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Pathways of Connection: From Theological Reflection to Engagement

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Abstract

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My thesis explores the role of theological reflection in guiding congregations toward deeper engagement with their surrounding communities. As an Episcopal priest, I have witnessed declining church attendance and aging congregations, particularly in my southwest Florida parish. With the arrival of new families in our community, my congregation sought ways to connect meaningfully with them, shifting from a traditional inward-focused model to a model rooted in relational ministry.

Through a structured process of theological reflection, small-group discipleship, and community engagement, we developed a pathway for transformation. The study, divided into two phases—**Pray, Wait, Connect** and **Pray, Wait, Act**—focused on deepening faith, assessing our mission, and creating action steps for outreach. Through prayer and discussion, members reevaluated their personal faith journeys, the congregation's mission, and practical ways to engage new families.

Key findings highlight that successful ministry today requires stepping beyond church walls to meet families where they are. By hosting community events, fostering intergenerational connections, and forming partnerships—such as leasing space to a Christian daycare—our congregation began moving from passive longing for growth to active participation in God's transformative work.

This thesis argues that churches must reimagine discipleship and engagement strategies in response to cultural shifts. It challenges congregations to embrace innovation, risk-taking, and deep listening to their communities. The case study of my parish demonstrates that through intentional prayer, theological reflection, and small but faithful action steps, churches can revitalize their mission and build pathways for authentic connection.

Ultimately, this research affirms that families still seek faith formation, but the Church must adapt its approach to meet them. By prioritizing relationships over attendance numbers, congregations can rediscover their purpose as centers of spiritual life and community transformation.

Pathways of Connection:
From Theological Reflection to Engagement

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Introduction: A Congregation with a Dream

I am an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. I have spent twenty years in ministry watching my beloved Episcopal church grow older, smaller, and in some cases watch a congregation close its doors permanently. I currently serve a congregation in southwest Florida with an average worship attendance of sixty. The congregants median age is seventy-two. We are a predominantly Caucasian congregation with middle to upper-middle class incomes, now living on retirement income. The congregation was founded in September 1988 in rural Sarasota. For the first twenty years the congregation was made up of families with children and teenagers. Since the 2010's the number of families has slowly dwindled. The children and teens grew up and left the area, and their parents are now grandparents still attending our church. Since my arrival in 2016 the members have reminisced about their early years when the Sunday school and youth classrooms were full of children. Many of the leaders have shared with me their hope that one day our congregation would host a pre-school in those vacant classrooms.

Our congregation is in a prime location for the opportunity to grow in our service and presence within our community, especially to families with young children. Since 2018 our rural area has seen unprecedented growth and gated housing communities built. Once surrounded by cattle, we are now surrounded with neighbors. This new reality presented great hope that our neighbors would somehow find us and willingly walk in our doors and fill up our pews. When this did not happen I raised the question, "God's transformative power is at work all around us and at our doorstep. How will we, a congregation of senior adults, welcome the transformation already taking place and create pathways for connection with our new neighbors, particularly the families with young children?"

For all our curious questions and good intentions our focus remained on bringing the “outsiders” into our congregation, welcoming people who fit in with how we do things here, and measuring growth as people in pews and money in the offering plate. The mission statement when I arrived was “Come and Discover the Spirit of St. Margaret: A Welcoming Place to Belong, Rooted in Simplicity, Where All Can Make a Difference.”¹ This mission reflects an old model of thinking, that in order for a new person to be a partner with us in mission he or she must be in the church with us. There is an inferred expectation that an interested person will come and discover the welcome of the congregation, and that he or she will serve in the pathways we have created. This generally meant the new person would become an acolyte, usher, or sing in the choir. This kind of focus establishes barriers to building community relationships, engagement with our neighbors, and creating pathways for ministry partnerships. If God is transforming our community, and I believe this to be true, then what do we need to do to shift our focus to partnering with God’s transformational work?

First our Vestry (the congregation’s board or council), and ministry team leaders needed to review our mission statement and determine if and how our statement and its meaning needed to change. “What makes congregations the special places they are is that they are focused on God, in whom they live, move and have their being. Their members congregate to remember how God has acted in the history of the world and in their own lives. They congregate to discern what is happening to them in the world today, and to listen for where God is leading them.”²

After a three-year process of prayerful reflection of our mission statement it was determined that

¹ This was the mission statement printed in all the bulletins when I first arrived and remained the mission statement through a three year process of revision.

² Ammerman, Nancy, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. “Chapter 1 Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing.” Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 23.

a relationship with God was missing from our statement. The Vestry also determined that if we are a “welcoming place to belong” then we needed to truly welcome all people into the life of our congregation. Finally, the Vestry decided to keep the last line as it was written, “Where all can make a difference,” but knew they needed to broaden the congregation’s understanding of how and where we are called to make that difference. They affirmed that the differences we are to make are transformative differences in people’s lives, in the congregation and out in the community.

Planning the Steps to Meet the Dream

The changes to the mission statement were implemented in December 2019. Updating our mission statement and offering online worship addressed some of the technical challenges. Learning what we need to do to connect and engage with the new communities being built all around us is an adaptive challenge. In truth, our clergy, Vestry, and ministry team leaders only saw the gates to the communities as locked barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic gave us time to research the most recent demographics on our area. The months of isolation gave me time to prayerfully reflect on my feelings and conflicted thoughts about the spiritual maturity of our parishioners. I became convinced that we needed additional spiritual work before we could live into the changes we said we wanted to make in order to build community relationships and ministry partnerships.

The first step to overcoming barriers that keep us from relational ministry is taking time to pray and reflect theologically together, to listen and connect to God’s word. I have a wonderful congregation, full of people ready to serve. But the “energy to serve [can] overwhelm their ability to listen to details of the tasks... for nuances about the community members. Their

plan [is sometimes] to drop into the site, do good, and leave.”³ Our members have a desire to serve but do not always recognize the theological implications in our service to others. We needed to begin to connect the transformative worship on Sunday mornings to our daily living during the week. “Making central the praise of God requires that the truth of God and of ourselves be understood well, affirmed boldly, and taught affirmatively.”⁴ I decided I needed to create an opportunity for our parishioners to engage the task of theology, reflecting on how our faith informs our daily living.

The second step to overcoming barriers that keep us from relational ministry is to create small, but faithful, action steps in response to God’s transformational work already taking place. God is at work in the individual lives of the clergy and members within a congregation, in the life of the congregation, and within the life of the community. “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”⁵ Isaiah reminded the people in his time that God was and is at work, even in the places we may not yet recognize God’s plan. In order for us to faithfully pursue God’s calling we may need to let go of some of our sacred cows (or current ways of doing things) and embrace some new ways of doing things. Our God is creative and invites us to be imaginative, try new ideas, and risk failure. Small action steps are a good way to begin.

³ Patterson, Bobbi. *Building Resilience Through Contemplative Practice: A Field Manual for Helping Professionals and Volunteers*. “Chapter 3 Willingness/Not Willingness.” 1st edition. New York: Routledge, 2019, p. 50.

⁴ Keck, Leander. *The Church Confident: Christianity Can Repent but It Must Not Whimper*. First Edition. Nashville: ABNDP - Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 57.

⁵ Isaiah 43:19. Zondervan. *NRSVue, Holy Bible*. Updated edition. Zondervan, 2022.

The third step to overcoming barriers that keep us from relational ministry involves taking risks, moving out of our comfort zone within the church, and engaging in person with our neighbors, where they are now, meeting physical as well as spiritual needs. The authors, Powe and Weems, remind us that innovation requires three important points: “Innovation requires a willingness to take risks, innovation requires putting aside previously held convictions, and innovation starts outside the [congregation] and not within it.”⁶ This third step is generally the most difficult for the congregation. One way to meet the challenges that Powe and Weems offer is to begin with a small action step that involves a low to medium risk that the leadership believes will be an obtainable win. The risk should challenge the congregation to suspend their way of thinking and invite them to see a new thing God is calling us to do. In Acts chapter 10, God challenged Peter to risk eating an unclean animal through a vision as a way of helping Peter realize God was doing a new thing by calling him to go to the home of a gentile commander and share the Good News of Christ. The most difficult part of innovation is usually getting congregational members to venture out into the community for new ideas and input. It may be that you begin by intentionally bringing long-time members together with brand new members to share innovative ideas for doing things in new ways and to build trust with the developing leaders in the faith community. Trained leaders can bridge connections between the congregation and the community.

My Thesis for the 21st Century Church

Trained leaders build connections by engaging families, neighbors, and community partners through relational ministry. My research confirms my thesis that families with young

⁶ Powe, Jr, F. Douglas, and Lovett H. Weems. *Sustaining While Disrupting: The Challenge of Congregational Innovation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022, p. 19.

children seek spiritual centers that support their daily needs. The Church must let go of our comfortable piety and go into the community to love and serve with personal connection. Real engagement and connection happens when we take the risk to meet the families where they are, as they are, in their everyday lives.

My hoped for outcomes for my congregation and the Church are threefold. First, the congregation discovers creative connections with young families moving into our community. Secondly, with our willingness to step out of our comfort zones, we experience and embrace the joy of meeting our new neighbors. And thirdly, as we love and serve outside ourselves, we will grow to be evangelists who invite families to join us in creating pathways to build relationships, spiritual life engagement, and ministry partnerships.

Does This Thesis Hold Hope? A Conversation with Other Authors

If your congregation is similar to the one I serve then you know the realities of the aging church, dwindling numbers of families with children and youth, and the wringing of hands wondering why young people just do not see the value of coming into the church when we have so much to offer. The culture of attending a house of worship changes within a single generation, let alone over the last six generations. We may want to ask, “Where are all the families, children, and youth? The answer: they simply do not exist in the same numbers that they used to.”⁷ In his book, *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations*, George Hawley explains in great detail how America’s population is aging rapidly and why “those denominations with the lowest birthrates are also experiencing the most dramatic decline.”⁸ This

⁷ Hawley, George. *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017, p. 25.

⁸ Ibid., 103.

is true in my congregation and across the Episcopal denomination. We have fewer families attending church with their children, but this does not mean that families are not seeking centers for spiritual formation and support.

The prophet Moses reminded his people, “Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children—Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”⁹ The ways in which families seek spiritual support have dramatically changed, but parents want to share their faith with their children. The search for faith and spirituality that is meaningful and shapes our lives is in high demand, but people are not going to a house of worship to find what they eagerly seek. How does the church step outside itself to offer connection, community, and transformative faith to the world?

First we must recognize our own need to grow as mature Christians in Christ. As God’s people we are meant to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout our daily living. Our daily faith practices call us to seek Godly wisdom, not merely for individual self or even for the sake of the church, but so we seek and share wisdom for the sake of all creation. Prayer and theological reflection must be the practice of every disciple, and we can only grow and mature through deep listening to the Holy Spirit within us. “The Spirit calls church to both lean forward and dig deep, to announce and embody its future hope and to live in grateful acknowledgement

⁹ Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:6-7. Zondervan. *NRSVue, Holy Bible*. Updated edition. Zondervan, 2022.

of its creaturely grounding in God's original grace."¹⁰ How does the church step outside itself? In my Episcopal tradition we begin in prayer and theological reflection. We begin by listening for God's holy call to us as individuals and to the congregation as it is within its community context.

The church has been too focused on bringing those outside in, rather than taking our stories out into the community. We have forgotten the words of Moses, to share our faith stories everywhere and at all times throughout the day. Sharing our story daily, not just when we are at church, allows us to build relationships outside of the worship center. Relationships are built when we are willing to be vulnerable in sharing our story, asking questions of one another, and listening deeply to the other. We need to be asking different questions of the families, listening to when they share with us what is important to them and where they find meaning in life. We need to ask how, as a community of faith, we can support these young families to meet their practical and spiritual needs. And we need to offer parents, children, and youth opportunities for missional engagement that answers God's call upon their lives. In their article, *American Religion Is Not Dead Yet*, Wendy Cadge and Elan Babchuck define the significance religion has in our lives and the questions we need to be asking in order to connect religion with peoples' lives today.

"Religion has historically done four main "jobs." First, it provides a framework for meaning-making. Second, religion offers rituals that enable us to mark time...Third, it creates and supports communities, allowing each of us to find a place of belonging. And finally, fueled by each of the first three, religion inspires us to take prophetic action. So rather than asking how many people went to church last Sunday morning, we should ask, "Where are Americans finding meaning in

¹⁰ Pauw, Amy Plantinga. *Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017, p. 106.

their lives? How are they marking the passing of sacred time? Where are they building pockets of vibrant communities? And what are they doing to answer the prophetic call; however it is that they hear it?”¹¹

I mentioned above the need for congregations to shift the focus from an older model of measuring success as people in pews, money in the offering plate, and new people properly fitting in with the existing congregational culture. The focus must shift to partnering with God’s transformational work already in progress. We do this by intentionally asking our neighbors questions and listening to their responses. We begin by asking questions that invite the new neighbor to tell us their story. In my context, if the person is a retiree I may ask why they decided to retire here? If the person is a younger person, working, or has a family I might ask, “What things about southwest Florida drew you to settle here?” As the new neighbor shares his/her story, we must listen carefully. Listen for their interests, talents, hopes for life in the new town. Allow conversation to happen naturally. Be willing to share your story in return.

Within peoples responses we will hear their practical as well as spiritual hopes, needs, and wants. We will learn how our neighbors find meaning and purpose in their lives and how they celebrate or mark the passing of sacred time in life. We will discover where vibrant community is already taking place and how we, the Church, might fit into that community.

In the twenty-first century we have more generations living today than we ever have had in the past. When we engage in conversation with the different generations we will get different responses. In my ministry context I hear stories from retirees that own a home somewhere up

¹¹ Cadge, Wendy, and Elan Babchuck. “American Religion Is Not Dead Yet.” *The Atlantic* (blog), January 16, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2023/01/us-religious-affiliation-rates-declining/672729/>.

north and now have a second home here in southwest Florida where they plan to eventually make their permanent home. Talking with a younger person who has a family, they usually share how the new job brought them to our area. Of course, they share stories about their children; their ages, likes, and dislikes. A young adult may share their struggle to find a job that meets their financial needs, how they share an apartment with one or several other young adults to make the rent. Listening to and understanding our new neighbors' needs and hopes, we may discover how their family enjoys spending time together. We can learn how they celebrate important life events, birthdays, and holidays. And we can hear their expectations of their new life in our area. These conversations help us, the church members, connect with them in a meaningful way. Neighborly acquaintance becomes neighbors supporting neighbors. This is how pathways of connection begin and can lead to friendships, and ministry partnerships.

We may have to go outside of our congregation in order to ask these important questions of representatives from all the current generations. Going outside of our congregation to meet other generation groups is a way to build a wider reaching community. Carroll Anne Sheppard in her book *Congregational Connections*,¹² describes six generations in the church. At the time her book was published in 2011, Sheppard lists the six generations to include: Builders, Silents, (Baby) Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z.¹³ In 2025, the Builders and Silent generations are almost gone, but children born between 2010 and 2024 are termed Generation Alpha.¹⁴

¹² Sheppard, Carroll Anne, and Nancy Burton Dilliplane. *Congregational Connections: Uniting Six Generations in the Church*. Bloomington: Xlibris, Corp., 2011.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ McCrindle, Mark. <https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/generation-alpha/why-we-named-them-gen-alpha>.

Sheppard describes the Builders, Silents, and Boomers as the “Olders” generations. Traditionally, these are the generations who were and currently serve as the leaders in congregations. Sometimes people of these generations are not ready to give up their leadership role and allow someone younger to step into the role. One direct way we can honor those who are our long-time leaders is to intentionally invite them to coach or shepherd a younger person in the ministry they have lovingly performed for so many years. We are grateful for those who have been our congregational leaders, and we look to them to continue to be mentors for the younger generations maturing into ministry leadership roles. Sometimes we must let go of how we think ministry is to be done in order to allow others to create new pathways for ministry, discipleship, and leadership to occur.

Sheppard describes the Gen-Xers, Millennials and Gen-Zs as the “Youngers.” These Youngers have not necessarily been raised in a church environment. Families desire to be in community and share their faith with their children and others, but they do not necessarily want to gather in the buildings of the institution. Meeting the families where they regularly gather is a first step to building relationships that lead to community and trust. If you serve in a suburban congregation as I do, one opportunity to begin making connections is to have two or three people volunteer to walk the neighborhood at different times of the day. Each small team would commit to walking the same time for several days and weeks, meeting and engaging with those they meet in the neighborhood. The primary purpose is to build relationships. As relationships are built and developed we may discover our neighbors’ practical and spiritual needs, as well as their gifts, talents, and interests. Another step to building greater connection within the neighborhood is to host a community event such as a community picnic that brings all the neighbors together.

Today's parents want Christian formation for their children, but they also recognize they need formation for themselves if they are to feel competent to instruct their children in faith when they are at home. One outcome of this family need is that parents want to worship with their children in the same space and not send their children to a nursery or Sunday school classroom. Learning together as a family within worship or at a formation event with all generations present means that once home the families can engage in what everyone experienced at church and what meaning it holds for their daily living. This is one way "Olders" can build relationships, mentor parents, and discover new and creative pathways for discipleship. "The challenge for clergy and congregational leaders in more traditional churches is to carve out a psychological and social niche for Youngers who are not traditionalists, but who yearn for a church community for themselves and Christian formation for their children."¹⁵ One option for creating a formation event that engages all the generations together is *Messy Church*.¹⁶ *Messy Church* is intentionally structured to engage all ages in creative, hands-on Christ-centered formation. The curricula meets the congregational goals to look outside ourselves and mark significant moments in life together. Every lesson provides for radical hospitality for everyone while celebrating significant moments together.

In Matthew's gospel children were being brought to Jesus in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of

¹⁵ Sheppard, Carroll Anne, and Nancy Burton Dilliplane. *Congregational Connections: Uniting Six Generations in the Church*. Bloomington: Xlibris, Corp., 2011, p. 70.

¹⁶ Parsley, Ross. *Messy Church: A Multigenerational Mission for God's Family*. Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2012. More information can be found at <https://www.messychurch.brf.org.uk/what-messy-church/>.

heaven belongs.”¹⁷ In our congregation we desire to hear the sound of children in our midst, but are we willing to allow those who bring them to fully enter into this faith community? Making room for everyone will require the church to create new pathways for engagement and connection within and outside the buildings. We can begin by letting go of some of our old models of engagement and step into God’s work already in progress in the community around us. In my current congregation we recognize that God is at work in the lives of all our recent, new neighbors. We are currently in a time of prayer, theological reflection, and making plans on how to engage the new community around us with events happening outside of the buildings. The above suggestions are some of the ways we are considering for this missional work with families.

I have stressed the importance of building relationships and connecting with families outside of the church buildings. This is not to say we stop inviting families to join us at worship or at events held at our churches. We do want to invite the families in to worship with us and grow as disciples of Christ. “Providing ministry settings in which we “let the children come” to Jesus, meet and respond to God, may require a different approach to children’s ministry. We will need to encourage adults to *be with* children, to journey with them as Christ is being formed in all of us. Likely there will be a challenging learning curve to figure out what this means within a given church’s tradition.”¹⁸ In the book *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church Family, and Community*¹⁹, the authors stress the importance of allowing children and youth to take an immediate role in the active life of the congregation. In this new century people of all

¹⁷ Matthew 19:13-15. Zondervan. *NRSVue, Holy Bible*. Updated edition. Zondervan, 2022.

¹⁸ May, Scottie, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell. *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005, p.71.

¹⁹ Ibid.

ages, but especially the children, need a spiritual environment that nurtures a vibrant faith, and offers belonging and meaningful participation in the Body of Christ. Building relationships of trust often begin outside of church and lead to the invitation to worship with us.

Given that regular attendance for families today is generally once a month, the traditional Sunday school approach is not necessarily the best way to offer a spiritual environment that nurtures a vibrant faith. We need to create new settings that provide a time of connection for the children and families that meet with their needs and levels of engagement. In his article, *When Celebrating Children Is Not Enough*²⁰, author Luther E. Smith Jr. challenges the church to move beyond the Sunday school model of nurturing faith and willingly engage in the issues happening within the lives of children and teens today. “What churches do to nurture children is commendable. Still, the absence of church involvement in the lives and issues of many children is conspicuous. Care and nurture for these children depend more on churches finding their way to the public square.”²¹ Jesus met the families and their children in the public square. As a congregation we need to ask how do we meet the families in our community spaces? The author Harold Shank would answer, “Effective and winsome ministry comes when we hear the cries in the public places and then accommodate the people for whom Jesus made room.”²² One way our congregation decided to meet the “cries in the public square” was to join the Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity justice ministry network (S.U.R.E.). Since 2016 we have partnered with fifteen other local congregations to do justice work. In 2017 S.U.R.E. ensured that minors

²⁰ Moore, Mary Elizabeth, and Almeda M. Wright, eds. *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World*. Chapter 1 “When Celebrating Children Is Not Enough.” Luther E. Smith, Jr. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008.

²¹ Ibid., 14-15.

²² Shank, Harold. *Listen and Make Room: Joining God in Welcoming Children*. Abilene: Leafwood Publishers, 2020, p. 11.

who commit non-violent misdemeanors will receive a civil citation instead of an arrest. This means that minors would pay reparations and community service hours, but no arrest record, securing their future for opportunities to attend college, serve in military service, and acquire a job. We continue to work with S.U.R.E. to ensure the use of restorative practices in our schools in place of out of school suspensions.

How can the congregation provide a spiritual environment that nurtures a vibrant faith, and offers belonging and meaningful participation in the Body of Christ for families? One of the accommodations that is proving to be helpful at reaching families is the intergenerational approach within outreach, formation, and worship settings. For many families work, school, and extracurricular activities keeps family members separated for most of their week. Often the only time they are all able to come together is in a faith community event. “Why should church leaders even consider moving toward a more intergenerational approach to Christian spiritual formation? The simple yet profound answer to this question is that intergenerational Christian experiences uniquely and especially nurture spiritual formation for *all ages*.”²³ Even in the prophets of old, I am remembering Joel 2:15-16, the people were called to gather together, all the ages as a solemn assembly, to hear the word of the Lord. When we create opportunities for people of all generations to assemble together, for worship, for formation, for play and fellowship, or to do works of mission, we allow cross mentoring and nurturing to happen. The elder can teach and mentor; but they can also learn and re-engage with the mysteries of God that children believe and profess.

²³ Bruner, Ron, and Dana Kennamer Pemberton. *Along the Way: Conversations About Children & Faith*. Abilene: Christian University Press, 2015, p. 99.

Karen Marie Yust describes the intergenerational approach as, “The process of nurturing and sustaining children in a life of faith is exhilarating because it calls forth in us our own spiritual longings and commitments and provides ways to live well with them. We get to ponder alongside our children the mystery of God’s presence and activity in the world. We revel with them in times of being silent and resting in God’s love. We practice speaking a new language together and telling stories that give meaning to our lives. We get to ask ourselves what items we will include in our household as signs of the religious culture that shapes our spiritual journey. We act out our deepest commitments through shared service in a larger world that needs our love and care.”²⁴

Intergenerational ministry allows a congregation to partner with all the generations in the larger community. This approach allows us to shift our focus to partnering with God’s transformational work already in progress. By having multiple generations present at a gathering, whether a *Messy Church* event or a Trunk O’ Treat, we learn how our neighbors find meaning and purpose in their lives, how they celebrate sacred times in life, and connect with the need we all share, the need for belonging. “But if ten people ages 2 to 80 are grouped together, they will fall into a natural age hierarchy that nurtures and teaches them all. For our own mental and societal health, we need to reconnect the age groups.”²⁵

In her book *Children’s Spirituality*, Rebecca Nye offers six criteria for ensuring spiritual foundations using the acronym SPIRIT: “space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy, and

²⁴ Yust, Karen Marie, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives*. 1st edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 163.

²⁵ Bruner, Ron, and Dana Kennamer Pemberton. *Along the Way: Conversations About Children & Faith*. Abilene: Christian University Press, 2015, p. 97.

trust.”²⁶ Nye defines the points within the acronym as, “Space – our experience here convincing us that this is a holy, and safe place to be. Process – spirituality is more about process than product. Imagination – Spirituality depends on our being open and willing to go deeper. Relationship – Offering authentic models of relating to one another is right at the core of spirituality. Intimacy – [To] seize opportunities to come closer, delve deeper, take risks and pursue passions. Trust – Is comfortable with different kinds of knowing, and not knowing [and] is essential to the maintenance of spiritual life.”²⁷

Using Nye’s acronym we can imagine and create new pathways of engagement and opportunities to connect with our community. For example, in my current ministry context we are a congregation attempting to connect with neighbors who live in newly developed, gated communities. These communities are single homes and town home units. The people living in these gated communities are typically families with young children or retirees. With the assistance of a couple of our newer members who live in one of these gated subdivisions we can plan to host a neighborhood picnic at the subdivision’s large community complex and picnic shelter. We, the church, provide the food and drinks, create the announcements to go out in the subdivision’s publications, use our Next Door app to send out an invitation to all the homeowners in the community. By holding the event within the neighborhood we create safe space, because it is the space that the families live and play in regularly. In this example the process of how well we communicate the neighborhood invitation about the picnic is something our planning team will want to evaluate after the event is held. Our church members who live in this neighborhood can help our planning team get imaginative about the food and drinks, and

²⁶ Nye, Rebecca. *Children’s Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*. London: Church House Publishing, 2009, p. 41.

²⁷ Ibid., 41-56.

about the games we might set up for the event. The most important work is training and reminding our church members that our focus is making new relationships with our new neighbors. Meet a new person, find out their story; where they are from or what kind of work they do, and then introduce your new friend to another person. Connecting neighbors and church members with like backgrounds or similarities helps build intimacy and trust among all the participants. This is one example my community connections ministry team is discussing for the next year.

For each event, whether for fun, for worship, or for mission we design the setting and agenda making sure to provide a safe space, with emphasis on process, with an open mind and imagination, willing to be vulnerable with others, building relationships of trust. This is one example of a modern approach to congregations entering into the community to love and serve with personal connection. When we are willing to be vulnerable and take risks we will encounter God's holy presence within ourselves and at work within the wider community.

Closing the Gap: The Innovation

The above research and conversations with other authors and practitioners engaged in family and children ministry convinced me I had to begin by getting to know the members of the congregation better. Even though I had served this parish for almost five years, almost half of the years were during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that our community was returning to worship in person, I did not presume knowing my members spiritual gifts, their hopes and dreams for the future of our parish, or what each member was willing to bring to mission and ministry. I had to get reacquainted with those I serve.

Since my arrival in 2016 the members have shared with me their hopes to one day have a daycare or preschool center on their premises. Now that we were post-pandemic, I needed to find out if this dream was still something the church members hoped to fulfill, or had it been replaced with a different hope? I decided to hold one-on-one interviews with everyone in the congregation willing to meet with me and I called this opportunity, “Spill the Tea with Carla.”

I wrote a newsletter article describing my hopes and intentions for holding the interviews. I spoke about the process in church for a couple of weeks, again explaining my intention to get reacquainted and know one another better. I made a calendar signup document available for everyone who wanted to meet with me, requesting their name, phone number, or an email as the best way to contact them. I extended the invitation to the former clergy of the parish and former congregational members who had recently had to move out of our area. I intentionally wanted to hear from those who were no longer with us because I believed they too could share hopes they had for our congregation’s future mission.

I met and shared tea with fourteen current members and three former members. Each interviewee signed a consent form²⁸ that briefly explained my initial ethnographical study of our congregation. The purpose of the interviews and time together was to get reacquainted; to hear their story, learn about their gifts and passion for ministry, and discover why they choose to worship and serve with our congregation. I asked each person, “When did you first discover our parish and what made you stay?” “What spiritual practices are meaningful to you in our liturgy, or in your personal practices?” “Is there a biblical story, metaphor, or image you think of when you think of our congregation?” “What is one thing you do well and would be willing to share

²⁸ See Appendix A “Let’s Spill the Tea”: Interviews with Congregation’s Members.

with others?" "When you imagine our future what is one hope or dream you have for our parish?" I needed to learn more about why so many drive great distances to worship and participate with us, what brings them joy, and what passions or gifts do they have that they would be willing to teach and share with others. Lastly, I needed to hear if the dream for a daycare center was still alive within our people's hearts and minds.

I enjoyed sharing tea and stories with each person I interviewed. I learned that many had reached an age where active service was something they were drawing away from for a variety of reasons, aging and reducing mobility being the most common. I also learned that the dream for a daycare or preschool was still alive and well. Some people thought the preschool would be a boost to our finances. Other members wanted to use our empty classrooms in a purposeful way, and a preschool would be an excellent way to fill those rooms. Others have been hoping to be connected and engaged in the lives of the children and their families. No matter what the reason for the desire to see a preschool on the property, if this many members of the congregation hoped for such a ministry, I had to begin laying the groundwork for the dream and mission to begin.

Through the interview conversations, I learned that many members wanted to reconnect with God in their own lives. Members shared a deep desire to recognize where God was already at work and how our congregation was called to engage with our new neighbors. And they all said they had no idea where or how to begin. "Sustaining leadership is about building upon the history and strengths of the congregation to advance the mission and move the congregation to an even more faithful and fruitful place in its journey to know and do God's will. Leadership...is helping people engage the pressing opportunities and challenges they face, and that requires

careful assessment before setting those few priorities.”²⁹ Using resources from Powe and Weems³⁰, Root and Bertrand³¹ and Margaret J. Wheatley³², I developed a plan for innovation that I hoped would build congregational leadership and deepen discipleship, allow us to observe the changes around our church together, and create action steps we could take to courageously engage the community.

I developed a ten-week study for small groups. The first five weeks focused on our personal relationship with Christ and discovering our vocation that supports the mission of the Church. The last five weeks focused on imagining God’s call to our congregation, creating a list of possible action steps, and discerning which of those steps we would take. I intentionally kept our small groups at a maximum of ten members. This number allows for people to create a group with trust and vulnerabilities in sharing from their own faith experiences.

“Healthy small groups have three components: heart, hands, and head. By *heart* I mean intentionally creating the atmosphere where people can share with one another, pray for one another, and check in on one another without feeling intrusive. The result is the growth of a community of care as part of the local congregation. The *hands* element comes when the members of the small group serve together. The *head* element is the biblical and theological component.”³³

²⁹ Powe, Jr, F. Douglas, and Lovett H. Weems. *Sustaining While Disrupting: The Challenge of Congregational Innovation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022, p. 89-90.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Root, Andrew, and Blair D. Bertrand. *When Church Stops Working*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2023.

³² Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose To Be?, Second Edition: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2023.

³³ Foss, Michael W. *Reviving the Congregation: Pastoral Leadership in a Changing Context*. “Chapter 2 The Pastor’s Soul: Leaning on Grace.” Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014, p. 37-38.

Michael Foss goes into greater detail about vision and planning for small groups in chapter 2 of his book, *Reviving the Congregation: Pastoral Leadership in a Changing Context*.³⁴ With these three key components; heart, hands, and head, I created a small group study to use during the seasons of Lent and Easter.

Innovation part one I called *Pray, Wait, and Connect*.³⁵ This was our Lenten devotion. There was a Sunday morning small group during our adult formation hour and there was a Wednesday evening small group that met after our mid-week Eucharist for an hour. Each week had a focus question.

Week 1: *Who is Jesus Christ to me?* Week 2: *Who and/or what is the Church to me?* Week 3: *How am I a disciple of Jesus?* Week 4: *What is my understanding or practice of giving and gratitude?* Week 5: *What is my response to God in what I have heard these last five weeks? Where do I hear my (or the congregation's) purpose or call?*³⁶

For the first five weeks the small groups met together to pray, to do theological reflection on the appointed scriptures for the week, and to share our personal faith stories. I chose to use Darrell Guder's "Five Questions"³⁷ as our theological reflection guide: 1. *What is God's good news in this text?* (the gospel question), 2. *What conversion does God call for in this text?* (the change question), 3. *What does God reveal about us and the world in this text?* (the context question), 4. *What does this text reveal about God's future?* (the eschatological question), and 5.

³⁴ Foss, Michael W. *Reviving the Congregation: Pastoral Leadership in a Changing Context*. "Chapter 2 The Pastor's Soul: Leaning on Grace." Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

³⁵ See Appendix B Innovation Part I: "Pray, Wait, Connect" Season of Lent 2024.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Root, Andrew, and Blair D. Bertrand. *When Church Stops Working*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023, p. 117-118.

Where does God send us through this text? (the mission question). His proposed five questions ensured that God remained at the center of our work together.

As I mentioned above, I developed this innovation to build congregational leadership and deepen discipleship, allow us to observe the changes around our church together, and create action steps we could take to courageously engage the community. The first five week study allowed space for long time members and new members to connect and build relationships of trust. Each week the groups shared more of their personal faith stories. The vulnerability with one another allowed them to pray specifically for one another, to hear God's call upon their lives and the life of our congregation, and to see God more clearly in the community around us. Each week there were similar revelations from the small groups, even though they met on different days.

In week one both of the small groups said that the good news within the scripture texts was that God has a plan. The conversion that God calls forth is that we be open to letting go of old habits and make way for what God is doing new. God desires a relationship with each person and sends us to do God's work. The groups agreed that they need to have a deeper relationship with God if they are to actually share their stories with others and spread the Good News in Christ.

In week two the groups agreed that there is a hope for the future because God is still at work in our world, and we are called to continue the mission of making disciples. Making disciples requires that we welcome everyone, no exceptions, to know our loving God. Week three reinforced that discipleship is costly, it requires sacrifice, a hard thing to do. God calls us to conversion: to peace, wisdom, trust, faith, and to love and help others. These do not always come easily in times of division in our nation.

In week four we reflected on our practice of giving and gratitude. This was the most challenging week for our small groups. We are a congregation comprised of many wealthy and privileged members. At the closing of each small group, they had come to the same understanding; God gives us everything we have, and God calls us to give and share with others. For many they initially understood God's blessings as possessions or wealth. As the conversations continued people became aware that our health, our faith, our creativity, as well as our possessions and finances are blessings to be shared with our church and with our new neighbors.

By the time we reached the fifth week the small groups were getting excited about how each person was going to respond to God's call on their lives and on the life and mission of our congregation. Small group members shared that they felt deeply connected to Christ and to one another. They were eager to take the next steps, to dream together, and create some action steps. We took Holy Week and Easter as a short pause from our small groups. We were set to reconvene after the first week of Easter. During *Pray, Wait, Connect* we created the space for using our hearts and head. The work of our hands would come in during Innovation part two, *Pray, Wait, Act*.³⁸

The work of making disciples is the most important work for clergy and laity. Discipleship is the foundation for growing congregational leaders. In my ministry context within the Episcopal Church, I see congregations and dioceses holding to old habits. Habits of looking to the clergy to have all the answers, not teaching and equipping all people for ministry, and holding on to traditions that no longer meet the needs and realities of our present time. "Not only have we been unprepared for the twenty-first century, our churches cling to old-world habits like

³⁸ See Appendix C Innovation Part II: "Pray, Wait, Act" Season of Easter 2024.

sailors clinging to any piece of timber after a shipwreck.”³⁹ A powerful image on the preparedness for ministry in this century from Michael Foss.⁴⁰ Ministry today requires a partnership between the clergy and the laity within a congregation, as well as partnerships within the wider community.

Our congregation is an average size for the Episcopal Church, which is a small congregation compared to other denominations. COVID-19 impacted our members in all the same ways it impacted other congregations; death of members, decline in attendance in person, as well as the unseen toll it took on our socialization and overall health.

Stephanie Spellers writes, “A church that has been humbled by disruption and decline may be a less arrogant and presumptuous church. It may have fewer illusions about its own power and centrality. It may become curious. It may be less willing to ally with the empires and powers that have long defined it. It may finally admit how much it needs the true power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. That is a church God can work with.”⁴¹

At the conclusion of the Lenten study our small group members were eager to come together and figure out how to move forward. The small groups returned after Easter week, again meeting in groups on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings for five weeks. We kept the groups to the same ten members per group. Innovation part two I called *Pray, Wait, and Act*.⁴² Each small group gathering began with a time of member check in and prayer. We continued to

³⁹ Foss, Michael W. *Reviving the Congregation: Pastoral Leadership in a Changing Context*. “Chapter 1 Collision of Perspectives.” Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Spellers, Stephanie. *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community*. New York: Church Publishing, 2021, p. 23.

⁴² See Appendix C Innovation Part II: “Pray, Wait, Act” Season of Easter 2024.

build community and trust within the groups. Whereas in Lent our focus questions led to personal faith discernment, the questions used during the Easter study were congregationally focused. The trust built in the first sessions made space for sharing the difficult observations, realities, and adaptive challenges facing the congregation.

Each Easter study had a “Thinking About” theme.

Week 1: *Thinking About the Quality of Relationships*. Week 2: *Thinking About Fear vs. Love*. Week 3: *Thinking About the Quality of Thinking*. Week 4: *Thinking About the Role of Money*. Week 5: *Thinking About the Willingness to Contribute*.

At the start of each group’s gathering, I gave the members a copy of the theological reflection responses they had given in the earlier Lenten sessions. After our prayer, we reviewed the responses recorded in order to connect our personal faith and spiritual practices to our reflection work in the corresponding Easter week study.

For example, the first week of the Easter study, we reviewed week one from the Lenten study, “Who is Jesus Christ to Me?.” In Lent we had discussed our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Now in the first week of Easter we discussed the quality of relationships in our congregation. In week two the Lenten question was our relationship with the Church and now in Easter we considered if our congregation made decisions based out of fear or love. In the Lenten study for week three, we discussed discipleship; in Easter we discussed how our faith informs our congregation’s life choices. In the corresponding discussions for week four, we shared openly about the role of money in our personal lives and in the life of our congregation. Finally, in week five we compared our personal vocation and our impact on the congregation’s call to mission.

Each week I wrote guiding questions for our time of prayer and discussion adapted from Margaret J. Wheatley's five topics for exploration.⁴³ Wheatley writes, "Each of these explorations demonstrates your commitment to opening to what is. This in itself is important. It gives you a start to interrupting the destructive trends of our culture and offers possibilities for engaging people to join you in developing an Island of Sanity."⁴⁴ Wheatley's suggested five topics of exploration which are "Quality of Relationships, Fear Versus Love, Quality of Thinking, Willingness to Contribute, and The Role of Money."⁴⁵

In the week one gatherings the small groups took a hard look at the quality of relationships in our congregation. The members shared that the pandemic and period of isolation made returning to what was familiar difficult. There seemed to be a hesitation to get close to people again. New members shared that the welcoming spirit of the congregation is alive and well but inviting new people to connect in deeper relationships or engage in mission is missing. At the close of the gathering each group made a list of small action steps that they thought the congregation could take to move forward in repairing the quality of relationships. The action steps included creating a women's bible study, a grief support group, re-envision our Wednesday evening worship and programming, host a newcomer's dinner or senior luncheon for connection, offer a class on spiritual gifts in the fall, and connect with a preschool.

At the second study the small groups reflected together on whether our congregation used fear or love to make decisions. The groups agreed that for most decisions our congregation acts out of love, but we work hard not to give into the fear of financial scarcity. Action steps listed

⁴³ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose To Be? Second Edition: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2023.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 66.

included training ushers and greeters, creating a new team of lay eucharistic visitors, highlighting new members in our newsletter, and expanding our social media presence through the Joy FM radio webpage. A group member supplied church information to the Joy-FM webpages. The other action steps we have not yet addressed.

In study weeks three and four the small groups wrestled with how our leadership and congregation must begin to engage in long-term thinking, decision making, and planning. The action steps listed at the end of each of these weeks included long-range strategic planning, and reaching out to our neighbors, but the steps were not concrete enough at this time to launch. We will need to return to considering our quality of thinking and the role of money as we move forward together.

Our final week in small groups we reflected and evaluated how well we communicated the expectation of members to contribute. We looked beyond the role of financial contribution, and instead listed ways we could invite people to contribute to mission outside of our church.

The small groups planned to put into action several of the action steps for the fall of 2024. The action steps suggested were opportunities to meet our neighbors and included holding a worship service and picnic at the local state park inviting campers to join us. Unfortunately, a hurricane postponed this particular event until a later date. Another event was to invite neighborhood families to a Trunk or Treat event. At the Trunk or Treat our members dressed in costumes, decorated the trunk of our cars, and gave out candy. We had other fun stations for the children including decorate a pumpkin, face painting and temporary tattoos, and games. Several families with their young children in Halloween costumes attended our event. It was a fun evening and a great way to connect with our community.

My Evaluation of the Innovation

Taking time to know the members of the congregation was invaluable work. I learned about the members' hopes and dreams for the congregation, how they imagine connecting to the wider community, and how they are willing to contribute to the work of community engagement. Learning about the congregation's willingness to contribute led me to connecting with people who stood out as possible learners and leaders for beginning the work of community engagement.

Pray, Wait, Connect, and Act innovation went well. Ten percent of our congregation attended the ten week study through Lent and Easter. The opening time in small groups spent in check in and prayer with one another helped re-establish relationships between members and friends, and build new relationships with new members. The participants' willingness to be honest in their reflections and open sharing of their personal stories led to an active time of creating action steps, ideas that were new for this particular congregation. Some of the action steps we put on our list were about how to add to congregational life. The action steps the participants put into action immediately moved people to participate in discipleship opportunities. The most amazing thing to happen is our connection with a Christian daycare LLC that has agreed to rent our unused classroom space and open a daycare center on our property. The daycare center anticipates opening early 2025. Our church members are working on getting background checks for all our parishioners who want to volunteer at the daycare center once it is opened. The congregation is excited to talk with the Director and teachers about how we can support the staff, families, and children.

The Conclusion

In the beginning of my paper I mentioned that I hoped for specific outcomes for my congregation. First, that the congregation would discover creative connections with young

families moving into our community. Secondly, we would step out of our comfort zone and embrace the experience and joy of making personal relationships with neighbors. And thirdly, we would create pathways through love and service growing mature disciples to become evangelists who invite families to join us in spiritual life engagement and ministry partnerships.

I created the innovation series, “Pray, Wait, Connect, Pray, Wait, Act,” intentionally as a discipleship study for the senior adults of my congregation. My emphasis on theological reflection and prayer to guide us into creating new action steps for ministry has led some of our members to move from passive observance of our community life changes to actively engaging in God’s transformation work already in progress. With the congregation’s excitement to partner in ministry with the Christian daycare meeting on our premises, we have amazing years of community engagement beginning now.

I am encouraged by Westerhoff’s words of truth when he writes, “We face an age of significant and radical transformation, a time to critically reflect on our personal and social lives...and open ourselves to God so as to discern what God has in mind for us in this new era in God’s history.”⁴⁶ Westerhoff’s words certainly seem to describe this second quarter of the twenty-first century. God is at work. Families still seek faith formation. The Church is called to seek the seekers. This is significant ministry and holds the promise of radical transformation for all our lives if we will boldly receive the call.

⁴⁶ Westerhoff, John H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Revised Edition. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2000, p. 22-23.

THE APPENDIX

Appendix A	<p>Let's Spill the Tea: Interviews with Congregation's Members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Example of the Consent Form b. Brief Description of Steps for Conducting the Interviews
Appendix B	<p>Innovation Part I: "Pray, Wait, Connect" Season of Lent 2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Description of the Lenten Study b. Brief Description of Steps for Conducting Small Groups c. The Five Weeks of Lesson Plans
Appendix C	<p>Innovation Part II: "Pray, Wait, Act" Season of Easter 2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Description of the Easter Study b. Brief Description of Steps for Conducting Small Groups c. The Five Weeks of Lesson Plans
Appendix D	<p>Carla's Corner: Summer of 2024</p> <p>Electronic Newsletters sent bi-weekly to the congregation describing the outcomes of each of the small groups throughout the "Pray, Wait, Connect" and "Pray, Wait, Act" studies. There were ten all totaled.</p>

Appendix A: *N g v ø u " U r: Interviews with Congregation's Members*

Example of the Consent Form



Consent Form

Thank you for speaking with me today.

I am a student at Candler School of Theology conducting an ethnographic study for a Doctorate in Ministry degree. My telephone number is (941) 525-3932. You may contact me at any time if you have questions about this study.

The purpose of this research is to become reacquainted with the members at St. Margaret of Scotland

Episcopal Church. I am trying to learn more about why so many members drive sometimes great distances to worship and participate with us, what brings people joy, and what passions or gifts do they have that they would be willing to teach/share with others?

If you consent, we will have a conversation. I will ask you several questions as we talk to get to know you and your joys better. Our time together today will take about one hour. I will make an audio recording of our conversation so I can remember correctly when I review my notes and learning.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time.

There are no known risks associated with this interview. However, if you feel distress in the course of our conversation, please inform me promptly.

While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is my hope that you will enjoy sharing your answers to these questions and that you will find the conversation meaningful. This study is intended to benefit our congregation by enlivening our discourse on the joys and gifts to be discovered together at St. Margaret's.

Your name can be kept confidential in all of the reporting and/or writing related to this study. I will be the only person present for this conversation and the only person who listens to the recordings. When I draft my thesis, I would like to use your name. If you want me to use a pseudonym, I will certainly abide your wishes.

If you wish to choose your own pseudonym for this study, please indicate the first name you would like me to use for you here. _____.

I plan to construct my thesis – a written account of what I learn – based on these interviews together with my reading and historical research, and other research styles I will learn throughout the course of DMIN program. As I am learning, I am also trying to share with our congregation, so we all learn together.

There is a possibility that my final thesis paper could be printed or published. In this event, I will continue to use your name or the pseudonym that you have written above.

By signing below, you agree to an audio recording of our conversation for this research study. If you have not given a pseudonym for me to use, then you agree to give me permission to use your first name. I want to answer all of your questions as best as I can and to your satisfaction. Please do not hesitate to ask me your questions. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Participant's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name: The Rev. Carla McCook

Brief Description of Steps for Conducting the Interviews

In my ministry context I used a sign-up sheet to schedule interviews with congregants who were willing to complete an interview with me. I set a personal limit of twelve interview times based on my own schedule availability.

In the interviews, my goal was to begin to establish a baseline of why our members worship with us, the spiritual practices of our members, and what might be the biblical or faith traditions that support their faith and decision to worship at our church. Each interview met for forty-five minutes to an hour, and I made recordings of each interview for my transcription notes. As I met with each individual, I gave them a few minutes to read the Consent Form, clarify questions of the process, and sign the form. I always had two copies of the form prepared so that I kept one and the interview person kept a copy. Even though I had my short set of questions, I allowed our conversation to flow from what each person was sharing with me. When the interviews were completed, I published my *Carla's Corner*, an electronic newsletter to the congregation, to inform our congregants of what main themes came from the interview process.

My questions for each person were as follows:

1. When did you first find St. Margaret of Scotland Episcopal Church and what made you stay?
2. What spiritual practices are meaningful to you in our liturgies and worship or in your personal practice?
3. Is there a biblical story, a metaphor or image you think of when you think of our congregation? Why?
4. What is one thing you do well and would be willing to share with others?
5. When you imagine our future what is a hope or dream you have for St. Margaret's?

Appendix B: Innovation Part I: *ō R t c f . " Y c k* Season of Lent 2024 v ö

Description of the Lenten Study



"I am an Episcopal priest serving in ministry for twenty-plus years. I currently serve a small, Episcopal congregation in Sarasota, Florida. St. Margaret welcomes everyone as a beloved child of God, desires to create a place where people can find belonging within a faith community and follow a call to make a difference in the world. My DMIN project is to connect a senior adult congregation with the needs of the families in the new communities being built around us. Sometimes the church shows up without knowing or recognizing the deeper need of people in our midst and community. In reality my contextual project is a project for the wider Episcopal Church. If our church is to survive, it must live into a mission of deep engagement with the needs of the community at large." [from Carla's "Practical Theology Reflection DMIN," Jan. Class 2024]

Carla's Corner: "Pray, Wait, Connect" with our Congregation, Feb. 15, 2024.

As many of you know I am currently enrolled at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta in the Doctor of Ministry program. I have one year left to write my final paper and complete the project due in March of 2025.

My final piece for my project and paper is to complete my proposal for ministry innovation within my ministry context which is here at St. Margaret's. The research approach I want to practice with our leaders and congregation is what I call, "**Pray, Wait, Connect; Pray, Wait, Act**" model.

In Part I of the Innovation we will "Pray, Wait, and Connect." God wants his people to pray. God is asking us, the Church, to pray as one body, and to listen to what God's Spirit is saying to God's people. Therefore over a five week small group study we will pray and reflect on the Holy Word of God. We will wait with intentional listening for what God might be saying to us through prayer and Word. We will connect with one another through the sharing of our personal faith experiences.

My pilot project is not a new idea or church practice, but it is new for me and St. Margaret's to be intentional in this practice together. As a congregation, during the holy season of Lent we have planned small group settings for reading scripture together and praying together and allowing God to speak through our personal stories and through what we hear during our prayer time. The framework for these five weeks are the following questions.

1. Who is Jesus Christ to me?
2. Who and/or what is the Church to me?
3. How am I a disciple of Jesus?
4. What is my understanding or practice of giving and gratitude?
5. What is my response to God in what I have heard these last five weeks? Where do I hear my/congregation's purpose or call?

During each session we will use Darrell Guder's "five questions."⁴⁷ His questions will allow the small group to consider the message of the scripture text, God's call for change, the context for today, where do we see God at work already and where we are being sent.

Small groups will meet Sunday morning at 9:00 a.m. and Wednesday evenings at 5:30 p.m., each a one hour session for the first five weeks of Lent. We will practice the first part of the model, "Pray, Wait, and Connect." We will keep confidentiality by not assigning names to the shared stories. If anyone asks not to have their story shared, we will not share it.

Brief Description of Steps for Conducting Small Groups

Two small groups met during the first five weeks of the Lenten season. One small group met on Sunday mornings for one hour before our worship service. The second small group met on Wednesday evenings for one hour following our mid-week Eucharist worship. These first five weeks were Part I of my Doctor of Ministry innovation project. Each week I invited small group members to reflect on a central question about their faith.

Week one: "Who is Jesus Christ to me?" Week two: "Who and/or what is the Church to me?" Week three: "How I am a disciple of Jesus?" Week four: "What is your understanding and practice of giving and gratitude?" The final week: "What is my response to God in what I have heard these last five weeks? Where do I hear my purpose or call?"

Each week we used specific biblical texts and Darrell Guder's five questions and our own life and faith stories to answer the theme question of the gathering. I recorded answers on our whiteboard during the sessions so the answers could be used later in the Easter study, Innovation Part II.

⁴⁷ These five questions are taken from the book, *When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023. pages 117-118.

Innovation Part I: Lenten Study: The Five Weeks of Lesson Plans

Lenten Study for 2024: “Pray, Wait, Connect; Pray, Wait, Act”

Week 1: Who is Jesus Christ to me?

Introduction Scripture: Revelation 1:5-7

“and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. So it is to be. Amen.”

Opening Prayer: BCP p.814 (#3 + 0 " H q t " L q { " k p " I q f ø u " E t g c v k q p

O heavenly Father, who has filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your works; that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness; for the sake of him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Scripture(s) to read, listen, and reflect upon: *(Read one reading at a time. Allow a moment of silence after each reading for people to think about the readings. Then work through the questions one reading at a time. If you only get through one reading, assign the other for “homework.”)*

John 17:1-5

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people,^[a] to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe^[a] in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?^[b] ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.”^[c] ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know^[d] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe^[e] because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that

I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me^[f] for anything, I will do it.

Questions to ask after the scripture reading: Darrell Guder's Five Questions⁴⁸

1. What is God's good news in the text? (the gospel question)
2. What conversion does God call for in this text? (the change question)
3. What does God reveal about us and the world in this text? (the context question)
4. What does this text reveal about God's future? (the eschatological question)
5. Where does God send us through this text? (the mission question)

Week 2: Who and/or what is the Church to me?

Introduction Scripture: Acts 9:31

³¹ Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Opening Prayer: BCP p.816 (: + 0 " H q t " v j g " O k u u k q p " q h " v j g " E j w t e j
 Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ:
 Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his
 resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Scripture(s) to read, listen, and reflect upon: *(Read one reading at a time. Allow a moment of silence after each reading for people to think about the readings. Then work through the questions one reading at a time. If you only get through one reading, assign the other for "homework.")*

Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon^[a] of the church at Cenchreae, ² so that you may welcome her in the Lord, as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. ³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the gentiles. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert^[b] in Asia for Christ. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia,^[c] my fellow Israelites who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our coworker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my fellow Israelite Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and

⁴⁸ These five questions are taken from the book, *When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 202. pages 117-118.

greet his mother—a mother to me also. ¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

Revelation 1:1-17

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place, and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. ⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁹ I, John, your brother who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." ¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire; ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last ¹⁸ and the Living One. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹ Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Questions to ask after the scripture reading: Darrell Guder's Five Questions⁴⁹

1. What is God's good news in the text? (the gospel question)
2. What conversion does God call for in this text? (the change question)
3. What does God reveal about us and the world in this text? (the context question)
4. What does this text reveal about God's future? (the eschatological question)
5. Where does God send us through this text? (the mission question)

⁴⁹ These five questions are taken from the book, *When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 202. pages 117-118.

Week 3: How am I a disciple of Jesus?

Introduction Scripture: Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Opening Prayer: BCP p.832 (8 3 + 0 " C " R t/E g f g k e' a v k' dU g n h

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

Scripture(s) to read, listen, and reflect upon: *(Read one reading at a time. Allow a moment of silence after each reading for people to think about the readings. Then work through the questions one reading at a time. If you only get through one reading, assign the other for “homework.”)*

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

John 8:31-38

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

Questions to ask after the scripture reading: Darrell Guder’s Five Questions⁵⁰

⁵⁰ These five questions are taken from the book, *When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 202. pages 117-118.

1. What is God's good news in the text? (the gospel question)
2. What conversion does God call for in this text? (the change question)
3. What does God reveal about us and the world in this text? (the context question)
4. What does this text reveal about God's future? (the eschatological question)
5. Where does God send us through this text? (the mission question)

Week 4: What is my understanding or practice of giving and gratitude?

Introduction Scripture: Luke 6:38

“give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Opening Prayer: BCP p. 827 (#5 : 0 + " H q t " v j g " T k i " j v " W u g " q h " I q f ø u "
 Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Scripture(s) to read, listen, and reflect upon: *(Read one reading at a time. Allow a moment of silence after each reading for people to think about the readings. Then work through the questions one reading at a time. If you only get through one reading, assign the other for "homework.")*

| — > Ç Ç i O
¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

2 Corinthians 9:1-5

Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, ²for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³But I am sending^[a] the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; ⁴otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be put to shame—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking.^[b] ⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you

and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a bountiful gift and not as an extortion. ⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing^[e] in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad; he gives to the poor;

his righteousness^[d] endures forever.”

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.^[e] ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you^[f] glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your partnership with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Questions to ask after the scripture reading: Darrell Guder’s Five Questions⁵¹

1. What is God’s good news in the text? (the gospel question)
2. What conversion does God call for in this text? (the change question)
3. What does God reveal about us and the world in this text? (the context question)
4. What does this text reveal about God’s future? (the eschatological question)
5. Where does God send us through this text? (the mission question)

Week 5: What is my response to God in what I have heard these last five weeks? Where do I hear my/congregations’ purpose or call?

Introduction Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Opening Prayer: BCP p.832 (7 : + 0 " H q t " I w k f c p e g

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

⁵¹ These five questions are taken from the book, *When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 202. pages 117-118.

Scripture(s) to read, listen, and reflect upon: *(Read one reading at a time. Allow a moment of silence after each reading for people to think about the readings. Then work through the questions one reading at a time. If you only get through one reading, assign the other for “homework.”)*

Luke 5:27-32

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, “Follow me.” 28 And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them. 30 The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” 31 Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; 32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

John 6:1-14

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

Questions to ask after the scripture reading: Darrell Guder’s Five Questions⁵²

1. What is God’s good news in the text? (the gospel question)
2. What conversion does God call for in this text? (the change question)
3. What does God reveal about us and the world in this text? (the context question)
4. What does this text reveal about God’s future? (the eschatological question)
5. Where does God send us through this text? (the mission question)

⁵² These five questions are taken from the book, *When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 202. pages 117-118.

Appendix C: Innovation Part II: “Pray, Wait, Act” Season of Easter 2024

Description of the Easter Study

Carla’s Corner: “Pray, Wait, Connect” with our Congregation, Feb. 15, 2024.



The second part of the Innovation Practice, “Pray, Wait, Act,” will be the focus during the season of Easter. Within small groups, we will meet to review the words or phrases that were most common throughout our Lenten time of sharing. Again we will pray together, listen and reflect seeking to hear clearly how God is calling us, the Church, to respond in action steps. The pivotal question is where do we perceive God is at work, and will we receive our call to action?

Our small groups will meet on Sunday mornings at 9:00 a.m. and on Wednesday evenings at 5:30 p.m. Each small group will meet for five weeks to read scripture and pray together, to share our personal faith and life experience stories while listening deeply to one another, and end each gathering with a list of mini action steps we might take in response to God’s call on this congregation.

God is already at work in this church and in the lives of the neighbors moving in around us in the new housing developments. Through theological reflection, prayer, and action we can be a congregation that 1) grows in deeper relationships with one another and with God and 2) seeks to create pathways of connection and engagement with our community all around us.

Brief Description of Steps for Conducting Small Groups

Two small groups met during the first five weeks of the Easter season. One small group met on Sunday mornings for one hour before our worship service. The second small group met on Wednesday evenings for one hour following our mid-week Eucharist worship. These second five weeks were Part II of my Doctor of Ministry innovation project. At each small group gathering we began with prayer and a time to center ourselves. Then we reviewed the notes taken within both small groups throughout the Lenten study Part I.

Each Easter week had a reflection theme that corresponded with the original question asked during the Lenten study. For example, on the first week in Lent our question was to ask each person about their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore in the first week of the Easter study our reflection theme was “Thinking About the Quality of Relationships that we have

here in our congregation.” In week two of Lent we were asked about our understanding and participation with the Church. On week two of Easter the reflection theme was “Thinking About Fear vs. Love – is the Church a loving, welcoming place?”

In Lent for the third week the discussion question was, “How am I a disciple of Jesus?” In the Easter study on week three our reflection theme invited us to “Think About Our Quality of Thinking.” This particular week we were attempting to get to the heart of why our discipleship matters and how our faith impacts our ministry and mission as a church. Lenten study week four focused on our understanding and practices of giving and gratitude. The Easter week four asked us to reflect on “The Role of Money.” Do we understand money to be a tool for mission or the talk of scarcity? The final week in Lent we were asked, “What is my response to God in what I have heard these last five weeks? Where do I hear my purpose or call?” On the final week in Easter we reflected on “Thinking About Our Willingness to Contribute.”

During each of the “Thinking About...” reflections we used eight questions taken from Margaret J. Wheatley’s book, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. We concluded each of the five weeks throughout the Easter study creating a list of simple Action Steps we could take to move us forward in response to what we had heard throughout the session.

Innovation Part II: Easter Study: The Five Weeks of Lesson Plans

Easter Study for 2024: “Pray, Wait, Act”

Week 1: Thinking About the Quality of Relationships⁵³

Open with Prayer and Silence for Centering Ourselves

Reflect upon and Discuss the following questions:

1. Review the notes from the Lenten series, “Pray, Wait, Connect” week 1. List the themes that stand out to you that were within both small group responses.
2. If you were to create a trend line from a few years ago to now and a few years ahead, how are people relating to each other here at St. Margaret’s?
3. Has our trust in one another increased or declined?
4. Do we seem more willing to be “there for one another,” to go the extra mile, or not?
5. Has our trust in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, increased or declined?
6. Do we seem willing to listen and connect with how we hear or perceive God’s Spirit leading?
7. What is your evidence for your conclusions?
8. Name one simple Action Step we could take to move forward with any one of the above relationships.

⁵³ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. (2nd edition). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2023. P.66.

Week 2: Thinking About Fear vs. Love⁵⁴

Open with Prayer and Silence for Centering Ourselves

Reflect upon and Discuss the following questions:

1. Review the notes from the Lenten series, “Pray, Wait, Connect” week 2. List the themes that stand out to you that are within both small group responses.
2. If fear and love are two ends of the spectrum of human emotions, where do you see examples of each here at St. Margaret’s?
3. Which reaction, fear or love, is more likely in specific situations or with specific issues?
4. Are either of these emotions coming to dominate as time goes on?
5. In our leadership, what role do these two emotions play? Which do we use to motivate people?
6. Which emotion do you believe God uses to move the hearts of his followers?
7. What is your evidence for your conclusions?
8. Name one simple Action Step we could take to move forward with any one of the above relationships.

⁵⁴ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. (2nd edition). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2023. P.66.

Week 3: Thinking About the Quality of Thinking⁵⁵

Open with Prayer and Silence for Centering Ourselves

Reflect upon and Discuss the following questions:

1. Review the notes from the Lenten series, “Pray, Wait, Connect” week 3. List the themes that stand out to you that are within both small group responses.
2. When a crisis happens, how do we respond here at St. Margaret’s?
3. Are our values (mission statement) used to resolve the crisis?
4. Are we considering the future? Is long-term thinking happening in our conversations, decision making, and planning?
5. How do we make space for people to think, reflect, listen, hear, and respond to God’s presence in our lives and in the life of this congregation?
6. Does this space make an impact? If so, how is this visible to our members/visitors?
7. What is your evidence for your conclusions?
8. Name one simple Action Step we could take to move forward with any one of the above relationships.

⁵⁵ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. (2nd edition). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2023. P.66.

Week 4: Thinking About the Role of Money⁵⁶

Open with Prayer and Silence for Centering Ourselves

Reflect upon and Discuss the following questions:

1. Review the notes from the Lenten series, “Pray, Wait, Connect” week 4. List the themes that stand out to you that are within both small group responses.
2. How big of an influence, as a percentage of other criteria, do financial issues have on decision making here at St. Margaret’s?
3. Has money become a motivator for us or a deterrent to do mission because of debts?
4. Has survival replaced love and service to those within our congregation?
5. Has survival replaced love and service to the wider community?
6. What is your evidence for your conclusions?
7. Name one simple Action Step we could take to move forward with any one of the above relationships.

⁵⁶ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. (2nd edition). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2023. P.66.

Week 5: Thinking About the Willingness to Contribute⁵⁷

Open with Prayer and Silence for Centering Ourselves

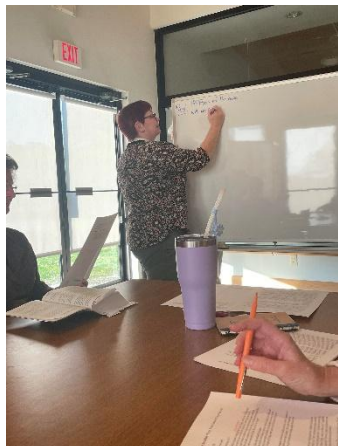
Reflect upon and Discuss the following questions:

1. Review the notes from the Lenten series, “Pray, Wait, Connect” week 5. List the themes that stand out to you that are within both small group responses.
2. Thinking of our congregation - What invitations to contribute have we extended and why?
3. How have people responded?
4. Moving forward, what are our ongoing expectations for people willing to step forward?
5. Are these expectations higher or lower than a few years ago?
6. What do we hear from God about our willingness to follow His Call?
7. What is your evidence for your conclusions?
8. Name one simple Action Step we could take to move forward with any one of the above relationships.

⁵⁷ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. (2nd edition). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2023. P.66.

Appendix D: Carla's Corner Electronic Newsletters, Summer of 2024

Carla's Corner: "Who is Jesus Christ to Me?," April 25, 2024



At the start of Lent we held our Sunday morning and Wednesday evening classes. These two small groups met for five weeks. Each week our focus was on a different question. We prayed together, read scriptures that helped us to reflect on the question of the class, and we listened to one another and to God's holy Word. This prayer, reading, and listening deepened our spiritual connection with God and with one another. Currently the second half of this study continues. Starting today in my Carla's Corner we will read about what came out of these small groups' study and prayer.

Reflections from Week 1: Who is Jesus to Me?

Our scripture texts were from Revelation 1:5-7, John 17:1-5, and John 14:1-14.

In Revelation we met Jesus in his full, awesome, glorious power; the one who gives charge to his angels to watch over each congregation. And we read, "even those who pierced him will be forgiven." Therefore we know God is forgiving.

In John 17, Jesus promises hope and eternal life for all who believe in him and obey his commandments. Our eternal life is knowing God, knowing Christ and therefore we are to share the Good News with others.

From John 14, Jesus prepares his disciples to do the work he has given us to do. We are to continue making disciples. It is necessary that we share our stories with others, bearing witness to God's presence in our lives.

Who is Jesus to YOU? For these two small groups, they determined that it is not enough to know a lot about Jesus or God – we have to KNOW JESUS – it is a personal relationship, it is experiential. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega (the beginning and the end of all things), He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life – He is the Savior and Redeemer of the world.

Carla's Corner: "Who or What is the Church?," May 9, 2024



Throughout the Lenten study each week, we asked a different question. The second week's reflections question was, "Who or What is the Church?"

Our scripture texts were from Acts 9:31, Romans 16:1-16, and Revelation 1:1-17.

In Acts we learned that the early church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and lived in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and increased in its numbers.

In Romans we learn that a woman deacon, Phoebe, led the church in Cenchreae. So we know that women and men helped to start and build the first congregations and make disciples of Christ. Paul tells us to greet our brothers and sisters in the Lord with a holy kiss – again admonition to love one another as Christ loves us.

From Revelation we read that every church is like a lampstand in the throne room of God. As a congregation we are meant to be Christ's Light bearers to the World.

The Church today is more often thought of as a building or place to go. But Jesus calls the Church his Disciples. The Church is not a what, it is a who. We, the people of God, are the Church. There is still a hope for the future because God is still at work and continues to call people into His Church, into His holy fellowship. We are the people of God when we practice forgiveness and love one another.

Who is the Church to YOU? For these two small groups, they determined that the Church is a community, it is people, it is the gathering where we are known by our love, and all are included. The Church is our filling station – where we come to fill our spiritual tanks and then go forth to love and serve all people. The Church is the People who worship Jesus, and believe he is the Christ.

Carla's Corner: How am I a Disciple of Jesus? May 23, 2024



You are probably familiar with Matthew 28:18-20, known as the “Great Commission”, Jesus sends his disciples out to “Go, make disciples, baptizing and teaching others the commandments of the Lord”.

In Luke’s gospel account Jesus calls us to healing by letting go of everything that possess us and to instead allow God into those places. (Luke 14:25-33)

John tells us that to be disciples of Jesus we must know the Truth, which is Jesus, and that His truth sets us free from sin and everything that binds us. (John 8:31-38)

Our small groups concluded that Discipleship is Hard Work! It requires us to sacrifice time and our desires in order to truly hear God’s call to our lives, and follow where God leads. In one of the small groups someone said, “God sends us on our knees in prayer to follow him and to make disciples.”

In other words, we cannot do the work of discipleship for ourselves or make new disciples without God’s help in all that we undertake. This is the work of the church, the Great Commission.

Questions for Your Reflection:

How are you growing in your discipleship (relationship) with Jesus?

How are we at St. Margaret’s making disciples for Jesus?

Share your reflection answers with us.

Carla's Corner: How do I practice giving and gratitude? June 6, 2024



“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” Luke 6:38

Jesus often taught on money. He told several parables regarding how we are to receive all that we have from God and be generous in giving back to God and by providing for others' needs. In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus told the parable of the rich fool, the man who said to himself, “I have plenty, I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and then eat, drink, and be merry”. The Lord God demanded his life that very night.

In his teachings, Jesus reminds us repeatedly that everything we have comes from God. We may think we worked hard to earn or obtain what we have, we deserve it. But it is the Lord God who gave us the jobs, the opportunities, and the blessings in our lives. We know that God supplies our every need but not necessarily our every want. We need to have faith that God will meet our needs. But that does not preclude us from telling God our heartfelt needs.

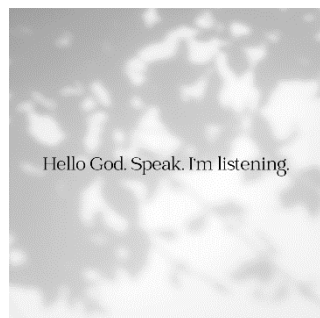
It is in our relationship with God, our forthright prayer conversations with God that God meets us where we are and sometimes changes our hearts desire to match God's desire for us. In these conversations we need to give thanks for all the blessings we have received daily from God. When we spend time in gratitude, naming to God those things we are thankful for, this time of prayer changes us. We move from being fearful with a mindset of scarcity to grateful with a mindset and attitude that makes us want to give to others.

Paul reminded the members of the Church in Corinth that we are to be cheerful givers. “The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will reap bountifully. Each must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

In the Church we talk about gratitude and thanksgiving as Stewardship. Too often the word stewardship is solely connected to the Pledge Card in the fall campaign. But stewardship is daily living with gratitude and thanksgiving for everything we have: our family and friends, our homes and possessions, for the beauty of creation, for the rain, sunny days, for all the little things in life that bring us a smile. Out of our faithful stewardship (gratitude and thanksgiving) we are then ready and expectant that when we see a need we can meet, we give to meet that need without thought of repayment. We do it with cheerfulness and the gladness of heart that we had the opportunity to be there for someone else.

Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Carla's Corner: How do we respond to what we hear God saying to us? June 20, 2024



This past Sunday in church we read the story of the Lord calling young Samuel. In the gospels we read the stories of Jesus walking up to Peter, Andrew, James and John calling them to follow him and he would make them fish for people. Jesus called Levi (also known as Matthew) at the tax collectors' booth "follow me" and he left his booth to follow Jesus. Throughout the scriptures we read how God calls people, both individuals and nations, to follow where God is leading.

The Lenten series we ended with this final question, "Where do I hear God calling me to go? Where do I hear God calling St. Margaret's to go?"

The answers in the class consistently answered that God is asking us to truly welcome and engage with all people. God requires us to witness God's work in our own lives with others, to be comfortable telling our story to someone new. Too often we are afraid, and we do not take the leap of faith – trusting that God has created the opportunity for the encounter with another person and that we can share one faith experience with that person.

How about you? Is God speaking to you asking you to trust Him in a new way? Maybe God is speaking to us as a congregation. What do we hear God saying to us all? How is God calling us to reach out to our new neighbors? What ideas for opportunities to connect with the larger community do we need to hear, recognize and respond? No one person has all the answers. Together we can listen, share, and respond to God's call upon us all.

I encourage you to take time this summer to listen to what God is saying to you. Deep in your thoughts or resonance chambers of your heart, what do you perceive God is saying to you? I would really like to hear from you if you would be willing to share with me. We can practice sharing our faith story one with another.

"Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10 NRSVue).

Carla's Corner: Thinking About the Quality of Relationships at St. Margaret's? July 3, 2024



The quality of our relationships with others can reflect the quality of our relationship with Jesus. Do we have an ongoing, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ? Does our relationship with God help us to have better relationships with other people?

During the Easter season we held a small group on both Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings for five weeks. In that first Easter week we talked about how our relationship with Jesus influences our relationship with other people. Then we asked several specific questions about the quality of relationships at St. Margaret's.

The questions we asked were:

1. What is the trend line over the last couple of years and looking to the future say about how we are relating one to another here at St. Margaret's?
2. Has our trust in one another increased or declined?
3. Are we willing to "be there" for one another or do we miss opportunities to "go the extra mile" in care for one another?
4. Has our trust in God increased or declined as a congregation?
5. Are we willing to listen and connect with how we hear God's Spirit leading?

As you can imagine different people had different answers to each of the above questions. Some feel we are doing well and gave examples of how we are building relationships with one another and in God as a congregation. Others shared their frustration that they have not felt fully welcomed and engaged with other members, or shared times of feeling alone and unknown. Each person's answers were valid and honest.

Then the two small groups spent some time listing some simple Action Steps we might take to improve relationships here at St. Margaret's. The emphasis here is that we need to learn to build, maintain, and grow our relationships one with another so that we take those honed skills into the community and begin building relationships with our new neighbors.

How would you answer the above questions?

Which of these Action Steps interest you or can you suggest others that may help us learn and practice relationship building and strengthening within our congregation?

Action Steps proposed: start a Women's Bible Study; start a Grief Support Group; Re-Envision Worship on Wednesday (WoW); Make Coffee Hour more connected; Newcomer's Dinner; Senior Luncheons; Connect with Preschool Teachers and Families; hold a Spiritual Gifts Class.

Carla's Corner: Thinking About Fear vs. Love at St. Margaret's? July 18, 2024



“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” 1 John 4:18.

If the Church is the place where we believe all are welcomed and we expect to find joy and receive love then what do people say about our congregation? How do people experience St. Margaret's?

The small groups agreed that St. Margaret's is a welcoming and loving place, a place where you can meet God and feel the comfort of the Holy Spirit, a congregation that knows we are to love one another. Members of these small groups also shared that there is still a lot of work to be done.

St. Margaret's is a welcoming congregation, but we sometimes forget to engage more deeply with one another and especially with new visitors and members. We need to get to know one another and caring for one another when someone is going through a difficult time in life. When we notice someone has not been in church for a couple of weeks, do we call them or send them a note just to say we are thinking about them? What if someone or their family is going through a rough patch, are we willing to make meals or help? How do we walk with our friends who are grieving? The small groups suggested some simple Action Steps we can take to meet these challenges and show our love for one another: training for our Greeters and Ushers to help connect new people with a pew buddy, and start a Welcome New Member feature in our newsletter, be more intentional about connecting with people during our coffee hour time.

As the scripture above from 1 John reminds us, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”. We do not fear the changes that will come as new people join our church. We do not need to fear that we do not have enough resources, people, or money because God knows our needs before we ask. But we've all experienced times in our lives when fear has closed love out of our hearts.

Let us be prayerful and intentional to keep love at the center of our hearts: for God, for one another, and for our new neighbors moving in all around us. Perfect Love casts out fear. Where love abides all things grow for the good of God's glory.

Carla's Corner: Thinking About Our Quality of Thinking at St. Margaret's? August 1, 2024



This third week of small groups during our Easter classes was possibly one of the tougher classes. As disciples of Jesus our faith is meant to influence our way of thinking and our actions. Being a faithful disciple of Jesus is hard work. It takes daily practice of praying, listening, reading scripture, doing random acts of kindness, using our gifts for the sake of others and all for the glory of God.

This week's class asked the participants to reflect and share about the quality of our thinking as a faith community here at St. Margaret's. What is the quality of our thinking? Do our values that we say in our mission statement* correlate to how we are living out that mission with one another and in the community?

The small group participants answered: we show our thoughtfulness and love towards one another through prayer, visitations, providing meals, providing receptions for funerals, and a call chain in response to tropical weather. Participants also said we need to broaden our scope, to see the needs in our wider community around us, and engage with that community matching our assets with their needs. The participants also observed that as a faith community there is a "disturbing vacancy and lack of participation in faith formation and discipleship opportunities."

Simple Action Steps included thinking more broadly and long range planning, hold gatherings for new members and have intentional steps for engaging the newcomers. Creating a plan to engage with people in Skye Ranch not just through social media, but to actually meet and get to know our neighbors. To grow our own participation in formation and discipleship opportunities so we are continually learning how to be better followers of Christ in our everyday life.

***Our Mission Statement:**

A Welcoming Place to Belong,
Where All Can Know God's Love,
and All Can Make a Difference!

Carla's Corner: Thinking About the Role of Money at St. Margaret's? August 15, 2024



If you will recall, in Lent our small groups discussed our understanding of giving and gratitude. In our Easter classes we took that first discussion further by asking, “What is the Role of Money at St. Margaret?” This week I want to share with you our class questions for reflections and the responses the small group participants gave.

First question, “how big of an influence do our financial issues have on decision making here at St. Margaret?” Responses included: “We tighten up, cringe and suck in our breath wondering can we do it, here we go again.” “The percentage of the financial cost is a big piece of our criteria to do a project.” “People who work with the finance committee and budget seem to know money is a big criteria for planning our budget, others further from the budget planning not very aware; there is a disconnect of understanding, especially of the importance of pledging.” “Amazed how God always provides for us through those who faithfully give, and we have to trust God will help us meet our needs.”

Second question, “has money become a motivator for us or a deterrent to do mission because of our debts?” Some of our participants responded in saying, “it is a motivator, people want to give and support mission.” Other participants said, “We need to help all of us understand our Mission and that giving translates into mission for transformation.”

The third question, “has survival replaced love, service, and giving within your faith community and within the wider community?” Our participants said that our congregation seems to love and serve inwardly and outwardly, our outreach is strong (and could be stronger), and we seem to understand that love and service need to be done equally within and outside of our congregation.

Action Steps include supporting our members who are in need or going through a rough time, grow our formation, be welcoming and engage with new people, support and empower our folks to start new “ministry” initiatives like the recent start of a Women’s Bible Study on Wednesdays.

Carla's Corner: Thinking About Our Willingness to Contribute at St. Margaret's? August 29, 2024



This week we conclude our wrap up from the Lenten and Easter series. In each session the main focus of questions and reflections was how do we hear God calling and how are we responding? These questions to asked to each as an individual and to us as one congregation.

The small group participants said that we extend invitations to bible study, for men, for women, and for seasonal Sunday offerings, we invite the newcomer to be a part of the different ministries within our church, we show love and service to Ashton Elementary School teachers and to cancer patients through outreach, and we have opened up to extend our property use to other groups.

So, how do we move forward and what are our expectations for people willing to step forward? Small groups said that we need to express more appreciation for those who have stepped forward and for their contributions, we need to encourage and empower laity to step forward with ideas and to lead others to do new things, we need to take courage to see how we as a congregation go beyond giving things or money to situations or people, but actually engage in mission and ministry with our community.

Action Steps suggested from the small groups: continue formation and education opportunities, grow leaders and Vestry members in continuing education on stewardship, spiritual formation, ministry organization connecting and engaging others, continue to look for ways to connect with outsiders.

I want to thank all our Lenten and Easter small group members for your faithfulness and openness to share and be vulnerable and creative together. Looking ahead to this fall our emphasis for the Vestry, ministry team leaders, and our congregation is reflecting our *Mission Statement to everything we do here and growing in our understanding of our Spiritual Gifts, both as individuals and as One Body in Christ. Stay tuned for future Carla Corner's with more information on how you can be a partner in our discipleship and ministry together!

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and All Can Make a Difference!

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