



ACADEMY OF CHRISTIAN TRAINING AND STUDY  
Christian Church in Northern California - Nevada

# "Abundant Living: Re-thinking Stewardship"

*"I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly."—John 10:10*

## Materials Packet

*There will be an addendum closer to the beginning of the course with correlating chapters from the optional book "Not Your Parents' Offering Plate." Chapters from the optional book "Sabbath and Jubilee" are referenced here.*

HOLY MANNERS—page 3

### SESSION ONE: **ENOUGH! Believing in God's Abundance**

*What IS abundant living? Why would we choose it? What would a life of gratitude look like?*

- Genesis 1 and 2
- Resolution of the United Methodist Church, resolved 1996, on the subject of abundant living, page 4
- Lowery text, chapter 6 (Sabbath and Creation)

### SESSION TWO: **LIVING FAITHFULLY**

*Time, Talent and Treasure: What holds us back from abundant living? What does abundant living look like in relationship to people in the world? In relation to the earth itself?*

- 1 Corinthians 4:1; 1 Peter 4:10
- Relational Tithes: Wealth, Poverty & Communities of Faith By Darin Petersen, page 7
- "Saving Paradise," Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker, Tikkun magazine, page 12
- Interview with Sallie McFague, author of "A New Climate for Theology," page 17
- Lowery text, chapter 8 (Sabbath made for humans)

### **SESSION THREE: Don't worry, be happy! (Or The Faith that Frees)**

*Celebrating our liberation (from the cycle of acquisition, from perpetual work to the point of exhaustion)*

- Celebrating Sabbath Economics, Sojourners Magazine, page 19
- Article on Sabbath Rest, Sojourners Magazine, page 21
- Article on Simple Living, page 24
- Why people give, page 28
- Lowery text, chapter 5 (Proclaim Liberty!)

### **SESSION FOUR: Creating a community of abundant living-- Best Practices for our churches and for us**

*Creating a community of shared values: best practices, the budget as a moral document, and ways to create a culture of gratitude, generosity and abundance in the church, including clarity of vision and mission*

- How to build a narrative budget, page 29
- Cultivating a missional church, page 33
- Article on being clear about the church's purpose, page 42
- NOT IN THIS PACKET, BUT HIGHLY RECOMMENDED: Handbook for Treasurers of Disciples of Christ churches: <http://www.churchextension.org/upload/Treasurers-Handbook-July-2009.pdf>
- Lowery Text, chapter 1 (An Ethic of Abundance and Self-Restraint)

### **SESSION FIVE: I am a steward of the mystery; you are a steward of the mystery!**

*Claiming our individual roles in creating abundance in our lives and the lives of our congregations*

- Lowery Text, chapter 9 (A Modern Spirituality of Sabbath and Jubilee)



## Holy Manners for the Group Process

- 1. First and foremost we acknowledge that we come together as brothers and sisters in Christ:** When we remember that Christ is in our midst, it is easier to behave in ways we know he would ask of us—compassionate, open and supportive.
- 2. Confidentiality:** What's said in the group stays in the group unless there is full agreement and permission to share a piece of information.
- 3. Respect:** Disagree without being disagreeable. Acknowledge the other person's point of view. Confirm that you heard correctly before responding. Avoid sarcasm and hurtful comments and tones of voice.
- 4. Truly Listen:** Sometimes the hardest thing to do is simply listen to a person without already thinking of what you are going to say back before they even finish. Rather than get into a "discussion," just simply receive the person's sharing and give only a response of affirmation or understanding.
- 5. Be more committed to relationship than to "winning" or being "right:"** It is hard to have true dialogue with people whose whole goal is to prove their point or win their agenda. It is best to be able to just listen and be respectful. Stay open in your sharing.
- 6. Sabotage or manipulation are not acceptable under any circumstances:** When destructive behavior is discovered, it must be named to the person (keeping in mind the above guidelines) and agreement reached to cease such behavior. Support and help should be offered as appropriate. A person who persists in this kind of behavior needs to be asked, in love, to leave the group.
- 7. Be committed to attending each group and really "show up."** When we are busy or stressed it is easy to physically show up, but mentally or emotionally be elsewhere. Make the commitment to not only physically make the group meetings, but to be fully present to each other while you are here.
- 8. Affirm your brothers and sisters!** When someone shares something that comes right from the depth of their soul and you can tell this is not easy for them to do...thank them! When someone shares something you have been thinking or feeling yourself, but have been unable to articulate...thank them! A little affirmation goes a long way in reminding us that we are fellow travelers on this journey.

<http://www.ccncn.org/holymatters.pdf>

# Resolution of the United Methodist Church, resolved 1996, on the subject of abundant living.

<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=4&mid=915>

**Please be aware that this statement does not appear in the 2004 (current) Book of Resolutions. It is available for archival purposes only.**

All creation has been brought into being by God, who "saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). All creation declares God's handiwork; everything exists in an intricate web of interdependence, and all this is given value and blessed by God (Genesis 1).

The initial and foundational value of all creation comes from its being the handiwork of God. God seeks the salvation, healing, and reconciliation of all creation: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). In Jesus Christ, "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20).

Through the divine Creation and Incarnation of God in Christ, we see the world as a loving creation—a creation intimate with its Creator. It is through this intimacy with God through Jesus Christ that we find our value and our worth.

The whole of creation contains all that is necessary to sustain itself and is an indication of God's affection and desire for re-creation.

We are people called to live toward God's vision of reconciliation through Christ Jesus. This reconciled world, or "new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1), includes creation healed—a creation where diversity is celebrated as a gift, rather than resisted and destroyed; where loving relationships are supremely valued and the resources of the world are shared equitably and justly; where all persons know their worth and value as children of God who seek the well-being of God's creation above their own greed.

It is a world where we live out of a theology of "enough," a theology based in knowledge that we are grounded in Christ; that our sense of personal value and esteem grow from our Christ-centered life. It is a theology that allows us to move away from worshipping the gods of consumption and material need.

In living out a theology of "enough," we will no longer expend our physical resources in consumption and our emotional resources in worrying over status. Our security and sense of well-being will be defined in relationship to God, not by our possessions. We will center our lives around God.

We hear a reminder of this style of living throughout Jesus teachings: "Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat? or 'What will we drink? or 'What will we wear? For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed [God] knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and [God s] righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31-33). While Christ does not seek for any of us to be without basic necessities, a simplified life will move us away from the expectations and injustices of affluent living. Abundant living is a life of greater simplicity, of a more responsible use of resources, and of a deeper faith.

Jesus discusses the foolishness of the rich and the greed that builds treasures on the earth. He admonishes us to build treasures in heaven, so that we might keep ourselves pure in heart and faithful to God (Luke 12).

In the "new heaven and new earth," we will choose a just lifestyle and share our wealth with the poor because we no longer need "things" to give us worth. With a theology of "enough," we will find gracious and fulfilled living in meeting our own basic needs and those of others. We will truly be "keepers" and "doers" of God's Word.

## **A Corrupted Vision of Abundant Living**

There is a conflict between what abundant living means for a Christian and what it has come to mean in secular society. In secular society, abundant living is defined by one's aspiration to purchase an endless number of things, far more than is needed. Secular abundant living is experienced when one desires to live in luxury with every whim satisfied. This type of abundant living creates a system where the wealthy consume a disproportionate amount of resources and produce a disproportionate amount of waste. This living is rooted in

a consumerism that exploits natural resources, exacerbates global resource crises, and causes cycles of global poverty that often lead to local and international violence.

Hearing these facts often raises feelings of guilt, anger, and denial. The false hope that technology will find fixes for all problems leads us to believe that change is not necessary. We who live in a culture of consumerism believe we have earned and deserved all of what we have; we do not want to give up anything. Our "things" give us a misguided status, a false sense of security, and a distorted sense of self-worth.

If we fail to believe in our hearts that our worth comes from our relationship to Christ and that we are called to bring God's redeeming love to creation through our actions and lifestyles, then all the arguments and information on the global crisis will be ignored. We will care about our impact on creation when we each recognize that creation is a gift given by a loving God for the benefit of all life. Only then will we assess how our lifestyles (what we do, use, buy, wear, eat, live in, and travel in) affect all present and future life.

We have a choice: We can be sustainers, or exploiters, of creation.

### **Visions of Faithful Abundant Living on Earth**

- Abundant living is when all people have their basic needs met for food, shelter, and good health.
- Abundant living occurs when all have meaningful and fulfilling work that contributes to the common good of all others.
- Abundant living is providing not only for the needs of this generation, but also for generations to come.
- Abundant living is found in having time for family and community life.
- Abundant living produces an environment where children are valued, cared for, and nurtured in families and communities.
- Abundant living is a lifestyle that protects the diversity of all creation.
- Abundant living is based on spiritual principles, which results in unity, sharing, mutual respect, and appreciation.
- Abundant living is found in a church that nurtures growth and a deepening relationship with God through Christ.

### **Abundant Living Toward Redemption and Renewal**

The United Methodist Church is called to help find opportunities for individuals to reevaluate their sense of value and to center their lives and lifestyles around God, rather than around consumption of material things.

The following are steps to assist The United Methodist Church in responding to its call:

#### **United Methodist Congregations**

Local congregations will reclaim the spirit of sacrificial discipleship through networks and abundant-living communities. These will nurture the conversion of people in local communities through study, lifestyle assessment, and nurture of spiritual life. (The General Board of Church and Society can suggest resources.)

#### **General Board of Church and Society**

The General Board of Church and Society, working with the General Council on Ministries, will assist general agencies, boards, councils, and annual conferences to assess their patterns of consumption (including but not limited to facility use, travel, compensation packages, and purchase of reusable materials).

#### **General Board of Discipleship**

The General Board of Discipleship, with support of the General Board of Church and Society, will develop ways of assisting persons (especially those who have experienced programs such as the Disciple Bible study or other Bible-study programs) to reassess personal lifestyles, with the goal of a conversion to a more simple, less-consumptive lifestyle and to a greater sensitivity to each person's decision-making responsibility in relation to national, global, social, environmental, and economic problems.

**General Board of Global Ministries**

The General Board of Global Ministries will look at the models of development taught to and by World and National Division partners and assess these models roots in the culture of consumerism. The Women's Division shall include the focus of abundant living in the Schools of Christian Mission.

**Council of Bishops**

The General Board of Church and Society will work with episcopal leaders to increase their awareness and modeling of abundant living and support their commitment to ministries to and with the poor of the world.

**General Board of Higher Education and Ministry**

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry will work with United Methodist seminaries and schools to provide education to promote individual conversion to a simplified lifestyle.

ADOPTED 1996

See Social Principles, ¶ 163D.

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## ***Relational Tithe***

Wealth, Poverty & Communities of Faith By Darin Petersen

[http://www.relationaltithe.com/pdffiles/Wealth, Poverty & Communities of Faith.pdf](http://www.relationaltithe.com/pdffiles/Wealth,_Poverty_&_Communities_of_Faith.pdf)

Poverty is the state for the majority of the world's people and nations. Why? Is it enough to blame poor people for their own predicament? Have they been lazy, made poor decisions, and are solely responsible for their plight? What about their government? Have they pursued policies that actually harm successful development? Such causes of poverty and inequality are no doubt real. But often less discussed are deeper and more global causes of poverty.

As we entered the 21st century the gap between the global rich and poor grew. This is true as well among the community of people seeking to live in the way of Jesus. James, the brother of Jesus, wrestled with how a handful live in abundance while so many go without. If there has ever been a time in history that this has to continue to be wrestled with, it is now. The rich and poor are isolated into separate communities and rarely have, or choose, the opportunity to engage with one another.

For those of us who live in comparative abundance, the choices we make tremendously affect each another – choices related to where and how we live. Choices we make in our neighborhoods are mysteriously and powerfully felt halfway around the world. Even though our world is becoming more and more connected, the barriers that exist between the rich and poor are growing exponentially year after year.

In the United States, where Christianity has become a market, it is hard to reconcile how multi-million dollar buildings are erected, while our extended global family is in need and going without. Will the church of North America allow herself to be conformed to the patterns of this world, or will she demonstrate that another world is possible and needed?

For most local congregations, Ray Mayhew writes, "We usually calculate how much it costs to run the church, and then decide how much we can give away to missions and the poor." This is not usually done out of selfishness or lack of concern for the poor. It is the direct result of our theology of stewardship which appears to be quite different from that of the early church.

Unlike our early forefathers, many draw a parallel between giving to the Levites in the Old Testament via the tithe, and giving to the church (rather than the poor) in the New Testament. In several ways, this is a fundamental mistake. Sociologically, the church is parallel in function to the synagogue (which incidentally, also took offerings for the poor), not to the Levitical system of temple, priest, and sacrifice. The religious infrastructure centered on the tabernacle or temple no longer exists, and has no physical or financial parallel in the church."<sup>1</sup>

Current day Jewish people do not tithe, given that the tithe was intended for the Temple. Gifts and offerings, outside the tithe, are what contribute to the ongoing work and support of local synagogues. It is questionable when people seek to make a parallel between the tithe given in the Hebrew Scriptures and that which is given to local congregations today. For instance Larry Burkett writes:

"In the Old Testament book of Malachi we're told that God wants us to direct our entire tithe into the storehouse. A storehouse in the Old Testament had four functions. It was used to feed (1) the tribe of Levi and the priests of Aaron, (2) the prophets, (3) the Hebrew widows and orphans living within the city, and (4) the widows and orphans of the Gentiles who were living in and around the Hebrew city.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Burkett, *Answers to Your Family's Financial Questions*, Living Books, 1998, pp. 160-161.

However, the equivalent of the Old Testament storehouse in the New Testament, as well as in our present day society, is the local church...If we associate the functions of the Old Testament storehouse to the New Testament and current local church, its fourfold function would be to provide for the needs of (1) the pastor and staff, (2) missionaries and evangelists, (3) widows, orphans, single parents, and invalids in the local church, and (4) the unsaved who surround the local church."

Congregations today function much like the synagogues. Certainly, theologically we are the temple of God. But to argue that the above parallels stand is a stretch at best. "Therefore, a parallel between giving the tithe for the maintenance of the Levites and temple under the old covenant, and giving it for the maintenance of the church and clergy under New, is tenuous at best. A more appropriate parallel might be between giving to the rabbi in the synagogue and the pastor in the church. However, rabbis did not qualify as recipients of the tithe, and until the Medieval period most would not accept any payment whatever for their services."<sup>2</sup>

Our local congregations also function much like a family. Or, in the words of Paul, much like a body. We share in the resources and needs of one another, not considering either one our own. For example, I do not "give" my wife money to buy groceries for our family. What is mine is hers and vice versa. When the Hebrew tithe was given, it was given away to others. It was given to the Levites, a tribe to which those doing the giving did not belong. In contrast, when I give to the church, it is not "given away" at all. I am the church! Revenue given to the church directly benefits me as a believer in providing pastoral care, Bible teaching, family counseling, facilities for my children and a building for me to worship in. In that sense, very little is given away. Most of the money I give to the church is spent by the church on meeting my needs and those of my family. For this I am very grateful. However, I am also suspicious whether I am a valid recipient of such expenditure.

A refinement of the questionable fiscal construct mentioned above (that giving to the church and clergy under the new covenant parallels giving to the Levites and the temple under the old covenant), is to concede that indeed the Levitical system cannot parallel the church, as it has been fulfilled in Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Mayhew

<sup>3</sup> But then to argue that a meaningful parallel *can* be drawn between the financial support of *priests* (as distinct from Levites), under the old covenant dispensation, and the support of the clergy under the New. Priests were indeed the shepherds of Israel and it could be argued that while the system requiring the manual labor of a Levitical tribe passed away, the teaching and shepherding responsibilities that were part of the priestly role continue and are today exercised by the clergy. Priests were of course supported by the Israelite community. The house of Aaron made up about 5 percent of the Levitical population and received a "tithe of the tithe" (Neh. 12:47). [While the Old Testament system of tithes and offerings is complex and difficult to unravel, many of us believe that though they are no longer a legal requirement under the new covenant, the concept of the tithe does provide us with some helpful guidelines in the Church Age] Therefore if we conclude that there is, in fact, a parallel between the support of the priests in the Old Testament and the clergy in the New, and use a simple tenth as a guide, then a "tithe of the tithe" would still only qualify the clergy (and those working with them) to receive ten dollars out of every hundred given to the church. It is my contention that the poor should be the primary recipients of the remainder—not the demands of an ecclesiological infrastructure (on average, eighty five dollars out of every hundred given to the church is spent internally, leaving only fifteen to be given away on causes that in no way directly benefit our members). With the exception of I Corinthians 8:13, which I will discuss below, neither the apostles or the ancient church seemed to make these Old Testament comparisons in developing their fiscal policy. However, surprisingly, they did make a direct comparison with the old covenant in developing their theology of the poor. Their radical posture of generosity towards the needy was a continuation of what was already initiated under the old covenant. The care for the destitute and disenfranchised under the Mosaic legislation was, as we know, in stark contrast to their exploitation in the surrounding nations. Laws governing the gleaning of fields, loans without interest, the remission of debt and the provision of Sabbath and Jubilee years were unique to Israel and set her apart as a society. When the Talmud was eventually written, it would reflect this tradition by proposing that one fifth of one's possessions be given to the needy, and devote an entire volume ("Pe'ah") to the appropriate use of the tithe and the rights of the poor. The genius of life under the covenant was that obedience would mean the whole nation would prosper, and poverty would only exist in exceptional circumstances. As already mentioned, this meant that they were able to support, by the regular tithe, a large community of Levites. The Levites would, in turn, maintain the elaborate and costly system of tabernacle and temple. [However, the funds for the construction and maintenance of these sacred buildings were primarily supplied by free will offerings and did not draw on the tithe] With the institution of the new covenant everything changed. The church, unlike national Israel, was now scattered among the nations, included Gentiles, and its members subject to injustice, oppression,

While, to my knowledge, we cannot establish with absolute certainty the theological connections made by the ancient church between giving under the old covenant and giving under the new, examples abound that illustrate at least some of their thinking writes Ray Mayhew. For example, Irenaeus, in the second century, argues that the teachings of Jesus did not abrogate provision for the poor in the Mosaic law, but rather enlarged and extended them, and that “instead of the law enjoining the giving of tithes” (which would go to the Levites), Jesus tells us “to now share all our possessions with the poor.” Many of the subapostolic documents, from a very early date, attest to the parallel between giving to God via the Levites under the old covenant and giving to God via the poor in the new covenant.

In ancient Jewish tradition we find people who realized their responsibility to the poor. We encounter countless debates and discussions in the texts about this understanding that still beg, and demand, our understanding (If a harvester’s hand is pricked by a thorn, and a handful of grain falls to the ground, can it be picked up, or does it belong to the poor? If grain falls into an ant hole, does it belong to the owner of the land or to the poor?, etc.) Justo Gonzalez writes, “It would be easy to ridicule such discussions as unwarranted legalism; but the main point should not be obscured, that all these debates and regulations were an attempt to safeguard the rights of the poor, and that their fundamental premise was that the poor do have rights...”

Jesus emerges out of that Jewish tradition and culture and calls people, then and today, to a way of life that is full of compassion, deeply concerned for poor, and that understands our responsibilities. As the community of Jesus in the first century moved out from the shadows of Jewish tradition, it kept and, in many ways, developed and deepened it’s understanding of God’s heart for the poor. Many of the early followers were poor themselves and found refuge within the community of faith.

In the Gospel narratives, the preaching of the Kingdom has strong economic implications. It relates to both the justice that the Kingdom requires and the need for drastic action in view of its impending reality, writes Gonzalez. We see that many of the gospel parallels dealing with economic matters demand that people live extraordinarily different. What might happen if, as followers, when we begin to apply Biblical principles of economic sharing?

*The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. 14Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." Luke 3:9-14*

The marriage of justice and the need for action continues in the preaching of Jesus and the early movement of his followers. Beyond the laborers in the vineyard, the unjust steward, and the talents, we also see what seem to be “harsh sayings” of Jesus. We observe the response to the rich ruler to sell everything as well as his commentary in regards to the camel and a needle. We also see Jesus instructing people to sell what they have to give to the poor. Luke’s version says, “sell all you have and distribute it to the poor”. By the time the sayings were incorporated into the Gospel of Mark and through the other gospels they were already presenting some difficulties for the gospel writers. This is probably why we’re told that the disciples are astonished and ask who could then be saved. (Mark 10:26) says Justo Gonzalez. Jesus teaches that “Everyone who has left houses or

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persecution, and the common lot of living in a pagan society. The Mosaic provision for God’s poor in the old covenant (gleaning, loans, Sabbath and Jubilee years etc.) was no longer available for God’s poor found throughout the Empire. However as the new covenant community they had the advantage of being free from the financial burden of maintaining a Levitical tribe along with the elaborate ceremonial system that went with it. This meant that the provision for God’s poor among the nations could now come from the income that previously went towards maintaining the old ceremonial system. The mechanism under the new covenant for the equity that was available under the old would be the redistribution of wealth through the tithes and offerings of a church released from the burden of Levite, Temple, sacrifice and ceremony. – from EMBEZZLEMENT: THE CORPORATE SIN OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY? Page 5-6

brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

“They began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as any might have need.” (Acts 2:45 NAS) It is quite possible that the gospel writers along with the early followers of Jesus saw this response to leave everything as an act of solidarity which was central to the teaching of the Kingdom of God that showed the “first will be last and the last will be first”. The early church saw fellowship (koinonia) not simply as spiritual sharing but as a total sharing that includes the material as well as the spiritual. Although this understanding of fellowship was voluntary in nature it does not mean that it was taken lightly. On the contrary, it was core to who they were as a people. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and koinonia, to the breaking of bread and prayers.” Acts 2:42

While the early Jesus movement attracted many that were poor and who found the normal response to the gospel was to renounce the goods one could otherwise possess, they still made room for those that were not ready to take such steps. This led to the need to figure out how to handle a church that included both rich and poor. This may quite possibly be why the Epistle of James, gives so much attention to how people of faith are to relate to one another.

Today there is also a negative change in income distribution. The unfortunate reality is that the gap between the rich and poor is widening. For example: About 0.13% of the world’s population controlled 25% of the world’s assets in 2004 and 20% of the world’s population consume 86% of the world’s goods while 80% of humanity gets just the remainder 14%.<sup>4</sup>

For those who have the opportunity and availability to connect on a global scale, there is the responsibility to respond – to respond to the reality that we need to know our global neighbors. We ought to be creative in developing ways to connect with one another.

There is much to be learned through such connections – connections of relationships that allow rich and poor to become each other’s teachers. Relational Tithe seeks to make such connections and offers a platform where the rich and poor express and experience global solidarity with local roots.

Relational Tithe has experienced the power within a group of people willing to share a tenth of their income and move through the barriers that tend to isolate us from real needs and relationships. Members of Relational Tithe hold to the belief that the tithe is one of God’s mechanisms to ensure that no one goes without.

Within the context of friendship and common commitment, we share a tenth of our income to need-meeting and collectively submit ourselves to accountability in regards to our giving. Relational Tithe keeps one common fund between all members from which we share relationally with people in need. One hundred percent of the tithe goes to needs that are collectively brought to the community.

Clusters of Relational Tithe participants share in life, story-sharing and need meeting. Sometimes clusters are geographically connected, at other times members of a particular cluster are scattered throughout the country and globe, but continue to share in the joy and responsibility of finding ways to redistribute relationally – connecting one another to needs that are present before us.

Relational Tithe is essentially a global community that meets the needs of one another and our neighbors, collectively and relationally. Sometimes the needs we meet come from within the community – covenant members who find themselves in difficult situations. Most times, however, the tithe is redistributed to neighbors, friends and families that Relational Tithe members are in relationship with. Each member covenants to honestly share the needs of their community within their Relational Tithe Cluster, and at times with the larger community. We commit to sharing questions, ideas, and blessings to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/PovertyAroundTheWorld.asp>

best collectively decide if and how to meet needs. For the sake of good stewardship, we want to assure that we give appropriate deliberation to the funds we redistribute.

As we journey together, we are challenged to be aware of the scarcity of what our society offers and counter it with the abundance we find in a loving Creator. We are increasingly able to realize and express the beauty of “what is mine is yours” as we wrestle individually and collectively with our faith and resources.

As we examine our own lives, may we hold tightly to the reality that there is one Bread we all partake of as we seek to share in “The fellowship (koinonia) of his suffering” (Philippines 3:10). The early church was deeply marked by the fellowship of the rich and poor, even to the point of suffering – may this essence also mark who we are in light of a very different world.

This article draws from the work of Ray Mayhew [EMBEZZLEMENT: THE CORPORATE SIN OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY?](#). To read Mayhew’s paper or for more information on Relational Tithe go online at [RelationalTithe.com](#). You can also write or call Darin Petersen if you like at [Darin@RelationalTithe.com](mailto:Darin@RelationalTithe.com) or 510-225-2309.

*This article is based on Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Boston: Beacon Press, 2008, a best book of the year at Publishers Weekly. For more information, including many more art works, see [www.savingparadise.net](http://www.savingparadise.net).*

**by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker**



PHOTO BY NAKASHIMA BROCK AND REBECCA ANN PARKER

It took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century. Why not? This question set us

off on a five-year pilgrimage to ancient sites throughout the Mediterranean world. What we discovered is that during their first millennium, Christians filled their sanctuaries with images of Christ as living presence in a world ablaze with beauty. The spaces placed Christians in a lush visual environment: a cosmos of stars in midnight skies, golden sunlight, sparkling waters teeming with fish, exuberant fauna, and verdant meadows filled with flowers and fruit trees. Punctuating such scenes were images of the great cloud of witnesses.

Paradise, we realized, was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries. This both disconcerted and intrigued us. On the one hand, we were dismayed to think that early Christians appeared to be obsessed with the afterlife. On the other hand, we wondered why they covered every inch of church walls with such images. As we investigated further, studying sacred texts and rituals as well as images, we came to understand that paradise was not an other-worldly or post-mortem realm. Paradise was this world-permeated and blessed by the presence of God-and it was the counter-realm to empire. As feminists, long concerned with the problems created by crucifixion-centered forms of Christianity, we decided to explore this ancient vision of paradise to illuminate the struggles and possibilities in our own time.

Many scriptures picture a lush garden, a safe and beautiful dwelling place for humanity, watered by a river that assures abundance for all. The prophets of the Bible invoked the story of creation and of the garden in Genesis to judge and condemn unjust, unwise kings, their oppressive policies, and their wars. The prophet Amos used images of paradise to call for justice. "Let justice roll down," he said, "like rivers." Like the rivers of paradise. The prophet Isaiah promised paradise here and now to those who share earth's wealth justly: "Share your bread with the hungry, open your house to the poor ... You shall be like a watered garden, whose springs never run dry."

The Christian gospels echo prophetic uses of paradise and justice. In Luke, for example, Jesus announces his mission in the world by reading from the book of Isaiah.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19 and Isaiah 61:1-2).

Jesus quotes from a chapter in Isaiah that begins with creation's goodness and concludes with the earth flourishing as a renewed garden. With the arrival of the year of the Lord's favor-a jubilee year of justice-

Isaiah says God will cause "what is sown in [the garden] to spring up ... [and] righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." Isaiah wrote his words to exiles suffering under the Babylonian empire. In Luke, Jesus reads these words to the poor of Galilee who were struggling with a new empire. "Today," Jesus announces to them, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21) In echoing the vision of Isaiah, Jesus says the Spirit of God in the world is already at work to encourage a fuller flowering of righteousness-today, not tomorrow, not later, but now. And later in the same gospel, Jesus says, "*Today*, you will be with me in paradise." Not later in the afterlife, but today, here on earth. Paradise in the Bible is blessed, but it also poses dangers. As Genesis makes clear, the serpent was in the garden *before the fall*. So the garden of God is not an ideal utopia without challenges. Its inhabitants must exercise wisdom and astute judgment if they are to avoid the traps that evil sets before them. And difference and struggle-tension and disputation-are hallmarks of life in the garden.

### **The Paradise in This World**

Paradise on earth dominated early Christian understandings of salvation. Many early leaders called the church "the paradise in this world." Christianity in this form shared much with Judaism, which began in the Second Temple period to identify Mt. Zion with the paradise mountain, the Jordan as the great river of paradise, and the Temple as its focus, a cosmology found in the book of Ezekiel.

The maintenance of paradise required people of faith to work to alleviate suffering, to appreciate the spirit of God in all creation, to love beauty as a blessing of creation, to avoid the use of violence, and to care for each other as friends of God. Sinning was inevitable; even the wise were not innocent of all sins, but had learned through trial and error how to be more effective at resisting the principalities and powers of the world. Not all sins were equal, however. The worst, which required special handling, were adultery, apostasy, and the shedding of human blood-even pagan blood. Each of these indicated a deep sickness in the soul that destroyed the health of human community centered in compassion, care, trust, and the respectful honoring of the spirit of God in all humanity-- and in all creation.

To accept membership into the church as paradise meant taking responsibility for sustaining paradise in this world. It meant appreciating, celebrating, and maintaining a salvation already given to the whole community, which, in gratitude, offered food, healing, and shelter to any who needed them. The historian Peter Brown, in summarizing early Christianity, calls it a life-affirming, this-worldly, optimistic faith.

### **The Imperial Turn to Christ's Tortured Corpse**

What happened to this life-affirming Christianity? The first images of Jesus dead appeared in the late tenth century, in Northern Europe. Crucifixion images emerged only after the Christian West saw dramatic changes that began with the Emperor Charlemagne around the year 800. The emergence of such images marked a turn in Christianity toward violence and away from the humane values of compassion, justice, and love for life. Charlemagne, modeling himself on his image of Constantine, ruthlessly forced conversion of his enemies at the point of a sword, breaking the ban on bloodshed. He used his version of Christianity as the propaganda arm of his empire. His clerics insisted that the sins of the empire's pagan enemies had crucified Christ. Instead of Christ being a spirit-inspired model for humanity in paradise, Charlemagne's court theologians made Christ a fierce, wrathful judge who condemned all sinners to hell-especially those who rebelled against imperial rule.

Instead of the church as paradise where the risen Christ and humanity communed in joy, love, and glory, the church became the place of judgment, riddled with fear. Christ crucified, the terrible judge, lorded it over lowly sinners who feared for their lives. As the distance between Christ and humanity grew, the church as paradise in this world became increasingly difficult to imagine, and paradise receded into the distant afterlife. It became so unimaginable that purgatory had to be invented to take care of residual sin,

even in the afterlife. The proper piety was abject terror of hell and fervent hope of heaven. Christians longed to be restored to a sinless, pure, and innocent state, as the only refuge from the judgment of God. To suffer punishment and to be completely absolved of sin became the only possible way to enter paradise in the next life, after suffering in purgatory. The more one suffered in this life to atone for one's sins, the closer one came to being absolved and saved.

In the late eleventh century, a theology emerged that said the only reason God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ was to die to save sinners from eternal damnation. Apocalyptic predictions of the world's end escalated during the same period. If God could sanction torture and murder, and seek to destroy the world, holy war for the sake of God became thinkable. Christians began to believe they could be saved through killing those they marked as enemies of God—Jews, Muslims, and heretics. As crusading fever took hold, Christians turned erotic desire not on beauty and creation but on pain, suffering, and death.

Paradise became an idealized, unreal, utopian ideal that could only arrive after the apocalypse, and Christian piety focused on extreme suffering as noble and good. Love of the tortured, murdered corpse became the heart of faith, and self-sacrifice became the highest form of love. Instead of working to alleviate human suffering, Christians began to think of suffering as a sacred calling. Present time became a place of sorrow and sin—Christians were to live in hyper-vigilant suspicion of its dangers and toils, relying only on divine mercy to be delivered from this world of woe.

The vision of life as paradise in this life would not die, however. In the medieval period, dissenting Christian movements such as the Waldensians rejected violence and promoted justice for the poor. In the seventeenth century, Quakers preached that paradise is accessible now through spiritual awakening. In the nineteenth century, Christians whose gender, race, or class had acquainted them firsthand with state-sanctioned oppressions troubled the waters of their faith traditions. Rejecting the pieties of anti-worldly Christianity, they turned to the Jesus of the gospels and generated diverse movements that sought to realize the Kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven."

Reformers emerged from oppressed groups themselves to forge vigorous and varied movements that upheld the dignity and worth of all human beings and that worked for justice and equality. They generated new visions for community in North America. Their efforts helped fuel the abolitionist movement, women's suffrage, labor movements, and anti-lynching campaigns.

### **Bringing in the Commonwealth of God**

In the early twentieth century, "Social Gospel" Christians believed the purpose of Christian life was to "bring in the Commonwealth of God"—to fulfill the prophetic vision that "earth might be fair and all people glad and wise." At the end of World War I, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), a German Baptist minister who ministered among the urban poor, published *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. The Social Gospel inspired many Christians to work for two decades to create the New Deal, the commonwealth that has taken half a century to dismantle and now lies in shambles amid the worthless paper of Wall Street and massive ponzi schemes.

Rauschenbusch had a keen capacity to identify how evil and sin operated in social and political systems, even in the guise of religion. He rejected the typical Christian teaching that sin was rooted in individual rebellion against God's will. Rauschenbusch observed that "in actual life such titanic rebellion against the Almighty is rare.... We do not rebel: we dodge and evade. We kneel in lowly submission and kick our duty under the bed while God is not looking."

Sin mattered, not because it disappointed, offended, or alienated God, but because it disrupted relationships of love and justice in human affairs. Rauschenbusch said:

We rarely sin ... alone. Science supplies the means of killing, finance the methods of stealing, the newspapers have learned how to bear false witness artistically to a globe full of people daily, and covetousness is the moral basis of our civilization.

Rauschenbusch insisted that the death of Jesus did not redeem humanity from its sins. Rather, it revealed the character of transpersonal evil-collective sins of empire and militarism that continue to put earth and its peoples at risk of crucifixion.

Rauschenbusch objected to narrow forms of Christianity. To counteract the sins of nationalism, racial categorization, religious chauvinism, and economic exploitation, God must be conceived as "the all-pervading life ... the ground of ... spiritual oneness," and those who worship God must recognize "the consciousness of solidarity" to be of the essence of religion. Social Gospel theology has, ever since, inspired many Christians to work tirelessly for justice.

### **Paradise Left Behind**

At the dawn of this new century, America's Christians are engaged in deep conflicts generated by the struggle to define and claim paradise. Near the end of the last century, a Christianity that embraces redemptive violence and looks to salvation in a world to come became a major public and political voice for Christians. Re-inscribing imperial Christianity, they bless conquest and colonization, privilege those with wealth and status, sanction war, and exploit the environment. In popular books such as the "Left Behind" series, they offer a paradise that is on the other side of the end of the world, after God destroys this earth.

"*Today* you will be with me in paradise," Jesus said. But when Christians seek to destroy paradise today, they force people to live in exile, homeless, and always in search of paradise somewhere else. Preoccupied with being lost, people become anxious for home, for escape from present life, which can never measure up to an idealized, imaginary idea of salvation. They turn, instead, to individual salvation in consumerist alternatives, grounded in a deep, hidden despair and profound spiritual loneliness. They are easily manipulated by false "gurus" who scold them and then offer them canned answers, another version of hellfire, judgment, and grace.

People so lost, so self-obsessed, and so hungry for spiritual grounding do not know how to shelter others from the storms of life. Their inability to see paradise here produces an eager greed for what others have, and an insatiable desire for goods. Avarice motivates large-scale programs of economic aggrandizement, military domination, and environmental exploitation.

### **Paradise Here, Today**

We know that another world and another society are possible. They begin when we understand that paradise is already present, and all our faiths can affirm it. What we need now is a religious perspective that does not locate salvation in a future end point in time, a transcendent realm, or a zone after death. Paradise is not withheld, closed, or removed from us. Realizing this requires us to let go of the notion that paradise is life without struggle, life free from wrestling with legacies of injustice and current forces of evil.

Our dangerous opportunity today is to live facing into this reality: histories of harm are all around us, current forces of evil operate within and among us, and yet everywhere the bushes are on fire, the rivers of paradise circle the earth, the Spirit rises in the wind, and the fountain of wisdom springs up from the earth we walk on, from this holy ground, a ground on which we create shelter for each other, even now, even in the storms of today.

We re-commit ourselves to this world as holy ground when we remember the fullness of life that is possible through our communities, our life-affirming work, and our love of each other. We give thanks for gifts of love that have been ours all along, an ever-widening circle of beauty, the Spirit in life, the Spirit in us and in this paradise on earth.

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# An interview with Sallie McFague by Fortress Press

<http://www.fortressforum.com/profiles/blog/show?id=2335135%3ABlogPost%3A1753>

**Fortress Press:** Your most recent work with us—*A New Climate for Theology*—relates theology, economy, and climate change. In what way does climate change pose a theological issue?

**Sallie McFague:** In an essay in *The New York Times* (3/08/09), Thomas Friedman writes, “What if the crisis of 2008 represents something much more fundamental than a deep recession? What if it’s telling us that the whole growth model we created over the last fifty years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall--when Mother Nature and the market both said: ‘No more.’” The economic meltdown and the climate crisis are two sides of the same problem, a problem based in large part on the basic assumptions we well-off Western human beings hold about ourselves: that we are “individuals” who deserve whatever we want and can legally hoard for ourselves, our comfort, and our pleasure. The major religions disagree about many things but none of them commend “Blessed are the greedy.” If “sin” is still an appropriate theological category (and I think it is), then the sin of us well-off human beings is our insatiable greed that is causing financial chaos and ecological destruction. Moreover, if the “abundant life” is also an appropriate theological issue, then suggesting alternative satisfying possibilities for human and planetary flourishing is part of the religious task. Theology is into the business of suggesting that “a different life is possible.” The religions critique the ways we are living that are detrimental to us and our world and give us hope—and some practices—for living in better ways. Hence, theology, economy, and climate change are natural and necessary conversation partners in the flourishing or deterioration of our common life.

**FP:** Your work on climate change is very critical of our present economic configuration. Do you see some hopeful elements of an alternative for the future?

**SM:** As the above quotation from Thomas Friedman states, economics and climate change are intimately related. They are both the product of excessive, unbridled use of scarce resources in unjust and unsustainable ways. Moreover, what the present dual economic-ecological crisis is telling us is that the kind of economics currently practiced worldwide is a failure needing serious revision. Its most serious error is what is called “externalities,” those things such as the just distribution of resources and planetary sustainability that are not a part of neoclassical market economics. Just distribution of resources to all life-forms and long-term sustainability are two sides of the same issue, for unless the parts of the planetary system have the basics of existence, the whole cannot be healthy. However, in market economics, the “environment” usually enters the loop only when government action demands the redress of a disaster, such as toxic pools from manufacturing waste. The “environment” is not factored into the price of goods at the front end, nor are necessary resources distributed with a view to the planet’s health.

However, the current economic-ecological crisis may be a wake-up call to the falseness of our current economic system. We will always need a system of allocating scarce resources (which is what economics does), but our current model strongly suggests that living within this system is “living a lie.” Reality is not set up to accommodate it.

The religions are or should be one of the voices in a society that calls attention to such lapses. As theologian John Hick claims, the function of the main religious traditions is “the transformation of

human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” (*An Interpretation of Religion* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 300). In our time, “reality” is understood as the evolutionary, ecological story of the radical interrelatedness and interdependence of all living creatures and physical processes. Therefore, there is no way we can have a just, sustainable planet unless all its parts have access to the necessary resources on a permanent basis. The individualistic, consumer anthropology is a false view of reality, one that is unjust to most living beings and unsustainable over the long run. The role of religion in our time is to critique the anthropology that is destroying our planet and suggest alternatives that are “reality” centered.

**FP:** Climate change and other issues seem inherently global. How do you formulate a Christology that is open and not exclusive? How is the figure of Jesus a resource for addressing climate change? How has your own Christology changed since *The Body of God*?

**SM:** The figure of Jesus is a resource for addressing climate change because of the self-emptying love for others manifest in his life and death. Jesus is not unique in displaying this manner of living, for most religious traditions are countercultural, suggesting that non-attachment, non-possessiveness, deep sharing, self-limitation, and giving space for others to live is central to good communal practice as well as the way to personal fulfillment. Could the crazy notion of self-emptying be a clue to what is wrong with our present way of being in the world as well as a suggestion of how we might live differently? What we see in the life and death of Jesus (as well as in the lives of many of his disciples such as John Woolman, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Martin Luther King Jr, and so on) is not self-emptying as self-denial in order to purify oneself but rather an invitation to imitate the way God loves the world. In the Christian tradition “kenosis,” or self-emptying, is a way of understanding God’s actions in creation, the incarnation, and the cross. In creation God limits the divine self, pulling in, so to speak, to allow space for others to exist. This is an inversion of the usual understanding of power as control; instead, power is given to others to live as diverse and valuable creatures. In the incarnation, as Paul writes in Phil. 2:7, God “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” substituting humility and vulnerability for our insatiable appetites. In the life of Jesus and his death on the cross, God gives of the divine self without limit in order to side with the poor and the oppressed. Therefore, Christian discipleship also becomes a “cruciform” life, imitating the self-giving of Christ for others.

Could this be an ethic for well-off human beings on our planet at the present time? What characterizes our time is two things: first, an awareness of our radical interdependence with all other life-forms and, second, an increasing appreciation of the planet’s finitude and vulnerability. These realities of our time mean that the vocabulary and sensibility of self-limitation, ego-lessness, sharing, giving space to others, and limiting our energy use no longer sound like a special language for the saints but rather sound like an ethic for all of us, especially those using much more than our fair and sustainable share of the world’s goods. The religions may be the greatest “realists,” with their intuitive appreciation for self-emptying and self-limitation as a way not only to personal fulfillment but also to sane planetary practice. Could it be that the religions might take the lead in exploring and illustrating how an ethic of self-limitation might function in light of the twenty-first-century crisis of climate change?

## Practicing Sabbath Economics: How to live in the light of God's abundance and provision.

by *Matthew Colwell* *Sojourners Magazine*

[http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&mode=printer\\_friendly&issue=soj0805&article=080513](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&mode=printer_friendly&issue=soj0805&article=080513)

Theologian Ched Myers characterizes “Sabbath economics” as the basic struggle of mammon vs. manna. “Mammon” is the Greek word (from Aramaic) used in Luke 16:13 when Jesus notes that “no slave can serve two masters ... you cannot serve God and mammon.” The word is translated “wealth” in the NRSV, and is portrayed a few verses later as the “love of money” (Luke 16:14). Mammon is then illustrated by a tale Jesus tells in Luke 16:19-31, in which a rich man feasts sumptuously and stores up luxury goods even as a poor beggar lies right outside his door. The economy of mammon is one of excess accumulation for some and poverty and deprivation for others.

“Manna,” on the other hand, refers to the story from Exodus 16 in which God rains down “bread from heaven” (Exodus 16:4). The Hebrew people were instructed to gather neither too much nor too little of the manna, but rather enough to meet their needs. And they were not to gather manna on the Sabbath day itself, making this manna story one of the first illustrations in all scripture of the meaning of Sabbath. In contrast to mammon economics of excess and deprivation, this model of manna or “Sabbath” economics stresses God’s abundance and provision. That abundance carries with it the accompanying instruction not to gather too much lest others go without.

Practicing an economy of sufficiency is no easy task when the model of mammon economics dominates. But there are practical steps households can take to live into alternatives. The following steps are based on the “Sabbath Economics Covenant” developed by Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, an ecumenical organization focused on economic and spiritual discipleship. The covenant is a simple tool for applying the biblical theme of Sabbath economics to daily practice, inviting households to commit to changes in seven economic areas. Since lifestyle change is rarely easy work, commitments to new economic practices are often best made in small-group settings where idea-sharing, support, and accountability can be part of the process.

Some steps to consider:

**1. Take a look at where your money is invested.** Is it held in Socially Responsible Investments (SRI) that screen out predatory lending, war profiteering, and other unjust economic practices? Better yet, is it invested in community development financial institutions (CDFIs) that make capital available to the poor and to underserved communities? (See [other articles in this issue](#) to learn more about SRI and community investing.)

**2. Look at your credit card and how you use it.** For years, I had a credit card from Wells Fargo Bank, only to later learn of their notorious predatory lending practices (see [www.responsiblewealth.org](http://www.responsiblewealth.org)). More eco-friendly credit card options are available today, such as the Salmon Nation card from Shorebank Pacific, a bank committed to environmentally sustainable community development ([www.salmonnation.com](http://www.salmonnation.com)). Since owning a credit card carries with it the temptation to overspend, some find it helpful to limit themselves to one credit card, to avoid credit cards altogether, or to construct a “credit card condom.” Such a “condom” is a paper sleeve placed over the credit card with questions on it such as “Do I really need this?” and “Can I really afford this?”

**3. Get organized in your giving.** Evaluate the organizations you currently donate to, and ask yourself which institutions, organizations, or causes best reflect your values and priorities. Then make an annual “giving plan” that charts how your convictions line up with your practice of giving. A helpful resource in constructing such a plan is *Inspired Philanthropy* by Tracy Gary and Melissa Kohner. Sabbath economics begs the specific question: Are you giving to organizations that locally and globally promote an economy of sufficiency, ensuring that the poor and hungry have enough?

**4. Take steps towards a greener lifestyle.** You can assess your environmental footprint at [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org). Transportation choices have an enormous impact, so bicycling, public transportation, walking, or other forms of travel that avoid or limit car usage can significantly decrease our footprint. For food choices, look into purchasing your food at a local farmer’s market, through a community-supported agriculture program in your area ([www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)), or through a community or self-tended garden. *Green Living: The E Magazine Handbook for Living Lightly on the Earth* provides a host of green lifestyle options to consider, such as greening your living space or yard and switching to eco-friendly products. The mantra “reduce, reuse, recycle” remains a helpful “rule of life” for treading lightly on the

irreplaceable gift of creation.

**5. Take a look at your consumption habits.** In *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*, John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning note, “Though they see only a fraction of it, Americans consume 120 pounds—nearly their average body weight—every day in natural resources extracted from farms, forests, rangelands, and mines.” Ryan and Durning further point out that if the whole world were to consume at the level of North Americans, we would need at least three additional planets to support it. Consider ways to limit your consumption to more sustainable levels. A much discussed event of 2006 was a “compact” made by a group of friends in San Francisco who committed to a “shopping sabbatical,” introducing only used or borrowed items into their households for a year. How might you take such a “sabbatical” for a week, a month, or a year? Some find it helpful to “fast” from purchasing particular products they are prone to overbuying. You might also consider downsizing your living space or explore co-housing options ([www.cohousingresources.com](http://www.cohousingresources.com)), either of which helps limit excess accumulation. For additional steps households can take, books on “simple living” abound—*Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective* is one such resource.

**6. Take steps toward greater solidarity with the poor and marginalized.** Trips of exposure or “reverse mission” help individuals and groups connect with and learn from people who are living in poverty. BorderLinks, Witness for Peace, Ministry of Money, and Center for Global Education all sponsor such trips of solidarity. Other organizations provide opportunities for individuals to serve as “international accompanists,” thereby inviting North Americans to both draw near to oppressed and marginalized communities and provide a “peacekeeping” presence that deters violence. Christian Peacemaker Teams, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and Justicia y Paz are three of the many organizations that sponsor such journeys. For more local solidarity options, look into participating in a local living wage campaign ([www.livingwagecampaign.org](http://www.livingwagecampaign.org)). Volunteering at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter can also be a helpful entry point toward deeper relationships with the poor through the conversations and connections such efforts can allow.

**7. Observe a Sabbath discipline in your daily, weekly, monthly, and/or yearly rhythm.** The Hebrew word for Sabbath, *shabbat*, literally means “to cease” or “to rest.” While a number of religious traditions (including the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition of which I am a part) have unfortunate histories surrounding Sabbath legalism, to dispense with Sabbath-keeping in reaction to such past excesses would be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The longstanding Jewish and Christian discipline of marking one day of the week as free from work is a practice as vital now as it ever was, given our modern-day propensity for speed, hyperactivity, and overwork. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, Sabbath-keeping has been practiced as a community, supported by others engaging in the same practice on the same day. Those attempting to practice the discipline today may encounter difficulty and frustration in their efforts without the accountability of a small group, Sabbath-keeping partner, or community of support. Sabbath-keeping can also be incorporated into one’s daily activity through designated time for prayer, journaling, or scripture study. Taking a designated day for a retreat once a month or observing a several-day retreat once a year can open up additional room for Sabbath, allowing time and space for God to “re-create” us.

Household economic actions like these are no substitute for the necessary work of public action and political advocacy. The global environmental crisis will not be solved simply by household recycling, nor will the extraordinary economic disparity in our world disappear when a few more people choose community investing. But these practices are a vital complement to the larger political work, reinforcing and amplifying our public witness. Such practices might be compared to the classic spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and corporate worship. They are simple, everyday expressions of faith representing steps on the lifelong path of discipleship.

In Isaiah 58:6-8, after criticizing God’s people for fasting while simultaneously oppressing their workers (58:3), the voice of the Lord declares that practices of economic justice should be the spiritual disciplines of the people:

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? ... Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

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*Practicing Sabbath Economics.* by Matthew Colwell. Sojourners Magazine, May 2008 (Vol. 37, No. 5, pp. 20-24). Features.

**The Sabbath Promise:** To follow Jesus more deeply, we must learn to stop and rest.

by **Michaela Bruzzese** *Sojourners Magazine*

[http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&mode=printer\\_friendly&issue=soj0505&article=050511](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&mode=printer_friendly&issue=soj0505&article=050511)

*Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...and you will find rest for yourselves.*—Matthew 11:28-29

With most of our lives already full-to-overflowing with the demands of family and work alone, attempting to integrate the responsibilities of discipleship can seem like another burden or one more thing we "have to do." Jesus, however, promises us the opposite. A fully integrated discipleship, in the eyes of Jesus and of many great religions, provides rest and sanctuary from a busy world. As well as giving us the energy and vision to engage the world and struggle for our vision of what is good and right, our faith should and can also provide us with a safe time in which we can find rest and renewal from the pressures of our lives.

Matthew emphasizes the point even more in the above verses. He has placed Jesus' invitation to true rest between Jesus' confessions about the radical, divisive nature of discipleship and his teaching about the inability of most people to comprehend and/or act on the good news. Matthew 10:5-39, after recounting the commissioning of the disciples, includes *five separate warnings* that following Jesus will be a cause of persecution and division. He makes clear that Jesus' good news is so threatening to established social, religious, and economic orders that serious consequences are inevitable. Matthew follows Jesus' promise of rest with "the kingdom discourses" in chapter 13, which elaborate through parables the inability of virtually all who listen to Jesus' word (especially those in power) to either understand or act upon it. Portraying the kingdom of God like a mustard seed, a farmer sowing, and a farmer separating the grain from the chaff, Jesus' message is clear: Very few people can truly hear what he has to say, and even fewer can live it.

As such, the invitation to rest seems out of place at best and sarcastic at worst. How can Matthew assure us of the "easy yoke" of Jesus after guaranteeing us that discipleship brings hardship? The only answer (besides sarcasm) is utter sincerity. By including this text at all (Luke and Mark do not), and by placing it between these pivotal themes, Matthew makes rest a fundamental component of a lived discipleship. The ability of Jesus' followers to be as profoundly rooted in him as they are in struggling for the kingdom is paramount to Matthew's understanding of discipleship. Returning to the center, resting in God, and being renewed are vital to the ability to consider following Jesus at all; indeed, Matthew hints it must be at the very center of discipleship itself.

### **A Tradition of Rest**

How do we find this place where we can lay down our burdens? Jesus' (and our) Jewish heritage can profoundly inform the practice of rest in our everyday lives. The observation of the Sabbath, in many ways the centerpiece of lived Jewish experience, is the built-in practice of rest and renewal in the Jewish tradition. Its unique and profound integration of worship, rest, celebration, and renewal is a beautiful model for all people of faith. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord."

While its meaning and practice merit in-depth study and experience, a review of the scriptural bases for Jewish Sabbath provide a critical blueprint to anyone seeking to fully and passionately live their faith in the world. Through their written reflections *The Sabbath* and *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, respectively, Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Irving Greenberg lead us through a journey of understanding, inviting us to experience, not just know, the joy of the Sabbath.

For Jews, observation of the Sabbath is both commandment (failure to keep the Sabbath was originally punishable by death) and gift; so important that it is reinforced with three different biblical justifications for its observation. It is a means of preserving and obeying the covenant (Exodus 31:13); an imitation of God, who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Exodus 20:8-11); and a remembrance of Egypt, including both the experience of slavery (with a caution against enslaving others) and the God who liberates (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

First, the Sabbath allows the faithful to deeply reconnect with God and with their identity as a covenant people. In the words of Rabbi Heschel, "The Sabbath is meaningful to [people] and is meaningful to God. It stands in relation to both, and is a sign of the covenant entered into by both." The day of rest allows people to reclaim their fundamental identity first and foremost as loved by God for who they are as God's creation—not for what they produce, own, or create. As Rabbi Greenberg emphasizes, "It is a proclamation, 'I am,' not 'I do.'...The individual reasserts the primacy of human value and the principle of the intrinsic worth of human existence." For Jews the Sabbath is a weekly claiming of their heritage, an insistence that their primary identity is not as citizens, workers, or consumers, but as children of God who are invited to a covenantal relationship with God.

Second, related to the concept of identity are the themes of creation and the imitation of God. Since creation is an ongoing process in which humanity serves as co-creators with God, *tikkun olam*, the perfection of the world, is contingent upon humanity's active and passionate participation. Six days of the week are committed to co-creating, but the seventh enables Jews to rest in the dream of perfection, to stop the struggle and to live as if the dream has been realized. In this way, the Sabbath provides a critical pause in the often overwhelming quest for perfecting the world, as Rabbi Greenberg emphasizes: "The weekly encounter with messianic perfection saves one from internalizing the indignity and injustice of the status quo. The taste of salvation gives new energy to resist the counsels of despair and to press on for higher levels of dignity and justice for all."

Third, the Sabbath also critically sets limits on the temptation to assign too much importance to the act of creating (work) or to the things that are created. "The Shabbat offers an alternative: A rhythm of work and abstinence, an alternation of creatorhood and creaturehood," writes Rabbi Greenberg. The memory of enslavement in Egypt helps Jews remain aware that they can fall victim to the slavery of things, work, and production or even victimize others through these. The Sabbath sets limits on work by reserving a day in which work is not permitted for anyone, including employees, family and friends, and even animals.

These biblical foundations give rise to a day that is like no other and is in fact the pinnacle and focus of all other days. In the words of Rabbi Heschel, "[T]he Sabbath is the counterpoint of living; the melody sustained throughout all agitations and vicissitudes which menace our conscience; our awareness of God's presence in the world." The other days of the week derive their meaning and reason for existence from the Sabbath and are a journey toward it. Jews place limits on the world as it is—Orthodox Jews sometimes tie a string around the perimeter of their community as a tangible sign that within the string, people are living in sacred time—so they can live the dream of how it should be. This isn't an escape, but an insistence on renewing the covenant and rejecting the claims of a society whose goals and values are profoundly different from, and often antithetical to, the dream.

This holy time, at least 25 hours in length (some people extend the Sabbath longer), requires important physical, spiritual, and emotional preparation. The home is cleaned and people take particular care to wash and dress for the occasion and to prepare their spirit for the Sabbath. Special foods are prepared, friends are invited (the Sabbath is thought to be better if those who have nowhere else to go are welcomed), generosity and love are the root of all interactions. Emphasis is placed upon relations: with one another, family, friends, and God. Through joining together, singing, praying, eating together, and rejoicing in their relationships (sex between a married couple on Friday nights is considered a mitzvah, a good deed!), Jews who observe the Sabbath insist on creating and living in a special time that connects them to their identity as a covenant people.

These tangible acts are a way of resting in their faith, their God, and each other. Because of this ability to rest and restore, Jews can continue to reach for the dream of healing in a broken world.

Transposed into contemporary Christian life, this Sabbath rest runs against the grain of dominant Western culture. Issues of wealth, in particular, merit the construction (and maintenance) of a secure spiritual foundation from which to draw support and perspective. Given the overwhelmingly consumerist cultures in which many of us live, trying to live kingdom ideals when it comes to money and things is not only difficult, but profoundly countercultural. It is not supported or condoned by the mainstream; on the contrary, it is considered suspicious, idealistic, and naive.

Similarly, holy rest challenges our individualism: It reminds us that we need each other. The manual for discipleship, if it existed, would come with a warning: Do Not Try This Alone. Christianity is fundamentally expressed *in community*. Jesus formed a community of disciples, he sent the disciples forth in groups, and he promised that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). The Holy Spirit descended in community, creating church. And our continuous process of conversion is both realized and expressed in community, for, as Tony Kelly writes in *The Force of the Feminine*, "to be converted, turned out of

oneself toward that Universal Love revealed in Christ, is to be turned toward others who, one way or another, support or occasion one's growth in conversion."

In short, discipleship has never been a solitary endeavour, and even less so now. If we're even going to try to live kingdom ideals in contemporary culture, we need time to gather as a community and immerse ourselves in "God's culture."

As we who follow Jesus try to balance our own call to work for God's reign with our need to rest and renew, we can learn much from those who have so beautifully integrated the demands and gifts of their own faith. We can live discipleship as Matthew describes it: a balance of fully committed action in the world centered by the time to renew and rest in our fundamental identity as God's beloved.

*Michaela Bruzzese was a Sojourners contributing writer and freelance writer living in Chile when this article appeared.*

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*The Sabbath Promise.* by Michaela Bruzzese. Sojourners Magazine, May 2005 (Vol. 34, No. 5, pp. 16-18). Features.

The Art of Simple Living

<http://www.simpleliving.org/Portals/11/The%20Art%20of%20Simple%20Living%20PDF.pdf>

Simple Living is “living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich. This way of life embraces frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, and a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale.” (Duane S. Elgin and Arnold Mitchell)

The practice of voluntary simplicity is advocated in the teachings of Jesus, the early Christian Church, St. Paul, St. Francis, and many others. It also has its roots in the teachings of other world religions, the teachings of Gandhi, and the writings of Thoreau. The American Friends Service Committee (The Quakers) define simple living as a “non-consumerist lifestyle based on being and becoming, not having.”

### **Seven Reasons for Choosing a Simpler Lifestyle:**

1. As an **act of intentional living** performed for the sake of personal integrity and as an expression of a commitment to a more equitable distribution of the world’s resources.
2. As an **act of creation care** for ourselves and especially for our children and grandchildren against the earth destroying results of over-consumption such as pollution, climate change, and resource wars.
3. As an **act of solidarity** with the majority of humankind, which has little choice about material affluence.
4. As an **act of celebration** of the riches found in God’s creation, and the riches of community with others, rather than in the “poverty” of mindless materialism.
5. As an act of spiritual discipline ordering our lives to reflect the values of simplicity and just living taught by Jesus and teachers in other world religions.
6. As an **act of advocacy** for changes in present patterns of production and consumption.
7. As an **act of provocation** (ostentatious under consumption) to arouse curiosity leading to dialog with others about affluence, and sustainable “*green*” living to redirect the production of consumer goods away from the satisfaction of artificially created wants toward the supplying of goods and services that meet genuine social needs. (Based on an article by Jorgen Lissner)

*"Simple living today is joyful, bright, poetic and mentally robust."*

from Michael Phillips and Catherine Campbell's *Simple Living Investments*

### **Voluntary Simplicity**

Voluntary Simplicity is not a list of rules. It is a consciousness, an awareness.

**It is a matter of personal responsibility.** Every time we go to buy something, to use something, we think:

- Do I need to buy this?
- Or do I want to?
- Do I really need to use this?
- Do I buy what I like?
- What will impress?

It can be difficult separating needs from wants. Especially with some things, like automobiles. What do we use them for? Can we do without? If not, how do we choose the one we need?

Voluntary Simplicity is not a list of rules to follow, though there are **five life principles**. It's about seeing our lives as extravagant, even out-of-control concerning our consumption. Then deciding what to do little by little, day-by-day, week-by-week to cut down on consumption.

We recommend not going cold turkey.

That brings significant frustration.

Remember what our children would say to us when they wanted to do something that they knew was irresponsible.

- **"But, all the kids are doing it."**

Let's try that in our lives. [say this aloud in a whining voice]

- **"But, everybody's driving a new car. . . .**
- **But, everybody builds a big, expensive house** that's ten times bigger than they need, claiming it's for equity when the kids leave home. . .
- **But, everybody has a yard that looks like a golf course** so that nobody complains that we're lowering their property values. . . ."

Sounds pretty silly and disconcerting, doesn't it?

Living more simply can be lonely.

Our families, our church, our social circle may think we're peculiar. It's important to find another Simple Liver or to start a support group. It may mean dealing with resentment when others don't "get it." When we are making corrections, living more responsibly and others don't seem to have the slightest inclination to change their wasteful ways. Living Simply faces great challenges, powerful forces.

Voluntary Simplicity is not romanticizing poverty, monks, the Amish or people who struggled through the Depression. We only diminish those people's devotion or struggle, and we tend to try to make the journey of discipleship look silly or "for others/unrelated to us," untouchable. Poverty is NOT fun. Two thirds of the world population live in poverty Involuntarily. We have a choice.

It's more than frugality, far from being a tightwad, and surely not being a miser.

In some cases we'll actually need to pay more for tools that are Earthfriendly.

Instead it's a journey to find more meaning, more joy, more fun in life by getting out from under the burden of so much stuff, to remove the barrier of stuff that keeps us apart from other people, from God and even from ourselves. There are multiple paths to Voluntary Simplicity. One is the secular, which is called "Downshifting."

A young executive is cruising along in high gear, peddling her sports car as fast as she can. She thinks, This is a lot of work! So she downshifts, maybe she takes a different job that has a smaller income but less stress. Maybe she moves into a smaller house in a rural area and grows her own tomatoes. Maybe she gets smart, gets control of her credit card and pays off her debts. Basically she's downshifting to increase her personal happiness.

Christians adopt Voluntary Simplicity for the same reasons.

Personal happiness is good. But there's more. We adopt Voluntary Simplicity also to be in touch with God and to help

others. Voluntary Simplicity is a lifestyle of integrity, living as a disciple of Jesus, walking our talk.

The essence of voluntary simplicity is summarized in *Living More with Less* by Doris Janzen Longacre

- Do Justice
- Learn from the World Community
- Cherish the Natural Order
- Celebrate Responsibly
- Nonconform Freely

**1. Do Justice** ... "Do Justice" may remind us of the courts. . . to get our due. Biblical Justice is quite different. It reflects God's great love for the poor and our call to respond to their needs. In *How Much Is Enough?* Alan Durning categorizes the world population into three groups. One fifth - 20% - are the disenfranchised people. They have no reliable source

of food or water, no medical care, only one set of clothes and they walk wherever they go. Three fifths - 60% of the world population - are the sustainers. They have basic, reliable sources of food, some medical care, several sets of clothes and they take public transportation. The remaining fifth or 20% are the overconsumers. This group has access to lavish, cheap food, has reliable medical care, has many sets of clothes and they use private transportation. This last group, the over consumers, is made up, to one degree or another, of virtually everybody in North America,

Western Europe and Japan. Guess what percentage of the world's resources are used by the disenfranchised and the sustainers, 80% of the world's population and by the over consumers, 20% of the world's population. That's right, just flip the figures. The overconsumers use 80% of the world's resources and the other 80% of the world's people use only 20% of the resources. Notice that the first principle is not "thinking about Justice," or even "believe in Justice." It's Do Justice. In addition to our prayers, our contributions, and our pressuring of governments, we help the poor around the world by taking seriously the phrase, Live Simply That Others May Simply Live. By consuming less we make more available for others. As we work to take control of our own lives, our own consumption, our own waste, we work toward changing the inequitable distribution of wealth. As we share ideas of simpler living with others we hasten the day when justice is done. Learn from the World

**2. Learn from the World Community** ... We have a great deal to learn from Community people in countries in the developing world. Most of the world's people live simply by necessity, not by choice. Our attitude has largely been that we want to help those poor people with THEIR problem OVER THERE. We need to realize that their problem is caused by OUR problem OVER HERE, our problem of over consumption. All things are connected. One beautiful way to Learn from the World Community is through music. Several years ago a black bishop from Africa told an unforgettable story. He said, "White folks. yes, they're the people who can sing and NOT move at the same time." African . . . music can help liberate many white North American Christians from their rigidity. Thousands of Christians are leaving North American and Western European churches. They' not going to another church. They're falling away from the faith. But in Africa, Christianity is gaining three times as many converts. We have something profound to learn from our African brothers and sisters. We can also learn about food. . . from creating simple, tasty meals to understanding the whole process from seed to table. The United States is undergoing something called "vertical integration." This is the process in which the most powerful resource - food -becomes monopolized. The people who sell the food also own or control the distribution system, and the processing plants and the production, the farms. When we shop at Farmers Markets, support community based agriculture, refuse to buy out-of-season fruits and vegetables, we begin to control and take responsibility for our food. We can learn food justice from the world community. We can learn more about community by doing menu planning and meal preparation and clean-up together. And we can vow that we will eat at least one meal a day together. So much of the time we have allowed the school, the community, the TV, even the church to take away our common meal. Research indicates that a typical U. S. father has only three minutes a day of direct conversation with his child. And that married couples in the USA have only five minutes a day of meaningful verbal exchange. Learning from the World Community about food is important for another reason. We Americans now eat a great deal of expensive, highly processed food with many of its nutrients processed out. Why? Yes, it's convenient. It's a cycle. We work more hours so we can afford more expensive food that's fast so that we can work more to buy more expensive, hollow food....Alternatives promotes cookbooks that use recipes from Third World countries, such as More-with-Less Cookbook and Extending the Table. Even people from our highly technological medical establishment are now seeing the potential of learning from shamans, healers and witch doctors. We are learning natural and alternative cures, from the rain forests, Native Americans, herbalists, acupuncturists.

**3. Nurture People** ... We find meaning in life through our relationships with God and with people, not through stuff. If we let them, the things we own would own us. First we may go into debt paying for this thing shortly after its exciting glimmer dies down. Then we have to maintain it. And secure it so nobody steals it! What owns whom? We put ourselves at risk by going into a mall. We find the thing that is going to give excitement and fulfillment to our life. We whip out our credit card and take our treasure home. It's great [hug the TV]. . . for a while. Then something else comes along that we can't live without. So what happens to our first little lifesaver? We either chuck it or store it. If we keep it, we have to dust it or put batteries in it. We have to maintain it. And we surely wouldn't want anyone to steal it. So we secure it. We protect it. We lock it up. So we go into debt to buy it, then we use our time and energy to maintain and secure it. It raises the question, "Who owns whom?" Yes, it gives a new meaning to the concept of ownership. I'll tell you what works for me. I play a game with myself that you can play with your children or grandchildren. It's OK to admire things in stores and say, "I Like that." It's not OK to say, "I want that," or even worse, "I need that." Think of the mall as a museum. Everything there is on display for your pleasure, but somebody else owns it. Say to yourself as you stroll through the galleries, "Thank you store person for putting this here for me to see. I'm so glad you're responsible for all this stuff and I'M NOT." Nurture People, not things. Let's

use our time, money and energy to nurture relationships. . . with our self, with others and with God. We have been hearing a lot lately about intimacy, about getting to know someone well, about opening oneself up. Most of us have experienced that when we choose to be intimate with our spouse, that things get in the way. To be intimate we may choose to take something off. . . to take everything off. Stuff can get in the way of intimacy in other situations as well. We can learn to discard stuff and put relationships first.

**4. Cherish the Natural Order** ... This is the environmental component. Most folks have heard the four R's of Caring for Creation - reduce, reuse, recycle and restore. Reusing means to use something over again. It means not using something just one time. It means refusing consumables like styrofoam cups. And it also means using things that can be repaired. That's not easy because so many things are designed to break. It's called "planned obsolescence." We can buy tools and appliances and shoes that can be repaired but we need to do our homework to find them. It's inconvenient. The Europeans are on to something. They are beginning to require manufacturers to be responsible for the final disposition of their product. That should make them a lot more concerned about how the product is built and how it can be repaired and recycled. Recycling means making something new out of something that's already been used. Most of us realize that we have to do something. So, we recycle glass, paper and metal. After glugging down a soda we drop the can in the bin and carry the bin to the curb on recycle day and feel proud to be an American, proud that we have done our best for Mother Nature. That's an important start. But that's really the easiest and least necessary part of the whole cycle. Don't use recycling as an excuse to keep things the way they are. It's not OK to keep on over-consuming just because we recycle. Even more important is Pre-cycling - evaluating a product before you buy it to make sure it is environmentally sound. And recycling does little good if we don't close the loop. . . buy products made of recycled materials, such as paper. It does little good to recycle if we don't then buy the products we need made from recycled materials. Yes, it may for the time being cost a bit more to buy and use recycled paper. But living simply, living faithfully is not living "on the cheap." Sometimes it costs more to do what's right. Restoring. . . remember what your grandmother used to say, "You got it out. You put it back!" The most common example is trees. But this also relates to sustainable agriculture, i.e. putting natural, not synthetic nutrients back in the soil. This can help make up for past mistakes but never should be used as a reason to make future ones. And some resources cannot be restored, like oil and topsoil. The first R is the most important. . . and hardest for Americans. . . Reduce. That's what Simple Living is about.

**5. Nonconform Freely** ... We are not talking anarchy here. We are resisting the pressures created primarily by advertising. The forces against us living more simply are extremely powerful and devious. Some of them are quiet, unwritten. . . like how we dress in church, how our house will look at Christmas time. But many of them are loud, in-your-face forces that work to get as deeply into your pocketbook as possible everyday. We all have basic physical needs. . . for food, for shelter, for community. It's helpful to have information about where we can meet those needs. That's one reason for advertising. What's objectionable is advertising that creates false needs, really wants or desires. . . when advertisers play with our heads, trying to get us to think that we will be better people by the beverage we drink, that we will be sexier if we buy a certain kind of car, that we will be more popular or successful if we wear certain kinds of clothes or perfume. When I watching TV, I ZAP the commercials. . . mute the sound. Be put-off by aggressive car and soda pop commercials. Are they the price of admission? That's exactly what the advertisers want you to think. But the air waves belong to the people. We owe advertisers nothing! (Remember Turn Off TV Week in April, and Buy Nothing Day, Friday, November 29. Yes, that's the day after hanksgiving!) Sioux City is a nice place to raise a family. This past summer had billboard selling sun tan lotion that showed three young, attractive people. They happened to be naked. It was no big deal. There was no outcry. Just another billboard selling something. At the same time a group in Des Moines was working to promote breast feeding. They were turned down from buying billboard space because their subject was TOO OFFENSIVE! Some advertisers are trying to capitalize on peoples' desire for simpler lives. Recent commercials use the Simplicity theme. An expensive luxury car is hyped with a picture of the Honda Accura and the word "Simplify." Denny's restaurants use the slogan "Simplify your life. Eat out more." MBNA America, a huge credit card processor, proclaims "Simplify your life in the New Year! . . . Consolidate your holiday bills. . ." A typical MBNA account charges over 19% interest. Credit card "checks" (a form of the dreaded cash advance) have no grace period. Interest begins accruing immediately. At the same time, their late payment fee went from \$10 to \$20 to \$30! The Masters of Double Speak! In the name of "research," some advertisers - without your permission, even without your knowledge. We have the right to follow our religious principles, our faith, instead of our culture, instead of advertisers who pressure us to buy things we don't need, probably don't even want, and that break down on schedule.

## Reasons Why People Give by [Cynthia Woolever](#)

Lewis Center for Church Leadership, Wesley Seminary

[http://www.churchleadership.com/leadingideas/leaddocs/2010/100331\\_article2.html](http://www.churchleadership.com/leadingideas/leaddocs/2010/100331_article2.html)

In our [U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#), worshipers rated the extent to which ten factors influence their decision to give to their congregation.

The most important is **gratitude**. About half said they give to the congregation because they feel a sense of gratitude for God's love and goodness. (49% said this is a major influence on giving decisions.) More than one in three worshipers say they give to support **God's work in the world**. Giving out of a sense of **duty** was the third most important influence. It motivated the giving of about one in three worshipers. The fourth most important influence rests on the church's teaching that the **Bible** instructs believers to support their congregation. One in four worshipers described this as a major influence. Finally, the last major influence in the top five is a **sense of obligation** to support the work of their local congregation.

The remaining five factors rated by worshipers are less important in their motivations for giving. Hearing about **specific needs** was rated sixth (23%). The seventh most influential factor is a sense of **gratitude for help** that the worshiper and his or her family receive from their involvement; about one in five worshipers said this was a major influence. Very few worshipers rated the last two factors as major influences on congregational giving: the congregation's or **leader's urging to give** and possible **tax benefits**.

### How can leaders encourage financial giving?

First, worshipers want to know how their contributions make a difference. Congregational leaders should highlight the specific ways that worshipers' financial gifts are changing lives in the congregation and the community. The emphasis should be on ministry rather than on supporting programs.

Second, leaders can help worshipers become percentage givers. Currently, only about 14 percent of worshipers said they decide how much to give based on a percentage of their income. In a national study of giving, researchers found that worshipers in "percentage-giving churches" contribute three times more dollars than worshipers in congregations that ask for offerings in dollar amounts (*Money Matters*, Dean Hoge, et al., Westminster John Knox, 1996). In percentage-giving churches worshipers are asked, "What percentage of your income do you feel God is calling you to give?" This question is consistent with the Bible's instructions about giving.

Third, only a very small percentage of worshipers report that the urging of the congregation or leader is a major influence on their financial decision-making. Is this because it rarely happens? Congregational leaders can emphasize that financial giving is a spiritual matter—an opportunity to express gratitude to God and contribute to God's work.

[Cynthia Woolever](#) is director of the [U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#). This article is adapted from an article that appeared on the U.S. Congregational Life Survey's blog found at <http://presbyterian.typepad.com/beyondordinary/2010/03/ten-reasons-why-we-give.html>.

## **BUILDING A NARRATIVE BUDGET** **(From the Missouri United Methodist Fund)**

<http://www.mumf.org/files/docs/Building-a-Narrative-Budget.pdf>

### *What is a narrative budget? Why use it?*

A narrative budget is a representation of the line item budget in simple, easy-to-read descriptive terms. It transforms a line item of money and expenses into an exciting and enlivening picture of ministries and missional expressions of the congregation. Research studies indicate churches often fail to communicate the value of the ministries they provide and the changes occurring in personal lives through ministries. Contributors, therefore, have a limited understanding of the use of their gifts or relationship with those receiving ministry benefits.

A line item budget is an effective tool for the committee on finance to manage financial resources. It is not an effective means for interpreting those ministries or their impact. On the other hand, the narrative budget helps members of the congregation understand what the church is doing in ministry, evangelism, discipleship training, benevolences and missions. It is a connecting link between the contributor and the church's ministries. A well-composed narrative budget will educate and inspire everyone.

### *Where do we start?*

Enlist a small, special committee composed of representatives from the finance, budget development, and/or stewardship committees, the church staff, and a skilled writer and graphic artist.

1. Review the line item budget and group budget items by ministry areas, such as worship, education, youth, missions, etc.
2. Review the congregation's mission statement. Creatively describe the various ministries of the congregation as they fulfill the mission statement.
3. Consider pro-rating all salaries, building operational costs and overhead as well as program funds into specific ministry areas.
4. Write one or two descriptive paragraphs for each ministry area. Use examples that paint a picture of the ministry. Enable readers to understand the impact the ministries have in changing lives. Use stories to illustrate the ministries' effectiveness during the previous year. Picture new or expanded ministry needs as the rationale for increased funding.
5. Provide a positive, clear explanation of significant funding changes, whether they are proposed increases or decreases.
6. Expand the reader's horizons by identifying several relevant and exciting additional or future ministries that could be undertaken with funding beyond the budgetary financial projections.
7. Consider a pie chart that uses ministry areas to depict the budget visually.
8. Prepare the narrative budget in an attractive, inviting, readable brochure format.
9. Determine ways to use the narrative budget most effectively to communicate the exciting message of ministry throughout the congregation.

Budgets are tools that help financial leaders do their work in the church. They provide vital information for planning in the church. Budgets can enable congregational leaders to be faithful in their stewardship of the church's resources. What budgets cannot do, however, is motivate the majority of people to give. A surprisingly small percentage of the American population can read and understand a line-item budget. Too many churches pass out copies of the annual budget, believing that they have communicated important information. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that very little communication has occurred. People do not give to budgets. They give less from the head than from the heart. People give to other people, to needs, to causes – to things that make them feel good and happy. Budgets miss these key targets.

Most of what is contained in a line-item budget is of little interest to the majority of people who attend our churches. Most people who are going to give to the church will give a certain amount to support the institution. People realize that there are costs to maintain the building, pay the insurance and utilities, and to support the pastor. They give to the mission and ministry of the church. If they are going to give anything more, the church needs to answer a basic question: “Give me one good reason why I should?”

The narrative budget is one way to give people a good reason. It focuses less on the numbers and more on what the numbers accomplish. It is a one- to two page presentation that explains what the church hopes to accomplish and the funding needed to reach and exceed its goals. The following is an example of a narrative budget.

### **Missions**

The ministry group on missions has done an excellent job providing leadership for our congregation. Our mission involvement has increased greatly in the past three years. We support the local food bank and the soup kitchen in town, and we are beginning a second year with our thrift shop. The pregnancy center and drug rehabilitation center receive monthly offerings from our church. Through our Church World Service, Africa University, and Black College Fund apportionments, we give \$3,500 in support; and we contribute approximately \$1,200 to the six designated special Sunday offerings annually. We can continue this work next year with \$6,000 in support. Our hope is that we can exceed that goal by another \$1,000 in order to send a representative from our church on the district mission trip to Mexico in July. Future plans include reaching out to our community through literacy programs for children and adults and participation in the Women's Shelter Project. For an additional \$2,000, we will be able to train crisis counselors to work with the shelter and to build a library to teach men, women, and children how to read. Your faithful support of these ministries through your financial contributions helps our church grow strong in missions and outreach.

### **Program**

The church council has reviewed our program ministries for the past year and hopes to continue providing high quality opportunities for growth, learning, and worship in the year to come. In education, we fund our curriculum and resources with \$1,500 each year. The additional \$450 we received this year allowed us to purchase new commentaries and a set of Bible maps. We hope to do the same in the coming year, funding the church school needs and adding to our resource library. We need a television and VCR for the church school, and we hope to purchase the new Disciple Bible Study materials for a new group. We can accomplish these two things for an additional \$1,500. We plan to purchase new whiteboards and bulletin boards for each classroom. We have received two donations toward our whiteboards totaling \$550. With an additional \$1,000, we will be able to purchase these and the bulletin boards.

The worship ministry group would like to continue to count on \$500 for the coming year for worship supplies. The \$900 memorial gift allowed us to purchase new paraments for Lent, Easter, Christmas, and Advent. We hope to purchase Pentecost and Kingdomtide paraments next year for an additional \$450. We also plan to replace 50 hymnals. We have \$200 designated for hymnals, but we need another \$400.

The membership ministry group is still working on developing the Stephen's Ministries program, and we are thankful for the training we received this year. We hope that we can use \$900 for training and resources in the church. For twenty five percent more, the membership ministry group will purchase devotional booklets for distribution to homebound and hospitalized members and friends. We are still developing visitor packets and would like to purchase commemorative mugs to give to visitors to our church. These will cost about \$350, and we will get them if the funding is available.

### **Pastoral Support**

We have been very faithfully served and are grateful for the fine leadership of our pastor. The staff-parish relations committee has recommended a six percent increase in salary for the coming year that we joyously support. With increases in insurance, pension, social security, and travel expenses, the pastoral support for the coming year will be \$66,975.

### **Other Staff and Salary**

Youth pastor \$ 7,500  
Secretary \$11,500  
Music Ministries Director/Organist \$21,500  
Custodian \$15,350

### **Building and Grounds**

We estimate needs of \$16,750 for the coming year. Insurance on the church and on the parsonage will be \$11,175.

This is just a sample of what a narrative budget might contain and the way it might be presented. Dollar figures are round and easy to comprehend. No totals, and no bottom-line figures are provided. Instead, there are estimates of costs and dreams for what more might be done if money is available.

Churches using narrative budgets note two things: (1) Few people, if any, ask for a line-item budget; (2) Giving to specific needs occurs more frequently. Narrative budgets do a better job of speaking a language that the majority of people can understand. Notice three things about the narrative budget. First, it lists the programs and missions of the church first. Often, pastoral support, building maintenance, insurance, apportioned funds, and salaries are listed first in a lineitem budget. One school of thought says that budgets should be organized from the largest amounts to the smallest. The sad reality in today's church is that mission and ministry budgets often come last because they are the smallest. What implicit message does this send? Mission and program budgets fund the work of the church. It is important to highlight these needs first. These programs and ministries are what most people care about deeply. We do ourselves a great favor when we list these things first. Second, no paragraph lists only one figure, but a variety of figures: a low, a medium, and a high goal. The low figure is the minimum needed to do the work that must be done. The middle figure is a dream figure that would allow us to do more than the minimum. The high figure is also a dream figure that allows us to provide a vision for what we could do if money were no object. Many people who read a narrative budget are so inspired by the medium and high goals that they will "go the second mile" to make the dreams a reality. Last, certain budget amounts receive no description. These are fixed costs, such as insurance, utilities, and maintenance that do little to motivate increased giving. Few people plan to give more than is needed to cover the fixed costs of running the institution. "Sell" the work of the church rather than the maintenance of the building and organization. These three things increase the appeal and effectiveness of the narrative budget over the traditional line-item budget.

## **TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY: CULTIVATING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH**

<http://www.missionalchurch.org/resources/taketime.pdf>

by Inagrace T. Dietterich and Dale A. Ziemer<sup>5</sup>

We have been asked to explore current trends in the church in light of the emerging discussion of what it means to cultivate the missional church. To begin the discussion we would like to draw your imagination to the journey of Jesus as he is invited into the home of "a woman named Martha."

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' (Luke 10:38-42)

With whom do you identify in this episode? With Martha who is actively engaged in creating a comfortable and hospitable environment for Jesus, or with Mary who disengages herself from the household tasks, sits down, and listens to what Jesus has to say? Most of us, as active and concerned church people, will almost certainly identify with Martha. We may even feel a bit resentful about Jesus' response to her request for help. Like Martha, we are committed, involved, responsible, and very, very busy people. While some of us may have regular times for quiet devotion, it is very difficult for most of us to take time out, to slow down, step back, and listen--even to our spouses. We live in a world that honors activity rather than quietness, production rather than contemplation, Martha rather than Mary. But Luke reminds us of a different path. Calling us to pause in the midst of the hectic tasks of life and ministry, asking us to detach ourselves from the many demands of job and family, Luke declares that taking the time to sit at the Lord's feet is "the better part."

At a time when many observers are describing the relationship of the church to the surrounding culture in terms of "post" (post-Christendom, post-establishment, post-Constantinianism), the church is challenged to clarify its identity and vision. From local church to denomination, a great deal of time, energy, and money is being expended to try and help congregations become more relevant and accessible, to make their message and services more attractive and understandable. But perhaps the most scarce commodity of all is time, adequate time for attentive conversation and thoughtful reflection. Everyone connected with the church is very busy, from high school youth to seminary professors (and perhaps pre-schoolers as well!). There are many important responsibilities to be fulfilled, people to be seen, programs to be developed, resources to be produced, meetings to be attended, planning to be done.

Yet it may well be that with all the strategies of renewal and all the rhetoric of change, church people are being distracted from their primary purpose as God's people. At the heart of all the hustle and bustle there is increasingly the awareness of an emptiness, a lack of substance, a missing core. Taking the time to be holy entails intentionally listening to God. Discovering the identity and vision for the church of the future means discovering whose we are, who we are, and what we are to be about as communities of faith.

### *Reading the Signs of the Times*

The ability to read and interpret the signs of the times is a core competency required of congregations as they

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move into the twenty-first century. When asked to describe the signs of the times most church leaders and members of mainline denominations point to the obvious: the thirty-year unrelenting pattern of church membership loss, financial shortfalls, deteriorating buildings, and loss of societal influence. They recognize the potential for rapid decline in even the most prosperous and strongest of congregations. Most see that the days of effortless dominance by a handful of mainline Protestant denominations is over.

It is at this point that many in the church go astray. Seeing only these factors, and failing to put them into a critical and theological perspective, they are tempted to look for quick solutions to the membership, financial, and other immediate challenges confronting them. Many observable trends today reflect this desire for a neat and ready made answer. For example, there are trends of adopting marketing techniques designed to package the church's "product" in a more attractive manner, seeking to make connections with the secular "non-church" mindset. There are trends of attempting to imitate the success of a particular church model, such as suburban mega-churches, in order to attract more members. There are trends of trying to revitalize congregations by forming multiple small groups, seeking to provide more options to meet people's personal and spiritual needs. There are trends of embracing "alternative worship" services, seeking to be more relevant and creative. And there are trends of redrawing the organizational chart, downsizing, and seeking to become more efficient.

What these trends have in common is that the image driving most—if not all—of them is the so-called golden age of the 1950s, a time when all you had to do was open the doors and people flocked into the church. And all of them are about "more" of the same, attempting to become more successful by simply trying harder and working smarter. Too many church leaders fail to see the institutional challenges as symptoms of a much larger panorama of cultural change. Therefore they also miss the opportunity to enable the church to rediscover, reinterpret, and revision its life and ministry within a changing cultural context—to live into a missional identity and vision.

Whether we recognize it or not, change—destabilizing change—is the primary fact of life for congregations today, and it will continue to be the primary factor into the future. The once seemingly calm and tranquil environment in which North American churches functioned has become increasingly uncertain and turbulent. Swirling gusts of cultural, political, technological, and economic changes are sweeping across the religious landscape. The familiar understandings and the comfortable postures of the past will be insufficient for faithful and effective ministry within tomorrow's world. Whether we like it or not, "Mainstream Protestants are living through a significant reforming, reshaping, and redefinition of their churches." Within this context, congregations are challenged to read the signs of the times, to sit at the Lord's feet, to take the time to be open to the power and the promise of God's transforming presence.

As the church faces the facts of change it also faces significant obstacles, not the least of which is the always present trend of resistance to innovation. Churches today at all levels (local, regional, and national) are characterized by complex organizational structures, policies, and procedures constructed in and for another age. In other words, while the cultural hegemony of mainstream Protestantism may have ended, the old patterns, attitudes, and ways of believing and behaving continue. Churches are organized and function in a manner that guarantee that the policies and practices that may have worked in the past will simply continue into the future. These systems and structures are inadequate for the challenges of the current situation because they resist innovation and reinforce the status quo. Failing to read the signs of the times, too busy for significant theological reflection, and thus resistant to significant change, these church bodies are set up for failure—for unfaithfulness to their divine calling.

Through our research and consulting, teaching and writing, we at the Center for Parish Development, in partnership with a variety of church bodies, are identifying and nurturing alternative trends. These trends reflect the attempt to lay foundation stones for a more intentional identity and vision as missional churches. They include processes of (1) envisioning a dynamic and faithful future, (2) reconceiving theology as the work of the

people, and (3) cultivating a common mind within the community of faith. We will illustrate how congregations are engaging in these processes. These illustrations are not so much the result of formal research, or a full case study, as they are gleanings from church leaders who are involved in deliberate efforts to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and thus to be transformed as a body of people participating in God's mission.

Pause to reflect together and discuss what you have read so far, using these questions:

1. What trends can you observe in churches today?
2. What do these trends have in common with each other?

### **Envisioning A Dynamic and Faithful Future**

Being faithful to the living God who is actively present in changing historical situations--"Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19)--calls the church to be adventuresome and open to profound change. Those church bodies who are seeking "to sing to the Lord a new song" (Isa. 42:10), are learning new ways to put the questions, developing new frameworks for interpreting them, and crafting new proposals for shaping the church's life, worship, and ministry. Embracing change as an opportunity for greater faithfulness, they are coming to view the current challenges not as decline but as transition, as an opportunity to re-vision and participate anew in God's creative and redemptive mission for all humanity--to be transformed.

*People are beginning to imagine about their church, 'What if we were really chosen by God?'*

*What I'm seeing now at our church is definitely a glimmer. We are beginning to understand that it is our life together that is a representation of something important. Our life together is the measure, our witness. This is really something that people are thinking about.*

*The conversation is beginning to move away from 'bucks and butts' to 'how can we become more faithful?'*

The experience of these churches is radical--it goes to the very roots. One author describes the depth and complexity of such a change process: "The Scriptures refer to what we are calling transformation as conversion, being born again, the year of release or jubilee, and from being 'no people' to 'God's people.' Transformation means fundamental changes in perspective, behavior, relationships, and structures that together lead toward wholeness, justice, and reconciliation." Church transformation--profound systemic and strategic change--means moving beyond rigid adherence to the past, to the envisioning of a responsive, dynamic, and creative future.

*I used to think that we entered this transformation process to help our church become a better vendor, to keep our members happy. Now we are asking some different questions as we reflect on the Bible and our religious heritage to discern God's vision for the future.*

Congregations engaged in the transforming process of envisioning are becoming intentional learning communities actively engaged in discerning God's vision for their future. Both to enable this process and as a result of the process, the membership of the church becomes more theologically informed, focused, and involved, and the leadership becomes more reflective, flexible, and responsive. As they begin to learn corporately and collaboratively, they begin to appreciate the importance of setting aside the time to listen, to dream, to share, to test, to learn from one another. And their goal becomes not one of quick solutions or quick agreement, but of discovering an enriched common vision through the sharing and testing of personal visions.

A major learning for us has been how much time actually is involved in discerning God's call as a congregation. We are not seeking an artificial conformity, but the rich texture which can arise from the bringing

together of our personal visions into a coherent and dynamic whole. Many local churches and other church bodies are currently involved in varied processes of visioning and/or discernment. This is a positive trend. But in order for it to become more than just another fad (like the trend of writing mission statements a few years ago), it must involve more than the writing of a vision statement to be adopted by the church council and displayed on the church bulletin. Communal processes of envisioning truly become the discernment of God's saving purpose when they are open to and filled with the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit within the shared prayer, reflection, dreams, and insights of the community of faith. Thus churches are engaging the whole congregation in communal processes of study and interpretation of the biblical witness to God's redemptive activity in the world. They have come to see that authentic vision comes not from individual inspiration or majority vote, but from the renewal or conversion of the corporate mind, heart, and will. This trend has involved learning new behaviors and skills.

*We have begun to set aside comfortable ways of being 'the church,' and to think in new ways by getting in touch with our spiritual roots. We're not just exchanging our opinions, or examining our individual piety, but discovering who God is calling us to be as the church. God has a vision for this congregation. But in order to dream God's dreams and see God's vision for us, we need imaginations that are full of the biblical images. The ways of the business world, the jingles of ads and the plots of TV sit-coms crowd out the Psalms and Master's plan for the Creation. Together we will refresh our biblical imaginations and discern God's vision for us. It still feels like 'driver's training.' We are relearning skills we need to be the missionary church in these next 100 years: claiming our heritage, studying our culture, evaluating our behavior, and letting the Word and Spirit lead us.*

The trend of envisioning together a dynamic and faithful future involves developing the capacity to envision (to see) the world as God sees the world, to think and relate to one another in new ways, and to act in ways that are based upon this new way of seeing.

*We came at strategic planning out of God's call to us to be the body of Christ. We have been guided by Romans 12:2: 'Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind....' The greatest value to us has been the change process itself with its many concentric circles of being immersed in Scripture and theology, of training, of listening, of reflecting, of discerning the many gifts of people, of challenging ourselves.*

*We didn't start with structure, although we now have designed a new conference structure. We are becoming vision-led, intentionally conciliar, and connective.*

Use this question to reflect together:

This section introduced you to the idea of “envisioning.”

What is involved when a church engages in envisioning?

### **Theology as the Work of the People**

Closely linked with the trend of envisioning is the trend of once again enabling theology to be the work of the people. This involves undoing the culturally established pattern of mainline Protestantism which presupposed a religion-culture synthesis. Since we were a "Christian nation," the intertwining of goals, commitments, and destiny of church and society was simply taken for granted. And as long as American culture was believed to be permeated by Christian ideals and behavior patterns, there was no need for the person-in-the-pew to reflect upon the distinctive identity and vision of Christianity. But, since the church's socio-cultural context is no longer that of a "Christian nation," the doing of theology is no longer a vocational option for a selected minority. In the process of rediscovering a missional identity and vision congregations are recognizing that the entire community is called to be knowledgeable and articulate about its faith.

*Rockaway Church is learning to drive in a society where so many "rules of the road" have changed. We are learning how to think as a congregation about the unique challenges and opportunities we face. It is hard work to think about our faith. Theologian Douglas John Hall, comments, 'Whenever it becomes evident that Christian discipleship now entails new depth of thought—that a people pursuing 'happiness' instinctively avoids!—there is an exodus from the churches. Some of those who leave the thinking churches make their way to other 'sanctuaries' where thought is assuaged at once with ready-made answers, or lulled by old familiar tunes.' The Reformers in our heritage envisioned a disciple community in which all members, not only the clergy and the theologians, wrestled with the meaning of what they believed. You are doing that. Rejoice!*

These churches have discovered that in our secular and/or religiously plural society, it can no longer be assumed that the images, practices, and vocabulary of Christianity will come naturally, that they will automatically make sense to the average person. In such a world the intentional and disciplined thinking of the faith-- theology--is essential in order to shape, equip, and empower missional communities. In other words, churches living into a missional identity are saying "goodbye" to Christianity as good common sense, available to all without reflection, training, or change in attitude and lifestyle. And they are saying "hello" to theology as the work of the people, affirming that all Christians are to be engaged in the persistent and consistent exploration of the uncommon sense of Christianity.

*Pastors are questioning all of their working assumptions, they are trying to distinguish between what is Christendom thinking and what is not. Church leaders are starting to have frank discussions about the church's past--what it was and what it wasn't. There is ferment, the foundations are being shaken. We are meeting together and are 'peeling the layers off the onion,' getting deeper into identifying working assumptions and working theology, discovering what we really believe and how we practice that.*

When the church is preoccupied with the effort to attract new members, or the meeting of the culturally defined needs of existing church members, it is all too easy to forget that the root meaning of "disciple" is discere, to learn. The uncommon sense of discipleship does not come naturally or easily, it must be learned within an ongoing process of formation. Becoming a disciple community means becoming a learning community which is being trained, educated, instructed in the new way of life made possible by the events of Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. Embracing a missional identity and vision involves the active and disciplined thinking of the faith, which provides the motivation and direction for the church's ministry within the world. "Discipleship is submission to the discipline of understanding, without which the discipline of obedience-in-act lacks foundation and rationale."

*We're involved in lots of theological reading and study--it's now an ongoing thing in this congregation. Thinking the faith has been important to us. We have seeds of an astute learning congregation. There is definitely more of a servant attitude as a result of The Beatitudes Bible study in which a sizable percentage of our congregation was involved. There's a change in perception about what we're after as a church. This actually could be quite a major shift. People are looking at church in a different way.*

The typical approach to "learning" assumes an autonomous individual engaged in a self-directed search for knowledge and/or technical skills. The New Testament presents a different approach. The learning of the disciple community involves a communal process of conversion and witness guided by the enlightening and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:13). Discovering a missional identity and vision involves the expectation of and openness to the Spirit at work in, with, and through the disciplined thinking of the faith. It is important to keep in mind that when the controls are lifted, when all members of the community are invited to participate, it is inevitable that there will be tension, struggle, and conflict. As congregations wrestle with important ideas and controversial issues, frustration, hostility, and even anger often emerge. A significant aspect of learning to be a disciple community is the demonstration of how to use conflict constructively among

a body of unique, gifted, and dissimilar people.

*I am learning as a pastor that to help people move out of Christendom is a very redundant process--it tends to be two steps forward and three back. It involves resistance and people becoming entrenched. Or they kind of know Christendom isn't going to work but are not sure about the future. They are waffling on the fence.*

*Engaging in significant discussion about our faith and commitment involves a lot of frustration at first, an unbelievable amount of frustration. Older long-time members are becoming open to new experiences, but also report that they are scared. There is lots of anxiety expressed about where this is going.*

*At Six Mile Run Church we discovered that the generations (those over 55 years and those under) have to talk and learn to understand each other. We now have every-other Sunday gatherings of people of any age coming together to dialogue, to understand one another's needs, values, and visions.*

Yet in the midst of the diversity and the conflict, the work of theology also involves the joy of discovery. Trusting the promises and following the leading of the Holy Spirit, congregations are discovering the courage to risk the unknown, to move beyond their comfort level, to embark upon the adventure of learning. As together they explore the images, stories, practices, and language of their faith, they discover new insights, new energy, and new ways of participating in God's saving mission.

*There are now opportunities for conversations where the deepest yearnings of the heart for the church can be expressed. We are beginning to listen to alternative voices and minority voices, not using power plays. We are more patient and we look for further wisdom.*

As they shape a missional identity and vision, congregations are developing the expectations, practices, and structures necessary to stimulate theological reflection and dialogue. Missional churches which "think the faith" are uncommon communities, communities which provide the space, the time, and the support for creative conversation and critical exploration. They are recovering "the practices, habits, and dispositions necessary for theological discourse to be fruitful, for our biblical interpretation to be faithful, for our theological judgment to embody wisdom, and for our discipleship to be transformative in the midst of a world which knows not God."

*It was a good and fruitful process. Along the way there were people grumbling, 'It takes too long.' This is a learning that needs to be stated. Yes, it took a long time, but that time created the atmosphere and the arena for change to occur. The length of time allowed us to involve lots of people, to study, explore, and discuss together. Then by the time we brought the plan in, many people had contributed, many were ready. This needs to be reiterated over and over. When dealing with a large and complex organization, with lots of 'volunteers,' you have to allow time to enable it to work through. People want things neatly and quickly packaged, but it just does not work that way.*

Use these questions to reflect and discuss together what you have read in this section.

1. What might it look like if the entire Christian congregation was "knowledgeable and articulate about its faith?"
2. What does the word "discipleship" mean to you?

### **Cultivating A Common Mind**

In response to the increasingly destructive nature of parliamentary style debate, many church bodies are turning to discernment or consensus methods of decision making. Yet to cultivate a common mind there must be a

community: a people who are living in relationship with one another by "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In such a community people are spending significant time together, they are talking together, they are studying Scripture together, they are bearing one another's burdens. In other words, they know one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Without this community, efforts at discernment, while well-intentioned, represent merely one more artificial technique. In the process of nurturing a missional identity and vision congregations are becoming intentional about (1) forming a context of mutuality, (2) engaging in faithful conversation, and (3) affirming the unity of the Holy Spirit

***A Context of Mutuality.*** The cultivation of a common mind requires a context of mutuality in which people are participating in and being formed by a togetherness of faith, hope, and love. At present, many churches lack both the expectation and the experience of such mutuality. Coping with the many demands of family and work, gathering for only an hour on Sunday morning, and involving diverse groupings, most churches do not stimulate the sense of a shared venture or adventure. Yet, without a substantial experience of mutuality the cultivation of a common mind is simply impossible. The challenges and opportunities of being a disciple community call the church to set aside the time and the space to slow down and develop the skills of listening to and learning from one another--to take the time to be holy.

*At St. James Church we started meeting on a monthly basis with whomever would come to talk, usually about 20 people, 3-4 hours at a time. We held two Sunday morning extended sessions, downstairs, three hour blocks of time, with 80 people in the room. We prioritized our strategic issues, talked about the church, and did Bible study together.*

The recovery of the church's common life--a context for mutuality--is central to the church's discernment and participation in God's mission in the world. It is in the messiness, the excitement, the demands, the joys, the irritations, and the satisfactions of life together that insight, wisdom, and judgment--a common mind--are cultivated. "Christian communities provide the contexts whereby we learn--as the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit--to interpret, and to have our lives interpreted by, the scriptural texts such that we are formed and transformed into the moral judgement necessary for us to live faithfully before God."

*Now we are doing a massive discernment Bible study, getting ready to paint a vision portrait. There is Bible study going on everywhere. On one wall in the church we have newsprint called the "Vision Wall," with pictures of biblical images coming out of the Bible study, written, drawn, words, Bible verses--a graffiti wall, to express what we're thinking and imagining about the church. 'Bible study and prayer are very important,' people now say. They've become incredibly disciplined. They are recognizing that Bible study and prayer together are the business of the church. That's the big change.*

***Faithful Conversation.*** The cultivation of a common mind requires that people not only spend time together but talk with one another in a significant manner. More than the surface sharing of opinions, or even energetic debate, faithful conversation is a multi-layered dialogue. As such it involves self-respect: a knowledge of and respect for one's own beliefs or position, and self-exposure: an acknowledgment of and openness to the other as other, as distinct and different. And perhaps most important, a willingness to get so caught up in the to-and-fro of the dialogue that participants may be profoundly changed in the midst of the process.

*The payoffs at Six Mile Run have been simply in keeping the conversation open and going, persistence in staying at it. To have the number of congregational gatherings we've had, and moving to dialogue about core issues, that's definitely a new behavior on the part of the congregation. Some are experiencing this as a spiritual journey; others are just scratching their head.*

Churches that are encouraging faithful conversation are discovering that it involves affirming rather than

denying the significant differences which exist within the church. "After all," said one member, "if we all thought alike, there would be no need for dialogue." Faithful conversation thus assumes not only the true and honest sharing of our thoughts and insights but also the authentic interest in the thoughts and insights of others. It thus calls for a level of vulnerability and engagement that is open to and even eager for new learnings.

*The visioning symposium was clearly a banner moment in the life of the Annual Conference. We were a fractured community. In the symposium we attempted to bring this community together and succeeded in opening lines of communication. It became a healing moment for many. When we have been able to get people to sit down at table together, and what they're about is meaningful and important conversation, something meaningful and important takes place. It's difficult to pull them away from that. I thought that people's resistance to giving so much time would be greater. When we give time, resources and guidance to do this, meaningful sharing and learning takes place. People don't respond, "Boy, I'm glad that's done."*

***The Unity of the Holy Spirit.*** In order for dissimilar persons to engage one another with self-respect, self exposure, and openness to change, there must be a deeper unity that serves to encourage dialogue within the community. Scripture itself offers insight into how such unity comes about. The miracle of Pentecost illustrates the nature of Christian community and Christian communication. The events of Acts 2 describe "the coming of the Spirit as an event of new communication and new communication among people long separated from each other in faith, culture, and language." They did not all become alike, yet by receiving the Holy Spirit they were freed from the bondage of isolation that had made them fearful and suspicious of one another. Within the community created by Pentecost the barriers of language were overcome by the experience of new unity and mutual understanding in Christ. Thus faithful conversation does not depend upon all members of the congregation speaking the same language (whether ethnic, professional, cultural, or theological), but upon their openness to the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit active and present in their midst. As expressed in one congregation's vision statement:

*The Holy Spirit renews people and creates a new and diverse community. The Spirit of the Lord liberates human beings from all the fears and forces that destroy life in community as God intended. In the Spirit of Christ we are transformed. We are new.*

### **Conclusion: A Missional Identity and Vision**

Envisioning a faithful future, doing theology together, and cultivating a common mind through the communal reading and interpretation of Scripture are not ends in themselves. The purpose is to shape the church's identity and vision as that body of people in the world called to participate in God's redemptive mission. The mission of the church is not to solve society's problems, to gain political influence, or even to recruit members. "The mission of the church is to participate in the reconciling love of the triune God who reaches out to a fallen world in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit brings strangers and enemies into God's new and abiding community." Over the centuries, the church has allowed its mission to be defined by something other than the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But in this new era of the church's cultural disestablishment there is the opportunity to recover our true mission. "There is a place for Christians in the postmodern world, not as typically decent human beings but as unapologetic followers of the Way." Becoming thought-filled, full-bodied, and whole-hearted missional churches requires time and commitment, the setting of priorities and the focusing upon common endeavors. The reality is that many congregations-- including the pastor--are so busy with so many activities that to ask people to study Scripture together is an imposition. Taking the time to listen carefully to one another, to test and build upon one another's ideas, to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in the midst of their conversation, can seem like a very strange request in a hectic, pragmatic, and task oriented world. The request may seem strange, but as those congregations accepting the challenge have discovered, a positive response yields many surprises.

*We're not paying much attention to the operational pump-up-the-church stuff anymore. I'm not sure if people are becoming genuinely disinterested in the operational stuff of our church. They seem like they're more interested in Bible study now. We also have 40 people going on a work trip to Appalachia, when we thought we might get 10 to go. 45 people participated in our Vision Conference, when we didn't expect that level of participation.*

It is through the witness of the church that the world discovers the nature and purpose of God's saving work in Jesus Christ: "The fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture is the life, activity and organization of the believing community....The performance of Scripture is the life of the church." Churches that are becoming transformed into missional communities are creating the opportunities for people to come together, to hear God's Word within the biblical narratives, and together to discern what it is that is essential for their ministry. They are beginning to embody a new identity and vision. The focus of their faithful conversations is not about survival or even growth, but rather, "What does it mean to proclaim and to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of the alienation and brokenness of our world?" Disengaging from the usual household tasks, moving beyond the quick solution, they are taking time to sit at the Lord's feet, they are choosing the "better part."

*Is all this really getting us anywhere? Yes, I think so. But it takes a while for God to train us for new challenges. Just imagine how impatient God's people were when God asked them to walk around Jericho once a day for seven days. 'We need this wall to come down, and you want us to just walk around it again?' But on the seventh day they walked around it, the trumpets blew, the people shouted, and the wall fell down flat. Imagine that! They were learning to depend on God. So we are patiently seeking God's leading for us.*

*Our journey may sound simple and smooth, but it was not without challenge or opposition. In fact there were rocks and ruts and brambles along the way. The story of God's people has never been smooth. There always are some who complain and want to go back to the old ways: 'Let's go back to Egypt.' There are those who want to short-cut God's vision and substitute their own: 'The wilderness isn't really so bad.' And those who have idols they don't want to let go of: their personal golden calves. But to those who are faithful, the promises are fulfilled.*

Use the following questions to guide your reflection and conversation.

1. What particular benefits for your church do you see in "taking time to be holy?"
2. What concerns or fears are raised for you?
3. What questions do you have at this time?

## Would you like fries with that?

*Is your church clear about where it's heading? Can you clearly state your purpose as a church?*

LUKE TATTERSALLI says you should develop a Mission Statement...

Source: *Perspective Vo4 No2 @Perspective 1999*

<http://perspective.org.au/other/106/would-you-like-fries-with-that>

Next time you're standing at the counter in McDonalds ordering your Big Mac, Coke and Fries, have a look around the service area. Somewhere close by, you'll see a plaque bearing this message:

"McDonald's Future – To give each customer, every time, an experience which sets new standards in value, service, friendliness and quality."

That is McDonalds "Vision Statement" or "Mission Statement". McDonalds, like most companies in the world today, has a clear statement of their mission. It's a statement about what they exist for as a company – what they're trying to do and achieve. Companies today have realised that to succeed in business they need to be totally clear about what they're doing.

The Ford Motor Company has this as their Mission Statement:

"Our mission is to improve continually our products and service to meet our customer's needs, allowing us to prosper as a business and to provide a reasonable return to our stockholders."

A mission statement for a company works in two ways:

1. It reminds the people WITHIN for the organisation what they're working towards – what they are supposed to be doing.
2. It also informs those OUTSIDE the organisation what that group is striving to achieve.

### **PEOPLE WITH A PURPOSE**

It's not only companies that are developing mission statements. There's a trend among churches today to do the same. Now, while I'm the first to admit that many of the trends in the business world are things that the church should try to avoid, I think the idea of a mission statement is great. Churches, more than any other group, need to be clear about what they're doing. After all, we're doing something far more important than selling cars or making hamburgers.

Imagine you were to go into a church – any church, even yours – and you were to ask people this question: "What does this church exist for – what is it trying to do?" I dare say you would get a lot of blank looks. There may be some in the congregation who could give some kind of intelligent response. But generally churches lack focus and clarity in what they are doing. And they shouldn't.

If you've seen the movie "The Blues Brothers," then you will no doubt remember that Jake and Elwood believed they were on "a mission from God". You might have had some doubts about the credibility of

their mission. But there can be no doubting that the church IS on a mission from God. God has called his people together as the church, and he has called them for a purpose.

Have a look at these Bible verses and see if you can guess what that "mission" is:

*"Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted."* (Isaiah 12:4)

*"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."* (1 Peter 2:9)

God has called his church to tell people about what he has done for us in Jesus – to proclaim the Gospel. That has to be the main reason for our existence as a church. If you want a word to sum it up it is called "evangelism". We need to be telling others about Jesus and how they can have eternal life through him.

But there's more to being a church than just evangelism (though this is by far and away the most important thing). There is also the role of edification – building up each other both physically and spiritually. God wants us to become mature as Christians, and he also wants us to demonstrate a great love and concern for each other. Jesus said this would be the stand-out feature of his disciples – their love for each other. So in discussing the purpose of the church and its reason for existence that must also be included.

## **STATING YOUR PURPOSE**

A mission statement needs to be a clear, concise, and understandable declaration of the purpose and intention of your church. It needs to be phrased in words that are accessible to an outsider – not religious jargon. And it needs to be sharp – to the point.

Bill Hybel's Willow Creek Church in Chicago has this Mission Statement:

*"To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus."*

If you started attending that church, you'd be in no doubt about what they want to do.

I know of a few churches that have adopted this as their mission statement:

*"Ordinary people learning what it means to follow Jesus."*

While that may fall more into the category of a motto or a slogan rather than a mission statement, it still gives a clear idea to those inside and outside what that group is on about.

Some churches have an even briefer statement:

*"Growing followers of Jesus."*

That's a cute one, because it has a dual meaning – growing in terms of both evangelism and edification.

The Mission Statement that our church has adopted was one developed by Dubbo Presbyterian Church. The statement is this:

*"To present Christ to every person – and every person mature in Christ."*

It is based on one verse in Colossians 1:28. It may be based on one particular verse – but it sums up what God has called his people to do. It says there are clearly two things that we should be doing as a

church. First, we should be telling other people about God, and what he has done for us in Jesus. And second, we should be encouraging those who have come to know Christ – those who are part of the church.

In developing a Mission Statement, you need to choose words that communicate clearly what you want to do as a church. And it needs to be a statement that the church understands and accepts. It's no use having a few of the leaders in the church dream up a mission statement that's not understood or accepted by the members of the church. The whole church has to own the mission statement if it is to work effectively.

## **THE VALUE OF A MISSION STATEMENT**

A mission statement may seem fairly insignificant, but it can be an invaluable asset for a church. As I said above a mission statement can work in two ways:

1. It reminds each of the people in the church what their church is trying to achieve – what goal they are working toward.
2. It also tells people outside the church what your group is on about – why your church exists.

I've found it helpful to preach on our Mission Statement at the beginning of each year – normally two sermons looking at each part of the statement in turn. It's a great way to get the year started – it helps us to regain our focus and start out on the right foot.

We try to keep the statement regularly before people's eyes. It's printed on our letterhead, and appears on the cover of the church notice sheet more often than not.

Our mission statement is regularly discussed at our leader's meetings and used as the benchmark for measuring the success or value of activities within the church. I know of another church where each of the groups and organisations in the church – Bible study groups, men's groups, women's groups, youth groups, etc – is asked to write their annual report in terms of how their group has worked to fulfil the mission statement of the church.

I recently heard someone say that the best thing about our church was our mission statement. When I quizzed them further, they said it's great to have such a clear focus on what we're doing as a church. Why not try it at your church too?