



***Oh... Now I Get It!***

*Understanding why we are no longer doing that  
in the church, but instead are doing this...*

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## **Forward**

This short book is a small part of the unfolding story of God's work in and through the people who gather as First Lutheran Church (FLC) in Lafayette, LA. This is a picture of where the church is right now in 2016. One thing we can be sure of, God will continue to bring transformation in and through this congregation. I am thankful to Bill Easum, Bill Tenny-Brittian, Kris Tenny-Brittian, and Scott Musselman who have served as my mentors and guides over the years with their books and blogs, workshops and teaching videos, and their leadership ministry through their web page, *The Effective Church Group* at <http://effectivechurch.com/>. This group has been invaluable to shaping me and my approach to parish ministry as a pastoral leader. I am thankful to all the people who helped make the writing of this book possible. Special thanks to Jeannie Brister who edited the first draft of each chapter and for producing the graphs and artwork. Likewise, a special thank you to her daughter, Jeanne Brister, for being the first proof-reader for each chapter. Thank you to the reading team of Hank and Jackie Bernard, Barry and Kathleen Gidman, Kathy Crowley, Randy Carlson, Claire Fung, Nathan Jackson, Connie Melancon, and Sarah Trahan, for their insights and suggestions for making improvements to this book. A big thank you to the members of First Lutheran Church who have remained committed and courageous enough to follow me and my crazy leadership ideas as we move into the future. I dedicate this book to my wife, Amber, and our children, Simon (13) and Thea (10).

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction

Chapter 1 – More Than Membership

Chapter 2 – Dying To Thrive

Chapter 3 – Called To Equip

Chapter 4 – Large and Small Groups

Chapter 5 – Leaders Who Follow

Chapter 6 – No Longer a Convenient Christian

Chapter 7 – Pursuing the Faith

Chapter 8 – First Faith Habit: Daily Bible Reading

Chapter 9 – Second Faith Habit: Active Listening Prayer

Chapter 10 – Third Faith Habit: Encouraging Others in Their Faith Journey

Chapter 11 – Fourth Faith Habit: Doing Good Works in Jesus' Name

Chapter 12 – Fifth Faith Habit: Sharing Generously with Others

Conclusion

## **Introduction**

Growing up in a family of nine children, there always seemed to be someone left out of the decision making process about a family event that was forthcoming. When that would happen one of my siblings would inevitably cry, "Nobody told me!" So we would explain to that sibling – what and why a decision was made and/or why a family event was being planned and/or why something was no longer going to happen. And the response would often be, "Oh... now I get it!"

A similar situation is happening in the congregation where I am serving as the pastoral leader. There always seems to be someone left out of the decision making process about some church event that is being planned and/or something that is no longer going to happen. Someone will inevitably cry, in one way or another, "Nobody told me!"

I've discovered that an important part of my role as the pastoral leader is to help people understand why we are no longer doing *that* in the church, but instead doing *this*.

This book is written for those who want to participate in the mission and ministry of First Lutheran Church (FLC) in Lafayette, LA with a deeper understanding of why we do what we do, and why we don't do what we used to do. It is intended to help people respond by saying, "Oh... now I get it!"

## **Chapter 1 – More Than Membership**

*Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."*  
(Matthew 28:18)

*Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses..."*  
(Acts 1:8)

The mission of the church (global or local) has always been and will always be the same. It will never change. The mission of the church is – *to be disciples who make disciples*. That's the goal. That's the purpose. That's the reason for any church to exist. Every church shares this same mission, which Jesus instituted. He instructed his disciples to, *"Go and make disciples..."*<sup>1</sup> Jesus did not say, *"Come and make church members..."*

And yet, that's what seems to have been happening in many Lutheran churches for the past 500 years. Since the Reformation we've created systems and structures that focus on making faithful church members but not necessarily faithful disciples of Jesus. I wonder why?

Point of clarification, I've discovered that every disciple is a faithful church member but not every church member is a faithful disciple. It's more than membership. Let me explain...

There seem to be two different approaches to being and doing church as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is where *vision* is so important. Vision gives direction, and parameters, and guidance for carrying out the church's mission. Some churches have a vision that is focused more inward than outward. Other churches have a vision that is focused more outward than inward.

Of course, every church has a vision and no two churches share the exact same vision. The vision describes the preferred future and the strategic process for how the mission will be carried out in that location, given its people and its resources. That's why a ministry that works well for a church in Florida may be a disastrous ministry for a church in Pennsylvania, even if they belong to the same denomination, they may not

share the same vision. They can't share the same vision. The same is true about churches across town.

The vision that is inward tends to set the direction for meeting the needs, wants, and desires of those who belong to the church - aka the churched. The vision that is outward tends to set the direction for meeting the needs, wants, and desires of those who don't belong to the church - aka the unchurched, de-churched, and non-churched. Let me explain...

The word "church" comes from the Greek word, "ecclesia," which means, "called out from." Every church is a group of people who have been called out from the world to share a particular identity and purpose.

The question is - *What have we been called out to be (identity) and to do (purpose)?*

Some churches see themselves as being called out to form a *distinct society* with an inward focus. Other churches see themselves as being called out to form a *distinct witness* with an outward focus. I am thankful to Bill Easum and Tom Bandy who explained these two different approaches to being and doing church in their book *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Inward Focused Church – aka A Distinct Society**

When a church sees itself a *distinct society*, it naturally develops an inward focus, with a particular mindset that resembles a club-like atmosphere. This kind of church becomes a place where members retreat from the world for personal refreshment, and where their needs get met by a personal chaplain - aka the ordained pastor. The expectation is that as a member, you are expected to follow certain institutional rules and responsibilities in order to enjoy the special privileges of the club. I know this sounds harsh, but I've noticed that many Lutheran churches tend to operate this way and don't even know it.

*Concern* is a constant companion for inward focused churches. They worry - *Will we have enough money to pay the chaplain's salary and be able to maintain our building and property for another month?*

All potential new members are seen as a blessing to help pay the bills. Inward focused churches will often create an endowment fund or an "emergency fund" so they can survive the loss of long-standing members

when they die off. These kinds of churches are often more concerned about how much money they have in the bank, instead of how many lives are being changed with the Gospel.

These churches are focused inward for a reason – to take care of the members first and foremost. If there are any leftover resources then they will focus on the unchurched.

The strategy is geared towards preserving the institution, and new people are expected to become members like the rest of us so they can enjoy the benefits of the club. *Status quo* and *comfort* are highly valued in these kinds of churches.

Their vision is focused on *survival* of their beloved church. They can't understand why new people don't visit more than once and/or why nobody wants to join their "friendly" church. Churches with an inward focused vision are a dying breed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In these churches you will notice that members tend to believe and behave as if their wants, needs, and preferences should be a chief concern whenever a decision is made. In fact, the members are very likely to become upset if a decision gets made and they were not in some way consulted. This mindset nearly always ensures that many, if not most, decisions – even minor decisions – must be made using the "majority rules" rule.

This kind of thinking is also called "small church thinking," because this kind of thinking ensures that a church won't see any significant or sustainable growth. The truth is that any church that isn't growing is really dying.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Outward Focused Church – A Distinct Witness**

When a church sees itself as a *distinct witness* it naturally develops an outward focus, with a particular mindset that resembles a company of companions on an exciting journey. Outward focused churches are not tied to a place but to a process of equipping people to become more and more like Jesus in thought, word, and deed. The participants (not just members) experience a constant connection with Jesus as Lord wherever they happen to be. They enjoy the fruit of the Spirit<sup>4</sup> and will let go of anything that gets



in the way of sharing the Gospel with others. Participants hold themselves accountable to their own faith development by loving God and loving others.

*Care* is a constant companion in the outward focused churches. They wonder – *Who around us needs to experience God’s grace, and love, and mercy, and forgiveness today and how can we share it with them?*

They see themselves as blessed to be a blessing to others. All guests and visitors are seen as an opportunity to minister to others as if ministering to Christ Jesus himself. They rely on faith to run the church, not finances. Money in the bank is spent to fulfill their God-given mission, trusting that God will provide through them when future needs arise.

They are focused outward on sharing an abundant life with others and in the process they experience real life by serving others.

The strategy is geared towards going out to meet the un-churched, de-churched, non-churched neighbors and develop a relationship with them so they can experience Jesus too. I define the un-churched, de-churched, and non-churched as anyone who is not involved in a congregation on a regular basis and/or not growing as a disciple. *Trust* and *transformation* are highly valued in outward focused churches.

Their mission is motivated by a desire for *spiritual faith formation* of all age groups, especially adults. These churches naturally grow as more and more people catch the vision and want to be part of the mission of disciple-making that is happening in and through the church. Churches with an outward focused vision are a thriving breed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The participants in these churches think differently. The leaders, and a majority of the congregation, know that it’s not about them. Nothing is about them when it comes to being the church. In fact, they recognize that the church exists to be on the move with Jesus out in the world... to serve and not to be served (or even get their own way).

These congregations trust in their leaders to make good decisions based on the congregation’s mission, vision, and values. The congregational members aren’t involved, and don’t care to be involved, in non-mission critical decisions. They don’t worry about carpet colors, paint samples, or even what time their favorite worship service might be scheduled. Instead,

the average member is so busy doing ministry in real life, they don't have time to get involved in running the church. They leave that up to the leaders.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Church on the Move**

FLC is moving away from being a church that is focused inward (*distinct society*) and striving to provide for the needs of Lutherans – our former target audience. We are moving towards becoming a church that is focused outward (*distinct witness*) seeking to provide for the needs of the un-churched, de-churched, non-churched – our new target audience.

The rest of this book will explain some of the shifts we are making to become a church that is moving towards thriving, and away from just surviving (or dying). I want to help you understand the reason why we are no longer doing *that* in the church, but instead doing *this*... Happy reading.

## **Chapter 2 – Dying To Thrive**

*Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25)*

FLC has been declining, some people would say, "dying," since 2003. That was the year our average weekend worship attendance reached an all-time high at 216.<sup>6</sup>

During that year the church was busy focusing on and providing for the needs of the members. The pastor was the chaplain for the congregation and willingly made himself available 24/7. He was dedicated and committed to providing pastoral care in the congregation and did so faithfully for nearly 30 years. The relationship worked well for him and the congregation. It was a good match for both the pastor and the parishioners. Those years were perhaps the most fruitful years in the congregation's history thus far.

The congregation had grown to a point where three traditional worship services were offered every weekend, one on Saturday evenings at 5:30 and two on Sunday mornings at 8:00 & 10:30. Traditional Sunday school was offered for children from 9:15-10:15 with each age group meeting in their own classroom and the pastor leading an adult class at the same time in his study.

The Sunday school classrooms were also used during the week to house a Mother's Day Out as well as an Accredited School for Pre-K through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. There were four Youth Groups meeting once a month for various age groups in the congregation led by volunteer leaders. A week-long Vacation Bible School (VBS) was hosted during the summer for the children of the congregation and the school. The pastor led an adult VBS class at the same time. Monthly congregational dinners were held so that members could get to know each other. Pairs 'N' Spares was a favorite social ministry for couples and singles to meet for fellowship events like bowling, movie night, or dinner out. Non-church groups including; Jazzercise, AA, and NAMI, all "rented" the church building during the week.<sup>7</sup>

In 2003 the congregation began construction on a freestanding six classroom school building on the church property. The school was outgrowing the Sunday school space and conflict continued over the classroom space that being shared by the Sunday school, Mother's Day Out, and the School.

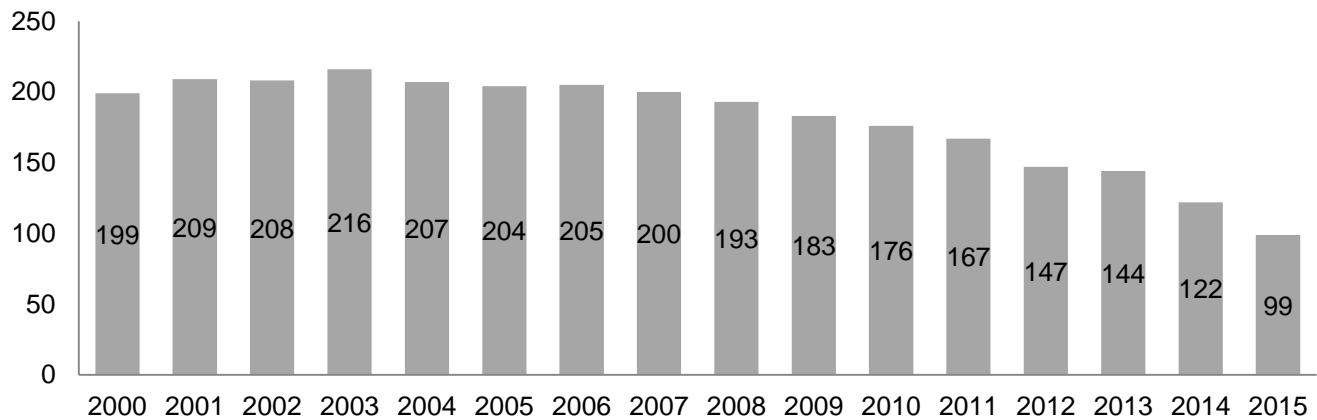
The congregation was committed to sending up to ten percent of the church's income to support various missions both locally and globally. The church participated in a Blood Drive twice a year. There was a Quilting Group that provided bedrolls for the local homeless and for Lutheran World Relief. The church sent volunteers across town once a month to St. Joseph's Diner to help prepare and serve meals for the homeless men in the area. The congregation also sent volunteers to participate in Meals on Wheels for the elderly in Broussard, LA.

The church was busy running and hosting all kinds of ministries in and through the church building. The question is – *were we busy making disciples or simply busy church members?*

Since 2003 we have seen a steady decline in worship attendance and ministry opportunities at FLC. We still allow AA and NAMI to use the building. Mother's Day Out, (now called Parent's Day Out), no longer uses the school building. Their mission was not in sync with our mission to be disciples who make more disciples.

Many of the things listed above that we used to do; we don't do anymore, due to the lack of people resources to do them. The average weekend worship attendance in 2015 has dropped to 99 attenders. If the current trend continues, we will be out of business in less than 10 years. Whatever we were busy doing these past 12 years, it has not helped to turnaround the church from its perpetuating decline. The trend looks like this:

## Average Worship Attendance from 2000 to 2015



### External Factors

I believe there are many factors as to why FLC appears to be dying and not thriving. Here are a few of the external factors that have contributed to the decline. According to Dave Ferguson and his brother Jon Ferguson in their book *Exponential*<sup>8</sup> they suggest that:

- *Today, fewer than 20% of Americans attend church regularly, and only 22% have a positive view of church.*
- *Half of all churches in America did not add one person through conversion last year.*
- *Every week forty-three thousand Americans are leaving the church for good.*
- *One hundred years ago, there were twenty-eight churches for every ten thousand Americans, and today there are only eleven churches per ten thousand.*<sup>9</sup>

I believe the best way to address these external factors is for us to understand and address the internal factors of the church. What happens inside a church influences the perception of people outside the church. I've come to realize that perception influences everything.

## Internal Factors

Here are a few of the internal factors that contributed to the decline at FLC.

- In June 2011 the student population of the school (then pre-K through 6<sup>th</sup> grade) had declined to the point where the church closed the school after ten years of operation. A few people left the church...
- On June 6, 2011 at the same time the school closed, Pastor Ken Burke retired after serving 29 & ½ years serving the congregation. For many people he was the only pastor they ever knew. A few more people left the church...
- On June 21, 2011 Pastor Nancy Andrews began serving as the congregation's interim pastor. A few more people left the church...
- I arrived on December 1, 2012 and began to cast a new vision and mission focused on making disciples, not members. A few more people left the church...
- Some people just drifted away or moved away or stopped coming over the years for various reasons.

Given our current situation, I invited the church council and a few other key leaders to join me in a book study to consider the question: *Why is First Lutheran Church dying and what can we do about it?*

On Sunday, February 14, 2016, we began a 10-week study reading and discussing Bill Easum's book, *A Second Resurrection*.<sup>10</sup> Bill describes how many churches today are spiritually dead (85%) and need to be resurrected. He defines spiritually dead churches as those that:<sup>11</sup>

- *Have lost their sense of mission to those who have not heard about Jesus Christ and do not pant after the Great Commission.*
- *Exist primarily to provide fellowship for the "members of the club."*
- *Expect their pastor to focus primarily on ministering to the members' personal spiritual needs.*

- *Design ministry to meet the needs of members.*
- *Have no idea about the needs of the "strangers outside the gates."*
- *Are focused more on the past than the future.*
- *Often experience major forms of conflict.*
- *Watch the bottom line of the financial statements more than the number of confessions of faith.*

After reading over that list, I shared with the group of leaders that declining churches can be seen as dead and dying churches when they focus on operating this way. Continuing I said, "I don't want to be part of a dead and dying church." I heard a unanimous, "We don't either."

We talked about this list and how important it is for us, as church leaders, to realize that we don't want to be doing these things in our church anymore. They are killing us. I then read out loud to the group from Bill's book,

*Such churches are living corpses. They are physically alive; some may even be growing; but they are spiritually dead to the mission of the New Testament church – to make disciples of Jesus Christ. They've turned inward and exist solely for themselves. They look for ways to serve themselves, the kingdom be damned. They're like baby birds sitting in the nest with their mouths open waiting for momma bird (pastor) to feed them with no concept that Jesus intends them to feed others. Oh, they might collect money to send away to some distant mission field, but they are all thumbs when it comes to sharing the good news with their neighbor or community. What growth they might experience is not of their doing – it just happens because of the population growth around them.<sup>12</sup>*

One of the leaders said, "We used to be like that but I would suggest we've been moving away from being that kind of church these past few years." Others agreed.

"Good," I said, "We *are* making progress even though we are still declining." Then I said, "We are growing the church down so that we can grow it up to be faithful and fruitful."

"I like that image. We are trimming away the dead branches," one of the leaders said.

"Yes we are." I agreed. "And it needs to be done."

We talked about how important it is to develop an environment for people to grow spiritually. We also talked about how the church leaders need to lead the way by modeling the faith wherever their faith journey takes them, at work, at home, in the church, driving their car, with their families, wherever. We talked about how important it is for a church to be focused outward and not inward, as Bill suggests. He says that the behaviors of a dead and dying church need to change in order for a church to become alive again. These behavioral changes include:<sup>13</sup>

- *The church turns outward in its focus.*
- *Jesus, not the institution, will become the object of our affection.*
- *The Great Commission will become our mandate, and we will measure everything we do by how many new converts [disciples] we make rather than whether we have a black bottom line.*
- *Membership in the Kingdom will replace membership in the church.*
- *And those who try to control the church with an iron fist or intimidate the church at every turn of the road will be shown the door.*

After reading through this second list, one of the leaders said, "We need to replace that first list with this second list. We need to be doing these things and not those other things."

"Yes!" I said, "Now you get it!" There was a collective, "Ohhhh..." in the room.

Then one of the leaders asked me, "Pastor what is your vision for our church? What would you like to see happen?"



"Yeah! We want to know?" Came another voice.

I answered by saying something like this...

"My vision is for us to create and maintain an irresistible environment for people to grow deep and wide in faith, hope, and love (spiritual maturity) -- equipping and empowering one another for missional-ministries according to one's giftedness and passions so that more and more people experience God's transforming grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness at work in their lives through inspiring worship, dedicated small groups, and redemptive ministry teams."

"Oh... I get it!" Came the reply from the leader who asked the question. "I want to be a part of a church like that!" She said excitedly.

"I get it too!" Said another leader in the room.

"That is so helpful!" Another leader replied.

We have been focused on the church's institutional needs for too long. No wonder we've been declining. We are dying to thrive. We have become like the factory in this modern day parable for the church:<sup>14</sup>

*There was an ambitious businessman in a certain city who had built a huge grease factory. People from all over the world came to view this factory once it was completed and in full production. The ambitious businessman was only too pleased to show the visitors the entire process, from the point where coal was offloaded from ships to the point where the grease was eventually pumped into huge tanks.*

*One day a visitor arrived and asked whether he could be taken on a guided tour through the factory. The owner of the factory escorted the visitor to the outside of the factory where coal from a ship was being offloaded, making use of enormous machines. The coal was then placed onto conveyor belts running on thousands of rollers. From there the coal was dropped into a mill where the large pieces of coal were broken up into smaller pieces. From there the coal ran on lengthy conveyor belts, once again supported by thousands of rollers to the next process and from there to the next and then to the next. The visitor marveled at the conveyor belts crisscrossing throughout the factory with millions of rollers on which these long belts ran.*

*He also marveled at the huge machines used to break the coal into increasingly smaller particles and the other chemical processes used to eventually convert the coal into usable grease and he marveled at the size of the tanks used to store the grease. He had never seen anything like that in his life. It was mind-boggling.*

*Afterwards, having a cup of coffee with the owner, the visitor was however puzzled by something. "I've seen how the coal is offloaded. I've seen the processes through which the coal had to go until it finally became grease. I've seen the tanks into which the grease is pumped. The only thing I haven't seen in your facility is where the grease is dispatched to the consumers."*

*"You clearly don't understand," the ambitious businessman answered him. "Didn't you see those huge machines and the millions of rollers on which the conveyor belts run? They need to be greased often to keep them running efficiently. We don't have any grease left to dispatch!"*

The basic law of congregational life is this, "Churches grow when they intentionally reach out to people instead of concentrating on their institutional needs; churches die when they concentrate on their own needs."<sup>15</sup> It sounds counter intuitive but it's true. We need to be dispatching people to reach out and share the love of Jesus with others. We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

Bill says that it doesn't matter what you are reaching out to do as long as it results in four things:

- 1. It blesses those being served.*
- 2. It blesses those serving.*
- 3. It creates visibility for the church.*
- 4. It results in growing the Kingdom of God.<sup>16</sup>*

It's time for us to stop focusing on the institutional needs of the church and start focusing on the needs of the un-churched, de-churched, non-churched living all around us. They are the reason we exist as a church. They are the reason we need to be dispatching people from doing church business to doing kingdom business. The first step in that move begins with an understanding of the role of the pastor. That's our topic in the next chapter.

### **Chapter 3 – Called To Equip**

*The gifts he [God] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..*

(Ephesians 4:11-12)

There seems to be a lot of talk these days about what a pastor is supposed to be doing for the congregation. The expectation really depends on how a church answers the question from chapter one - *What have we been called out to be (identity) and to do (purpose)?*

If the identity and purpose of a church is to be a *distinct society* and focused inward then the role of the pastor tends to be that of a chaplain. Churches that operate with a chaplaincy model for ministry will seek *comfort* and *status quo* to be the intended result.

If the identity and purpose of a church is to be a *distinct witness* and focused outward then the role of the pastor tends to be that of an equipper. Churches that operate with an equipper model for ministry will seek *growth* and *transformation* to be the intended result.

Point of clarification, there is nothing wrong with a chaplaincy model for ministry. We need gifted, called, and passionate men and women to serve as chaplains, serving as the hands and feet of Jesus to minister to those in need. Chaplaincy is the model we use in the church for taking care of the flock. Care must happen in and through the church. And yet, as important as that is, chaplaincy is not the primary purpose of the church. Transformation is. The primary purpose of the church involves transforming people's lives to be like Jesus in thought, word, and deed – aka being his disciples.

Yes, the flock needs to be cared for but that is not the primary role of the pastor. The primary role of a pastor and the primary role of a chaplain are like oil and water for a church. They don't mix. They can't mix.

Bill Tenny-Brittian has discovered that most seminaries are still preparing a majority of pastors to be care-givers rather than pastoral leaders who make disciples.<sup>17</sup> Pastors who serve as chaplains usually fulfill their role by *doing* church ministry on behalf of others rather than *leading* the church so others can find their place to serve and thereby build up the body of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

The chaplaincy-pastor will be busy throughout the week doing the following things and church members will often be upset if the pastor isn't doing these things:

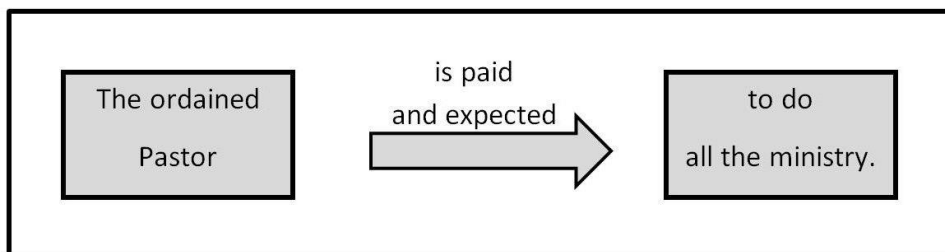
- Administrative tasks (*creating bulletins, updating websites, letter writing, negotiating copier contracts, newsletter creation and/or editing, scheduling meetings, sending reminders, creating budgets, etc.*)
- Attending meetings (*committee meetings, team meetings, board/council/session meetings, ministerial association meetings, denominational meetings, ad hoc meetings, event planning meetings, etc.*)
- Visitations (*hospital visits, in-home member visits, breakfast, coffee, lunch, dinner visits with anyone/everyone, crisis counseling, pastoral counseling, etc.*)
- Overseeing church ministries (*leading events, attending any-each-and-every event every time the church doors are unlocked whether on or off campus, etc.*)
- Presiding (*MCing every worship service, providing opening/closing prayers at the fellowship supper, women's and/or men's meetings, etc.*)<sup>19</sup>

Bill says that doing these things will not grow a church. They certainly won't turn Christians into disciples either. He says that if a pastor is doing any, or most of these tasks, it would be a good time to reevaluate his or her calling. I would agree, since statistics show that 85% of the churches in the U.S. are either stagnant or declining.

I appreciated how Bill puts it, "If a pastor derives great satisfaction from doing these things, then he or she should consider contacting the local hospital, military recruiter, public safety leaders, university, or denominational officials to find out about career chaplaincy opportunities. Why? Because most of these tasks, if not all of them, could be and should be handed off to someone else so the pastor can be busy with the tasks associated with the church's mission to make disciples."<sup>20</sup> It would be healthier and more effective for the pastor, the church, and these local organizations if a chaplain-pastor was serving in one of these other areas, instead of the church.

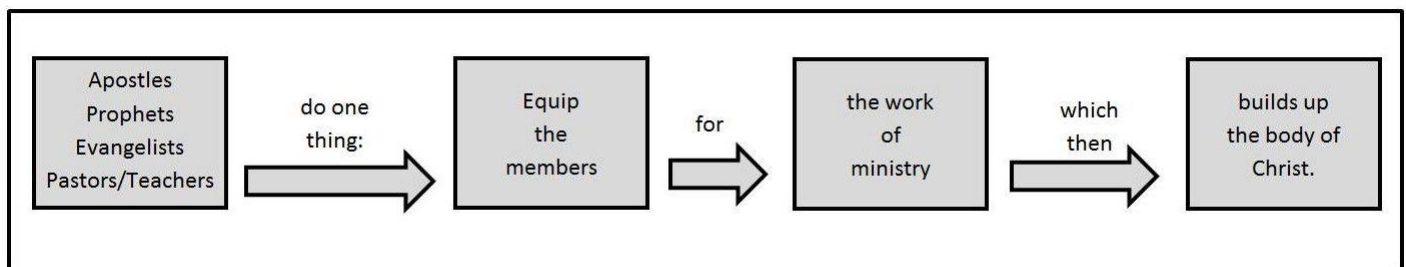
Unfortunately, we've created a church culture where most church members expect the pastor to be doing these ministries and nothing else. At the same time, many pastors are committed to doing all these ministries because that's what seminary teaches us to do.

Here is what the pastor as chaplain model looks like:



There's a better way. I remember the first time I read Ephesians 4:12 about the role of the pastor. He or she is to equip the members for ministry. I did a word search for the word "pastor" in the Bible and this is the only place where the role of the pastor is mentioned and explained. The pastor is not to serve as a chaplain but as a coach. The pastor is to get ministry done by recruiting, training, and coaching others to share their gifts, talents, and passions in and through the church for building it up.

Here is what the pastor (any church leader) in the equipper model is supposed to do:<sup>21</sup>



Since my arrival at FLC three years ago, I have focused on transitioning the church away from the chaplaincy model towards embracing the equipping model for the role of the pastor and for all leaders in the church. This is not an easy shift to make. It has created a significant amount of unresolved conflict in the congregation. It calls for a new way of thinking and behaving for everyone. Indeed, it is such a difficult transition to make that 80% of all attempts to move a church from the chaplaincy model to the equipping model usually fails.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, there are a variety of reasons for this failure, including 1) church people are so used to being taken care of, they don't want to be equipped, 2) the pastor has a high mercy gift<sup>23</sup> and will give into the whims and wishes of taking care of the church members in order to keep them happy.

I learned a long time ago that pastoral care is not the responsibility of the pastor. As strange as that sounds, the primary role of the pastor is to help people mature as disciples of Jesus. This maturing process happens best when people are serving others in and through the church, rather than being taken care of or sitting in a classroom learning about serving others.

No matter how big or small the church becomes, the role of the pastor is not centered on hospital calls or shut-in visits. That issue was settled in Acts 6 where the food distribution to the widows would be done with gifted laity so the leaders could tend to leadership things. The only reason a pastor should do any kind of visitation is to equip someone who is gifted and has a passion to do that ministry.<sup>24</sup>

Does this mean the pastor shouldn't care about the congregation? Of course not! It is precisely because the pastor cares for the congregation that the pastor focuses on equipping people to effectively live in this world by practicing servanthood in and through the church. The more ministries the pastor does for the congregation, the weaker it becomes. The more ministries the congregation is equipped to do for the sake of making disciples, the stronger the congregation becomes.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus was an equipping pastoral leader. He used a simple strategic process that looked like this:

*He spent the majority of his ministry with a small, diverse group of people. He chose them based on character and giftedness. He did not work with everyone personally and he did not treat everyone the same. First, he trained the public. Next, he equipped his disciples on a daily basis. Finally, he gave special time to just three – Peter, James, and John. He singled out people to mentor them. He also taught us the mentoring rule of 10-12, where one leader is mentoring a small group of 10 to 12 disciples.<sup>26</sup>*

Jesus is a great model for effective pastoral leadership. The way he did ministry is the primary way for us to develop a culture of equipping in the church. If Jesus is our model then the role of the pastor isn't about making sure that people are taken care of. The role of the pastor is to model the faith for the purpose of transforming and empowering disciples through other servant leaders. In the church every leader is to be a disciple and every disciple is seen as a potential leader.

Jesus used three steps:<sup>27</sup>

1. **Come and see – recruiting.** The pastor needs to spend a majority of the time looking for those who are ready to take the next step of faith and involvement in the church's vision and mission according to their character, giftedness, and passion.
2. **Come and follow – training.** The pastor models what the person has the potential to become. Modeling is more than teaching. It's hanging out together and applying the faith to everyday situations. Modeling can't be done in a classroom. It has to be experienced in real life settings. It's on-the-job training.
3. **Remain in me – coaching.** The pastor stays connected with that leader-in-training for on-going coaching and support. That leader then spends time looking for those ready to take the next step in faith and the process continues through his or her coaching and support of that new disciple/leader.

I believe the primary role of the pastor is to equip the members for ministry. And yet, at times I find that very challenging to do in a traditional, established church. It gets messy. There is no other way to put it. Sometimes it's just easier to do "it" myself, whatever "it" is that needs to be done.

It gets messy because people don't always do "it" in the most efficient or most effective way. Sometimes people just don't do what they agreed to do and "it" doesn't get done at all. When that happens, I need to remind myself that we aren't in the church business and I shouldn't be doing "it" just to get "it" done. Instead, I need to hold people accountable in a loving way to live the faith by serving in and through the church.

If I am doing a majority of the ministry and not equipping others then two things will happen – *burnout* and *boredom*. I will burnout and the members will be bored. I don't want to see either one of those things happen to me or to them.

At the same time, I need to remind myself that we are in the kingdom business and the "it" I should be doing is kingdom work, not church work. It isn't about getting the church work done. It's about getting the kingdom work done through two kinds of groups – *large* and *small*. That's the topic in our next chapter.



## **Chapter 4 – Large And Small Groups**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles... They continued to meet together in the temple and in their homes... And the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-43, 46-47)*

According to Carl George in his book *Prepare Your Church for the Future*<sup>28</sup> he says that thriving, growing churches in the future will have groups that are large enough to celebrate and small enough to care. He is talking about the kind of groups in Acts 2, where the church gathered regularly as large groups for worship in the temple and as small groups for faith development in people's homes.

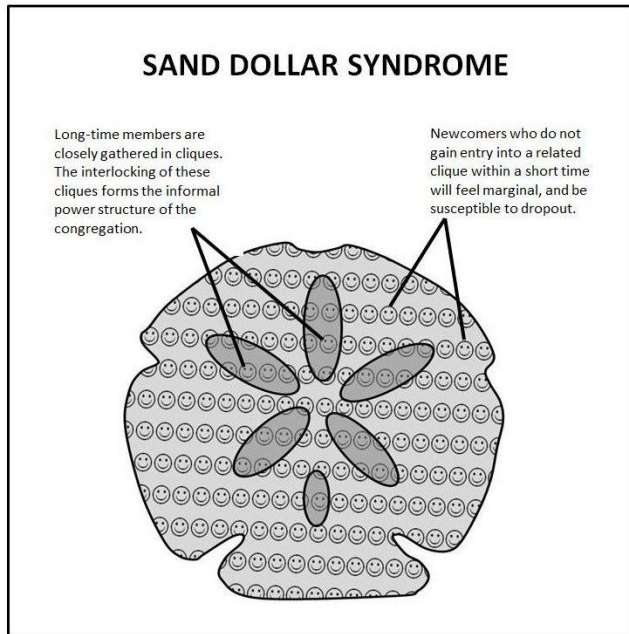
Since FLC has been declining for the past 12 years, I suggest that it's time for us to 1) change our minds about how the church's mission and ministry should be done and 2) change our strategy and structures for carrying-out the mission and ministry of discipleship. This calls for a fresh way of thinking and a different way of doing church. It means we need to stop doing *that* and start doing *this*.

We tend to use a "congregational-group" model where the entire congregation is seen as one big happy group of people. This one-for-all-and-all-for-one approach to being and doing church sounds good and is traditionally the way we've operated. We say that we want everybody to be involved in the church. So, it only makes sense that people would say things like:

- *We need to have more congregational dinners so people can get to know each other.*
- *Pastor you need to go visit so and so, they haven't been in worship for a long time.*
- *We should have name tags for people to wear on Sunday mornings.*

- *We need to take care of our own people first before we start inviting any new people.*

George says this “congregational-group” model promotes “the sand dollar syndrome.”<sup>29</sup> He explains that on the back of a sand dollar is a star-like design embossed with five areas pointing out from the center (see image). Like the sand dollar, there are cliques of people within the church



who are bound together by things like past experiences, common interests, and family ties. The rest of the church, especially newcomers, occupies the space outside of these closed, clannish groups of friends and alliances. In some churches these cliques are called committees.

The majority of the people are seen as participants in the congregation, or sand dollar, but they are not part of any insider group. The cliques, or committees, in the church tend to set the agenda

and become the gatekeepers for who, what, when, where, and why something should or should not happen in and through the church. Control is maintained so that nothing and no one gets too crazy or too radical.

Without realizing it, these cliques become a church within a church. They tend to comfortably minister to one another within their own committees but have institutionalized neglect for the rest of the people. This happens unintentionally. The expectation is that the rest of the people in the church will be involved in a minimal way as they pray, pay, and obey.

In this “congregational-group” system a bureaucratic structure is developed where the church’s constitution is read more carefully than the Bible. Authority, power, and decision-making are for those who have seniority within the cliques. The church is expected to do business as usual whether or not people are learning, growing, or developing as disciples.

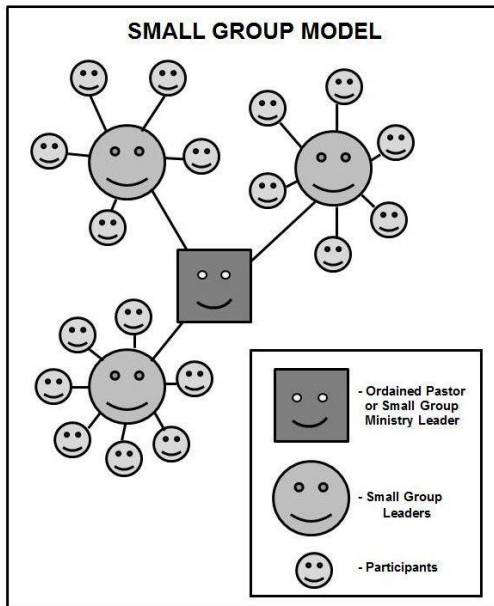
In this one-size-fits-all group model there can only be one pastor, often called “the senior pastor.” He or she is seen as the most important person in the church. The assumption is that the ordained pastor is the only one skilled enough or schooled enough to adequately provide intimate pastoral care for those who belong to this “congregational-group.” In reality there is limited intimacy and limited pastoral care happening in the congregation through this model. One person is really limited to how much ministry he or she can do effectively or efficiently.

In time, as the “congregational-group” grows beyond 150 participants, people become dissatisfied and disillusioned because the ordained pastor is not able to provide the intimate care the members once received and/or now expect. That is a big “if” because a church using the “congregational-group” model isn’t designed or expected to grow. It seeks smallness and strives to stay under 200 in worship. This “we’re big enough” mindset usually sets in when there is between 75 and 125 people in worship and the church typically has enough income to pay its bills.<sup>30</sup>

George says, “The congregation size unit makes for structured neglect of the kind of deep hurts many people carry. It does so by preventing meaningful, widespread gift usage and by assuming that most people aren’t very needy.”<sup>31</sup> The truth is, we are living in a hurting and hostile world and people are longing for a safe place to be accepted, cared for, and loved in order to make sense out of this crazy world. Unfortunately, our traditional, established approach in the church is not prepared to cope with the quality of turmoil that people are experiencing in their personal lives today.<sup>32</sup> The ordained pastor cannot effectively or efficiently meet all of the people’s needs all the time.

It’s time for us to create a new mind-set and develop a new group model at FLC – groups that are large enough to celebrate and small enough to care. George calls this the “cell & celebration model.”<sup>33</sup> It’s a group model designed to address many of the problems we seem to be facing in the church right now including: assimilation, communication, and faith development.

In this model the cells are the ongoing relationship groups of 3 to 12 people who care for and minister to one another.<sup>34</sup> The participants study the Word of God and learn how to apply its teachings to their lives. They build up and encourage one another. The lay leader of each cell group receives ongoing training and support from the ordained pastor and/or a staff person. The small group model looks like this (see image).



These lay leaders of the cell groups become the ministers that drive, perpetuate, and ensure the quality of the entire church.<sup>35</sup> The ordained pastor becomes the lead pastor to this group of lay leaders/lay pastors. Within each cell group there is an enormous amount of flexibility and innovation to fulfill the desired result: *to provide a safe environment for the participants to grow in spiritual maturity by sharing their gifts and passions in service to the mission and ministry in and through the church.*

Within the cell and celebration model there is no need for congregational dinners because every cell group includes some kind of food at their gatherings – from a full meal to a simple snack. There is no need for the ordained pastor to chase down inactive members because the cell group leaders encourage participation in worship regularly with the sermon being the basis for the cell group’s text study. There is no need for name tags because nobody is a stranger in a cell group. Everybody is somebody in a cell group and everybody is seen as somebody in need of care and support to live the faith every day. Every cell group is also encouraged to invite and welcome newcomers into their group as evangelism and assimilation become as natural as inhaling and exhaling. Every cell group is working towards starting another cell group within 6-8 months, so that others can be cared for and supported in their faith journey too.

There are four major shifts that need to happen in the church for this cell and celebration model to be effective. We need to shift our thinking:

1. *From staff oriented to lay oriented*
2. *From program centered to relationship centered*
3. *From professional pastor to a coaching and equipping pastor*
4. *From Bible study small groups to small groups that offer community, personal growth, mission, and study of the Bible for life application.*<sup>36</sup>

I've discovered that when it comes to a small group ministry in a church there are two different approaches. There are churches *with* small groups and there are churches *of* small groups. The vast majority of established churches, especially churches that see themselves as a *distinct society*, are churches *with* small groups. In these churches, small groups are seen as just another program option for people to participate in. The small group ministry will often find itself competing with all the other options that are happening in and through the church.

On the other hand, churches that see themselves as a *distinct witness* are churches *of* small groups. Small groups become the only ministry program the church offers in addition to worship. In these churches 99% of everything the church does revolves around and intentionally happens through small groups.<sup>37</sup> This is the same model that Jesus used with the 12 disciples.

Here are some of the differences between churches *with* small groups and churches *of* small groups.<sup>38</sup>

<b><i>With</i> small groups</b>	<b><i>Of</i> small groups</b>
1. Staff = 1 to 100 people	Staff = 1 to up to 400 people
2. Expensive to staff	Costs very little to staff
3. Pastor ministers to everyone	Laity minister to one another
4. Pastor emphasizes worship	Pastor emphasizes equipping
5. Institutionally oriented ministry	People centered ministry
6. Staff person assimilates	Small groups assimilate
7. Staff person for evangelism	Small group evangelizes

8.	Ministry is top down	Ministry side-ways, top/down
9.	Ministers are specialists/generalists	Everyone is a minister
10.	Disappearing model	Emerging model
11.	Programs/committee based	Small groups/team based
12.	Church can grow large and cold	Focused on continued care

I am learning how important it is for me to lead the congregation away from being a church *with* small groups to being a church *of* small groups. That's why we dropped the committee structure in 2013 to make room for the small group ministry approach. It's important to remember that no matter how important small groups become, large public worship is still the main thing that happens in a church.<sup>39</sup> That's why we've moved towards a theme based worship every week, where the liturgy, music, and videos reflect the topic for the day and not some liturgical calendar that may or may not be applicable to people's lives.

Churches *of* small groups bring their cell groups together regularly to form the large group gatherings for worship, leadership development, and special events. Worship is seen as a time to celebrate the transformation that God is doing in and through the lives of the cell group participants. Worship also becomes a time for the small group leaders to invite new people to participate in their cell group.

Bill Easum helped me understand that developing an effective small group ministry is one of the hardest ministries an established, traditional church can undertake.<sup>40</sup> I would agree with him. He says that it takes perseverance and patience. That has certainly been my experience.

We introduced the small group model in 2013, calling them "LIFE Groups" to describe how each group would live the faith together in their everyday lives by supporting and caring for one another. Unfortunately, our small group ministry never really got firmly planted in the congregation.

We used the 10-week small group model by Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas as spelled out in their book, *Activate*.<sup>41</sup> It seemed that just as each 10-week session ended, the small groups were just starting to jell and develop deep relationships within their small group. In the first season we had four small groups. The second season we filled three groups. In the

last season we had two groups. Needless to say, our small group ministry did not grow and produce more groups like we had hoped. Instead, the small group ministry got even smaller. Lives were touched but not like we had hoped. We decided to discontinue our small group ministry for the time being.

In spite of our first attempt, I still believe that small groups are the best way to help people grow in spiritual maturity and produce disciples who make more disciples. There are so many benefits to being a church of small groups. Here are some of those benefits:

- *Provides a great care system by equipping group participants to care for one another*
- *Assimilates, evangelizes, and provides the best environment for spiritual faith formation*
- *Keeps laity informed about the congregation and the mission*
- *Provides a unity of spirit and a diversity of thought by bringing together diverse people in an environment of trust, dialogue, care, and compassion*
- *Low financial cost to the congregation*
- *Drastically reduces the dropout rate and the list of inactive members*
- *Reduces to almost zero the burnout rate of both pastor and laity*
- *Reduces the number of organizational meetings with the local congregation*
- *Works in any size church.*<sup>42</sup>

Participation in a lay-led small group can be life-changing. I have heard story after story of what our LIFE Groups have done for people and their faith journey, especially for someone like Holly. Here is Holly's story in her own words...

## **Holly's Story**

*As a military family we lead a very transient lifestyle. We came to Lafayette from my favorite duty stations to date, and because of that, I think "settling in" to the area was extremely difficult. About a year into our move I started giving up hope that Lafayette could ever feel like home and began counting down the days to our next move. We had just come back from an extended vacation back home with our families when my husband and I quickly realized our quality of life was suffering tremendously. We lacked any meaningful connection to the area we now called home.*

*My oldest daughter attended a faith-based Mother's Day Out program a few days per week and would come home asking me questions about Jesus and the Bible. Questions that I, having been raised un-churched, could not answer. At the time I figured we could try to "kill two birds with one stone" and join a church. My family would undoubtedly make friends within a congregation and I could slowly learn some of the answers to some of my daughter's questions. I really did not anticipate being touched by the Holy Spirit and starting my own faith journey.*

*Our plan was to check out a new church every week until we found one that we thought would be a good fit for our family. First Lutheran was the first church we visited. It was love at first service for my husband; and although I would take a bit more convincing, we became regular attenders. Attendance led to my baptism and our family officially joining the church.*

*My thirst for more exposure and understanding of the Bible and a deeper relationship with God grew by the day. A few months after joining the church there was an announcement in the bulletin that Living In Faith Everyday (LIFE) Groups would be starting. It was definitely outside of my comfort zone, but I decided to give it a try and attended the first meeting.*

*I had no idea what to expect. I certainly would not have expected to find everything we had originally wanted from the congregation as a whole: fellowship, support, guidance, friendship, etc. would be more readily established in the small group setting.*



*Instead of gaining superficial relationships with many I gained more meaningful, intimate relationships with my fellow group members. Not only did I start to form a strong bond with these women, my feeling of connectedness to Lafayette began to easily develop.*

*It was not just my social life that benefited from the LIFE Group meetings, but my spiritual life as well. The women in my LIFE Group all had unique takes on the previous week's sermons and different interpretations of the relevant Bible verses. Throughout the weeks, that passed too quickly, my relationship with God evolved into something I'd never imagined. My life had new meaning. I felt renewed and energized and I now completely trust in God and his plan for my life. My family was brought to Lafayette for a reason. First Lutheran Church and the wonderful women with whom I bonded during weekly LIFE Group meetings is just the beginning of my journey of faith.*

*I cannot speak highly enough of my experience in a LIFE Group. To say it was life changing would be an understatement. I didn't want it to end. I look forward to the opportunity to participate in another small group and cherish the lasting bonds that I formed.<sup>43</sup>*

Holly gets it. Because of her experience, it is crucial that we restart our lay-led small group ministry, learn from our mistakes, and use a model that seems more appropriate for us.

In my research recently I discovered Bill Easum's "Missional Small Groups Manual."<sup>44</sup> He wrote this resource for established churches like ours who are looking to develop a small group ministry in a more traditional church setting. Churches of small groups have been evolving for decades and are mushrooming up all over the place. According to Bill these churches, no matter what tribe they come from, have several things in common.<sup>45</sup>

- *Almost everything revolves around small groups. Worship for adults, children and youth along with small groups become the bulk of their ministry. The mission is seen as global and local and carried out through small groups. This means fewer other programs are provided.*

- *Intentional pathways are in place to help people become involved in small groups. Every leader in the church knows the pathway and knows how to use it to maximize the number of people participating in small groups.*
- *People are invited to discover their gifts and passions and encouraged to use them in and through the church even if there isn't a place for them at the moment. Small groups are allowed to follow their hearts.*
- *They are more focused on building the kingdom rather than growing the church.*
- *The pastor and staff do as little ministry as possible and as much equipping of the laity as possible. They measure their success by how many apprentices they have who grow into leaders of small groups.*
- *Laity is considered the heart of pastoral ministry. The belief is the more people are involved in hands-on ministry the quicker they will more resemble Jesus.*
- *They are concerned with relationships and community building instead of designing and implementing programs.*
- *They offer a powerful missional approach since they are based in the community and outside the local church. The small groups are geographically based rather than affinity based.*

My experience supports what Bill says, "The further we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the more people will have a need for support and quality relationships."<sup>46</sup> We aren't there yet but we are getting ready to relaunch our small group ministry with the ultimate goal being leadership development within each cell group. In the process of developing small group leaders, more and more people will find the care and support they need for living the faith in their everyday world.

I am prayerfully considering who to recruit, train, and begin coaching as potential small group leaders so we can relaunch our small group ministry. I will probably start with Holly and others like her, who experienced the life-changing power of participation in a small group. They will become apprentice leaders as I coach and support them in their spiritual growth to become our small group leaders. Leadership is our topic in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5 – Leaders Who Follow**

*Then he [Jesus] said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."*

(Luke 9:23)

I went to visit a family recently at their home. This family had moved into the area and had started coming to worship at FLC. I arrived at their house, rang the doorbell, and after a brief time a little face peeked out from the side window. That little face then quickly disappeared. I expected the front door to open. Instead, I heard a child's voice yell, "Mommy, Jesus is here!"

Of course, I am *not* Jesus, but what a great compliment. That child saw Jesus in me. Isn't that the ultimate goal of discipleship? Ohhh... if we could live our lives in such a way that when people look at us they would see Jesus...

That begs the question – *is your life worth watching?* To put it another way - *if you call yourself a disciple of Jesus, does your life reflect him and his ways?*

I found myself wondering what it would take for people to see Jesus in each one of us. How could we create a church where the members reflect Jesus and his ways to the people around us?

That's when I realized how critically important leadership is, and the kind of leaders we need at FLC in order to be a disciple-making church. It makes sense to me that the first "job" for every church leader is to be a follower of Jesus. Every leader is first, a follower. That's how it was in the early church.

In her book, *Reclaiming the L Word*,<sup>47</sup> Kelly Fryer points out that for the first 300 years, everything that happened in the church was based on a simple creed: "Jesus is Lord."<sup>48</sup> The Bible even suggests that this was the first formal statement of faith for the church.<sup>49</sup> The words, "Jesus is Lord"

was used in the early church because they considered Jesus to be the object of their love, devotion, and life itself. They incorporated his teachings into their lives by remembering how he lived and then they tried to live their lives the same way.<sup>50</sup>

In those early years of the church, Christianity was about a life-giving relationship with Jesus and not about rules and rituals or doctrines and decrees. They saw in Jesus a life worth living and they wanted to live their lives the Jesus' way – by faith, hope, and love. That's probably why the early Christians were called "followers of the way."<sup>51</sup>

The goal of the early church was never to learn *about* Jesus. It was always about learning how to live *like* Jesus. The early church saw in Jesus a life worth watching. The original goal of the church was never about teaching the Bible or church doctrines. The original goal of the church was about teaching people how to live like Jesus lived.<sup>52</sup>

When we confess that "Jesus is Lord," we are saying that he is the guide, the example, the role model for how we will live our lives every day. That is the core of what it means to be a disciple. I appreciate how Bill Easum describes this lifestyle. He writes:

*Attempting to follow the life and character of Jesus was the goal of early Christianity. Such a goal goes far beyond the popular phrase, "What would Jesus do?" When faced with a decision the early Christians didn't have to stop and think about that question. They were so in tune with Jesus they intuitively knew what to do and how to act. The early Christians weren't as much concerned about how they should act in response to something as they were about the character of the totality of their life. Sure, they were concerned about how they reacted to the things life sent their way, but they were more concerned about living in such a way that their entire existence demonstrated what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. They knew their actions spoke louder than words. They knew that changing the inner character of a person is what Jesus was all about. They knew that salvation went to the core of a person and changed not only what they believed but how they lived.<sup>53</sup>*

That does not appear to be happening in many churches today. I wonder why. When did the emphasis shift from experiencing a life worth watching to a life we learn about?

Scholars suggest that this shift began to happen when Christianity was legalized in 362 A.D. by Constantine. Since then there has been a slow and steady movement away from Jesus and his teachings, as people follow the teachings of the institutional church more and more.<sup>54</sup> The institutional church appears to be the object of people's love, devotion, and life itself instead of Jesus. People began to "go to church" rather than "be on the way" with Jesus. Church became a boring place to gather, rather than an exciting journey towards spiritual maturity on the road of faith.

Scholars have noted that during the fifth century the simple creed "Jesus is Lord" was replaced with two lengthy creeds - the Apostles' and the Nicene. Both of these creeds take an academic degree to comprehend. We recite one of them every week in worship, and as we do, I look around wondering if anybody really knows what those words mean. No one had to teach people what it meant to say, "Jesus is Lord," but it seems you need to take a seminary course to understand either one of these two statements of faith that the institutional church created.<sup>55</sup>

After the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Christians become known as "people of the book" instead of "followers of the way."<sup>56</sup> Thanks due in part to Guttenberg's invention of the printing press, with Luther and the Reformers using the printing press to enlighten the world with their teachings. This was a very good thing that happened for the church. Unfortunately, it opened the door for Christianity to be studied rather than something to be lived. With the printed word being studied, Jesus was removed even further from experiencing a living-relationship with him. Since the Reformation, the church has spent more time on how to interpret the Bible than how we are to live like Jesus did.

No one can argue that we need to study the Bible. We certainly do. It's our playbook for life. I'm suggesting that we need to study it with a focus on how the Bible reveals Jesus to us, and the application of those learnings to our lives. I believe it's time for Jesus to become Lord again -

Lord of our churches and Lord of our lives. That means we must become his students and learn from him and his ways.

Jesus invites us to be his students and to learn from him. He says, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"<sup>57</sup>

Jesus was seen as a rabbi when he said those words. A rabbi was a teacher of the Torah – aka the Old Testament. There was no New Testament written yet. A rabbi's interpretation of the Torah was called "his yoke." I am thankful to Ray Vander Lann and his blog article, *That The World May Know*, where he explained this rabbi/disciple relationship.<sup>58</sup>

Most rabbis would invite the best of the best to be in a small group of students. Sometimes a student would seek out the best rabbi to follow, but was often turned away. Students who were chosen to learn from a rabbi were called *talmidim* (singular, *talmid*) in Hebrew, which is translated as *disciple*. A rabbi's group of students would learn his interpretation of the Scriptures (Old Testament). This was called taking "the rabbi's yoke." When a student was chosen by a rabbi to be a *talmid*, the rabbi would say, "Come, follow me."

Learning the Scriptures from a typical rabbi meant that his disciples had already memorized the entire Old Testament and were living life based on the 613 laws found in the Old Testament. The rabbi would teach his disciples about his interpretation of the Scriptures and his interpretation of the laws in the Scriptures.

Jesus said that his yoke, his interpretation of Scripture, is easy and light compared to the unrealistic expectations of most rabbis in his day. To be a disciple of Jesus there was no need to try and be the best of the best, or to memorize anything before following him. There was no need to live your life burdened by the 613 laws in the Old Testament either.

Instead Jesus invites anyone (meaning everyone) to become a disciple and to follow him. He taught his own interpretation of the Old Testament and said that our lives should be shaped by just two laws - *love God and love others*.<sup>59</sup>

In the first century each rabbi would also teach the accepted interpretation, or yoke, of their community. For many rabbis their yoke involved participation in the community of the Torah – promoting a “do this and don’t do that” approach to life. Jesus’ yoke was about participation in the community of faith, which he called “the kingdom of God.”<sup>60</sup> The community that Jesus promoted was not about food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy as guided by the Holy Spirit.<sup>61</sup>

Fulfilling the Torah was the task of every rabbi and their disciples. “To fulfill” means to “obey correctly.” If a rabbi interpreted the Torah incorrectly and taught anyone to not obey it as God intended, he was teaching people how to “destroy” the Torah.

It appeared as if Jesus was trying to destroy the Torah. His interpretation of Scripture and his approach to the law were far different from any other rabbi in his day. That’s probably why the religious leaders took issue with him.

Jesus addressed any confusion or misunderstanding about what he was doing by pointing out that he came to fulfill God’s law, not abolish it.<sup>62</sup> Jesus came to complete the law and to show people how to correctly keep it.

One of the ways Jesus interpreted the Torah was to stress the importance of the right attitude of the heart as well as the right actions of the individual.<sup>63</sup> Jesus’ yoke was grounded in growing the character and integrity of his disciples, not just growing them with head knowledge.

Disciples were passionately devoted to their rabbi as their lord. This meant that the rabbi/disciple relationship was an intense and personal relationship. As the rabbi lived, taught, and modeled his understanding of the Scriptures, his disciples listened, watched, and imitated him.

That’s what Jesus’ first disciples did. They were with him,<sup>64</sup> followed him,<sup>65</sup> learned and lived by his teachings,<sup>66</sup> imitated his actions,<sup>67</sup> and made everything else secondary to living like Jesus, their rabbi.<sup>68</sup> We are called to do the same thing, to take on his yoke and to learn from him by spending



time with him every day in prayer and Bible study, as well as participation in worship and a small group.

There is a great story in the Bible about Peter walking on water.<sup>69</sup> When Jesus (the rabbi) walked on water, Peter (the talmid) wanted to be like him. Peter had certainly not walked on water before this nor could he have imagined being able to do so before he met Jesus. However, if Jesus, his teacher, could do it, and Peter wanting to be like him and do what he did, then Peter should be able to walk on water too. And he did! It was a miracle. Peter was being just like Jesus and doing what he was doing. And then, we are told, Peter doubted. Doubted who or what?

I always thought that Peter doubted Jesus and his power. Maybe he did, but Jesus was still standing on the water. I wonder if maybe Peter doubted himself, doubting his ability to be like Jesus and do what he did. Jesus responded to Peter saying, "Why did you doubt?"<sup>70</sup> Jesus believed in Peter and his ability but Peter did not. Peter doubted his own ability.

There is a crucial message for us in that story. Jesus calls us to be his disciples because he knows that he can instruct us, empower us, trust us, and fill us with his Spirit to follow him. Jesus believes in us and our ability to be like him and to do what he did. The question is - *do we believe in ourselves?*

Jesus believes that we can be his disciples who make more disciples. I believe that too, do you? In the next chapter we will consider how one person at FLC went from being a convenient Christian to being a committed Christian.

## **Chapter 6 – No Longer A Convenient Christian**

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)*

One day Julie Carlson, an active participant in the congregation, said she wanted to talk with me about what God has been doing in her life. When someone tells me that, I get all excited inside, like a kid at Christmas time. I couldn't wait to hear her story.

We set up a time and a place to meet. She talked. I listened. I smiled. I listened with a smile. The more she talked, the more I smiled. I listened as she passionately told me about the transformation she has been experiencing in her own faith journey these past few years. Here is her story in her own words...

*Up until recently, I was a convenient Christian. I know it sounds harsh, but I admit it freely. I had some sort of abstract idea of who God was, but I only sought his counsel in dire emergencies, when it seemed as if all else was failing and I had nowhere else to turn. When it was convenient for me. I knew of some entity, greater than me, who was easy to blame when everything went wrong... "Why God! Why did this have to happen to me?!?!" But, he was completely out of the picture when things went right, because clearly, that was all me controlling those outcomes... "Step aside God, I got this." Most of the time though, I just imagined God as this omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, sparkly male version of Judge Judy, sitting on his judge's bench style throne all smug-like, watching and waiting for me to screw up so he could hurl lightning bolts, or locusts, or some other such hell on earth at me.*

*I was a sporadic, at best, church attendee, choosing to attend primarily the big named holidays... Christmas and Easter. I acknowledged Jesus Christ by celebrating his birth and his death each year, paying little mind to his life or his ministry in between. I would consider the sermon engaging if I managed to remain conscious for the duration, whether I could recollect a single word of it after "the Lord's face shined upon me" out the door, never came into play... let completely alone if I would use any of these teaching in my day to day life once I drove from the church parking lot and joined the rest of society.*

*It got to where church was an obligatory check mark for me... "Look at me, look at me, God! I am in church. And I want credit for being all churchy this week." Even though the Pastor sounded a lot like Charlie Brown's teacher. Being accountable for any of what was said, seemed a lot like work... and I mean seriously, I already wear enough hats in this world... who will put the pot roast in the crock pot and make the dentist appointments for the children if I am busy thinking about what was said at church?*

*I knew I was a sinner. I knew I fell short of the glory of God. That meant to me that I was a failure in the sight of God, I was incapable of accepting God's forgiveness, and I was going to hell. Cue the frogs and boils...*

*The weirdest part of this life is that I was happy there... content... comfortable. I had no expectations of anyone. Not of my pastor, not of my congregation... not of myself. Check the box, try to remain conscious, be a good girl, don't steal your neighbor's goat... you're all good... see you again for the next major church holiday. Wear a new dress.*

*This was all working for me, in my convenient Christian lifestyle... until the new guy showed up. Our previous pastor retired, a man I loved, who baptized both my babies and welcomed us, as a family, into the church, left. And a new pastor came. And I didn't like him. I didn't like him at all, and I couldn't even put my finger on why I didn't like him. In hindsight, I think the reason I didn't like the new pastor at first, was simply because he wasn't the old pastor.*

*But then things got worse. With his arrival, things quickly changed. What was he doing? Who does he think he is? I was furious! He took away our hymn boards, and I liked the hymn boards. They were tradition. Then he put up Jumbo-Trons, like at a sports bar! What was happening to my church? He got rid of our multiple hymnals. We started listening to Contemporary Christian Rock Music... in the sanctuary! Like drums and guitars and stuff... I felt awkward... does Jesus even like drums and guitars? He changed the entire service structure, the responsive readings, and all the words I knew by heart... now what am I supposed to say to God? This guy was out of control!*

*But he didn't stop there, he shook up a few of the preconceived notions I had about the way a pastor should behave and appear during the church service. When he stood to give the sermon, he did not*

*simply stand behind the pulpit, and speak, like every other pastor that I had ever known. He completely removed the pulpit from the sanctuary. It was strange to have such an enormous change. And he dressed differently; he didn't wear the traditional robes. But, I liked the robes. It made the pastor seem more holy, more righteous, further away from us mere mortals and closer to God for some reason. So this was our new pastor, with no pulpit or robes between us, standing there in his khakis and sandals... amongst us... like he was one of us... face to face... eye to eye... giving us the message. He was so close to us. I didn't know what to do. It was so unfamiliar.*

*Slowly... unexpectedly... for some strange reason I stopped hearing my pastor and I began to listen to him. And that was when things began to change for me. I shocked myself, and my whole convenient Christian world, one day when, for the first time, I called upon something that the pastor said on Sunday... on a Tuesday!!! At work!!! What, wait a minute... this doesn't fit within my check box of convenient Christianity...*

*I was further flabbergasted the day that I caught myself applying words that he spoke to me at a Lenten Soup Supper on Wednesday, to behaviors I was exhibiting at the grocery on a Friday. This is just not like me. I am being accountable. His words are applicable. Not just on Sunday... for one hour. This is crazy! And it kept happening to me, over and over, more situations, more people, more opportunities, more days of the week...*

*I was now fighting myself, tooth and nail, to continue to dislike him. But I couldn't. The things that he was saying made sense to me. I didn't want to listen to him, but I found that he spoke to me, to my heart, to my spirit, and soon I looked forward to hearing what he would say next. And he made me want to do something about it! I wanted to talk about it. I wanted to tell others about it! I couldn't keep all of this goodness to myself!*

*I wanted to keep God far from me, so he couldn't see me, but he kept leading me back to him time and time again. Not so God could see me, he could always see me... but so I could see him. Not as a ferocious, locust hurling, lightning bolts throwing, male version of Judge Judy, waiting for me to screw up, as I had always imagined. But rather as a patient, loving, forgiving Father... who has more grace than I have sins. This was all new for me.*

*I was beginning to understand.*

*I remember the first time the new pastor told me that the Bible was a love story. I nearly fell off the pew and thought, "They must have skipped the Book of Revelation at the seminary he went to." But now I see it, now I feel it, now I know it... the unbelievable love that God has for me, for us, his children. Now, when I think about how unworthy I am, I think about how never once did God call who we expected him to call, the ones who seemed the most qualified, the ones who seemed to have all of their stuff together... he called the ones we least suspected, the unqualified, the unworthy... and I am, we are, made worthy and qualified through him.*

*So it is with a renewed faith and open eyes that this pessimistic parishioner can finally say that I trust my pastor. I believe in him. I see his mission for our church, and I believe in it. I believe in a God of grace, poured out for me through his Son, Jesus Christ. I am forgiven, I am loved, and I have a purpose. I have been, and continue to be, on an incredible journey... from being a convenient Christian to being a head-strong child of God... on a mission. Blessings, Julie Carlson<sup>71</sup>*

I look forward to the day when I hear more stories like Julie's, stories of transformation and new life happening in and through the congregation. Stories of people saying, "I get it! And I want others to get it too!" Stories of people saying, "I no longer want to live my life just going through the motions as a convenient Christian. I want to live my life on purpose with meaning and direction as a committed Christian."

I also look forward to the day when more and more people are being equipped to live the faith in their everyday world. I've discovered that living this new life as a committed Christian calls for practice every day. It doesn't just happen. Each one of us needs to be intentional about our own faith development. In the next chapter we will consider the importance of pursuing the faith.

## **Chapter 7 – Pursuing the Faith**

*“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel...” (Philippians 1:27)*

Crystal (*not her real name*) grew up attending and participating in a Lutheran church. Truth be told, she sometimes participated in the youth group and sporadically attended worship with her parents. She said that she “graduated” from church the day she was confirmed.

Crystal had no desire to be confirmed and repeatedly told her parents as such but they wouldn’t listen. They begged her, “Do this for us, please!” They pleaded with her for the entire week leading up to Confirmation Sunday. They kept telling her, “If you don’t want to come to church after being confirmed, you don’t have to.” So she didn’t. Her parents would always regret saying that to her.

The day of her Confirmation was the last day Crystal was in worship. She was 14-years-old and “glad to be done with church” as she put it. Now at the age of 34 she had walked into worship for the first time since that fateful Confirmation day 20 years earlier. Her parents eventually stopped attending church too. They just wanted to make sure that Crystal was confirmed. They approached Confirmation as if it was some kind of “spiritual insurance.”

Crystal got married before she was 20-years-old, divorced a few years later, then remarried. She was yearning for something in her life but not sure exactly what that yearning entailed. She felt empty inside, as if she was going through the motions of life with no direction and no meaning.

One day a friend invited her to come to worship at FLC. She came, reluctantly. About halfway through worship, Crystal realized that she had been wandering in a spiritual wilderness since walking away from the church on that fateful Confirmation day. For the first time in her life, it felt good to be in worship among a community of believers. That day in worship was a spiritual new beginning for her.

After three months of weekly participation in worship, Crystal asked if she could speak with me. She shared that she enjoys coming to worship and that the story I told during the message that morning, about "The Rabbit," compelled her to want to talk with me. She said that for her, she feels there must be more that she could be doing when it comes to maturing in the faith. She said, "She is now in hot pursuit of 'The Rabbit.'"

The story of "The Rabbit" I told that Sunday morning went like this.<sup>72</sup>

*One day a young man named, Larry, asked the pastor this question. "Why do some people seem to live by faith all the time and others do not?" The pastor told Larry to visit Mr. Frank, an elderly man in the congregation. "He has the answer to that question." The pastor said. "Mr. Frank, even as an old man, has never lost his commitment to Christ. His faith is strong, perhaps stronger than ever, in spite of everything that has happened to him over the years."*

*So Larry went to see Mr. Frank. He was sitting on the front porch with his dog stretched out before him taking in a relaxing afternoon. Larry posed his question: "Why do some people seem to live by faith all the time and others do not?" Larry continued, "I heard that you have an answer to that question. I was told that people see something in you they don't see in most people who are Christian. What makes you different?"*

*The old man smiled then replied, "Let me tell you a story. One day I was sitting here quietly watching the sunset with my dog. Suddenly a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up and took off after that white rabbit. He chased that rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by his barking. What a sight it was as that pack of dogs ran barking across the creeks, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns. Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued in hot pursuit of that white rabbit. In that story, young man, is the answer to your question."*

*Larry sat there in confused silence. Finally, he said, "Mr. Frank, I don't understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and a commitment to Christ?"*

*"You fail to understand," said the old man, "because you are missing the obvious question."*

*"What question?" Larry asked.*

*The old man smiled and said, "Why didn't the other dogs continue on the chase? And the answer to that question is this. They had not seen the rabbit. Unless you see what you are chasing after, the pursuit becomes too difficult. You will lack the passion and determination necessary to keep the faith when others do not."*

Crystal said that story spoke to her in a powerful way and that now she realizes, she is in hot pursuit of a deeper relationship with Jesus. She asked me if there was something she could be doing during the week to help her live the faith in her everyday world, "...to deepen my commitment to Christ," as she put it.

"Yes, there is." I assured her. I continued by saying, "I've discovered five personal faith habits that we can do during the week between church activities that can help us live life with a clear direction and a real meaning as disciples of Jesus." I shared the following list of faith habits with her.<sup>73</sup>

- 1. Daily Bible Reading*
- 2. Active Listening Prayer*
- 3. Encouraging Others in their Faith Journey*
- 4. Doing Good Works in Jesus' Name*
- 5. Sharing Generously with Others*

Then I blurted out that many people seem to participate in worship but go no further in their own faith development. They stop the pursuit. They put in their one hour a week as a passive participant but that's it. It's as if they attend worship to get credit from God for being there. It's like they are on a scavenger hunt and need to get their "card stamped," or their "box checked." They may not even realize they are doing this.

"That's exactly how my family approached worship." Crystal confessed with a sense of revelation in her eyes. I suggested to her that those who take the next step beyond Worship will often join a Small Group and find their faith growing exponentially.



Worship and Small Groups are the two main activities or “church programs” that healthy, growing churches offer. I encourage people to see them as the means for carrying out our mission and ministry in order to help people connect with God and each other as disciples of Jesus. Those who are willing to practice these five faith habits between church activities, begin to live life the Jesus way – by faith, hope, and love.

I invited her to consider taking the next step in her faith journey by adding one of these personal faith habits each week for the next five weeks. “Each habit can stand alone or they can build on each other.” I shared, “Chances are that by the end of two months you will be in a much better place spiritually than you are right now.”

I continued by saying that if adding a new habit every week for five weeks seems too overwhelming then just pick one habit to focus on for the next month. Don’t get hung up if it takes you longer than a week or two to make it a habit. I ended my discourse by saying, “Remember this, moving in the right direction, even at a snail’s pace, is still moving in the right direction when it comes to maturing in the faith. It doesn’t have to be a hot pursuit.”

“That is what I’m looking for.” She said excitedly, “Thank you! Now... what was that list again?” I repeated them as she typed them into her iPhone.

If we agree that the mission of the local church is to be disciples who make more disciples (as suggested in chapter 1) then the focus of the church is *transformation*, not *preservation*. This transformation is an ongoing process that happens every day and not on some scheduled day marked on the church calendar.

According to Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians, we are called to live a life that is worthy of Christ Jesus and his gospel.<sup>74</sup> That means we live by faith every day pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus and with others. This life of discipleship does not come naturally. It takes practice to confirm our faith every day. In the next five chapters we will look at these five faith habits in more detail.

## **Chapter 8 – First Faith Habit: Daily Bible Reading**

*"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)*

I believe there are at least five faith habits that provide the building blocks for personal maturity and spiritual growth in addition to participation in Weekly Worship and a Small Group. By making these habits part of our lives, we can grow deep and wide in the faith producing good fruit for the kingdom of God. Practicing these habits will help equip us and empower us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

I've listed these faith habits in the order of progression from the habit that most aids in personal transformation to the habit that most aids in church transformation. Each habit can stand alone or they build upon each other. When practiced together, they can reinforce each other too. They are:

- 1. Daily Bible Reading*
- 2. Active Listening Prayer*
- 3. Encouraging Others in their Faith Journey*
- 4. Doing Good Works in Jesus' Name*
- 5. Sharing Generously with Others*

Let's take a look at the first faith habit in more detail. Jesus said that we are to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.<sup>75</sup> I've discovered the more time we spend in the Word of God, the more we want to feast on it.

Feasting on God's Word gives us the spiritual strength for living the faith in this ever-changing world. At FLC we approach the Bible with a listening heart and an inquiring mind. That does not mean we understand everything we read in the Bible, nor will reading the Bible solve all of our problems. And yet, as we begin to practice this first faith habit we enter into a living relationship with God.

Here is a five-step process for listening and discerning the Word of God as we feast on it day or night.<sup>76</sup>

First, (*come to the table*) find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Pray for God to speak to you through what you are about to read. Share your desire not for information but transformation. Invite the Holy Spirit to open your mind, heart, and hands to shape your character during this study time.

Second, (*take a bite*) read the passage slowly, stopping when it speaks to you or when you reach the end of a section. Take small bites. The purpose is quality reading not quantity reading.

Third, (*chew*) meditate on what you've read, read it a second time or third time. Let the Word of God speak to you. Underline sections that catch your attention or words or phrases that jump out for you.

Fourth, (*savor*) prayerfully ponder a few questions as you try to grasp the meaning of this passage.

- *What does this say about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, people, life?*
- *What does this say to me personally?*
- *What does this say to us as the church?*
- *What changes does this passage invite or challenge me to make?*
- *What can I do to apply this text to my life?*

Fifth, (*digest*) contemplate its application to become a part of your life. Memorize the passage or verse and share your insights with others throughout the day. Focus on and commit to living out God's will, as revealed in your reading time.

Reading the Bible regularly connects us with the greatest story of all time – God's love story with all humanity grounded in grace and truth.<sup>77</sup> It also connects us to the community of faith throughout the ages. It shapes our connection to the world as well. It also helps reveal our place and our purpose in the world according to God's will.

We are blessed with many good translations of the Bible. Most are based on the original Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) languages, understanding the subtle differences between the translations calls for a serious study. The introduction in the front section of the Bible

will often help you understand the factors that make that particular translation unique.<sup>78</sup>

A Bible that goes beyond a translation is called a *paraphrase*. In these versions the author has taken certain liberties and added his or her interpretations to the text. For our purpose a *Life Application Bible* or *The Leadership Bible* both have helpful notes and applications for the reader. A more scholastic reading of the Bible can be found in *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, *NIV Study Bible*, or *Contemporary English Version Learning Bible*. Find a translation that works for you.<sup>79</sup>

I suggest you begin by reading one of the Gospels: *Mark*, *Matthew*, or *Luke*. They share the good news of Jesus. Then read *Acts*. It reveals the challenges of the early church. Then turn to the *Psalms*. They are songs or prayers to God. Then consider the Letters of *Paul* or *James*. They help give shape to one's faith. Reading the Old Testament takes a bit more background to understand, as the history of God's people involves a different culture and lifestyle. A good Study Bible can be helpful in understanding the key themes of the Old Testament.

Some people commit to reading the entire Bible in a year. This approach tends to be less about feasting on the Word and applying it to one's life and more to do with getting through the Bible in a certain time period. There is a lot to digest in one year. Take your time. I encourage you to focus on reading the Bible to help shape and guide your daily faith journey.

Set aside at least 10 minutes every day to read the Bible. Approach it as a celebration of new beginnings as you meet God and grow in faith, hope, and love. Strive to live into God's will for your life guided by the words you are reading. Consider keeping a journal. Write down your thoughts and experiences as God grows you through this study time.

In the next chapter we will look at the second faith habit in more detail, *Active Listening Prayer*.

## **Chapter 9 – Second Faith Habit: Active Listening Prayer**

*Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.*

(Colossians 4:2)

I invite you to approach this second habit as one-on-one time with God, to connect, to share, and to discern God's will for your life.<sup>80</sup> God speaks, we listen.<sup>81</sup> Of course, we can pray anytime, anywhere, but the kind of listening prayer we are talking about involves setting aside "God time." Find a time, a quiet place, and a position (sitting, standing, kneeling, lying down, or exercising) that works for you.

We believe that God answers every prayer, sometimes the answer is "no." God knows what is best for us and God answers our prayers accordingly. Prayer becomes more natural for us, the more we practice it.<sup>82</sup> Through prayer we discover and experience God's will for our lives. I encourage people to use the ACTS method for prayer. ACTS is the acronym for the four parts of prayer, which includes:

A – Adoration – praising God for who God is. We say things like: *Almighty God... Everlasting God... Loving God...*

C – Confession – owning our sins. We might say things like: *I have failed to... I am sorry for... Please forgive me for...*

T – Thanksgiving – thanking God for all that God has done, is doing, or will do in our lives. We say things like: *You have... As you did for... Thank you with all my heart for...*

S – Supplication – prayers of request for ourselves and/or others. We say things like: *I need... He/she needs... Use me to...*

We end our prayer time by saying, *Amen*. This lets God (and others) know that we are finished speaking to God. *Amen* means, *so be it* or *may this be so*.

The Lord's Prayer is a model prayer for us to use. Matthew's version is similar to what most Christians pray.<sup>83</sup> You could pray it through once and then pray each petition, stop and take a moment of silence to meditate on that phrase. Then, weave your own personal prayer into each phrase.<sup>84</sup>

Example: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name..." Pause, reflect, then continue... "O Lord, I pray for those who do not know you as their heavenly Father especially (*name*)..." or "I pray for (*name*) who is struggling in his/her relationship with you right now, O God. Send your Holy Spirit to touch him/her in a new way. May he/she experience your love in a special way today. Help me to keep your name holy, for you are God alone. Remind me of your presence in my life always, even when I forget you are here with me."

Example: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." Pause, reflect, then continue... "Almighty God, I know that your will, will be done today in spite of me, so please guide the choices that I make, and the conversations I will have with others. Guide my attitude and my behavior to reflect your will for my life and for those around me. Help me to be gracious with others as you are gracious with me. Help me to be patient with others as you are patient with me. Help me to be responsible and helpful even in times of disagreement or conflict."

We really don't know how prayer works. We believe that prayer is an important part of the mystery of the faith. Through faith, we can see what others cannot see. Through faith, we can experience what others tell us is impossible. The power of prayer opens us to the presence and the possibilities of God.<sup>85</sup> Prayer changes how we see and experience the world around us, so be careful what you pray for, you might just get it. Research confirms that prayer has a positive effect on those who pray and on those who are prayed for.

Sometimes we don't know how to pray or what to say when we pray. We may find ourselves in a situation where words cannot even describe our thoughts or our feelings. So we just let it out through a sigh. Saint Paul tells us that when we sigh, God hears it as a prayer.<sup>86</sup>

Set aside at least 10 minutes every day for prayer. Take note of what is happening in your life – your stress level, your outlook, your treatment of others. You might make a prayer list and write down the transformation you experience through your prayer time. Ask God to help you to be spiritually alert and see how God answers your prayers.

In the next chapter we will look at the third faith habit in more detail, *Encouraging Others in Their Faith Journey*.

## **Chapter 10 – Third Faith Habit:** **Encouraging Others in Their Faith Journey**<sup>87</sup>

*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.* (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

We all need encouragement from time to time, especially when it comes to practicing the faith. Some of us need a lot of encouragement and some of us need very little encouragement. I invite you to see this third habit as personal but not private, since encouragement involves more than one person. This habit is about us, all of us, holding each other accountable to living as disciples of Jesus.

In the Bible there are over 30 “one another” statements that are intended to describe how disciples of Jesus are to encourage one another and build up each other.<sup>88</sup> The author of Hebrews challenges us to encourage one another daily.<sup>89</sup> Encouragement can happen anytime, anywhere, by anyone.

Encouraging one another is about caring for each other by loving each other. On the one hand, Jesus teaches his followers to love everybody. On the other hand, we are not to love everybody the same way. We learn from Jesus that there are three different “kinds” of love in Greek.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Jesus points out that there are three different “kinds” of people who receive our love. Jesus says that we are to love our enemies,<sup>91</sup> love our neighbors as ourselves,<sup>92</sup> and love one another as he loved us.<sup>93</sup> The deepest level of love is to be shared with one another.

Encouragement is the way disciples show our love for one another within the faith community. I’ve discovered this is one of the best ways for a congregation to provide pastoral care. Encouraging congregations don’t need a pastoral care staff person, and they don’t expect the pastor to visit them in their home, or hospital, or in hospice care. The members are there for one another to encourage one another, no matter where their faith journey takes them.

This third habit involves more than just taking care of one another in times of crisis or need. It involves members who get along so well that they spend time together outside of church activities. They have coffee together,



go to the movies together, and hang out together without excluding others. A great biblical picture of how effective churches care for one another can be found in Acts 2-4.

The kind of encouragement we are talking about is not so much a slap on the back with an enthusiastic “atta-boy” or “atta-girl.” Although telling someone, “Thank you, job well done!” is important to share from time to time. We are talking about building up one another and supporting each other to live by faith, hope, and love every day.

Encouragement means asking one another a number of faith development questions. Questions like:

- *How is your faith walk (relationship) with Jesus going?*
- *What has God said to you during your Daily Bible Reading time?*
- *What have you heard God saying to you during your Active Listening Prayer time?*
- *Who have you encouraged today/this week in their faith walk and how did it go?*
- *How can I pray for you?*

Imagine how your life would change if every week a couple of people emailed, texted, called, or took you out for coffee to discuss these questions with you. Imagine how you could change someone’s life, if every week you were having a conversation with someone in your small group using these questions. Imagine everyone in the congregation calling and connecting with one another every day in order to have conversations based on these questions. There would be a lot of encouragement happening in and through the congregation.

I invite you to set aside 10 minutes every day to reflect on these five questions. Keep a journal or note pad to write down your faith progress. Be prepared to answer these questions for yourself, should someone ask you. Look for opportunities throughout the day to encourage others with these faith development questions.

In the next chapter we will look at the fourth faith habit in more detail, *Doing Good Works in Jesus’ Name*.

## **Chapter 11 – Fourth Faith Habit: Doing Good Works in Jesus’ Name**<sup>94</sup>

*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus  
for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*  
(Ephesians 2:10)

The fourth spiritual habit moves us beyond ourselves to reach out to those who are un-churched, de-churched, and non-churched. The first three habits are inward focused towards those who have already answered the call to follow Jesus. This fourth habit is about living into Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves. According to Saint Paul, doing good works is to be our way of life.<sup>95</sup>

Of course, the church doesn’t have the corner market on doing good works. Many major religions tend to promote this “do good for others” habit. At the same time, people don’t need to be religious or spiritual or even go to church to do deeds of kindness or goodness. We, in the church, take it one step further and say that we are doing good works “in Jesus’ name” in order to keep our pride and our egos in check.

Jesus reminds us that only God is good,<sup>96</sup> we are not. Our good works come not from us but from Jesus through the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. By adding the words, “in Jesus’ name” we are reminding ourselves and others that we are being the vessel or the vehicle for Jesus to continue his redemptive work in the world through us. Rightly so then, Jesus should get the credit for any good works, not us. We are to be his hands and feet serving others in his name. Jesus said something about letting our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.<sup>97</sup>

As Lutherans we struggle with this “doing good works” language, even though Jesus used it and promoted it. Instead, we tend to use the word *serve*. For me *servicing* and *doing good works* is the same thing.

I prefer to use the “doing good works” language because we can be tempted to serve grudgingly or selfishly. The “doing good works” language reminds us to focus on the good and the needs of those we are serving. We

don't do good works in order to earn God's grace or forgiveness or special credit in heaven, as some people are wooed into thinking. We do good works because we want others to experience Jesus and his love through us.

The call to serve others in Jesus' name allows God's grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness to flow through us into the world. Disciples serve others because that's what Jesus did. He came to serve, not to be served.<sup>98</sup> Jesus loved others by serving them. And yet, Jesus never did for others what they could do for themselves and neither should we.

As we practice this fourth habit we discover our best selves by serving, and in so doing, we receive so much more than what we give.<sup>99</sup> At FLC we say that *we are blessed to be a blessing to others*. Our good works become the means for sharing our blessings with others.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 Paul suggests a couple of things when it comes to serving others by doing good works.

First, each one of us is gifted by God with personalities, talents, spiritual gifts, passions, and values that make us unique individuals. Paul says that the church ought to be the place where we share our gifts for building up the church and for reaching out to others. Unfortunately, people tend to serve in and through the congregation out of a sense of duty or because no one else will do "it," whatever "it" is. There is no joy in serving this way and it often shows.

Second, by serving in and through the church, according to how God created us, we discover fulfillment and the abundant life that Jesus offers. Sharing ourselves, our gifts, and our resources makes a significant contribution to the health and well-being of the church's mission and ministry. The church is what we collectively make it, doing our part by serving in and through the church.

Third, the local church is not simply measured by how many people attend. It's also measured by the way its people expand and extend God's love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness in a world of skepticism, loneliness, and need. If you are not serving in and through the church, you are missing part of the eternal purpose God intends for you. Service is not measured in terms of hours but in the difference we make in the lives of other people.

I invite you to find your place of serving in and through the church if you aren't doing so already. I hope you will begin to see what I see, that every member is a minister, every ministry task is important, and every person is a "10" in some area of service. We are moving towards using the *one person, one passion, one position* approach to being and doing church, which means that we believe everyone should serve in one position according to their one passion. This approach to servanthood prevents *burnout* and *boredom* from creeping into our lives and into the church.

In the next chapter we will look at the fifth habit – *Sharing Generously with Others*.

## **Chapter 12 – Fifth Habit: Sharing Generously with Others**

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*  
(Philippians 4:6)

The fifth faith habit shifts the focus from ourselves and the church, and puts it where it ultimately belongs – on others. At FLC we believe that everything we have comes from God. God provides. That means we are stewards of the stuff that God has placed into our care. Some of us are good stewards and some of us are not so good. Regardless, Saint Paul tells us not to worry about anything. Instead, he says that we should pray about everything and trust in God’s benevolence to provide.<sup>100</sup>

I appreciate how Rick Warren puts it.<sup>101</sup> He says that every time we show generosity to someone, our faith is strengthened. He says that when you have something, and instead of keeping it for yourself you give it to someone to help them, you’ll have to depend on God to help you. When you choose to help a friend who is having a tough time paying his or her bills, you’ll have to trust God to provide for you and your bills. If you only have a certain amount of time to get work done, but you use that time to help your neighbor, you’ll have to trust God to give you the time you need to get your work done. Our faith is strengthened when we depend on God in those situations. God provides for us every time we provide for others.

God has provided us with everything; including who we are, what we have, and what we can accomplish and acquire. In the Old Testament the people of God gave one-tenth of their income in return to thank God for what God had done for them and had given to them.<sup>102</sup> Giving 10% is called *a tithe*. Giving a tithe is not for God’s sake. It all belongs to God already. Giving a tithe is for our sake and for the sake of others. It strengthens our faith.

As disciples of Jesus our level of giving ought to determine our level of living, and not the other way around. We place our trust in God and not in our stuff, our abilities, or our money.<sup>103</sup> That’s because generous giving brings with it a spiritual protection and a promise. The promise is we will receive “a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.”<sup>104</sup> In other words God will continue to provide for our every need.

Those who give generously discover a joy through giving. When we hoard, we deny the destiny that God has placed within us. Clutter can take over our lives and our possessions can easily begin to possess us. A non-giving Christian is a contradiction in terms. Likewise, a non-forgiving Christian is a contradiction in terms. We are to give generously through physical means, financial means, and spiritual means, as God gives to us.

The example for generous giving is like holding onto an ice cube. The longer we hold on to it, the smaller the ice cube gets as it melts in our hand. On the other hand, place that ice cube with others and it not only keeps its shape but it can build and grow into an iceberg. As we give, God takes our giving and places it with others; soon what seemed like a small thing becomes a world-changing gift of generosity.<sup>105</sup>

As children of God we are to reflect the heart of God, our heavenly Father. We are created in God's image, which means that we were created to give. Unfortunately, sin turns us away from God and onto ourselves. Our giving spirit is turned into a "gimme" attitude. Getting more does not translate into a greater purpose and certainly not into a more joyful life. Lives that are filled with things can be spiritually empty.

Tithing is the biblical guide for our giving grounded in grace, not the law. Tithing is the foundation for our giving, not the ceiling. How do we get there?

First, look at your take home pay, take 10% of that and you have a tithe. If your take home pay is \$2,000 every two weeks then a tithe is \$200 every two weeks. If you are not tithing, it may be difficult to make that leap all at once. Consider what percentage you are currently giving and grow towards a tithe, increase a percentage each year.

Second, realize this is a life-time commitment. You are making it an essential part of your financial planning. Tithers are among the best financial managers because they live within their budget. Such planning is good financial stewardship.

Third, tithing is designed to go first to support the mission and ministry of a disciple-making church. The tithe does not include the extra giving the Old Testament calls "alms." Alms giving is the practice of leaving the edge of the field for gleaning by the poor and alienated.<sup>106</sup> We first give back to God through the church and then after that first fruit is given (10%)

then we give to other organizations. This is what we call, “second mile giving,” or what the Bible calls, “alms giving” or “gleaning gifts.”

Fourth, see our generous giving as both a temptation and a joy. It is tempting to compromise our spiritual commitment and not trust that God will provide. Our giving is an opportunity to exercise our faith. Our generosity brings joy because we tap into one of the least understood gifts of the human spirit, *self-giving*. This is an important building block for a faith-filled life of purpose and meaning.

Fifth, talk about tithing and generous giving with your children. Model your words with your actions. Generosity begets more generosity. Teaching your children to give will equip them for a life that will unlock greater personal joy and happiness.

Mike Foss says that one of the reasons the witness of the church is not stronger in the world today is because Christians do not tithe.<sup>107</sup> That’s a bold statement. Some of us in the church are not very generous givers. I believe that’s because there is a spiritual deficiency in our lives, which leads to a financial deficiency in our churches. Our giving is a spiritual matter. It has nothing to do with the church as an institution to keep it running. It has everything to do with the heart of being a faithful disciple of Jesus and expanding his kingdom during our lifetime.

Discipleship includes investing our treasures where our hearts are.<sup>108</sup> Our hearts belong to Jesus forever and his heart belongs to us forever. If that is the case then there is no such thing as a miserly Christian. We are generous givers because that’s what Jesus does for us and because it brings greater joy and happiness to us and others.

I invite you to take the necessary steps to become a generous giver starting right now. Consider your current giving level to God through FLC and increase it by a percentage and grow towards a tithe – 10% and beyond. Keep a record of how God provides for you and how your life takes on a deeper understanding of what is truly important. Live by these words – *we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others*.

## **Conclusion**

First Lutheran Church in Lafayette, LA is going through a transition right now from doing things that promote a membership mindset in the church to seeking ways to equip people for discipleship in and through the church. In chapter 1, we considered how we are moving from being a church focused inward to being a church focused outward, from being a church for Lutherans to being a church for the un-churched, de-churched, and non-churched in the area. In chapter 2 we considered how we need to turn the church inside out because churches that focus inward are dying and churches that reach out to share Jesus with others are thriving. In chapter 3 we learned that we are reinventing the role of the pastor from being a chaplain who does the ministry on behalf of the people to being an equipper who empowers the people to do ministry according to their gifts and passions. In chapter 4 we learned how important it is for people to participate in small and large groups for adult spiritual faith formation – especially for people like Holly. In chapter 5 we learned that leaders are first and foremost disciples who live in a special life-giving relationship with Jesus and strive to live their lives with him and like him every day. In chapter 6 we heard Julie’s story and how she is no longer a convenient Christian. She is now a disciple on a mission. In chapter 7 we heard Crystal’s story and we learned about the importance of confirming our faith every day in pursuit of a deeper relationship with Jesus. In chapters 8 through 12 we learned how to put our faith into action by practicing five personal faith habits. At FLC we are no longer focused on making members for the church. We are now focused on making disciples for Jesus wherever our faith journey takes us. I pray you are compelled to say, *Oh... now I get it!*



## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:16-20
  - <sup>2</sup> Easum and Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, Abington Press 1997, pages 10-11.
  - <sup>3</sup> Blog, Tenny-Brittian, *Small Church Thinking*, June 21, 2013
  - <sup>4</sup> Galatians 5:22
  - <sup>5</sup> Blog, Bill Tenny-Brittian *Small Church Thinking*, June 21, 2013
  - <sup>6</sup> ELCA Congregational Trend Report
  - <sup>7</sup> Congregation Annual Report for 2003
  - <sup>8</sup> Dave Ferguson & Jon Ferguson, *Exponential*, Zondervan 2010
  - <sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 14
  - <sup>10</sup> Easum, *A Second Resurrection*, Abington Press 2007.
  - <sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 5.
  - <sup>12</sup> Ibid, pages 5-6
  - <sup>13</sup> Ibid, pages 8-9
  - <sup>14</sup> Blog *A Modern-day Parable for The Church*, Mission Issues, 2010.
  - <sup>15</sup> Easum, *Church Growth Hand Book*, Abington Press 1990, page 16.
  - <sup>16</sup> Blog, Easum, *A New Scorecard for Churches In Any Age*, Feb 3, 2016
  - <sup>17</sup> Blog, Tenny-Brittian, *The Role of The Transformational Senior Pastor*, May, 1, 2008
  - <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>21</sup> Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business Returning The Ministry to the People of God*, Zondervan, p. 132.
  - <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>23</sup> Romans 12:6-8
  - <sup>24</sup> Easum, *Culture of Equipping*, 2008, page 8.
  - <sup>25</sup> Blog, Tenny-Brittian, *The Role of The Transformational Senior Pastor*, May, 1, 2008
  - <sup>26</sup> Easum, *Culture of Equipping*, 2008, page 6.
  - <sup>27</sup> Ibid. pages 5-6.
  - <sup>28</sup> George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 1992
  - <sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp 64-65.
  - <sup>30</sup> Easum, *A Second Resurrection*, p. 25.
  - <sup>31</sup> George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, p. 68.
  - <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 69.
  - <sup>33</sup> Ibid., P. 70.
  - <sup>34</sup> Ibid., P. 59.
  - <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>36</sup> Easum, *Missional Small Groups*, p. 8.
  - <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
  - <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 9.
  - <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
  - <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 20
  - <sup>41</sup> Searcy and Thomas, *Activate*, Regal Publishing, 2008
  - <sup>42</sup> Easum, *Missional Small Groups*, p. 20.
  - <sup>43</sup> Holly Hang sent me this written version of her story in an email on June 15, 2016
  - <sup>44</sup> Easum, *Missional Small Groups*, p. 20.
  - <sup>45</sup> Ibid. pp. 7-8.
  - <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>47</sup> Kelly Fryer, *Reclaiming the "L" Word*, Augsburg Fortress, 2003
  - <sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.
  - <sup>49</sup> Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3

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<sup>50</sup> Easum, *A Second Resurrection*, p. 46  
<sup>51</sup> Acts 9:2  
<sup>52</sup> Easum, *A Second Resurrection*, p. 46  
<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 51  
<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 47  
<sup>55</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 48  
<sup>57</sup> Matthew 11:28-30  
<sup>58</sup> Blog, Ray Vander Lann, *That The World May Know*.  
<sup>59</sup> Matthew 22:34-30, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-28  
<sup>60</sup> Matthew 6:33  
<sup>61</sup> Romans 14:17  
<sup>62</sup> Matthew 5:17-19  
<sup>63</sup> Matthew 5:27-28  
<sup>64</sup> Mark 3:13-19  
<sup>65</sup> Mark 1:16-20  
<sup>66</sup> John 8:31  
<sup>67</sup> John 13:13-15  
<sup>68</sup> Luke 14:26  
<sup>69</sup> Matthew 14:22-33  
<sup>70</sup> Matthew 14:31  
<sup>71</sup> Julie Carlson sent me this written version of her story in an email on June 14, 2016.  
<sup>72</sup> Inspired from a sermon "The Rabbit" by Pastor Tim Zingale, September 3, 2007  
<sup>73</sup> I am thankful to Bill Tenny-Brittian who introduced me to five similar faith habits in his book, *High-Voltage Spirituality*.  
<sup>74</sup> Philippians 1:27  
<sup>75</sup> Matthew 4:4  
<sup>76</sup> Ezekiel 3:1-3  
<sup>77</sup> John 1:17  
<sup>78</sup> Foss, *Real Faith for Real Life*, Augsburg Fortress, 2004, p 61  
<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p 62  
<sup>80</sup> Romans 12:2  
<sup>81</sup> Psalm 95:7  
<sup>82</sup> Isaiah 1:18 & Luke 18:1  
<sup>83</sup> Matthew 6:9-13  
<sup>84</sup> Foss, *Real Faith for Real Life*, pp 24-25  
<sup>85</sup> Mark 10:27  
<sup>86</sup> Romans 8:26  
<sup>87</sup> Blog, Tenny-Brittian, *The Third Spiritual Habit: Intentionally Encouraging Other Christians*, March 15, 2010  
<sup>88</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:11  
<sup>89</sup> Hebrews 3:13  
<sup>90</sup> Blog, Tenny-Brittian, *The Five Marks of An Effective Congregation*, February, 25, 2009  
<sup>91</sup> Matthew 5:44 & Luke 6:35  
<sup>92</sup> Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27 & Romans 13:9  
<sup>93</sup> John 13:34-35  
<sup>94</sup> Blog, Tenny-Brittian, *The Fourth Spiritual Habit: Kindness Done in Jesus' Name*, March 17, 2010  
<sup>95</sup> Ephesians 2:10  
<sup>96</sup> Mark 10:18  
<sup>97</sup> Matthew 5:16  
<sup>98</sup> Mark 10:45  
<sup>99</sup> Act 20:35

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<sup>100</sup> Philippians 4:6.

<sup>101</sup> Blog, Rick Warren, *Happiness Habit: Your Faith Grows With Your Generosity*, February 26, 2016

<sup>102</sup> Malachi 3:8

<sup>103</sup> Matthew 6:19-20

<sup>104</sup> Luke 6:38

<sup>105</sup> Foss, *Real Faith For Real Life*, pp 111-112.

<sup>106</sup> Leviticus 22:23

<sup>107</sup> Foss, *Real Faith or Real Life*, p. 111.

<sup>108</sup> Luke 12:34