



Presbyterian Mission
**Theology, Formation
& Evangelism**

Pilot Toolkit for **Vital Congregations**



Developing the 7 Marks of Congregational Vitality

Contents

2	The Life Cycle of a Worshiping Community
4	Emoji Assessment (PowerPoint Presentation)
5	7 Marks of Vital Congregations
11	Survey for Congregational Vitality
14	Neighborhood Exegesis
15	Bible Study Devotional

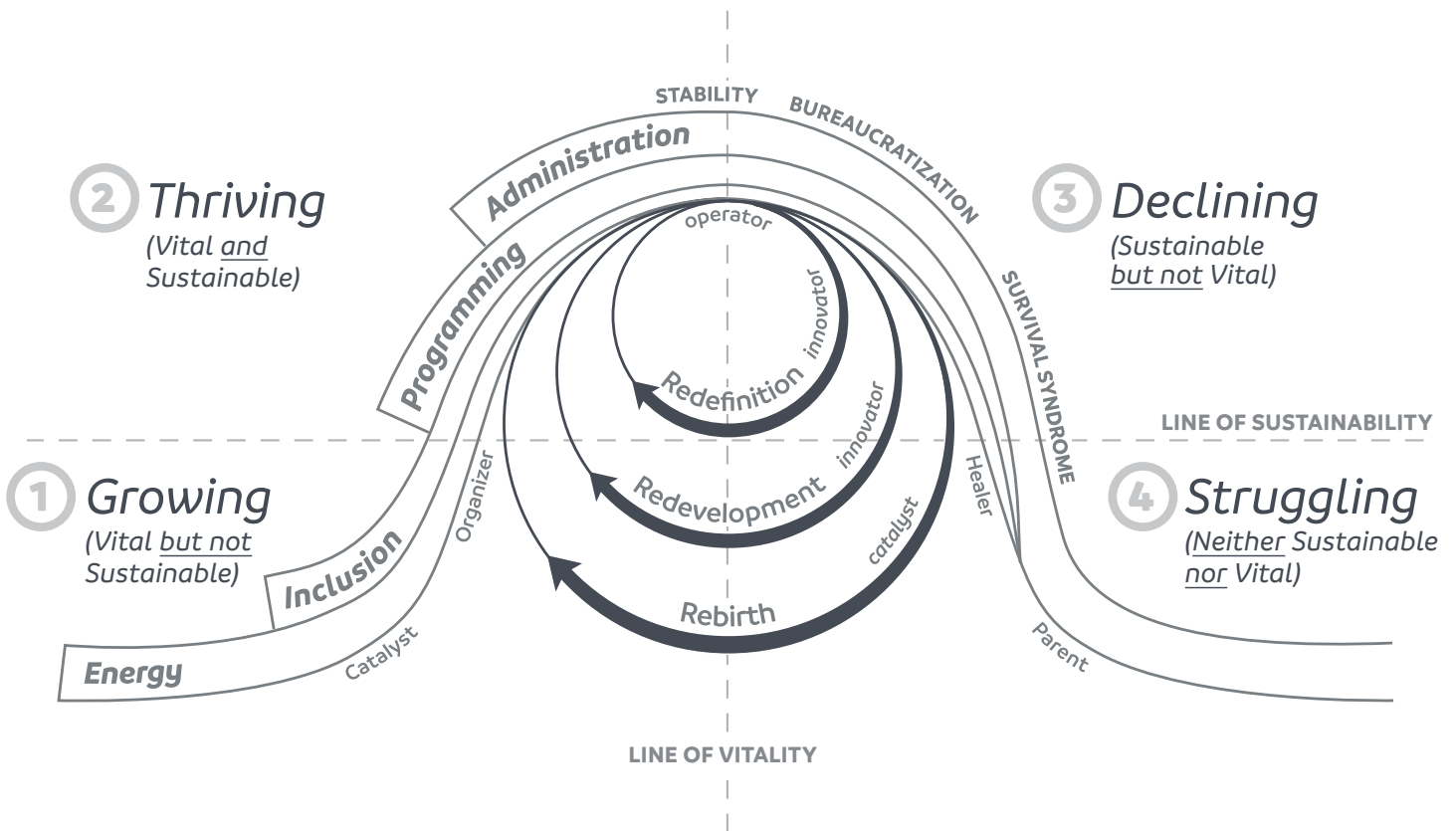
The Life Cycle of a Worshiping Community

The concept of a congregational life cycle has been around for a long time, and typically illustrated with a diagram such as the one below, that looks like a bell-shaped curve, showing the stages that a congregation can proceed through, from left to right. Note that as we move from left to right, we see that the congregation is growing and then eventually plateauing (the top of the curve), but only for a short while, and then steadily declining.

But, a gradual progression toward decline and even closure is not inevitable. What's missing in many life cycle models is an illustration that shows how

worshiping communities can, and often do, break out of this cycle. The model we've developed (*see diagram below, drawn by our colleague Angie Andriot*) shows a "circling back" toward the thriving stage as the result of intentional work to redefine the worshiping community's vision, redevelop the worshiping community if needed, and birth a new community if it has declined too far to be redeveloped. Note that the farther a worshiping community moves over the top of the curve and to the right, more effort is required to move back to the thriving stage.

THE CONGREGATIONAL LIFE CYCLE



Using a new survey that will measure components of vitality and sustainability, we will be able to place each participating worshiping community at a particular location on this diagram, which will provide a basic assessment of where the community is currently located in this life cycle.

We've taken several different congregational life cycle models and pulled the best features out of each to create this one. Let's walk through it together.

FOUR QUADRANTS:

Note that the diagram has two axes: vertical (representing the line of vitality) and horizontal (representing the line of sustainability). A worshiping community that is located above the line of sustainability exhibits traits that suggest it will be able to sustain itself for a long period of time. Below that line, it either hasn't yet achieved sustainability (too new) or had in the past but has lost it. To the left of the line of vitality we have communities that are vital; to the right, becoming less vital.

Putting these two axes together suggests four different quadrants, beginning at the lower left and moving along the curved line to the right, or clockwise.

QUADRANT 1 — *Growing*: Worshiping communities in Quadrant 1 are in the development stage and are new, excited, and vital. They exhibit lots of energy and vision, hope and enthusiasm, and a belief that the community has great potential. They are very change-oriented. However, they're not developed enough at this stage to be considered sustainable. Perhaps there is not enough participation for financial viability, or perhaps they're just not organized yet and fully engaged in planning and strategizing. It's a good place to be, but not for very long. Without more organization and stable leadership, a worshiping community is very vulnerable at this stage. The type of leaders best suited to lead a worshiping community at this stage are catalysts (those with charismatic qualities and entrepreneurial skills; the visionaries) and organizers (those who can grab the vision and run with it; people who know how to get things done). Usually the most growth occurs while a community is in this stage. As they become more organized, newer worshiping communities in Quadrant 1 tend to think a lot about inclusion: both inviting those outside of the worshiping community, and intentionally including those who have started participating. They need to be thinking about how to draw people in and then how to assimilate them into the group, how to engage members in discovering and using their spiritual gifts, and how to distribute and use power and authority.

QUADRANT 2 — *Thriving*: Worshiping communities in Quadrant 2 have achieved sustainability while remaining vital. Although energy levels may not be as high as they were previously, energy is still there, and it may be renewed or increased by some of the worshiping community's activity. By now, it has developed a culture of mission and also some services that meet the needs of its participants, the surrounding community, and beyond. Saarinen refers to this as programming, which serves specific functions such as worship, music, learning, serving, managing, and witnessing. In this context, administration refers to mission statements, goals, objectives, budgets, and planning. Worshiping communities in Quadrant 2 tend to be higher in programming and administration, and lower on energy and inclusion than Quadrant 1 communities, but all four of these "gene structures" are present. A lot of change can lead to conflict; but if well managed, small inevitable conflicts are not detrimental to the overall health of the worshiping community. At this stage, the community has developed plans for reaching people, including a diverse mix of people, assimilating new people, and intentional spiritual formation. The goal is to get to this quadrant, and when the worshiping community inevitably drifts into Quadrant 3 (Declining), through some redefinition of its goals, it can return to Quadrant 2 without a great deal of effort. The type of leaders we typically see at this stage might still be the catalysts and/or organizers who got the worshiping community started, but they may have lost some of their enthusiasm and moved from organizers to operators. If they forget about the passion that they once had, they can lead the community into Quadrant 3.

Or, they may have left and been replaced with an operator type. Or, a new visionary catalyst or organizer has moved in and is trying to convince the community to do some redefinition of its mission and purpose. If that doesn't happen quickly, the worshiping community may slide over the hill into Quadrant 3 pretty quickly. Worshiping communities in Quadrant 2 are still growing, though perhaps at a much slower pace. They are in a pattern of adding enough new members to offset annual losses that naturally occur, and until they slip over the hill, are adding more new members than their losses. Because the energy expended on growth in Quadrant 1 shifts to ministry and administration as the worshiping community moves into Quadrant 2, growth tends to slow. This is probably the BEST time for a congregation to consider birthing a new worshiping community.

QUADRANT 3 — *Declining*: Worshiping communities in this quadrant at first would argue that they have not ventured over the hill and are still in Quadrant 2. Indeed, it's difficult to tell when that point happens. But at some point a congregation moves from thriving to less thriving, and if not checked, will continue down the Quadrant 3 slope towards Quadrant 4 (Struggling). Worshiping communities located in this quadrant have typically stopped growing, and at first are in a pattern of maintaining, which slides into patterns of more losses each year than gains. The worshiping community may become bureaucratized to the point where some people begin questioning whether it's lost its sense of vision or purpose. The people and leaders may have lost their sense of urgency to be on mission, and yet may maintain financial stability due to a large endowment, or by keeping a large enough member base to be able to maintain for years, and maybe even decades. Note in the diagram that some redefinition, if it occurs early in the community's time in Quadrant 3, (requiring the leadership of an innovator, who is often not the "operator" leader who brought them here in the first place) can return the community to Quadrant 2 without a lot of effort and monumental changes. If not, the community is at risk of catching the "survival syndrome," which is characterized by some of the following: fundraising efforts to keep the doors open, letting staff go to keep functioning with a steadily decreasing budget, developing an attitude of scarcity thinking that replaces abundance thinking, conflict,

and blame. A worshiping community at this stage needs a healer to lead them. The further the community continues sliding down the hill toward Quadrant 4, the more work will be needed to redevelop the community back into a Quadrant 3 community. Such work requires the leadership of an innovator who can help the community through the inevitable conflict that will come to move into healthier patterns.

QUADRANT 4 — *Struggling*: Worshiping communities in this quadrant generally know that they are in trouble, because they, at some point, recognized that they were in Quadrant 3 and tried to do something about it. They may have been engaged in major conflict, have developed unhealthy responses to conflict, and no longer have healthy systems in place. They may have slowly aged as a community, with their younger generations growing up and moving out. They are usually more engaged in maintenance than in mission at this stage. They are becoming less sustainable, and the further they move toward the end of the cycle, may come to realize that they are no longer vital and no longer sustainable. Quadrant 4 worshiping communities are at a crossroads, where they have to choose between doing nothing and inevitably closing their doors, intentionally closing their doors and using any remaining funds to help fund something else, merging with another congregation in a union or federated relationship, or completely rebirthing as something new.

Emoji assessment

Click here to access a [PowerPoint Presentation](#).

7 Marks of Vital Congregations



1

Lifelong Discipleship Formation vs. complacent “Christian” piety; simply teaching good morals; offering the latest programs

Lifelong Discipleship Formation is about daily life. It’s about how we claim and proclaim our identity as followers of Christ. It’s about how we practice our faith; how we grow in faith, cherish faith, and share faith in the world. Beyond mere words, how do people know we are disciples of Jesus Christ? No matter the age, it’s about daily seeking and living in relationship with the living God. We are called to be righteous, to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. Thus, lifelong discipleship formation is about how we live into that right relationship with God, with all God’s people, and all of creation. It’s about growing in the community of God’s grace, the church, and interpreting faith in our everyday life; confronting brokenness and sinfulness when we fall short of the glory of God, and shining a bold light of Christ for all to see. Lifelong discipleship formation requires an awakened and engaged commitment to God, and to all people whom Christ loves. It is about the call to daily take up our cross and follow Christ.

A. Biblical References:

Acts 2:42–47; Luke 8:11–18; Philippians 3:9b; Romans 8:1–17; Matthew 5:1–16; Deuteronomy 11:13–21

B. Objectives:

- An intentional plan for discipleship formation of all ages; from the cradle to the grave theology (including, but not limited to, family systems and intergenerational discipleship where applicable)
- A regular practice of Bible study, prayer, and other spiritual habits, inside and outside where we gather
- Church teaches rituals and faith traditions, biblical literacy and spiritual practices to all members
- Church equips and empowers all people to interpret faith in daily life. It engages in, not hides from, difficult conversations of society and cultures today. (i.e., sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and all other “isms” that divide)
- Fostered environments of diversity which help enhance and deeply enrich biblical study, worship, and communal life

C. Potential Outcomes:

- People learn to think critically and interpret scripture in their daily lives. They have the biblical literacy and the faith language to engage in necessary conversations
- They practice a living relationship, to a living God, responding to the call to follow as true disciples of Jesus Christ
- Move beyond committee meetings and program attendance, and identity in Christ becomes central to life
- Genuine sense of joy, energy, commitment and passion to being the community of God
- People “outside the church” glean a new understanding of what it is to follow Christ and be church
- The church begins to transcend culture and be about God’s work of reconciliation, love, and peace

D. Reflection Questions:

- Does Christian formation in your church lead people to change the way they live? (i.e. schedule time, spend money, give resources, see different people, serve, spend time with family, have conversations with friends)
- Are people of all ages being challenged in assumptions, growing in understanding, and learning the language of faith?
- Does the study of scripture influence the mission and ministry of your church?
- Are faithful habits being translated to daily living?
- Does the Word of God permeate all aspects of life together? Name some examples.
- Do all people feel welcome to share their voice, opinion, story without judgement or fear?
- What difficult conversations of faith and culture does your congregation need to have together? Whose voices are missing from the conversation to take place?
- As a disciple, what uncomfortable things do you need to let go of, truths do you need to be aware of, places you are afraid to follow, things you are afraid God might call you to do? (i.e. injustice, oppression, hatred, evils, suffering, inequalities to confront).
- How can faithful discipleship become our daily identity instead of just religious piety? How do others know we are disciples of Jesus Christ?

2

Intentional Authentic Evangelism vs. “Jesus freaks”; “Christian” hypocrisy; a committee responsibility

Evangelism is simply sharing the Good News. It is authentic and it is intentional, not merely expressions of kindness or good moral ethics. We all have Good News to share in our lives; it is a part of our identity. And when we share this news, it is with intentionality and with people with whom we have relationships. We don't have to be trained to share the good news of a new job, baby or puppy! We simply share what is beautiful and dear to us. Therefore, evangelism must be connected to lifelong Christian formation. It is through intentional spiritual practices in the faith community that we meld God's story with our story, and we share that story with people in our daily lives.

A. Biblical References:

John 4:1–41; 2 Corinthians 4:7; Galatians 2:19b–20; Mark 4:1–20; 1 Peter 3:13–22; Matthew 4:19–20; Psalm 96; John 3:11–21; Romans 10:1–17

B. Objectives:

- To recognize that all disciples are called to Evangelism, not just committees and leaders; it is an authentic part of their life
- To empower and equip all people to enter relationships unashamed and unafraid to share the Good News
- The church recognizes that evangelism should be need-based (meets needs of un-churched/de-churched)
- The church develops practices for people to share their story and give witness to Good News in their lives

C. Potential Outcomes

- Hospitality is not viewed as a substitute for evangelism
- Evangelism is viewed as a way of life, not as a program or function of a few
- The mission focuses on sharing the Good News
- The people of God meld and claim God's story within their lives; living unafraid to share it
- Develop authentic relationships founded in Christ; image of Christ is shared

D. Reflection Questions:

- When did the news of Christ become Good News in your life?
- Does your church authentically allow individuals to come as they are, with their particular stories, and hear the Good News? Why or why not?
- In your church, how do people share their stories and connect it to the Story of God's redeeming love?

- How is your congregation equipped, empowered, and encouraged to intentionally share the Good News in daily life?
- Do you have an evangelism committee? If so, what are they tasked to do? How do you practice sharing the good news vs. growing membership?
- What keeps us from sharing the Good News in our daily relationships?
- Can we call it “Good News” if we do not share it in our authentic relationships?
- Name a time when sharing the Good News was good for someone who needed to hear it.

3

Outward Incarnational Focus vs. inward institutional survival; closed communities of assimilation/exclusion

If discipleship formation is about learning/ understanding/living the Good News, and authentic evangelism is about intentionally sharing the Good News in relationships, then outward incarnation is about not limiting where and to whom we share the Good News. Outward incarnational focus is about being the gathered community of Christ sent out! We go not because we have a strategy for new membership; we go because we have a Savior who commanded us to be on God's mission. We go because God's saving love in Christ, cannot be inwardly contained in our buildings when we live with neighbors in need and a hurting world. The Good News is meant to transform and transcend. The church is meant to be a beacon of Christ's grace, justice, freedom, and love. Outward incarnational focus means we daily take up our cross and follow to the marginalized of society, the poor among us, the suffering and sick, the stranger and enemy, the down-trodden and “the least of these.” We do not just focus on bringing similar or like-minded people inside to assimilate to our way of doing things; nor do we just go to people and places that are familiar and comfortable. Outward incarnational focus, requires an emboldened faith, that goes because Christ is already present, and calls us to join.

A. Biblical References:

Matthew 25:31–46; Romans 12:1–21; Matthew 7:14; Luke 19:1–10; Matthew 8:18–23; Luke 6:27–36; 2 Peter 1:16–21; Luke 9:1–6, 23–27; Luke 10:1–12

B. Objectives:

- Conduct community analysis to ascertain the needs, fears, hopes, and pressure points in the community, so that the church's ministry and mission can address them.
- The church practices genuine hospitality (more than being warm and friendly, it is about attempting to

anticipate the needs of others; practicing inclusion; stepping out of the comfort zone; loving and nurturing others; it's about them, not you)

- Join on Christ's mission with the lost, weak, suffering, lowly, least, marginalized, oppressed, outcast; working towards forgiveness and reconciliation
- Faithful engagement in rich relationships of all diversity
- Church becomes a living being sent to follow the Spirit and join where Christ is already present; not still/static

C. Potential Outcomes:

- The congregation is a noted presence in the community (i.e. needs are met, people feel welcomed, reconciliation and diversity help transcend culture)
- The community is viewed as being more important than the church building; we take up God's mission
- Transformation and renewal of congregations that reflect the rich diversity of the kingdom of God
- Shifts from "bringing in young people and young families" to sending out, showing up, being present where God is already at work; many come to know Christ their Savior

D. Reflection Questions:

- Who is at the margins of your community? Your congregation?
- How does your congregation show up outside your building and share the love of Christ?
- What would your community say about your churches identity?
- Where is Christ at work and inviting you to join? Does your congregation have an emboldened spirit to follow Christ?
- What prevents you from going where God may send you? What are your fears? What leaves you focused inward?
- Does your church welcome the lost, help the doubting, sit with the grieving, lend aid to the poor, help the downtrodden, offer forgiveness to the sinner, clothe the naked, support the suffering and sick, strengthen the faint hearted, respond to the skeptic, help bind up the broken-hearted, stand up for the weak, give voice to those silenced, pray with those in pain, and otherwise live into the incarnate spirit of Christ our Savior? If so, in what ways? If not, why?
- Do you feel like your church equips you in the faith to have difficult conversations of racial oppression, social injustice, white-privilege, racial profiling, sexual and gender inequality, terrorism, and/or stereotypes and prejudices of any kind?



Empowering Servant Leadership vs. the pastor's job; monopolized leadership; hiring the young, energetic pastor

All people of God, in the image of Christ, are given fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts meant for building up the Church. In this way, we are all called to serve the Lord, to do our part in membership of the body of Christ. Every part is necessary. Every part is valuable, and every voice is important. Every person should be equipped, nurtured, and supported to use their gifts to glorify God, through servant leadership; not just cliques of powerful people or continual burnout of the same leaders. In keeping with true discipleship formation, churches are called to help all members to be empowered to use their gifts in servant leadership. And, God calls and equips some for the particular task of pastoral ministry, which must be cultivated, nurtured and trained. Ministry can never be about a single pastor, but it is about identifying, equipping and empowering those servant leaders God puts in our midst.

A. Biblical References:

John 13:2–17; Ephesians 4:1–16; 1 Timothy 4:6–16; Matthew 9:37–38; 1 Samuel 3:2 Timothy 2:14–26; John 13:1–20

B. Objectives:

- The church encourages members, when appropriate, to be "ministers" (priesthood of all believers)
- The congregation provides tools and a healthy environment to train and support leaders
- The staff and other leaders model servant leadership principles
- Develop methods in which voices, ideas, opinions are shared; people are empowered in their faith
- Congregation assists people in discerning spiritual gifts for use in service to church and community

C. Potential Outcomes:

- Shared power and fresh ideas generated in worship and ministry, not staff or program-driven
- The church has healthy expectations of leadership; nurture and support is a shared responsibility
- Empowered servant leaders committed and passionate in mission and ministry of the church
- Servant leadership is diversified by age, race, gender, etc., as all people identify spiritual gifts and are trained in their call to serve

D. Reflection Questions:

- How does your church identify, equip, train, and support its leaders?
- Who is the leadership in your church? Is leadership a shared power? Do the same people lead everything?

- Is your leadership diverse? Are different ages, genders, races, beliefs, views represented?
- What practices does your congregation have that ensure the health of your servant leadership? How are they practically supported? What do you do when someone is burned out?
- How does your church handle monopolized cliques of leadership?
- What spoken and unspoken expectations do you have for your pastor(s)?
- How does your church help members discern spiritual gifts? How are voices/ideas heard?
- How are people empowered and encouraged to serve?
- What does your church do if the wrong people are leading?

5

Spirit-Inspired Worship vs. self-gratifying worship; stale ritual divorced of meaning; consumer entertainment worship

Spirit-Inspired worship is a gift of God's wonder! Six days we labor and toil, and on this Holy Sabbath day we get to come into the presence of God; we get to encounter the awesome mystery of the God who longs to be known in relationship with us. We worship, because through prayer and supplication, through the Word proclaimed and the sacraments celebrated, through the songs of praise and passing of peace — God meets us there. Worship is our lifeline to the Holy God. Our worship should be active participation into the living relationship with the triune God; thus, all should feel welcome and have a place. Worship should challenge, teach, transform, convict, and call us into deeper relationship with God and one another; not gratify our comforts and entertain our desires. Worship is an encounter with God that we understand and do not understand. It is an act filled with mystery and awe, but in worship we have the opportunity to express our deepest desires to God and listen for God's voice. In worship, we also experience the call to serve and be in mission.

A. Biblical References:

Isaiah 6:1–13; Isaiah 29:13; Hebrews 12:28–29; Luke 24:13–35; Exodus 3:1–6; Deuteronomy 12; Philippians 2:1–11; Hebrews 5:1–10; 1 Chronicles 16:7–36; Revelation 22:1–7; Matthew 21:12–17

B. Objectives

- Prayerful discernment of members actively participating in all aspects of planning and leading worship
- There is thoughtful and sound biblical preaching
- Intentional worship does not cling to rituals, but is open to filling sacred space with new rituals

- Engages all people, of all diversity, and enables them to be active participants in the experience
- Creates space for peoples' stories; not afraid of silence
- Communal connectivity to one another, and connection to God
- Challenges and sends the people of God beyond their pew into daily life
- There should be awe, expectation, and anticipation in coming into the presence of God

C. Potential Outcomes:

- Worship helps people deepen their relationship with God and nurtures faith
- Worship strengthens our communal ties as stories are shared and we intimately experience God
- Worship becomes an expression of relationships to God and to the household of God
- Worship opens us to experience the wonder God longs to reveal and wonder transforms our lives and ministry, never leaving us the same, but leading us to even deeper questions
- Worship enlivens us, emboldens us to be a people of God in our communities and our world
- Blessing of rich diversity as people share new rituals, traditions, ways of interpreting which challenge and enrich our wisdom in faith

D. Reflection Questions:

- What would you say are the fundamental principles to why you gather for worship?
- What would a visitor say about your worship?
- How does your congregation practice spirit-inspired worship — allowing space for lament, praise, confession, questions, wrestling contemplation with the Word?
- Is worship collaborative in your church? Are people of all ages/backgrounds included?
- Does your congregation explain, teach and educate people on the rituals and traditions?
- How does your worship challenge, ignite, educate and transform people?
- Does worship meet people where they are and allow for active participation? How do people share their stories?
- Name times when God's wonder was experienced in worship.
- How open is your congregation to change in worship? Do they seek new ways to ritualize the sacredness of worship, or do they hold on sacredly to their rituals and traditions?
- Do all cultures, races, languages, genders, ages, all diversity find a sacred place to worship? Is worship enriched by their unique traditions and styles?

6

Caring Relationships vs. any other social club; facades, hypocrisy and judgments of the “church” and “religion”

Caring relationships seems an easy mark of vitality. We all want a place to belong; people who care about us. Many congregations would argue: “this is why we come together; we welcome and care for each other.” Yet, caring relationships in Christ requires true agape love; a sacrificial, self-emptying, perfect love. Although we are imperfect, it is about striving to see all people the way Christ sees them; not from judgments or preconceived perceptions. It is about helping walk with others, responding to their needs, desiring their well-being. It is about walking with people in tragedy, and rejoicing in their triumphs. Caring relationships of God is about allowing people to be real in their stories, without hiding or holding back, and loving every imperfect part of them. Church should be the one place where the God who already knows, encounters our honest confession, and allows us to give testimony. It should be the place where conflicts are confronted, crucial conversations of forgiveness and reconciliation are had, and people of God are transformed by agape-love. Caring relationships is about vulnerability and trust. It is about meeting all people of God where they are, and sharing our One Savior, Jesus Christ. Caring relationships don’t come through hospitality and welcoming committees, they come through a carefully cultivated environment that is genuine and sincere in being the household of God.

A. Biblical References:

Acts 6:1–7; John 21:15–19; Romans 12:9–18; Galatians 6:1–10; John 13:35; Hebrews 10:24–25; John 8:1–12; Romans 15:1–6

B. Objectives:

- Cultivates an environment of true caring relationships through genuine opportunities to share testimony
- The church seeks to strengthen ties within the household of God; fostering relationships between demographics, with members on the margin, people who are missing or who have been hurt
- The church seeks to build and rebuild relationships of conflict or strain; clear process of conflict resolution
- The church develops caring relationships in the neighborhood and community (i.e. other churches, community organizations, health and human services, advocacy groups, presbytery)
- Evaluate and envision ways of sharing the love of Christ in new relationships

C. Potential Outcomes:

- The church provides lasting community of agape — a love where all people belong
- Faith is strengthened; accountability and commitment grows

- People find belonging, lay burdens down, share needs, experience Christ
- Collaboration with other churches and community organizations becomes easier
- Growing connectional relationships throughout the presbytery, the denomination, and beyond

D. Reflection Questions:

- What practices of caring relationships does your congregation cherish most?
- What would a neighbor/community visitor say about the environment of caring relationships?
- How does your congregation respond in caring for the sick, marginalized, grieving, lonely? What about the alcoholic, the racially profiled, the abused child?
- Are people free to share their story and feel comfortable being authentic?
- What stops us from truth-telling in God’s house? What are the fears?
- How might you foster a genuine environment of caring relationships and true agape?
- How does your church handle conflict?
- What relationships in the church need to be reconciled?
- How do you foster and nurture lasting relationships in your community, with your presbytery, and beyond?

7

Ecclesial Health vs. unhealthy dysfunction; toxic environments; obsolete and irrelevant buildings

Ecclesial health is about: 1) Why we gather as a church community 2) How we practice being church together. It is about whether our mission, vision, and values match up with the ways we live together. It requires continual attentiveness, awareness, and assessment in asking “are we who we say we are?” And more importantly, “are we who God is calling us to be?” Prayer and discernment are at the heart of ecclesial health! There are several factors to ecclesial health: prayerful discernment, decision-making process, health of pastors, stewardship of budget and resources, clarity in mission and ministries. Ecclesial health is about the people of God having a clear purpose; all people are stake-holders invested in being a part of this community of faith. There are shared core values, a clear mission, and commitment and loyalty to the life we gather in as church. Yet, they also know that this is a living faith. So, they dare to dream and understand that change is inevitable. With ecclesial health, there is joy and gratitude in coming together; people, not programs or properties are valued. People gather and are sent to be Christ’s Church.

A. Biblical References:

II Corinthians 5:11–21; Matthew 15:1–9; 1 Corinthians 12:14, 24b–25; Romans 6:1–14; Luke 24:13–35; John 2:13–25; John 17; Colossians 2:1–19; 1 Timothy 6:11–21

B. Objectives:

- A communal life centered on prayer and discernment of God's will
- Clarity in Vision, Mission, Core Values; budget reflects these core principles
- Continual attentiveness, awareness and assessment to mission and practices of being church
- Pastor(s) and staff are regularly evaluated using best practices
- Pastor(s) and staff, all servant leaders, are nurtured and supported in health; clear expectations
- Stewardship and tithing are taught year-round; accountable giving in gratitude
- Transparent in spending; continual discernment of budget sustainability
- All are stakeholders, committed to fiscal responsibilities, active participation, and necessary voices in envisioning, dreaming, and decision-making

C. Potential Outcomes:

- Congregations practice a living faith, ever-changing, where prayer is central to existence
- People are the church sharing core values, mission, vision
- Authentic joy, desire, commitment in being the church
- There is a culture of accountability and risk taking, openness to new things

- Sustainable budget, tithing responsibility, stewardship center on generosity to being church
- Pastor(s) and leaders are cared for, evaluated, and supported

D. Reflection Questions:

- How would you describe the ecclesial health of your church?
- Do you feel like your church centers life with prayer at the heart of all things?
- What is the mission of your church? Who wrote it? How does your church live into its mission? How does your budget reflect your mission?
- What are the core values and vision of your church? Does everyone know and share them?
- Does your congregation do well to embrace change?
- When was the last time a dream led to incredible new vision and ministry in your church?
- Are people stakeholders in being a part of your church? Do they feel committed to values and mission? Do they feel they are necessary in dreaming, envisioning, decision-making process?
- What are the policies for pastor(s) and staff in your church? How are they evaluated? Supported?
- How does your church teach stewardship and tithing?
- Who makes decisions in your church? Are they transparent? Do all get buy-in; all opinions heard?
- Is your budget sustainable? How is it assessed? Who determines spending?

Survey for Congregational Vitality

A Discernment Tool for Sessions and Staff

1 Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Does your church prioritize faith formation and disciple making?

1. Do you see people grow in their faith through participation in the activities of this congregation?
 1. Which would you say of the following are emphasized in your church?
 - An intentional plan for lifelong faith formation or discipleship
 - Bible study
 - Christian education for all ages
 - Prayer circles, prayer chains, prayer partners, prayer walks, etc.
 - Teaching or practicing stewardship throughout the year
 - Other activities to engage in or learn about spiritual disciplines
3. Does this church ...
 - Challenge its members to become more Christ-like?
 - Emphasize sabbath-keeping as a priority?
 - Have a strong culture of generosity?
 - Help members apply their faith to everyday life?



Notes:

2 Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Does your church engage in evangelism?

1. Does your church encourage members to ...
 - Be very open about being Christian when they engage in mission?
 - Engage in theological discussions of truth and meaning with those outside our church?
 - Invite others to worship or other church activities, including mission?
 - Make specific efforts to form relationships with people who are not Christian?
 - Make specific efforts to reach out to people who are in a different demographic than that of existing members?
 - Openly share their faith?
2. How often does the leadership of your church talk about evangelism in worship?
3. How true are the following statements?
 - We think of mission as a form of evangelism
 - Our outward communications make it clear that all are welcome regardless of who they are or what they have done
 - This church equips members to welcome all people
 - This church invites people being served by the church into the life of the congregation

3 Outward Incarnational Focus

Does your church help others outside the church?

- 1. How true are the following statements?
 - We equip members for ministry wherever they are (community, school, hobby, work)
 - People in this community would not notice if our church closed
 - People in our community know our church leaders
- 2. Would you say that this church ...
 - Is a prophetic voice in our community?
 - Responds to the needs of people in the local community or beyond?
 - Promotes social righteousness issues within our community?
 - Teaches that being the church is more important than being at church?
 - Emphasizes mission over self-preservation?

Notes:

4 Empowering Servant Leadership

Does your church foster servant leadership within the church?

- 1. How true are the following statements?
 - Sometimes we have a hard time finding people to volunteer to serve
 - We encourage members to identify and use their spiritual gifts
 - Staff and other leaders here model humility
- 2. Would you say that this church ...
 - Involves members in the planning of activities and worship?
 - Has a plan to develop disciples who make disciples?
 - Develops growing disciples into leaders?
 - Emphasizes the importance of mentoring and spiritual direction?

5 Spirit-Inspired Worship

Does your church lead inspiring worship?

- 1. How well do the following terms describe worship services at this congregation?
 - Boring
 - Filled with a sense of God's presence
 - Filled with wonder
 - Frustrating
 - Inspirational
 - Joyful
 - Renewing
 - Thought-provoking
- 2. Would you say that worship services at this church are designed to ...
 - Allow time and space to communicate directly with God?
 - Challenge participants' assumptions and convictions?
 - Help participants be more open to God?
 - Help participants be more open to others/humanity/neighbors?

- Help participants understand scripture?
- Encourage participants to take action?

 Notes:

5 Caring Relationships

Does your church love and care for one another?

1. *How true are the following statements?*
 - I am aware of serious conflict among members
 - I know there are members who have been hurt by this church
 - I observe informal cliques that others find it difficult to break into
 - I observe people warmly greeting one another before or after worship and at other events
 - We take care of members who are sick, grieving, or otherwise need support
 - We reach out to people who have not been to church in a while
 - We encourage small groups and/or fellowship groups so that caring relationships happen

7 Ecclesial Health

Does your church maintain healthy systems in place that allow the church to live into its mission?

1. *How true are the following statements?*
 - Our congregation manages conflict well
 - We share our church financial picture, including sources and use of funds, with members
 - Our members can articulate our mission/purpose
 - This church has an intentional plan to help new members become and remain connected
 - Our members are hopeful or excited about this church's future
 - People here are nostalgic about this church's past
 - Decisions in this congregation are mainly made by staff/pastoral leadership rather than by session
 - People expect leadership to do everything
2. *Would you say that this church ...*
 - Is willing to change to meet new challenges?
 - Has clearly stated beliefs and values?
 - Has a healthy sense of mission/purpose?
 - Is open to diverse views?
 - Helps its leaders avoid burnout?
 - Has unresolved issues of scandal or drastic, painful change?
 - Has a strong connection with the presbytery?
 - Has a strong connection with other congregations?
3. *How often does the leadership of your church do the following?*
 - Gather in prayer and discernment around God's mission
 - Evaluate programs and/or ministries
 - Evaluate staff

Neighborhood Exegesis

1. Lead *Dwelling in the Word* on Luke 10:1–11 (see below)

2. Introduce the idea of a neighborhood visit.

Emphasize that the goal is to get to know more about the neighborhood and its people. We do this by using all 5 senses. We are not going out to teach anything, to convert anyone, or to change the neighborhood, just to learn from the people who know more about it than we do.

3. Ask participants if they have any ideas how they can learn about the neighborhood.

They will probably mention looking at the houses and businesses, observing what kind of services are available, listening to what languages are spoken, talking to people, etc. Press them to come up with as many ideas as possible by asking, “what else?”

4. Explain parameters:

- You will be going out two-by-two, just as Jesus sent the disciples (three is okay if you have an uneven number.)
- You need to return by ... (designate time.)
- Pray with your partner before leaving the building — that you will find the right people to talk to, that you will be observant and respectful.

5. Hand out the List of Observations (see page 16)

6. Give these three assignments:

- Buy a drink or something to eat in a local establishment.
- Talk to at least one person from the community.
- Bring back a token, something that represents what you learned about the people you met.

Dwelling in the Word

Luke 10:1–11

¹After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ [b] ¹⁰But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.

Reflect:

- Listen to the passage.
- Underline any words or phrases that stand out.
- Sit quietly with those words.
- What message do you hear?
- Share with another person.

Debrief

- Have each pair tell about their token — it will provide a vehicle for them to debrief the experience.
- All together, brainstorm a list of all the people-groups you identified in the community.
- Choose one of the people-groups mentioned, and brainstorm several activities you could try if you wanted to get to know that group better.

List of Observations:

- Who do you see? Describe the people.
- What are they doing?
- What conversations do you observe?
- Are people alone or in groups?
- Do you see people walking on the streets? Driving? Sitting? Biking?
- How are the people dressed? Pay attention to details such as shoes, jewelry, hair and clothing styles.
- What do you hear and smell?
- Pay attention to the town infrastructure: sidewalks, streetlights, stop lights, signage. What do they tell you about the community?
- Describe the houses you see: single family, apartments, condos? Are they well cared for? Do you see toys in the yards? Cars parked out front? What can you tell about the community?
- What kind of signage do you see? Advertising? Fliers on telephone poles?
- What is your overall impression of the community?
- Is there anything that you might expect to see in a community that seems to be missing?
- Describe the commercial district: what stores do you see? What stores are not present? What signs of commercial vibrancy do you see?
- What businesses do you observe? Can you get a sense of what people in this community do for a living?
- Where are the children? Is there a school in the community? What signs of children or youth activities do you notice?
- What leisure activities can you observe? Is there a gym, movie theater, sports facility, etc.
- What churches or other community gathering places do you observe?

 Notes:

7 Marks of Vital Congregations

Immediate Tool Kit Devotional

- ① **Lifelong Discipleship Formation vs.**
complacent “Christian” piety, simply teaching good morals, or offering the latest programs
- ② **Intentional Authentic Evangelism vs.**
“Jesus freaks;” “Christian” hypocrisy; a committee
- ③ **Outward Incarnational Focus vs.**
inward Institutional survival; closed communities of assimilation/exclusion
- ④ **Empower Servant Leadership vs.**
the pastor’s job; monopolized leadership; hiring the young energetic pastor
- ⑤ **Spirit-Inspired Worship vs.**
self-gratifying worship, stale ritual divorced of meaning, or consumer entertainment worship
- ⑥ **Caring Relationships vs.**
any other social club; façades, hypocrisy, and judgment of “church” and “religion”
- ⑦ **Ecclesial Health vs.**
unhealthy dysfunction; toxic environments; obsolete and irrelevant buildings

1 Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Opening Prayer

God of steadfast love,

The Earth and all that is within it proclaim your wondrous works. The mystery of your splendor, the hope of your redemption, the truth of your salvation is daily made manifest throughout your beloved creation. You are, indeed, a living God who longs to reveal in wisdom and in truth. You long for relationships of righteousness. You desire for your people to marvel at your majesty and be transformed by your grace. Lord, we admit we do not always perceive it. We fear to follow; we ignore our discipleship. In Christ, help us to have courage and conviction to walk in faith that seeks wisdom and righteousness all of our days. Make us a people whose lives proclaim your story, and witness to your love. Form us as your disciples, so that we might be instruments of your will and grow ever closer to you. For this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Scripture: Acts 2:42–47

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Acts 2:42–47 is Luke’s depiction of the primitive communal life together. It focuses on four key ideas: 1) The apostolic teaching 2) Fellowship “koinonia” — a group of companions who shared in a common life 3) Breaking of bread in their homes — central pledge and symbol of common life and common faith; table fellowship. Breaking bread also refers to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, a practice of regularly dying to the old and being raised up in new life with Christ. “In their homes” is differentiated from the “apostolic teaching” to note that discipleship formation happens inside and outside the “temple” life together. 4) Devoted themselves to prayer — devotional life finds expression in family gatherings and daily community.

vv. 43 depicts the communal life together and the assurance of God’s presence through “many wonders and signs.” Notice the idea that “awe came upon everyone.” The notion of “awe” or “fear” is a testament to miracles within the Old Testament . It is characteristic of the reverence attributed to God’s power. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.” Psalm 111:10. This communal gathering, the revelation attributed in apostolic teaching, prayer, breaking bread together, and fellowship, are all attributed to the fact that God shows up in Spirit and in truth. God reveals God’s self in relationship to God and to one another. This communal life seeks wisdom and understanding, and God is present there. Thus, “All who believed were together and had all things in common” (vv. 44).

Luke emphasizes the daily routine of the community, whereby, daily needs were being met, people gathered in the temple, broke bread in homes, and praised God with glad and generous hearts. And daily God was there, adding to those whom God gathered.

“As one views modern congregations, many with their hectic round of activities — yoga, ceramics, daycare — one suspects that socialization is being substituted for the gospel, warm-hearted busyness is being offered in lieu of Spirit-empowered community. One wonders if the church needs to reflect again that when all is said and done ‘one thing is needful’, namely to embody, in the church’s unique way, the peculiarity of the call to devote ourselves ‘to the apostles’ teaching’ and fellowship, to breaking of the bread and the prayers.” —William H. Willimon

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. What is necessary for Lifelong Discipleship Formation to take root?
2. What leaves us skeptical, fearful, unwilling?
3. What would need to change in our communal life? Our home life? Our daily life?
4. Name how your church community helps to nurture and equip you for Lifelong Discipleship.
5. Name a pivotal time when you grew or were challenged as a disciple in your church.

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, hopes, and triumphs of Lifelong Discipleship Formation.*

2

Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Opening Prayer

Living God,

In Jesus Christ, we have been given Good News of saving and sacrificial love. This news is the very breath that offers us life. It is the unmerited salvation, the gift of grace, and the hope of an eternal home in your kingdom. In times of suffering or sorrow, in times of rejoicing and rest, this is indeed the Good News of our entire being. But, we forget that sometimes, Lord. We separate it from daily news. We hide it away so we don't offend. Lord, make your will, our will; your intent, our intentionality. Make Intentional Authentic Evangelism who we are, unapologetically. Make it so that we cannot help but to share this good news in authentic relationship with others. Lord, this we pray to the one who gave life, so that we might live, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: John 4:1-41

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases and images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Jesus is leaving Judea for Galilee, because the Pharisees are jealous of Jesus' success in those who were coming to believe. In order to get to Galilee, Jesus goes through Samaria. The hatred and violence between the Jews and the Samaritans, were heightened during this time, as Jews were being attacked traveling to and from Jerusalem for the temple feasts. In fact, the violence made travelers take a different, more popular route, but Jesus went with his disciples into Samaria.

Jesus, who is tired, comes upon this Samaritan woman, drawing water in the midday heat. Here the themes unfold: the living water (vv. 7-15); spiritual worship (vv. 16-24); and Jesus' self-disclosure as the Messiah (vv. 25-26)

Note that Christ first comes close; he draws people into conversation and relationship. He meets them for who they are, right where they are, and genuinely talks with them. No pamphlet, no immediate call to repentance, no hell fire scare tactics, just a real conversation.

This story identifies two basic necessities to humanity: water and food. John give glimpse of a tired Christ in human flesh who sits in the heat of the day and asks for water. As Jesus enters a relationship with this woman, she experiences God offering a drink of water that will satisfy her thirst forever. There is nothing, not the threat of violence amid these two peoples, not the story of this woman's life, not the heat of day or the fact Jesus has not eaten, nothing – will stop Christ from meeting this woman with Good News. In fact, when the disciples try to get him to eat, Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together" (vv. 34-36). Meanwhile, many in the city of Samaria came to believe, because of what the woman shared with them.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Recall the first-time Christ became Good News for your life? Who told or shared with you?
2. What does Intentional Authentic Evangelism require of us? What does it look like in our daily lives?
3. What stops us from sharing the Good News with people we are in relationship with?
4. Think of the daily needs of people you are in relationship with. How could they benefit from the Good News?
5. How does your church community equip and empower you to practice Authentic Evangelism?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Intentional Authentic Evangelism.*

3

Outward Incarnational Focus

Opening Prayer

Christ, you took on human flesh, so that we might see and believe; so that we might live a life surrendered to ourselves and steadfast upon the salvation you bring. You took on flesh, and you entered this world, this community, this congregation, so that we might follow you in faithful paths of redemption. But, Lord, you know we fear what we do not know; we sit unwilling to follow you out. It is not that we don't care about an outward focus of you in meeting the needs of a broken and fearful world crying out for salvation; but we get busy. We get overwhelmed by the weight of it all. Lord, fill us with your emboldened Spirit of courage and strength, so that we might be led out to join our living God. Make us the community you long for us to be; a beacon of light, a vessel of hope, a glimpse of eternal love for all people to witness. For we pray to the one who is fully God, and fully human, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–21

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases and images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Paul writes to the church in Rome outlining the ethical principles to the mercies of God. It is a call to frame our lives as “living sacrifices” according, not to our will, but to the will of God. Paul Achtemeier writes, “The fundamental response to the gracious lordship of God displayed in his Son is to allow oneself to be shaped totally by the new lordship, rather than by the lordship of sin that operates in ‘this world.’ Beginning with the Christian community (12:3-13), Paul moves to the wider society (vv. 14-21) in his discussion of the impact of God’s structuring grace on human relationships.”

Her name was Grace. When I sat with her on the front steps of the church in Africa, she seemed timid and quiet. As the custodian of the church grounds, and she seemed to appreciate keeping to herself. Finishing up a long day, I sat beside Grace on the steps, and I asked, “How are you, Grace?” A common question of cordial conversation, became for me, the moment that God’s grace manifested in this shy woman, named Grace. She told me that tomorrow was her Birthday, and this was a special Birthday, because it marked the one year anniversary when God told her, “Grace, it’s not your time to die.” Grace had been robbed one night walking home after dark, and received an injury on her leg that became infected. After several days, unable to get the infection under control, and her fever to break, the doctor told her family members to prepare for the worst: “Grace is probably not going to make it through the night. She is going to die.” In and out of awareness, Grace vaguely heard the words of the doctor and that of her family, but she said that night she prayed, and she asked God if she was going to die. And Grace told me, “I heard God answer: ‘No, Grace, it’s not your time to die.’” So, the following morning, all were amazed to see Grace sitting up and her fever had broken. Although she carries the scars of that horrible day, she sat on those steps of the church sobbing in gratitude for the grace God poured out in her life. “I just want to spend my Birthday giving thanks to God, and surrounded by those I love.” The following day, we celebrated Grace’s Birthday, and her life, exactly that way. Gathered together in love, we gave thanks to God for the grace and mercy shown to this beautiful woman, Grace.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Name a time when you encountered the living God in your daily life.
2. Think of those in your community who need a glimpse of God’s grace and love.
3. What prevents our church from focusing outward on joining the living Christ?
4. What would it require for us to share God’s grace to the lowly and “least of these,” the marginalized and the poor, the broken and the oppressed; the ones God calls “beloved,” and will not stop pursuing until the lost are found in Christ?
5. Describe ways in which your faith community serves and includes people in your neighborhood/community.

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Outward Incarnational Focus.*



Empower Servant Leadership

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

By the work of your hands, you created all that is good. You formed us in Christ's image, and you fashioned us with spiritual gifts according to your will. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:4-5). Created in your image, Lord, we have been made to serve and glorify you. Lord, help us to strengthen our gifts, and live empowered by your Spirit. Help us to find strength in serving one another, for we can accomplish far greater things in your name. And may we be your disciples, who help nurture and encourage the gifts of all others, without envy or strife. God, we know the harvest is plentiful, so make us to laborer together in the grace and love of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: John 13:1–20

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Jesus, knowing that His hour to "depart out of this world to the Father," gathers with the disciples around table fellowship in this ultimate act of love. This narrative of Jesus begins "the Book of Glory" (chapters 13-21) leading to the crucifixion. Christ, as teacher and Savior, leads by example in this symbolic act of washing the feet of his beloved disciples. This memorable act of service is one of equality, one where there is no social status among the company, and our Savior is humbled in service. Gerard Sloyan writes, "Being bathed by Jesus means being symbolically taken into the event of the cross. It is likewise a model of service for the disciples." In this event, we see that we must be washed clean by our Savior, and in turn, we are sent out to do the very same.

This is the call for the people of God to practice Empowering Servant Leadership. Yet it is a rite of those who believe, who witness and testify to the final hours of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Notice, John begins this "Book of Glory" by stating that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (vv. 1). Jesus showed great love to the end, to the ultimate expression of washing the feet of the disciples whom Christ loved. We remember that the table was prepared and the invitation extended to the Savior who bids us come, but John's gospel message reminds us that the Savior is also the servant, leading by this ultimate example of love. For all who are in Christ, who have been created in the image of Christ and cleansed by the blood of our Savior, we are empowered and gifted by the same Spirit that was in Jesus to be Servant Leaders. It is not just in some, but all who are beloved disciples to the very end.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. What does it mean that Jesus washed the disciples' feet, even Judas and Peter, as one of His final hours?
2. Can you name your spiritual gifts? How do you use them for servant leadership to the glory of Christ?
3. Recall a time when someone exercised servant leadership in a way that inspired you?
4. How does your church cultivate, nurture, and support servant leadership?
5. What gets in the way of all disciples using their spiritual gifts for servant leadership?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Empowering Servant Leadership.*

5

Spirit-Inspired Worship

Opening Prayer

God of all praise and glory,

You call us to rejoice in you, to praise your name, to find comfort in your presence, to stand in awe, to bow in confession, to come and worship. And in your worship, you meet us in ways we understand and do not understand. You meet us there. Your Spirit proclaims truth, your Word anoints us with wisdom, and your roots grow deeper in our soul. Lord, you deserve our worship each day. So, please forgive us when we forget what it is about; when we think ourselves too busy. Forgive us when we make it about what we desire or what entertains us. This sacred gift of wonder and love was meant to be so much more than we often make it. Yet we long to experience you, God. We need you. So, inspire our worship with your Spirit, so that our hearts and our lives are transformed by your wonder. This we pray to the living God who encounters us in worship. Amen.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:9–5:10

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

The writer of Hebrews uses thematic language in order to inform the reader that we have “a great high priest,” one who is sympathetic, in whom we find rest on the Holy Day of Sabbath. The writer wants believers to hold fast to confession, because Jesus, himself, was tempted in every way and yet was sinless. This affirmation of the priestly nature of Christ, explains why we, who are sinners, can approach the throne of our Savior. Christ fully understands the nature of our humanity, and in loving sympathy Christ bids us to come and worship. It is an active call to obedience, just as Christ was obedient to the will of God in suffering death on a cross. “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (vv. 16).

Too often our worship can become about us; our wants, our preference of style, our comfort in not being exposed, our way of going through the motions with little thought to the traditions. Yet, Spirit-Inspired Worship calls us into the presence of the “great high priest;” the one who suffered in obedience, so that we might find rest, receive mercy, and cling to grace. Spirit-Inspired Worship holds fast to the truth that when we come into God’s presence, “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” (vv. 13). Spirit-Inspired Worship exposes us, brings us to our knees in confession, and offers us freedom and rest in the Savior’s arms. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (vv. 7-9). It is Jesus Christ who lives and allows us the freedom to come into God’s presence in Spirit-Inspired Worship.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Describe a time when you encountered the wondrous presence of Christ in worship.
2. What does your church do to faithfully engage in Spirit-Inspired Worship?
3. What things stand in the way and distract your church from Spirit-Inspired Worship?
4. What prevents us from obedience in worshiping in spirit and in truth; in full exposure before the Savior?
5. What does it mean for your life that we have “a great high priest” who has granted us Sabbath?
6. How do you experience God’s presence in daily worship? Does your church equip you to worship daily?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Spirit-Inspired Worship.*

6 Caring Relationships

Opening Prayer

God of perfect love,

We are cleansed and claimed by the love of Jesus Christ, our Savior. We are redeemed and restored by the self-emptying, sacrificial love poured out. And we are called to love you and all whom you call beloved children. Open our hearts to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to love as Christ loves: reconciling conflict, supporting all people in tragedy and triumph, and daily surrendering our will for the sake of walking with others. We know that in our own accord, we will be imperfect at this. We will fall short. We will disappoint others and miss opportunities. Yet, Lord, help us to show up, to share Christ, and to be a beacon of hope, justice, love, and joy to all whom you call us to care for in our lives. For this we pray in the name of the one whose perfect love casts out all fear, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: Galatians 6:1–10

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (vv. 2). “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (vv. 8). “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (vv. 10).

He never felt as if he had a place to belong, a place where he was accepted. For twenty years, life circumstances had left him homeless. Yet life had not left Steven bitter. On the contrary, Steven quoted the Word of God in all things. He walked through the breakfast line in the basement of the church every single morning, and would greet you with a resounding testimony to the glory of God, and the blessed assurance of a new day now dawning. Every day, as he came in off of the streets, he testified to the new day’s opportunity to praise God.

Steven’s friendly demeanor and constant affirmation of the Lord, made him an easy relationship for the youth of the church. As the youth began to worship with the homeless community in the sanctuary on Sunday evenings and to dine around table fellowship afterwards, there was an evident shift, a sort of softening about Steven that began to intrigue me. After one Sunday evening worship service, Steven approached me to say a simple phrase: “You’ve done a good thing, Rev.” What initially threw me in this exchange was that Steven’s disposition was more somber and serious. “What’s going on with you,” I asked? “Rev,” he said shaking his head, struggling to collect words. “I’ve been coming into the basement of this church for twenty years for y’all to serve me breakfast. And I’ve been grateful. Lord knows I’ve been grateful. But you know this is the first time I’ve ever been invited and feel welcomed to come into God’s house, into the sanctuary of this building, and worship!”

Caring Relationships. Whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith, because we reap what we sow. It is the most simple and significant of commands, “to love the Lord your God, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet it is, in truth, the most difficult thing to live into. Christ’s true and perfect agape-love, is when the Spirit of Christ dwelling within me, meets the Spirit of Christ in you; regardless of all else.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. How does your church sow and nurture Caring Relationships?
2. How does the church equip and empower you to see opportunities for Caring Relationship in Christ?
3. Name a time when you have experienced Christ’s Agape-love? Did it happen in the church?
4. What prevents, hinders, blinds us from opportunities for true Caring Relationships?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Caring Relationships.*



Ecclesial Health

Opening Prayer

Lord,

You are the cornerstone to the Church you have gathered and built; a necessary foundation. You build and bind your people together, so that the whole is greater than the sum; so we can be greater, and do far greater than if we were alone. In you, we have our breath, and vitality of life. In you, we are a small part of the kingdom of God's glory and the work of redemption for all creation. Yet we make ourselves small. We forget to dream. We lose sight and wander in this world. So, forgive us for losing sight of your mission, for letting go of passion, and for ignoring the gift of being your community — the Church. Heal us in your Spirit's power that we might be a community of great faith and deep abiding love for all the world to see. We pray these things in the name of the one who is not finished with us yet, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:27

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

“Those in Christ are a new creation. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us” (vv. 17-20).

Paul's address to the church in Corinth is a letter explaining his lack of boastfulness in the work he has done; an all too important message for the church sometimes. Paul instead wants people to know that he lives knowing that his life will be judged by Christ, and that Christ's love controls his whole life. The critics of Paul's work in Corinth were the same power struggles, popularity, and positions that all too often still occur in the church today. Paul is addressing the fact that none of this is what he's about, or what church is about. What matters is the heart; that's what Christ will judge in all people. And Paul sees himself as an ambassador to Christ in the ministry of reconciliation. Ernest Best writes, “Ambassadors have full power to speak for the government they represent and can commit it to a course of action. Since they have also often to reconcile opposing views and people, it is an appropriate term to apply to those who represent Christ. If we think of ourselves in this way, then we also need to remember the responsibility that goes with being an ambassador. In what we say and do, we commit our principal, Jesus.”

Ecclesial Health is about all people of God, coming together in what we say and what we do, because we believe that we are ambassadors to God's message of reconciliation in a broken and fearful world. It is about how we are church, \enact and live out being church together. There are going to be critics and unhealthy functions of the church, because we are flawed and sinful human beings. Yet we have a Savior, who is not finished reconciling the church and the world to God, and we get to be ambassadors and witnesses in Christ.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Does the mission and core-values of your church reflect being ambassadors of reconciliation? How?
2. Do all members feel empowered to live as ambassadors of Christ? Give an example.
3. Where is there boasting and pride in your church?
4. What would critics say about your church? What message do you put forth for the world to see?
5. In what ways does your church show Ecclesial health? In what ways is it unhealthy?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship.*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Ecclesial Health.*