

Gospel Questions

The Greater
New Jersey Conference
The United Methodist Church

Gospel Questions

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource has been designed for use with local church leadership, Sunday School classes, small groups and among the ministry teams of the annual conference. Each section weaves together a study of the scriptures and a series of questions designed to get to the deeper questions of our faith. In addition, there are video links throughout this resource that will further your conversation and understanding. It is intended that this study will raise additional questions and call for deeper, on-going reflection and dialogue. To facilitate a broader perspective from across the annual conference, an on-line blog will be available to post questions, reflections, and further the conversation.

It is recommended that within the local church, the church council and/or other leaders do this study together either as a significant part of their regular meetings, or as a special study to which members of the leadership team commit to participate together. Each member of the leadership team is then invited to take this resource and share it with a small group within the congregation to expand the participation and involve more persons in reflecting on some of the questions of what it means to be the church in the 21st century.

The planning team envisions that this resource will be a valuable tool that will prepare a congregation to engage in the mission and ministry study called for in the strategic ministry plan of the annual conference and identify goals and next steps towards becoming a more vibrant and vital congregation for Jesus Christ in the world. The Gospel Questions are not an ends in and of themselves. They are a means of engaging congregations in discovering the foundations upon which we do our ministry that together we can make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Introduction

In popular understanding in our Western culture, a teacher is one who imparts knowledge to others. Yet the most effective teachers are those who ask effective questions that invite the learner to search for deeper understanding. Jesus, seen by many as the greatest teacher of all time, did impart truths, but he also asked questions. According to John Dear, S.J., there are 307 questions found within the four gospels.¹

Questions invite the hearer into a time of discovery and exploration, encouraging the learner to develop new and even deeper questions. The gospel invites the listener to hear the questions of Jesus as if they were being asked anew in our present generation.

In Matthew 5: 43 – 47, Jesus teaches the crowd on the mountainside saying:

*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. **For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?***²

These are not rhetorical questions for listeners then or now. They are questions that invite the listener to a deeper, and sometimes uncomfortable, understanding. These questions shake the foundations of popular culture even among people of faith. They are questions that cannot be answered once and for all, as the challenge of daily living continues to draw us away from the higher vision for living that Jesus proclaimed.

The Greater New Jersey Conference at its 2013 session adopted a Strategic Ministry Plan that lays out a direction for ministry for the coming five years. Within the plan itself, there are some serious questions that are challenging our conference as well as our denomination. The temptation is to jump into quick-fix solutions and prescriptions for reversing downward trends and revitalizing the United Methodist Church in the Greater New Jersey area. But to what end?

Before getting to the “hows” and “whats” of ministry, there is a basic need to understand the “why.” There are some serious questions that are often set aside, questions that get at the heart of what it means to be the church, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and to be a leader for Jesus Christ in the world. Our denomination calls the church into the mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” so there needs to be serious conversation around what transformation looks like, what needs to be transformed, and why should we, as United Methodist Christians, embrace the responsibility of being catalysts for the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our communities and around the world. We need to reflect on who is in our worshipping communities, who is not, and why a congregation may or may not reflect the community at large. There are serious questions to ask about what each congregation and ministry team within the annual conference is called to be doing, especially in light of the conversations that emerge from questions that get at the roots of who we are as a church.

There is no single, simple answer to the questions that challenge us to rethink who we are as the church. It is quite possible that as a congregation engages in reflecting on the questions presented in this resource seeking clarity around important concepts for ministry, even more questions will arise, and perhaps that will bring confusion. But this is exactly the kind of exploration that Jesus encouraged in the gospels. He answered questions with questions and parables that would leave the listener puzzled and confused, as we see in this familiar story:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”³

The original hearers had to wrestle with their understanding of fairness: in the kingdom of heaven, is life supposed to be fair, and what does fair mean? It confronted the hearers with their understanding of faith handed down through from parent to child. It challenged them to rethink what it meant to be the chosen people of God. This was not a story told as an illustration to help listeners understand better. This was a story told to raise questions, challenge preconceived notions, and shake the foundations.

As a congregation, the Gospel Questions are not meant to be used to affirm what we already commonly accept. They are meant to help us go deeper and grow more faithful. You are encouraged to be a part of the questioning as well as the answering, embracing the challenge of setting aside pre-conceived ideas and biases, and emerging with new understandings that act as a springboard to renewed vision and vitality for the church. You are invited to be like one of the original listeners, a partner in the creation of a vital and vibrant church that speaks to new generations, un-served and underserved populations who need to know the love of Jesus more now than ever.

What is a Disciple?



1

1. What is a Disciple?

Jesus' Question: ⁴⁶*“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”*

Luke 6: 46

Following the calling of the twelve disciples, Jesus gathers with them and a great crowd on a level plain where the multitude sought healing and instruction from him. Jesus' words echo those recorded in Matthew's 5th through 7th commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. But unlike the Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel, Luke records a series of blessings and woes. Sandwiched between Jesus' teaching about fruit bearing trees and a parable about a house built on the rock and the house built on the sand, is a question that Jesus poses to his followers: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I tell you?”

Christian discipleship is not a spectator sport nor is it an activity that we choose to participate in when we can fit it into our schedules. Discipleship is an active, life choice grounded in a response to God's love and grace that we have experienced through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *“Discipleship focuses on actively following in the footsteps of Jesus. As Christian disciples, we are not passive spectators but energetic participants in God's activity in the world. Because of what God has done for us, we offer our lives back to God. We order our lives in ways that embody Christ's ministry in our families, workplaces, communities and the world.”*⁴

What does it mean to follow Jesus and to be his disciple? Some are tempted to quickly answer by brushing the question aside with acronyms such as WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) or FROG (Fully Rely on God). They are interesting reminders, but get us no further in helping us answer the root question of what is discipleship. Some will also say, “To follow in the footsteps of Jesus.” This is a good answer, but what do those footsteps look like, and where to they take us? Each answer opens the door to new questions.

Within the written gospel account, Jesus is asked a question in order to test him, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He answers with familiar words, words that have become known as the great commandment:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Matthew 22: 37-38

These words of Jesus are grounded in relationship: relationship with God, and relationship with neighbor. As with all relationships, these are not static and fixed, but growing throughout the changing experiences of life. At the foundation of discipleship is a relationship of love between us and the giver of life and the source of hope. 1 John 3: 18 states: *“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”* But how is that love expressed? Let's examine a story from the gospel of John.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.⁵

Responses and Reflections

The gospel account tells us that it is six days before Passover, and therefore just days before Jesus' impending arrest, trial, and crucifixion. What we also know from the gospel is that only a short time before this, as recorded in the 11th chapter, Jesus had raised Mary's brother from the dead, and then retreated to the region of Ephraim near the wilderness with his disciples. He had now returned to Bethany, and was feasting in the house of his friends. Imagine the gratitude that Mary felt towards Jesus. Imagine how her heart was overjoyed at seeing him once again.

What do we learn from Mary about what it means to love with your whole heart, soul, and mind? How is that expressed here, and what are some of the spiritual disciplines and practices that help us to express that kind of love within the church today?

In the story of Mary of Bethany, we begin to grasp the nature of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ and how that relationship begins to be lived out in our Christian life as disciples. But, as Jesus reminds us, there is another that is like it: *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Again, as we turn to the scriptures, we find in the words and teaching of Jesus guidance as to what it means to be in relationship with our neighbors. Luke 10: 25 – 37, found in the introductory section to this study, is often quoted as Jesus answering the question posed to him, "Who is my neighbor?" But there are others as well. Using the chart below, look at the suggested scriptures, and record how this scripture informs what it means to be a disciple who loves his/her neighbor.

Scripture Reference	What does the scripture tell us?	What does this scripture call us to do?
Matthew 5: 21-23		
Matthew 7: 12		
Mark 10: 17-22		
Luke 10: 25- 37		
Luke 13: 10 - 17		
John 13: 1 - 8		

Volumes have been written to describe what a disciple is and does. We can only touch the surface in some ways. Yet, we can also begin to discern together a common understanding of discipleship. Based on what you have seen in the scriptures thus far, how would you define and/or describe what a disciple is to someone who has little knowledge of the Christian faith?

What does it mean to “make” a disciple?

Jesus’ Question: Simon, son of John, do you love me? (John 21: 17)

Matthew 22: 37-38 is known as the Great Commandment and Matthew 28: 16 – 20 is the Great Commission. It is Jesus’ final charge to those he had originally called as his disciples, sending them out to make new disciples “*of all nations*”, baptizing and teaching them. His charge to these eleven in Galilee is the same charge to the church throughout the ages – go and make disciples. But how did Jesus make disciples? In Mark’s gospel we read:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.⁶

Jesus intentionally invited the fishermen to follow, which meant being in relationship with him and one another. He didn’t wait for them to come to him, he sought them out and pursued them. Secondly, Jesus had a mission for them that related to their life circumstances. These four understood fishing, so Jesus spoke to them in images that resonated with their life’s experience. He envisioned a greater, hopeful and hope-filled future to which he invited them to be participants and co-journeymen. Discipleship was not limited to receiving a body of knowledge from the master teacher; discipleship was embodying the essence of the One who called them.

“How impossible, how utterly absurd it would be for the disciples—these disciples, such men as these!— to try and become the light of the world! No, they are already the light, and the call has made them so.”⁷

We also see that Jesus wasn’t content with his initial success. After all, the first two disciples he called left their nets and followed, so wasn’t that good enough? Mark tells us that he went further. But not everyone responded, as Zebedee and the hired men remained behind while James and John went. We know from the rest of the gospel account that Jesus called others, some responded and some did not. That did not stop him from inviting and calling.

The church today, as the body of Christ, responds to the call to make disciples by inviting persons into relationship with God through Christ. But discipleship doesn’t end with invitation. Jesus’ disciples responded to his call, but then they journeyed with him, learned from his teachings, witnessed his healings, experienced his miracles, and were given responsibility to fulfill parts of the mission themselves. They saw firsthand how some responded, and others did not, how religious leaders were threatened, and how the good news that he proclaimed created discord among the establishment. The original disciples also had plenty of missteps of their own along the way, but through it all, they were in a relationship with Jesus who loved them, forgave them, modeled faithful living and cared for them over and over again.

Christians throughout the generations have had the same experience of being invited into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, learning from his teachings, witnessing amazing and wondrous events through the body of Christ, and given responsibility to fulfill the mission as well. Discipleship isn't a one-time response; it is a life-time journey into a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God. But like all relationships, it requires intentionality and commitment. The result is a maturing relationship, a maturing discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

Peter is called to follow three times within the gospel account. The first is at the Sea of Galilee as we have just examined. The second was in Caesarea Philippi following his declaration, "You are the Christ." The third is at the end of John's gospel account. Three times Jesus asks Peter the same question: Simon, son of John, do you love me? Perhaps Jesus was trying to have three affirmations that mirrored Peter's three denials, but maybe he was challenging Peter to go deeper in his relationship with Jesus. He uses Peter's original name, Simon, pointing back to the original call. But this time, Jesus is challenging him not to follow as he did in the beginning, but to feed the sheep. Jesus has challenged Peter to take on a new, more mature role in discipleship. He is not just a learner, but is now commissioned with the task of doing the work of the shepherd. But as is often the case, having to feed others strengthens the new shepherd as well. Jesus goes on to tell him that it is going to be difficult. Imagine Peter hearing these words of Jesus, and then remembering his words at Caesarea Philippi just before his second call:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"⁸

The gospel points to a pattern of maturing in discipleship that begins with a response to a call to follow, learn, absorb, imitate. But then there comes a point when this call leads to a deeper commitment, where the disciple begins to embrace the deeper aspects of what it means to live as Christ lived, to lose one's life in order to gain a new life in Christ. Disciples are then sent out to be Christ for the world. As with most things in life, this is not always a neat pattern that progresses from one stage to the next, as people enter into this pattern of maturing discipleship from a variety of perspectives. Sometimes, a person will respond to an invitation to serve in the world, to be the hands and feet of Christ for another without understanding what this means or even why they are responding, and from this point begins a cycle of learning and maturing. Some have much when they come to Jesus Christ and their spiritual need is to give away, to lose their life. Others come from a place of need and have little; they will come finding new life.⁹

Becoming a disciple is both an initial response to the call of Christ and a growing relationship that is encouraged and nurtured by the church. Rarely does a person continue on a steady trajectory of spiritual maturity and growth. There are times when the cross seems too heavy to bear, when life presses in and following in the ways of Jesus is difficult. There are times when even the most faithful person drifts off the path of following Jesus or gets lost along the way. Discipleship, therefore, is an invitation to a journey, not an event. Being a disciple is a commitment to be in relationship with Christ, so that we might be Christ for the world, not a member of an organization. Relationships are not static, they are dynamic.

For too long the church has seen its primary role as bringing people into the membership of the congregation, with the assumption that there has been a commitment to follow Jesus. But is that assumption accurate?

Look at this story that is related to us in Matthew’s gospel.

Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.¹⁰

Responses and Reflections

The challenge for the rich young man was that he was ready to fulfill the requirements of his religious tradition, but when asked to make the commitment to dedicate all that he had and all that he was to follow after Jesus that was impossible. Reflect for a moment on this story and what it tells us about the path for maturing disciples. In light of this passage, what do you think Jesus is calling the church to do and be? How does membership differ from discipleship? Why is this distinction important?

The church’s ministry is most effective when it is calling new disciples, guiding and empowering persons to mature in their discipleship journey, and equipping them to be Christ for the world. By so doing, the church embodies the essence of what Jesus did as he lived among us.

Video Link:

Conversation:

- Reflecting on the scripture study and video presentation, how would you together define what it means to be a disciple?
- What does your congregation do to call, guide, empower and equip people for the discipleship journey and why is this so important for the church/your church today?

What does it mean to be the church?

2



2. We are the Body of Christ

Jesus' Question: Who do you say that I am?

Jesus went with his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. While he was there, he asked them a question: “*Who do people say that I am?*” The disciples responded with John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. They missed some of the other things that were said about Jesus. A demon-possessed man from Geresā call him the Son of the Most High God. John the Baptist called him the lamb of God. In John’s gospel, Jesus self-identified with seven “I am” titles: the bread of life, the vine, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, and the way, the truth and the life.¹¹ But some scribes called him a blasphemer, one who eats with (and therefore accepts) sinners, and one who had a spirit of Beelzebul. And in Mark 3:21, we read that his family comes to restrain him because people were saying that he had gone out of his mind!

Jesus’ disciples had seen and heard it all: the good and the bad, the names of adoration and the names of degradation. We might say that their response to Jesus’ question was rather restrained. But Jesus doesn’t leave it there. He asks them directly, “*But who do you say that I am?*” (Mark 8:29). It is an essential question for every disciple, and for the church, the Body of Christ. For how we answer this question determines how we understand what it means to be the body of Christ and how we will live that out as a local congregation. Quite simply, it’s about body image.

Paul, in his Corinthian correspondence, uses the imagery of the body of Christ as a means of identifying the meaning and function of the church.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.¹²

Paul also addresses the church in Ephesus with these words:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.¹³

In his book *Three Simple Questions: Knowing the God of Love, Hope and Purpose*, Bishop Reuben Job begins with the crucial question: Who is God? That is an enormous question, and yet as Christians we know that our best hope for knowing God is to look to the person of Jesus. How we respond to our understanding of Jesus will greatly shape how we think of the church.

Bishop Job states, “. . . *each of us names our God by our actions – by how we choose to live.*”¹⁴ The Christian therefore names God for our world by how we live out the ways of Jesus Christ both individually and corporately as the body of Christ.

*It is in Jesus that we have the clearest picture of who God is, what God does, and how God invites us to live as God’s children . . . In the life of Jesus, we explicitly see this incomprehensible God who is not bound by our limitations or imprisoned in our preconceived ideas. . .*¹⁵

But how did Jesus live? He was a teacher and a healer. He was one who feasted with friends and fasted in the wilderness. He was engaged with his society, yet took time for personal prayer and reflection. He did such amazing feats such as feeding the 5,000, walking on water, and stilling the storm, yet also did things as simple as welcoming children and enjoying dinner with friends.

So when Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am,” how we answer as 21st century followers makes a great deal of difference, for that will determine not only our understanding, but how others understand who Jesus is for our contemporary society.

Jesus had travelled with his disciples out of Galilee into the region of Caesarea Philippi where Peter blurted out boldly, “You are the Christ.” Jesus himself had not identified himself this way for his disciples. This was something that Peter and the other disciples discerned from their experiences with him. They believed Jesus to be the chosen, anointed one of God. But then Jesus goes on to explain what it meant for him to be the messiah, an image echoing the suffering servant imagery of Isaiah: *the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* (Mark 8: 31) Peter and the other disciples weren’t ready to hear this. Maybe they were embracing a popular image for the messiah as a military/political leader. Perhaps the crowds that had gathered to listen to Jesus or be healed by his miraculous touch had solidified an image for them as a travelling rabbi and miracle worker. But Jesus was clear: he was a messiah in the model of Isaiah’s suffering servant, one who would lay down his life for others. Furthermore, those who would number themselves as his followers would be asked to deny themselves and take up their own crosses. That’s what following meant.

Who do you say that Jesus is? If in our understanding Jesus is limited to being a teacher on the mountainside, or a compassionate healer who cared for the widow of Nain (Luke 7: 11-15) or wept at the tomb of Lazarus, that will shape the church’s ministry in one way. If Jesus is limited to one who drives the money changers from the temple and challenges the religious authorities that will form a quite different understanding of church. If Jesus only died on a cross, that too will form a different kind of church.

The goal of being the body of Christ will differ tremendously depending on the image or images of Christ that we hold. For example, if the image of Jesus is of a meek, mild, and gentle care-taker of his inner circle of disciples, it would seem inconsistent to imagine a bold and forward thinking church. If our image of Jesus is that of one who had a particular

concern for the least and the last, the poor, and the marginalized, so will our image of the church and its mission follow suit.

Read the scriptures listed that follow and respond to the questions in the other columns:

Scripture	What does the passage tell us about who Jesus is?	What does the passage tell us about how we are called to be the church?	What is our congregation doing that is an expression of this passage?
Matthew 6: 14 - 19			
Matthew 15: 21- 28			
Matthew 16: 24 - 26			
Mark 6: 35-42			
Mark 11: 15 - 19			
Luke 15: 3-7			
Mark 15: 33 - 37			
John 13: 33 – 35			

The above passages are only examples of the complexity of Jesus' ministry, and therefore the complexity of what we are called to be as the church. Discuss together with others in your group your understanding of the body of Christ, the visible presence of Jesus in your community and the world. Be specific in

naming what you believe the church is called to be and do, and how this is significant for persons in the community who are not a part of yours or any congregation.

In a couple of sentences, record a summary of your discussion below.

A Living Body

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.¹⁶

Jesus describes his relationship with his disciples with very organic imagery. The branch and the vine are integrally connected; the branch is fed by the vine, and in turn the branch produces fruit. That which feeds the branch feeds the fruit as well. Like a body, one part is dependent on another, but all are dependent on Christ. The collective branches are the church, each carrying a responsibility to bear fruit, and from the fruit seed is produced, and Christ becomes known anew.

Reflecting on these words of Jesus, we see that the primary purpose of the church and the local congregation is to bear fruit. Yet, there is little in this or other passages that spell out the role and purpose of each local congregation. Local circumstances, the changing context throughout the history of the church, the diversity of language and culture are among some of the factors that impact the way in which the church is called to share the good news that will bear fruit for Jesus Christ. But in all times, in all circumstances, and in all places the church is called to bear fruit not for its own sake, but for the sake of Jesus Christ, the true vine.

Look again the passage above. What do you see in this passage that provides hope for you and your congregation? What in this passage causes you concern about your congregation and your role in its ministry? Discuss this with one another in your study group, and list below items you have identified.

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On the day of his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples. John's gospel tells us that they were locked behind closed doors, afraid of those who had conspired to arrest and crucify their Lord. After showing them the wounds of his hands and his side, they rejoice at seeing him.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."¹⁷

They are in that moment *in-spired*, as the gift of the Holy Spirit is breathed into them. The disciples are changed. They are no longer students sitting at the feet of the rabbi; they will be sent out to be the church in the world, to be the hands and feet of Jesus. But they will not go alone. They will go enlivened and empowered by the Holy Spirit to re-present Christ in the world. They will go with God dwelling in them and shining through them, as the new temple – the place where the world meets God and God meets the world.

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.¹⁸

The gift of the Spirit is given to the disciples for the purpose of being in ministry to the world. We know that the disciples, having learned the ways of the gospel from Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit, share the good news, heal the sick, strengthen the weak, lift up the down-trodden, and build the church so that new followers can do the same for others. The Spirit was not given to the disciples to care for and protect themselves. It was after they received the Spirit that they moved out from behind the locked doors to be in ministry in Jerusalem and beyond. It was after they received the Spirit that the disciples were able to put fear behind them and move out with the boldness that changed the world.

A question for the church today is how we are using the gift of the Spirit to reach beyond ourselves. A congregation that makes its self-care a priority, that makes decisions for the convenience of its members, that measures its ministry based on what it will gain for itself whether that be financially or in other ways, or holds fast to traditions and customs that make its members feel good but fail to be relevant to the community beyond the church needs to examine whether or not it has been open to the leading of the Spirit. A congregation needs to decide if it is an organization or an organism, a static collection of persons who come together for a function, or a living body that is growing, adapting, and changing with its environment. A congregation needs to look at its health, take its pulse, look at where it is healthy, and where it needs to adjust its life-style and habits in order to live more vitally in the world as the Body of Christ.

Video Link:

Conversation

- How does your congregation measure vitality?
- What are the signs of vitality that you have seen in your congregation and how are these making a difference in your community?

What is a Spiritual Leader?

3



3. Spiritual Leadership

A discussion on a Dave Ramsey *EntreLeadership* podcast centered on how effective leadership requires delegation, and team building. Several insights on leadership in business were made beginning with the statement that *"the purpose of a business is to duplicate yourself; there comes a point when you mature in your leadership when you realize that you have to delegate."* Effective leadership starts with team building and then delegating both tasks and the results. Often there is a delegation of a list of tasks, but the final result remains with the one doing the delegation. In this way, the leader is out front, with others on the team viewed as simply supporting players. But when tasks and results are delegated, there is ownership in the outcome, responsibility shared, and leadership is multiplied for future growth.

"It is your job as a leader to make the team successful, not the other way around." The point of building a team (in business) is to build the company, and it stops being about you [the leader] and starts being about the team. The leader, therefore, needs to have integrity and continually cast the vision for the team, constantly leading in such a way that demonstrates that there is something greater into which the team can put its heart.¹⁹ George Barna states, *"... a leader succeeds only if his or her followers succeed, and the followers succeed only if their leader is sensitive and responsive to God and empowers the people to do [God's] will."*²⁰

Jesus never read anything written by Dave Ramsey or George Barna, never listened to a podcast or studied any of these principles. Jesus, as far as we know, never attended a management or business course. But we see in Jesus a most effective leader, in either secular or religious circles. Jesus was, in many ways, the ultimate entrepreneur, bringing a new and exciting vision of God's kingdom to people who were in need of a hope-filled future, built on a foundation of the law and the prophets, but unique and separate from the religious models of his time. The kingdom he proclaimed was built on love, forgiveness, and grace. It was a realm that embraced the marginalized, the forgotten, and the least of all God's people. He invited people into a relationship with God that was not dependent on religious leaders and sacrificial practices of the temple. It was also a ministry that continued because he did not depend on a single person to pick up where he left off, but brought together a group of followers, a team, who would multiply his ministry far beyond the regions of Judea and Galilee.

He built a team of disciples whom he taught, mentored, and empowered to do the ministry that would usher in this vision of a realm *"on earth as it is in heaven."* And though Jesus had the ability to do all things, it was never about him. We see in one of his most powerful acts, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, that his delay in going and raising his friend was so that others might believe in and glorify God. (see John 11: 15 and 40) Jesus asks the rich young ruler, *"Why do you call me good? Only God is good."* (Matthew 19:17). He didn't count his own goodness as something to be idolized – it wasn't about him. He sent out the twelve, and then later the seventy to do the work that he could do, but wanted to empower them to do so as well. When faced with the challenge of feeding 5,000 plus people who had gathered to hear him teach, he says to his disciples *"You do it."* Jesus was capable of performing these miraculous things. He could walk on water, still the storms, and raise people from the dead. He certainly had the ability to do all things. His purpose, however, was to prepare a team which would, empowered by the Holy Spirit, carry on the ministry after his time with them. Jesus empowered his followers to

take on the ministry that would multiply throughout the generations, a ministry that would literally change the world. It was a ministry that depended on the gifts that each disciple had been given.

The Gifts of the Spirit

Jesus' question: *How much longer must I be with you and bear with you?*

The initial coming of the Holy Spirit is described in two different places. One is in the 20th chapter of John's gospel, as we saw in the last session. Then there is the account in the second chapter of Acts. It is sometimes thought that it was only upon Jesus' departure that the Holy Spirit comes, however, there are references throughout the Hebrew scriptures that speak about God's Spirit coming upon and dwelling within persons. However, in the New Testament context, it is the coming of the Spirit that enlivens the life, teachings and example of Jesus within his followers.

It was in Jesus' absence that there was a new openness to receiving empowerment so that the followers could go into the world to be witnesses of the good news. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, there was also an empowerment through gifts that were given to the followers of Jesus. One of the earliest gifts noted in the New Testament is the gift of bold speech, as recorded in Acts 4: 31: *"When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."*

Within the writings of Paul, there are several listings of gifts of the Spirit, one found in Romans and another in Ephesians.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.²¹

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.²²

In addition to the specific gifts listed in these passages, there are important insights about the purpose of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are meant to be complementary of one another, not in competition. They are given freely by God without price. Gifts are given for building up the

body of Christ, to bring persons into a mature relationship with Christ, to promote the body's growth. Spiritual gifts, therefore, are not about self-aggrandizement or self-promotion. They are given to strengthen the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are given for the purpose of encouraging growth *and* maturity in the body of Christ, not maintaining the status quo. Spiritual gifts are given to encourage invitation, hospitality and welcome, as well as deepening the faith commitment of the community.

These gifts are meant to be used not stored away, trusting that as they are used God will continue to provide. Following the mountain top experience of the transfiguration, Jesus descends from the mountain with his inner circle of Peter, James and John to rejoin the other nine disciples. A man comes up to Jesus and asks for help for his son, an epileptic who has from time to time thrown himself into the fire. The man had brought his son to these nine disciples, but they could do nothing. Jesus says:

“You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “Because of your little faith . . .”²³

What was Jesus feeling here? It could have been anger, frustration, impatience, or even sadness at their inability to use the gifts they had been given. It was Jesus' hope that the disciples would have been able to respond to this father's request. They had witnessed many miracles; they had learned that Jesus' healings were the result of prayer and faithfulness to God. Why hadn't they been able to perform this one healing? It would be difficult to say that they had no gifts for healing or casting out demons, as the disciples had been sent out and had seen the fruits of their labors previously

What do you think? Why couldn't they do this miracle?

Knowing and recognizing our gifts is important if they are to be used faithfully for God's glory. Yet there are those who believe that somehow their gifts are either non-existent or unimportant. Disciples understand that *“ultimately and always we belong to God, and no power on earth or in heaven can snatch us from the security, identity and safety of that belonging.”²⁴* Because we are loved by God, God has blessed us all, even when we don't recognize the gifts we have been given. The inability to recognize Spiritual gifts does not mean that they are non-existent or unimportant. Rather, it is the responsibility of the church, the Body of Christ, to recognize and call forth the gifts of others within the community of faith, supporting and encouraging the use of these gifts for the building of the body. To claim that someone is not gifted, either ourselves or others, makes a statement about God that we may not intend, but it is a statement none-the-less.

Gifts are not the same as skills which can be gained and learned. There is a tendency to assume that the gifts of the Spirit are related to one's job, training, or educational background, and we then limit the possibilities of God's work in our midst with these assumptions. We also assume that Spiritual gifts easily translate into specific offices within the church, such as administrative council positions, a Sunday School teacher, or a member of the finance committee. While a person may have a gift of administration or teaching that is used well in their secular employment, there may be other untapped and unused gifts that will function even more effectively for the building up of the body and making new disciples. The art of discerning gifts, therefore, is far more than looking at what someone is "good" at. It requires looking deeper, recognizing that a variety of gifts emerge for different seasons in the life of a person and the church.

There are any number of inventories available that help persons to identify gifts, but the effectiveness of identifying gifts is strengthened if a person, connected in community, is engaging in conversation, encouragement, and equipping. Jesus had called fishermen and tax collectors. These were not religious leaders or preachers; they were not healers. Others were gathered to him as well, seventy in all according to Luke's gospel, and Jesus sent them out to share the gospel, to do the very work that he was doing himself, trusting that they were sufficiently gifted to go out to do his work.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"²⁵

Jesus recognized in these seventy gifts that they most likely didn't recognize in themselves, given their surprise at the fruits of their labors that they reported! (see Luke 10: 17-20) It is not so unusual, that the spiritual gifts of a person are often more apparent to a faith community or those who are recipients of the gifts than the one who has been given the gifts. Why do you think that might be the case?

Spiritual or Secular Leadership – What’s the Difference?

A false dichotomy has been set up between the characteristics of spiritual leadership versus secular leadership. While the outcome of a leader’s labors may be measured quite differently between the two, in many ways the leadership of spiritual and secular leaders is quite close. Perhaps the greatest difference between the two is not in leadership style or leadership skills. The big difference is also not in who we lead. The difference lies in who (or what) we follow. This is what determines the vision; it is what determines desired outcomes; it is what determines who will be an effective and transformational leader.

There are many places within the *Book of Discipline* that describe and identify characteristics of faithful leadership. Persons called to leadership within the church are those who “*shall be persons of genuine Christian character who love the church, are morally disciplined, are committed to the mandate of inclusiveness in the life of the church, are loyal to the ethical standards of The United Methodist Church set forth in the Social Principles, and are competent to administer its affairs.*”²⁶ Leaders are first and foremost called to a life of faithfulness, committed to justice and mercy. Leaders are called to reflect Jesus Christ in their lives, to demonstrate in words and actions who they follow. Competency to administer the affairs of the church follows after. In the first steps towards licensed or ordained ministry, the first questions asked, handed down to us from founder John Wesley, are:

- *Do they know God as a pardoning God?*
- *Have they the love of God abiding in them?*
- *Do they desire nothing but God?*
- *Are they holy in all manner of conversation?”*²⁷

Leadership in the church begins with following God.

Spiritual leadership is built upon a foundation of a meaningful, growing relationship with God, understanding that all things flow from this relationship. Secular leadership may define god in other ways, whether that be economic, political, or personal gain. Simply said, the spiritual leader understands that “it’s not about me, it’s about Jesus.”

The result is that the leader will draw other people into that relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The secular leader may recognize that effective leadership isn’t about him or her, but they will not define the goal in the same way. This is not to say that every secular leader is self-centered or profit oriented, nor does it mean that everyone who leads within the church is a spiritual leader. Spiritual leadership hinges on who and how the leader follows!

Take a few minutes and discuss together who has been an important spiritual leader for you in your Christian journey. What were the qualities or characteristics that this person had? How did they embody the gospel, and how did they communicate the good news to you?

List here some of the qualities that you identified in the discussion:

Jesus provided the greatest model for authentic spiritual leadership. Though he was an extraordinary teacher and healer, he modeled leadership as he washed the disciples' feet (see John 13). He called his followers to the same practice of leading by serving. He remained focused on the goal, and let neither personal interests nor pressure from others distract him from his mission to proclaim the kingdom of God and demonstrate its fullness, even when that led to a cross.

He was committed to calling others, discipling them, and sending them out to serve with true empowerment, the power of the Holy Spirit. He was ready to entrust the future to those he empowered, trusting that God would provide the gifts necessary to do the work. He was compassionate and caring, accepted people for where they were on the journey, but called them to something greater than even they could imagine for themselves. And, even at the time of his greatest trial awaiting his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and subsequent crucifixion, he depended on his relationship with God that was strengthened by prayer, and because of that relationship, he could pray with confidence, "Not my will, but yours." It wasn't about him – it was about God's mission for him. It wasn't about his interests, but that the world, through him, might be saved.

Video Link

Conversation:

- How are effective spiritual leaders identified, encouraged, sent into ministry, and supported in our congregation?
- What do we, as a congregation, need to do to more effectively call people into various forms of ministry?

What does it mean to transform the world?

4



4. Transformation

Jesus' question: *Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? (Luke 18:8)*

Hope of the World, O Christ of Great Compassion . . .

In 1954, Georgia Harkness wrote the hymn "Hope of the World" for the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Evanston, Illinois. Her prayer hymn expresses a hope for reconciliation, justice, and faithfulness to Christ as a means of bringing healing of wholeness to a broken world. It was her hope almost 60 years ago, and continues to be a hope for the church today.

One only has to pick up a newspaper, browse news services on the internet, or turn on any one of the 24 hour cable news services to find that there is division and strife in our world, including among the people of God. In spite of efforts to bring peace, wars and the threat of war are still prevalent in our global community. Violence continues to run rampant; systemic oppression plagues the cultures of our world. People are objectified and used for economic or political gain. Millions die of preventable disease and malnutrition. True community that seeks after God's shalom continues to elude us. The assault on our environment and the lack of stewardship for the creation that God has given us is abundantly evident. Sadly, this is not a new phenomenon. While the specifics have changed, the cultural mindsets that continue to feed brokenness and division have not. The question remains: Where does our hope lie?

It is not a new question. Simeon waited to die for an answer to his prayer. Anna waited for many years, fasting and praying in the temple, until that day when Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the temple. (see Luke 2: 22-38) Crowds who gathered in the wilderness to hear John's call for repentance awaited the messianic hope that would free them from the oppressive burdens of life. And a woman in Samaria who came at mid-day to the well, isolated from her community, disconnected because of her life choices, looked to Mt. Gerazim, just as the Jews looked to the temple in Jerusalem, for their hope. But the hope she longed for stood in her presence and asked her for a cool drink of water from the well.

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water

that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet . . . The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”

This is a story of transformation for a Samaritan woman and for the community of Sychar. This is a story of wholeness and reconciliation for the woman who witnessed the confronting, changing power that Jesus had on her life and shared it with others. Reflect together on these questions:

How was this woman at the well transformed? What do you imagine her life was like prior to meeting Jesus, and how do you think it changed?

What was the effect of the woman’s transformation on others such as the disciples and the people of Sychar?

Luke 19: 1-10 recounts another story of the transformation of Zaccheus, a tax collector and collaborator with the Roman government, a man who by his own admission had lined his own pockets by cheating his neighbors. Zaccheus climbed a tree because he was short in stature and wanted to see Jesus who was coming through his home town of Jericho. Jesus saw him and called him down so that he might come to Zaccheus' house for dinner that day.

⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Like the woman from Samaria, Zaccheus' transformation was more than just personal. In response to his encounter with Jesus, the poor were cared for and he reconciled with those whom he had defrauded in a very tangible way. Jesus proclaimed that salvation, that is wholeness and shalom, had come to his household that day.

The Gospel is clear in its message of the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Yet even within the church, there are skeptics. As numbers dwindle and emerging generations explore alternative spiritualities, there are those who are convinced that something outside the good news will be the answer. Some suggest that the gospel is no longer germane, addressing circumstances from generations past but irrelevant for today's culture. Others put their hope in the latest program to hit the shelves rather than the underlying principles founded on the essence of our faith. Others want to pick and choose those parts of the gospel message that fit their preconceived notion of faith, embracing either personal piety or social holiness rather than seeing the two as an integrated whole expression of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. We will trust Jesus with our "souls" but not with our pocket books! All of these, and more, limit a total embrace of the gospel and its transforming power in our lives.

If we are to embrace our mission as United Methodists "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," it must begin with a firm conviction that in Jesus Christ, lives can, are, and will be transformed, and through the transformation of lives, our world can move closer to God's vision of shalom. The statement below from the 2012 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church begins to set out for United Methodists the mandate we have for transformation.

*The mission of the **church** is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world. The fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world is the vision Scripture holds before us . . .*

. . . This mission is our grace-filled response to the Reign of God in the world announced by Jesus. God’s grace is active everywhere, at all times, carrying out this purpose as revealed in the Bible . . .

. . . Whenever United Methodism has had a clear sense of mission, God has used our church to save persons, heal relationships, and spread scriptural holiness, thereby changing the world. In order to be truly alive, we embrace Jesus’ mandate to love God and to love our neighbor and to make disciples of all peoples.²⁸

Take note that in this statement, the mission, while embraced by our denomination, is our statement of what we believe the purpose of the universal church is, not just United Methodists. Take a few moments as a group and reflect on each of the excerpts from this paragraph.

What questions does it raise for you as a community of faithful disciples about your on-going mission and ministry as a congregation?

John Wesley stated the world was his parish, yet in many situations, the parish has become our world. In what ways has your congregation seen its ministry in light of the greater call to bring the good news to the entire world?

In what ways has God been using the church to save persons, heal relationships, and spread scriptural holiness, and where have we fallen short due to a lack of a clear sense of mission?

What's gotten in the way?

Why Transformation

Jesus' question: *Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?*

Take a few minutes and look at a national newspaper, an internet news site, or a cable news network. Make a quick list of things that you see that run counter to the vision that God has for the world. What headlines reflect division among the world's people, violence, indifference to the poor, economic disparity, objectification of people, sexism, racism, or misguided priorities? It doesn't take long to see that this is a daily occurrence. Politicians and commentators will demonize persons with whom they have honest difference of opinion. Schools slash budgets while congress approves weapons systems that even the Pentagon questions the need for. A wall stands between the city of Jesus' birth and the city of his death and resurrection, dividing families and neighbors, and highlighting a religious and political struggle that has existed for centuries. Wherever we personally stand on any of the issues of the day, there is no denying that there is division among God's creation. There are people crying out for justice and mercy. There are children struggling for survival physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

There are millions, if not billions, crying for bread. We hear their voices in a myriad of ways. We know countless stories, and we do respond with love and compassion. Yet there is still so much more, and as the church we are called to continue to serve God and neighbor, to show love and compassion, and to offer hope to the hopeless, give voice to the silenced, and provide new vision for a world where God's shalom will reign. Sometimes that means working in partnership with other churches, government agencies, or international organizations. Sometimes it means walking the journey alone, especially when others don't want to walk with us. At times it means taking a stand that will be unpopular with some, and even bring persecution. But Jesus warned us about this, and called us to be bolder than the culture that surrounds us.

Christians are the body of Christ, the living presence of the one who walked in our midst, taught us a new way, and demonstrated for us the true meaning of love as he gave his life not for those who are already on board, but for the world, so that "the world, through him, might be saved."²⁹ With each new generation, the story must be told, the relationships made, and the gospel lived so that new persons might come to know Christ. Too often, however, the mandate for transformation is lived out only within the four walls of the church, for those who have already made the commitment to cross that threshold. We offer acts of mercy, but find it difficult to work for justice and speak for those whose voices have been silenced through fear, intimidation, systemic injustices, and even lack of understanding. We offer welcome to those who readily accept it and embrace our invitation, but back off with those who may not be ready or prepared

to receive the gift. We look at global issues and are overwhelmed by the massive issues that seem to be beyond our scope of influence or understanding, and we remain silent.

It is tempting to think small. *“I’m only one person”*
“we’re a small congregation”
“our plate is already full”
“not everyone will get on board.”

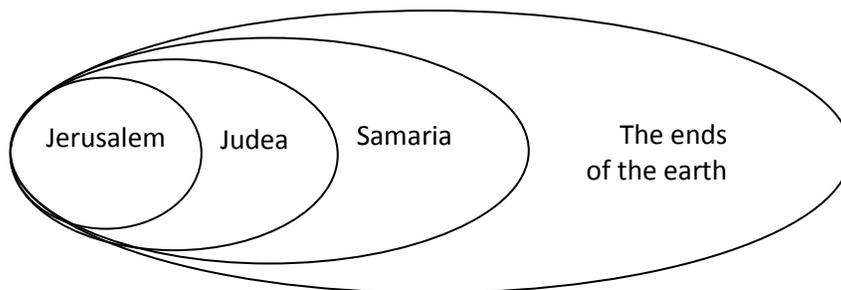
There are all sorts of reasons why we might find the on-going work of transformation difficult, if not daunting. It was not different for the disciples whom Jesus called. Just before his ascension, he gathered with these eleven. They were not a stellar group. One was missing from their ranks after he had betrayed Jesus. One had denied ever knowing him. The others went into hiding and were fearful for their own lives. Their bold proclamations of remaining faithful to Jesus in his time of trial were rather hollow. But Jesus brought them together again on the Mount of Olives, and there he commissioned them:

“⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”³⁰

Jesus was sending them forth to be the living body in the world, and to bring transformation to an ever widening sphere of influence starting in Jerusalem. I’m sure that among them, there was some conversation about how they could ever bring this kind of transforming work so far beyond their comfort zone. Someone probably said, “there’s only eleven of us – it’s not going to work.” Someone else probably thought, “I’m just not gifted to do this.” And one of them most likely said, “But we’ve never done it this way before.” Yet Jesus didn’t depend on just them. He spoke of empowerment from the Holy Spirit, and with that power they could become transforming agents in their ever expanding world from the home church, to the larger community, to the untouchable territories, and finally to distant lands in ever-widening spheres.

You shall be my witnesses in:



Today, our the ever-widening spheres are not necessarily unknown to us, and yet the reach of the good news for transforming ministry still exists. You may define Jerusalem and Judea as your local church and your immediate community. You may see it as your local community and a larger region. Yet, there is always an “end of the earth,” a place that is far beyond where we may have thought that transforming ministry is possible, whether that be around the world or around the corner. Use the chart below to identify and reflect on four or five things that you believe need transformation. Then discuss together in your group why you feel this needs transforming, what Biblical foundation there is for this, and what might be some steps you could do within the local church to facilitate transformation.

Area for Transformation	Why?	Biblical Foundation	What might we do?
Local community			
Greater NJ Area			
National Level			
Global			
Other: Local church, area, etc.			

Following the resurrection of Jesus, as recorded in the Luke’s gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples in the evening of the first day. ³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” His question to the disciples is as real today as it was then. With the risen Christ walking with us, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the possibilities for transformation of the world are endless. Yet we also know that if we say nothing, nothing will

happen. If we do nothing, nothing will happen. If we do not work for transformation, nothing will change.

Video Link:

Conversation:

- In what ways has our congregation be transforming lives and changing the world? How might we do this more as we move ahead?
- What are some of the larger issues that we cannot do by ourselves but could effectively be addressed as we unite with other Christians? How do these issues bring Jesus Christ to the world?

**Why are we challenged
to connect with young
adults and the non and
nominally religious?**



5

5. Reaching Out to New Generations

One of the hallmarks of United Methodism is its rich diversity. As a global denomination, United Methodists are transforming lives and bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to a multitude of nations in Africa, Asia, Europe, South and North America. Within the Greater New Jersey Conference, one of the most diverse areas in the United States, there are congregations worshipping in a variety of languages representing a whole host of cultures, all praising God and offering the hope of the gospel. This is a blessing that we celebrate, yet it means that being the church requires intentionality if we are to truly be open to and welcoming of one another.

Diversity, however, is more than simply welcoming differing people into a dominant culture's way of being the church. It requires learning from one another, celebrating differences, supporting and encouraging persons in their own spiritual journey, and offering Christ in different ways and contexts. We celebrate this as United Methodists, and yet diversity is more than racial, ethnic or culture. There is also the diversity of age. The average age of a United Methodist is 58, while the average age of persons within the area of the Greater New Jersey Conference is between 37 and 38. There are generations of people missing in our pews, people from younger generations who experience life differently and offer fresh perspective on the world. This generation is called mosaics or the Millennial Generation, persons born roughly between 1984 and 2002. These are the teens and young adults, a generation that is largely absent in the life of the church.

The mosaic generation cannot be viewed as a single entity, with all persons of this age group fitting neatly into a single description. In fact, one of the hallmarks of the Mosaic generation is that this is a generation that has more information and more choices than in any previous generation. However, according to David Kinnamon, president of the Barna Group and author of *UnChristian*, there are some statistics that the church must pay attention to. When we look at youth who are presently involved in the church, research shows that three out of five of these youth will not be involved in the church in the next 10 to 12 years. This shouldn't surprise us because this is already a pattern in many of our congregations today. As Kinnamon points out, a well attended youth event doesn't necessarily mean that there has been a life-changing transformational experience.³¹

Mosaics are a generation who thrive on personal relationships and new experiences. There is, therefore, openness to the life-changing power of Jesus Christ who can make a difference not only in their everyday life, but in the world as a whole.³² The challenge for the church is that for an increasing number of persons in the Mosaic generation, the church is becoming increasingly irrelevant. There is a prevailing belief among some that given enough time, these young persons will see the light and come back to the church. For some, that might be true. But then there are increasing numbers of young people who cannot come back because they have never been a part of the church and have not been raised within households that valued the Christian message. They will not come back because they have never been there to begin with.

This is lifted up in a variety of other studies of this generation. A Pew Research report about the millennial generation points out several pertinent facts:

- ✓ “[Millenials] are more ethnically and racially diverse . . . They’re less religious, less likely to have served in the military, and are on track to become the most educated generation in American history.
- ✓ Three-quarters have created a profile on a social networking site. One-in-five have posted a video of themselves online. Nearly four-in-ten have a tattoo (. . . about half of those with tattoos have two to five and 18% have six or more). Nearly one-in-four have a piercing in some place other than an earlobe . . .
- ✓ They are the least overtly religious American generation in modern times. One-in-four are unaffiliated with any religion . . . Yet not belonging does not necessarily mean not believing. Millennials pray about as often as their elders did in their own youth.”³³

All this points to the fact that there is a rich mission field that surrounds our churches, persons who fill the malls and restaurants, fitness centers and gyms, recovery and self-help groups; these are persons for whom the message of the gospel can be meaningful and rich, life-changing and transforming. These are people looking for authenticity and meaning in life, which is at the heart of Jesus’ message to the world. Jesus proclaimed, “*I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.*”³⁴

Faithful Christians of the church today often express a desire to welcome the younger generations because “this is the future of the church.” Yet the Mosaic/Millennial Generation is not only the future of the church, it is the church of the present as well. But their understanding of the meaning of the church, their view of the world and the culture we live in and how the gospel is relevant to that is quite different. They are looking for a different kind of church that cannot be expressed with a few praise songs from twenty or thirty years ago and an informal atmosphere that allows them to bring coffee into the worship space. In a series of conversations with several mosaics, they expressed hesitancy about a church that wants to welcome them as a means of rescuing the legacy of the institution into the next generation. These are people who are looking for community that will welcome, invite, engage, and send out to serve as a natural rhythm in the church’s life. They are looking for a church that is more diverse and open.

So what needs to change so that today’s church can reach into this mission field, and why is it so important? Looking back to the great commission, Jesus sent the disciples into the world to make disciples. One of those disciples, Peter, became a primary leader in the Jerusalem church and a primary spokesman for the part of the church that advocated for all Christians to also follow Jewish law. But then there came a time when he was challenged to look beyond, to go to a new and different place in his walk with Christ and as a leader in the church. The book of Acts tells the story:

⁹About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.³⁵

What do you see in the vision of Peter that would have been surprising and challenging for the Jewish Christians of his day? What do you think God was trying to tell Peter in this vision?

It was unusual enough that Peter was staying in the home of Simon the tanner. Tanners dealt with animal skins, and the Jewish laws concerning coming in contact with blood of animals or other people would certainly have been a challenge for this follower of Jesus in this particular home. But it seems that Simon was known to Peter, as he welcomed the apostle into his home. Peter was already stretching the law, at least in the minds of some people in his day. Now there was something bolder – a vision that was pushing the envelope even more. Peter’s vision was preparing the way and setting the stage for the next

“Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” ²³*So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.* ²⁴*The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.* ²⁵*On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him.* ²⁶*But Peter made him get up, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.”* ²⁷*And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled;* ²⁸*and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.* ²⁹*So when I was sent for, I came without objection.”* ³⁶

While these excerpts from the 10th chapter of Acts may seem logical and hardly surprising, it is anything but. Centurions were Roman soldiers, not Jews. Caesarea was the capital city for the Roman government, and though it was a large metropolis, Jews didn’t frequent this city. There is no mention that Jesus ever went to this city himself, and before this, the city plays no role in the gospel account.

Reflect together on what you think this story is saying to the church today? What do you think Christians today consider profane or unclean within our culture?

Knowing what you do about Mosaics, how do attitudes held about our present culture serve to build walls rather than bridges between the generations?

A Scriptural Call to Action

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,”³⁷

These words were written by the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. He was calling the church to a new way of thinking, a different mindset that was not based on personal preference, territorialism, or self-promotion. Instead, he called the church to have the mind of Christ – to look at the world through Jesus-colored glasses. Jesus modeled humble, servant leadership for all people. He welcomed children over the objections of his disciples, broke social mores by talking with women in public and healing those with debilitating disease. He demonstrated the true meaning of love and acceptance, and the apostle was calling the church to the same attitudes and way of being: a way of humility that focused on the interests of others.

There is much to be learned from the Mosaic generation in the church. Research demonstrates that Mosaics are more upbeat, optimistic, and open to change than previous generations.³⁸ This is a generation that sees diversity as a blessing to be nurtured. Millenials also want to make a difference, and are therefore ready and willing to serve others and to engage in hands-on mission to make faith relevant. This is also a generation that understands and uses technology in all sorts of new and creative ways. “A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that the typical Mosaic spends 8 1/2 hours *each day* using various media, including television, radio, music, print resources, computers, the Internet, and video games. That time is compressed into about 6 1/2 hours since they often use more than one media at once.”³⁹ In other words, this is a generation for whom a simple power-point presentation is routine, and talking head videos don’t particularly excite them. Yet these are people who are masters at creating video and using social networking to communicate with literally hundreds of people on a daily basis.

Take a few minutes as a group. Looking at some of the characteristics of as a gift instead of a limitation, how could you envision the church becoming more alive, more relevant, and more connected with the world we are called to serve?

Responses and Reflections

It would be difficult to read the gospels and find commandments that deal specifically with how Christ envisions us reaching out to young people. In Jesus' world, concepts such as adolescence didn't exist. There is a variety of places where young people are mentioned, but in a very adult context such as the young man raised from the dead in Nain or the rich young man who cannot give everything up to follow Jesus. The fact that young people and young adults are not specifically mentioned, however, may be the strongest call for the church. The Millennial/Mosaic generation is unique in its characteristics, but the call of the church to be in ministry with Mosaiacs is not unique. *"God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Much to our surprise, God invites all to hear, receive, believe and practice the good news."*⁴⁰

Christ called the church to go into all the world. The great commandment calls us to love God and love neighbor, the two being seen as two parts of a whole. The challenge from the prophet Micah was to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. These are God's calls to all Christians for all people, what pastor and author Mike Slaughter refers to as the Great Requirement. There is nothing that indicates that the church gets a pass on any generation, yet the statistics point out a bold reality: the largest generation of people in the United States is underserved by the church of Jesus Christ.

In the art world, mosaics are a collection of individual, small tiles that are placed together in a deliberate pattern to create a larger image. We see mosaics on the floors of Roman ruins and on the ceilings of great cathedrals. If viewed from further away, it is hard to see that each piece of the mosaic carries its own unique colors and shape, but as one moves closer to the larger image, the individuality of each piece becomes obvious. One might argue that the beauty of a mosaic doesn't lie in the individual pieces, but in the image as a whole. But that fails to recognize that there is beauty in each individual piece, and that without each of the pieces, there would be a gap. Something valuable and important is missing.

In a recent article by CNN correspondent Rachel Held Evans republished through UM News Service Daily Digest, she writes about why Millennials are leaving the church and what they are looking for.

- *What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.*
- *We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against.*
- *We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers.*
- *We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation.*
- *We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities.*
- *We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.*
- *You can't hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there.*
- *Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.⁴¹*

Her article provides some encouraging news: millennials/mosaics are looking for many of the same things that persons from other generations are seeking. Simply said, if the church made an effort to reach out to the Mosaic Generation, it would do much to create a more healthy, whole, and vibrant church focused on its true mission. It would do much to keep us focused on Jesus so that we don't get side-tracked. It would bless us by being a more relevant, meaningful church for today and the future.

For a snapshot of the Mosaic Generation, you may want to view the following slide show <http://www.slideshare.net/ez2bsaved/mosaics-2638113>

Conversation:

- What are young people looking for in life, and how does the gospel message address their hopes?
- Why isn't the church connecting to the younger generation and the non and nominally religious? What needs to change in order for that to happen?
- How do we relate and connect with young people and why isn't the message connecting as it once did?

**How will you connect
with the people in
your community?**

6



6. Who is My Neighbor? Connecting with our community

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “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 your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”⁴²

These verses set the stage for one of Jesus’ best known parables commonly referred to as the Good Samaritan. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is being tested and challenged by religious authorities and interpreters of the law. Each time, they are trying to back Jesus into a corner in order to discredit him with the people or catch him disobeying the Jewish laws. His responses often call his listeners to move beyond the law to its foundations, to greater principles than human convention, to the greater good that is God’s intention. Jesus was politically savvy in his responses, but his greater purpose was not to talk circles around his challengers but to lead towards a greater truth: the truth of amazing, unconditional, unbounded love.

In this conversation with the lawyer, Jesus is asked the question, “Who is my neighbor?” The traditional answer according to Jewish law would be that a neighbor was one who was obedient to Jewish law, was ritually clean, who worshipped in and brought sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem. Basically, the traditional understanding of the neighbor was one who was like “us.” Jesus’ familiar parable redefined the meaning of neighbor. There were at least two persons who acted in a neighborly fashion: the Samaritan and the inn keeper. The Samaritan stopped to help; the inn keeper had to trust someone who was considered un-trustworthy by societal standards. Yet this would have created a dilemma in the minds of the first hearers, many of whom would have considered the Levite and the priest their neighbors. But there is another neighbor – the man beaten and left on the side of the road. He was the one who needed to be helped, and that redefines the meaning of neighbor as well.

As the body of Christ, if someone were to challenge the church with the question, “Who is my neighbor” what would be the answer? Most churches would not self-identify with the priest or Levite. Many would identify the neighbor as us, the one who is ready and willing to help someone and those who would join us in the journey. This certainly is a part of the definition of neighbor in the gospel. However, how often would we define the neighbor as the one beaten up by life through poverty, oppression, sexism, racism, violence, physical, verbal, or emotional abuse? Does the church see the one who has been left on the side of the road and forgotten due to age, differing abilities, employment status, racial/ethnic/cultural background, immigration status, orientation or life-choices as a neighbor? How we answer the question “who is my neighbor?” is essential in setting a vision for ministry within the local context.

How does your congregation define “neighbor” in your local context? What is the evidence that this definition is being lived out in your midst? Record some of your thoughts in the space provided below.

The church is called to be an inclusive community that is open to all persons. There is a tendency to think of inclusivity as merely a willingness to welcome anyone who comes to our churches. While this is certainly a part of the inclusive community, it goes well beyond that.

“Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world . . . The mark of an inclusive society is one in which all persons are open, welcoming, fully accepting, and supporting of all other persons, enabling them to participate fully in the life of the church, the community, and the world.”⁴³

The inclusive church is willing to do self-examination and make needed changes to enable persons to fully participate in all levels of the church. This is an on-going process as churches and communities are ever-changing in the mobile society in which we live. The inclusive church is intentional in its evangelistic ministry, seeking to be in conversation with persons who are non and nominally religious to ascertain how the church might most effectively share the gospel in a meaningful and relevant way. The inclusive church therefore doesn't have a preconceived notion about what others need, but an openness to learn and engage persons in dialogue in order to create an authentic community.

We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals. Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important – because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance.⁴⁴

The two quotes listed above are from our United Methodist *Book of Discipline*. As faithful United Methodists, our mandate is to model a community that is inclusive and open, encouraging, creative, and life-giving community. We take our “marching orders” from the gospel. We are called to be ahead of the curve, not trying to catch up with the world around us.

A question: does your local church look like the community that you serve?

A quick look at the demographics of your local community can be very instructive. You can find this information at MissionInsite, available to all our churches through the conference web site. You also will need to gather some information about your own congregation. While a more in

depth study will produce a lot more valuable information for you to use, for the purpose of this discussion, a quick look will suffice. For now, focus on these statistics.

	Community as a whole	Church Participants	Difference ±
Average Age			
· % under 18			
· % 18 - 34			
· % 34-54			
· % Over 55			
Racial/ethnic makeup (by %)			
· Asian			
· Black/African American			
· White			
· Hispanic/Latino			
· Nat. Am/Pac Islander/other			
% Blue collar/white collar			

Comparing the information listed above and other information you know about your church and the community in which you are located, in what ways is your church like the community in which you are located, and what ways is it different?

Alike

Different

Who will welcome, who will do the work?

¹⁰On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. ¹¹When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured. ¹²The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." ¹³But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said,

“We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.”¹⁴ For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.”¹⁵ They did so and made them all sit down.¹⁶ And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.¹⁷ And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.⁴⁵

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 is the one miracle that is recorded in all four gospel accounts. Obviously, it was an event that made an amazing impact on the church as it was moving from a small, regional community of believers an empire-wide faith with a distinct identity apart from Judaism. It was a story preserved and retold by the church in its diverse settings. In Luke’s account, the miracle occurs immediately after the twelve had returned from a missionary journey that Jesus had sent them on, empowering them to cast out demons, cure disease, proclaim the kingdom, and heal. They came back amazed at the effect of the power they had received. But when the masses gathered around and they needed to be fed, the disciples were ready to send the crowds away. But Jesus responds quite differently: *“You give them something to eat.”* Note the contrast. Disciples were empowered to cast out demons and proclaim the kingdom, but they couldn’t imagine feeding a crowd! Even though Jesus blesses and breaks the loaves and fish, he gives them to the disciples to feed the crowd.

Do you think that the disciples were realistic in their assessment of their ability, or were they timid and unsure about the limits of the empowerment they had received? These twelve are not unlike faithful Christians today who often see themselves as unable to do the work of ministry due to a lack of gifts and a limit on their empowerment by the Holy Spirit. And so, we find that churches often want to depend on a select few to “do” the ministry while others advise or support the “real ministers,” whether that be clergy or highly motivated, gifted laity. Yet, as you reflected during the section on Spiritual gifts, God has given gifts to each and every one of us, and we are called to use these gifts to build up the body of Christ, to bring it new life and provide hope and vision for those who are among the least, the last, and the lost.

The United Methodist tradition has recognized that laypersons as well as ordained persons are gifted and called by God to lead the Church. The servant leadership of these persons is essential to the mission and ministry of congregations. They help to form Christian disciples in covenant community within the local congregation through spiritual formation and guidance for Christian living the world.⁴⁶

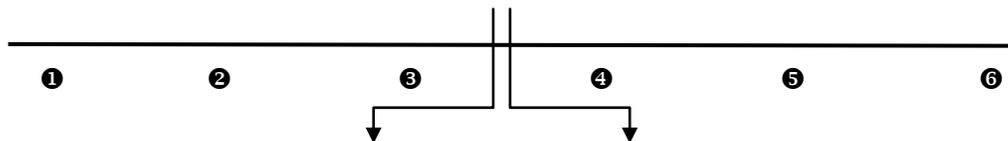
The work of forming the church is on-going. It is never done, as communities change, people come and go for a variety of reasons, and the needs of the world are constantly morphing into something new and different. Yet, through all of this, the gospel of Jesus Christ remains relevant and hope-filled. When our church doesn’t look like the community, it means that there is something to examine, questions to ask, and decisions to be made if we are to continue to be faithful. When the church does look like the community in which it is located, there are questions to ask such as how will the church not become fixed and stuck in one place, how do we look to grow deeper and richer in our community life together, and what are the next steps.

Quite simply, the church should never be complacent about where it is today, for as communities and people change, bringing the gospel to a changing world needs to change with it.

Yet there are a number of congregations who feel ill-equipped to do this work. A number of churches recognize that there are persons who are un-served or underserved within the community, but are unsure of what the next steps are. No two communities and no two churches will be identical, and therefore the steps towards become an inclusive, welcoming congregation on a new level will be different in each place. After discussion together, identify where you lie on the continuum listed below, and then consider what questions provided.

1. We are a content congregation who doesn't see any need to reach out to anyone. We like who we are and expect anyone who comes in to do things our way.
2. We are always glad to welcome new people, but we don't really go out of our way to invite anyone or plan ministry designed specifically to attract new people
3. We want to bring new people in, but we don't have a handle on what it would take to really become an inclusive, welcoming congregation that looks like the community we serve
4. We are a congregation that is beginning to look more like our community, but we still have a ways to go.
5. Our congregation has an intentional plan for inviting, welcoming, and engaging new persons in ministry so that our church looks quite a bit like the community in which we live.
6. We are a totally inclusive congregation that represents the diversity of our community in a variety of ways

Identify where you are on the continuum listed above, and discuss the three questions listed below that correspond to your identification.



Those churches identifying as 1, 2, or 3

What are the bridges that need to be built in order to reach new people?

How will you make some initial connections within your immediate community?

Who will be charged with making an intentional plan to make the church more reflective of our community by age, ethnicity, culture, economic situation, etc.?

Those churches identifying as 4, 5 or 6

How has your congregation effectively built bridges in the past and how can these continue or be strengthened

What are some of the emerging needs or trends that the congregation needs to be aware of so that it can continue to be effective in ministry?

How has the openness and welcome of our congregation been measured and evaluated the past, and how should we proceed to determine our effectiveness moving forward?

Video Link

Conversation:

- What new things do you need to learn in order to build bridges and be in ministry to and with your immediate community?
- Why does the church need to continually do the work of being an intentional community of faith?

7

Why be engaged?



7. Action Plans – When Learning and Talking just isn't enough

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

A Future with Hope -Jeremiah 29:11 Greater New Jersey Conference Strategic Ministry Plan Summary

Vision

We see a church like Jesus Christ—radical spirit and humble, teaching and healing, soul saving and soul tending, leader and servant, unbound and outbound.

We also see a Wesleyan Church—personal holiness and social holiness, connectional and risk taking, thoughtful and inspirational, small groups and large vision, welcoming all and respect for diversity of thought.

Increase the number of highly vital congregations¹ from 14% to 41%²

Call, equip, send and support turnaround³ spiritual leaders

Resource congregations to assess their ministry and establish a path for vitality

Resource⁴ congregations to develop worship that transforms lives and connects with people in the community so that 31% of our congregations are growing

Resource congregations to make disciples, particularly with the non and nominally religious in the community so that GNU is making one new profession of faith for each 15 worshipers

Resource congregations to mature disciples, particularly through small groups and children and youth ministries that connect with the community so that 75% of our worshipers are engaged in a small group

Resource congregations to engage in justice and mercy ministries in the community and around the world so that 40% of our worshipers are engage in community or global mission projects

Resource congregations to create a culture of generous giving for ministry and mission so that Local churches spend \$320 per worshiper on mission per year and we raise \$12 million for mission

Mission

GNU will make disciples of Jesus Christ for the *transformation of the world.*

We seek disciples that will sit at the feet of Jesus and become life-long learners and followers of Jesus Christ, leaving behind safety and complacency to serve like Christ to save souls, end poverty, be graceful with those at the margins, connect with people who are different from us, and magnify God's presence in the world.

This type of discipleship is encouraged and supported through vital congregations.

¹HIGHLY VITAL CONGREGATIONS are inwardly transformed and missionally outbound. Vital congregations are Spirit-filled, forward leaning communities of believers that grow over time, welcome all people (Galatians 3:28); make disciples of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20); and serve like Christ through justice and mercy ministries (Micah 6:8 and Luke 4:17-21).

²FROM 14% TO 41% is a complete turnaround and transformation of the way we do ministry. It will require a full commitment to follow the way of Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit, align conference ministry with congregations. Building on our Wesleyan tradition, we will focus on processes, equipping, innovation and experimentation.

³TURNAROUND LEADERS assess the gifts and needs of the congregation and community, set a courageous vision and goals, and inspire and equip the congregation to make new disciples, grow worship, grow disciples' faith through small groups, engage the congregation in life changing mission, and increase giving to mission and ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12

⁴WE WILL RESOURCE congregations and spiritual leaders that are ready and desire to become vital and more like Christ. We will resource for three stages of ministry – explore, engage and evolve. We will resource congregations and spiritual leaders by coming along side of them and assisting them with their development plans. Congregations that desire to continue as they are we will work with as legacy congregations.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”^{xlvii}

The earliest Christian communities were bold in their actions and in their vision for the future. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring the good news to their local community and to ends of the earth. Like Christians of every generation, they had choices. Disciples who, on the day of the resurrection were afraid and hiding behind locked doors for fear of their own lives, were soon proclaiming the good news on the streets of Jerusalem and baptizing thousands. Paul, after his own transforming experience and years of being disciplined by the church, had a bold vision that would bring the church to Asia Minor and Europe, with an eye towards bringing the gospel to the Empire’s capital in Rome. The bold leaders of the early church did not have an easy time. They were challenged from within and from without. But they were people of hope, empowered by the Spirit, determined to share what they knew to be the best news ever: the greatest hope for the world is found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the book of Acts, Peter and John had been imprisoned and released after appearing before the council of high priests in Jerusalem. Standing with Peter and John was a man who had been healed, and the council did not dare to challenge such an amazing feat and the bold witness that these two original disciples of Jesus had made. Returning to their Christian community, they were amazed that these two leaders had been released, praising and praying:

“And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.^{xlviii}

The good news of the scriptures is filled with accounts of persons who, with the power of the Spirit, were given the ability to do bold actions and speak bold words. These persons are witnesses to the boldness with which God encounters the world, the boldness of God’s love, and the boldness of faithfulness in response to this amazing grace that God grants. As we are reminded in the letter to the church of Laodicea in Revelation, *“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”^{xlix}*

The church is most effective in sharing the good news when people of faith step out with bold action. Leaders such as Martin Luther, John Wesley and his brother Charles, John Allen, Sojourner Truth, and many other people of faith throughout the history of the church dared to be different, to step out when it wasn’t popular, to buck the trends of society all for the sake of Jesus Christ. Effective Christian leaders knew that the task ahead of them was too big for them alone; they had to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit. Their vision for the future was a God-sized vision – any other wasn’t worth pursuing.

Jesus began his ministry with a plan, built on a foundation of scripture and bold in its scope. It was a vision that was empowered by the Spirit. It was also a vision that had its doubters and skeptics.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “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.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.¹

State in your own words what you think Jesus is setting forth as his mission and vision for ministry?

How is the vision, as described in the passage above, a God-sized vision?

In June of 2013, the Greater New Jersey Conference of the United Methodist Church embarked on a new journey – adopting a strategic plan with a God-sized vision that cannot be accomplished by human effort alone. Some may question the wisdom of a bold vision, especially in a time of shrinking numbers in the pews, economic challenges, aging buildings that require a larger and larger percentage of the church budget, and rising costs of maintaining ministry on all levels. While these and other concerns are very real, the Greater New Jersey United Methodists has committed to move forward with a spirit of boldness, a commitment that cannot be accomplished without faith that God is with us as we move forward.

This strategic plan sets direction for the Annual Conference and its churches. It is a strategic plan built on the foundations of scripture and, quite honestly, is too big for us to accomplish on our own. It is a plan that will require commitment to prayer, scripture study, relationship building, and honest assessment. It is also a plan that will require our local churches and the annual conference to stretch and move into new places where we have not been before. Perhaps the questions that have been raised in this resource is the first place that has required stretching as we need to come to some clarity about what we mean when talk about discipleship, leadership, transformation, inclusivity, and building community. Perhaps the honest assessment of how we might need to alter our methods of sharing the good news for the non and nominally religious and the younger generations has already challenged us.

Challenges, though, are not enough. Will there be any action? That is a question that is still to be answered, but a question that is crucial if this plan will move us forward as a conference. “Will there be action?” is a question we need to ask if we seek to be more faithful and more fruitful for the kingdom.

*We see a church that is like Jesus Christ – radical spirit and humble, teaching and healing, soul saving and soul tending, leader and servant, unbound and outbound . . .
We see a Wesleyan Church – personal holiness and social holiness, connectional and risk taking, thoughtful and inspirational, small groups and large vision, welcoming all and respect for diversity of thought.*

This statement is the vision that is set forth for the Greater New Jersey Conference. Take a few moments and note what parts of this vision you believe your church is doing well and is on track. Discuss together why you have chosen these particular aspects of the vision, and what is the evidence that you would point to in support of your choices? (record notes below)

What parts of this vision statement need further clarification for you? Share these with one another and seek help and support from the group to come to a better understanding of what these mean?

What parts of the vision statement do you think have been, or will be, difficult for your congregation to live out? Why do you think this? If you could choose one of two things to work on, what would they be?

Planning and strategies for ministry are an important to fulfill the vision. Jesus carefully planned his ministry so that he would be in harmony with God's time. Paul likewise had a plan for his ministry of spreading the gospel, including using his citizenship to demand a trial in Rome so that he might go that far in his journey. The church has often made plans for ministry, some which have successfully moved the church forward and others that have been marginally successful, if at all. Many people have a difficult time with adopting any plan as they have seen much work go into a planning process and a document that then is put on the shelf and never viewed again.

The success of any plan, however, is the ability to work that plan, to make something happen. The effectiveness of a plan, however, is not measured in checking off the laundry list of tasks and to-do items. For the church, the goal of any plan is not to complete it for the plan's sake. The goal should always be to give glory to God, to do God's will, and further God's plan for God's people. This is precisely what Jesus did.

For example in the eleventh chapter of John, Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is ill. Rather than go immediately to Bethany, he delays for a couple of days before going with his disciples. Jesus knows that Lazarus has now died, but he tells his disciples that he waited, "*For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.*"^{li} After he arrives, he prays at the tomb of his friend, "*Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.*"^{lii} Two times within the story, Jesus uses the circumstances of Lazarus' impending death and resurrection as a means of giving glory to God and witnessing to those who were gathered. Jesus' mission was not to bring glory to himself, to fulfill a set list of miracles and healings, or teach through some great sermons. His purpose was to usher in a new age, where God's ways will reign on earth as it is in heaven, and there will be shalom among all of God's people. His mission is to fulfill the vision laid out at the beginning of his ministry. His strategy was to use as many means as possible to demonstrate God's love, God's power, and God's grace.

The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We describe disciples as persons who "*sit at the feet of Jesus and become life-long learners and followers of Jesus Christ, leaving behind safety and complacency*

to serve like Christ to save souls, end poverty, be graceful with those at the margins, connect with people who are different from us, and magnify God's presence in the world." No vision becomes possible without persons willing to fulfill the vision. No vision is possible without a community of people committed to making something happen. That requires a strategy that will support and encourage persons and communities – that strategy is a vital congregation – a local church that is alive and vibrant, bearing fruit for the sake of the gospel, and reaching out to be a transforming presence for others in the world.

A lively, entertaining church that does little to nothing for anyone else is not vibrant. A church with a sizeable endowment fund that uses its resources to maintain itself and keep those already in attendance happy isn't vital. Vitality is far more than happiness and enjoyment. Vitality is making a difference, being God-like in our ministry to reach the poor and the marginalized, encouraging and leading persons to grow deeper in their relationship with God through Christ, and taking risks for Jesus trusting that God will empower the church to do great things.

The pyramid on the first page of this section has at its apex increasing the number of highly vital congregations from 14% to 41% - a complete turnaround in numbers. Why is this so important that it would be the primary goal? Because it is in the local congregation that lives are changed, that communities are impacted, that transformation happens. The work of the annual conference and its leadership is to encourage, support, and resource congregations to become vital, working in partnership with the local church leaders towards this goal. Each of the strategies listed below the top triangle lift up and sustain the top goal.^{liii}

But the decision about congregational vitality does not lie with the annual. It is the decision of each local church. Each congregation needs to determine if it is willing to be risk-taking, open to needed change, ready to meet the challenges of focusing ministry on fruitfulness rather than mere activity. Each congregation needs to come together in conversation around important questions and determine whether they are ready for a new day when they can affirm, "Here I am, Lord. Send us."

Conversation

- What are the ministries you currently do so that you can make disciples, grow the vitality of your congregation, grow spiritual leaders, become more like the people in your community, and become younger and more diverse?
- Using your imagination for a God-sized plan for your church, what might you explore as a congregation to be a more vital congregation for Jesus Christ?
- Why be engaged by the vision, mission, objectives and strategies outlined in this plan? What difference will it make and how will we be different?

Next Steps



Afterward

Now that your group has completed this study on the Gospel Questions, what is the next step? This is a question that will be different for each congregation, as the diversity of churches in our annual conference would not allow for a single action plan. But what next for your congregation?

As a group, discuss together what you believe are the next steps in moving towards vitality for Jesus Christ in your community. Discern together two or three specific action steps for your congregation to consider, what is a reasonable time-line for taking these steps, and who will be the persons who will take the lead in this. For some congregations, there will be a stronger need for growing new and stronger leaders. Other congregations will see a need for engaging in mission or transformative ministries. Others will need to step back and examine assumptions that have been a part of the culture of the congregation for generations.

A second task that you are encouraged to take on to think about who is the next group of persons in the church who should be invited to engage in the Gospel Questions study. Each of the persons in the present group may want to invite someone specifically to join a new group that will engage in this study. Perhaps more of the church leadership should be invited, or current Bible studies and small groups in the congregation should be encouraged to use this study as a means of digging into what it means to be a Christian in the 21st Century. What is the plan for inviting persons, and what is the target date for the start of the next group(s)?

Finally, what are the questions that were raised for you as a group about your congregation and its ministry? These are the questions that cannot be easily answered. These are questions that often have a number of different answers because a single answer will not address the concerns of the diversity of persons in your church or community.

May God continue to bless you as you move ahead boldly, taking risks for Jesus Christ, and growing more vital so that together we might bring transformation to a world in need of the Good News.

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Action Plans

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³⁴ Revelation 3: 16-17, NRSV.

³⁴ Luke 4: 16-22, NRSV.

³⁴ John 11: 15, NRSV.

³⁴ John 11: 41b - 42, NRSV.

³⁴ The pyramid is only a summary diagram. You may find the complete strategic plan on the conference web-site: gnjumc.org.