

A STUDY GUIDE FOR SERVICE AS A SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY IN CHRISTIANITY

Study Outline

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WEEK ONE

Overview

This study of the sources of Christianity's relationship to the idea of service to others begins with a discussion on what it means to be Christian. Here are three qualities defining life as a Christian from Lifebridge Christian Church's publication "LifeQuest"

1. He/she does not live without purpose
2. He/she does not act randomly
3. He/she does not behave carelessly

****Opening group discussion : Define what it means to be Christian. When the group comes up with a consensual definition, discuss how each person individually relates this definition to their own life.***

Paul chooses to live for Christ and make a difference with his life. He chooses to be a person of impact. Are you longing to do the same?

A Current Overview of the State of Christian Congregations

The source of this statement is *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers* by Marlene Wilson, a dedicated Christian and nationally known writer, teacher and trainer in church volunteering.

I love the church and care deeply about the problems it faces today. Most major, mainline denominations are experiencing serious membership losses, and most of them don't know why. The vast majority of congregations and parishes are experiencing "the ministry of a handful" in which a small core of members are doing almost all of the work while the rest come to watch on Sunday. This is troublesome organizationally as that handful tends to "burn out" while coming to resent the pew-sitters for their uninvolved and seeming lack of interest and commitment. But it is much deeper than an organizational problem-it violates our theology! Basic Christian theology relating to the priesthood of all believers and the whole body of Christ is being ignored every week in church and after church. It is my belief that this is done not by design, but by default... One of the clearest directives given to Christians is to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1: 22). That most certainly does not mean that we simply are all to be active in our congregations or parishes. We are called to minister in our vocations and occupations, our communities, and the world as well. The church does not exist to be served but to provide and equip servants. As someone once said, "It is to be a launching pad, not a hangar."

... "Christians are"... Searchers coming together to love, strengthen, and enable one another as they eagerly celebrate Word and sacrament together so they can go out and be the church in their daily places.

****Group opportunity for contemplative inquiry. Discuss the nature and intention of a "parable." Members of the group bring in the text of the following parables and read them aloud. The ensuing discussion should center on determining their common thread.***

The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12)

The parable of the fig tree (Luke 13)

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16)

The parables of the talents and the pounds (Matthew 25 and Luke 19)

The scene of the last judgment (Matthew 25)

Contrast this common thread with the activity of Jesus (Acts 10:38)

*** Group discussion: the objective of this study group is to inspire congregants to begin or continue to equate “doing by helping others” with spiritual service. How do you interpret the words in James 1:25, “But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom... and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he...will be blessed in what he does.”**

(Wilson continues) Part of the dilemma is numbers. As our population has grown, so has the size of our towns, cities, and churches. With greater numbers has come the need to organize, in order to get necessary things done. But too often in the process the verb organize has become a noun, and we have become an organization. That’s where we have lost the theology of it all. The church has found itself just one of many organizations making claims on people’s time and lives. And it is not doing too well in that competition because, as “just another organization,” it does not stack up very well. It often wastes people’s time, uses some people up, uses others not at all, and has vague plans and goals.

So when we talk about learning .how to mobilize the people in our churches, it is essential that we pause before getting into the “how-tos” and deal seriously with the “whys.” That’s really what theology is-the why behind our beliefs and actions. And that is exactly where the church is and must be different from any other organization. We must be clear about our reasons for both being and doing, or church work becomes just another activity to squeeze in (if we must) or get out of (if we can).

Oscar Feucht in Everyone a Minister suggests that the church is an organism-a living, changing, dynamic body-rather than an organization.! The reason Christians come together as that body is to receive the power of the Spirit promised to us, not that we might be just an effective organization, but that we might be the church. And not the church stacked neatly in a row on every other block in towns and cities, but the church in the everyday lives of real people along the highways and byways of life. That brings us back again to that word theology-the why of Christian involvement.

For most people, the term theology conjures up images of ancient monks hovering over musty manuscripts and scratching out their wisdom with quill pens. Theology was something the early church leaders worried about, argued over, and finally settled. People divided themselves into denominations that aligned with varying conclusions about theology-each quite sure they were the possessors of the real truth.

...I would suggest that it’s time we take theology out of the hallowed halls, blow off the dust, and bring it into our living rooms, board rooms, and even bedrooms. For theology is not something you merely study-it’s something you live.

... A person's theology is meant to be personal, vibrant and every-growing, not static, impersonal and boring. It's the stuff of life – beliefs impacting life impacting faith impacting actions, impacting beliefs-with God directing the scenario for each of us.

...This brings us to the question at hand – is there a theology of Christian involvement? If so, what is it? Can we find biblical girders or skeletal support for a Christian's activities in and on behalf of his or her congregation or parish (or community)? Let us search the Scriptures:

****Discussion opportunity: Each member of the group researches one of the passages cited and presents the context and meaning in group discussion.***

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light
1 Peter 2:9 RSV

Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:12 JB

So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.
Romans 12: 5 RSV

Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others' the special gift he has received from God. Peter 4: 10 TEV

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. 1 Corinthians 12:4-5 RSV

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them; if prophecy, let us say proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.
Romans 12:6-8 RSV

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only. James 1:22 RSV

But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit you out of my mouth!
Revelation 3:16 TEV

...The evidence seems abundantly clear. We have been created, called and equipped to be God's people and are therefore expected to act accordingly. These and other passages form the cornerstone for our theology relating to Christian involvement.

WEEK TWO

What Do We Want?

(from *The Volunteer Revolution* by Bill Hybels)

Most of us want to live lives of purpose. We want to give ourselves to a worthy cause. But years of bombardment by the messages of a self-serving culture have confused us. Indulge yourself. Fulfill your desires. Sate your appetites. Pursue pleasure. It's all about you. Given such messages, it's easy to understand our fear that investing time and energy into serving God and others will diminish our lives. What will really happen, we wonder, if we leave the comfort of the spectator stands and get dirty on the playing fields of servanthood? Won't we be busier than ever and have to work even harder ... without a compensating increase in our bank accounts? And if so, does that make sense?

If I commit myself to serving, we ask, will I end up enjoying it or dreading it? Will life really be more fulfilling? Or just more draining? Will it help me grow spiritually or might the extra demands actually weaken my spiritual life? Why should I sign up for this? Will it really be worth it?

Because Scripture is clear that soul-level satisfaction comes from reflecting the person of Jesus Christ. And there's no clearer reflection of Christ than one person serving another. But how do we really live beyond ourselves and become servants? How do we truly consider others as more valuable than ourselves?

I don't offer easy answers to these questions. I've struggled with selfish interests, the distraction of my own needs and general weariness that can accompany serving. But time and time again, I learn that the soul-level satisfaction you and I need comes from activating our faith. Following Jesus is something people do! It takes commitment and perseverance. Intentionality and selflessness. But nothing can match the rewards for volunteers who find their place to serve and take the plunge!

... Are you willing to risk finding out if Christ's approach to life really will satisfy?
Do you realize how equipped you already are to add value to the world around you?
Are you ready to try your hand at this thing called "serving"? Would you like a legacy of doing good for others-of living beyond yourself?

This is what I was made for!

When is the last time you breathed those words quietly to yourself? Or shouted them at the top of your voice? If you're like most people, you long to say those words more often. To experience moments of deep satisfaction and have a sense of real fulfillment as you go about your everyday life. But is anyone really living this way? Is it possible for ordinary people to live lives of real meaning and purpose? And if it is possible, what's the secret?

The world claims to know the path to satisfaction and fulfillment: Take care of number one. It's all about you, it says. After all, if you don't take care of yourself, who will? Focus on what you want and what you need. Arm yourself with self-soothing strategies for today and self-securing tactics for the days ahead. With all these messages coming at you, it's easy to become distracted

with tending to your own needs and pursuits. But after you've spent enough time following the world's path' to fulfillment, it's not unusual to ask, "Is this really all there is to life?"

What if there was another way, a better way to find that soul-level satisfaction you long for? In the course of this study curriculum, we will explore this question.)

In John 10:10, Jesus said that he came for the purpose of giving us abundant life. The original Greek word for abundant is *perissos*, meaning superior, or beyond measure. Whether or not you feel it's true of your life now, Christ came so that you would experience this type of above-the-ordinary lifestyle.

"I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10 (NASB)

****Group study and discussion opportunity: What do you think it would look like for you to have abundant life? Let's look at an example of the search for an abundant life. Group reads Ecclesiastes together.***

Solomon is referred to in the Bible as the wisest man to ever live, but even he struggled with how to live a fulfilling, abundant life. Ecclesiastes shows us that he "started by accumulating a vast sum of money, only to discover that it didn't provide the meaning he had hoped for. Then he sought power, attained it, and discovered that it too failed to satisfy. Next came a scandalous pursuit of pleasure. Then fame and celebrity. Finally, at the end of all his efforts, he uttered his famous words: 'All of this is like chasing the wind!'

Discussion: Have you ever "chased the wind"-pursued things you thought would bring great satisfaction but only led to emptiness? If so, what did this look like for you?

****Further Discussion: Accurately assessing how satisfied you are can be tough. In today's culture, you are bombarded daily with media and marketplace messages that say you can have it all, you should do it all and you deserve the high life.(How have you responded to all of this. This is a saying going around about life in America: "You're born, you shop, and then you die."***

The group may want to discuss the following questions:

What are a few of these messages that you have heard?

Why do you think these particular messages stuck with you?

Do they reveal anything about where you tend to look for satisfaction?

A discussion challenge to group members: Think about the ways you pursue satisfaction in your life today. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well are these ways working for you? Explain your answer.

WEEK THREE
Christian Engagement: Living Beyond Myself
(inspired by the Volunteer Revolution by Bill Hybels)

What is the lesson from Solomon's experience in Ecclesiastes? Certainly, he never set out to chase the wind. Yet, at the end of his efforts and wisdom, all he gained was restlessness in his soul. Interestingly enough, the injunction to help others, to reduce the suffering of others is not only at the heart of Christianity but also integral to the foundational teachings of other great traditions.. Why would that be? It seems to be intrinsic in every human being. Is it because it opens the heart? Perhaps the desire to be a world-changer is planted in the heart of every human being. We can suffocate that desire in selfishness, silence it with the chatter of competing demands, or bypass it on the fast track to personal achievement. But it's still there. Whenever we wonder if the daily eight-to-five grind or our round-the-clock parenting tasks are all there is to life, that divine desire nudges us. Whenever we feel restless and unsatisfied, the desire whispers in our soul. Whenever we wonder what a life of real purpose would feel like, the desire calls us to something more.

**Discussion opportunity: Have you experienced the tension of feeling less than-extraordinary and yet having a deep-seated desire to make a difference in the world? Can you relate to Peter's concern about whether there would really be any benefit or payback for trusting Jesus and living beyond himself?*

Read and discuss Jesus' response to Peter in Mark 10:29-30. Do you think people who serve Christ's purposes, who live beyond themselves, really receive "a hundred times as much" in return? Why or why not? How hard do you think it might be to trust Jesus' approach of living with an "others-first" mindset instead of a "me-first" mindset? How would you feel about trying Jesus' approach? Excited, fearful, skeptical, curious? Why?

WEEK FOUR

Starting to Move Service from an Idea to an Action

When have you been the recipient of the “interdependence,” the dynamic of someone practicing “love with its sleeves rolled up” in your life? What was your experience? Have you ever served someone in a way that helped meet one of their basic, everyday needs? What did you do and how did it feel to serve that way? When you live beyond yourself, you become part of this God-designed interdependence, in which his children look after one another and help meet the needs of those around them. Your “good works” have the power to impact people’s lives -even in very basic ways- and they fill up your soul like nothing else. Surely Jesus had this powerful potential of doing good in mind when he reminded us in Matthew 20:28 that, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”?

**Discussion opportunity: Read Matthew 20:28 together and discuss the intention of “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”*

View the video of Father Thomas Keating’s talk “Healing Through Contemplative Service” at Restoring the Soul: Faith and community Partnership’: ‘Needs and Dreams.” Conference on collaboration and volunteering. Discuss.

Contemplation and discussion opportunity: If there were a surefire way to live a satisfying, extraordinarily fulfilling life, would you be willing to give it a try? Why or why not? Take several minutes of quiet for each individual in the group to contemplate this question. Then have a round table discussion. There is no need to come to any conclusions but this should be a matter for exploration.

WEEK FIVE

What Right Do I Have to Help

The problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply of shoving them all back, in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind. (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity)

The church as it was meant to be was that all members of the congregation would minister, according to individual talents and experience, serving together, meeting the practical and spiritual needs of people, both inside and outside the family of God. This means an equitable contribution is expected from every person who is part of the church, based on capacity and personal gifts. In a church that is functioning properly, there is an intrinsic interdependence on each other. The congregation is composed of people, equipped by leaders, teachers and pastors to carry out ministry, and thus become the core volunteer base of a church. Imagine for a moment the incredible impact that could be achieved if churches across the globe rallied around this format for ministry, where every Christian is out serving the community and helping assuage the terrible problems that pervade our world today.

****Discussion opportunity: Read John 13:14-15. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” What does this mean to you? Does this example set by Christ have any impact for your daily life?***

****Study opportunity: Read I Corinthians 12:14-27. The “body” referred to is the church. What are the implications of this section of the New Testament?***

Read Acts 2:42-47, where a compelling description is given of the church as it was intended to operate. The original vision was for Christians to become communities of blessing, where all "body parts" play the role they were meant to play. Where people devote themselves to learning, growing, praying, giving, inspiring, communing, giving, fellowshiping, praising and agreeing with each other on what living really is all about.

****Discussion Opportunity: Here is a vision of the local church rooted in action, in service. Use this idea as the basis for a discussion of how this might impact your congregation.***

WEEK SIX

Approaches to Service

There are a range of approaches to service depending on how familiar you are with doing it. What is critical is your willingness to serve, not the duration of your commitment. We all have a natural human tendency towards self-gratification. Sometimes it's glaringly obvious; sometimes it's quite subtle and sly; it's always very powerful.

**Discussion opportunity: Use these questions as the basis for a round table discussion>
What qualities typically mark someone who is totally self-focused?*

*What cultural messages do we receive in everyday life that reinforce a self-serving attitude?
Consider each of these areas: advertising, the marketplace, TV and movies.*

Growing up, what value did your family place on serving others? If you can, tell about a time when that value was expressed.

Contrast that with your family's attitude towards the need to get ahead-to serve oneself at the expense of others (even if subtle).

In what areas of your life today are you most prone to adopt a self-serving attitude (consider your family, neighborhood, vocation, community or even church)? Where is that self-focused tendency more overt? Where is it subtle and harder to detect?

WEEK SEVEN & WEEK EIGHT

What do I actually do now?

Activating your faith: Includes a service activity

Once we're committed to a "volunteer revolution" in our local church, the next question is, of serving? "What do I actually do now?" Its all about becoming more of who you are...No matter your particular strengths, weaknesses interests, passion abilities, there is a place for you to serve within the body of Christ. There are things you can do that will help meet the need of others and at the same time give you a sense of deep joy and accomplishment. The next step is to jump in and serve.

"First Serves" are one-time serving opportunities that whet your appetite for serving without asking you to make a long-term and binding commitment. You serve and then evaluate your experience so you can decide whether to try a similar opportunity or something new altogether. As you experiment with different First Serve opportunities you learn about yourself -which needs touch your heart most deeply (this is related to your passions) and which tasks or roles you feel confident and comfortable in (this is related to your gifts) -until you can zero in on those one or two areas of service that cause you to think, "This is what I was made for!"

One approach says: first, learn about yourself and your pattern of giftedness. Only after you've reflected and filled out spiritual gift assessments ... then get involved. But while that may help some people, experience shows it is often more helpful to roll up your sleeves and just jump in somewhere. You learn about your pattern of giftedness-what you like to do, who you like to do it with, what seems to fulfill you-on the job. And while it's commendable to have a "whatever it takes" attitude, we must be careful to continue to evaluate how our serving is going so we find the right ministry fit. A sustainable model says: first serve with a "no-strings-attached" agreement and see how that goes. Try several things before you settle in. After each serving opportunity, assess what the next step of involvement ought to be-either more of the same or move into a new area.

What are your hopes or desires regarding this serving opportunity? What do you expect as a result?

What types of people do you think you will encounter as you serve in this particular way?

What might their needs be?

What do you think you might discover about yourself as a result of serving?

When you've taken a basic inventory of your personality and considered your interests and possible spiritual gifts, the next step is to jump in and serve. One of the best ways to find a place to serve that matches up with who you are is to just jump in! Look for opportunities that seem to match up with who you are and give them a try. Experiment with different serving opportunities, and learn from each of them, until you find a place that fits who God created you to be.

In today's Christian circles, there are lots of people who discover their gifts but never put them to use! In the "body" analogy, it would be as if your arm suddenly quit responding to your brain, or your feet decided they no longer wanted to walk in the same direction and instead went separate ways.

****Discussion Opportunity: What do you think is the impact when Christians choose not to fulfill their role in the body and instead choose to stay on the sidelines''***

Read Psalm 34:8. How could this truth be applied to the arena of serving? What "goodness" of God could you expect to encounter in having just a "taste" of a serving experience?

Read Ephesians 2:10. What does this verse indicate about God's role in our journey to refine and maximize our serving potential? What's a serving role you'd love to try that you've never done before? What keeps you from trying it?

Learning Through A First Serve

There are some critical questions which should be considered after trying a First Serve (or any serving opportunity):

- ◆ Did the contribution you made seem meaningful?
- ◆ Was your emotional energy higher or lower after you served?
- ◆ Was there a comfortable relational dynamic on the team? Did you enjoy serving alongside these people?
- ◆ Would an ongoing commitment to this ministry be realistic for your current season of life and schedule?
- ◆ Which of the above do you think would have the most long term impact personally?
- ◆ If you're currently serving in a ministry, how would you rate your experience according to these four criteria?
- ◆ Those who have been serving in an area for some time may be reluctant to serve elsewhere, yet the idea of "migrating" can actually help both the individual and those being served. What might be potential barriers to testing out a new field of service if you're already involved somewhere? What good outcomes can you imagine?
- ◆ What can you do to take a first step into a serving role?
- ◆ If you are serving already, how might you encourage someone to participate in a First Serve with you?
- ◆ What are your hopes or desires regarding your service opportunities? What do you expect as a result of serving?
- ◆ What types of people do you think you will encounter as you serve in this particular way?
- ◆ What might their needs be?
- ◆ What do you think you might discover about yourself as a result of serving?

****Discussion Opportunity: Use the above questions as the basis of a group discussion.***

One Person's Story of Discovering Service (from Bill Hybels)

Dr. B, an Armenian refugee exiled in Paris during his youth, presented his New Testament classes in an elegant French accent-but there was nothing elegant about his message. His radical call to follow Jesus into a life of sacrifice and service absolutely rocked me.

I was a cocky, twenty-year-old thrill-seeker from an affluent family. I'd had boats, private planes, fast cars, and Harley Davidsons at my disposal since long before I could operate them legally. I'd traveled extensively through South America, Europe, Africa. I'd vacationed at the famed Copa Cabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. I knew what life was about!

But this compact, middle-aged professor had me by the scruff of the neck, shaking all certainty out of me.

"Students," he said, "true fulfillment will never come through self-gratification." While my classmates slept, I broke out in a cold sweat. His words contradicted everything I thought I believed.

"Self-gratification will never lead to the fullness of life you are looking for. It will lead you to emptiness and self destruction. And along the way, you will destroy other people." I could barely breathe.

Dr. B explained to those of us sitting in his classroom that most people eventually figure out what it takes to get to the top. If they work on Wall Street, the goal is to earn a lot of money. If they work in Hollywood, the upward journey means producing award-winning films. If they're in Washington, D.C., the key is to get as close as possible to the Oval Office.

"We all want to get to the top," he declared, "but Jesus said the way to the top in his Kingdom is to become a faithful servant to the Father and a humble servant to one another. "

The decision to become followers of Jesus radically changed the lives of his first disciples. They left their families, friends, and jobs to become homeless travelers, banking their futures on the often-disturbing words of a revolutionary teacher.

For a while, of course, it felt like a grand adventure.

Take Peter, for example. Every day for years he had walked down to the seashore, cast off in his boat, dropped the nets, hoisted up a catch of fish and counted them, took them to the market, traded them for a few coins, bought food, and went home. Hardly scintillating.

Then he met Jesus and became the right-hand man to the most powerful, gifted, charismatic leader of the day. Jesus miraculously fed huge crowds, healed the sick, and raised people from the dead. Who could imagine where it might all lead? Peter had fixed himself to a star and the star was rising.

But then things started getting messy. Jesus' habit of boldly challenging the self-serving values of religious and political leaders created hostility. His relentless call to a different way threatened to get his followers in big trouble.

It had always been hard for the disciples to accept Jesus' radical call to serve God and others. "If anyone wants to be first," he told them, "he must be the very last, and the servant of all." Isn't that a bit extreme?

Then he started using really uncomfortable language: deny yourself, take up your cross, lay down your life.

In Matthew 19:27, Peter finally asked the question all the disciples probably wanted to ask: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

I'm confident there stirred in Peter's heart a sincere longing to abandon his life to Jesus' cause. But he was only human. His old life, if not an adventure, had at least been predictable. He knew where he was headed and what he'd get out of it. But with Jesus, he had to put everything on the line with no certain return. Am I a fool to follow this man? he wondered.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30).

Jesus promised Peter that following him would be worth it. It wouldn't be easy-they might even face persecution but they would receive incredible rewards, both in this life and the next. He actually promised that his followers would receive back a hundred times whatever they gave up!

The Gospels make it clear that the disciples had a hard time believing their leader's promise. They seemed convinced that self-centeredness, not servanthood, provided the only sure pathway to the rich life they longed for.

One day Jesus asked them a question-"What were you arguing about on the road?" -but they kept silent because on the road "they had argued about who was the greatest."

Jesus called his followers to servanthood, but in the unguarded moments of their private conversations, they argued about which of them was most likely to hit the big time. Who among them, they debated, was the most gifted? Who would be the best known? Who would enjoy the most success in the future? Who would get the most speaking engagements, grant the most interviews, sign the most autographs, wield the most power?

You know, we're a lot like the disciples.

THE WAY TO REAL LIFE

I felt so gripped by Dr. B's teachings on servanthood that I asked him to speak to the little high school youth group I had begun leading.

"You want to really live?" Dr. B asked the students.

"Then drape a serving towel over your arm." Dr. B hit this theme not once, not ten times, but in nearly every message he presented in those early years of our youth ministry.

He frequently taught the familiar story from John 13 about the day Jesus and the disciples had dinner and the foot-washer didn't show up. In that time and place, where people often walked in sandals down dusty roads and then reclined at low tables with their feet not far from the faces of other guests, custom required that a servant at the door should wash dirty feet. But not so at this dinner. Something went wrong. The foot-washer didn't show up.

Imagine you're standing behind a pane of glass watching this scene. The first disciple enters the upper room and discovers there's no foot-washer. Suddenly, for him, it's decision time. Does he wash his own feet? Does he take off his garment and become like a rank-and-file servant and wash everyone else's feet? Look into his eyes. He's thinking, Not me. That's not my job. I'm not a slave. I'm no foot-washer.

He tries to size up where Jesus will sit and chooses an advantageous position at the table.

The second disciple enters, realizes there's no footwasher and sees his friend already seated at the table. Well, he thinks, if he's not going to stoop to the level of footwasher, neither am I. And he heads toward the second-best seat in the house.

All the disciples do the same thing. They file in. Walk past the water basin. Choose the best remaining seat at the table. Recline. Stick their dirty feet in each other's laps.

Last, Jesus enters. Watch him. He looks at the water. He looks at the filthy feet of the disciples. You can see it in his eyes. Three years, sermon after sermon, illustration after illustration, confrontation after confrontation. Can you see it? It looks a lot like failure.

He walks to the table and reclines. He just sits there, silently. Maybe someone will at least have the humility to wash the feet of their master. But no, nobody moves.

Now watch him. He gets up from the table, walks to the water basin and starts to take off his outer garment. Carefully he picks up the towel and slips it through his belt, exactly the way a common servant would. Then he pours the water into the basin.

Now look at the eyes of the disciples. Disbelief. Embarrassment. Then as Jesus begins to wash the feet of the first disciple, you see something deeper in their eyes: agony,

regret, maybe tears. What is the matter with me? How did I miss this? My whole world revolves around me. It's bad enough I wasn't humble enough to wash the brothers' feet. But I wouldn't even wash my Savior's feet! How could I have done this? What's the matter with me?

Jesus circles the table. Peter resists for a moment, but Jesus knows well how to silence Peter. When he finishes his task, Jesus folds the towel and puts it back. He slips on his robe, walks back to the table and reclines. John 13:12-17 records his next words:

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

****Discussion opportunity: Comment on this story. What are your responses to these teachings? Are they literal?***

WEEK NINE The View from the Other Side

Joni Eareckson Tada was paralyzed from the neck down at age 17, immediately becoming quadriplegic after diving into too-shallow waters in the Chesapeake Bay. Without aid, today Joni would be immobilized and incapable of managing even the most routine tasks of life.

During an interview with CNN host Larry King, Joni reflected on what it's like to rely on people who are willing to live beyond themselves. To King's question, "Does it annoy you that you're always dependent on others?" she replied:

Well, you know, I have an interesting perspective on depending on others. I think it gives people a chance to serve. And I'm not so much big on independence as I am on interdependence. I'm not talking about co-dependency, I'm talking about giving people the opportunity to [practice] love with its sleeves rolled up. And my life is pretty much the context to which people can assist me. I mean, it gives me such joy to be wheeling up to a door at a local mall that doesn't have one of those automatic openers and say, "Pardon me, could you open that up for me?" And then some gentle soul opens it up, and I say, "You're a good boy scout! Thank you, sir." I think that builds bridges between people with disabilities and [people who are] able-bodied.

****Discussion opportunity: Read Ephesians 2:10. Discuss the meaning of the sentence: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." How do you feel, knowing that the God who created you also prepared good works for you to do?***

Congregations as Learning Communities

Adapted from *Learning Communities*, Dennis G..Campbell

Inspiring movement for change, once enough individuals agree.

The world we live in is so complex and changing so rapidly that most of us feel overwhelmed with the challenges before us. Nowhere is this state of mind more prevalent than in congregational life. Once the local church was a haven of calm stability, but now that our external context is constantly in flux, congregational stability may not be attainable, and possibly not even desirable.

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* and senior lecturer in organizational behavior science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argues that the future of every organization depends on its ability to learn together as a community. I agree with Senge and would add that in our rapidly evolving religious scene, congregations that seek only to achieve some degree of stability, rather than constantly opening themselves to learning and responding to external and internal change, will surely die or, at best, exist at a marginal level with little mission or ministry.

The time is past when we needed only periodically to initiate redevelopment efforts in a congregation, attain a level of new vitality and health, and then settle back and relax until the time came to do it all over. The healthy congregations of the 21st century will be those that leave that process of linear thinking behind and create within their internal culture the behavioral patterns, structures, and values that will naturally position them for a continual cycle of redevelopment. These congregations will never be finished with their learning, but they will recognize that the only healthy and faithful response to a rapidly changing culture and

environment is continually to ask what God is calling them to do, and what they must learn or unlearn to respond faithfully to that call.

Changing the internal cultural and systemic DNA of a congregation to create a learning community will require the ultimate transforming effort. The transformation cannot be just a new program or organizational structure for the congregation. Change must be instituted at a deep enough level of the congregation's corporate life that eventually the new learning is absorbed without anyone's conscious thought.

Developing a learning community is not an experience-with a distinct beginning and ending. A congregation will develop into a learning community as it perpetually uses a set of tools and disciplines that enables it to remain open to what God is calling it to be.

Senge (acknowledged the possibility that the concept of "the learning organization" could become a fad.) The church experiences its share of fads. We tend to latch onto new approaches, programs, and methods as if they were the Gospel itself, and then within a year we are promoting some other innovative tool as the real thing. It is important to recognize that the various approaches and tools we use in congregational ministry run a life cycle of popularity. Whether any approach remains in long-term practice depends on whether it is rooted in and consistent with Christian theology and identity ...(Realistically this concept) may not be useful to every congregation.

Senge describes five disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, the building of shared vision, and team learning. Congregational leaders and members who want to help their faith communities become learning communities need to understand these disciplines.

“Systems thinking“ serves as the "cornerstone that underlies all five disciplines. It is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools developed to make the full range of behavioral patterns of a organization clear and consequently to reveal the high leverage points for effective change. These leverage points include procedures, processes, people and structures that have a significant effect on the larger system. By implementing small change at these leverage points, one can initiate larger change in the overall system. One way of describing systems thinking is that it is the practical application of systems theory. General systems theory emerged a half-century ago and has been applied to a variety of disciplines, from biology to psychotherapy.

****Study opportunity: if the group or members thereof are interested in learning more about this approach, they may research and report on the following:***

1. Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

2. Rabbi Edwin Friedman, a psychologist applied family systems therapy to congregations in his book Generation to Generation, from which our initial use of systems theory in the church was derived.

3. Peter Steinke's writings

4. Paul Dietrich, director of the Center for Parish Development in Chicago has developed an approach for churches.

5. Jay Forrester, professor at MIT, is the true pioneer of systems thinking.

WEEK 10

The Externally Focused Church

Inspired by the book by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson

The New Testament describes Christians as "doing good" at every turn. With so much evil and brokenness in the world, surely no one can miss the importance of our obeying that command. It doesn't have to be a spectacular act of goodness; in fact, the common everyday variety is usually what's called for. Giving a helping hand, noticing a need, stepping out to greet or console or listen ... these are what Christ calls us to do. Then almost as if by magic-our simple acts lead us to other acts which lead us to more involvement, and eventually we find we are making a much bigger difference than we ever thought possible. Whole new ministries are born, teams of people come together to do corporately what no one person could do alone, and we find what we were born for: serving others with our gifts, and changing the world in the name of Christ. It all goes back to simple good deeds. Do something, somewhere, now!

Before churches will be heard, they must reestablish trust. To establish trust, they must first show their ability to love. Two items clearly reveal the truth about what matters most to us: our checkbooks and our calendars. Regardless of what we claim, how we spend our money and our time exposes what truly matters to us. Likewise, if we were to examine church calendars and budgets, we could determine fairly quickly what really matters most to our churches today. Is it what mattered to Jesus?

Churches talk about service, and everyone agrees that it ought to be important to us, but do we really know how to effectively meet the needs of our communities and reach lost people? Are we willing to step outside the safety net of our church pews and cross the street into real-life, real-world acts of service in order to share the truth of Jesus Christ?

**** Discussion opportunity: The group should begin to list its hesitations about service. What kind of service opportunities might be attractive as a first time experience. Perhaps some of the people who have volunteered in the community at large could discuss their experiences***

There is a movement creeping its way across churches of all shapes, sizes, and denominations. It's gaining ground, it's getting attention, and it's making a difference. It's slowly changing church statistics. These churches are evaluating what really matters, and they are reaching skeptical, hurt, and broken people through serving. How are these churches changing the relationship between the church and their communities? How are they getting a skeptical society to hear them? They are externally focused, and this is what defines them:

- They are inwardly strong but outwardly focused.
- They integrate good deeds and good news into the life of the church.
- They value impact and influence in the community more than attendance.
- They seek to be salt, light, and leaven in the community.
- They see themselves as the "soul" of the community.
- They would be greatly missed by the community if they left.

Remember Show and Tell in third grade? It seems as if the church has become more concerned with telling than showing. Christians will tell others what they need to do to be right with God, to be better people. Christians will proclaim what isn't right with the world. Christians know how to tell about God's love and why it is needed in people's lives. For the most part, though, our

churches have forgotten to show God's love. And all too often, what we do show doesn't match up with what we tell.

Today, whether we like it or not, we have to earn the right to be heard. As we've all heard many times, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Showing through serving can help Christians and churches tell more effectively. The success of an externally focused church depends on getting involved in the community, creating authentic relationships, and being truly useful. In the process of showing, externally focused churches have discovered, again and again, that people are more willing to listen to their telling

Resources

These resources may not be exclusively from Christian sources but they can all make a contribution to the development of volunteer service.

Campbell, Dennis G. *Learning Communities*

Dietrich, Paul. *Assorted articles. See website of the Center for Parish Development in Chicago*

Feucht, Oscar. *Everyone a Minister*

Forrester, Jay. *Assorted articles. Professor at MIT, pioneer of systems thinking.*

Friedman, Rabbi Edwin. *Generation to Generation*

Hybels, Bill. *The Volunteer Revolution and Living Beyond Myself*

Rusaw, Rick; Swanson, Eric. *The Externally Focused Church*

Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline*

Steinke, Peter. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*

Wilson, Marlene. *How to mobilize Church Volunteers*

*Visionary Leadership in Volunteer Programs: Insight and Inspiration from the
Speeches of Marlene Wilson*

The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs

WHEN THE GROUP IS READY

Choose a Volunteer Service Project

1. Is the group ready? Take a consensus.
2. If the general feeling is that people are inspired, and would like to try a volunteer project take the next step which is to explore possible areas for projects.
3. Discuss with whom you would prefer to work: children, youth at risk, single moms, prisoners, families, elderly, the disabled, animal welfare, environmental situations. Pick one area.
4. Would you prefer to volunteer as a group, or are you willing to work in one on one situations, and then bring your volunteer experience back for group discussion?
5. How much time would you like to spend: a morning, a day, one day a week for a period of time, as long as the project may take? The suggestion is to start small and see how it goes.
6. Contact the Volunteer Connection which hosts information for several hundreds of community projects. It is located at 2885 E Aurora Ave, Ste 32. It is best to call for an appointment to review the project listings, 303 444 4904 or email vc@volunteerconnection.net. You can also check out project listings on the website www.volunteernconnect.net

Miranda Dettmann, the Administrative Assistant sends out selected project listings to faith-based organizations on a weekly basis. She would be happy to add your congregation to the list of recipients.

7. The experience of the volunteer project should become the topic of a further session of the study group. Did the rubber hit the road? How did peoples' experiences relate to the parables of Jesus and his teachings on service? How does volunteering relate to the body of Christ? For congregations who take part in the ceremony of the Eucharist and wine, are there implications of this sacrament which relate to being of service to others?

Futures: Long-Term Service Opportunities

When and if the group or your congregation reaches the point that they would like, either as a group or as individual volunteers, to commit to ongoing service. Please contact Restoring the soul: Faith and Community Partnerships at 303-938-9916 or restoringthesoul@netzero.com We would be delighted to help you select a long-term project for collaboration with a service agency.

Our goal is to support a new paradigm in volunteering: Collaborations are formed in direct relationship to the capacity of the partners. Faith communities offer to provide anywhere from 3 to 50 or more volunteers on an ongoing basis, depending on their capacity at a given time. A collaboration might consist of more than one congregation partnering with an agency with a flexible number of volunteers from each, thereby meeting the total number of volunteers needed

for a particular project. The ongoing needs of Boulder County human service agencies are so extensive that valuable partnerships can be formed to meet a range of criteria.

Innovative Approaches

We have defined a new volunteer arena for this project. Human service agencies have said that volunteerism is crucial to their operations but often, in terms of bottom line, the time it takes to put short-term projects in place, train and oversee them, is very costly. Restoring the Soul has undertaken to ask faith communities to commit to several year's support of a project. In this way, even if individual volunteers only commit to serve for six months, the faith community itself has committed to man the project for several years, enrolling additional volunteers from its congregation as necessary. This allows the service agency to actually build a long-term program on the basis of the faith community's commitment. This is an exciting paradigm for collaboration.

The second innovative approach is in response to faith communities' desire to build the strength of their own community while serving others. Often a volunteer project, such as mentoring, is based on a one-to-one relationship. The faith community cannot act as a group in the project, which is often the preferred format. The model that we are encouraging, and which has drawn significant interest, is the creation of a study group within the congregation made up of its volunteers. The study group explores the meaning of service within the particular spiritual path, both historically in scripture and commentary, and in the personal experience of service. The procedure enriches the volunteers and reinforces internal community. We are also in the process of formulating a model for interfaith study groups, in which all the faiths in a particular collaboration meet and share the history and experience of service