

2020 Lenten Devotional

Vital Congregations

Trinity United Presbyterian Church



It has been said that it takes 30 days to form a new habit. We all know it's much easier to start something new, than to break a bad habit. Everyone is different, but what if we could do something new to help us in our faith journey? What if we did something positive for Lent, instead of giving something up? What if we, together as a church, infused ourselves with vital spiritual practices that would help us become a more Vital Congregation?

During the next 40 days of Lent, you're invited allow God to shape our hearts and minds in worship, participate in opportunities to grow in grace, to relieve suffering, to invite and welcome people, and to walk with Christ our whole lives long.

Practices of Vital Congregations

Caring Relationships—Sun Feb 19 and Wed March 5

Radical Hospitality—Sun March 8 and Wed Mar 12

Risk-Taking Mission and Service—Sun March 15 and Wed Mar 19

Lifelong Discipleship—Sun March 22 and Wed Mar 26

Passionate Worship—Palm Sunday, March 29 and Wed Apr 2

Empowered Servant Leadership—Maundy Thursday/Good Friday April 9-10

Intentional Authentic Evangelism—Easter Sunday, April 12

--

When elementary-aged Little League baseball players practice their sport, they practice hitting, catching pop-ups, scooping up ground balls. When professional Major League baseball players practice--adults at the height of their athletic abilities--what do they do? They practice hitting, catching pop-ups, scooping up ground ball. Players at all stages and abilities repeat and deepen and improve upon the same basic practices.

The same is true for congregations. The greatest difference between stagnant and declining congregation and those that are constantly growing fruitful congregations is that in the fruitful congregations the pastor, staff, leaders, volunteers, members and guests, are constantly learning and improving the basic elements of ministry.

Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*

--

What would each committee or team or small group in the church add to the worship experience?

Name three different committees or groups that are most important to the life of the church?

Think of one or two ways each of these groups could change worship—either weekly worship or worship in their groups—in small ways or big—in a church-setting or personal worship.

Radical Hospitality

Christian hospitality is the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to stranger, for by doing that some have entertained angels unaware." Hebrews 13:2

Churches that practice Radical Hospitality sense a calling and responsibility to pray, plan, and work to invite others and to help them feel welcome and to support them on their faith journeys. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, they take the initiative to invite, welcome, include and support them grow in faith as they become part of the body of Christ.

Getting Off Track

It's easy to focus on what we expect from the church, rather than what God created us to do. In the Spirit of Jesus, we are here *"not to be served, but to serve."* Matt 20:28 How are we doing in our church? Do we focus more on how our needs are being met? Or do we open ourselves to the possibility that our needs are best met when we place ourselves in service to others in Christ's name?

--

What Does the Bible Say About Hospitality?

Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. (Matt 25:35)

Hospitality is a mark of Christian discipleship, a quality of Christian community, a concrete expression of commitment to grow in Christ-likeness by seeing ourselves as a part of the community of faith. By practicing hospitality, we become part of God's invitation to new life, showing people that God in Christ values them and loves them.

Hospitality streams through Scripture. In Deuteronomy, God reminds the people of Israel to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the wander. Why? *"For you were stranger in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19)*. We, too, were once strangers to the faith, residing outside the community where we now find rich resources of meaning, grace, hope friendship, and service.

We belong to the Body of Christ because of someone's hospitality and welcome. Someone invited us, received us, and helped us feel welcome—a parent, a spouse, a friend, a pastor, or even a stranger. If we had not felt welcomed and supported in some measure we would not have stayed.

Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt 25:35). "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). If we really believed this, we would change our behavior towards strangers! Taking Jesus seriously changes congregational behavior.

At every turn, the disciples seem ready to draw boundaries and distinctions that keep people at a distance from Jesus. They have a thousand reasons to ignore, avoid, and sometimes thwart the approach of people, reminding Jesus that

some of these people are too young, too sick, too sinful, too old, too Roman, too blind, too Gentile to deserve his attention.

But Jesus teaches, "Whoever welcomes on such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt 18:5). Hospitality has us seeing people as Jesus sees them and seeing Jesus in the people God brings to us. Jesus' hospitality extends beyond the cordial welcome we offer when someone appears at the threshold of the church and then feel good that we've completed our obligations.

Jesus tells a parable about himself, saying, "Then [the king] said to his slaves ... 'Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet'" (Matt 22:8-9). Jesus sends them out to welcome the ones who didn't know they were even invited to come, when the others rejected the invitation.

Paul implores the followers of Christ to practice an active hospitality. *"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom 15:7).* The grace received in Christ places upon Christians the joyful gift and challenging task of offering others the same welcome they themselves have received. The letter to the Hebrews cautions, *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).*

Does Our Radical Hospitality This Bold?

The early Methodists practiced hospitality in many ways so radical in their day that many traditional church leaders found their activities offensive. John Wesley preached to thousands on roadsides and in open fields to reach coal miners, field laborers, factory workers, the underclass, and the poorest of the poor. He invited them into community and nurtured in them a strong sense of belonging as he organized societies and classes for mutual accountability, support, and care.

According to Wesley, before people even consciously came to faith, they have inner desires for relationship to God that are stifled, forgotten, neglected, ignored or denied. By God's grace, people may be more ready than we realize to accept the invitation of Christ that comes through gracious hospitality.

Through the practice of Radical Hospitality the church today can express the gracious and extravagant welcome of Christ. God seeks to be in relationship with people. Just as God's grace triggers in people the interest and eagerness for relationship, God's grace shapes the invitational posture of congregations to reach out in love.

Think About Your First Time at Church

Think about people who long to find a welcoming faith community but haven't yet. You may have been this person in the past. How did you feel?

They wouldn't want me here if they really knew me.

Will they judge me?

Are they all married and with their families?

Do they all know each other already? Will I make friends?

Is everyone else smarter, wealthier, more experienced, happier than me?

The motivation for enhancing the quality of worship is not only about deepening our own faith but also about allow God to use us and our congregation to offer hope and life and love to others. God works through us to change the world. Worship is God's gifts and task, a sacred trust that requires our utmost and highest.

Offering Our Best

We all play a role in worship, offering our very best efforts in planning, preparation, care, and constant improvement.

Think through the tangible, concrete aspects of your worship space and delivery. How would you gauge the excellence of:

Comfort of the worship space

Other visual decoration or emphasis

Sound system Lighting

Any projection used

Bulletin or order of service

Appearance or design of the front of the sanctuary space

Now for each of these, think of one dramatic way, even if it seems impossible to do, that this area could be radically improved:

Comfort of the worship space

Other visual decoration or emphasis

Sound system

Lighting

Any projection used

Bulletin or order of service

Appearance or design of the front of the sanctuary space

Which of these would make the biggest difference to our current members?

To first-time visitors?

Finding Our Role as Worship Leaders

The responsibility for worship extends beyond the pastor, worship leader and musicians to each of us in their worshipping community.

Imagine mission teams, work project leaders, and volunteer coordinators intentionally including periods of prayer, devotion, or worship with their groups. Imagine ushers and greeters, and other hosts meeting together to pray and discuss how to deepen the quality of warmth and hospitality so that it exceeds all expectations for visitors and members alike.

Just imagine if each committee or team focused on enhancing worship. Perhaps no one thing would improve by 100%, but maybe 100 things would improve by 1% and the passionate love of God evidenced in these changes would renew the congregational life.

What each person brings to worship shapes the experience of for everyone as much as what he or she finds there. Passionate Worship begins with each worshiping individual. One way to deepen the experience of worship is for each person to actively prepare his or her heart, mind and should before attending. Nothing reinforces the practice of prayer and learning from Scripture better than vibrant personal devotional life.

Many churches publish Scriptures or topics before services so that members can review the readings, meditate on the verses, and prepare for worship. Other churches encourage members to take notes, or they provide a sermon outline so that people can rethink they hey points at home during the week.

How do you prepare your heart and soul for worship?

Worship soars on the God-given gifts of the congregation members. Perhaps you are willing to serve as a greeter or reader, offer your musical talents, learn or teach about prayer in Sunday school for a different age group.

Do you offer yourself and your best to serve in worship?

Our experience of worship begins with attitude, the spiritual eagerness, and the passion we bring with us. It matters how we sing and pray, in how we greet others, in how we approach the sacraments. **Passionate Worship begins with our love for God, our desire to open ourselves to God's grace, and our eagerness for relationship with God.**

People come to worship carrying many concerns. Some worry about a cousin serving in the military. Others face financial troubles that tear at the fabric of their family life. Some sense a disturbing lack of fulfillment in their careers. Others fear health challenges. Others feel deeply affected by the immensity of a tragedy. Some face monumental decisions, while others must constantly moderate intense conflict at home. Some are overwhelmed with gratitude, humbled by feelings of love and joy. Each congregation is a tapestry of hope and hurt, a collage of experience and anticipation, a patchwork of gifts, needs, fears, and aspirations.

People come to connect to God and one another as well as to feel restored, reminded, remembered, and refreshed. They wonder what God has to do with all that's going on inside of them and in the world around them. They want to know that having a relationship with Christ changes their life. In their search, God finds them, heals them, sustains them, and forms them anew.

Have they always been church people? Do they know I don't know what I'm doing?

How Did You First Become a Part of This Congregation?

How did you hear about it? Who invited you?

What made you come back a 2nd time, or what convinced you stay?

What are three or four key entry points (groups, activities, events) through which new people are most likely to connect with your congregation?

What makes these attractive and inviting? What could you do to make them even more inviting?

How does your church invite people?

How do you personally invite people?

How do you feel about inviting people?

Think About How It Feels to Approach Your Church Building for the First Time

What was your first experience walking into the church building? What was helpful and what was confusing to you?

How well are the parking areas marked? Does the parking look inviting?

Are signs in and around the building clear, informative, readable?

How many entrances are there into your buildings? List some:

Circle the entrances that people are most likely to use.

Are those attractive, well-lit, inviting, and well-marked?

From these entrances, how easy is it to find:

A Different Point of View

Imagine entering your church from a different point of view than your own. What issues can you identify if:

You were walking with a small child or pushing a stroller.

You were a college-aged person or a youth.

You didn't have a good grasp of English.

You were in a wheelchair or using a walker.

You weren't familiar with "church talk" (i.e. chancel, sacristy, foyer...).

What are 3 noticeable areas that need to be improved to make the building more friendly, accessible, and safe?

What are some short-term solutions that your church could act on immediately and without great cost?

What are some larger and longer-term solutions to consider?

Now, think again as the reluctant, pessimistic, or uncertain visitor...would you come back?

What is Radical Hospitality?

Radical means "arising from the source" or "very different from the usual or traditional." Radical Hospitality arises from the practices that are rooted in the life of Christ and that radiate into the lives of Christians. **Radical Hospitality that is radically different from the norm exceeds expectations, goes the extra mile, and takes welcoming the stranger to a whole new level.**

Imagine people offering the absolute most of themselves, their creativity, their abilities, and their energy to offer the gracious invitation and reception of everyone they meet as though they were welcoming royalty. Churches that are really good at Radical Hospitality are not just friendly and courteous, passively receiving visitors warmly. They offer surprising and unexpected quality of depth and authenticity in their caring for the stranger.

Newcomers intuitively sense that:

These people really care about me here.

They really want the best for me.

They aren't desperate for new members, they really value me.

I'm not just a number, a customer, or an outsider here. I'm being invited in.

Aspiring to Radical Hospitality follows Jesus' example of gathering people into the Body of Christ, inviting others to the banquet of God's gracious love.

Using All the Senses

Does our worship time together involve all of the senses during the service?

In Services Now What Could We Do?

Sight

Sound

Taste

Smell

Touch

What Can We Do?

Jesus said, "*I am the vine, and you are the branches*" (John 15:5). **Worship connects the branches to the vine, keeps people connected to the source of life, and helps them to grow in Christ.**

In worship that is passionate, people find such care that they cannot help but talk about the sermons, ideas, stories, music, and prayers during the week. Worshipers who are absent feel that they have missed something, and they also feel missed. Passionate spiritual communities increase in attendance because their members and visitors cannot help but talk positively about their experiences with others.

There's a contagious quality to authentic, engaging worship, to relevant sermons and uplifting music, and warm inviting community. Just as in the early church, God adds to their number day by day because worshipers naturally invite those with whom they have other things in common, bearing witness to the helpfulness, insight, and spiritual sustenance they've found.

Passionate Worship supports and nurtures all the other ministries of the congregation, giving life, vision, direction, and encouragement to the whole body.

Offering their best and highest efforts, pastors, musicians, and worship leaders play an essential role as they pursue excellence through prayerful planning, spiritual preparation, and constant learning. But the responsibility for worship rests with more than just those who lead the worship services. **Everyone has a role in fostering Passionate Worship.**

Imagine if a church decided to enhance the congregation's worship life, asking each ministry area and committee, each Sunday school and Bible study, each staff member and choir to do something extra out of love for God to strengthen community worship and depend on the practice of personal devotions. Imagine the Property and Finance Teams reviewing with the pastor the functionality and effectiveness of microphones, sound systems, and lighting, and looking through the entryways of the church, nursery, hallways, and sanctuary to see these places look fresh, inviting, clean, safe, and well-lit. **Does the way people care for their place of worship reveal their passion for worship and their love of God?**

engages them. They make worship accessible, while, at the same time, maintaining deep theological integrity.

Handouts, announcements, and signs are free of “insider language”. Prayers, creeds, and liturgical responses are printed or projected so that newcomers don’t feel like outsiders. During every service, pastors and leaders offer an invitation to further discipleship, and they encourage visitors to learn more about getting involved in church life. Everything says, “We’re glad you are here. Come back. Learn more. We’ll help you follow Jesus.”

Worship for the Head and Heart

Passionate Worship elements touch the head and heart. Think through this week’s worship service.

What elements or moments in the service ignited your intellect?

What did you learn?

When did you feel emotionally moved? What brought joy, tears, or praise?

Think through the service. Look with some distance at the way the service begins, builds, and then concludes. Consider the following questions:

- Does it feel smooth and flowing or a little choppy?
- Where is there a speeding up and rhythm and energy?
- Where does energy calm and slow?
- Does it ever just stop abruptly?
- What is simple?
- What is more complex?
- Where do you see metaphors and images being used?
- Where is there narrative and story?
- Where might children connect?
- Where would teens connect?

The Message Worship Sends

There is a contagious quality to authentic engaging worship that draws the community in.

In your service, what says to the congregation—both to your members and to your visitors:

We’re glad you’re here. Get involved, grow with us.

Please come back. We’ll help you follow Jesus.

How could each of these messages be given with greater passion?

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (Matt 10:40). These churches exhibit a restlessness because they realize so many people don’t have a connection to a faith community and they feel a personal motivation to invite and welcome more people into their congregation.

It also requires intentional focus on those outside the community of faith. Jesus’ example of hospitality shows us the unceasingly invitational posture that we carry with us into our world of work life, leisure time, neighborliness, and community service. It involves seeing ourselves as sent out by Christ, and going out of our way, even at the risk of a sense of awkwardness and inconvenience, to invite people to some aspect of the church’s ministry.

Instead, they exhibit a restlessness because they realize so many people don’t have a connection to a faith community and they feel a personal motivation to invite and welcome more people into their congregation. *“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7).*

Pastor Robert Schnase was serving a congregation that wanted to deepen its understanding of hospitality, growing beyond the practical steps recommended by books on evangelism, assimilation, and visitor follow-up. They had the techniques right—helpful signage, accessible parking, trained greeters, a system of visitor follow-up.

They were asked to share what they had each received through the church that built up their walk with Christ. They were also asked to share what their thought was their own biggest personal contribution to building up the Body of Christ.

After they had each shared their experiences, Pastor Schnase suggested that they think about **one of the greatest contributions that they should seek to make—is inviting someone else or helping a newcomer feel genuinely welcome so that he or she receives what we have received.**

We Have Something People Really Need

Sometimes church members forget that churches offer something people need.

People need to know that God loves them, and that they are of supreme value to God, and that their life has significance.

People need to know that they are not alone. When they face life’s difficulties, they are surrounded by a community of grace. That they do not have to figure out by themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic reversal, and temptations that hurt themselves or others.

People need to know the peace that runs deeper than the absence of conflict, the hope that sustains them even through periods of grief, the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them and lifts them out of their own preoccupations.

People need to learn how to offer and accept forgiveness. They need to know how to serve and be served. The church becomes a school of love where people can learn from one another how to love.

People need to know that life is not having something to live on but something to live for. People need a sustaining sense of purpose.

Most people discover their need for God’s grace and for the love of Christ through the experience of receiving it from others. *“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matt 25:35-36).*

Edwards Deming, the person behind Total Quality Management, observed that “a system produces what it is designed to produce.” A system is aligned to get the results it is getting, and it will not get any other kind of results unless something changes.

Congregational systems are perfectly aligned to get what they are getting, and that mean uninterrupted decline for most churches.

How is your church doing? Is worship attendance increasing or decreasing? Is membership trending older or younger? Is the number of classes, studies, services, and missions increasing or decreasing? Is your church like most mainline congregations, declining in numbers, increasing in expenses, and aging in membership with each passing year?

“This is what the Lord says, ‘You know if a man falls down, he gets back up again. And if a man goes the wrong way, he turns around and comes back’” (Jer 8:4).

To become a vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values. Good intentions are not enough.

Too many churches want:

More young people, as long as they act like older people,

More newcomers, as long as they act like old-timers,

More children, as long as they are as quiet and well-behave as the adults,

More ethnically-diverse families, as long as they act like the majority of the congregation.

What Does It Take?

Small churches have painted their nurseries, trained their nursery staff, replaced playground equipment, and within weeks, word-of-mouth carried the message of their special care for children to others, and attendance grew from 45 members to 55. And it all started with a simple paint job! **If every ministry changed a little toward welcoming younger people, the cumulative effect might change the direction of the church.**

“The point is to do something, however small, and show you care through your actions” (Mother Teresa, from a Simple Path).

Flexibility to change the way of presenting God’s Word is vital to Passionate Worship. Vibrant fruitful, growing congregations succeed because spiritually mature and passionate leaders visibly support and encourage worship and music in diverse forms and expressions. By simple acts, lovingly offered, churches draw people to God and to one another. They keep the end in mind, helping people find a way to God by making God’s gracious message available in worship.

In churches that practice Passionate Worship, the music is at least good, but never mediocre. Music speaks directly to the soul, setting the tone and emotional texture of the service. In some congregations the music may be simple, but it is dynamic, inspirational, high quality, and a gift from the heart.

If you have ever watched a silent film, you recall how the actors must over play their emotions because there are no spoken word or music to convey the action. When silent films were overlaid with live music, audiences soared and could connect with films in a new way that was thought impossible.

Music moves people, unifies congregations, strengthens the sense of belonging, provokes reflection, inspires joy, and lifts the spirit. Services that reflect passion for worship are balanced, using a mixture of complex and simple elements to communicate the message, a rhythm ranging from fast-paced and upbeat to reflective and quiet, and a tone that spans human emotion from pure joy to sorrowful, from lighthearted to respectful. Variation speak to both the heart and mind, and addresses those who prefer the familiar, as well as others who learn through variety, images, metaphors, and stories.

Passionate Worshipping communities enliven aesthetic sensibilities to the beauty of God, giving worshipers multifaceted pathways to the truth of Christ. Worship is approachable, accessible, and comprehensible to the people that passionate worshipping communities seek to serve.

In Passionate Worshipping communities, people don’t merely show up and sit passively in their pews—they are engaged, genuinely connected, personally addresses, and deeply challenged. The message touches them, the music moves them, and the worship of God changes them.

Churches that exhibit passion for worship prepare their services not only with long-term spiritually-mature members in mind, but also with attentiveness to visitors, young people, those with little worship experience, and those who have barriers to participating. By allowing people the full ability to worship and see others like them leading in worship, it makes it easier for them to connect with worship. There is an open quality to every element of the service, so that people can participate, become involved, and connect more deeply.

Worship is the most like point of first contact that they unchurched have with a congregation. And in some churches, many visitors don’t find genuine warmth, a premium on excellence, or a message presented in a way that

In the mind-set of expectancy, as opposed to one of searching for every human weakness, worshipers discover that God wants a relationship with them and seeks to say something through the time together. People are not at worship to observe and evaluate but to receive what God offers and offer their best in response. “What is God saying to me through the words of Scripture, even if they are read imperfectly? What is the Holy Spirit saying to me through the sermon, even if the illustrations are weak? How is the music unifying the message through the power of music, even if the organist drags the pace a little?”

—

Passionate Worship is not restricted to any particular style. It can be highly formal, with robes, acolytes, stained glass, organ music, orchestral accompaniment, and hardwood pews with hymnals. Or Passionate Worship can take place in an auditorium, gym, or store front, with casually dressed leaders, images in the screen, folding chairs, and the supporting beat of a praise team.

Authentic, engaging, life-changing worship deserves from the experience of God’s presence, the desire of worshiper for God’s Word, the chased heart people deliberately seek when they encounter Christ in the presence of other Christians. Worship leaves people challenged, sustained, and led by the Spirit of God. And it changes how they view themselves and their neighbors. **An hour of Passionate Worship changes all the other hours of the week.**

The regular practice of Passionate Worship gives people an interpretive lens through which to view the world. It helps them see events, relationships, and issues through God’s eye. Among competing interpretive contexts in which people are immersed (fierce individualism, consumerism, nationalism, partisanship, negativism, etc.) worship helps people perceive themselves, their world, their relationships, and their responsibilities in ways that include God’s revelation in Christ. When a congregation loses touch with the purpose of worship, people come and go without received God.

Worship changes people and changes the way they experience their whole lives. Churches aspiring to have Passionate Worship work hard to deepen spiritual life and improve the quality of worship to help connect people to God.

—

When people passionately care about worship and expect to encounter God in these moments together, it changes how they behave in preparation for worship. **Churches cannot expect visitors and members to take worship seriously if they do not act as if it is important for them.** We must ask, what can we do to improve our worship?

“When the imitation of Christ does not mean to live a life like Christ, but to live your life as authentically as Christ lived his, then there are many ways and forms in which a [person] can be a Christian,” (Henri Nouwen, from *The Wounded Healer*, (Doubleday, 1972).

Maybe it looks like safe and easily supportable new initiatives, such as a Parent’s Night Out program for young families or Brown Bag Bible Studies in workplace cafeterias. Maybe it looks like more edgy ministries, such as alternative services in strip center malls for the “tattoos and piercings” crowd. Churches can let the Radical Hospitality they see in Christ lead them in creative directions.

Rev. Barron Willer, “We reach out to people who have small children with what we call ‘The First Quarter.’ During the high school football season, we invite parents with children ages 0-4 years old to bring them to church to be cared for while the parents go to the football game. This is a way of saying that they church cares about you and your family...It is a very simple idea that can touch lives with the love of Jesus for some children that might otherwise never come through the doors of the church.”

Churches marked by Radical Hospitality work hard to figure out how to best anticipate other’s need and to make them feel at home in their ministries. **“It’s not as much about what I want and about what makes me comfortable” says one old-time church member.** Churches that practice Radical Hospitality strive without ceasing to exceed expectations to accommodate and include others. They adopt an invitational posture to everything the church does. Members work with a heightened awareness of the person who is not present, the neighbors, friends, and co-workers who have no church-home. With every ministry, they consider how to reach those who do not yet know Christ.

Opening the Doors for Others to Come In

How do people hear about your church most often? Think of all the ways someone in your community might hear or learn about your congregation.

Think of all the groups (Bible studies, support groups, performing groups, service teams, etc.) that are places where new people come into the life of the church. Which groups in your church seem to be the easiest for new people to join?

Can you identify why these groups or events are active, easy entry points?

How do they invite?

How are new people connected?

In what ways do new people in these groups become “regulars”?

What makes someone feel they are “new” anymore?

In what ways could the whole congregation be helped, reminded, and encourages to invite and truly welcome new people?

As individuals?

As classes or groups?

As a congregation?

Extending the Invitation: What Does Your Church Have to Offer Your Community?

Can you list 2-3 groups of people in your community that are waiting to be invited to your congregation? What are they like? What might they need? What could you offer?

(Ex. Single moms Support, community Mom's Bible study with childcare)

Group:	Need:	We could offer:
---------------	--------------	------------------------

How could you make inviting these people a regular part of how your congregation plans and hold events, small groups, classes, and worship?

Do you need ways to train the congregation to do better at inviting and then bringing people into the real life of the church?

What training or tools might help? What could make a difference?

What happens when a new person or family:

Visits worship for the first time:

What could make that a little better:

What could make that a lot better:

Attends a Sunday School class:

What could make that a little better:

What could make that a lot better:

Tries a small-group setting:

What could make that a little better:

What could make that a lot better:

What steps would be involved to do the best and most radical kind of welcoming in each case?

We Cannot Afford Negative Reviews

Ever wondered what the impact of a bad review us? You're almost ready to buy. But if you're like most people, you search for reviews on that company or

Reflect upon the following statements: Worship changes minds. Worship changes hearts. Worship changes behavior. Where in your worship is there opportunity for this?

Where do you see peaks of excellence? What could changes boost the effectiveness and excellence?

What is Passionate Worship

Why use passionate to describe the practices of vibrant, fruitful, growing churches? Without passion, worship becomes dry, routine, boring, and predictable, keeping the form while lacking the spirit. Insufficient planning by leaders, apathy of worshipers, poor quality music, and unkempt facilities contribute to an experience that people approach with a sense of obligation rather than joy.

In spiritually passionate community, there is a palpable air of expectancy as people gather for worship. Musicians, ushers, greeters, and other hosts arrive early. With care and eagerness they prepare together and encourage one another. They genuinely delight in one another's presence, and they give attention to the smallest of details to make the worship serve go well for worshipers.

The gathering congregation, even when it includes many first-time visitors, never feels like a crowd of strangers. There's a unifying anticipation, a gracious and welcoming texture to the way people speak, act, and prepare. Clearly the pastor, music leaders, and worshipers expect something important to take place—and they are eager to be a part of it.

Many times we unconsciously enter worship in the evaluative posture of someone preparing for a movie critique. We rate the sermon, the time for children, the prayers, and the music according to some internal scale. "How was the service? Well, the sermon was too long, the piano was too loud, the children too noisy, and the room too cold," Our attention turns to the imperfections, mispronunciations, missed cues, discordant sounds, weakness of the leaders and flaws of fellow worshipers.

Many things can get in the way of worship. Sometimes the service feels like a performance—inauthentic, even self-indulgent, as pastors or music leaders push themselves to the center of attention. Younger generation and newer Christians find some services incomprehensible because the forms of music, language, and liturgy are so restrained or foreign. When we don't connect authentically or when we don't understand worship it inhibits our ability to participate fully.

Holy Spirit, experience grace, and offer and receive forgiveness. God touches worshipers through music, story, prayer, Communion, and they experience belonging, support and connection. Worship that touches the heart assures us that what we know with our heads is also confirmed and strengthened by what we know with our hearts. **Worship opens hearts.**

And finally, the pastor seeks to engage people with a practical challenge to do something in their family, community, and world because of their faith in Christ. Worship equips and encourages people and calls them to change the paths as they grow in Christ-likeness. **Worship changes behavior.**

Worship: Not Just in the Sanctuary

What sustains your devotional life throughout the week?

How do you prepare for worship? What are the resources, practices, and perhaps people who help you feel ready for worship?

What would happen this week if you, as actively as you can, prepare intentionally for worship? What would that involve?

How can we, as a congregation, encourage personal worship (prayer, devotional reading, Bible study) in our community?

Expectation and Anticipation

Psalm 84:2 says, *“My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.”*

When did you last feel you could hardly wait for worship?

What inspired that longing and eagerness to be in worship?

How do we create expectation and anticipation for worship each week?

Worship Flow

List the parts of the worship service at church in order:

product. You see a few bad reviews, and mostly good reviews, but suddenly you're second guessing a purchase.

People are eager to vent about negative experiences with others—they're just waiting for the opportunity to do so. Negative customer service is often the root of a negative review. Unfortunately, it only takes one major slip-up or bad service experience, and the vast majority (95%) of customers share their bad experience with others.

Research done by Moz, a marketing research company, found that a company risks losing:

22% of potential customers when **a single negative review** of your product, service or company is found;

59% of potential customers with **3 negative reviews**;

70% of potential customers with **4 negative reviews**.

“And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? “Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.” (James 3:6,9-12)

Even though you're not going to make everyone happy all the time, churches cannot afford to ignore bad reviews. Getting negative feedback can feel like a personal attack. After all, you've put in countless hours and endless energy into it, so when someone criticizes your hard work it's only natural to feel upset. Approaching negative feedback as an opportunity to learn rather than just an anxiety-inducer, makes all the difference. This way of thinking allows us to take criticism and genuinely desire more feedback in the future for further growth.

It may take as many as 5-7 positive comments to undo 1 negative comment in someone's mind. Thus, we need to focus our attention on creating conversations, inside and outside of church, on what is right, good, healthy, fruitful and life-giving.

A woman was going through a rough time in her personal and professional life, and in her search for connections, hope, and direction, she began to visit a few churches. After her first two worship services to which she came to alone, sat alone, and left alone without anyone greeting her. Her prayer for her next visit was simply, “I only pray that someone speaks to me today.” Could that really happen to someone visiting our congregation?

How many of us have had a similar experience? Have you ever arrived at a church, entered the hallways, and despite you obvious “lostness” and active searching for signs and directions, passed by multiple people without anyone nodding at you or offering to help you find your way? And we've all experienced the ushers or greeters who offer perfunctory handshakes without

looking us in the eye, who hand us a bulletin and push us along without any personal engagement or warmth. We can always do better.

Aspiring to Radical Hospitality

Churches aspiring to Radical Hospitality must regularly ask:

- How are we doing at inviting guests and teaching people to invite others?
- How are we doing at genuinely welcoming people?
- How are we doing at helping people find their way into our congregation?
- What are we doing to help people who feel unfamiliar with us to feel at home?
- How can we offer the Radical Hospitality we see in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ?
- How are we doing as a congregation, as a Sunday School class, in our worship services, mission projects, youth programs...?
- How can we do better?

Radical Hospitality begins with a single heart, a growing openness, a prayerful desire for the highest good of a stranger. It begins when one person treats another respectfully and loves the stranger enough to overcome the internal hesitation to invite that person into the life of the Christ's church.

Ushers Lead the Way: Churches that practice Radical Hospitality **don't merely have ushers and greeters**—they train them, teach them, prepare them, and make their service a vital ministry. Their ushers and greeters don't merely point—they escort. They don't merely pass out bulletins—they make people feel at ease. They take note of names and introduce visitors to the pastor and to others. They constantly **seek to understand the perspectives of the newcomers** and to see church practices and facilities **from a visitor's point of view so they can anticipate those needs.**

Welcoming Children: *“When we had our carpet replaced in the sanctuary of our church, we decided to leave out the last pew on one side and replace it with a short pew and several rocking chairs. Now we are visually inviting and welcoming people with small children to be at home here, not just with our words. It is usually the first thing that people notice when they come for the first time and it is an obvious statement that children are welcome here.”* Rev. Dorothy Johns

Visitor Friendly: Churches characterized by Radical Hospitality don't just communicate with their own members in mind. They intentionally communicate to the public through mailing, brochures, posters, banners, newspapers, websites, signs and social media. All of their communication is “visitor friendly,” free of insider language and “churchy” talk. They communicate what the church represents and communicates that all are invited and welcomed.

Learning from Other Churches: Constantly learning from other churches how to do better with hospitality, visitor follow-up, and newcomer integration. Pastors and lay leaders read and learn how to be more inviting, and they discuss it and put plans into action.

“Let me people go, so they may worship me.” (Ex 8:1) Worship was the reason given repeatedly for why God liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Worship defines God's people.

In worship, people practice the highest command Jesus has taught us: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love you neighbor as yourself.”* (Luke 10:27) **Worship bends hearts toward God as it stretches hands outward toward others.**

Jesus tell the story of the tax collector genuinely and humble crying to God in the temple and says, *“I tell you, this man went down to his home justified”* (Luke 18:14). Just as the tax collector saw his life changed, through worship God pardons sins, restores relationships, and God changes lives. Worship is the most likely setting for people to experience the renewed relationship with God that Christians call “justification,” when a person realizes he or she is pardoned, forgiven, loves and accepted by God. **People practice and experience the resurrection new life in worship; every Sunday is a little Easter.**

Worship is the church's optimum environment for conversion (the return to relationship with God) whether quick, dramatic, and memorable, or marked by gradual shaping and nuanced over time. **God expects lives to change in worship.** Attendees move from being spectators to participators; they move from one person in a crowd to active disciples of Jesus in the body of Christ.

The Psalmist describes an eagerness for relationship with God in worship, *“My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord, my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God...For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere”* (Ps 84:2,10). As we come to know the Lord and spend more time in worship, our desire for experiencing God in worship increases and we miss it when we are away. Through the relationship to God cultivated in worship, the psalmist goes *“from strength to strength”* (Ps 84:7), receiving encouragement and daily renewal that characterizes life in God.

Worship also includes those personal devotional practices done apart from the physical presence of others: including private prayer, meditation, fasting, reading, spiritual disciplines. Both community worship and personal devotions depend upon each other. They complement and reinforce one another, adding richness to the experience of each.

—

One pastor described his intention for leading worship by saying that in each service, he tries to engage the intellect and the heart of the worshippers. Through engaging the intellect, worshippers learn something about the content of their faith. They learn about God, Jesus, and the stories of Scripture, the practice of the faith, and the world around them. We are challenged not just to feel our faith but to change our worldview to that of Christ's. **Worship changes minds.**

Through engaging the heart, God reaches the interior life of the worshippers. The intimacy of worship helps them know mercy, grow in hope, sense the

Passionate Worship

Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches offer Passionate Worship that connects people to God and to one another. People gather consciously as the body of Christ with eagerness and expectancy as they encounter the Living God. They encounter Christ through singing, prayer, Scripture, preaching, offering and Holy Communion. And they respond by allowing God's Holy Spirit to shape their lives.

People are searching for worship that is authentic, alive, creative, and connects us to the One who created us to worship God and glorify him with all we are. We may not ordinarily use the word passionate for worship, but perhaps we should. We don't attend worship to squeeze God into our lives; we seek to meld our lives into God's. It is a time to think less about ourselves and more about faith, less about our personal agendas and more about God's will. We encounter a fresh reality of Christ so that God's Spirit can reshape our lives and form us into the body of Christ.

When we look at worship through the eyes of faith, we look beyond what people do during worship so that we can see what God is doing. Christ actively seeks relationship with us through worship. **God uses worship to transform lives, heal wounded souls, renew hope, shape decisions, provoke change, inspire compassion, and bind people to one another.** Through Passionate Worship, God draws people to Christ, deepens understanding and relationship with Christ, and over time transforms lives as disciples grow in the image of Christ.

What Does the Bible Say?

"How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, even faints for the courts of the Lord." (Ps 84:1-2)

From the earliest accounts of faith, people gathered to pray, sing, listen for God's Word, and share in the common meal. Synagogue means to "bring together" and the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, means "called out of the world" and refers to **calling people from their ordinary life to gather in sacred time and space together.**

Worship breathes life into the community of Christ's followers, forms identity, and provides a place of common learning about faith and listening to God. People express love for God, serve God, and experience God's gracious love. **Worship forms communities, shapes souls, corrects self-interest, and binds people to each other and to God.**

God reaches out to us through worship services, whether they follow an ancient, traditional, or contemporary style of worship. God speaks to us in beautiful sanctuaries, simple buildings, storefront gatherings, hospital chapel, outdoors under the open sky, or in homes. In every imaginable setting, people seek God through worship, allow God's Word to shape them, and offer their response of faith.

Feedback and Criticism: Evaluate their work honestly and solicit feedback from newcomers about what helps in offering the genuine welcome of Christ.

Don't Give Up: They focus on how to communicate better with greater numbers of people. They constantly develop lists of visitors, active and inactive members, Christmas and Easter attendees, day school families, scout families, and infrequent guests in order to invite them to special services, new ministries, or service projects. They don't give up on anyone.

Not Afraid to Fail: They don't merely expect current classes and choirs and ministries to invite and welcome people. They also launch new ministries and classes aimed at including those who are new. They are not afraid to try and to fail.

Relationships Matter: They do not look only at the numbers, corralling people through perfunctory processes to get them to join. Instead they genuinely engage people, listen to them, and help them to feel accepted, respected, connected, needed, involved, and loved. They focus on the ultimate goal of helping newcomers grow into disciples and into the Body of Christ's people. Building relationships is worth more than a large number of unengaged people coming through the door.

What's All the Buzz About? The willingness to risk something new breathes a buzz and stir in the community that strengthens participation in all other ministries of the church. Word-of-mouth is still the most important forms of human communication, and when people talk about congregations as places that make people feel welcome and loved, then the church thrives. In ways no one understands, when the contemporary service begins to welcome new people in a manner that exceeds expectations, often the traditional Sunday School class for older members grows as well.

What are 3-5 reasonable changes or actions that your church could make with the help of the congregation?

1. _____ 4. _____
2. _____ 5. _____
3. _____

What is the one activity, which, if done with excellence and consistency, would have the biggest impact on becoming a congregation that shows Radical Hospitality?

Now dream above the reasonable and expected. Make a list of big, life-changing, seriously scary and bold ideas:

How could your church bring new people into the church—either into the community or welcomed into the building—by meeting just one of these needs?

The refreshing intimacy and companionship of fellow Christian learning together engrafts us into the body of Christ and becomes a means of grace by which God awakens a heightened desire to love our neighbors. Interior spiritual growth and renewal changes outward behaviors as following Christ becomes a way of life.

No matter how dedicated our efforts, the transformation of human hearts and minds is God's work through the power of the Holy Spirit. And intentionally learning in community is one way of placing ourselves in the hands of God so that God can sculpt our souls and recreate us in the image of Christ.

Outside the Classroom

Growing in faith takes place not just in classrooms but almost everywhere that we are, from choir to clean-up crews, we encounter faith.

List at least 6 places that you can think of where learning, prayer, and other faith development can happen:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Learning doesn't just happen through speakers and teachers. What are some ordinary, non-teaching activities that your church does? How might these become infused with growing in faith and community?

What are ways that you personally hear about groups or classes? Think of a few ways your church can use these settings or ways of communication to get the word out.

Think about people in your community who you would like to invite and welcome into the church. These can be type of people or individuals. What kind of needs might each of these groups or individuals have that could be met in a group?

GROUP:

NEED:

Risk Taking Mission and Service

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Risk-Taking Mission and Service includes the projects, the efforts, and work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever be part of the community of faith.

Keeping the church alive and fulfilling its purpose requires the active and regular service of members and visitors. The volunteer impulse, animated by the spirit of God in Christ, causes people to give time generously to help with ushering or parking, sing in the choir, bound members, and teach Sunday school. Such basic and ordinary service is the lifeblood that gives the congregation strength. The phrase *"to equip the saints for the work of ministry"* (Eph 4:12) means that churches invite, encourage, prepare and cultivate such ordinary service so the ministry of Christ thrives.

The word mission turns church service outward. Mission reminds congregations that Christ's compassion, grace, mercy, and love extend to the entire world, that these fruits are cultivated not only within the walls of the church or among the people of the body of Christ who are regularly seen and already known. Mission spreads the faith by exemplifying the compassion, mercy, and justice of Christ in the world.

Mission initiatives change churches. Even when a small percentage of the membership immerse themselves in significant mission and service, the texture of church life changes. The interweaving of lives across culture, class, color and age boundaries genuinely enriches the congregation and makes Scripture stories come alive in real experience.

What Does the Bible Say?

Nothing is more central to faith identity and to the church's mission than transforming the lives and conditions of people by offering oneself in God's name. Nearly every page of Scripture shows people serving God by serving others. (*"Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are member of my family, you did it to me."* Matthew 25:40) The earliest written Scriptures record a consistent emphasis on justice, compassion, respect, and love for the neighbor. The books of law not only restrain violence, fraud theft and harm but call us to *"love our neighbor as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18)

Scripture inextricably links love of God to love of neighbor and calls people to charity, justice, and mercy. The Psalms reveal the nature and intent of God in passages replete with reminders that God is the *"lover of justice"* (Psalm 99:4); that God *"loves righteousness and justice"* (Psalm 33:5); that the people of God are *"to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed"* (Psalm 10:18); and to *"give justice to the weak and the orphan"* (Psalm 82:3). The theme continues in the writings of the prophets, *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness; and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Micah 6:8)

Jesus echoes the words of the prophets to describe his purpose: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the*

poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). The stories, teachings, and parables of Jesus consistently point towards God's love for the poor, the sick, the outcast, and those most vulnerable to the oppressions of society. "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant ... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." (Matthew 20:26-28)

Against the resistance of the religious elite and contrary to the advice of his disciples, Jesus lifts up the bent-over woman on the Sabbath, touches the unclean with healing power, releases the paralyzed from his bed, eats with tax collectors in their homes, and risks the violence of the mob to intervene for the woman caught in adultery. In teaching and action, Jesus shows that God's way includes costly demonstrations of unexpected love to the least likely. The stories of the good Samaritan, the father risking humiliation to welcome back his prodigal son, and the rich person neglecting Lazarus at his own doorstep all consistently show who Jesus is; and through Jesus, we see what God intends for us.

Jesus tells that in every act of compassion, people touch Christ. "I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:35-37). The disciples can't imagine what he is truly talking about, until Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). And Jesus demonstrated the posture he asks of his followers by taking the form of a servant. Directly addressing servanthood, Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant ... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Matt 20:26-28).

And Christ invites his disciples to follow him into this kind of love. "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36). "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

The life service flows naturally and inescapably from the teachings of Jesus Christ, and no congregation or disciple can avoid the direct gift and demand of God's call to love and serve others. A church without service dies like a tree with neither roots nor fruit, without nourishment or purpose. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

Compassionate service marked the early church as disciples were admonished to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22). They prayed for the sick, visited the imprisoned, and marshaled their resources to provide for the needs of the poor. Paul recognized how the core practice of love defined the Christian life, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And If I have

support new opportunities for learning in community to help assimilate people into the life of the church.

Becoming Known for Growth in Faith: Pastors, staff and especially members not only publicly support and leader Bible studies and classes, they highlight the importance of continuing faith in their conversations and in their own lives. The notion of **growing in faith by learning in community becomes widely known, highly valued, and broadly practiced.** Newcomers are welcomed to take the next step toward becoming part of a small-group study, class, or work team.

Taking It to the Street: Congregations also explore new ways of forming learning communities using technologies. They initiate blogs, online chats, video lessons, podcasts, and they experiment with online Bible studies for particular niches of people or topics. Churches also make sermons, special lessons, and presentations downloadable do that members, friends, and guests can listen on their own times while driving, running, working out, on vacation, or to share with a friend.

Hospitality: Each group in the church can find a reader sense of purpose when they see themselves as "not just" a work group, or "not just" a Bible study, or "not just" a choir. Each group within the church has the ability to help form faith if they understand their significance in creating welcome and creating healthy faith-filled community life. They can see that their groups and actives are covered in prayer, characterized by mutual support and care, and are reflections of the faith.

Not Afraid to Try: These churches are not afraid of failure and willingly initiate new ministries of learning in community, knowing that some will take too and last and others will only continue a few months and then fade away. They realize that God is able to change lives by working through our imperfect attempts to start new classes or groups, even when they only last a short time. In starting new groups, they are not afraid to start with low numbers, trusting that God will make good use of the time to help those who attend.

Evaluate Your Programs: Evaluation is an important part of discernment. New is not always better. And a class that has met forever, is not always meeting the needs of the congregation. Leaders consider the full life cycle of members and look for ways the church forms faith at every stage. They look for gaps and unmet needs to round out their ministries. For example, they inventory the complete annual program of ministry for children: Sunday school, kids choir, VBS, Christmas programs, special events, and all the other ways they touch children's lives during the year. They ask themselves, if their ministry is sufficient, full, and effective and how they can do better.

Goal is Maturity in Christ

Maturity in Christ is always about content AND relationship. Ideas change people, and people change people. And God uses both together to work on our behalf and to shape our lives in the image of Christ. Transformation comes through learning in community.

successfully, maintained strong attendance that continued to grow, developed an outward focus, and continues to serve large numbers of young adults today.

What did the pastors, staff and volunteers learn through these experiences? First, keep trying. Don't give up. Try different times, places, leaders, formats, but keep trying. Second, the secret is relationships, relationships, relationships. Finally, no small groups survive for long without the support, leadership, and the help of the laity and pastors.

Reaching the Community

How do new classes or groups get started in your congregation?

What new class or group has succeeded and grown? What are some of the factors or reasons for success? (setting, time, place, leadership, way they invite others)

What new effort didn't succeed as well? What are some factors or reasons for failure? How could you try again?

Have you been involved in starting a new group or class? Have you participated in a new group?

What Can We Do?

Time: Churches that practice Intentional Lifelong Faith Development not only offer high quality adult Sunday school classes for learning and fellowship, they also support weekday evening studies, home groups, and a host of opportunities for faith studies at varying times and places to make them as accessible and convenient as possible. They focus on schedules and interests of the people they seek to serve, even if it doesn't fit the usual weekly church schedule.

Length: They offer study and learning groups that involve varying levels of commitment and experience, with some studies requiring no preparation at all and others requiring in-depth reading. They offer short-term classes and long-term studies as well as ongoing opportunities that people can attend at any time. They seek to have so many people participating in small-group ministries that the total participants in all classes, choirs, and groups exceeds 50% of their weekly worship attendance.

New Groups: They realize the power of social topics and interests to attract unchurched people, and they advertise and invite people beyond the walls of their own church. Such churches realize that the most accessible small groups to new people are new groups, and so they constantly try to initiate, invite, and

prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor 13:1-2).

Love, incarnate in ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, bears witness to the living Christ.

Life-Changing Experience Mission and service can change the server as much as the person served.

-Think about a time when an act of service you performed changed your life. What was the experience like?

-Why do you think it made such an impact on you? In what ways might it have been outside your own comfort zone?

-When have you been helped in some needed but unexpected way – either through service or through a friend or family member? How did it feel? Did it change you?

Mission and Service in the Congregation

How is mission and service a part of faith development in your congregation?

Where do you see children, teens, and adults learning about and being inspired to respond to service opportunities?

Think about your own congregation and the way information is shared and ideas are developed. Where do you most often hear about mission and service projects, their stories, and results? How are these woven into the story of the church?

Looking over the past year, are the mission activities repeat projects? How many new ideas arise and how have they been launched? How are new project ideas discussed and approved?

What individuals or committees have to approve a new idea? What are the steps?

How are calls to mission, service and mission project work or reports about mission incorporated into: Worship, small groups, Children's programs, Youth meetings, Task teams (choirs, committees, etc.)?

Think about the meaning of the verse, “*What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8) What does it mean to you personally? How do you cultivate these acts of service in your own life and in the life of your church?

What is the Risk-Taking Mission and Service?

So if mission and service appropriately describe the volunteer impulses and outward reach that characterize so many of our congregations, why qualify them with the adjective risk-taking? **Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations push beyond ordinary service and everyday missions to offer extraordinary opportunities for life-changing engagement with people.**

Risk-taking steps into greater uncertainty, a higher possibility of discomfort, resistance, or sacrifice. Risk-Taking Mission and Service takes people into ministries that push them out of their comfort zone, stretching them beyond the circle of relationships and practices that routinely define their faith commitments. God uses such ministries to expose church members to people, situations, and needs that they would never ordinarily encounter and that reveal to them spiritual qualities and practical talents that, apart from their deliberate intention of serving Christ, they would never discover. The most poignant of Jesus’ teachings and practices were costly demonstrations of unexpected love that transformed lives, families, communities, and the world.

Jesus says, “*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same*” (Luke 6:32-33). People naturally love those who love them. Anyone with the good taste and good sense to treat you well is the kind of person you find easy to treat well in return! People instinctually love their families and friends, those who think and live like they do, those with whom they naturally intermingle and congregate. Even unbelievers and those who never seek Christ do the same. The social cohesion of countless clubs, professional organizations, neighborhood cliques, trade unions, and country clubs prove the point.

The stretch of Christian discipleship is to love those for whom it is not automatic, easy, common, or accepted. To love those who do not think like us or live like us, and to express respect, compassion, and mercy to those we do not know and who may never be able to repay us – this is the love Christ pulls out of us. Jesus stepped across oppressive social boundaries, intermingled with those who suffered crippling infirmities and social stigma, and offered hope to those at their point of gravest despair. He loved the least lovable and the most vulnerable, and he offered the same unmerited grace to the greatest sinner as to the finest saint. The down-and-out see in Christ as much love for them as the up-and-coming.

Risk-Taking Mission and Service involved work that stretches people, causing them to do something for the good of others that they would never have considered doing if it were not their relationship with Christ and their desire to serve him. Of course, church members love and serve those close at

The pastor of a small country church wrestled with how to best provide opportunities for Bible study and fellowship for members who have busy family schedules and live miles from the church. Attempts to host weekday evening studies at the church brought together the same few long-time members who always attended faithfully. The pastor supported these efforts but particularly wanted to reach some of the young families who didn’t participate as fully in such ministries.

One day she shared her dilemma and desire with one of the younger families and casually asked whether the family would consider hosting an hour-and-a-half study every other week in their home if she could get a few families to attend. The family enthusiastically agreed, and a few weeks later they had their first home Bible study on a Tuesday night in the host’s living room with three other families present.

This worked so well that the pastor felt emboldened to ask another family on the other side of the county for the same favor of hosting a few others for Bible study. They graciously agreed. And the pastor now leads two groups on alternate Tuesday evenings that reach about seven couples and families. Delight and joy energizes the conversations, and the families look forward with eagerness to their times together.

The pastor learned several lessons from her experience. First, people desire fellowship and to learn about the faith, but they have trouble fitting it into their lives. The more the church can do to accommodate, the better. Second, if congregations keep the end in mind (offering quality learning in community), their leaders may have to break out of the usual pattern and expectations of place, frequency, and curriculum to reach people.

A larger church tried unsuccessfully several times to launch a new Sunday school class. Church leaders were stumped on how to get good quality teaching and fellowship going for young adults. As they prepared for their next attempt, a married couple in their mid-50s stepped forward to offer their help. These “empty-nesters” seemed unlikely candidates for teaching the class, but they had felt God had nudged them toward this ministry. They genuinely loved young adults, and they promised to give the class their best time and energy.

The couple set to work contacting young adults and couples to talk about their hopes for the class. They checked websites, called other churches, and visited with their leaders of successful programs for young adults to get more ideas. Fifty to sixty people showed up for the first gathering and the leaders described the purpose of the class, the topics they would begin with, and some other activities and ministries they might do together.

From the beginning, the class began to demonstrate extraordinary care for one another. They young adults adopted an invitational stance, always searching to bring others in. Within a few months, they were looking for service projects that could use the talents and passions of the members. The class launched

And learning in community provides accountability for our faith journeys. We learn in community because others keep us faithful to the task of growth in Christ. That's why churches offer Sunday school classes and Bible studies and small-group ministries. The practices of faith are too demanding without support from others.

Other Christians help us: pray, read Scripture, exercise love and forgiveness, and explore and respond to the will of God in our lives.

Why add "intentional" to describe the practice for churches that are vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations? **Intentional refers to deliberate effort, purposeful action toward an end, and high prioritization.** It highlights the significance of faith development and contrasts those congregations that take it seriously with those that offer it haphazardly and inconsistently, without new initiative, plan or purpose.

Intentional Lifelong Faith Development describes the practice of churches that view the ministries of Christian education and formation, small-group work, and Bible study as absolutely critical to their mission and that consistently offer opportunities for people of all ages, and interests, and faith experiences to learn in community together. They consciously and deliberately covert spectrum, fostering faith development outside worship doing the course of the year for children, youth, young adults, singles, couples, middle-aged adults, and older adults. They support and maintain existing Sunday school classes, studies, choirs, and women's and men's organizations, but they also continually fill the gaps with short-term, long-term, and topical small-group ministries and start new classes especially designed for visitors and new members.

Even small churches can offer robust ministries of learning, growing and maturing in faith by creating new opportunities for long-term members to learn in community. It only takes "two or three gathered in [Jesus'] name: to experience the presence of Christ and grow together in faith.

And when church leaders take their own spiritual growth seriously and immerse themselves in the study of Scripture, in prayer, and in fellowship, they understand the purpose of the church and the point of ministry differently. While church leaders can apply their knowledge of business practices to enhance the church's effectiveness, they cannot lose sight of the lessons taught by Christ through his life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection. **Leaders must have a grounding in the faith in order to lead as faith-filled leaders.**

How can church members and leaders make good faith-filled decisions for the congregation without proper grounding in the faith? Whether the church should build a new youth center, fund an overseas mission trip, or support a local soup kitchen is a decision not reducible to mere cost-benefit analysis. These decisions require hearts of faith that explore the will of God as well as minds that review financial reports.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations are led by lay people and pastors who intentionally work to grow in the grace of Jesus Christ and the knowledge and love of God and who understand the need for intimate Christian fellowship and intentional instruction in the faith.

hand in their congregations and neighborhoods, even if these are the fruitful of natural inclinations as well as commitment to Christ. But it is important to look beyond one's own close social and community circles and consider how Christ desires to use a person's gifts and talents and capabilities to enhance the well-being of others beyond their inner circle.

"While serving meals and hospitality at the local Salvation Army kitchen, Martha Caldwell, a member of our First UMC – and 'Show-ers of Blessings' was born. Now, once a week persons are transported to the church, given fresh coffee, new soap and shampoo, soft towels, and a place to do that we too often take for granted – keep clean. The ministry, staffed and supplied by volunteers, is growing. Mothers bring their children and leave with thanksgiving on their lips, and men walk a little taller. We hope to expand the ministry to offer a new set of clothes after the showers. We are learning more about the need to which we've been invisible too long and about the ability to facilitate dignity."

What have we done in the last six months to make a positive difference in the lives of others that we would not have done if it were not for our relationship to Christ? Reflecting on this question takes us to another level in our understanding of Christian discipleship, moves us beyond our comfort zone, and presses us to follow Christ into more adventurous encounters with people.

"A quiet act of compassion can sometimes testify more powerfully to God's presence than a well-wrought sermon. Each day in our communities, persons reach out to others in trust and care." -from *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. (Jossey-Bass 1977)

As we practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service, God's Spirit:

- changes us
- changes others
- changes our churches

Risk-taking also draws our attention to the truth that many of our most urgent ministries have an uncertain, unpredictable quality. We cannot know whether or not our efforts will make the difference we hope. Much of our hardest work may have little visible impact or may seem to end in utter failure. Sometimes alcoholics we help through rehab return to addictions, children we remove from violent homes run away anyways, homes we build are destroyed by the next flood, disadvantaged youth we support with scholarships drop out after two years, and ex-cons we take a chance on end up back in prison. Like the seeds scattered by Jesus' sower that land on rocky ground, get choked by weeds, or gobbled by birds, many of our finest efforts come to no visible good. But like Jesus' parable promises, as we remain faithful to the task, a harvest comes forth in miraculous ways. Christ's ministry requires our willingness to risk failure.

Stories abound of individuals responding to the call to address human need through Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Thousands of church people follow the common path marked by our forebears and repeated in every generation.

The history of mission and service consists of successive excursions from the same starting point:

- awareness of human need
- perceiving God's call to do something
- feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy
- courageous spirit
- using spiritual gifts and material resources
- overcoming resistance
- opening ourselves to suffering
- making a difference
- discovering meaning and purpose
- inviting others

—

“A small group of four couples from answered the challenge to find a place of service in the community by seeking out a ministry that would be ‘really hard’. The group, calling themselves ‘Helping Hands’, worked with a local Habitat for Humanity unit to identify a family in need of housing but who didn’t qualify under the Habitat for Humanity guidelines. The group, which by then had expanded to about thirty persons from the church, found such a family in need. They were able to raise enough funds to place a home on an available site and equip and furnish it. There were even enough funds left over to begin the process of placing another home nearby for others in the same family. Having developed relationships with numerous local businesses which contributed to the first home, ‘Helping Hands’ has found these businesses more than willing to continue to participate either by donation or at greatly reduced cost. A small church across the street from the home sites say what was occurring and also became involved in the ministry, connecting two churches of differing racial and socio-economic situations. All this arose from a seed planted in a few persons who responded to the call to be in the ministry to others in need.”

—

A pastor of a medium sized congregation noticed that despite her avid support of hands-on, risk-taking mission, many of her most passionate and imaginative proponents of such projects were slipping away from church involvement. She gathered a few church leaders, and they tracked how many new ministry ideas worked their way through the church organization and administration to become accepted church programs.

The usual pattern began with one or two people excited and energized, feeling called to meet a particular need. When they shared their idea with others, they were referred to the Missions Committee, which met three or four times a year. This meant that two months might pass before their idea received consideration. Most of the committee had served for years, had little energy for hands-on projects themselves. When a new idea was presented, they’d discuss it and conclude that they did not have money budgeted for is. Several weeks later, they’d report on their discussion to the Administrative Board, where a

Imagine new families or individuals who come into your congregation with little church background. What are three settings where they could get their basic questions about faith answered?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How do all the opportunities, other than weekend worship services, help members and visitors grow in faith? Try charting from childhood, through teen years, on to adulthood the classes or groups that help an individual grow in faith. Think about Bible study, prayer life, coping/recovery, and service opportunities.

Childhood

Teen Years

Adult

What seems missing? During this week, think of three people you meet and how they might find help growing in their faith life.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What Do We Mean By Intentional Faith Development?

The practice of learning in community gives disciples a network of support, encouragement, and direction as we seek to grow in Christ. As we consciously appropriate the stories of faith with others, we discover that our questions, doubts, temptations, and missteps are not unusual but are part of the journey. We are emboldened to new ways of thinking about God and to new ways of exercising our faith in daily life.

Others help us interpret God’s Word for our lives, offering an antidote to our own desires to merely confirm our current lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors. The fruit of the Spirit that we see in Christ (Gal 5:22-23) cannot be learned apart from a network of relationships, because they give us the training ground to practice and grow these spiritual muscles.

In the intimacy of small groups, we give and receive the care of Christ by praying for one another, supporting one another through periods of grief and difficulty, and celebrating one another’s joys and hopes. **Sunday school classes, Bible studies, choirs and other small groups are really little churches within the bigger church family.** Small groups are the most likely places for us to learn to “*rejoice with those who rejoice*” and “*weep with those who weep*” (Rom 12:15).

The song “Day by Day” from the musical *Godspell* expresses the Christian disciple’s desire to grow in the grace of Christ and to advance daily in the knowledge and love of God. In the musical the cast sings a beautiful prayer that asks God for three things, “To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly day by day.”

When we learn the life of Christ and will of God by studying God’s Word and through experience with other people of faith. By joining a Bible study or class, we place ourselves in the circumstances that are the most advantageous for growth in faith. Bible study is not just about self-improvement but about setting ourselves where God can shape us, intentionally opening ourselves to God’s Word and call. **God uses faith-to-faith relationships to change us.**

“Since we cannot make the journey backward into innocence, help us to go forward into wisdom.” Edward Tyler, *Prayers in Celebration of the Turning Year* (Abingdon, 1978)

Your Personal Story of Faith

Think back to the first places you heard about the Bible, faith, and God’s love for you. Where did this happen? Who did you first learn from?

If you were raised in faith as a child: Who helped you say your first prayers as a child? What effect did this have in your childhood? In what ways did your early experiences, like these, shape your life of faith?

As an adult: What has been the most powerful, life affecting setting for learning about faith? What made it special?

Joining a Faith Community of Learners

What was your first experience in this congregation for learning? Who invited you?

Was it a positive, welcoming experience? Did it affect your decision to be a member of this congregation?

Have the groups that you’ve studied with, learned and enjoyed fellowship with here affected your maturity in faith?

How have you found opportunities to make space for others to have that experience?

similar dynamic took place, with none of the voting members expressing much interest. Four months would go by before projects were finally put to rest, and by that time even those who originally felt inspired had lost interest.

The pastor and church leaders realized that the responses and discussions were taking too long and that the people most energized and supportive of new projects were not decision-makers serving on committees. So they devised a new plan. Some months later, following a hurricane in a neighboring state, two members approached church leaders with the idea of forming a team of volunteers, getting some training, and traveling for a week of clean-up or repair work on homes or churches.

Instead of waiting until the next Missions Committee meeting, the pastor and the two members who had already been inspired by the idea thought together about the most likely people to be interested and gifted for such a project. They personally invited these seven people together for prayer and discussion and also used the church bulletin to invite anyone else interested in the project to attend. The meeting attracted nearly twenty people. The two who had raised the original idea had done their homework before the meeting. They had contacted their denominational office on volunteer ministries to get information on how to coordinate with other congregations and how to work in cooperation with local churches in the affected area. Since the gathering included those eager to do something, they found themselves confirmed and strengthened, encouraged by others who also felt called to this work. Instead they asked for permission to gather support from special offerings, Sunday school classes, and individuals eager to help.

By the time they presented a report to the Missions Committee and Administrative Board, they had the project planned and had named a team of twelve volunteers for the project who would be supported by numerous auxiliary volunteers assisting at home with food, materials, and communication. They presented their budget, fully supported by gifts and pledges outside the existing church budget. The Missions Committee gladly supported their efforts, and the Board offered its blessing and approval. Thus began a new era in hands-on mission in the church, and a new style of initiating ministry.

Risk-Taking Mission and Service is Described as Helping Those Who May Never Be a Part of Your Congregation

How does your congregation offer its ministry of compassion, mercy, and justice to the community?

List some ministries in your church that make the greatest impact in the community for people who may never be a part of your congregation.

Face-to-Face

How does your congregation engage face-to-face in service in your community?

What groups of people can you list who are in your community who, though they may not ever attend or join your church, could be helped?

How does your congregation serve the community around you? Think of as many services to the community that you can recall. How many are face-to-face? Who do they serve?

Ministry:	Who is served:
(Ex. Soup kitchen)	(ex. Homeless, hungry, poor)

How have these ministries changed your congregation and the lives of its members?

Your Message Reaches Out

Are there ministries that your church is known for in the community?

What do non-members in your town know about your church? Is it a message on generosity?

Many congregations work together or with community organizations to serve in the area. How many partnerships in the congregation involved in now?

Can you think of three strong partner possibilities?

What would be easy ways to help?

Name at least three really bold and risky ways to be at work in the community:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Think about how you have experienced God's grace and mercy in your life. How can you join with others to share that grace in your own city?

What Can We Do?

How do churches cultivate the practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service over and above the ordinary and necessary service and mission that characterize most congregations? These churches not only raise money to

Intentional Lifelong Faith Development

What Does the Bible Say?

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Acts 2:42

Learning in community replicates the way Jesus deliberately taught his disciples. His followers grew in their understanding of God and matured in their awareness of God's will for their lives as they listened to Jesus' stories, instructions and lessons while gathering around dinner tables, on hillsides, and at the Temple. **Jesus taught us to learn our faith with others in community.**

Following the formation of the church by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the earliest communities of Christians thrived as "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Notice the dual reference to learning and community.

Paul sprinkles his instructions to the followers of Christ with encouragements to learn, grow, teach, and mature. He presents faith not as something static, a possession, or an all or nothing proposition, but rather as something we grow into and strive toward, a putting away of one's *"former way of life, [the] old self"* (Eph 4:22,24).

The change God works in us through the Spirit results in deeper awareness of God's presence and will and increasing desire to serve God and neighbor. By God's grace, we become new persons. *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!"* (2 Cor 5:17).

The growth in Christ spans a lifetime. Paul writes, *"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own...Straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal"* (Phil 3:12-14). Faith moves, grows, changes, matures.

As we mature in Christ, God cultivates in us the fruit of the Spirit: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Gal 5:22-23). These are the qualities to high the Christian aspires; these are the qualities God's Spirit forms in us as we deepen our relationship with God through Christ.

These interior spiritual qualities are all radically relational, and we only learn them in the presence of others through the practice of love. They are honed in community, and not just by reading books and studying Scripture. They become real in our lives in the love we give and receive from others and in the things we learn and teach with others. *"Where two or three are gathers in my name, I am there among them"* (Matt 18:20). Jesus taught in community so that we would learn to discover his presence in others.

The notion of growing in faith is central to the Christian faith. **Faith is not static but dynamic.** It requires cultivation. Steady maturing, is often full of setbacks, distractions, and missteps. As we grow into the image of God, our old self withers as the new self grows in the likeness of Christ.

Name some of the ways that your congregation reaches out into the world:

Do you see, through relationships or connections, any natural ways to work internationally through raising funds, traveling for hands-on service, or other support?

What international projects do you see happening with churches or groups in your town or state?

List three simple ways today that members of your church could reach out in service to the world.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Look at your list and move out to your comfort zone just a step or two. With help, prayer, and planning, what are three things that you could do?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now what is one, big, scary, life-changing dream? Spend this week removing the boundaries on your thinking. Dream big.

support overseas, international, and community work, they also organize teams, solicit and train volunteers, and send people to work directly in hands-on, face-to-face ministries.

Churches that practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service value:

- contact
- engagement
- long-term relationships

These churches measure the impact of their work in lives changed rather than in money sent or buildings constructed.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lost their life for my sake will save it.” Luke 9:24

They don’t stop at reading about the global church, they globalize their own ministry by forming partnerships with sister churches, supporting international student changes, and sharing common prayers. They give people multiple opportunities to serve in meaningful ways. They go the extra mile and put forth the effort to see that the **people they serve feel respected, confirmed, confident and blessed, not dependent or helpless or indebted.**

Such congregations do mission with people of other cultures and not ministry to them; they don’t view service as a one-way street, as if their members hold all the answers and have all the resources and are helping people who have nothing. They sharpen their sensitivity to the inequalities of power and wealth, and work toward partnerships and mutual ministry in which they learn as much as they teach, receive as much as they offer, and grow in Christ through their sharing of Christ’s compassion. They practice humility and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in their work together and their engagement with those they serve. People come first, and Christ’s love for people binds them to one another and to their task.

Churches shaped by Risk-Taking Mission and Service consciously seek to motivate people to more extraordinary service. They lift examples in preaching and teaching; and they support those on the cutting edge of service with prayer, funding, and appreciation. They don’t let the controversy or resistance within the congregation override their support for ministries of compassion by members called to such work. They do not self-righteously criticize or belittle those members who cannot or will not work on the front lines beyond the comfort zone, but rather they work intentionally to develop ways in which everyone can play a supportive role. The spirit of mission unites them rather than divides them.

They don’t try to make everyone fit in the same mold, and they offer mission and service opportunities with gradations of involvement and differing levels of complexity appropriate to the talents, skills, and interests of a variety of people. They don’t just promote the highly-visible, time-intensive special projects but also provide ways for those who can give a few hours a week to serve. They value the person standing atop the roof on the work-site as highly as the person writing letters to the legislature at home, realizing that each is serving in his or her own way. For the person who steps forward wanting to help, there is always a place.

—
“When a church member suggested to me that our church should open a soup kitchen, we began connecting with other community leaders to get a sense of the local need for this type of ministry. We learned there are a significant number of people living in our community living on \$650/month social security checks. Our congregation worked with area food companies and local churches and received significant donations of food. ‘Soul Food’ ministries was born. Volunteers lined up to participate.

The first Sunday, food was prepared and signs were posted. And no one came. The second and third weeks, still no one came. When the fourth week and no one came again, a young volunteer suggested we take the food out to those in need. They packed up the food, jumped in cars, and came back with stories of complete appreciation and surprise. It was a simple suggestion, but it would change the face of this ministry. The director of the local food pantry provided a list of 30 people in difficult situations. The food became the vehicle by which we would reach out with the love of Jesus Christ to those we otherwise would not have reached. There is renewed hope that we are touching people’s lives for Christ even though it does not look as we first had envisioned.”

—
Churches that place a premium on Risk-Taking Mission and Service not only support the work of their members who volunteer for church-sponsored projects but also encourage, celebrate, and appreciate the service their members perform through community agencies; civic organizations; volunteer involvements with hospitals, clinics, schools, rehab centers, and probation courts. “Prayers, presence, gifts and service” that members do for the purposes of Christ in the community as representatives of the congregation.

“... all we do, our prayer, our work, our suffering is for Jesus. Our life has no other reason or motivation. This is the point many do not understand.”

-Mother Teresa, A Simple Path (Ballantine, 1995)

For churches with a culture of Risk-Taking Mission and Service, helping people in Christ’s name is not merely the prerogative of adults but is a regular part of the formation of children and youth. All youth and children’s ministries – Sunday school, mid-week, Sunday evening, vacation Bible school, retreats, and camps – include teaching and experiential components that stretch compassion outward beyond the walls of the church. Youth ministries practice age-appropriate, hands-on, in-person service at nursing homes and social service centers. They invite medical workers, teachers, and project team members who have returned from international work to present programs for young people to enliven interest in the global family. And they prepare and sponsor age-appropriate, hands on projects for junior high and high school-age students, near home and sometimes far away. Faith mapped in childhood provides pathways that shape lifelong commitments. Churches with too few youth of their own collaborate with other congregations to offer high quality, cross-cultural, hands-on service opportunities that help people, reshape attitudes, and form memories.

Churches that practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service not only offer their own projects and programs organized by their own members, **they also collaborate with other churches, other denominations, civic organizations, social agencies, and non-profit groups.** They weave the church’s social concern into the networks of community service. Small churches collaborate with other churches to form work teams, combining efforts to achieve together what they cannot do alone.

Churches that cultivate Risk-Taking Mission and Service not only **encourage members to volunteer for their projects but also actively invite and welcome newcomers, visitors, and the unchurched to help them in making a difference in the lives of others.**

Service projects become an entry point into the church and into life in Christ. Many people with no religious affiliation and no church home want to make a difference, yearn to improve the conditions of other people, and desire to make the world a better place by relieving suffering, reducing poverty, or struggling against injustice. Often they hold an image of churches as self-serving and self-absorbed, or as hypocritical. Young people in particular are searching for ways to channel their altruistic impulses into hands-on, face-to-face service that changes lives. Service isn’t just for insiders and long-time members; it’s a means God uses to shape faith and bind people into the body of Christ.

Congregations that value Risk-Taking Mission and Service stream-line the process by which ministries are approved, supported, and completed. They replace lengthy and rigid organizational protocols that strangle passion and turn the church inward with a permission-giving organizational environment that is agile, quick to recruit and respond, and empowering of those who passionately want to work. They continue annual and ongoing projects that truly make a difference, and they work to create additional opportunities and channels of service so that the church’s ministry remains fresh, new and relevant to the changing needs of the community and world.

What’s the opposite of risk-taking? Safe. Predictable. Comfortable. Certain. Convenient. Fearful. These words do not describe the ministry of Jesus Christ who said: *“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”* (Luke 9:24).

The practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service reminds us that congregations are not ends in themselves; they are resources God uses to change lives and transform the world.

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:35-36)

Working With Others in the World

When you think of helping others around the globe, where do you personally feel called to help?