

The
Eight Essentials
for a
Healthy and Thriving
Congregation

Eight Week Small Group Study Guide
Including Leader's Guide

(To be used in conjunction with *The Eight Essentials for a Healthy and Thriving
Congregation; Developing a Strategy for Success*, available March, 2006.)

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Introduction

Welcome to a unique new study with one purpose in mind—to help your church become a healthy and thriving congregation.

The Eight Essentials for a Healthy and Thriving Congregation is a result of my own experiences as a UFMCC pastor over the past fifteen years. Through trial and error, challenges and celebrations, these eight essentials have survived the tests of time. It is my hope that you will find them to be a blessing to your congregation.

The eight individual studies are designed to be flexible. Although you can use them in any order that seems best for your church or study group you will find that some of them reference others. It is therefore best to take them in the order they are presented. These studies are ideal for Sunday-school classes, small groups and any type of leadership training.

They are written to be studied one lesson at a time over the course of eight weeks. Each study intentionally focuses on one essential. It is suggested that participants read the material and write out their answers for the questions for reflection before coming to the study each week. During the study it will be helpful to re-read the material as a group. Once the material is read, look over the questions leaving plenty of time for everyone to share. These questions are not set up for right and wrong answers; they are set up to initiate conversation. It is my hope that this conversation will lead your church on a journey to becoming a healthy and thriving congregation.

*This study is meant to be used in conjunction with *The Eight Essentials for a Healthy and Thriving Congregation: Developing a Strategy for Success* to be released March 26, 2006.

Lesson One: Set Up a Contextual Analysis of Your Congregation

Read II Corinthians 13:1-10

What is a contextual analysis and why is it important? Glad you asked! Many churches are unaware of this valuable tool for learning more about their faith community. What is learned through a contextual analysis can inform the congregation's decision-making in areas such as: dealing with people, conducting a pastoral search, planning worship, training leadership, developing education, providing pastoral care, and organizing general programming. It is also a helpful tool when dealing with conflict resolution. Contextual analysis, as defined for this study, is the integration of a church's history, culture, theology and experience.

Have you ever tried to find a particular store location, in a shopping mall, by using the big colorful diagram posted in the building? Two tasks must be accomplished before you can find the store or location you want:

- Locate the YOU ARE HERE marker to determine your starting place
- Locate the store

Knowing this information provides a way for you to get to where you want to go in a fairly straight line from point A to point B.

In the same way, I believe that before our churches can move ahead with their mission and vision we need to know:

- Where we are
- Where we want to go

Perhaps your church wants to grow in numbers, develop new programs, write a vision statement, or launch a pastoral search; perhaps it is facing personnel issues or a pastoral search. If you truly wish to have a positive and successful process you will want to consider conducting a contextual analysis. In other words, you're going to find the YOU ARE HERE marker for your church.

This analysis would have you look at four primary influencers in your church:

- The History
- The Culture
- The Theology.
- Major experiences in the life of your congregation

Every church is different because of the above four influences. Your goal is to discover where your church is at this particular place and time. **Warning: You may believe that**

you know exactly where your church is, but doing this analysis may yield some surprises for you.

The first step in performing a contextual analysis is to write out the history of your church with all of the details possible. Start with all of the Who, What, Where, When and Whys of the moment it became a gleam in someone's eye. List the leaders and key players throughout the years, important events in the life of the church, and where the church is today.

Next, look at the culture of your church and the area in which it is located. What are the demographics of your city or town? Does your congregation reflect these demographics? What is the make-up of your congregation in regard to gender, age, race, nationality, class, and sexual orientation? What other local factors might be specific influences in the life of your church?

Next, look at the theology reflected in your congregation. The UFMCC is not a melting pot. Usually several different denominational backgrounds are represented by the people in our churches. Because of this all MCCs are different from one another. We might walk into one of our churches and find it to be very high church as in the Catholic tradition. We might walk into another church to find a very Pentecostal type of worship service. What is the primary message about God that is presented in your church? How is it presented? Has your congregation's theology changed over the years? If so, why? Who/what influenced that change?

Finally, look at the major experiences within the life of your church. Some of these experiences might be positive while others may have been very challenging. For those you see as positive (such as a move into a new building), how did you celebrate it? For those you see as challenging (such as a split in the church), how did you deal with it and overcome it?

I also encourage you take the time to consider what you know best: YOUR EXPERIENCE. What was your experience the first time you walked through the doors of your church? What is your experience today?

Here is a description of how doing a contextual analysis worked for me:

My home church, founded in 1974, was situated in a beautiful three story building in the large metropolis of Minneapolis, Minnesota. We had a membership of approximately three hundred and fifty people and averaged close to three hundred people per Sunday during most of the time I attended there.

The church owned its own building; a large beautiful structure with a spacious sanctuary, upstairs classrooms and office space, and a social hall and bookstore in the basement. It had been exciting to watch this church grow over the years, moving from a storefront to this beautiful building. The pastor was a dynamic preacher and knew how

to inspire the congregation to applause on any given Sunday morning. The membership was primarily Lutheran and Catholic; the worship service combined these influences, most closely resembling an Episcopal style of worship. Minnesotans are often known to be rather reserved and even stoic. The standing joke was that we lived in the land of the chosen frozen.

In 1991 I was credentialed UFMCC clergy and left this large seventeen-year-old training church to pastor my own congregation.

My first pastorate was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. When I arrived, the church was seven years old and had a membership of approximately eighteen people; they had been averaging close to twelve people per Sunday. The congregation met in a sanctuary rented from the Uniting Campus Ministries of Louisiana State University. There was no office space; the church office was in my home. We could only have the sanctuary space on Sunday mornings. At that time we would have to set up the altar, chairs, hymnals and MCC banner in order to turn it into an MCC. We never knew who might have rented the space the previous night, so we learned to come early in case we had to clean first

The church had been through tough times in its short seven-year history; a year before I accepted the pulpit the congregation had gone down to eight strong people who had refused to close the doors. With the help of an interim pastoral lay leader they had brought the numbers up to eighteen. The congregation had a primary mix of Catholic, Baptist and Pentecostal. Known for the *laissez les bon temp roulet* culture deep in the heart of Cajun country, there was a strong New Orleans influence that basically said, "You're gay? OK, but let's have some beer and crawfish and dance anyway."

Can you say, "Culture Shock?" From the reserved and stoic people in the land of ten thousand lakes to the chank-a-chank music in the land of ten thousand drive-thru daiquiri stands, I found myself utterly unsure of how to pastor this church. The district coordinator was clear that if I came down there with a "Yankee attitude" and preached against the drinking and casual sex prominent in New Orleans, I wouldn't last a month.

For me the answer was to set up a contextual analysis. By doing an in depth study of the church's history, culture and theology, I was able to better understand who they were and how to best meet their needs. This wasn't a task I could do on my own. I spent countless hours talking to various people about the history of the church while making copious notes. I bought a book on Louisiana and began to study its history; I visited historical sites all around the area. I sampled the variety of Cajun fare and learned how to create a good roux that made the perfect gumbo. I incorporated their culture and history into worship whenever possible. In addition we added some Baptist hymns, some holy water in the baptismal font for Catholics who wished to use it to make the sign of the cross as they entered worship and some "amens" for the Pentecostals. We provided Christian education classes that went across such denominational lines, spiritually challenging people no matter what background they were from. As a result, over the next three-and-a-half years we grew to a membership of seventy-nine people,

averaging eighty people a Sunday. We started a financial campaign to purchase our own building and were able to rent office space in the same building as the sanctuary we rented. I stayed longer than any pastor in their previous history and thus the church broke out of an old cycle.

Although I have been gone for many years now, that church is currently twenty-one years old and has purchased its own building using money we began raising over ten years ago. Unless I had done a contextual analysis of the church, I am not sure we could have had such successful ministry together.

Here's the next part that ties into a contextual analysis. All of us, as individuals, carry into the church our own past experiences. If you were to walk into a new church, this Sunday, one that you had never attended before, you would likely begin an immediate comparison to your own congregation. Both consciously and unconsciously we carry our experience with us. These experiences also affect a contextual analysis. This is why some people will come through the doors of our church and absolutely love it, while others are uncomfortable and choose not to return. There is no one church that will meet the needs of everyone!

If you want to locate the YOU ARE HERE marker, set up a contextual analysis of your congregation. Look at who you are as a faith community based on your history, theology, culture and experience. Once you understand where you are, you can use this information to help you go where you want to go.

For example, let's say that your church is about to begin a pastoral search. From your contextual analysis you have determined that you are a church of fifty people in a congregation of primarily upper middle-class white lesbians between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. Your church rents space from a Unitarian Universalist congregation located in an upscale suburban neighborhood. Your theology is very liberal and you are hoping for a pastor who can provide enlightening worship experiences and empowering workshops for women.

Of course this is just a simple example of a much larger process, but can you see how this process could impact your pastoral search?

Let's take a look at our scripture reference from II Corinthians:

My initial response in reading this chapter 13 is that Paul is sounds very harsh in his writing. He has evidently given them some sort of warning in the past and now is coming to visit them for a third time; he is threatens disciplinary action toward anyone who challenges his authority in Christ. He tells them to examine themselves and see what's in their own hearts rather than rebelling against him. If they look into their own hearts and pass the test and do what is right, he won't need to take any disciplinary action.

Could you imagine your church receiving such a letter from Paul? You would likely be outraged; I know I would! Let's set up a brief and simple contextual analysis of this church in Corinth and see what we can learn.

THE HISTORY:

Paul was a missionary with a passion for starting churches that were centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He traveled extensively starting churches in various places. He also had others working with him to start new churches and to assist at these new churches. This church in Corinth is one of the churches started by Paul. Though Paul is believed to have stayed at Corinth longer than any other church he started, he did not remain there as their pastor. He corresponded with them through letters and through the leaders he appointed.

THE CULTURE:

Corinth was a narrow peninsula known as the Bridge of Greece because it connected the two parts of Greece. Only four miles long it was situated in an area that made it one of the greatest trading and commercial centers of the ancient world.

The culture was primarily Greek; the people placed high value on Greek philosophy and wisdom. It was the location of the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics.

"Korinthiazethai", a word meaning to live like a Corinthian, was translated, "to live with drunken and immoral debauchery." Aelian, the late Greek writer tells us that if a Corinthian was depicted on stage in a Greek play, they were always shown drunk and acting immorally. Corinth became a synonym for wealth, luxury, drunkenness, and immorality.

THE THEOLOGY:

Corinth had at least twelve temples. The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had about a thousand temple priestesses who were sacred prostitutes. These priestesses descended from the Acropolis in the evening and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth. Archaeologists have unearthed the remains from seven columns of the temple of Apollo. There were also temples to: Athena, Poseidon, and Asklepios to name a few. In addition, the Jews had established a synagogue in Corinth.

Into this wild city with its Greek, pagan and Jewish influence comes this little Christian Church.

THE EXPERIENCE:

Looking at the Corinthian church beginning with I Corinthians chapter 1 we can see Paul's experiences with this church. Some of his experiences included:

- Dealing with divisions in the church
- Correcting ideas about ministry and ministers
- Correcting ideas about what it means to be a Christian

- Confronting moral and ethical issues
- Handling issues in regard to lawsuits
- Confronting Issues about marriage
- Dealing with food that has been sacrificed to idols
- Establishing authority of the Apostles
- Giving directives about the Lord's Supper
- Teaching about the Body of Christ
- Handling problems with order in the worship service

Before this church can become mature and faithful we have to look at where they are. Before we can criticize them for their lack of faith and maturity, we have to remember the culture, theology, history and experiences of that little church in the midst of Corinth. How can they easily teach, preach and live out the Christian faith with so many cultural and theological influences?

On the other hand perhaps we can see why Paul was so firm in the scripture from II Corinthians 13. He wanted the Christian church to stay pure from all of the influences around them. He had already invested a great deal of time and energy with them trying to get them on the right path. Now he is warning them that he will not tolerate any challenge of his authority.

“This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority Christ gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.”

II Corinthians 13:10

Paul is hoping that they will get the point with his letter and pull things together before he gets there. The reader can only hope for the same.

YOU ARE HERE: A small group of new believers struggling with the influences of the culture, and theology prevalent in Corinth.

WHERE THEY WANT TO GO: Paul wants for them to become a healthy, thriving congregation that is faith-filled and growing in maturity. He envisions a church that can withstand the influences and spread the good news of Jesus to others.

If we look at the Corinthians from a “YOU ARE HERE” standpoint we have a much bigger picture of who they are and what they are up against since we developed a contextual analysis. Knowing this information informs Paul of the work that will have to be done in order to strengthen and encourage this church. It further informs the reader

as to why Paul is so firm in his letters to the Corinthians. If he wanted them to mature he had to be firm.

A contextual analysis gives us a big picture of our churches. It helps bring to light challenges as well as opportunities. What we learn informs decision making in the life of the church. I have used it to deal with personnel issues, conflict management, church growth, and more. It is my hope that you will discover what a valuable tool this simple process can be in the life of your church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

What is the history of your church?

What is the culture of the area in which you live?

What is the culture represented in your church and how does the culture of the area reflect there?

What is the primary theology/message represented at your church?

What are some of the major experiences your church has been through?

What was your experience the first time you entered the doors of your church?
What kept you coming back?

In the course of this study what did you learn about your church that you hadn't previously known?

How might a contextual analysis help your church in making major decisions?

Lesson Two: Develop Healthy Leadership

Read Mark 1:14-19; 3:13-19, 6:7-12, Matthew 28:16-20

In my earlier days as a pastor I adopted a method of ministry that looked a great deal like a high school football program. As the pastor I coached the team, called the plays, led the cheers, and went out for an occasional pass. In addition I ran the concession stand, cared for the injured, and provided the Gatorade.

In 1996 I received a flyer in the mail announcing a two-day leadership workshop by some guy by the name of John Maxwell. I had heard of him through some of my MCC colleagues but didn't know much about him. I sent in my registration totally unaware of how my life was about to change. He said many things that affected my life, but there were three in particular that I would like to share with you.

- “Hi, my name is John and I want to be your friend.”
- “How many of you pastors are tired, discouraged, and frustrated, not sure of what your next step should be? You're working yourself to the bone, and yet no one understands what you do and no one appreciates you. You're the leader, the CEO, the one in charge of making all the major decisions and yet no one seems to respect you. How many of you will put up your hand to admit that this is where you are today? (*pause to see hands go up*) Good, now you know who you are and have honestly admitted how you feel. Now I want you to do yourselves and your church a huge, life-changing favor. I want you to go home and write your resignation letter, give your notice and be done. It's the best gift you can give your church, yourself and your family.”
- “Leadership is influence, nothing more and nothing less. If you think you are leading, and no one is following, you are simply taking a walk.”

The first thing I realized is how alone I'd been in ministry. MCC churches can be isolated and finding colleagues from the greater community was not as easy in my early days of pastoring as it is today. When I heard this man stand up and claim that he wanted to be my friend I could have cried. I needed a friend in ministry, someone to help me with resources and ideas. For the next year there was a woman assigned to our church from John Maxwell's organization, INJOY. She called me once a month to ask how things were going and to suggest some resources that might be of help. What a blessing! I read everything on leadership I could lay my hands on and signed up for workshops on the subject anywhere within a one-hundred mile radius of my home.

The second thing I realized is that I was exhausted. I'd been trying to be THE leader of my church all by myself. I was determining the mission and vision of the church and trying to set the wheels into motion. I was a leader in the church, but I also needed to be seeking out, training and utilizing other leaders. Unconsciously I was setting up a

pastor-centered ministry. This was/is not healthy for the church and it certainly wasn't/isn't healthy for the pastor.

The third thing I realized is that leadership is not about position or office. True leadership is about influence. Of course that influence can be positive or negative. Thinking back over the course of history I can think of both kinds of influencers: Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler are two such examples. If I would develop other healthy and positive influencers in the church we would begin to share in the journey and effective ministry could be achieved.

If you go to a bookstore and look under the heading of leadership you will be amazed at the number of books written on this subject. My own personal library is filled with such books. I find that I enjoy ideas and concepts from different leadership authors; I have not found one book to meet all of my needs in regard to ministry. While I enjoy John Maxwell's structural approach to leadership (*The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*), I also am drawn to the more circular model of servant leadership I find in Robert K. Greenleaf's writing (*Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*). One book that surprised me with some of very good principles is *Leadership Secrets of Attila The Hun* by Wes Roberts, Ph.D. Laurie Beth Jones uses Jesus as a model for visionary leadership in *Jesus CEO; Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*. Of course these few books only scratch the surface of relevant material on the bookshelves today. Through these and others I have developed a leadership style of my own using bits and pieces I have gleaned through the writings and my own personal experience. This style is primarily based on the way Jesus trains leadership in the gospel according to Mark. Let's take a closer look.

First, He called people to come into leadership (Mark 1:14-20).

Second, He became a role model for them when He:

- drove out an evil spirit (1:21-27)
- healed (1:29-34)
- prayed (1:35-37)
- called others to leadership (2:13-17)
- answered tough questions (2:18-22)
- dealt with confronting religious leaders (2:23-27)

Third, He got selective and appointed twelve people, evidently out of those He originally called, whom He sent out to preach and have authority over demons. In Mark 4-5 He modeled how to teach, how to deal with the demon-possessed, and how to trust God for miracles.

Finally, He sent those twelve out in pairs (Mark 6:7-13) to do ministry with explicit instructions. He told them what to take and what not to take. He told them what to do when they enter a house and what to do if they weren't welcomed. They went out and taught, anointed and healed the sick, and dealt with those who struggled with demons, just as Jesus had taught and modeled for them to do.

We know that they while went out, they likely weren't all that far from Him at any given time. With others doing the same kind of work He was doing (under His leadership):

- More could be accomplished.
- He could build and prepare them for the time when He would no longer be there.
- People could see that this was God working through people and not believe that Jesus was the only one who could preach, teach, heal and deliver.

**I moved from Mark to Matthew because the most reliable early manuscripts don't have anything past Mark 16:8.*

These are the people who will be there at Pentecost and receive the power of the Holy Spirit. These are the people who will be at the beginning and forefront of the Christian church. These are the people who were trained by Jesus and who will eventually train others, who will eventually train yet others.

It's like a wheel that rolls on and on repeating the cycle as someone is trained, they train someone else, and they train yet others. Jesus' primary training was to:

- Call people into leadership
- Teach and train them through modeling
- Select certain people from among those who have been trained
- Send those out in pairs, still under His watchful eye
- Have them become leaders who train others (after He has ascended)

In keeping with that image of a rolling wheel let's use an acronym to lay out what I believe is most needed by leaders in today's churches:

C ommitment
A ccountability
R esponsibility
T eachable Spirits

It has been said that 20% of the membership of any given group do 80% of the work. If this is true, no wonder people are afraid to commit to boards, committees and other programs in a church! Once you are seen as a part of that 20% you might find yourself overloaded with more responsibility than you ever wanted. Therefore:

- We need that 20% to become influencers who will train others who will eventually train others, and thus multiply the workers.
- We need these influencers to set healthy boundaries and limits for themselves. It is better for them to say "no" than take on another task that could well become their breaking point.

A common question among church leadership is this: If I don't do it, who will?

Answer: If you are setting healthy boundaries and limits for yourself, and no one else steps up to the plate to take on a ministry, then maybe it isn't the right time for your church to take on this ministry.

Jesus asked for commitment when He said, "Come, follow me". That call to commitment was not just for the twelve, however, it was for all of them. In the same way Jesus is calling us to commitment in our churches today; not just 20% of us, but all of us. It is important to set healthy boundaries because people who over-commit are the ones who bless the church and then burn out to a place where they never want to come back.

Accountability requires evaluation, feedback and critical analysis. This may not be negative in the least, but many of us are afraid of any type of criticism. We are willing to go along and do our thing, but if someone wants to comment on it, we get defensive and sometimes even quit. Accountability can be a wonderful tool for growth. Those Jesus called and trained were accountable to Him. Those who would go out in His name to teach, heal the sick and deal with all sorts of troubled people would ultimately be accountable to Him for their actions. This accountability teaches by reinforcing what they are doing well and going back over those areas that need work. If we can look at accountability as a tool for growth in our ministry, we will find blessings there. Someone who is not willing to be held accountable may not be a healthy influencer in your church.

Along with commitment and accountability, responsibility also comes with the leadership territory. If we agree to accept a position then we must also be responsible for that which is required for that position. A responsible person takes it upon him/herself to know the expectations for their area of ministry and to follow through with them. A person who is in a leadership position but cannot be counted on is only holding an office, not serving as a leader.

Perhaps most importantly of all, good leaders/influencers have teachable spirits. If we go into a ministry assuming that we know it all, we will fall short of our responsibility. We must be open to new and different ways of doing things as well as to change in general. Do you want to know where the CART is most apt to get stuck? It's with those who believe they already know it all and who refuse to let go of what they know in order to grow. These individuals consciously or unconsciously affect the growth and development of a ministry more than we might realize.

With commitment, accountability, responsibility and teachable spirits in our leadership the church can move on to where God is calling it to go. The pastor cannot and should not do all of a church's work. If he or she chooses to do so, the church may well find itself immersed in an unhealthy pastor-centered congregation. A healthy pastor will model, teach, train and empower healthy leaders. Healthy leaders:

- Have teachable spirits; willing to learn new ways to do things

- Are committed with their time, gifts and talents
- Are accountable; able to honestly admit problems and faults as well as joys and successes
- Are responsible, on time and reliable. You can count on them to get the job done and done well
- Exemplify the character of Jesus—These people walk their talk
- Can agree to disagree during conflict; don't have to have everything their own way
- Deal directly and lovingly with others in the church
- Have healthy life priorities in place
- Are both encouraging and empowering to others in the church
- Are not threatened by spiritual concepts different from his/her own
- Encourages others to find their own relationship path to God
- Can admit to not having all the answers

If these qualities are taught and modeled, and others can learn them and incorporate them into their own lives and ministry, thus modeling and teaching them to yet others, the church will be able to move in the direction God is calling it. This positive cycle will continue to roll, the leadership will grow, the pastor and other leaders will no longer burn out, and the church will be blessed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Knowing that Mother Teresa held no high office or rank in life, what made her so popular and loved?

Recognizing that Adolf Hitler held no high office or high ranking in the military, what led to his rise in power over the German army?

Name someone who was an influencer in your life when you were growing up? How did she/he influence you?

Who is an influencer in your life today? How does she/he influence you?
Can you name one or two influencers in your church today? What, in your opinion, makes them an influencer?

On a leadership/influencer scale of one to ten, with ten being an absolute HALLELUJAH YES and one being an ABSOLUTELY NOT, what number would you give yourself?
Would you ever want to become a leader/influencer in your church? Would you be willing to train to become one?

If you are a pastor, can you think of others in the church that have more influence than you have? Is their influence positive or negative? Are you tapped into them and utilizing them in a healthy way in the ministry of your congregation?

How might this study on developing healthy leadership influence your church?

Lesson Three: Practice Loving Relationships

Read Matthew 22:34-40

The scripture seems clear about what is to be our first priority:

“Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”

How do we love God? Is it enough to go to church for worship services? In my personal beliefs, church is the place where we can go to worship God with others. In church we give of our time, talents and gifts, praises, thanksgivings, financial gifts and surrender our needs into God’s care. While attending worship can certainly elicit a sense of closeness to God, I believe that there is more involved in loving God first and foremost in our lives. Most of us spend more time with co-workers on any given day than we do with God. Some of us communicate more over the internet than we do with God. Some of us are quicker to serve our back yard birds’ needs than we are to serve God. Now I have nothing against co-workers, the internet and back yard birds! But if we are to love God first, we need to also spend time with God, communicate with God, and serve God.

I believe that a relationship with God requires several things:

S olitude	-	That time alone with God where there are no distractions such as the telephone, television, or people going in and out.
S ilence	-	Absolute quiet is required if we are to let go of the spinning of our minds and listen for the voice of God.
I ntentionality	-	I am intentional about taking my son to soccer practice. I am intentional about planning time with my life-partner. I am intentional about checking my email every day. In the same way, I need to be intentional about taking time for my relationship with God.
I ntimacy	-	I have learned that if I am intentional about taking time for solitude and silence with God, the relationship becomes very personal and intimate. I find myself sharing my deepest fears, deepest pain and deepest hope in those times. I sense God’s presence within me and all around me. It is an incredible experience!
P rayer	-	I believe that prayer is communication with God. I can write and speak eloquent prayers but the ones that really communicate with God are the words that come from my heart. When I have intentionally spent time in solitude and silence I develop an intimacy with God and everything in my life becomes a prayer. I see God in the flutter of a butterfly wings, hear God’s voice in a sunset, and silently speak to God of my praises as I watch a Scarlet Tanager bathe in our birdbath.

Once we make time with God a priority, it opens the door to God's presence in the activities of daily life, such as our time with co-workers, communication on the internet and care for the back yard birds.

"O taste and see that God is good"

Psalm 34:8a

Take a S S I I P and know that putting God first is the ultimate blessing in life.

And the second priority is like it.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Because of this second part of this scripture taken from Matthew 22, most people have decided that this means we are to love other people second in our lives. Often times when I am doing a workshop on this subject and ask people to state their life priorities they will say:

God
Others
Self

I want to point out a part of this scripture that is often ignored. It says that we are to love others in the same way we love ourselves. When I think about the opinions some of us have of ourselves, it concerns me that we are called to love others the same way as we love ourselves, because some of us do not love ourselves! Some of us are carrying around old bags and baggage that have been used in negative ways to define us. Perhaps the problem with the world today is that we DO love others the same way we love ourselves.

I believe that this scripture assumes that we already love ourselves. However, this is not always the case. Therefore I will be so bold as to state that our top three life priorities, at least according to this scripture, should be:

God
Self
Others

If we can truly love and care for ourselves, and love others in that same way, can you imagine the impact on our world? Or even the impact on our churches? What a concept to love ourselves so that we can then love others!

Here's another way to look at this: When we take good care of ourselves we can be there to help others. If you've ever flown in a commercial airliner you know that the

flight attendant instructs us to put the oxygen mask over our own nose and mouth before trying to assist others. I asked a flight attendant I knew personally about this once. He told me that when people insist on helping others first they end up passing out from a lack of oxygen. Then they are no good to themselves or anyone else. If we want to practice love, we must practice on ourselves as well!

I must admit that in 2002 when I learned that I was expected to attend an all day workshop on the subject of Love & Appreciation I was less than thrilled. It's not that I had any doubts about the writer and facilitator of the workshop; Wendy Foxworth is an excellent speaker and teacher. It's just that I knew what Jesus called the greatest two commandments like the back of my hand. What could I learn about this subject that would take a full day? By the end of that day I had the answer to that question: PLENTY!

It was Wendy's workshop that helped me to see the need to build a culture of love and appreciation in the church I was serving. We were bogged down in a culture of command and control that stemmed from old leadership ideas, old biblical beliefs and a group of people living in an oppressive culture in a very oppressive town. I admit that I initially came away from the Love & Appreciation workshop with a lot of new ideas, but also resistance. I liked my personal style of leadership and was quite comfortable with it. It would take a great deal of work to move from a culture of command/ control to a culture of love and appreciation. I suspected, however, that if we could do this successfully it might make a difference in the life of the church. Maybe we'd even start growing.

In response I came home from that conference and set up a plan that looked like this:

- Gather all the resources I can find on this subject
- Preach a sermon on the basics of Matthew 22:32-40
- Develop a workshop part I on love & appreciation and set a date to present it
- Present the workshop and listen closely to the written evaluations of it
- Begin to incorporate these concepts into worship. One example might be, "Can we show some love and appreciation to our choir this morning for the many ways they bless us?"
- Develop a workshop part II and set a date to present it
- Present the second workshop, look for both repeat and new attendees and listen to the evaluations.
- Integrate concepts from these workshops into the newsletter, board meetings and our times of prayer
- Develop a workshop part III and set a date to present it
- Present the third workshop, look for both repeat and new attendees and listen to the evaluations
- Follow up with another sermon relating to these themes
- Develop a Love & Appreciation team of people who bought into these concepts and realized how critical they were to the life of our church. This team would

perform skits at different times in the life of the congregation, promote the concepts individually and as a team, and eventually train others to be leaders in this ministry.

For those of you who might wonder what I chose to do those three workshops on, I should tell you that I focused them on what was needed contextually by that congregation at that point in time. In other words, I looked at the history, culture, theology and experience of that faith community in order to determine where to begin. Later the team would decide what was needed and how to incorporate it.

The first workshop had three components:

- A basic introduction of Wendy's workshop
- An introduction of Rev. Elder Lillie Brock's *The Change Cycle*
- An initial discussion on the history and culture of our congregation and how it influenced us

The second workshop focused on communication:

- Awareness of word choice, voice inflection, body language
- The skills needed in order to deal with someone in a loving manner
- Healthy ways to demonstrate love and appreciation in our lives and in the life of our church

The third workshop centered on conflict and the need to love unconditionally:

- Conflict per se/in itself is neutral, it's what we do with it that makes it healthy or destructive
- Conflict can be dealt with in effective and healthy ways
- We are always at choice in how we choose to act and react to people, places and situations

I then followed these workshops with a sermon on the PLATINUM RULE. You've heard of the Golden Rule? Well, this rule is similar but has a distinct difference. I learned about this rule while attending a Career Track workshop as a part of my research on love and appreciation.

"Treat others the way you want to be treated".

The Golden Rule

"Treat others the way they want to be treated."

The Platinum Rule

I personally began to incorporate the Platinum Rule into every aspect of my life. Here's an example: While I enjoy working independently on projects, there were those in my church who much preferred working in teams. I began to look at more team approaches for those people. While I'd love it if my life-partner sent me a dozen roses, she'd much prefer I cook dinner for her. If I wanted to take my son to the zoo, I might learn that our plans have changed because he'd much rather go and see a new movie.

We are not all the same; why should we assume that others want to be treated the same way we do? It made our ministry much more relational and much more enjoyable when we adopted the Platinum Rule.

I remember a one-frame comic, drawn by an artist named Guindon, that used to appear in a Minneapolis newspaper years ago. In this particular cartoon there were two older plump and rather frumpy appearing grown-ups jumping and leaping into the air in a comical fashion. The caption read: "Happy Practice. If you want to be happy you have to practice." In the same way, I believe that if MCC cartoonist Jean Gralley, illustrator of *What a Fellowship* (available through Chi Rho Press) were to draw a similar cartoon she might draw MCCer's embracing despite our differences with a caption that reads: "Love Practice. If you want to love you have to practice." Our practice of love will never make us perfect at it, but it sure will make us better!

In the video, *God, Gays, and the Gospel Millennium Edition*, the Rev. Elder Troy Perry was speaking about Jesus' greatest commandments when he said:

"When He was asked one time, 'What's the greatest commandment?' He didn't say 'thou shalt not commit adultery' or even 'thou shalt not kill.' He could have, but He didn't. He said, 'The greatest commandment is this, and on this hangs all the law and the prophets. The first commandment is you're to learn to love the Lord thy God with all your heart, your mind and your strength. And the second is likened to the first, you're to learn to love your neighbor as yourself.' And brothers and sisters I tell you this day, if we could learn that lesson, if we could just learn to live by those two commandments, everything would be all right."

Amen Troy. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do you honestly see as the top three priorities in your life today?

How might you keep God first in your life?

How might you make yourself the second priority in your life?

Do you believe that practicing the platinum rule would enhance your relationships with others? Can you give an example?

How do you think the implementation of the platinum rule might affect your church? Can you give an example?

How do you deal with conflict in your personal life?

How does your church typically deal with conflict?

How does (or could) your church practice love and appreciation using the Matthew 22:33-40 text?

Lesson Four: Be Willing to Move On and Go Where God Calls You

Read Jeremiah 48: 11-12

In the “Set Up A Contextual Analysis...” study we talked about the YOU ARE HERE marker one can find in a shopping mall. We established that once we found where we were and then found where we wanted to go it was a fairly straight line between point A and point B.

Now, I want to reflect upon another YOU ARE HERE marker, this time the one we would find is in a state park to mark a trail. The same general principle applies. If you want to hike the trail you look for:

- Where you are
- Where you want to end up

With the hiking map, there is one major difference. This time there is not a straight line from point A to point B. This time the route can take you in a very uneven circular path with choices along the way. With a hiking map we might back track in some spots. We may need to choose between a rugged shortcut and a longer, easier route. The trail can take us around a lake so that we have to look closely to pick up the trail on the other side. We might even find ourselves on nothing more than a deer path, wondering if we took a wrong turn! If we stick to the trail and watch for the markers along the way, we should have a great experience. If, however, we choose to never try hiking the trail at all, we will miss out on great experiences and wonderful blessings.

Without a vision the people perish.

Proverbs 29:18

I have never heard of a vision for either individuals or a faith community where God said, “Hey, kick back, relax and let life happen. I’ll bless you.” In scripture after scripture we see that God is calling people to something new. God called Moses to set the Hebrews free and they ended up in a desert searching for their promised land for forty years. God called Abraham to prepare to go to a place God would show him, but didn’t give a clue as to where he and his family were going. The disciples were called to leave what they’d always known and follow Jesus; later they would give up the lives they’d known to begin the Christian church, though they may not have realized that was what they were doing. They all had a starting place and then they began their journey. The difference is that they weren’t exactly sure where they were going to end up because this was not a “from point A to point B” kind of experience.

What all of these people had in common is that they were willing to place their lives in God’s hands and begin a journey that would bring them great experiences and wonderful blessings.

I took a tour of a winery many years back and learned that when you make wine you put the ingredients together and then put it into huge containers to ferment. Every so often these large metal blades within the container electrically start up and slowly stir the fermenting mixture for just a short period of time before shutting down again. It was explained that this was to keep the wine from settling and forming a gooey-gobby sediment, known as dregs or lees, on the bottom of the tank. If this sediment formed, the wine was ruined and had to be thrown away.

Someone asked if this is why people who make their own wine have to turn the bottles a quarter of a turn every day during the fermenting process. The tour guide affirmed this and said that different wines call for different times and turns of the bottle, but that this process was crucial. Again, if the wine inside wasn't moved periodically it would form dregs and that would ruin it.

After the tour I had a moment alone with the tour guide and asked, "What about in Jesus' day? They made wine all the time and didn't have huge stainless steel containers or even glass bottles. How did they keep the dregs from forming on the bottom?" The tour guide smiled and said, "They moved it from container to container. They had many different sized containers, so it might be in a taller, thinner container and then be moved to a shorter, rounder container. If they didn't move the wine around, the dregs or lees formed at the bottom and ruined the wine. Once that sediment formed, the whole mixture would put off a terrible stench. They would have no choice but to throw it away and start over."

With that information let's look at Jeremiah 48: 11-12:

Moab was a city that had not been willing to move on and go where God was calling it. It refused change and had become like wine that had not been poured from one vessel to another. Moab had likely begun to stink in its attitudes and was not willing to change its foul taste or aroma. God's response was to send those who would force change! "I will send those who pour from jars and they will pour her out; they will empty her jars and smash her jugs".

God appears to be upset with Moab's refusal to change, but God is not giving up on Moab. Instead God is going to set up circumstances that will demand change.

As John Maxwell once said:

"There are three times when people are ready to change:

- *When they hurt enough that they have to*
- *When they learn enough that they want to*
- *When they receive enough that they're able to"*

It sounds like Moab is about to feel some hurt and discomfort. They have become fossilized, rather than being willing to move on and go with God. God's response is not a punishment, but the creation of a catalyst for the change that needs to happen.

How do churches become willing to go with God and not become so set in their ways that they find themselves fossilized?

- Be open to change. The seven deadliest words in the history of the Christian faith are: **We've Never Done It That Way Before**. Study the scriptures and the ways the Spirit has moved people throughout history. Meet with other churches and find out what kinds of things they are doing; allow your church to try new things.
- Be **Committed, Accountable, and Responsible** to Jesus' teachings and God's purpose. Look honestly at the mission of your church. When was the last time it was revised? The mission is who we are as a community of faith. If your mission hasn't changed over the years, you may find that ministry in your church is beginning to stink.
- Be ready to venture forth in faith. Does your church have a vision? Where has God called you to go, and how will you get there? There are valuable resources to assist churches in vision casting. There will be an ultimate big picture goal, and then smaller goals (with steps) in how to attain that goal. Remember that venturing forth will require **change**.
- **Be Flexible**. If we are to move and go with God we have to be flexible. *"Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be broken.* Hurricane Andrew came through our neighborhood when we were living in southern Louisiana. We learned, as a result of those ninety mile an hour winds, that the flexible willows weathered the storm much better than the rigid oak trees. In the same way, churches need to be flexible when we go where God calls us to go. Things will not be the same once such a movement begins and we will need to put our faith in God.

How do we discern that God is calling us to move on?

- The people will seem dissatisfied with just about everything in the church. I'm not talking about those who are always dissatisfied with everything in the church. I'm talking about your influencers; those who hold leadership positions and the folks who typically seem quite happy with things.
- The leadership of the church will feel as though they are being resisted in the major areas of ministry.
- There will be an overall frustration within the life of the congregation.

- People will begin to talk about feeling useless to the church; that they have nothing to offer.
- There will be a sense that something is missing/lacking in the life of the church.
- There will be those who sense that somehow your church is out of date; like God has moved on and you've been left behind.

A seminary colleague once confided in me that his church, once a glorious institution in town, had become a dismal place for him and some of the others in the congregation. He had some folks come to him and say, "You know Reverend, things just feel out of sorts around here this past year. I can't put my finger on it." He met with the leadership of the church and they began to work on some new ideas for worship and Christian education. People heard the news of these proposed changes and were immediately up in arms. My colleague said, "Nancy, I don't know what to do. It feels like we're stuck. God's moved on and the church just wants to sit here and do everything the way we've done it for the past twenty years".

I suggested that he pray about how he and his congregation might move on and go with God. His response was, "Oh no! That would mean change. This congregation's biggest four letter word is: C-H-A-N-G-E. It isn't going to happen." He resigned one year later.

Here are some practical suggestions for how to lead a congregation through change:

1. Begin to get honest and open about the need to move on and go with God.
 - Use references regarding the Hebrews, Abraham, the disciples, and the early church leaders.
 - Talk about Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, and the need to get off of our blessed assurances and follow Him today.
2. Open up to other churches and find out how they keep from settling on their dregs.
 - How do they keep allowing themselves to be poured out into different vessels in order to stay fresh and alive in ministry?
3. Develop a self-imposed ruthlessness.
 - If the church is not moving, it is not fair to sit and cast the blame on others. We participate in the life of our congregations by choice, and we need to be ruthless in owning our part in the problems AND the progress.
 - We push ourselves to do our part, and in doing our part we must be willing to be committed, accountable and responsible. We are the ones in control of our attitudes, words and actions. In this process we must be responsible for them and strive to work toward the common goal God places before us.

4. Learn to listen, even when it's agonizing.
 - We want to listen to God and we want to listen to others, especially those who hold a different opinion from our own.
 - In listening to others we become more aware of our own beliefs and where we are in our own spiritual journey.
5. Be patient.
 - Process takes time. If your congregation is in the midst of moving on and going with God in a new direction, be patient with others, but also with yourself. Change is seldom easy.
6. Be aware of the cycles in your church (Rev. Elder Lillie Brock has an excellent workshop on *The Change Cycle*).
 - Take notice of any of the signs that might indicate that God is calling you to move on.
7. Take time to celebrate achievements.
 - Once the church completes a particular time of growth or movement in a direction God has called us, we need take time to play and celebrate!
8. Continue to build the body of Christ spiritually so that the next time God calls on us to move and grow in some area, we will understand what is going on.

God has not called us to settle on our dregs or lees as Moab did. God calls us to be moving in a direction that will ultimately be a blessing to God and to our faith community. Movement always means change, and for many of us change is difficult. Remember that we do not face it alone. We have other churches that have been through it. We have one another, and ultimately we have God, who is ready to walk the journey with us. So let's not settle down and raise a stink. Let's walk a journey of faith hand-in-hand with God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Does your church have a mission statement? If so, what is it? When did it come into effect? Is it still relevant for your church today?

Does your church have a vision statement? If so, what is it? When did it come into effect? In the big picture of your vision statement, where would you put the YOU ARE HERE marker today? What kind of progress have you made?

As you read this, is your congregation settling, on the move, or beginning to smell?

Would you say that your church moves with God in the same way that the winds move through the weeping willow, or is your faith community more like the rigid mighty oak?

Why do you suppose God chose to force change in Moab rather than simply letting them go as God did Sodom and Gomorrah?

If your church was not willing to move on and go with God, would you prefer that God sent jug-smashers to your church or simply ignored you and let you die out? Why?

Circle the one that typically leads your church to change:

- When they hurt enough that they have to
- When they learn enough that they want to
- When they receive enough that they're able to

Can you give an example?

Do you see anything from this study that tells you that God is calling your church to move on?

Lesson Five: OPEN THE DOORS WIDE

Read Acts 10:1—11:18

In 1995 I attended the UFMCC General Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. We planned to take to the streets, in a peaceful demonstration, and walk the mile or so from the conference hotel to the Martin Luther King Center. With Rev. Elder Troy Perry in the lead, approximately a thousand of us began that walk. I remember the power of the moment when we walked past the Ebenezer Baptist church where Martin Luther King Jr. had preached many an inspiring sermon.

As we passed the church I noticed an African American man get out of his car near us. He had a small boy with him who looked to be about four years old. Reading our signs and banners he turned to his child and said, “Oh baby, you better cover them jewels cause these people want them.” Horrified I watched as that little boy placed his hands over his genitals with look of absolute terror on his face.

I was sick at heart. A part of me wanted to make the demonstration a lot less peaceful in that moment. I wanted to shout at that man and tell him that he, of all people, should understand our march for freedom!

The truth of the matter is that even though minorities may share in similar journeys, no two experiences are the same. The Native American journey is different from the African American journey. The LGBT journey is different from both of them. Those who are differently-abled have their own unique stories to tell, as do women, the financially challenged, and others. We cannot assume to understand each other's journeys, but we can learn to celebrate one another's differences and victories.

In pastoring in different parts of the country, and visiting MCC's across the USA I have seen the following responses to diversity outside the cultural norms: hatred, tolerance, acceptance, celebration. Unfortunately I have seen these played out in the Christian Church as well as in the greater culture. Although this may be difficult to read and harder yet to believe, it must be said: I have seen similar responses and attitudes displayed in Metropolitan Community Churches. Here are some direct quotes I have heard over the years from our own faith communities that outwardly espouse God's unconditional love for all people:

“Well, I suppose they need someplace to worship, but they've got their own churches, why can't they go there?”

“If we start moving out pews to make room for wheelchairs, it'll mess up the whole sanctuary. Can't they just sit in the aisles?”

“If they've had the surgery then they're straight now. Let them go to those churches.”

“Great, another gay pride media blitz on drag queens and men in leather. Why don’t they realize that they give a bad name to the rest of us?”

“We don’t have the money to make the social hall accessible. We can bring refreshments to them and they can sit in the sanctuary and eat.”

“Well, there goes the neighborhood. What are we supposed to do with a bunch of those kind of kids running around getting into things?”

“OK, we saw what kind of people were here this past week. We need to tighten up on security around here before things start to go missing.”

“Why do they have to bring them to this church? They are loud and drive me crazy when I’m trying to focus on the sermon.”

While these are isolated incidents and not any one church’s attitude as a whole, I find that these attitudes close more doors than they open. These invisible doors can speak louder than the big welcome sign at the front door!

We cannot assume that because we are in an MCC that everyone is warm and fuzzy about each person who comes through our doors. We may find that educational opportunities abound within our own congregations as we strive to teach an inclusive open door theology. All churches have doors on the outside of the building, but there are usually invisible doors as well. Those doors we can’t see with our eyes but can sense with our spirits, especially if we look different from the cultural norm of the congregation.

Let’s talk about those invisible doors that can be found in just about any church on just about any day of worship. I can think of some different kinds of doors:

Storm Doors:	Keep people out.
Screen Doors:	Give the illusion that all is open, but there’s a door there.
Swinging Doors:	These doors swing in and out. Once inside or outside you had better take a step because if you don’t the doors will swing back and whack you. Have you ever heard the saying, “Don’t let the doors hit you on the way out?”
Revolving Doors:	You can come in and you can leave with only worship in between. There is no commitment, accountability or responsibility.
Back Doors:	You can come in but don’t let anyone see you.
Cellar Doors:	You can be here, but you must know your place.

It's been said that between 11:00am and noon on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. That says that there are a lot of doors involved in during that hour!

What we need to do is to move past the hatred, move past the tolerance, move past the acceptance and begin to truly **CELEBRATE OUR DIVERSITY!**

Let's look at Acts 10, one of the greatest turning points in the history of the Christian faith:

Cornelius was a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea, the headquarters for the government of Palestine. Here are some things we know about him:

He was known as a God-Fearer. In those days it was a term for non-Jewish people who had tired of trying this religion and that, and attached themselves to the principles of the Jewish faith. They didn't accept circumcision or the law, but attended synagogue and believed in one God.

He was kind. Scripture says that he did many acts of love and charity for others.

He was a man of prayer. We don't know what his relationship with God was like, but we know that he prayed.

Before Peter could come and be in any kind of fellowship or communication with Cornelius he had to have a spiritual awakening. Peter had grown up with the Jewish religious laws; the six-hundred-and-thirty-six laws that made up the Holiness Code. Before he could come and meet with Cornelius, God had to do some work in his heart and spirit. The Jews had no use for the Gentiles; some even said that help shouldn't be given to a Gentile woman giving birth since all she was doing was bringing another Gentile into the world. Peter had a lot to unlearn in a short time. Fortunately God had a plan!

On one of his travels Peter found himself staying at the home of Simon the tanner. Simon would have been expected to have a house near the sea because of his trade; out there would be less people to be disturbed by the sights and smells of his vocation. Finding himself hungry during midday, Peter did what was common in that culture, and climbed up onto the top of the house to wait for the meal to be prepared. While he waited, he went into a sort of trance. In this trance he had a vision in which he saw the sky open and some kind of vessel coming down. It was like a great sheet and on it was all the animals, reptiles and birds one could imagine. Interestingly enough, the Greek word for "sheet" is synonymous with the Greek word for "a ship's sail". So it could be that while Peter was on that roof overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, waiting for his lunch, that he saw a vision of a ship with a huge sail. On board the ship were all of the animals.

A voice came through the trance that said, “Peter, rise up, kill and eat.” Peter must have wondered what on earth was going on because as a law abiding Jew he could never eat the animals on that ship!

(Leviticus 11 states the strict food laws for anyone who is interested in reading more about them.)

This vision happened to Peter three times, and then the trance ended. If it had happened once Peter could have said that it was his imagination. Twice and he could have said it was his imagination and perhaps faintness from being hungry. But three times? It has been said that if we really want to grasp a concept we have to hear it three times. Peter has seen the vision three times but he’s still unsure of what it means.

While he is trying to understand it, the men whom Cornelius sent have shown up at Simon’s door looking for Peter. In that culture Gentiles were not allowed inside a Jew’s home; in fact, they could come no farther than the door. Can you imagine their surprise when Peter invited them inside? One would have to wonder who was the most surprised at his act of hospitality toward Gentiles:

- Simon the Tanner
- Simon’s watchful neighbors
- Cornelius’ men
- Peter himself

Peter went with them to Caesarea and Cornelius met him at the door. No doubt he never thought Peter would walk into his home. But Peter, a religious Jew, crossed the line and walked through that door into the home of a Gentile.

And when he walked through that door barriers began to go down!

Cornelius may have doubted that Peter would even come, and now he is there inside his home saying something like, “I know I shouldn’t be here, but God has shown me that I shouldn’t judge anything to be unclean or impure. So here I am. How can I be of help to you?”

Cornelius told his story about the “Being” who came to him, and said, “Now we are all here in God’s presence to listen to everything you have been commanded to tell us.”

Peter began to share the story of Jesus with them. While he talked the Holy Spirit fell upon those Gentiles and they were filled with the Spirit and began praising God in other languages! They had their own Pentecost experience, didn’t they?

Did Peter bring the Holy Spirit? No.

Did Peter do something to make the Holy Spirit come upon them? No.

Peter just had a teachable spirit and the commitment, accountability and responsibility to obey God. When he did what he was called to do, the door opened for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. Seizing the opportunity Peter said, “Hey, can anybody stop us from baptizing here? I mean who can stop us when these people have obviously

received the Holy Spirit!” And for the first time in the history of the Christian Church someone who was not a Jew became a Christian. Cornelius asked Peter to stay with them for a few days because they had so much to learn.

If we assume that Peter’s experience in Caesarea went over well with the others back home, we are mistaken. Acts 11 tells us that when he returned to Jerusalem he was criticized for the decisions he had made. He explained the whole thing and fortunately had the correct amount of witnesses with him to back him up. According to law they had to have seven witnesses in order to prove a case. Peter had six others with him and he made the seventh. The case they proved was that all people can be filled with the Holy Spirit and come to God.

My case for this study holds the same results. All people can receive the Holy Spirit and come to God; we don’t need to put invisible doors into place that keep someone out simply because of their age, size, gender, nationality, skin color, religious beliefs, physical/mental/emotional abilities or sexual orientation. In fact, we need to search out any such doors in place within our own congregations, as subtle as they may be, bring them to the awareness of the congregation and have them removed. In doing so we can diminish their power and break down the barriers, thus becoming the truly inclusive Church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

It has been said that until everyone is free, no one is free. How does this fit into the life of your congregation?

What is the congregational norm for your church? How many women, men, kids, people of color? What ages, class, race, abilities and sexual orientations are represented?

Do you think there might be invisible doors at your church that give a different message than the physical doors on the front of the church? If so, who is not openly welcomed?

How does your church respond to someone who is different from the cultural norm? Does the person come back?

If there is such an invisible door on your church, what kind is it? (storm, revolving...)

If Acts 10 is one of the greatest turning points in the history of the Christian faith, how might it become a turning point in the life of your congregation?

Can you think about a time when you have experienced an invisible door that gave you a different message than what was openly displayed? How did it make you feel?

If leadership is influence and one of the best ways to train leaders is to be a role model, what kind of influencer has Peter become?

Why do you think it's important to respect people with journeys different from our own?

Lesson Six: Build Strong Ministry Using Passionate People

Read Nehemiah 1:1 – 6: 16

If you were to ask me what my greatest passion in life was, I would probably answer, “my family”. My partner and son are the family I never had as a child. We communicate with one another, we trust one another, we respect one another and we love one another unconditionally. They hold a place in my heart that no one else can hold.

Scripture says that where your treasure is, there will be your heart (Matthew 6:21). In this case, where my heart is, there will be my treasure. My family is a God-given treasure and I would protect them at any cost.

If I came to your church, and was not the pastor, you would want to put me in a ministry that positively affected my family. Why? Because our best work lies within our greatest passion.

Let’s take a look at Nehemiah:

He was in the citadel of Susa, when some men came from Judah. While questioning them about Jerusalem and those who had survived the exile, he learned that the survivors were back in Jerusalem but the wall was broken down and its gates burned up with fire. Without a wall around the city, the people were defenseless against enemies.

Nehemiah had a passion for Jerusalem, his heart went out to them and he sat down and wept when he heard the news. Then for some days he did three things:

- Mourned
- Fasted
- Prayed

After mourning, fasting and praying he had a course of action. He went to the king whom he served and talked about what was happening in Jerusalem. The king was so moved that he:

- Gave Nehemiah permission to take leave and go to Jerusalem
- Committed to financing the rebuilding of the wall
- Set up the trip to Jerusalem for Nehemiah and paid for it

Nehemiah went to Jerusalem but didn’t talk about what he was there to do. Instead he went out during the night with a few men to examine the walls and see what kind of work was ahead of them. Returning, he gathered some of the people and cast the vision to them saying, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace.” The people listened to Nehemiah and agreed with him. They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.”

What Nehemiah did next was brilliant! He wanted the walls to be built strong in order to provide the best possible defense and protection. He therefore stationed people to work on the wall in front of their own homes (3:1-32) or the places they were passionate about.

If you heard that there would be a battle on the street you lived on, and that the best course of action would be to build a strong solid wall for protection, where would you be the most motivated to build? Likely you would want to be sure that the area in front of your own home was very secure. You would want to work on that area yourself with a heart-felt passion.

In the same way, we want to position people in a ministry for which they hold a heart-felt passion. Putting a person in a position for the purpose of filling the position can be harmful not only to that person, but also harmful to the church.

I was pastoring a small church some years back that had begun to attract new people. There was a suggestion that we start up a social hour after church. The church didn't have much of a kitchen so there were limitations. About that time a woman who had been a member of the church for several years, but not active in any sort of ministry approached me. She said, "I recently retired from my job and I have some extra time and energy. I'd like to get involved." I asked her if she had any special interests and watched as she hesitated for a moment. Then she replied, "No, I just want to fill a need; is there anything you need done right now that no one has volunteered to do?" I told her about the need for someone to pick up pastries and start the newly purchased coffee pot each week. She smiled and said, "Consider the position filled."

The first week she provided coffee and croissants after church. The next week we had coffee and doughnuts after church. The third week she called to say that she wasn't going to make it to church that week and that I should find someone else to do her job. The fourth week she simply didn't show up, and didn't bother to call. The next week she didn't show up again and didn't call. I contacted her and left a message on her phone machine saying that I was concerned about her and that we were missing her at church; I didn't mention the social hour. She didn't call me back. I called her again the next week and specifically asked her to call me back because I was concerned about her. I received no response. I then sent her a card through the mail saying that I hoped everything was okay with her and that she was missed at church. Almost three months after she began her social hour ministry, having only showed up for two Sundays, I ran into her at the local mall. She looked like she wanted to run in the other direction, but allowed me to come up to her and say, "Hello". I didn't push the issue of her disappearance, but simply said that it was very nice to see her.

The next week she called and asked if she could set up a time to talk with me. As we sat down together, several days later, I asked if could get her a cup of coffee. She

replied, "No thanks. I don't drink coffee." There were some cookies left over from a youth activity the night before so I asked if she'd like a cookie. She replied, "No, I'm diabetic. I don't eat sugar."

A light was beginning to dawn on me. I sat quietly and waited for her to speak. She looked down nervously at her fumbling hands and then blurted out, "The first week someone said the coffee looked like tea and tasted horrible. One guy went to spit it out in the bathroom while others laughed and cheered him on." Her face a deep shade of red, she continued, "Then someone asked why anyone would buy boring old croissants when there's a delicious doughnut shop right down the street; of course they didn't realize that I'd made the coffee and brought the croissants." She continued, "The next week I made the coffee stronger and brought doughnuts. Some woman called the coffee 'the worst tasting sludge she'd ever tasted. Another complained about the sugary doughnuts hyping up her kids and said that no one in their right mind would bring doughnuts to a social hour." With tears streaming down her face she stated emphatically, "I don't drink coffee and I had never made it before that day. I haven't had sugar for years so I didn't know what was right or wrong to bring. I don't even have kids!" With that she began to sob to a point where she could no longer speak.

I felt horrible. I had seen a ministry need and simply placed a warm body into that need. The results had been disastrous. The woman was too ashamed to come back to church and no one wanted to take over the social hour ministry.

Had I used Nehemiah's methodology in setting up this ministry I would have done things differently.

As you remember, Nehemiah:

- Heard about the problem
- Prayed
- Got help and guidance
- Got first hand experience in what he was dealing with
- Gathered the people together and cast the vision
- Set up a creative plan by putting passionate people in their heartfelt places
- Reminded the people of the vision on a regular basis

Nehemiah successfully brought new life to the Jewish community in Jerusalem by rebuilding the city walls. He was positive, determined and creative in his method!

In contrast I:

- Heard about the problem
- Put someone in the position

I was unsuccessful in setting up a social hour. It cost the church a member and it cost that member her dignity.

We can be just as positive, determined and creative as Nehemiah was in building within our own churches, but we have to put a plan into action that places the right people in the right positions.

In retrospect I wish I had:

- Heard about the problem (the need for a social hour)
- Prayed for God's wisdom, guidance and direction in this matter
- Talked with other churches about how they set up their social hour
- Brought the idea and information to the leadership of the church
- Cast the vision to the church
- Looked at filling the position with a team rather than an individual, using ministry identifying tools like spiritual gifts inventories, surveys and interviews

(Had I pastored a larger church I might have likely set up and empowered a team to put the entire social hour into ministry. With smaller churches we are limited in volunteers to do all of the footwork.)

It is also important to note that while Nehemiah had the vision he didn't show up and start building the wall himself. In fact, we don't read anywhere in this story that Nehemiah was hoisting stone to rebuild the wall. It was not his wall it was Jerusalem's wall. He was there to identify the problem, put a plan into place, cast the vision and get the right people working in the right areas. He wanted them passionate about the wall they were building and he knew right where to place them!

They became so passionate about building the wall that when their enemies threatened to kill them and put an end to their work they set a new plan into place where half of them worked to build the wall while the other half stood guard.

They completed the wall fifty-two days after they had begun to rebuild it. When their enemies heard this they lost all self-confidence because they realized that this was accomplished only with the help of God.

“For which one of you, when you want to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if you have enough to complete it? Otherwise, when you have laid down a foundation, and are not able to finish, all who observe it will begin to ridicule you, saying, “This person began to build and was not able to finish.”

Luke 14:28-30

What do you want to build in your church? It might be something that requires physical manual labor, or perhaps it is an area of ministry that is needed within the community. Here are some steps, based on Nehemiah, which will help you calculate the cost:

1. Identify the issue
2. Let go of the past
3. Fast in order to get focused
4. Pray for God to give you guidance and direction
5. Meet with others who can help advise you through their experience and/or finances (this includes resources outside the church as well as inside the church)
6. Look closely at the challenge and get a handle on what will be needed to get the job done
7. Cast the vision
8. Get the right people into the right places; If you don't have the passionate people then perhaps it isn't time for that ministry to come into play.

If you want to successfully bring new life and ministry to your church don't settle for simply filling positions. Instead, place people in positions who have a passion and heart for that area of ministry, and don't settle for anything less.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What are the ministry areas in your church? How were they built?

Why might it have been important for Nehemiah to mourn before he took any action?

Why might it have been important for him to fast and pray before he took any action?

How does your church make decisions about the life of the congregation?

Consider a current project going on in your church right now. What have you learned from Nehemiah that could help you better implement it ?

God helped the people build the entire city wall in only fifty-two days. What could God help your church build, and how?

Does your church strive to put people in the right places? If so, what tools do you use in order to do this?

What questions does this study raise for you?

Lesson Seven: Promote a Spirit of Generosity

Read Matthew 6:19-24

I can't remember which General Conference it was, but what I do remember is that my life-partner attended a workshop on the subject of giving. Having recently given my obligatory once-a-year stewardship sermon, I refused the invitation to join her and went off on my own to a totally different workshop. When we met for lunch that afternoon she was super-charged from the concept she had learned in her workshop. She said, "I really need to share this information with you and then present it as a workshop for our church when we get home." Having never seen her very jazzed about the disciplines of tithing I preached, I was intrigued.

In the workshop she had learned that giving was not really about principle and discipline. Instead it was something that flowed down and came back around to bless you as it blessed others. Being a visual person the image that came to my mind was that of a fountain. If we place water into the fountain it flows and splashes down and then comes back again so that it is constantly flowing. When I shared my idea about the fountain with her she said, "Yes, it's a very joyful process! The blessings keep flowing when we give out of a place of joy and generosity rather than out of discipline and obligation." This scripture popped into my mind almost immediately:

"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each one should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

She continued, "And it's about giving from a place of generosity, not obligation. It's giving with abandon. So many times churches try to stockpile as much money as they can. That's fine if it's in a fund for a particular purpose, but if we are storing up money as our church treasure, we're missing out on what ministry is all about."

My mind was swirling with these new ideas. Our church was small and every penny counted as we had regular bills to pay. We had some money in savings, but that was our emergency fund; we surely wouldn't want to give it away and not have it if we needed it! But as I read over the handouts from that workshop I agreed that taking this information home to our congregation was important.

The next month, in preparation for the workshop, I preached a sermon titled: *The Heart of a Matter*.

Let's look at it from a scriptural standpoint:

The scripture in Matthew 6:19-21 tells us that where our hearts are, there our treasure will be. We are warned about putting our hearts in three specific areas:

- 1) Where moths can destroy
- 2) Where things can be eaten and destroyed
- 3) Where things can be stolen from us.

The simple questions might be, "what is your treasure? What do you value most?"

This is what Jesus seems to be driving at when He calls up three pictures from daily life in Palestine in His day. Let's look at each of them:

1) **Avoid the things the moth can destroy.** They didn't have mothballs in ancient Palestine, and moths were a common problem.

- Clothing was a sign of wealth. The wealthier you were the more clothes you owned. We're not talking about basic clothing; we're talking about fine and elaborate clothing. If you recall the Old Testament story about Elisha's healing of Naaman, in 2 Kings 5:22, Elisha's servant asks for a talent of silver and 2 Festal Garments. Clothing was a sign of wealth and status.

Jesus seemed be saying in Matthew 6, that it's silly to set your heart on clothing because you can't wear more than one garment at a time. What you're not wearing is hanging there being eaten by moths. There's nothing permanent about clothing, so if that's where your heart is, you're settling for something in life that's very cheap.

2) **Avoid the things that rust can destroy.** The word that is translated "rust" is brosis (long o). it literally means "eating away" which is what the rust we might think of does, but Jesus wasn't talking about rust as we know it.

- In His day a person's wealth was determined not only by the clothing they owned, but also by how big their barns and storage bins were and how much was stored there. They had to be careful, however, because the more they stored up, the more problems they had with worms, mice, rats and other creatures who ate the stored food and polluted it.

I believe that Jesus was saying: Don't put your heart into storing up so much more than what you need, because there's nothing permanent about that stored-up food. There's no real quality there. If you put your heart into how much food you have in your bins and barns, you're selling yourself short. Besides, the vermin will just ruin it anyway.

3) Avoid the treasures of life that thieves can steal by digging through. The houses in that day were made of baked clay.

- Thieves would literally dig through the walls to break into the houses, so what good was it to hoard up gold and silver only to find that someone had dug through and stolen it all?

“If you put your heart into how much money you have you miss the point of ministry.”

These are the words I spoke to my congregation that day as I encouraged us to become a faith community that lived out of a spirit of generosity rather than a congregation of hoarders.

I was surprised at how well this message was received! In fact, at the next board meeting someone brought a proposal for the church to participate in the upcoming Relay For Life, a community event to raise money and fight in the cure for cancer. A team was put into place and eight or nine people spent the night out there making sure that we had someone walking the track all through the night.

Our congregation got very excited about giving time and money to this worthwhile cause! The next Sunday we announced who had participated and how much money our church had donated to the fight against cancer. The applause was deafening and the excitement was contagious.

At the next board meeting someone brought a proposal that suggested the church send a donation to Habitat for Humanity. You cannot imagine my surprise when the board enthusiastically voted in the idea. Thank God I had a teachable spirit because I too was learning along the way!

Two months later a remarkable thing happened in the life of our church. A local businesswoman called me to say that she didn't attend church but felt she was supposed to give ten percent of her earnings to our MCC for the next twelve months. She asked me if I'd be willing to pick up the check from her each month at her place of business. Of course I readily agreed. Then she dropped the bombshell: It was her stipulation that our church should keep half the money and use it for whatever we wished. We were, however, to give the other half away in the church's name. She didn't care where we gave it, but it had to be given from our congregation. She didn't want her name ever brought into it.

To this day I don't understand her rationale, but she was obviously a spiritual woman and she was certainly true to her word over the coming year. Once a month she would give me a call to say that the check was ready. I would drive to her place of business, have coffee with her, and fill her in on all the places that her money was going. She laughed heartily as I told her about our joy at being able to send it so many places, how the board meetings had gone from drudgery to the happenin' place to be.

Our church had gone from being hoarders to feeling like Santa Claus! We sent money to a horse ranch for disabled children, to PFLAG, to a health clinic that served impoverished people, to a new gay bar that was opening in town and needed sound system repairs, to a social worker's organization that provided needed items for children who had just been taken from their homes and placed into protective care, and more. We came to love board meetings because each month we could see how much money we had to give and then decide where to give it.

We were also able to purchase brand new hymnals for the church, start a building fund, purchase much needed supplies and pad our conference fund. Our church had become a fountain; we had started the flow but now it just kept pouring out and running over.

“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into our lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Luke 6:38

Additionally, as the church received letter after letter of thanks from these organizations we were giving to, as we heard each and every month about how our giving was touching lives, our own offerings began to mysteriously go up. The congregation sat enraptured as I read these letters from the pulpit each month. Our little church was making a difference in our city! As a result:

- **Giving in general went up significantly.** Not only financially, but also in the contribution of time and the sharing of talents. People wanted to give to our church because they were happy with how their contributions were being used.
- **The level of joy went up significantly.** People got excited and wanted to be involved in the church like never before. Social opportunities began to abound.
- **The church began to grow spiritually.** We could see what God was doing in our midst; it was as though the scriptures were coming alive for us.
- **The excitement was contagious.** Some people came back who had been away for a while and some new people came.
- **We earned respect from the greater community.** We began to network with some of these organizations and that resulted in their coming to our church to learn more about us and even to provide speakers and workshops. We also began to team our efforts with some of these organizations.

A well known philanthropist was once asked, "How is it that you give away so much and yet have so much left?" He replied, "I guess it's because I shovel it out and God shovels it in; God must have a bigger shovel than I do."

In the midst of our church's experiences my family has also developed a spirit of generosity. We are no longer concerned with going over the ten percent tithing principle. Instead we choose to give from our hearts whenever we sense God calling us to give. We, of course, give weekly based on our salaries as well, but that amount is closer to twelve percent than the typical ten percent tithe. In addition we claim what we give on our taxes and when we get our tax returns we tithe on that amount. It has become a very joyful experience for us to give out of a place of generosity rather than a place of discipline or obedience.

As a result we too have grown spiritually as we learn to trust God to supply our needs. Now we don't always have everything we want, but we have everything we need. On top of that, we have joy in our lives, and it's just like a fountain, ever flowing, ever coming back around again to bless us.

If you want to know blessings in your life and in the life of your faith community, promote a spirit of generosity.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What were you taught about the subject of giving throughout your lifetime?

Is it different from what your church teaches you about giving today? If so, how is it different?

What metaphor describes your congregation best: A flowing fountain or a dam? Why?

How might your church finances be affected if your congregation developed a spirit of generosity?

How might your personal finances be affected if you developed a spirit of generosity?

In the experience we read about, the church began to give and things went UP from there:

- Offerings went up
- The level of joy went up
- Spiritual growth went up
- The excitement level went up
- The respect of the greater community went up

Are these things you would like to see happen in your faith community?

Does your church have the teachable spirit(s) needed to bring this about? Explain

In your personal life, what place would you like to be giving out of?

Lesson Eight: Reflect the Abundant Life

Read John 10:10

I vividly recall my first trip to the mission. It was actually a Christian run shelter for the homeless in an urban downtown area with a sign out front that read:

The Hands and Heart of Jesus Mission

One could check into the mission at 5:45pm each evening. A church service was held from 6:00pm – 7:30pm. Supper was at 8:00pm and everyone was to be in bed with the lights out by 10:00pm. You had to be gone by 7:00am the next morning; there was no breakfast available.

I was there to drop off a donation of blankets, hats, mittens and socks. I was surprised at how quiet it was and mentioned this to the man at the desk. He replied, “Well, everyone is at church right now.” I said, “Wow, that’s amazing that every single person attends the service you offer; it must be a very positive experience.” He stated matter-of-factly: “Well if they don’t go to church they can’t eat or sleep here. We take the spiritual needs of these people very seriously.”

I was horrified. Here was a shelter professing to offer the hands and heart of Jesus, but giving something far different. Can you imagine being hungry and exhausted, knowing that you had to sit through an obligatory worship service before you could get food and sleep? How could you focus on Jesus when your stomach was twisted in hunger pains? More importantly, how does this attitude and behavior reflect God?

“As water reflects a face, so a person’s heart reflects the person.”

Proverbs 27:19

From that point I became determined to be holistic in ministry. I realized that no matter what I preach, the way I live my life reflects my truest beliefs, so I became intentional about integrating different parts of our human make-up into what I preach, what I teach, what I practice and what I model. I am far from perfect at it on any given day, but I’d rather strive to make my life and ministry reflect what I truly believe about God than settle for anything less.

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and life abundant.”

Jesus speaking in John 10:10

Notice that Jesus didn’t say that He came so that we might have abundant spiritual lives. He came so that we might have life abundant; He is talking about life in general. Since the church is not a building but a grouping of individuals let’s look at how living out the abundant life as individuals can influence the community of faith.

Our lives are made up of the following components:

- Physical
- Mental
- Emotional
- Sexual
- Spiritual

Let's look at each of these individually.

Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. How are we living out this abundant life in our **PHYSICAL** selves?

“Your body is one of your prime sources of guidance, and it also helps create what you need. Take time today to attend to your body in special ways. Make it feel attractive, loveable, respected and appreciated.”

Penney Peirce

Checklist:

- _____ Eating healthy foods
- _____ Getting enough exercise
- _____ Taking vitamin or other supplements as needed
- _____ Watching our weight
- _____ Scheduling regular checkup's and procedures recommended by health professionals

As an overweight lesbian who is overdue for a teeth cleaning and mammogram, I am not throwing stones at anyone! Awareness can be the first step in a healthy direction. We also know, of course, that there are both long term and short term effects of not caring for ourselves physically. How we care for ourselves physically is a direct reflection on our selves and on our relationship with God.

Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. How are we living out this abundant life in our **MENTAL** selves?

The saying, *“It's all in the mind”* is very true. Our minds direct our choices, our attitudes and our actions. No wonder it's so important to care for our mental health! My mother used to tell me that once I got an idea in my head I just couldn't let it go. She was absolutely correct! I have learned that sometimes these ideas are healthy and positive and sometimes they are negative and destructive. Whenever I find myself incorporating what Mom called, “stinkin' thinkin'” into my thoughts, I pray for God to help me re-adjust my attitude. I have found these two things to be true:

1. I am always at choice in how I act and react.
2. If I need to adjust my mental awareness I need to first adjust my attitude

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Ephesians 4:22-24

How we care for ourselves mentally is a direct reflection on our selves and on our relationship with God.

Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. How are we living this out in our **EMOTIONAL** selves?

I believe that all emotions are gifts from God; it's what we do with them that can make a difference in how we reflect our selves and our relationship with God.

I see my emotions as a temperature gauge that reflects my current state of being. When I feel myself starting to run hot I ask myself these questions:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What happened to cause me to feel this way?
- What was the trigger for me?
- What can I do about this in the moment?
- What can I do about this over the long haul?

Just asking these questions can be like adding coolant to a hot engine. Remember, however, our emotions can run hot for positive reasons as well as for negative reasons.

Some of the hot emotions can include: anger, joy, hate, love, anguish, and fear.

Some of the cool emotions can be just as vital to our lives. These might include: apathy, relief, peace, reverence, dismay, and gladness.

Of course there are other emotions that run in between hot and cold! For those who think that there are basically only three emotions: Happy, Sad, Anger, let me assure you that there are lots more! Here are some of the emotions listed in the Psalms 1,2,4,5 and 6:

Delight, anger, fear, rejection, relief, distress, shame, joy, peace, hate, reverence, deceit, rebellion, gladness, faintness, agony, anguish, love, sorrow, dismay, disgrace, exhaustion

Scriptures tell us that some of the emotions Jesus experienced were: anger, compassion, frustration, betrayal, sadness, patience, abandonment, love, and concern.

As a quick note before moving on, it is important to state here that many of our emotions come out of stress. Our bodies do not know the difference between good stress and bad stress. Therefore, we should not be surprised that our body reacts the same way to joyful news as it does to sad and disheartening news.

Our emotions are a powerful force in our lives. It's important to keep them healthy!

How we handle ourselves emotionally is a direct reflection on our selves and on our relationship with God.

Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. How are we living this out in our **SEXUAL** selves?

Growing up I heard two basic ideas about sex:

- Sex is dirty
- You should hold out and save your virginity for the person you marry

Here's what I came up with out of those ideas:

Sex is dirty; save it for the one you marry.

God created us to be sexual beings. There are those who argue that sex is only for procreation, but here's my argument: If it's only for procreation then why did God make it so enjoyable? After all there are other systems in our bodies that provide results but aren't necessarily pleasurable or stimulating.

The church has been particularly negative on the subject of sex. It is the religious who have tried to frighten young people with stories about hair growing on their palms and self-inflicted blindness, supposedly resulting from masturbation. It is the church that has reduced LGBT people to their sexuality. The scriptures that have been used incorrectly to speak out against homosexuality all contain sexual references.

"Because of this God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."

Romans 1:26-27

Of course if we read back to discover what "*this*" is, we learn that this text is, at least in part, about idol worship and people doing what is unnatural for them.

We must also remember that while homosexuals are accused of being abominations and perverts, heterosexuals are reduced to being “vanilla”, and staying within the bounds of the missionary position. Neither is true neither is healthy.

I believe that our sexuality is a gift from God. I believe that God created a variety of sexual orientations and each is to be revered and respected. In turn we are to treat our sexual partners with respect.

Healthy sexuality is respectful
Healthy sexuality is loving
Healthy sexuality is mutual

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

I Corinthians 6:19-20

How we conduct ourselves sexually is a direct reflection on our selves and on our relationship with God.

Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. How are we living this out in our **SPIRITUAL** selves?

A priest, a rabbi and a minister go fishing; they get into a boat and out onto a lake where they bait their hooks, cast their lines and wait.

After an hour with no luck, the priest stands up, moves to the side of the boat and crosses himself. With his rod and reel in hand he steps out of the boat and walks on the water over to a place about fifty feet away. Standing there on the water he casts his line and immediately has a fish on it!

The rabbi then stands up, moves to the side of the boat, and says a blessing in Hebrew. With his rod and reel in hand he steps out of the boat and walks across the water, with a high-five to the priest as he goes by. About a hundred feet from the boat he casts his line and immediately has a fish on!

The minister sits there in astonishment as his two colleagues catch fish after fish. He has never walked on water, but doesn't want to look faithless! So carefully he stands up, moves to the side of the boat and says a prayer. With his rod and reel in hand he steps out onto the water and kerSPLASH, down he goes. He comes up for air sputtering and spitting feeling like a complete idiot. He climbs back into the boat and sits there dripping wet. Seeing that the priest and rabbi are still catching fish, he gets up again and moves to the side of the boat. He mutters that one word prayer we all know so well: HELP, and with his rod and reel in hand he steps out of the boat and onto the

water. KerSPLASH, down he goes again. This time as he comes up for air he hears the rabbi say to the priest, "So do you think we should show him where the rocks are?"

This is one of my all time favorite fishing stories, but even more importantly one of my all time favorite spiritual stories. I believe that religion and spirituality are different from one another. It is our spiritual lives that connect us to the Spirit of God. There are tools that can assist in that connection, but it is the connection itself that makes us spiritual people. I have learned that religion can give us the rules, but spirituality is about finding the "rocks". Spirituality is deeper and sometimes we need spiritual direction and guidance to find our way. Religion tells us the way as a people, but spirituality is about finding our own way as individuals.

"This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The one without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to this person and he/she cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person makes judgments about all things, but is not subject to another's judgments. 'For who has known the mind of God that he/she may instruct another?' But we have the mind of Christ."

I Corinthians 2:13-16

Listed below are some things that might help you find the "rocks" in order to walk your own personal spiritual journey:

- A spiritual director
- Rituals (lighting candles, smudging, rosary, special prayers, etc)
- Spiritual Retreat
- Daily Devotional and Prayer Time
- Observing the Sabbath
- Worship
- Journaling
- Nature Hikes
- Music

Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. If you want to know what Jesus believed all you had to do was watch how He lived His life. He was forever healing those with physical, mental, and emotional needs. He talked about the need to care for ourselves sexually in a healthy manner rather than degrading our bodies and thus our spirits. He talked about the need to put God first in our lives and He modeled for us how to do that. Jesus knew the importance of walking His talk and that is what made Him so very different from the prophets of that day. Jesus knew the need to live out:

- His love for God
- His love and respect for all creation
- Honesty and Integrity
- Forgiveness and Compassion

- Gratitude and Humility
- Trust and Faith in God
- Kindness and Hospitality

In His actions as well as His words, Jesus reflected God.

In the same way I believe that we reflect God by the way we live our lives and care for the physical, mental, emotional, sexual and spiritual aspects of our lives. If others are watching us today, how are we reflecting God?

Let's go back to something I said earlier in this study:

Since the church is not a building but a grouping of individuals, let's look at how living out the abundant life as individuals can influence the community of faith.

It's this simple: If the individuals are striving to be healthy reflections of God, then the church will be a healthy reflection of God. How do we encourage individuals to become healthy and reflect the abundant life?

- Teach (workshops, Bible studies, health fairs, special speakers)
- Preach (creative sermons)
- Encourage (support groups within the church, but also promote and advertise appropriate groups outside the church)
- Practice (remember, if you don't practice you can't get good at something; practice doesn't make perfect, but it'll make you better)
- Model (Wherever and whenever possible, model the abundant life)

Because the best way to reflect the abundant life in Christ is to live it out in our personal lives and then live it out in the life of the church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Can you think of a time in your life when you had an experience where someone's actions spoke louder than their words? What did they think they were reflecting? What were they actually reflecting?

How does your care of your physical, mental, emotional, sexual and spiritual aspects reflect upon your relationship with your Creator?

Are there any emotions that were taught to you (as a child or young person) that were bad? If so, what emotions were they and why were they believed to be bad?

If someone were assigned to watch you for an entire day, what would your attitudes and behaviors reflect about your relationship with God?

How does your church promote healthy living?

What does it reflect about your church's relationship with God?

What questions were raised for you as you went through this particular study?

The Eight Essentials for a Healthy and Thriving Congregation A Leader's Guide

Suggestions for Your Group Gathering:

- Maintain a setting for honest and open discussion rather than an instructional setting. In order to do so, focus on asking open ended questions rather than closed ended ones. For example, choose questions that allow for more than one answer, such as: “How do you think our church might work toward accomplishing this?” A close ended question typically allows only for one answer: “Do we do this in our church?”
- Suggested group rules may include, and are not limited to:
 - Confidentiality: what is shared in the group stays in the group
 - Recognizing everyone's view as sacred and worthy of respect
 - Begin and end on time
 - Take turns sharing so that everyone is listening respectfully
 - Recognize that silence is an acceptable way to participate - no one will be required to shareChoose your group rules carefully. They should offer safety and security to your group without excluding or becoming invasive.
- Set a time for these gatherings. It is suggested that one and a half to two hours be allotted for each study. You may wish to adjust this time to best meet the needs of your group.
- Establish a setting that is conducive to discussion. Since you will ask people to bring their study completed each week, an informal circle or “U” shape might work well. You want to avoid people having to turn around to look at whoever is talking.
- Refreshments: Some groups will enjoy a time of refreshments following the session. The leader may ask if anyone would like to volunteer to bring treats for the next week.
- Begin and end with prayer. You may want to ask for a volunteer to lead in a five to seven minute opening meditation before each session. If you choose to do this, it is best to ask for volunteers the week before, in order to give participants time to prepare.

Remember, these are only suggestions. You may wish to add to the list as you see a need.

Session One

Set up a Contextual Analysis of Your Congregation

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

- Something large to write on such as a dry erase board or large newsprint
- Markers to write with
- Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone
- Open with prayer/meditation
- Establish any ground rules (suggested above)
- Explain the process of what each session will look like including: the start time, the devotional time, the expectation to have each assignment completed in advance, the closing and refreshments.
- Hand out the study so that each participant has one.
- Read over the Introduction together.
- Ask: How many of you enjoy putting puzzles together? (*Watch for hands to go up*) Could you imagine trying to put a puzzle together if you didn't have the picture on the box? (*wait for responses*) Could you do it? (*wait for responses*) In order to put a puzzle together we need to have the big picture don't we? This evening we're going to talk about putting together the big picture of our congregation. The puzzle pieces include our church's history, culture, theology, and experiences. Let's begin reading together and see if we can begin to put some of this puzzle into place.
- Have people take turns and read through the scriptures at the top.
- Ask who would like to begin reading the actual study. Have people take turns, but give the OK for folks to not read out loud if they are not comfortable with it.
- When the study has been read through out loud, begin to facilitate the questions for reflection. Write some of the responses so that everyone can see them. For example, when you ask, "So, what is the history of our church?" (*write down the*

responses) Encourage people to write their own responses in the space provided in their studies.

- Allow for different people to respond to these questions. If someone seems to be dominating the conversation ask, "What do some others think?"
- Ask: Do we need to take some time and actually set up this contextual analysis? Would we need a team of people to do so? Who might be on that team? Do we have any volunteers from this group to take on this project?
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the next study for the following session.
- You may wish to ask who would like to open the group with a prayer or meditation the next session, and who would like to provide refreshments (if you choose to go that route).

*Refreshments are optional. If you decide to have a time of refreshments each week, you will likely be the one to bring them that first week.

*If people don't seem comfortable bringing the opening prayer/meditation, you may need to come prepared to lead that time each week.

Session Two

Develop Healthy Leadership

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

- Something large to write on
- Markers
- Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- A reminder of the ground rules from the week before.
- Ask: What are some traits you automatically think of when you hear the word: LEADERSHIP? (*write these down for everyone to see*).
- Have the scripture read out loud.
- Take turns reading through the study (for those who wish to read).
- Go through the questions for reflection. List responses to the first two regarding Mother Theresa and Adolf Hitler where everyone can see them.
- After going through the questions ask: “How do you think we could develop CART leadership in our church?”
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the next study for the next session.
- You may wish to ask for a volunteer to lead in the opening prayer/meditation for the next session, and for a volunteer to bring refreshments.

Session Three: Practice Loving Relationships

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

-Something large to write on

-Markers

-Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- A reminder (if necessary) about ground rules).
- Ask: Why do you think churches should develop a culture of love and appreciation? (*write responses where everyone can see them*).
- Read through the scripture.
- Read through the material for this session.
- Go through the Questions for Reflection (*write the responses to the last question where everyone can see them*).
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the next study for the next session.
- You may wish to ask for a volunteer to lead in the opening prayer/meditation for the next session, and for a volunteer to bring refreshments.

Session Four

Be Willing to Move On and Go Where God Calls You

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

- Something large to write on
- Markers
- Bible(s)

- Signal the opening by welcoming everyone to the fourth study.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- By now you shouldn't have to remind them of the ground rules, but if you believe it's still necessary, do so at this time.
- Ask: Is there any time in your life that you felt God's distinct call to move on? Do we have a volunteer to share that personal experience with us? (*limit to one person due to time constraints.*)
- Read through the scripture.
- Read through the study.
- Go through the Questions for Reflection.
- Where everyone can see it, write down the three choices listed in the seventh question. Then ask which one they circled. Keep a tally to see how similar or different their views are.
- If time permits, spend some extra time on the last question (*You may wish to write down the responses where everyone can see them*).
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the next study for the next session.
- You may wish to ask for a volunteer to lead in the opening prayer/meditation for the next session, and for a volunteer to bring refreshments.

Session Five

Open the Doors Wide

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

- Something to write on
- Markers
- Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone to the half-way mark in this series of studies.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- Ask them to make a list of every kind of door they can think of: *Write them where everyone can see them.*
- Read the scripture.
- Read through the study.
- Go through the Questions for Reflection. Spend some extra time talking about what kind invisible doors might be at your church (*Refer to the list of doors you made earlier—allow time for discussion*).
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the next study for the next session.
- You may wish to ask for a volunteer to lead in the opening prayer/meditation for the next session and a volunteer to bring refreshments.

Session Six

Build Strong Ministry Using Passionate People

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

- Something large to write on
- Markers
- Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- Ask: Has anyone ever been involved in an area of ministry that they felt very uncomfortable with? What made you uncomfortable? What do you suppose happens to a church that places warm bodies into open positions without considering people's passions (*record the responses to this last question where everyone can see them*).
- Read the scripture.
- Read through the study.
- Go through the Questions for Reflection.
- List responses to the last question where others can see them (*Allow time for discussion*).
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the next study for the next session.
- You may wish to ask for a volunteer to lead in the opening prayer/meditation for the next session and a volunteer to bring refreshments.

Study Seven

Promote a Spirit of Generosity

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

-Something large to write on
-Markers
-Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- Ask: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “giving” in regard to the church? Record answers where everyone can see them.
- Read the scripture.
- Read the study.
- Go through the Questions for Reflection.
- Ask: What has this study opened our eyes to that is different than what is written up on the board? Allow for some discussion as time allows.
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- Assign the final study.
- Remind them that you will (if you have chosen to do this) meet a final time in order to begin to put a plan into place. This plan will involve setting up long term and short term goals that have come out of this study.
- You may wish to ask for a volunteer to lead in the opening prayer/meditation for the next session and a volunteer to bring refreshments.

Session Eight

Reflect the Abundant Life

As the group leader:

- Come to the study prepared
- Remember that this is a group discussion rather than a lecture
- Listen to others and respect their opinions no matter how different they are from your own
- Facilitate rather than dominate

Suggested Materials:

- Something large to write on
- Markers
- Bible(s)

- Signal the beginning by welcoming everyone. Remind them that there will be one more session (if you desire to do this) to help put a plan into place.
- Opening prayer/meditation
- Ask: Why is it important for us to be balanced in our lives in regard to the physical, mental, emotional, sexual and spiritual aspects of the SELF. What happens when we are out of balance? Write these responses where everyone can see them.
- Read the scripture.
- Read through the study.
- Go through the Questions for Reflection. List, where everyone can see them, the responses to “How does your church promote healthy living?”
- Ask: So, for clarification, how does the way we take care of our personal selves influence our church?
- Bring things to a close and end in prayer.
- **Thank everyone for their participation in these studies!** If your church will continue with this study, you may wish to announce the scheduled date for *The Eight Essentials for a Healthy and Thriving Congregation; Developing a Strategy for Success* session(s), as determined by your church leadership. Take a moment to explain what the last session is about. (This will be the opportunity to put a plan into place for your congregation, based on the Eight Essentials you have learned over the past sessions.)
- If you are not doing a last session, take some time to talk about how these studies have impacted people in the group, and how they might impact the church.

Author's Biography



Rev. Nancy J. Horvath-Zurn was credentialed UFMCC clergy in 1991.

She has pastored churches in Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas and Minnesota.

She holds a Master of Divinity from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and is currently pursuing a Doctorate in Ministry from Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Nancy lives with her life-partner Barbara and their son Zachary in Rochester, Minnesota where she is the pastor of Healing Spirit MCC.

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Set Up a Contextual Analysis of Your Church

Scripture Reference

II Corinthians 13:1-10

Summary

A contextual analysis gives us a big picture of our churches. It helps bring to light challenges as well as opportunities. What we learn informs decision making in the life of the church. I have used it to deal with personnel issues, conflict management, church growth, and more. It is my hope that you will discover what a valuable tool this simple process can be in the life of your church.

Tips for Success

If you truly wish to have a positive and successful process you will want to consider conducting a contextual analysis. In other words, you're going to find the YOU ARE HERE marker for your church. Look at:

- 🌀 **Your History**
- 🌀 **Your Culture**
- 🌀 **Your Theology**
- 🌀 **Your Experience**

Your goal is to discover where your church is at this particular place and time.

Warning: You may believe that you know exactly where your church is, but doing this analysis may yield some surprises for you.

Develop Healthy Leadership

Scripture Reference

Mark 1:14-19; 3:13-19, 6:7-12

Matthew 28:16-20

Summary

Leadership is not about position or office. With commitment, accountability, responsibility and teachable spirits in our leadership the church can move on to where God is calling it to go.

Tips for Success

Healthy Leaders...

- 🌀 Have **teachable spirits**
- 🌀 Are **committed** with their time, gifts and talents
- 🌀 Are **accountable**
- 🌀 Are **responsible**, on time and reliable.
- 🌀 **Exemplify the character of Jesus**—These people walk their talk
- 🌀 **Can agree to disagree** during conflict
- 🌀 **Deal directly and lovingly** with others in the church
- 🌀 Have **healthy life priorities** in place
- 🌀 Are both **encouraging and empowering** to others in the church
- 🌀 Are **not threatened** by spiritual concepts different from his/her own
- 🌀 **Encourage others** to find their own relationship path to God
- 🌀 **Can admit** to not having all the answers

Practice Loving Relationships

Scripture Reference

Matthew 22:34-40

Summary

"Treat others the way you want to be treated".

The Golden Rule

"Treat others the way they want to be treated."

The Platinum Rule

Tips for Success

- 🌀 **Solitude** - That time alone with God where there are no distractions such as the telephone, television, or people going in and out.
- 🌀 **Silence** - Absolute quiet is required if we are to let go of the spinning of our minds and listen for the voice of God.
- 🌀 **Intentionality** - Be intentional about taking time for your relationship with God.
- 🌀 **Intimacy** - Be intentional about taking time for solitude and silence with God...so your relationship may become more personal and intimate.
- 🌀 **Prayer** - Communicate with God.

Be Willing to Move On and Go where God Calls You

Scripture Reference

Jeremiah 48:11-12

Summary

How do churches become willing to go with God and not become so set in their ways that they find themselves fossilized? Be open to change. Be Committed, Accountable, and Responsible to Jesus' teachings and God's purpose. Be ready to venture forth in faith. Be Flexible.

Tips for Success

- 🌀 Begin to **get honest and open** about the need to move on and go with God.
- 🌀 **Open up to other churches** and find out how they keep from settling on their dregs.
- 🌀 **Develop a self-imposed ruthlessness**...push ourselves to do our part.
- 🌀 **Learn to listen**, even when it's agonizing.
- 🌀 **Be patient.**
- 🌀 **Be aware** of the cycles in your church
- 🌀 **Take time to celebrate** achievements.
- 🌀 **Continue to build** the body of Christ spiritually so that the next time God calls on us to move and grow in some area, we will understand what is going on.

Open the Doors Wide

Scripture Reference

Acts 10:1-11:18

Summary

All people can receive the Holy Spirit and come to God. We need to search out any doors of exclusion in place within our own congregations, as subtle as they may be, bring them to the awareness of the congregation and have them removed.

Tips for Success

Remember and Eradicate the Doors...

- ☪ **Storm Doors** - Keep people out.
- ☪ **Screen Doors** - Give the illusion that all is open, but there's a door there.
- ☪ **Swinging Doors** - These doors swing in and out. Once inside or outside you had better take a step because if you don't the doors will swing back and whack you. Have you ever heard the saying, "Don't let the doors hit you on the way out?"
- ☪ **Revolving Doors** - You can come in and you can leave with only worship in between. There is no commitment, accountability or responsibility.
- ☪ **Back Doors** - You can come in but don't let anyone see you.
- ☪ **Cellar Doors** - You can be here, but you must know your place.

Build Strong Ministry Using Passionate People

Scripture Reference

Nehemiah 1:1-6:16

Summary

What do you want to build in your church? It might be something that requires physical manual labor, or perhaps it is an area of ministry that is needed within the community. Use the story of Nehemiah to help understand the way to build your ministry successfully, while allowing passionate people to minister to their fullest.

Tips for Success

- ☪ **Identify the issue/ministry**
- ☪ **Let go** of the past
- ☪ **Fast** in order to **get focused**
- ☪ **Pray** for God to give you guidance and direction
- ☪ **Meet with others** who can help advise you through their experience and/or finances (this includes resources outside the church as well as inside the church)
- ☪ **Look closely** at the challenge and **get a handle** on what will be needed to get the job done
- ☪ **Cast the vision**
- ☪ Get the **right people** into the **right places**. (If you don't have the passionate people then perhaps it isn't time for that ministry to come into play.)

Promote a Spirit of Generosity

Scripture Reference

Matthew 6:19-24

Summary

"...it's about giving from a place of generosity, not obligation..." The scripture tells us that where our hearts are, there our treasure will be. "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into our lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Luke 6:38

Tips for Success

- a. **Avoid the things the moth can destroy** - that it's silly to set your heart on clothing because you can't wear more than one garment at a time.
- b. **Avoid the things that rust can destroy** - Don't put your heart into storing up so much more than what you need, because there's nothing permanent about that stored-up food.
- c. **Avoid the treasures of life that thieves can steal by digging through** - If you put your heart into how much money you have you miss the point of ministry.

Reflect the Abundant Life

Scripture Reference

John 10:10

Summary

If the individuals are striving to be healthy reflections of God, then the church will be a healthy reflection of God. Therefore, we must take care of the

- Physical
- Mental
- Emotional
- Sexual
- Spiritual

in our lives.

Tips for Success

How do we encourage individuals to become healthy and reflect the abundant life?

- ☪ **Teach** (workshops, Bible studies, health fairs, special speakers)
- ☪ **Preach** (creative sermons)
- ☪ **Encourage** (support groups within the church, but also promote and advertise appropriate groups outside the church)
- ☪ **Practice** (remember, if you don't practice you can't get good at something; practice doesn't make perfect, but it'll make you better)
- ☪ **Model** (Wherever and whenever possible, model the abundant life)

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**Small Group Study
Pocket Reminder**

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