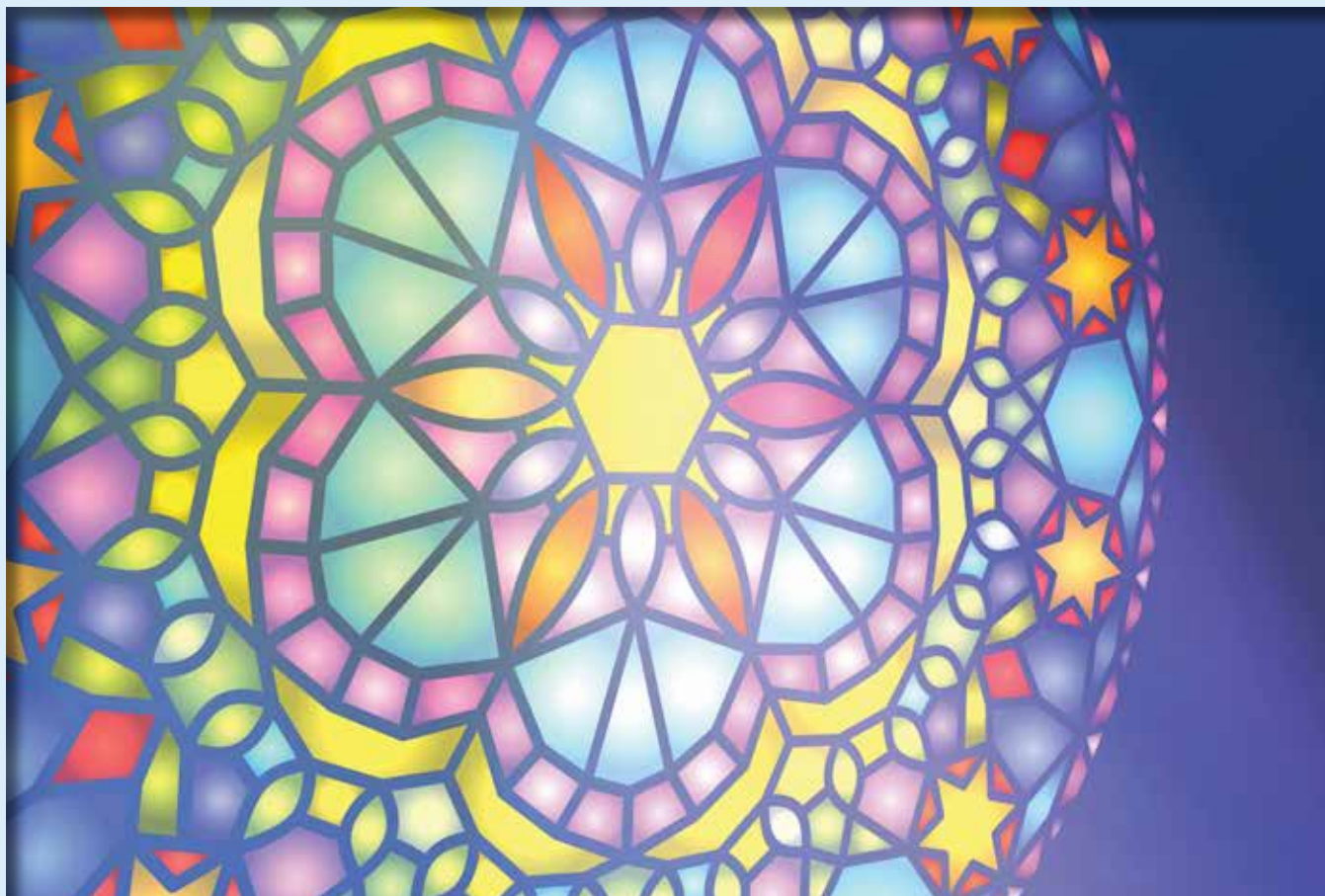


# *Engaging Matthew 25 Through Film*

## **Congregational Vitality**



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
**Presbyterian Mission**

# *Engaging Matthew 25 Through Film*

## **Five Films for Exploring Building Congregational Vitality**

### Introduction

In this third of the Matthew 25 booklets, we present five films that can be of help for a church wanting to enhance its congregational vitality. A well-chosen film and a guided discussion can put a human face on important issues. Although there are not nearly as many films dealing with this topic as there were for the previous two booklets, “Dismantling Structural Racism” and “Eradicating Systemic Poverty,” we did manage to find five.

A film like “All Saints” can enable us to see how one church, led by a persevering pastor and prodded by a group of needy refugees, was able to see an unexpected opportunity for service, even though the church was supposed to be shut down. This and the other four films in this series demonstrate that, despite a myriad of problems, the church can not only survive, but become very much a vital force in bringing change to society.

In preparing for the series, the leader should, in addition to viewing and reflecting on the films, download and read the following items from the PC(USA) website:

1. The Vital Congregations Page
2. The article “Building Congregational Vitality”
3. Immediate Toolkit Resources
4. Vital Congregations Manual.

Give to those who sign up for the course a copy of the article “Building Congregational Vitality,” which you can easily download, copy, paste and print. This includes a list of seven marks of a vital congregation, which will prove helpful in examining the congregation in the film and your own.

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# Session One: Overview

## What is “congregational vitality”?

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ — Matthew 25:34–46*

The quote from Matthew 25 is from the foundational parable of the Matthew 25 program. Those who meet the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the imprisoned are the ones welcomed by the king, who then recognizes them as his sheep.

Jesus’ call to care for the needy in specific ways is built into Western culture as the hallmark of how his followers are to act. “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” quoted so often in literature and everyday conversation, is usually applied to an individual’s kind deed. However, the “you” throughout the Scripture passage actually is plural. The feeding, welcoming, clothing and visiting were seen as collective acts. For Christians, this means the church, those “called out” (as the New Testament Greek word *ecclesia* means) to do Christ’s will.

The article “Building Congregational Vitality” begins with the question “What is congregational vitality?” with the answer being:

You might think that the vitality of a congregation or worshiping community is based on the number of members, the scope of programs, the size of financial gifts or some other statistics.

Not so — at least not entirely.

Rather, a community’s vitality is primarily its spiritual strength and its capacity for purposeful mission. Congregational vitality is evident in a worshiping community when its structural systems, finances and discipleship practices are aligned in such a way that the community is actively engaged in the mission of God in their local community and the world, and they are powerfully focused on growing as disciples in the way of Jesus Christ. Faith comes alive when we boldly engage God’s mission and share the hope we have in Christ.

The church, because of its many failings, all too often is pictured in a bad light in film, and this goes back many decades to such films as the 1941 Oscar-winning “How Green Was My Valley.” A close-knit Welsh family of coal miners attend an independent congregation. Although led by a compassionate minister, it is the elders who hold power in the church, and they use it by publicly shaming and banning a young “fallen woman.” Our heroine, appalled at the cruel treatment of the young woman, walks out of the church in disgust. There have been so many such films that whenever scriptwriters want to display hypocrisy or self-righteousness, they make the character a clergyman or ultra-pious church member, as in “Elmer Gantry.” But that is far from the case in the five films examined here.

## Survey of the Five Films

In the first session, the leader will show a short clip from each of the five films and lead a brief discussion of it based on the accompanying questions. (The time, given after “Clip,” will help the technician to know when to start and stop the clip.) Thus, the participants will gain an overall picture of where the course is headed. Emphasis should be placed upon brief, lest the group become too involved with one or two of the films that there is no time left for the others.

## **“All Saints”**

*Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 48 minutes.*

A dying Episcopalian church about to close discovers a new mission and life when a group of Southeast Asian refugees start attending and ask for help. In this sequence that we might title “Errand Boy or Pastor?” we see how the members react to the newly appointed minister and how one member in particular challenges the mission his bishop has laid upon him.

Clip: 0 to 4:23.

We hear the voice of the bishop as he installs the newly ordained Michael Spurlock as pastor of the tiny congregation saddled with a large building and a mortgage of \$850,000. The bishop emphasizes that a priest vows to obey his superiors, so we can guess that this will become an issue later on. There are only about a dozen parishioners sitting in the pews. The parishioners, aware that Michael has been sent to close down their church, are distant but polite in greeting their new pastor. Not so the elderly Forrest, who rudely passes by Michael. When the pastor confronts him, Forrest accuses him of being the bishop’s “errand boy” and not a true pastor.



### **For Reflection/Discussion**

1. Compared to a Baptist pastor, how is an Episcopal priest constrained by church law? What about Presbyterian clergy?
2. Why do you think the bishop emphasized obedience so much? Because Michael was a new priest, or because of something in his past?
3. What do we see that supports the bishop’s decision to shut down the church? The officials of virtually every denomination must make decisions about whether or not to close a church. Among Baptists it is members of the congregation who have this authority; in the Episcopal Church, as we see in the film, it is the bishop and advisers; and in the Presbyterian Church, the presbytery. What do you think should be the criteria — size of the congregation; the economic resources of the congregation; other?
4. How do the members of the church feel about the new pastor? And Forrest?
5. What do you think should be the role(s) of a pastor? How do Michael’s orders conflict with these?

## **“Lars and the Real Girl”**

*Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 46 minutes.*

When a delusional young man fixates on a life-size anatomically correct female doll, his worried brother and sister-in-law take him to their doctor. She recommends that they cater to his fantasy that Bianca, as he names the doll, is a real person. Lars says that Bianca is visiting him after the two had met at a church conference. The doctor thinks Lars will

work through his issues with support from his loved ones. Served by a pastor who emphasizes love in his sermons, the congregation goes along with Lars and his family. The church provides the perfect support system for the man, from his bringing Bianca in a wheelchair to worship, through their dating period and into the grieving period when Lars says she is stricken with a fatal disease.

Clip: 36:24 to 39:45

Lars has introduced the love doll as his girlfriend, Bianca, and his compassionate sister-in-law, Karin, has persuaded her reluctant husband, Gus, to accept this. All over town, news of Lars and Bianca spreads, with some of the men joking about it. Karin explains the situation to some of her friends. The couple meet with their pastor, Rev. Bock, and a circle of members, seeking their support. Some members of the group are dubious at first until Mrs. Gruner defends Lars and points out that each of them has an odd-behaving family member as well. When they turn to their pastor, he replies that the only relevant question is “What would Jesus do?” Cut to Sunday morning, and we see that the pastor answers his own question. Bianca sits in a wheelchair next to Lars and his family, and the pastor welcomes newcomers. Everyone is looking at Bianca and Lars. An engrossed choir member does not notice when everyone else sits down. After church, Rev. Bock warmly greets Bianca and Lars as they leave the sanctuary. Mrs. Gruner takes a bouquet of church flowers and gives them to Bianca as part of her welcome.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you think of Dr. Margo’s advice to Karin and Gus when they bring Lars to her? This conversation can be seen on the website of IMDB by clicking [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0805564/quotes/?ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_qu](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0805564/quotes/?ref_=tt_trv_qu) and scrolling down to the set that begins with “Have there been any changes in the family in the last year or so?”
2. How does Margo’s suggestion require others to focus upon him rather than themselves?
3. What is the reaction around town? Typical?
4. In the church circle, how is Mrs. Gruner crucial? How is she a channel of grace?
5. What do you think of Pastor Bock’s question? How does he practice what he preaches?

### “Encanto”

*Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 42 minutes.*

A Colombian family that has fled from urban violence has found refuge in a valley in the mountains, though at the sacrifice of the husband, Pedro Madrigal. His wife, Alma, with the help of a magic candle, has raised their three babies and their children in the valley that has become an “encanto,” a place of charm and joy. Each of the children and grandchildren when they were 5 years old received a miraculous gift used to benefit both the family and the village.

Clip: 4:25 to 9:02

In the first song, Mirabel is helping to get ready for her little brother’s Gift Day when she responds to the curious village children’s question about her gift. The song moves along quickly, so turn on the English subtitles. All of the gifted family members are named and demonstrate graphically what their gifts are. The song ends with the embarrassing (to Mirabel, that is) admission that Mirabel did not receive a gift on her fifth birthday.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does Mirabel answer the children’s question about what gift she has received? Why does she not answer directly? How is this evasion pretty common?
2. List the names of the family members and their gifts. How helpful is it that she describes them more than once? See the list in the review if the group needs help. Which gift interests you the most?
3. What does Abuela Alma say is the way they should use their gifts? How is this important in keeping the gifted person grounded, preventing them from being vain or selfish?
4. In what ways do we see that the house itself is gift? How does Mirabel receive help as she prepares for the celebration?

## **“The Long Walk Home”**

*Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 35 minutes.*

This story of the groundbreaking Montgomery Bus Boycott does not focus upon its leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — nor even Rosa Parks, the woman whose refusal to give up her seat on a bus led to her arrest and the boycott. Instead, it deals with an ordinary African American family, the Cotters, and a white family, the Thompsons. Odessa Cotter works as the Thompsons’ cook and maid. Our clip is one of four that is set in the church that the Cotters attend, where, during the boycott, meetings are held several nights a week. It follows a sequence in which Theodore Cotter, in his early teens, protects his slightly older sister, Selma, from being raped by three white bullies after she foolishly gets on a bus so she can visit her boyfriend. The bus driver, upset over the commotion, kicks both Selma and the white bullies off his bus. Theodore has followed the bus route in a taxi, and he sees his sister in a park, surrounded by the menacing white teenagers. Accepting the Rev. Dr. King’s teaching of nonviolence, Theodore unclenches his fist when attacked by the bullies, taking a beating rather than fighting back. Back home that night, Odessa scolds her daughter, then the family goes to church. Theodore’s battered face attracts considerable attention.

Clip: 49:14 to 55:07

As Theodore enters the pew with his family, the marks of his encounter with the brutal white racists can be seen by all. Parishioners who first see him quickly pass the word to others. The worshipers, as well as his family, obviously regard them as a badge of honor, their concern and respect enfolding and upholding him. He and his family join in the singing.

### **For Reflection/Discussion**

1. How does Theodore’s face look as his family takes their seats? What is the reaction of some members of the congregation?
2. As the leader speaks, what kind of support for the boycotters do we hear is being offered?
3. Besides glancing at Theodore’s face, what is the congregation engaged in? How is music important in the church, especially the Black church?
4. How does the Cotter family appear at the beginning of the scene? From their changing expressions, what effect does the music seem to be having on the Cotters?
5. How is music one of the great gifts the church has for us when we are down in the dumps or under great pressure? What lively song are the Cotters and company singing? What hymn or song do you especially like or turn to when in need? Look through the various indexes of your hymnal and note what a treasury it is, with inspiring hymns for any mood.

## **“Walking Across Egypt”**

*Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 40 minutes.*

Mattie Rigsby, an active leader in her small-town church, feeds a stray dog, but refuses to adopt it because she claims she is too old. When the dogcatcher comes and she learns from him that his nephew is incarcerated at the local juvenile detention camp, she turns down his suggestion that she visit the boy. Again, her excuse is she’s too old to become involved. That Sunday she is in church where the pastor reads the negative portion of the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. As the camera slowly zooms in upon her face, we can see by her changing expression her inner turmoil, leading to the conviction that she is one of the goats.

Clip: 10:55 to 14:57

Mattie looks comfortable as she sits in her church pew at the beginning of the clip. However, as the pastor continues to read about the goats who did not tend to the needs of their neighbors, her expression changes, becoming introspective, no doubt because the pastor is reading the negative responses of the goats that correspond with her own. Very slowly the camera moves in, from a long shot to a medium shot, and then, to catch her expression of guilt and resolve, to a close-up. We next see her at the prison farm with the cake she has baked for the boy.

## For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does Mattie's facial expression change as the pastor reads the passage? Note how the camera moves in from its distance shot with her among the other worshipers to a medium shot and then a close-up. What effect does this have on the viewer?
2. What is apparently going on within Mattie? How does her past conduct compare with what Jesus demands? What do you think of the filmmaker deciding to use the negative rather than the positive part of the passage?
3. What is she impelled to do, and why?
4. What do you think of the boy's response to her act? What does this suggest about what we might expect from similar acts? Should we do good only when rewarded with gratitude, or simply because it is the right thing to do or because Jesus wants us to do so?
5. How does this scene disabuse us of false, sentimental views of the poor? And why is this important?

## In Conclusion

In the article distributed to participants, the author describes the seven marks of congregational vitality:

1. A commitment to forming disciples over every member's lifetime. This leads first to personal transformation, as people put on the heart of Christ, and then to social transformation, as people joyfully go forth into the community and tackle the issues facing today's culture.
2. Embracing the call to evangelism. We show forth the love of Christ by our actions and our lives even more than by our words. Our relationships are genuine and caring. People know we are Christians by our love.
3. An outward focus. Our church is not a place to escape from the world, but rather our gateway to our community where we may be the hands, feet, heart and mouth of Jesus Christ for people who are suffering or marginalized.
4. Empowering every member to discover their individual calling and the gifts God has given them so they can go forth and serve.
5. Spirit-inspired worship that challenges, teaches, transforms, convicts and energizes us so when we are sent out, we have experienced the wonder of God and are changed for the better from when we arrived.
6. Caring relationships modeled on God's love. We open our doors and hearts to all people, and we build relationships modeled on God's love, which leads to genuine reconciliation and peace.
7. Congregations with healthy systems. Our mission focuses are clear. There is fiscal responsibility and accountability. We have thoughtful decision-making structures. Our leaders and staff enjoy a sustainable balance of work/rest time.

After briefly going over the above, say that in the next five sessions we will use these as a yardstick in the quest of revitalizing our own congregation. In the next five sessions we will be discussing not just the film and its characters but also be looking at their church in regard to this paper.



# Session Two

## *“All Saints”*

**Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 48 minutes.**

*“But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.” — Mark 4:29–31*

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. — Romans 8:28*

John Corbett portrays the Rev. Michael Spurlock, a newly minted Episcopal priest assigned by his bishop to All Saints Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, which is close to Nashville. All Saints is far from being a vital congregation, its remaining dozen or so members being older and tired of the struggle to maintain their church.

Barry Corbin plays the elderly parishioner Forrest, who takes an instant disliking to Michael because everyone knows that Michael has been appointed to close the dwindling congregation. His job is not to pastor the people but to inventory all the congregation’s possessions — Forrest disparagingly calls the new pastor the bishop’s “errand boy.” Indeed, when the pastor’s adolescent son, Atticus, declares that he will be bored in such a small place, Michael assures him that they will not be there very long — probably just for the two months needed to close the deal with a prospective buyer.

The other church members are not happy about the closure, but they have bowed to the inevitable, and thus are more accepting of Michael. Then the unexpected happens. A group of Karen refugees from Myanmar come to town. Ye Win is their leader, largely because he is able to speak English. They were Episcopalian in their strife-torn home country, so, to Michael’s and everyone’s surprise, they show up in church. Almost against his will, both the priest and his supportive wife, Aimee, become involved with the Karen, her part being to teach music to the group.

One night as he stands alone outside the church, Michael has an epiphany. The Karen are in dire need, but the church is broke and about to be sold. However, the church does own considerable acreage, enough to plant a variety of crops — and the Karen are farmers, though many at the present are plucking feathers at a chicken factory. He proposes that the members and the Karen plant crops, part of which can feed the refugees, and part of which can be sold for cash to pay off the church’s mortgage.

Without consulting Bishop Eldon Thompson, Michael gives the boot to the two developers planning to buy and replace the venerable church with a big-box store. Accepting the priest’s plan, the Karen and church members pitch in to plow the field and plant the crops. Help comes in a variety of forms, sometimes from those not a part of the church. After receiving an offer from a stranger, Michael amusingly asks Aimee if he really heard that. The Karen especially put in long hours, those who work at the chicken factory rising early before going off to work, and upon their return, working past sunset.

However, there are obstacles that threaten to scuttle the plan. First, there is Bishop Thompson, upset that Michael has scuttled the sale of the property without forewarning him. He reminds Michael that he had promised to obey him, and he poses the disturbing reminder, “Be sure it’s God’s voice and not your own.” Always good advice after wrestling with a spiritual experience!

The bishop’s cabinet also needs convincing. Obtaining their permission is difficult, but when compared to the problems raised by nature as spring turns to summer, that task seems easy. There is the hurdle of not enough water, requiring some form of spraying it onto the plants. Then, when that problem is solved and matters seem to be going well, a huge rainstorm threatens to drown the crops, requiring the people to fill sandbags to protect the plants. Much of the produce is lost, but the drenched harvesters manage to save a truckload of produce for which an urban buyer is willing to pay them enough to save the church. But then, still another disaster ...

I am not spoiling matters to reveal that there is an Easter following this crucifixion-like event, so that the results really do take on the miraculous. All of this is made plausible in the excellent script written by Steve Armour and directed by Steve Gomer. And what a joy to see at the end credits shots of the real pastor and the Karen people, many of whom played themselves in the film, which was shot in Smyrna at All Saints.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you think of Michael during the first part of the film? How is Forrest accurate when he charges the new pastor as being the bishop's "errand boy"?
2. How is All Saints Church similar to so many of the churches in your area? What is the plan for replacing it? If not torn down, how are old church buildings being recycled in your area?
3. What is it that upsets the bishop's plans? What do you know about the Karen people? Why have they come to this country?
4. How are Michael and the church members following Christ in their response to the plight of the Karen? How is this the opposite of what many in this country and Europe are saying about immigrants?
5. How does this bring Michael in conflict with his bishop? Obedience to one's superiors vs. doing what you think is right, or answering WWJD? Note what Michael quotes when he responds to the bishop, "I swore an oath as a Christian to serve the least of these."
6. What is Michael's nighttime epiphany? Might we explain that it was God nudging him to see the solution that lay right before him — that is, in the very land that the congregation owned and the farming background of the Karen?
7. How is the bishop's admonition to Michael, "Be sure it's God's voice and not your own," a good one to always keep in mind? How have people sometimes misidentified God's will and theirs? To get you started, what about the Pope and preachers who preached the Crusades — "God wills it!" — or Protestants persecuting women as witches or Catholics as evil heretics? You might also revisit Bob Dylan's song "With God on Our Side."
8. The farm plan might be God-inspired, but how do we see that this does not absolve anyone from the hard work of implementing it? What did the people gain from all of the heartbreaks that they endured?
9. How is the church living up to Christ's metaphor in Matthew 5:13–15 and that of the apostle Paul's in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13?
10. How could the film's title have a double meaning? The first is obvious, but in what way are virtually all of them saints (in the way that the apostle Paul used the word — check the beginnings of 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Philippians)?
11. Of the seven marks of congregational vitality, which ones do we see in "All Saints"?
12. Time now to focus on your own congregation:
  - How many members participate in your church's adult education programs? And are your classes focused more on self-improvement and self-fulfillment, rather than informing about issues and how to meet them?
  - Does your church engage in any kind of an evangelistic outreach?
  - Until the Karen started showing up, do you think the people of All Saints had an "outward focus"? What about your church: Do you think that there are more people fondly recalling the "good days when the pews

were filled” than those looking to see how the church can serve those in need in the community?

- Michael’s son asks challengingly, “Aren’t you God’s help?” How does your church “empower every member to discover their individual calling” as “God’s help”?
- Does your worship “challenge, teach, transform, convict and energize” you, or does it just make you feel good? (Or dare I say it, does much of it bore you?) Is the music a preponderance of praise music that repeats phrases over and over, or does it also include traditional and new hymns that call us to challenge evil and right wrongs?
- What opportunities does your church offer to deepen relationships?
- A few years ago, when moving to a new town, I visited several churches and attended “coffee hours” where members gathered in little clusters to chat — and even when I walked up and stood at the group’s edge, no one greeted or engaged me in the conversation. Could this be your congregation? How might your coffee hour be enhanced as a means of welcoming strangers?
- How healthy do you think your church is in regard to staff, stated goals, accountability?

# Session Three

## “Lars and the Real Girl”

**Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 46 minutes.**

*(Love) hopes all things, endures all things ...  
When I was a child, I spoke like a child,  
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;  
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.  
1 Corinthians 13:7 and 11*

*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.*

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. — Romans 15:1-2 and 7*

This is a humorous but touching film showing what a Matthew 25 congregation might be like as the people embrace a deluded young man. I am not sure if Paul's exact words to the Romans fit Lars Lindstrom and his family and friends in this film, but if we could substitute “weird” for “weak,” it certainly would. What a delight to see a filmmaker portray the church and a pastor in such a positive way, as director Craig Gillespie and scriptwriter Nancy Oliver do in what has to be described as a most quirky little film. Those planning to use it with church folk must introduce it carefully because central to the plot is a sex toy — a life-size inflatable female doll — which a disturbed, ultra-shy man fantasizes is his girlfriend. It must be sold to potential discussion group members as a warm, compassionate film, anything but the usual Hollywood hot sex movie. There are plenty of love scenes in this film, but the “love” depicted is “agape,” not “eros.”

One day a large crate arrives at Lars' lodgings, located in a remodeled garage behind the large family home inhabited by his brother, Gus, and sister-in-law, Karin, a delivery that changes the life of not only the three of them, but also that of virtually everyone in their small town. Karin calls Lars at the office to inform him of the unusual parcel, and uncharacteristically, he rushes home, even though quitting time is hours away. The next thing we know, the ultra-shy Lars, who has always turned down Karin's many invitations to breakfast or dinner, shows up at their door to introduce them to “Bianca.”

Karin and Gus are a bit surprised that Lars has initiated the visit, because he has turned down all of her previous invitations to share a meal with them. When they look at Lars' companion, Bianca, they are speechless for a moment. They glance quickly at each other for some clue as to how they should react. Bianca is one of those “anatomically correct” latex “babes” peddled over the internet. In an earlier scene, the porno-loving geek who shares an office cubicle with Lars had shown his coworker the webpage where one could customize a life-size doll and then order it. At the time, Lars had quickly turned away from the screen. His painful shyness has been such that he has avoided all social contact, even with his family, and any mention of sex embarrasses him. Indeed, part of his discomfort around Karin is because she is pregnant.

Treating the doll as if it were a real person, Lars says that Bianca is a paraplegic missionary, of mixed Brazilian and Danish parentage. Led by Karin, Gus plays along, even to the extent of allowing Bianca to move into their spare bedroom. Karin rounds up some of her clothes for Bianca, and they locate a wheelchair so that Lars can transport her around the house and town. Soon, Lars, who had hitherto stayed alone in his apartment, is taking Bianca everywhere.

It's fun watching the reactions of those meeting Bianca for the first time — shock, puzzlement, the latter over how they should react. To the credit of the people, those who know and love Lars play along, overcoming any objections that others who are skeptical raise. Margo (Kelli Garner) a co-worker at the office who has some neatness issues, defends Lars, and if he were not so shy, would have gone out with him. Like his family, she accepts Bianca as a real person. This is the advice that Dr. Dagmar (Patricia Clarkson) had given to Karin and Gus when they brought Lars (and Bianca) to her for examination.

The physician, obviously trained also in psychology, announces that Bianca's blood pressure is very low, so she suggests to Lars that he bring her in for treatment on a weekly basis. This ruse allows her to talk with Lars, a good tactic, as she learns how hugs, and even touch such as in a handshake, are painful to him, and it provides Lars with the opportunity at last to talk about himself.

Meanwhile, as word about Lars and his companion spreads throughout the village, a group from the church gathers to decide what they should do. The always-ready-to-help Mrs. Gruner (Nancy Beatty) declares that they should accept and welcome both Lars and Bianca at church on Sunday. When they all turn to and ask their minister, Rev. Bock, for his opinion, he falls back on the old question, "What would Jesus do?" The next scene shows us what the good reverend means — there sitting in the pew with his brother and sister-in-law are Lars and Bianca. (Earlier we had heard a brief portion of his sermon in which he declared that God is a God of love who calls us to love one another.)

Those who love Frank Capra's sentimental films extolling the decency of people will certainly enjoy this one. Ryan Gosling plays Lars straight, and the filmmakers resist any temptation to obtain a laugh at his expense — no campy scenes, but certainly some bizarre, funny ones. If every small town were as supportive as this one, who would want to move to the city? The unusual outcome will cheer the heart and leave you feeling good for a long time. There's no question that God is very much a presence in this film.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. When you first heard that a love doll is at the center of this film, what did you think or feel? How do the filmmakers and actors achieve the right balance throughout the film?
2. Are there any characters with whom you identify? Whom that you have met or known is like Lars? Does your church have a good number of Mrs. Gruners and the "church ladies"?
3. What do you think of the physician's agreeing with Karin that they should continue to indulge Lars in his fantasy? Of her comment to the reluctant Gus that Bianca "is real" to Lars and that "she is in town for a reason"? Of her method of "treatment" by first getting Lars to talk about Bianca and then himself?



4. What do you think of the scene involving the group of church members? How is Mrs. Gruner's response typical of her, from what we see of her in other scenes? How is the minister's WWJD response appropriate? What does he do at the end of the service when the people are leaving? What does Mrs. Gruner do out in the parking lot?
5. How does Lars change because of his delusion and the support of almost everyone? Whom does he begin to notice at the office? Do you think his attraction to Margo contributes to his "argument" with Bianca?
6. How might Karin's telling Lars that everyone is paying attention to Bianca because they "love you" contribute to Lars' change? Here's her little speech, given in response to Lars' saying that she doesn't care (about him):

"That is just not true! God! Every person in this town bends over backward to make Bianca feel at home. Why do you think she has so many places to go and so much to do? Huh? Huh? Because of you! Because — all these people — love you! We push her wheelchair. We drive her to work. We drive her home. We wash her. We dress her. We get her up and put her to bed. We carry her. And she is not petite, Lars. Bianca is a big, big girl! None of this is easy — for any of us — but we do it. ... Oh! We do it for you! So don't you dare tell me how we don't care."

7. Another good exchange is between Lars and his brother, Gus, when the latter responds to Lars' question about what is right — that it is "like when you decide what is right not just for you, but for everyone. Even when it is hard." He goes on by saying how their father took care of them "even though he had a broken heart" (over the death of their mother). He apologizes for leaving home as soon as he could because of the melancholy that had settled into their household.
8. How does Lars reach out to Margo at the office? How is this a sign that he is moving toward "wholeness"? When he tells Margo that he will be free because Bianca has been elected to the school board and must attend a meeting, how did you feel? What does this show about the level of support the townspeople have been giving him?
9. At the bowling alley when the newcomers saw Lars, Margo and Bianca, what did you expect to happen? Did you think that they were about to intrude and upset matters? How does this instead become a lovely little moment of solidarity, of celebration?
10. What do you think of the way in which Lars begins to change his relationship with Bianca? What do you think was the filmmakers' intention by inserting a portion of another of Rev. Bock's sermons? What do St. Paul's words have to do with Lars? How is the doctor again an important factor in supporting Lars when Karin and Gus come to her and ask, "How can you let this happen?"
11. What is it that Mrs. Gruner and her two knitting friends say when they come to Lars' home during Bianca's "illness"? How is "just sitting" often the best ministry of the church to those in need, especially those grieving?
12. How does Lars' "solution" to his problem of relating to Bianca and to Margo seem appropriate for his condition, as well as satisfying for the story? How are the minister's words appropriate and true? Can you see this little story as one more of the "mysterious ways" in which God reaches out "his wonders to perform"?
13. How might this film contribute to a deeper awareness of the nature and role of your church? Look over the seven marks of congregational vitality in the article "Building Congregational Vitality." Which ones can you see in this church?
14. We do not see a great deal of Rev. Bock, but from what we do see, what seems to be his view of the role of a pastor? How would you characterize his preaching? How is the pastor a vital part for changing a congregation?

# Session Four

## “Encanto”

**Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 45 minutes.**

*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. — Romans 12:4–6a*

*Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. — Joel 2:28*

This time Disney transports us to the mountains of Colombia, where the Madrigal family lives in an enchanting village called “Encanto.” In a flashback that reflects the experience of thousands of Latin Americans, a large group of people, including the Madrigal family, is fleeing from violent horsemen that threaten them. They are saved by the heroic sacrifice of Pedro Madrigal, the father of three infants whom his wife, Alma, holds close to her bosom. The fugitives are all saved and are transported by a magic candle that conveys them to the hidden valley where the Madrigals live in harmony together in a magnificent house so magical that it becomes a character in the story.

Each Madrigal family member is bestowed with a unique gift by the magic candle upon her or his fifth birthday. The child opens the door with her or his name on it and receives a new power that enables the recipient to serve both the family and the villagers. Luisa (Jessica Darrow) receives the strength of a Superman, enabling her to move massive stones and masonry; Isabela (Diane Guerrero) can make plants grow and flowers bloom; Pepa (Carolina Gaitán) can control the weather immediately surrounding her, depending on her changing moods; Camilo (Rhenzy Feliz) is a shape-shifter born to entertain; Dolores (Adassa) has such keen ears that she easily picks up the news and gossip of the villagers; and Bruno (John Leguizamo) can see the future, but nobody talks about him since he disappeared, dismissed by the family. Julieta (Angie Cepeda), the mother, can heal by her cooking or touch. The house responds to each member, its floorboards and floor tiles rising up and down to provide whatever help they need. (In one quick shot, the floor turns into a treadmill so that Luisa can engage in a jogging exercise!) Presiding over all of these is Abuela Alma (María Cecilia Botero), the grandmother whose stern will is law, having led everyone from the danger and chaos of their old home some 50 years earlier.

However, none of these is the center of our story. It is the teenaged Mirabel (Stephanie Beatriz), and though pretty, she wears glasses (perhaps reminding us older viewers of Disney’s earlier heroines in contrast to her, created in the days when the saying “Guys don’t make passes with girls who wear glasses” was popular). Come her fifth birthday, Mirabel received — nothing. Her mother, Julieta, though gifted with the power to heal, cannot banish the pain the girl feels. The only one of the large family who is “ordinary,” she regards herself as an outsider. This is something that her grandmother, Alma, the formidable family matriarch, especially reinforces as the fifth birthday of the youngest family member, Antonio (Ravi-Cabot Conyers), approaches. All but Mirabel use their gifts to get ready for the celebration. Mirabel wants to help, but her grandmother tells her to “stand aside.” Antonio’s big day arrives, and he receives the gift to talk with animals and thus tame them, even the mighty jaguar that shows up at the party, giving the boy a thrilling ride. But when the family scrunches together for the family portrait that will commemorate the occasion, Mirabel is left out. No one, not even her loving mother, notices this.

Soon after the party, Mirabel sees cracks appearing in the house. Frightened, she tells her grandmother, but Alma brushes aside the girl’s claim. The cracks continue to appear to Mirabel, until in the fragments of a green crystal that she pieces together she sees herself along with the cracked house. This propels her into an adventure that will lead to the surprising whereabouts of her Uncle Bruno, pit her against her beloved grandmother and lead to a host of other developments.

As a parable about gifts and the family, this is a splendidly colorful spectacle that is as beautiful to the eye as it is illustrative of the apostle Paul’s observance about the church and the various gifts of its members. In both film and

Scripture, an individual gift's is regarded as a means of building up family or church. Just watch and see how in clever and amusing ways the different gifts of the family members contribute to preparing for Antonio's fifth birthday party! Seeing their gifts deepens Mirabel's feeling of isolation, of being a helpless outsider. Only after being pushed aside by Alma does the girl set forth on a quest to find the absent Uncle Bruno.

From Bruno the girl will learn that he, too, saw the cracks and had a glimpse of the destruction of the house with Mirabel at the center of things. Mirabel returns to reconcile with her sister Isabela because Isabela had been angry at her when she had disrupted the sister's engagement dinner, bringing an end to the family's matrimonial plans. And now as they meet again, Mirabel learns that Isabela really had not wanted to marry her intended.

Mirabel's confrontation with her grandmother is more intense, the two engaging in a struggle of mind and will. Alma blames Mirabel for the total destruction of their house but then realizes that it was her fear of change that was to blame. In the haunting "Dos Oruguitas," sung in Spanish, Mirabel in turn learns about the terrible flight from war the night in which her grandfather, Pedro, had sacrificed his life so that Alma and the others could escape to safety. The song seems to end with Alma's apology to her granddaughter and her resignedly saying, "We are broken." But then a butterfly flutters by, and the girl, recognizing all that the old woman suffered and has done for them, reassures her that they are a family "because of you," and that "nothing is broken that we can't fix, together." Quickly the music becomes celebratory — and if your eyes aren't a bit moist at that moment, you need a heart transplant. It is fitting that the metaphor of a caterpillar transformed into a butterfly is employed here, because this is truly an Easter moment for the Madrigal family.

Thus, in addition to the Scriptural theme of receiving a gift for the benefit of others, the film helps us see the necessity for coping with change in a loving rather than a fearful way. It is usually the young, like Bruno and then Mirabel, who see change and embrace it, whereas the elderly often cling to the good old ways. (How often have you received on social media a nostalgic meme or list of cherished things that are gone forever?)

In a similar way, a congregation wanting to become vital needs to accept those who are both its future and its prophets, that is its younger members. It must not fall into Alma's error of letting fear of change overcome love. There must be love binding the old and the young, those fearful of change and those who seek it. As the second of the seven marks of congregational vitality concludes, "People know we are Christians by our love." We should remember years ago when preachers were sharing the quotation, a warning amusingly dubbed "The Seven Last Words of the Church" — "But we've always done it this way!"

Near the end of the film, what a beautiful scene when the villagers gather round to support the Madrigals in their moment of need, the rebuilding of the house! (So much happens, so fast, especially in the rap-like songs — yet Latin-rhythmed — of Lin-Manuel Miranda, that you will want to watch this film at least once more.) Another family portrait is taken — and this time both Mirabel and Bruno are a part of the finished product!

The film's last sequence, one of celebration, is a beautiful embodiment of Joel 2:28. In English the film's title means charm, glamour, spell, delight or joy. The house and village convey the sense of this, blessing all of its inhabitants and those they welcome. Wouldn't it be wonderful if your church also could be an "encanto" for your community?

I want to gratefully acknowledge the insights, especially in the last section of the review, offered by Stephanie Fritz and Melody K. Smith of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, who also shared with me the Facebook reflections on the film of PC(USA) pastor the Rev. Judith Fulp-Eickstaedt.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. Review the list (for groups) of the characters and their gifts. (See the list in the review if the group needs help.) Which gift interests you the most?
2. Go around the group and ask each member to name their gift(s) and how it can be used in the church. If someone is too modest or shy, ask the others to name the person's gift. The leader, for graphic emphasis, can list the name and gift(s) on a chalkboard or large sheet of newsprint.



3. After those present have named their gifts, ask, “What about other members? What gifts do they bring to the congregation?” Keep adding to the list on the newsprint or chalkboard. It should look impressive by the end!
4. Now back to the film: How is this an outsider movie? Compare it to other outsider movies that you have seen. How must Mirabel feel when she is not included in the family portrait? In what ways was Christ an outsider? (See her song “Waiting on a Miracle.”) Do you think your congregation has been adept at including outsiders? (My experience at visiting numerous churches has been that most of the time, I was ignored at coffee hours, even when I went up to various clusters of people, members preferring to socialize among themselves.) How can a congregation do better?
5. There are three generations in the Madrigal family. What crisis did the first generation face years before? How has this been a frequent problem for people in South and Central America, right up to the present? And of course, now for the people of Ukraine? During the various influxes of refugees over the past decades, what role has your congregation taken up? For example, during the Vietnam War, a congregation I served turned over the use of the upper floor of our CE wing to our sponsored Vietnamese family — almost 15 adults and children. Teams of members worked on food for them, their orientation to America, and securing employment and permanent housing.
6. Go to the website of Animation Songs (<https://animationsongs.com/encanto/>) and read the lyrics and listen to the songs. What do they tell us about the family and the singer(s)?
  - a. From looking at the song clip “The Family Madrigal,” what are some of the ways in which family members use their gifts for others? Compare this to what the apostle Paul wrote about the church and its members with their gifts. Which would most benefit your church? How are these gifts benefiting the community surrounding the congregation?
  - b. When does Mirabel begin to see cracks in their house? What is the reaction of other members of the family, especially of Alma? How is this typical? How do members of your church react to criticism?
  - c. What do the cracks that Mirabel sees signify — not only for the house, but for her family as well? Do you see “cracks” in your church? Do people ignore or deny them, as Grandmother Alma had done? What does Luisa admit to in her song “Surface Pressure”?
  - d. In “We Don't Talk About Bruno,” what are the reasons different people give for keeping Bruno out of their thoughts? How has his gift been anything but a blessing to him? Do members of your church tend to see critics as troublemakers and tend to dismiss them?
  - e. How is “What Else Can I Do?” a song of discovery and of reconciliation for Isabel and Mirabel? How is reconciliation in a congregation just as vital as in this film? Note what Jesus said in Matthew 5:23–26. In a Presbyterian congregation, who is especially responsible for bringing about reconciliation of its members?
  - f. In what ways in “Dos Oruguitas” do we see the estranged Alma and Mirabel coming to a mutual understanding? For Christians, how are the caterpillar and butterfly good symbols for what is happening between grandmother and granddaughter? (For an English translation of the lyrics, [click here.](#))
  - g. Family members sing the parts in “All of You” as the family comes together in a lovely moment of confession and reconciliation. Joined together, they hear the approach of the villagers. How is this a sign of a larger community, a solidarity with their neighbors? Mirabel sings “It's a dream when we work as a team.” How has your church experienced this — perhaps in a food or a Habitat for Humanity project, or — ?
  - h. Mirabel sings in the above song “But the stars don't shine, they burn/And the constellations shift.” How is this a recognition of change? How has your congregation dealt with change? Recognized or denied it is needed? How was (is) Alma's recognition of fearing that change means loss present?



7. Is your church membership entirely of one race? Note how in the film, set in Colombia, Pepa's husband, Félix, is much darker in complexion, indicative of a mixed-race culture. Does anyone in your congregation even think that the lack of racial diversity might be a "crack" or shortcoming? What relationships does your congregation have with those of other races? Go to "You too can help bend the moral arc" (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/you-too-can-help-bend-the-moral-arc/>) to read and see (includes links to two videos) what three New Jersey Presbyterian churches have done in this regard.
  
8. How might this film contribute to a deeper awareness of the nature and role of your church? Look over the seven marks of congregational vitality in the article "Building Congregational Vitality" — and also included on pages 7–8 of this booklet. Which ones can you see in your church? Which need more work to make yours a vital congregation, an "encanto" of the Lord?

# Session Five

## “The Long Walk Home”

**Rated PG. Running time: One hour and 35 minutes.**

*Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. — Matthew 10:38–39*

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. ... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! — 2 Corinthians 5:16–17*

This film, with two major stars, was not promoted much by a studio that apparently could not get a “handle” on it. It is such a quiet gentle film, until the climax — no horror or steamy sex scenes, no car chases or shootouts or exploding special effects. Just two women facing an important decision and the impact it has on their lives and those of their families. Whoopi Goldberg as Odessa Cotter, a maid working for a white Southern family, gives a performance equal to her excellent work in “The Color Purple” or “Sarafina!” And Sissy Spacek as the obedient housewife Miriam Thompson, whose better instincts lead her to sympathize with and then throw in her lot with her maid during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, provides a fine, restrained performance that never threatens to undercut Goldberg.

When Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP won their Supreme Court case that outlawed school segregation in 1954, the winds of change began to blow through the United States, especially the Southern states where racism was built into the law as well as being a part of social custom (as in the North). They became a virtual hurricane in Montgomery, Alabama, when a tired Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the midsection of a bus and was arrested. The Black community, led by its ministers, decided that they had had enough. They elected to walk with dignity rather than to ride in shame. Odessa and her husband have to make that decision, also. When they do, Odessa finds that it will have a deep impact on their children and even on her employer.

This film, then, is about facing decisions and shouldering their consequences, consequences that we cannot even think of when we first make the choice. It is also about the freedom, the liberation that comes from accepting and living with a decision that is based on a concern for dignity and respect.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe your favorite or most memorable scene in the film. What elements contributed to this: the acting; the scriptwriting; the music or sound; special camera work or lighting; the directing?
2. Recall the times of the Montgomery Bus Boycott:
  - What year(s) did it take place in?
  - Who was the president of the U.S. then? Head of the Soviet Union?
  - What Supreme Court decision was causing such controversy?

How did America’s fear of communism affect people’s views of the new civil rights movement?

- What were the popular songs and movies then?
- What was the “proper place” for women then?

3. What are the two families — the Cotters and the Thompsons — like? Compare Herbert Cotter with Norman Thompson; Odessa with Miriam.
4. What signs of the American caste system do you see in the film? How is this reflected in the park incident with the policeman? Why do you think that Herbert is not very impressed when Odessa tells him of Miriam’s reaction to the incident?

5. How did you feel about the Thompson family's Christmas table dinner conversation? (Several Southern Black people once told me how such white families expressed openly their racist views and exploits, as if the servants were but pieces of furniture.)
6. What does Miriam's story of the swimming pool incident in Oregon reveal about her? At what point in her relationship with Odessa does the white woman begin to look at her as a human being and not a tool or appliance to make her life more comfortable?
7. Describe the three important forces that are shown in the film: the family; the church; the local social mores. How do these affect the various characters in different ways? How do they support each other? Conflict?
8. Especially important for the Cotters is the role of the church. How did the Black church differ from the white church (and still does)? (A rereading of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "A Letter From a Birmingham Jail" might be in order here.)
9. We never see the Rev. Dr. King, but we hear parts of his sermons. What influence does he have on the characters, especially on Theodore Cotter? Note the close-up of his hands in the scene in which he is accosted by the white toughs: What keeps him from fighting back? What was the Rev. Dr. King's teaching on nonviolence? Was it a tactic, as with many civil rights leaders, or a way of life? Check out Matthew 5:38–48 and Romans 12 for the source of his belief.
10. Odessa tells Miriam in the car, after having driven by the parking lot where drivers pick up and discharge boycotters, that if she crosses over the line, she can never return. How is this borne out in the story? How is what happens the cross that Jesus talked about in Matthew 10:38?
11. What signs of "the beloved community" do you see in the film? What forces oppose its coming? Are the latter much different from those that opposed Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom?
12. Was racism a part of your conditioning when you were a child? What made you question it? Do you still find it lurking in the recesses of your mind? For some, it was a conversion to Christ or a slow, growing awareness of the implications of his teachings that rescued us from racism. Look again at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:16, as he describes his own transformation from a "human point of view" (racism that makes humans who are different into things) to a "new creation in Christ."
13. The story takes place over 60 years ago. Have relations between the races changed much in that time? What has been gained; lost? What efforts to overcome racism do you see in your community? In your church?
14. How might this film contribute to a deeper awareness of the nature and role of your church? Look over again the seven marks of congregational vitality in the article "Building Congregational Vitality." Which ones can you see in this church?
15. To see how First Presbyterian Church in Tecumseh, Michigan, is addressing racism, goto [pcusa.info/aplace](http://pcusa.info/aplace) and discuss the clip.

# Session Six

## “Walking Across Egypt”

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 40 minutes.

*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. — Hebrews 4:12*

*Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ — Matthew 25:44–45*

Ellen Burstyn is wonderful as the elderly Mattie Rigsbee, a woman admittedly slowing down yet still capable of caring for herself and others. Based on the novel by Clyde Edgerton, the story presents a sympathetic view of a small-town widow and the Christian faith that sustains and motivates her. This is a film to place alongside “Tender Mercies,” “Places in the Heart,” “The Apostle” and “The Trip to Bountiful,” a small but vibrant genre that every Christian should know about and use.

Mattie lives in a small Southern town where she is prominent in the leadership of her church. Her grown son and daughter live fairly close by but have strayed from her church-centered ways. Both are concerned that she is too old to be living by herself. Had they known of the funny but potentially serious predicament she is about to find herself in at the beginning of the film, they would be downright alarmed. Mattie, after feeding a stray dog, finds herself falling through the seat of a rocking chair and being unable to extricate herself from it. How she is rescued and what chain of events this initiates adds up to viewing that is both enjoyable and inspiring.

The film is suitable for intergenerational viewing and discussion, as well as for the usual youth and adult groups. Children will laugh at Mattie’s being stuck in her chair; adults will relate to Jonathan Taylor Thomas’ Wesley Benfield; and adults will feel empathy for Mattie and the difficult decisions with which she is faced. There is a moment of suspense when violence threatens to break out, but this does not materialize. The film offers an especially fine opportunity for adult groups to discuss relationships between elderly parents and grown children and to explore Jesus’ teaching in his Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25. The scene in which this passage is read in church is a wonderful example of what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says is the power of God’s written word. Be sure to note the portion that is used and its effect on Mattie!

The fate of this independently produced film is one more glaring example of the unfairness of the film distribution system, in that it was never given a chance at the cinema chains across the country. At the same time, it is one more reason to be thankful for home video.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. How is the lead character in the story different from those in most other films? Do you think Mattie’s age and sex contributed to the film distributors’ decision that this was not a commercially marketable film? Those who have seen Horton Foote’s “The Trip to Bountiful” might compare Mattie Rigsbee and Carrie Watts.
2. What seems to motivate Mattie? How is she like “the child” Jesus said we must become in order to enter the kingdom of God? How do we see that her faith is biblically based?
3. Compare the treatment of the church in this film with the way it is depicted in most Hollywood films. Two others, in which the church is a significant part of a character’s life, are “Tender Mercies” and “You Can Count on Me.” Do you think that the depiction of the minister is too much of a Hollywood stereotype — or is it important in order to show that sometimes the sheep can lead the shepherd?

4. What do you learn of the other characters?

- Wesley: Why is he in the reformatory? What could very well happen to him if he had stayed there?
- Lamar Benfield: Why doesn't he take custody of his nephew? Do you think it would really have been good for either of them if he had?
- Robert and Elaine Rigsbee: Do you think that Mattie's comments and badgering advice to them is justified? Or is she just being an interfering mother?
- Alora and Finner: What do you think of them as neighbors? How is their nosiness motivated by good intentions? How would you handle them if they were your neighbors?
- The Rev. and Mrs. Vernon: From the part of Rev. Vernon's sermon that we do hear, what seems to be at the heart of his theology? Does he practice it?

5. How does the little stray dog's coming to Mattie set the stage and introduce the main theme of the story? How are the dog and Wesley similar to each other, including Mattie's initial reaction to each of them?



6. What is it that sets Mattie to rethinking her decision concerning each of them? Note that in the film, Rev. Vernon uses just half of Jesus' parable. Which half? How is this a perfect fit for Mattie and the decision she had made about not getting involved with the dog and with Wesley?
7. What is Wesley's thinking about Mattie when he first meets her and then comes to her house? How does her treatment of him affect him in the long run? What significance do you see in his bathing scenes (beyond the humor and his naiveté regarding indoor bathrooms)?
8. When I showed the film to a group, one person regarded Wesley's transformation as unreal. What do you think? Was this shown as being too easy, or does the story show that being a change agent is difficult, never a cinch? At what points in the story do you see Mattie taking up her cross? (See Mark 8:34.)
9. The theme of grace is well displayed in the scene in which Mattie visits the Rev. and Mrs. Vernon following Wesley's abuse of their car. How are the Vernons the guardians of law rather than grace? How is Mattie more faithful to Christ's teachings than those charged to study and teach them?
10. Running through the film is the uneasy relationship between Mattie and her grown children. How typical is this?
11. For those who are parents: In an age when every parent is supposed to be able to boast how well their children turned out, do you feel that way — or are you more like Mattie? Do you sometimes wish you had done things differently? Do you now feel better that you spent more time at your workplace, or with the children? Also, does acting on one's Christian faith always lead to family solidarity? Check out what Jesus said about families and doing his will in Matthew 10:34–38.
12. For those who are grown children: Do you sometimes feel about an elderly parent the way Robert and Elaine do about Mattie? When you are together, do you listen to each other, or have you been turning each other off because of complaints and comments based on different values? How do you fulfill the commandment to honor parents and yet live your own life?
13. The novel, available in paperback, is a good resource for the discussion leader, in that it delves deeper into Mattie's mind and soul. Two sections you might share with the group:
  - The bathtub scene in which Mattie thinks of Wesley as a “dry, dying plant” in need of the water of the gospel available at her church (pp. 130–131).
  - Mattie's process of prayer and meditation in which she makes her decision about becoming Wesley's guardian (pp. 217–218).
14. How might this film contribute to a deeper awareness of the nature and role of your church? In the article you have been directed to before, “Building Congregational Vitality,” is the following list of relevant Scripture passages for study and reflection:
  - Acts 2:42–47*
  - John 4:1–41*
  - John 13: 2–17*
  - Isaiah 6:1–13*
  - Acts 6:1–7*
  - 2 Corinthians 5:11–21*

Divide into groups if yours is a large group and ask them to read and discuss the passage in relation to their congregation. What must your church do to conform to the Scripture?
15. To see what a vital church is doing, explore the website of Palma Sola Presbyterian Church ([www.pspchurch.org/](http://www.pspchurch.org/)). What activity might be adopted (and adapted) for your church?



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
**Presbyterian Mission**

100 Witherspoon St. | Louisville, KY 40202  
PDS: 10-050-21-011.