information.

<sup>41</sup> This offer only applies to churches within Presbytery of Grand Canyon and Presbytery de Cristo.



## Appreciative Inquiry: Memories, Hopes and Conversations

*Key to success is high participation in a positive, well-implemented church-wide event.*

1. The purpose of an Appreciative Inquiry exercise is to seek the following:
  - Clarity about yourself as a congregation,
  - Being energized toward your shared future,
  - Replacing a background of confusion and malaise about future prospects with a positive and hopeful outlook that continues into the next phases of transition.

*A good process takes the needed time at each step. Solid work will reap commensurate rewards.*

2. Implementation of a Church-Wide Event. Set aside a day and time period and issue explicit invitations.

*Tables:* 6–8 people per table. Each table should have the following resources:

- Interview question sheets for each person
  - Pens/pencils
  - Colored crayons and markers (lots)
  - A LARGE newsprint-size “Post-it”
3. Interviews: Use “Memories, Hopes, and Conversations” sheet on the next page.

Use the following explanatory script:

- In front of you there is a sheet with three questions on it. Break into pairs for mutual interviews. You will take turns responding to each question, while the other listens and takes notes. Each person will have 8 minutes to respond to the first question, so the first question will take 16 minutes.
- Take a moment to think about the first question. Decide who will respond first, while the other person listens and takes notes. In 8 minutes, we will let you know it is time to trade roles and let the other person respond while you take notes.
- It’s time to trade roles. In 8 minutes, I will let you know it is time to move on to the next question.
- The next two questions will take 6 minutes for each person—12 minutes per question.

*Data Collection:* On large sheets of paper posted around the room, have participants write responses to the following:

- What themes emerge from the narrative being told in this appreciative inquiry?
- What core values are emerging?
- What hopes, dreams, and possibilities are emerging?
- What challenges need to be confronted with repentance?



## Appreciative Inquiry: Memories, Hopes, and Conversations

Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Remembering my entire experience at our church, when was I most alive, most motivated and excited about my involvement? What happened? What was my part? How did I feel?

2. What do I value most about our church? What activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important? What are the best features of our church?

3. Building on these experiences and strengths, what are three possibilities I prayerfully imagine that God might desire for the future of our church?



## Journey Wall

A Journey Wall creates a timeline in the fellowship hall using butcher paper. For Thrive Project purposes, a Journey Wall can help a congregation look back (at their identity) to look forward (to where God might be leading).

At a fellowship event (or series of events), ask congregants to share their stories related to the Great Ends:

- The approximate time (by decade or year) when they *personally* experienced God’s love and grace through a church whose ministry was guided by the Great Ends. (This can be at the same or a different church.)
- The approximate time (by decade or year) when the church *as a faith community* experienced spiritual insight, deepening, or blessing through one of the Great Ends. (This is, of necessity, an exercise that will be dominated by longer-term members and will help others to hear the congregational story of God’s love and grace through the decades.)
- What *themes* emerge from the narrative told in this journey wall? What core values emerge?
- What *chapters* are written by this narrative? How do the different church epochs differ from one another?

## “Lord, Deepen Our Wonder” Prayer Concerts

In “Lord, Deepen Our Wonder” prayer concerts, the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the seven themes, specifically targeted toward:

- *Repentance*: Lord, how have we failed to live with courageous and generous faith?
- *Discernment*: Lord, what would you have us to know, to do, or to become?
- *Wonder*: Lord, show us your Providence and provision beyond our ability!
- All small groups and committees throughout the church
- As a Sunday morning gathering
- By organizing “prayer triads” or “prayer quads” of people willing to pray together for the church in connection to the Great Ends.
- As part of each week’s worship service—it could be *both* a joy *and* a concern!

A prayer concert is easy to organize and helps focus the spiritual *attention* and spiritual *intention* of the congregation. Possibilities include:





**The Thrive Project:**  
a season of experimentation



## Spring: a season of experimentation

Spring is a time to plant, a time to bloom, a time to set in motion God's eventual harvest. Jesus' imagery is filled with plant life, which is expected since Israel was an agrarian society, and continues to invite our imaginations to cultivate, nurture, expect, and reap harvests of God-life among us—or have we forgotten how to dream of such things?

The Thrive Project's third season is Spring: a season of experimentation. The premise of the season of experimentation is that we can still dream; therefore, we will still plant, still cultivate, still nurture, and still expect God to do great things. We must continue to partner with the God who brings the harvest.

For each season there is a purpose, and every purpose deserves some metrics:

*Spring/Experimentation proposed purpose statement:* to engage in ministry and mission as a congregation with sufficient "newness" (e.g. in new ways, for new people, amidst new relationships, with new voices, toward new goals, etc.) that members are required to trust in the Lord with all of their hearts.

*Spring/Experimentation proposed metrics statement:* By the conclusion of the season of experimentation, our congregation will have experimented with X form(s) of internal ministry within the congregation and Y forms of external or missional ministry.

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

(1) *Be the Church Always Reforming.* Choose one of the six Great Ends to focus on for skill growth, congregational experimentation, expanding community connections, or risk-taking.

- Brainstorm five *possible* experiments and then choose *one* to try. Evaluate. Repeat as many times as needed.



- (2) *Missional clustering:* Partner with other congregations (either Presbyterian, ecumenical, or interfaith) or community organizations toward engaging missional ministry.
- (3) *"Lord, Deepen Our Service" prayer concerts:* in which the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the Great Ends but specifically targeted toward God's provision for the ministry experiment(s).

For each of the above ideas, the presbytery can provide resources through its Thrive Project facilitators. We have tools to share, and we are in this together. In the Kingdom of God, there is no need to DIY. In the Kingdom of God, we are better together. In the Kingdom of God, where God desires harvest, we are called to plant, to cultivate, to nurture, to expect, and to reap.

We can do this...together!



## The Power of Purpose

By Brad Munroe, Presbytery Pastor

Have you ever wondered why, how and for what reason one church is thriving and another that is doing the exact same things is dying? Or wondered why, how and for what reason a program led by a 50-something, well-liked, long-term church member is a great success while the program led by a different church member with the exact same credentials utterly fails? Perhaps the difference is in the why.

Simon Sinek, in his book *Start with Why*, contrasts the impact Apple has had as a successful enterprise versus TiVo as a commercial failure. Both are tech companies with state-of-the-art products; yet one is cutting-edge cool and the other nerdy. What is the difference between Apple and TiVo? Apple started with why.

Apple's why—its vision and self-identity—is to make connections easier, to make it easier and faster for an individual to become a community and for personal ideas to become shared encounter. TiVo's vision and identity is to produce a remote control that allows you to manipulate your TV watching experience; this is not a “why” but a “what.” Apple's vision leads to energy, enthusiasm and passion and *just happens* to get fulfilled by creating gadgets. TiVo's vision leads to the making of gadgets for the sake of gadgets; no wonder TiVo failed.

Starting with why is a theological and spiritual issue. Why do we proclaim the Gospel? Why should I care about my brother or sister, neighbor or stranger, friend or enemy? Why do we seek to maintain divine worship, preserve the truth or promote social righteousness? Why on God's green earth should we seek to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world? These are questions that energize our faithfulness, that bring passion in the pursuit of fruitfulness.

David Gortner, in his book *Transforming Evangelism*, suggests that beginning with why is essential for our practice of the first Great End of the Church: “No program or formula will work. Evangelism that emerges



from our gratitude and compels us to speak is a chosen habit....”<sup>42</sup> Gortner suggests three spiritual practices to energize the habit of sharing faith:

- I will remember my own wonder, joy and gratitude.
- I will speak; I will tell my stories.
- I will meet other people listening for the Holy in their lives.

Implicit in Gortner's spiritual practices is the notion that faith sharing must start with a clear and compelling sense of why Jesus matters and why our relationship with Jesus matters.

- Because Jesus is the most amazing man, a true revolutionary, a Jesus-troubles-my-soul-in-all-the-best-ways prophet, a “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39) Savior of the world, we love telling his story.
- Because Jesus is both an abiding presence and my guiding light, both my Friend and Savior and Lord, it is a joy to tell his story.

Faith sharing then is neither a “program or formula” but a way of living and moving and having our being...if we start with why.

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<sup>42</sup> David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism*. (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2008), 48.

A corollary to Start with Why is to define “why” in terms that are real, compelling and connect to our lives in simple yet powerful ways. Dan Heath, in an article based on his book *Writing a Mission Statement that Doesn't Suck*, illustrates what happens when we try to get too cute with our words. He tells the story of the pizza parlor who proposed the following mission statement: “Our mission is to serve the tastiest damn pizza in Wake County.”<sup>43</sup>

Nice, right? Simple, clear, compelling: makes my mouth water.



But then Dan tells what happened when the owner suggested this mission statement to his managers; everyone became a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher and began to worry about things from grammar to political correctness to channeling one’s inner thesaurus. The resulting mission statement sounded like this: “Our mission is to present with integrity the highest quality entertainment solutions to families.”<sup>44</sup>

Would you like to have pizza from this place?

Last year I and others within the presbytery visited the border ministry of Frontera de Cristo with mission co-worker Mark Adams. We talked across the border fence with Mexican church leaders; we visited a migrant

repatriation center and a food cooperative; we held a prayer vigil to remember those who have died in the desert; we spoke with Border Patrol agents and the mayor of Douglas. Sounds nice, right? Perhaps...perhaps not.

But what happens when I talk not about what we did but why we did it; our day of prayer and reflection takes on a whole new light:

- Because Jesus is Lord of all nations, we lived the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) by speaking with those of other tongues, praying the Lord would break down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14).
- Because God hears the cries of the oppressed (Exodus 3:7), we visited a center of healing and hope to hear stories of God’s mercy and care.
- Because God cares for the needs of the hungry (Matthew 25:40), we visited a food cooperative to hear the amazing story of how 16 families no longer suffer food scarcity.
- Because God knows all people by name (Matthew 6:26), we prayed for those forgotten in the desert; we remembered them, and our hearts burned with a passion for shalom.
- Because God has established all governing authorities (Romans 13:1), we listened to the hearts of Border Patrol agents about how they seek to protect our nation even while wrestling with the very real human tragedies that surround them.

Do you know why you do what you do? Can you articulate this truth in simple, compelling ways? As a spiritual exercise, write a mission statement for each of the six Great Ends connecting your “why” to your “what”—starting with why.

In Christian faith, what we do certainly matters, but God cares about our hearts: why we do it matters just as much, maybe more.

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<sup>43</sup> Dan Heath, Fast Company: [https://www.fastcompany.com/1404951/how-write-](https://www.fastcompany.com/1404951/how-write)

[mission-statement-doesnt-suck-video](#). Accessed July 5, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



## The Power of Adaptation: Technical Fixes vs. Adaptive Challenges

We have all heard the old joke: “How may Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?” “Change? Who said anything about change?”

We live in an era in which changing leadership dynamics have come to the fore in conversations about ministry. Gone are the days when Bible, theology, church history, and a little preaching were sufficient course studies to prepare one for ministry. Gone are the days when churches could open their doors and *expect* their pews to be filled. Gone are the days of late modernity; here and now are the days of post-modernity, a time when Christian faith is no longer the default assumption of the dominant culture, a time when the church must learn to change.

In today’s world, common ministry assumptions are challenged, ignored, or presumed to be irrelevant. In today’s world, budgets are tight and overly stretched; staffing is being downsized. In today’s world, churches routinely wonder—and wander—about in search of mission and vision statements that do more than sound nice, they might actually guide a leadership team’s decision-making processes. Into this day has come a core of literature about what it means to be a leader for today’s

world, for today’s church. Current leadership studies talk about this tension in terms of “adaptive challenges” or “adaptive leadership.”

Adaptive challenges are not about change, but about growth. God is calling the Church to grow deeper into the image of Christ. The literature distinguishes between “technical fixes” and “adaptive change.” It speaks of leaders becoming able to learn, grow, and adapt to the new, ever-evolving challenges of ministry. A technical fix rummages around in the box for the right tool (that must have been misplaced); adaptive leadership asks, “Do we even need a tool? What would happen if...?” A technical fix looks around the table and asks, “Which of us would do this best?” Adaptive leadership asks, “Who else needs to be at the table?” A technical fix works very, very hard to do the same things in ever more efficient ways; adaptive leadership seeks to learn what is necessary to understand what is possible in order to try what has never been attempted.

Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz describes the distinctions between the technical and adaptive as follows:<sup>45</sup>

<b>Technical Fix</b>	<b>Adaptive Change</b>
Solutions are already known	Solutions are not yet revealed
The skill set required for leading currently exists	A new skill set is required for leading
Leadership seeks known answers	Leadership asks many questions
Solutions always come from within the present system	Solutions often come from beyond the present system
Problems are quickly solved with limited confusion	Problems require ongoing conversation and sustained discomfort, leading to perseverant dialogue
Leaders manage with their expertise	Problems are solved by wrestling together, collective intelligence
Episodic conflict occurs	Persistent conflict occurs, requiring the work of ongoing transformation

<sup>45</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *The Nature of Adaptive Leadership*, [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfLLDvn0pI8), July 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfLLDvn0pI8>.

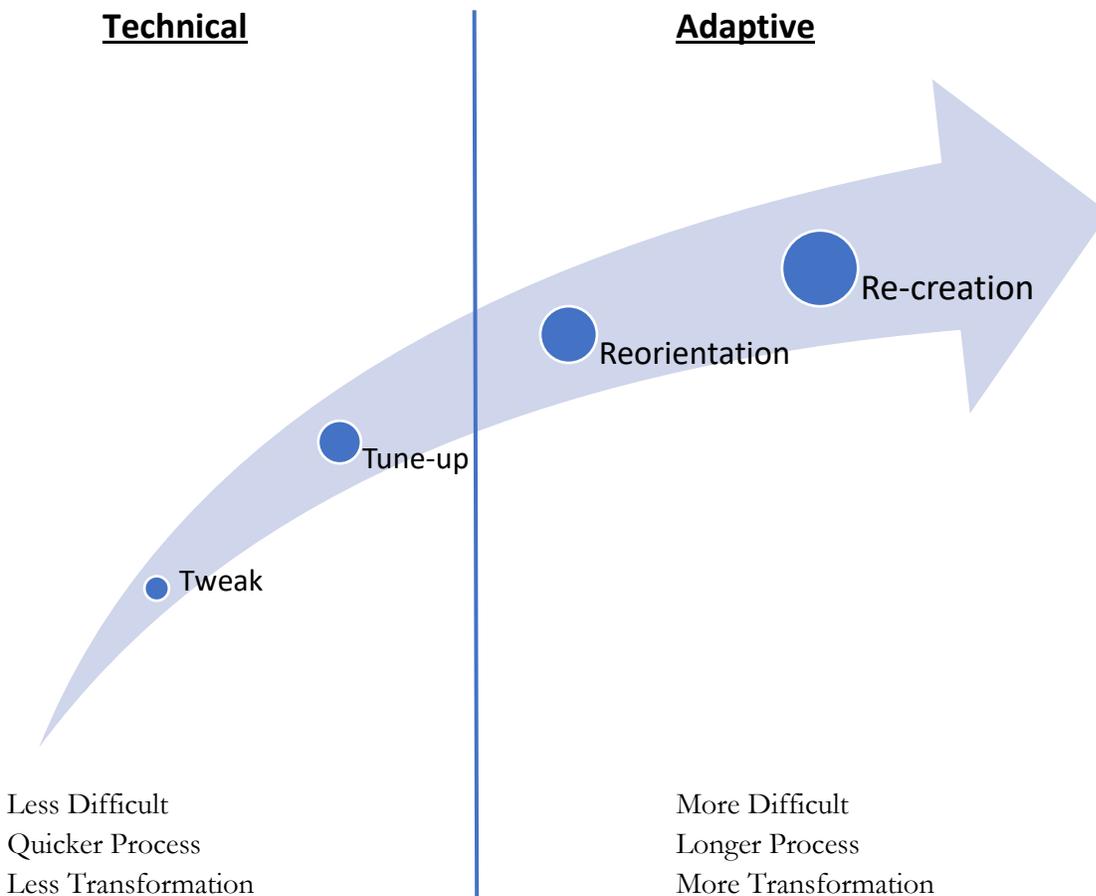
The distinction between technical and adaptive is more than a philosophical notion about leadership. Russell Crabtree, a ministry consultant and researcher who has worked with over 1,300 congregations from across the spectrum of mainline denominations, demonstrates that one of the strongest predictors of church vitality is a congregation's ability to adapt.<sup>46</sup> Crabtree tracked churches' four-year worship attendance shifts and discovered the following patterns:<sup>47</sup>

- Conservative and highly adaptable: +1.0%
- Progressive and highly adaptable: -5.7%
- Progressive and least adaptable: -11.4%
- Conservative and least adaptable: -16.7%.

Clearly, congregations are struggling to maintain their worship attendance in today's post-Christian culture. However, it is also clear that adaptability is a path toward positive movement. To put these numbers into a Presbyterian, Reformed faith perspective, we might reframe the above chart as follows:

- The Church Reformed and Always Reforming: +1.0% to -5.7%
- The Church Reformed but Never Reforming: -11.4% to -16.7%

The graph below seeks to visualize the difference between a congregation's typical response to a problem, which is to try a technical fix, versus what it might look like to lean into an adaptive response.



<sup>46</sup> Russell Crabtree, *Penguins in the Pews: Climate, Change, and Church Growth* (Hendersonville, NC: Magi Press, 2017), 53.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The other indicators are “high energy” and “clarity of vision.” Many mainline congregations have one or both

of these two indicators. Unfortunately, even these congregations often struggle with adaptation: “Change?!”



The tendency in most churches is to seek technical fixes because they are less difficult to implement—a mere tweak or minor tune-up is all that is required. They also move from question to answer more quickly and are able to be discussed, decided, and delegated during the same Session meeting. The only downside to technical fixes is that they don't lead to transformation of mission or vision, ministry values or vitality. Conversely, adaptive change is quite difficult to implement—requiring significant changes to the why, the what, and the how of ministry. The adaptive requires both a lengthier conversation and a broader dialogue that can take months, if not years. The upside to adaptive work is that

there exists the real possibility for the kind of God-inspired, God-guided transformation for ministry necessary for today's world.

In many of our ministries, we seem to be answering questions that are no longer being asked by the culture. In many of our ministries, we seem to spend an enormous amount of effort and energy ensuring that we do what we have always done, only better. Yet, there is hope, for in some of our ministries, we seem to be asking the right questions: “What do we have to *become* to be able to discuss these questions in meaningful ways? What is our purpose today?” In some of our ministries, we seem willing to engage in the journey of learning new ways to minister the Gospel of Jesus to a spiritually hungry, compassion-desiring, justice-craving culture.

What would it look like for your Session or your congregation to have the kind of conversations in which adaptive challenges are engaged? Such conversations require communities of radical humility, uncommon honesty, and a willingness to listen, listen, listen. Only communities of sensitivity, trust, and care are able to engage in such conversations.

What kind of community are you?



## Jesus' Leadership and the Adaptive Journey: the walk to emmaus and great commission for leaders

One of the prevailing temptations in ministry is to leap too quickly to solutions, especially for those who are leaders in their churches. Leaders become leaders by solving problems, by being perceived as capable and willing to tackle the difficult work of bringing God's good news into people's lives and the life of our communities. As leaders, then, we are tempted to leap before we look, for problems come fast and hard and the next one is just around the corner.

As churches who seek to grow ever deeper into the *missio dei*, the mission of God, and who live in an evolving society that finds "no religious affiliation" and "done with church" (the Nones and Dones) to be faster-growing segments of the population than "mainline Christian," we must ask ourselves what it looks like to walk the transformational journey. What does it look like to walk toward the faithfulness, courage, and compassion we are called to have for the sake of Jesus Christ. Put another way, "What kind of leadership is required to get unstuck?"

Summarized below are *Adaptive Leadership Lessons* from two of Jesus' better-known encounters: his Walk to Emmaus and his giving of the Great Commission. Each of these passages suggest ways we can lead toward adaptation in our congregations. How can we learn from Jesus for our own leadership?

### *The Walk to Emmaus*

1. *Jesus came alongside.* "As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them." (Luke 24:15) Leadership is relational, connective, a contact sport.
2. *Jesus asked questions.* "He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?'" (24:17) Leadership is inquisitive, interested in the insights, opinions, and input of others.
3. *Jesus listened to their answers.* "'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet. . . . Then some of our

companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.'" (24:19, 24) Leadership is open to others' stories and experiences; leaders intuit implicitly that transformation begins from a particular time, place, and circumstance.

4. *Jesus interpreted what was happening.* "'Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (24:26–27) Leadership frames our communal conversations, helping guide and direct them without controlling the outcome.
5. *Jesus let the disciples determine their own future.* "As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them." (24:28–29) Leadership allows others the freedom to respond in compassion and courage, in faith, in hope, and in love.
6. *Jesus revealed to the disciples their shared community.* "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." (24:30–31). Leadership cultivates community and caring, the sense that we are all in ministry together. Cleopas and the other disciple returned to Jerusalem and ignited a revolution.

But, before we seek to ignite transformation in our congregations, we do well to engage in a bit of self-reflection. As leaders, how would we rate ourselves? At which of these six actions are we *most* like Jesus and *least* like Jesus? How can we lean into our strengths? How can we invite and enlist those around us to help us minimize the damage we do because of our weaknesses? With God's help, all things are possible.

## *The Great Commission*

1. *Jesus received doubt.* Perhaps the greatest curiosity is that when the resurrected Jesus stood before the disciples, “some doubted.” (Matthew 28:17) Even the greatest leader ever was doubted by his followers. As teaching and ruling elders, not everyone is going to be on board with the decisions we make. That’s okay!
2. *Jesus moved toward the disciples.* Rather than be offended or taken aback, Jesus “came to [the disciples]” immediately following their expression of doubt. It is a leader’s temptation to experience others’ doubt of our leadership as rejection and to move away. Not Jesus. In the face of doubt, Jesus connected at deeper levels.
3. *Jesus gave clear instructions.* In the Greek text, “go” is not in the command form and has the connotation of “as you go.” The command is “make disciples.” (28:18) Making disciples is our mission—God’s *missio dei*. As leaders, we do not need to guess what our mission is, nor do we need to write a mission statement for our church; such has been given us already.
4. *Jesus grounded mission in identity.* The making of disciples is connected by Jesus with baptism (28:19), which is the sacrament of identity. *Who* we are gives

inspiration and passion to *what* we do. Because *we are* God’s beloved—a truth we learn in baptism—we seek to share the fullness of this gift with others.

5. *Jesus reinforced truth with action.* Jesus understood that a truth, such as our belovedness, is an abstraction if it is not reinforced with daily practices of active obedience. (28:20) As leaders, we need to call Jesus’ followers to demonstrate right theology through right practice—be doers of the Word, especially as we seek to live into our own belovedness and teach others according to their belovedness.
6. *Jesus was present.* Leaders aspiring to be like Jesus stay connected to their people. (28:20) The call to practice courageous faith requires knowing that we are not alone, never alone. God does not call us to individualism but invites us into community.

On the mountain of the Lord, Jesus broke through human doubt to invite divine faith. Can we do the same after our encounters with Jesus? Once again, we ask, “At which of these six actions are we *most* like Jesus and *least* like Jesus? How can we lean into our strengths? How can we invite and enlist those around us to help us minimize the damage we do because of our weaknesses?” With God’s help, all things are possible.





**The Thrive Project:**  
tools for the season of experimentation



## Exploring Your Church's Mission: creative writing exercise<sup>48</sup>

Because each church is unique, each church approaches the writing of a mission statement in its own way. Included here are some models and samples that may be helpful. These are not intended to be formulas, but merely suggestions and stimulators for your own ideas. Any of these may work well for a first draft and then be further developed.

**BASIC MODEL** *Begin writing phrases, sentences, and words which respond to the following:*

- Who have we been? Who are we now? How are we unique as a community of faith?
- How does our setting affect who we are?
- What are we doing now? Why do we do what we do? How do we do what we do?
- Where do we want to go from here? Toward what is God calling us?
- What are our hopes for congregational life and outreach into the community and world?
- How are we going to get there? What processes will we employ? Who will be involved?

*Develop paragraphs. What themes seem to emerge that might shape the statement?*

**MODEL #2** *Respond to these questions. Some questions may require more than one sentence to answer.*

- How are we unique as a community of faith?
- How has God shown special care for us as a community of faith?
- What kind of community of faith do we feel God is calling us to be?
- What do we hope to do in order to fulfill our calling?

**MODEL #3** *Complete each sentence with several words, phrases, or sentences.*

- We, the members of \_\_\_\_\_, are a people:
  - Passionate about...
    - Our passion is reflected in...
  - Whose spiritual gifts as a community are...
    - Our spiritual gifts are reflected in...
  - Surrounded by people and needs that...
    - Our response to these needs is...
- As a unique expression of Christian community, we intend to honor this passion and use these gifts to serve these people and needs by...
  - Living out the first Great End of the Church by...
  - Living out the second Great End of the Church by...
  - Living out the third Great End of the Church by...
  - Living out the fourth Great End of the Church by...
  - Living out the fifth Great End of the Church by...
  - Living out the sixth Great End of the Church by...

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<sup>48</sup> This tool has been adapted from the *Commission on Ministry Handbook* of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley.

#### MODEL #4 Describe a...

- *COMPELLING CAUSE* that is connected to a...
- *CONCRETE GOAL* that will be fulfilled by focusing energy and effort, prayer and perseverance on...
- *TWO VITAL BEHAVIORS* that are most likely to create...
  - *MOTIVATION* (willingness) and
  - *SKILL DEVELOPMENT* (ability) to accomplish the goal and fulfill the cause.
- Example 1 – Focus on the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind:
  - *Compelling Cause*: People need to encounter Jesus Christ and a personal invitation to church is the most effective way for that to happen, as 50% of friends will say yes to a personal invitation.
  - *Concrete Goal*: FPC members will invite 100 friends to come to church with them during Lent. (Not concrete: We will begin to emphasize the importance of invitations.)
  - *Vital Behaviors for proclaiming the Gospel for the salvation of humankind*:
    - We will (a) print business cards that can be used when inviting a friend and
    - We will (b) write/guide/teach/practice a script to build members' comfort level when inviting a friend.
- Example 2 –Focus on the promotion of social righteousness
  - *Compelling Cause*: People encounter Jesus Christ through a faith community that lives as a reflection of God's light and love, while attractional models of church fail to engage our culture.
  - *Concrete Goal*: We will create six new missional initiatives between Labor Day and Memorial Day. (Not concrete: We will try to be more missional.)
  - *Vital Behaviors for Missional Ministry*:
    - We will (a) create *operational clarity* by defining the term "missional" and what is meant by "missional ministry" in sermons, lessons, and printed material toward the goal of 95% comprehension among our members, and
    - (b) encourage our members to create and initiate their own projects by *redesigning the way we budget for mission* such that all missional projects that include three or more members will be funded by the church.

#### MODEL #5 Describe your mission in terms of Identity in Christ, which inspires motivation to understand why something is important, which leads you to live a particular way.

- We are... (identity statement/description)
  - Therefore, we do Member Care *because...* (why statement/purpose/motivation)
    - Therefore, we *intend* to do member care in this way... (what/how statement)
- We are... (identity statement/description)
  - Therefore, we Worship and Celebrate *because...* (why statement/purpose/motivation)
    - Therefore, we *intend* to worship in this way... (what/how statement)

- We are... (identity statement/description)
  - Therefore, we do Education *because*... (why statement/purpose/motivation)
    - Therefore, we *intend* to educate in this way... (what/how statement)
- Continue “We are...” for the Great Ends, as well as prayer, stewardship, leadership, etc.

**MODEL #5A** *Another congregation structured the statement by titling sections:*

- Who We Are
- Who We Are Becoming
- Why We Desire to Become Who We Are to Be
- What We Are to Do
- How We Are to Do It
- Why We Desire to Do What We Are to Do



**MODEL #6** *Appreciative Inquiry*

- Appreciative inquiry seeks to discern a congregation’s call through conversation about their history and identity that focuses on strengths, blessings, and hopes. For a review of the Appreciative Inquiry process, please refer to the section titled “tools for the season of examination.”

## Steps for Using Your Chosen Model

Prepare for a church-wide event by issuing explicit invitations. In advance of the meeting, choose which of the model(s) above you want groups to use in small groups. You may choose to have each small group use the same model (for focus) or assign several models (for variety).

- (1) *Remembering the church’s foundations*: Open in prayer and then begin with members participating in a preliminary exercise that reminds all participants of the congregation’s history, identity, and current challenges. Helpful tools for remembering the church’s foundations include the following and can be found in the season of examination section:
  - Journey Wall
  - Neighborhood Walk/Prayer Walk
  - Appreciative Inquiry
  - MissionInsite Database report
- (2) *Alternative to #1*: If time constraints at a particular congregational event do not allow for full participation in one of the foundation-setting exercises listed above, an alternative is for leaders to summarize gleanings from what the congregation has learned to date about themselves and their history, identity, and current challenges. **(15 to 20 minutes)**
- (3) Describe each writing model to be used and form the small groups by inviting participants to self-select the model with which they are most comfortable. **(20 – 30 minutes)**
- (4) Each small group designates one writer—she or he will craft the narrative but not participate in the group’s dialogue. The designated writer is to listen, listen, listen. **(30 – 35 minutes)**

- (5) The first five minutes of small group time should be spent in silence to allow the introverts to ponder what is important and what ideas they might have. **(35 – 40 minutes)**
- (6) Announce to the groups that they are to discuss what *could* or *might* be written, but do not allow the designated writer to put anything on paper; she or he is to listen the others' ideas only. Give the groups 15 minutes to discuss what they want to write. **(40 – 55 minutes)**
- (7) Give the rest of the group a break and ask the designated writer to spend 10 minutes crafting a response that uses their assigned template. **(55 – 65 minutes)**
- (8) When the group returns, have the entire group respond to what they like about what has been written on their behalf. Each person must share something they like. Only after everyone has said something they like can the group begin to suggest edits to the writer. The writer, and only the writer, has the final word on what gets written. She or he is free to accept the edit, use the edit in adapted form, or reject the edit. Give the group ten minutes for this portion of the exercise. **(65 – 80 minutes)**
- (9) Have each small group present to the entire group what they have written. **(80 – 90 minutes)**
- (10) As a large group, discuss what has been presented: **(90 – 115 minutes)**
- What themes emerge?
  - What commonalities are present?
  - Where are there differences in assumptions or perspective?
  - Where are there differences in hopes and dreams?
- (11) Thank participants, close in prayer, and give the data sheets to members of the discernment task force (e.g. Session, an Action Learning Team, etc.) **(115 – 120 minutes)**



## Writing Ministry Objectives: moving from dreaming to defining to doing

### How to Influence in a Positive Direction: four keys

1. The books *Influencer*<sup>49</sup> and *Start with Why*<sup>50</sup> posit four keys to influencing positive action toward a directed objective (i.e. getting something done):
  - a. Start with “why”—people connect with purpose and passion
  - b. Define objectives that are clear, concrete, and compelling; they will motivate more effectively
  - c. Focus on vital behaviors or leverage points/actions that direct change
  - d. Over-determine/over-schedule/over-plan for change

### #1 – From Notion to Mission: start with “why”

1. Before asking, “What shall we do?” or “How shall we do it?” ask questions about motivation, passion, and purpose. Ask “why” questions!
2. For the church that “wants to grow”: Why should we invite others?
  - a. Because people need to encounter Jesus Christ and a personal invitation to church is the most effective way to create that opportunity. Fifty percent of friends who are invited to church by a friend will say, “Yes.”
3. For the church that wants adults to “get more involved in adult education”: Why does adult discipleship matter?
  - a. Because people encounter Jesus Christ in the Word and experience deep, personal transformation. Adult learners go deeper when they learn in community.

4. For the church that wants “to be more missional”: Why does becoming missional matter?
  - a. Because people encounter Jesus Christ through the faith community that lives as a reflection of God’s light and love. Attractional models of church are, increasingly, failing to connect with those beyond the church.
5. **Key to the Key:** Know why you are doing what you are doing and have a reason that ignites passion, gets the heart pumping, that can be clearly articulated, internalized, and owned by all involved, especially leadership!

### #2 – Define Objectives that Motivate Action: moving beyond vague and abstract

1. Typical objective: “We will impact healthcare toward saving lives.”
  - a. Clear, concrete, and compelling: “We will save 100,000 lives by June 16 at 9:00 a.m.”<sup>51</sup>
2. Typical objective: “We will make 5,000 low-interest loans this year in [this developing nation].”
  - a. Clear, concrete, and compelling: “We will lift 5,000 people out of poverty before the end of the year by making 5,000 loans of \$5 per person per day.”<sup>52</sup>
3. Typical objective: “We will begin to emphasize the importance of invitations.”
  - a. Clear, concrete, and compelling: “We will energize our outreach by having at least 60 church members invite at least 100 friends,

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Grenny and Kerry Patterson, *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change* (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. (New York: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Grenny, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Grenny, *ibid.*

colleagues, or neighbors to church between Ash Wednesday and Easter.”

4. Typical objective: “We will make a push for more adult education.”
  - a. Clear, concrete, and compelling: “We will create and fill four new, short-term small groups; one new, long-term small group; and offer one additional Sunday morning class in order to have 35 new, first-time participants in adult study groups between Labor Day and Memorial Day.”
5. Typical objective: “We will try to be more missional.”
  - a. Clear, concrete, and compelling: “We will use 10% of our mission budget to create six new missional-initiative projects that include at least 18 first-time ministry participants between Labor Day and Memorial Day.”
6. **Key to the Key:** focused, measured, and time-limited objectives will motivate most effectively.

### #3 – Focus on Vital Behaviors: leverage points / actions

1. Vital behaviors are those actions that most effect change in a positive direction. What can leadership do that will have the greatest impact toward moving people to fulfill the objective?<sup>53</sup>
2. Vital Behaviors and “The 80% / 20% Rule”
  - a. 80% of the impact will come from 20% of the ideas/actions.
  - b. Put another way: If you have ten “good” ideas, leadership must eliminate eight of them in order to focus effort, energy, dollars, and attention on the two ideas that will most impact change. Leaders must be able to say “No” to most things in order to say “Yes” to what matters.

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<sup>53</sup> Grenny, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Grenny, et. al. use the phrases “over-determine” and “over-schedule,” by which they mean organizations need to put much more administrative and leadership focus toward

3. Sample Vital Behaviors to motivate members to invite friends to church:
  - a. Suggest a script with broad themes/possibilities, and then *practice, practice, practice.*
  - b. Create business cards with directions to the church and worship times for ease of distribution by members to friends, colleagues, and neighbors.
4. Sample Vital Behaviors to motivate members to participate in adult education:
  - a. User-friendly format (because adult learners don’t like to feel stupid) 😊
  - b. Time-limited groups (because adult learners are way too busy)
5. Sample Vital Behaviors to motivate members to get involved in missional ministries:
  - a. Clarity, specificity, and practicality in defining the term “missional”: what is it you are really, actually, and truly wanting people to do?
  - b. Redesigning the church’s budget process to allow “mission money” to support people’s ideas, passion, and creativity through projects that are self-designed but Session reviewed and approved.

### #4 – Address both Willingness and Ability: over-determine change<sup>54</sup>

1. To “over-determine change” is to speak *both* to our willingness *and* our ability. If we are willing but not able, nothing will change. If we are able but not willing, nothing will change. For something/someone to change, she or he must be both willing and able! Often a church’s “marketing” is to a person’s desire (willingness) without asking if they have any ability.

effecting change than is customary. The authors agree with Grenny’s concept but hesitate to use the phrase “over-schedule” in a document for church leaders, as this phrase has connotations that may confuse the reader.

- a. Willingness and Ability? Yes! = Asking a Presbyterian to think deeply about social issues in light of the Gospel. This is easy, and the program goes well!
- b. Willingness but no Ability? No! = Asking a Presbyterian to evangelize their friend. If you want a Presbyterian to evangelize, leadership better do extensive training!
- c. Ability but no Willingness? No! Asking all people to tithe their giving.
  - i. Ability and Willingness in giving: Asking people to give beyond their normal pledge to support the youth mission.

	Motivation	Ability
Personal	1 Make the Undesirable Desirable	2 Over Invest in Skill Building
Social	3 Harness Peer Pressure	4 Find Strength in Numbers
Structural	5 Design Rewards and Demand Accountability	6 Change the Environment

- 2. To “over-determine change” is also to speak beyond the *personal* and also to the *social* and *structural* as well. Often a group’s “marketing” is to the person’s willingness (see above), yet it is
- 3. Social Influencers
  - a. Social willingness: harness peer pressure; use consistent messaging; use multiple voices, not just the pastor’s; preach to the “we” and not just the “me.”
  - b. Social ability: find strength in numbers; focus attention on the “middle third” of a congregation that are the early adopters; find the hidden talents/gifts in your people.
- 4. Structural Influencers

also important to examine how the social and structural elements in the church motivate and impact change. Here is what over-determining change looks like as a 3 x 2 grid:<sup>55</sup>

- a. Structural willingness (often associated with the *physical* environment): How are rooms set up? What is the traffic flow, both outside the building and within the building? Is there sufficient signage?
- b. Structural ability (often associated with the *administrative* environment): How do congregational policies and practices encourage or stifle energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? How does leadership practice “permission-giving” versus “gatekeeping”? What trouble will I get into for suggesting an idea?

<sup>55</sup> Grenny, *ibid.*

## Influencers and Congregational Revitalization: questions to ponder

1. Getting in touch with “Why”:
  - a. What is your passion? Your motivation? Your dream?
  - b. What makes your heart(s) sing? (This is both a personal and an *all y’all* question)
  - c. How is God calling you to wonder about a BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals)?
2. The Six Great Ends and Your Congregational Objective(s):
  - a. Which of the Six Great Ends will you focus on to effect change?
  - b. What are you being called to do, with whom, and toward what purpose?
  - c. How can you write an objective that is clear, concrete, and compelling?
  - d. Is the objective you write focused, measured, and time-limited?
3. The Six Great Ends and Vital Behaviors:
  - a. Brainstorm at least ten good ideas that maybe, might, could (we hope), possibly be helpful toward moving in the direction of your objective.
  - b. Ponder ideas in silence for three minutes (to let the introverts think), and then discuss your ponderings together—first in small groups and then as a leadership team.
  - c. Discuss the ideas in terms of “interest-based” or “values-based” conversation: What can you affirm/appreciate? What are your concerns? What questions make your heart wonder?
  - d. Decide which *two* ideas (no more, no less) have the greatest possibility for leveraging/impacting/creating change in the direction of your objective.
4. The Six Great Ends and Creating a Willingness and Ability to Change:
  - a. How can you speak *personally* to folks in support of their passion? What will make their hearts sing?
  - b. How can you speak *personally* to folks to increase their ability? What training, education, preparation, perspective, or insight is required to move toward one of the Great Ends and your ministry objective?
  - c. How can you speak *socially* to create a sense of “team,” of group unity?
  - d. How can you speak *socially* to find those people who can move the objective forward? How many people are needed to start (to create an “early win”), and how can you add new voices, new hands, new leadership as you grow forward together?
  - e. How can you speak *structurally* through your physical environment? Are there any inexpensive modifications of the building that can be made? Any changes in where people are located or the location from whence they serve that can spark change?
  - f. How can you speak *structurally* through your administrative practices to promote energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? Who are the “secret gatekeepers” that patrol the hallways of your church? How can you convert these gatekeepers into “permission-givers” (and thus co-opt them to help with item 4c above)?



## Action Learning Teams (ALT)<sup>56</sup>

Ministry Design involves finding ways to bring the unchanging good news about Jesus to a rapidly changing culture—to grow people as disciples while meeting their human needs. This means we need to be a learning congregation, adapting to the reality of a changing culture. Conversely, information that leads to inspiration and motivation but that does not lead to action leads to frustration. Thus, we need to combine *Action* and *Learning*.

How does this work? In simplest terms:

1. It begins with an *Adaptive Challenge*. How can we ...?
2. It is accomplished by a *team* (called an **Action Learning Team** or **ALT**) of four to eight people.
3. They use a *reflection* and *questioning process*.
4. They resolve to *act*.
5. They *learn from the results* of the action taken.
6. They are supported by a *coach*.



### Now for some detail:

The **Action Learning Team** needs to be conducted in the context of the Mission and Vision of the congregation. One of the questions that must be in the forefront is “How do the results enhance the Mission and Vision?”

**The Adaptive Challenge** should be significant and deal with an objective, an opportunity, or an obstacle. It is an issue for which no satisfactory response is known or for which there is no adequate or effective solution.

### The Action Learning Team (ALT)

- Gather four to eight members to bring diversity.
- Team members bring faith and a heart for God.
- Team members may know something about the issues but remain open to learning more.
- Team members provide capability and imagination.
- Team members must have a commitment to teamwork and to action.
- The ALT is empowered to carry out the group's plan.

<sup>56</sup> Adapted from Stan Ott, *Acts 16:5: Action Learning Teams*. Vital Churches Institute. <http://www.vitalchurchesinstitute.com/>.

**The Questioning and Reflection Process:** The team must be open to:

- Questioning the “current knowledge” and finding new knowledge—gracefully challenging assumptions.
- Asking God for wisdom and insight.
- Reflecting on new ideas and possible solutions.

### **A Commitment to Action**

- The ALT expects to act and is empowered to carry out the action. The objective is not a discussion or a proposal but action.
- Experimentation is a learning form of action.
- Action learning is cyclical: improvements are expected within the action/reflection/learning cycle.
- Even if the initial actions are not fruitful, learning has occurred and the basis for other actions is developed.
- Permission-giving by the governing organization is essential. It may take the form of:
  - Full authority to act within the congregation’s stated Mission and Vision, or
  - “Keep us informed and let us know if resources or support is needed.”
- Remember to honor the past while creating the future.

### **A Commitment to Learning**

- Reflect on what has been/is being learned.
- How does the action need to change?
- How can the process be used with other questions or in alternative situations?
- What are the implications of our experience for our congregation?

### **The Learning Coach**

- Observes the process and facilitates open, fair process when necessary.
- May come from within the congregation or beyond the congregation.
- Ensures that all steps are taken.
- Keeps the process moving forward.
- Ensures adequate talk time for all members.
- Watches to make sure that the group adheres to its commitments with each other and with its purpose.
- The Coach does *not* engage in the problem-solving process.

### **A Suggested Schedule for Action Learning**

To adequately address a complex issue and to provide intentional time for questioning and reflecting, the Action Learning process requires three to twelve months.

*Meeting Schedule:*

- Meet at least 8–10 hours a month.
- Hold an initial extended meeting to hash out issues, define needed knowledge, and set regular (weekly) meetings.
- Set an end date.

*Suggestions:*

1. Ensure that the elders are committed to the process and that there is one elder as a member of each ALT.
2. Selecting and training the coaches: After the coaches are selected, have a coaches' meeting or two to ensure there is understanding and agreement on the coaching process. Suggest having periodic coaches' meetings for support, sharing concerns, sharing current results, potential overlaps, etc.
3. Selecting and training the ALT members: ALT members should be identified by the Pastors/Elders and trained in the process as outlined in this document. Care should be extended to distinguish between technical and adaptive changes as the majority of participants are familiar with and conditioned by technical fixes and may be inexperienced in considering adaptive solutions.
4. Communications are critical. It is important to keep the Session and congregation informed during the process. It is important that the coaches have clear communications with the ALTs on agendas, action items/plans, meeting dates, and meeting minutes.
5. Communication technology availability: This should include a room that accommodates ALT-size groups and is "wired" for high-speed internet to access Skype or Zoom videoconferencing or provide for conference calls.
6. Budget. There may be costs involved in the learning.
7. What else?



## Adaptive Change Checklist:

to help leaders distinguish between technical problems and adaptive challenges

In his book *Influencer*, Joseph Grenny posits six motivational dynamics that influence organizations like churches toward accepting, embracing, and living into change. Grenny places these six influences into a 3 x 2 grid as follows:<sup>57</sup>

For Grenny, it is not enough for one to be willing if one is not able, just as it is irrelevant if one is able but not willing. Willing and able go together like summer and apple pie. As well, Grenny argues that while most motivational speeches aim toward the individual—one’s personal willingness—it is just as necessary to target social and structural influences—the forces of the group and the organization of the group—if one wants to produce effective growth and change.

The chart on the next page seeks to merge Grenny’s work with the distinctions between technical fixes and adaptive

leadership found in the work of Ronald Heifetz. As a reminder, Heifetz describes these distinctions as follows:

	Motivation	Ability
Personal	1 Make the Undesirable Desirable	2 Over Invest in Skill Building
Social	3 Harness Peer Pressure	4 Find Strength in Numbers
Structural	5 Design Rewards and Demand Accountability	6 Change the Environment

Technical Fix	Adaptive Change
Solutions are already known	Solutions are not yet revealed
The skill set required for leading currently exists	A new skill set is required for leading
Leadership seeks known answers	Leadership asks many questions
Solutions always come from within the present system	Solutions often come from beyond the present system
Problems are quickly solved with limited confusion	Problems require ongoing conversation and sustained discomfort, leading to perseverant dialogue
Leaders manage with their expertise	Problems are solved by wrestling together, collective intelligence
Episodic conflict occurs	Persistent conflict occurs, requiring the work of ongoing transformation

Church leadership tends to operate in the technical column rather than the adaptive column, yet churches seeking revitalization would do well to learn adaptive ways. What follows is an attempt to create a checklist for adaptive change that offers specific, concrete questions

church leaders can ask themselves regarding the challenges they confront and seek to solve, as well as the means by which they seek to overcome these challenges. To paraphrase the comedian Jeff Foxworthy, “You might need adaptive leadership if....

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Grenny and Kerry Patterson, *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change* (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill, 2013).

<b>Technical</b>	<b>Adaptive</b>
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\_\_\_ Is it a problem familiar from the past?

\_\_\_ Is it a challenge of the emerging future?

\_\_\_ Did it “come out of the blue,” a surprise you didn’t imagine would come your way?

<b>Personal Willingness</b>	<b>Personal Willingness</b>
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\_\_\_ Is the problem within the range of expectations regarding one’s comfort zone?

\_\_\_ Does the challenge reasonably create anxiety even among those not prone to feeling anxious?

\_\_\_ Are people having to step out of their comfort zones?

\_\_\_ Has a sense of urgency been created?

<b>Personal Ability</b>	<b>Personal Ability</b>
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\_\_\_ Is a known skill or expertise sufficient to solve the problem?

\_\_\_ Is a new or as-yet-undiscovered competency required to engage the challenge?

\_\_\_ Are people having to learn a new skill?

<b>Social Willingness</b>	<b>Social Willingness</b>
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\_\_\_ Is there a history of shared vision or common expectations around the problem?

\_\_\_ Is a new vision of the world needed that is not yet shared widely in the congregation?

\_\_\_ Is the congregation challenging their own assumptions?

\_\_\_ Is the congregation willing to take action that is uncomfortable and changes their rhythms?

\_\_\_ Are people saying, “This doesn’t look/feel like church?”

<b>Social Ability</b>	<b>Social Ability</b>
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\_\_\_ Does the solution come from within the system?

\_\_\_ Are you, as a congregation, uncertain about your insight, experience, or competency to engage the challenge?

\_\_\_ Is this something that has both not been tried before and not even been imagined?

\_\_\_ What is the *congregation* having to learn to conduct this experiment in ministry?

**Structural Willingness**

\_\_\_ Are your By-Laws and Manual of Operations sufficient to address the problem?

**Structural Willingness**

\_\_\_ Does your current means of operating present an obstacle to this challenge?

\_\_\_ Is there a willingness to experiment with a new administrative structure that will appear to the “old-school” folk as lawlessness and chaos?

**Structural Ability**

\_\_\_ Is your building suited to address the problem?

\_\_\_ Are the conflicts that will evolve/occur as you address the problem within the range of expectations for previous difficulties: “We’ve been here and done this before”?

**Structural Ability**

\_\_\_ Might you need to alter or move beyond your building to engage the challenge?

\_\_\_ Might you need to adapt Reformed governance toward permission-giving, rewarding creativity, or cell-based initiatives?







**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:

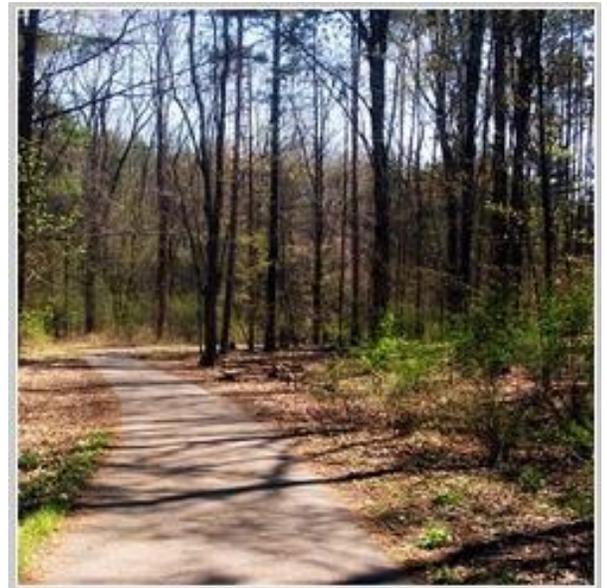
*Summer /Celebration proposed purpose statement:* to articulate and celebrate together what God has done and is doing in individuals, the congregation, and the community, as well as articulate and celebrate that toward which (and those toward whom) God appears to be guiding the congregation for ministry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

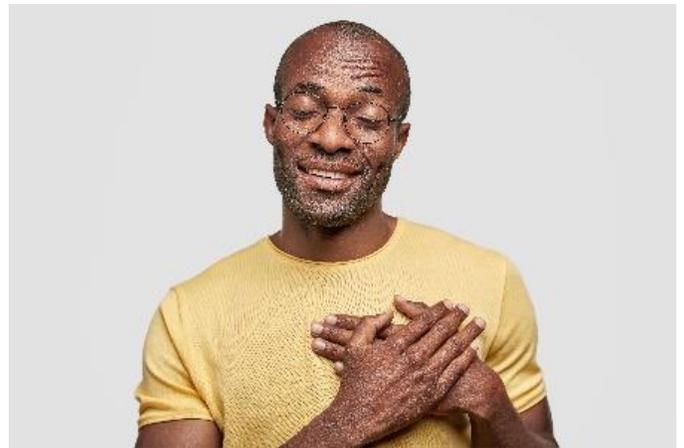
Gratitude and thanksgiving, gratitude’s accompanying behavior, are foundational to Christian spirituality, ministry, and mission. Biblical examples abound. The psalmist gives thanks, for the love of the Lord endures forever (Psalm 118). Paul instructs us to pray with rejoicing and with thanksgiving (Philippians 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 *σωζω*, 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.<sup>58</sup> Gratitude even changes the physical structure and neural pathways in the brain!<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> 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.

<sup>58</sup> Summer Allen, *The Science of Gratitude* (Berkeley, CA: Greater Good Science Center, May 2018), 28–50.

<sup>59</sup> 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](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain).

<sup>60</sup> 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](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."<sup>61</sup>

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*.

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<sup>61</sup>Robert Emmons, "What Gets in the Way of Gratitude?" *Greater Good*, November 12, 2013,

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_stops\\_gratitude](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_stops_gratitude).



## 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.<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> 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 platitudes<sup>64</sup> that undergird the practice of “morally, therapeutic deism.”<sup>65</sup>

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.

<sup>62</sup> Summer Allen, *The Science of Gratitude* (Berkeley, CA: Greater Good Science Center, 2018), 49–50.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>64</sup> 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.

<sup>65</sup> Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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 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."<sup>66</sup> 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,<sup>67</sup> 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.

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<sup>66</sup> 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) (sdmin. in the U.S. and Canada at EMICMGPublishing.com.

<sup>67</sup> 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.”<sup>68</sup> 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!”<sup>69</sup> 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?

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> 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?<sup>70</sup>

“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.




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<sup>70</sup> Robert Emmons, “How Gratitude Can Help You through Hard Times,” *Greater Good*, May 13, 2013,

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_gratitude\\_can\\_help\\_you\\_through\\_hard\\_times](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_can_help_you_through_hard_times).