



CBFVA
Congregational Resource



Nurturing Faith in Community

By Terry Maples, CBFVA Coordinator





Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Forward	3
Session 1 – <i>Introduction & How Did We Get Here?</i>	7
Session 1 Reflection Questions	12
Session 1, Response 1	13
Session 1, Response 2	14
Session 2 – <i>Programmed Faith vs. Formed in Community</i>	15
Session 2 Reflection Questions	21
Session 2, Response 1	22
Session 2, Response 2	25
Session 3 – <i>The Nature of Faith & Formation</i>	27
Session 3 Reflection Questions	33
Session 3, Response 1	34
Session 3, Response 2	35
Session 4 – <i>Centrality of Jesus to Faith Formation</i>	37
Session 4 Reflection Questions	44
Session 4, Response 1	45
Session 4, Response 2	46
Session 5 – <i>Spiritual Practices that Nurture Faith</i>	47
Session 5 Reflection Questions	55
Session 5, Response 1	56
Session 5, Response 2	56
Session 6 – <i>Beloved Community and Transformation</i>	58
Session 6 Reflection Questions	66
Session 6, Response 1	67
Session 6, Response 2	69



Forward

Context

For the past several years, CBFVA has produced annual thematic Bible studies to assist congregations across the Fellowship. We created *Faithful Voices* Bible Studies last year. In this second year of our theme we offer a very different kind of congregational resource—one that explores the nature of faith, the role of community in nurturing and forming faith, and the role of the church in helping Christ-followers turn faith into action in the world God loves.

Setting the Stage for the Community Conversation

Patterned ways of “doing church” can block a congregation from engaging in effective evaluation of its ministries. We can appreciate the honesty of Willow Creek when it acknowledged a few years ago how ineffective its resources were in helping grow and nurture disciples for Jesus Christ. That kind of honesty leads to soul-searching reflection and invites a congregation to consider new and different approaches.

In the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, a poignant scene depicts an elderly man about to be released from prison. Brooks Hatley has an important role in the prison: he’s the librarian. As the day approaches for his release, Brooks intentionally creates a crisis so he won’t be forced to leave. In the prison courtyard following the incident, prisoners talk about what happened to Brooks. Astutely, one of the prisoners, “Red,” points out that Brooks isn’t crazy, “he’s just institutionalized.” Brooks fears he will have no meaningful role to play outside the prison—he’ll simply be an ex-con who has been freed. For a while longer, he chooses to stay institutionalized (the comfort of the known) over freedom and the unknowns associated with it.

That movie plot sounds much like the story of the Israelites who were delivered by God from exile and slavery in Egypt. When things got tough during the wilderness wanderings on the way to the Promised Land, the people grumbled and complained. They cried out, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (Exodus 16:3). The

Israelites, too, had become institutionalized—desiring the known (slavery in a foreign land) over the unknown (freedom in God’s Promised Land).

In similar fashion, congregational ways of doing ministry can easily become set. Patterns are comforting and aren’t inherently bad. When, however, a church gets “stuck” it can inadvertently say *no* to new directions God might lead. Faithfulness to God demands a congregation remain pliable in God’s hands and always open to Holy Spirit’s promptings.

Some say the Baptist way of “doing” Christian education has become institutionalized. The genius of Baptist Christian education the past few decades is how effectively it helped congregations reach people and engage them in Bible study through the Sunday school. The incredible “success” of this approach left Christian education largely unchanged and unchallenged for decades. According to Eddie Hammett in Reframing Spiritual Formation, “Most churches continue to believe and practice Christian education that is done in classrooms, driven by printed literature, and tied to institutional loyalty and preservation.” The pandemic certainly helped us realize these assumptions are suspect and invite us to look at things differently.

Why NOW?

Shrinking participation in many Baptist congregations has created a crisis. This crisis is the catalyst for evaluating how well we have been educating for faith and the life of faith. While it is disconcerting to see declining numbers, this crisis offers ripe opportunity for us to intentionally reflect upon the effectiveness of congregational ministries and to consider fresh ways to nurture mature faith in believers.

The coronavirus pandemic amplified the Christian education crisis in our churches even more. Our routine is to meet together in classrooms at the church building on Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings for face-to-face conversation. Distancing measures made that impossible. This major disruption necessitated thinking differently about our practices. The myth about when and where worship and study must happen was challenged. Patterns established for being and doing church in an agrarian culture in the 1950’s are no longer relevant today.

In many Baptist congregations, Sunday school (Bible Study Ministry) is considered the *primary* tool for faith education. Serious reflection about Sunday school reveals several limitations inherent in this “programmed” approach to Christian education:

- Surveys reveal most people who attend Sunday school classes do so because of the fellowship not for Bible instruction.
- Effectiveness is often defined by how many people attend rather than the spiritual growth or transformation occurring in the lives of participants.
- Teachers are often content to “teach Bible lessons” rather than create discovery-learning experiences for participants, i.e. the emphasis is on teaching rather than learning.

- Current Sunday school practice rarely focuses on helping participants reflect on how faith helps them deal with the real challenges of life and how a disciple of Jesus Christ integrates faith and life on a daily basis.
- Time constraints, complicated by all we try to accomplish during a typical class session, leave little time for study, discussion, or praxis (learn, do, and reflect).

The institutionalized pattern has resulted in low expectation that significant change will occur in the lives of participants. While we are already being “forced” to re-evaluate so many of our practices, now is the time to consider a more holistic understanding and approach. These sessions give a framework for prayer and reflection.

Goals for this Congregational Resource

Since Paul Baxley’s arrival as Executive Coordinator of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, CBF’s focus has been *Toward Bold Faithfulness*. This emphasis ties directly to CBF’s tagline: *Forming Together*. How do we know if we are forming bold faith through our congregation? The purpose of this resource is to flesh out the nature of the faith we seek to form and help us wrestle with new understandings of what faithfulness looks like today. The old scorecards churches used for years to evaluate effectiveness are no longer useful, i.e. bodies, bucks, and buildings. We need new scorecards that inspire bold faith that results in transformation of lives and justice and action in the world.

Hopefully, it won’t take you long to realize the content in this series flows out of my passion and conviction about the life of faith. I served as a local church educator for 27 years before moving into my role with CBF. This congregational resource builds on the *Nurturing Faith* book I wrote in 2017 for CBF as part of its 25th anniversary celebration—*Reclaiming and Re-Forming Baptist Identity: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*.

For each session, I enlisted Virginia ministers to write responses, hoping that hearing different voices improves the capacity of our congregations to embrace fresh understanding of dynamic faith that is intentionally activated in the world. In addition, Dr. Art Wright, CBFVA’s Theologian in Residence, crafted reflection questions for each session. I’m grateful to all who invested in this project.

Here is an outline of our journey together:

- Session 1: Introduction – How Did We Get Here?
- Session 2: Programming Faith vs. Faith Nurtured in Community
- Session 3: The Nature of Faith and Formation
- Session 4: Centrality of Jesus to Faith Formation
- Session 5: Spiritual Practices that Nurture Holistic Faith
- Session 6: Beloved Community and Transformation

Please know my desire for this congregational resource. In good CBF-fashion, I want to clearly state I have no interest in being prescriptive and telling you exactly how you or your congregation must engage the journey of faith. Instead, my job is to create a resource that hopefully awakens imagination, asks hard questions, and challenges assumptions about practices and approaches that no longer create environments of passion for kingdom work. As you grapple with these sessions, I hope you sense my desire to shine a light on what I see as “better, more faithful ways” to free us from institutional/cultural think and open us to consider how God is calling us to jettison old patterns of being and doing church (or to reclaim old ways we have left behind that continue to be crucial for transformation). To accomplish this goal, I introduce you to the writings of many skilled practitioners who serve as our guides today.

I also hope you will, despite the necessity to highlight what is no longer helpful, see my deep and abiding love and confidence in the mission and ministry of the local church. My life’s work has been committed to helping the church discover how to say “yes!” to God’s love for the whole world. Believers have (often unknowingly) impoverished the word “faith.” Rightly understood, committed Christianity demands recovery of the rich meanings of faith that empower us to turn loose an institutional focus in order to embrace the Jesus way of love, compassion, and justice.

How to Use This Resource

As with any congregational resource, *Nurturing Faith in Community* can be used in a variety of contexts in the church: Sunday school classes, small groups, leadership teams, etc. To get “the best bang for your buck” (awakening consciousness within the entire congregation), I suggest a church-wide study. If that isn’t possible, start with your leadership team or Sunday school teachers. As these leaders reflect on current practice in light of kingdom goals outlined in the sessions, transformation will happen as those serving in key roles embody new practices. And remember: we are here to journey with you!

God’s richest blessings on CBFVA congregations as you engage these sessions. To God be the glory for the transformation that happens in individual lives, in faith families, and in the larger communities served by churches.

Terry L. Maples
CBFVA Coordinator

Session 1: Introduction: How Did We Get Here?

Congregational Need Addressed:

It's easy for congregations to get comfortable with patterned ways of being and doing church. These patterned ways of being, seeing, and doing can block serious reflection about a congregation's faithfulness to God's mission in the world. This session takes us on a journey to rediscover the imperative of discipleship that encourages the Jesus' way.

Disempowering Discipleship in American Christianity

One reason I'm investing time and energy in writing this series of lessons is my growing conviction that, for many, discipleship is optional, i.e. not an essential component of becoming a disciple of Jesus. I frequently hear phrases like this one, "I'm so glad all I have to do is believe" to be Christian. To me, this sounds much more like "fire-insurance" or "elevator religion" rather than commitment of one's life to the Jesus way. Scripture is clear, "the Devil believes and trembles," which reminds us, belief is inadequate.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ." Cultural understandings and practices often blur our vision of what it means to be Christ-followers, and what begins as commitment, "Jesus is Lord," (giving assent to the Jesus way) turns into religious ritual or a watered-down, cultural version of Christianity. Allow me to share a pointed example of what I mean.

Rwanda was dubbed the most Christian country in Africa with as much as 90% of the population claiming some Christian church affiliation. Yet, during the Rwandan genocide that took place between April 7 and July 15 of 1994, an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandans were killed (about 70% of the country's Tutsi population). The scale and brutality of the massacre shocked the world!

Rwanda had been held up as a success of Christian missions, but the genocide proved that the Western Christianity imported into the heart of Africa apparently failed to create communities of Christian disciples rooted in love. In reality, understanding the Jesus who taught his disciples to love neighbor was missing. It seems ethnic identity, Hutu or Tutsi, superseded the ideals of Christianity, i.e. we show we love God by how we love neighbor.

I start with this heart-breaking story to show what can happen when fundamental teachings of Jesus are not emphasized. Failure to embrace and embody our historic affirmation, "Jesus is Lord" (our ultimate authority), means we often ally ourselves

with earthly authorities—political, economic, cultural, or ethnic. Hear this challenge from Lee Camp in *Mere Discipleship*:

Perhaps in our well-intentioned efforts to bring all things under the lordship of Christ, American Christian culture has been guilty of baptizing unrepentant social systems and structures. Is it sufficient to “sprinkle” the culture of a city or nation-state and dub it “Christian”? Which brings us to the question of whether Rwandan Christianity is all that different from...American Christianity. Has American Christianity too often shelved its discipleship, compartmentalized its faith, and thus been blinded by unredeemed cultural forces that leave us prey to the principalities and powers of this world?

What if the church today looks at the world with patterned, long-held presuppositions? What happens if our assumptions about the way things are no longer challenge, and instead, get in the way of God’s ideal for humanity? For sure, our position of wealth and prestige shapes the questions we ask or fail to ask. James Cone, a theologian who doesn’t mind challenging assumptions, insists,

One asks different questions of the meaning of “God,” depending on whether one finds oneself in the “ivory tower” or in the slave cabin, in Pharaoh’s throne room or Pharaoh’s mud-pits, in the boardroom or the sweatshop. Where we are and where we have been, deeply affect who we think God is and what we think God wants us to be.

If we are honest, we know the goal of discipleship is total allegiance to Christ, i.e. there is no aspect of our lives that is excluded from this commitment. No wonder Jesus commands radical understanding of our relationship to God—love your enemies, share your possessions, extend unlimited forgiveness, etc. The radical nature of discipleship necessitates transformation (more than simple change), birthing new lenses (God’s lenses) through which we view people and the world, and turning upside-down what the culture thinks is important. Jesus’ radical demands naturally bump into our human nature—pride, ambition, lust, greed, and self-seeking. We must diagnose ways in which cultural expectations have blurred the vision Jesus hopes we embrace and embody. Our assumptions about the nature of faith and discipleship must be questioned and challenged lest we, too, adopt watered-down “christianity” that trivializes the call to follow Christ.

Shifts in Community Practices

In order to take an honest look at today’s church, we need to go back to the birthing impetus of the early church. What was important to early Christians, and what did they seek to carry forward into the next generation of Christ-followers?

Can you describe some community practices of the early church? Coming out of the Jewish faith, Christianity embraced Judaism’s covenant relationship with God and the imperatives of Israel’s community practices. According to Dorothy Bass in *Practicing Our Faith*, these were imperatives to:

- Address social inequities
- Protect the vulnerable
- Keep the power of privilege in check and under critique
- Steward the gifts of earth as a God-given trust held in common
- Extend hospitality to the stranger and sojourner, and
- Consider the enemy's welfare on the same terms as one's own.

The gospels reveal that these early communities embodied the ethos of Jesus. You see this in the breaking down of social classes, radical inclusion, pursuit of justice for the poor, rejection of rank and pride, inclusion of men and women in leadership, and following the way of service. People used whatever gifts God entrusted them to build up the Body of Christ. Of course, this is not the whole story because we know communities struggled with expectations from the wider culture, but these were the ideals.

Major shifts in communities of faith were taking place by the fourth century. Christianity gained status, and here's what happened according to Dorothy Bass (statements broken apart for emphasis):

- *stability won out over change,*
- *hierarchy prevailed over egalitarianism,*
- *male-held office triumphed over gender equality,*
- *power was more centralized than dispersed, and*
- *social, political, and economic privilege lodged with the few rather than the many.*

Over the centuries, renewal movements have emerged to take us back to the radical impulses of the first followers of Jesus. According to Bass, each renewal called out these qualities:

- A sense of divine power
- All gifts of followers are dignified
- Sharing of resources to meet needs
- Willingness to cross social boundaries for a more inclusive community
- An uneasy relationship to every dominant order
- Empowerment of all members (laity and clergy)
- A conviction that this is good news and an example for the world

The church in America today frequently fails to embrace the radical impulses of Jesus' teachings and the practices of the early church. It's time for renewal, even transformation! This transformation cannot be actualized without the capacity for good reflection, i.e. bringing our current experience into conversation with God's ideals. Reflection enables us to engage in truth-telling about our current practices and how they might be out of alignment with the Jesus way.

What contemporary evidence indicates the church needs transformation? In *Adventures in Missing the Point*, authors Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo ask

difficult reflection questions: *Are our churches...merely creating consumers of religious products and programs? Are we creating self-isolating, self-serving, self-perpetuating, self-centered subculture instead of a world-penetrating (like salt and light), world serving (focused on "the least and the lost," those Jesus came to seek and save), world-transforming (like yeast in bread), God-centered (sharing God's love for the whole world) counterculture? If so, have we unintentionally neutered the gospel?*

Folks in the contemporary church are tempted to look at our faith through consumer lenses. Mark Tidsworth (who spoke at our General Assembly in Charlottesville a few years ago) in *Shift* says these thoughts foster a consumer-driven understanding:

- *My decision about community of faith choice is based on my preferences, interests, and well-being.*
- *I am completely a free agent regarding my community of faith commitment. Everything is up for re-negotiation all the time, with my needs being the deciding factor.*
- *Concern for or obligation to others in my faith community is a lesser value than my individual freedom to choose.*
- *Church is similar to other organizations to which I belong, participating or not participating depends on how the church meets my needs and fits with my personal schedule.*
- *I have been subtly conditioned to believe the church is there to make me happy, so when it does not, then it means this church is failing and I should find another.*

Is your faith community catering to this type of church shopper? Do you believe you exist to provide religious goods and services, resulting in happy and contented members? Remember, Jesus did not appear to be overly concerned about pleasing the disciples. His description of discipleship demands sacrifice and self-denial.

In a challenging book [Dirty Word—The Vulgar, Offensive Language of the Kingdom of God](#), Jim Walker shows great capacity to rethink church in light of Jesus' ideals regarding the kingdom of God. Walker highlights three kingdom of God characteristics: *authenticity, intimacy, and tightly-knit relationships*. Unfortunately, Walker admits his own congregational experiences revealed the opposite—superficiality, isolation, and individualism—much like our culture does.

Walker maintains expectations of the church should align with expectations of the kingdom. To awaken consciousness about ways in which the kingdom of God and church are not the same, Walker provides this insightful chart:

Kingdom of God

Authenticity
Assurance
Belonging

“Church”

Superficiality
Fear
Rejection

Meaning/compassion	Luxury
Intimacy	Isolation
Tightly-knit relationships	Individualism
We	Me
Communion with God	Religion
Sharing in community	Advancing politics
Heart for the suffering/poor	The idol of “big, bigger, biggest”
The Word of God	Cultural values of beauty, fame, and wealth

I share this to make an observation: Until the church can engage in essential truth-telling about current reality in contrast to kingdom expectations established by Jesus, we will likely keep repeating comfortable patterns to the neglect of the Jesus way.

Key Cultural Issues Impacting the Church

To fully understand “how we got here,” we must recognize four cultural issues impacting the church (these come from a presentation by Karen Tye, a Christian Education professor):

1. **Secular** – One major issue is the myth we live in a “Christian” country. Where I grew up in North Alabama, most everyone went to church—either Baptist or Church of Christ. Ours was the only game in town. Nothing else happened at 9:45 or 11:00 on Sunday mornings....and blue laws ensured it. Few people quarreled with the world as it was. I don’t think anyone doubts the world is significantly different today, and the values of the Gospel do **not** shape and form life in this country. Most of us are willing to confess capitalism is the dominant shaper of our society. I’m not trying to bash capitalism per se, but great harm is done when producing and consuming become the controlling factors of life. Before long, we define success by the quantity of things we have which is antithetical to the Gospel. In this secular age when the church is no longer *propped up* by the culture, the church has had difficulty embracing its role as counter-cultural.
2. **Sectarianism** – The reality of a pluralistic society is all around us. An issue that deeply impacts our future is sectarianism. Karen Tye defines sectarian as “that which is partisan, narrow minded, and parochial. It is a defensive reaction to the realities of pluralism.” We see this in the rising tide of fundamentalism that insists on knowing who is “in” and who is “out.” Clearly the Gospel message insists there is a place for everyone at the table, and we must resist temptations to define another human being as “other.”
3. **Shrinking** – Planet earth is in trouble. We continue to damage the environment to feed our (over)consumption. Global warming is a reality and will continue to wreak havoc across the globe. Rain forests are shrinking. Tillable land is shrinking because of over-development. Our children will likely not have it better than we their parents did. The church, too, is facing

shrinking resources that lead to reduced staff, bi-professional clergy roles, and hard questions about how to do ministry with fewer financial and human resources.

4. **Searching** – While the first three cultural issues are pretty pessimistic, this one is hopeful. People are on a spiritual quest for meaning and are searching for something to root their lives. This search presents ripe opportunity for the church to reclaim its calling to offer spiritual nourishment. The pandemic has awakened our consciousness to this truth.

As you have read in this session, many factors contributed to *how we got here*. What has evolved over the years is patterned, set ways of teaching for faith in local congregations. The next step in our journey together is addressing programmed faith and its limitations for forming faith in Jesus for the sake of the world.

Session 1 Reflection Questions by Art Wright

- In what ways do you think your congregation is “too comfortable” with the “patterned ways of being and doing church” (p. 7)? Why? Why do you think your congregation has become so comfortable in particular ways of being church together?
 - Is comfort a good thing or bad thing in a congregation? Why or why not?
- What is your understanding of discipleship and the role it should play in the Christian life? How would you describe your congregation’s current model of discipleship to a friend from another congregation? Do you see any particular strengths or weaknesses to the way your congregation engages in discipleship?
- Take a look back at the imperatives of the early church that Dorothy Bass presents (pp. 8–9 above). In what ways might your congregation bring its own priorities into greater alignment with these?
- In what ways do you feel as though your congregation fosters a “consumer-oriented” mindset with its “religious products and programs” (p. 10)? How might your congregation begin to shift away from a consumer-oriented model?
- Take a look at the “Key Cultural Issues Impacting the Church” at the end of this lesson. How do you see these playing out in the context of your church and community?

Response #1

Alan Miller

Pastor, Orange Baptist Church

It is easy in our American Church context to perpetuate the status quo. If we are comfortable, or if a proposed change seems uncomfortable, we tend to keep things the same. Terry Maples explains in this Introduction that we are living in a time where renewal is needed. This session assesses where we are, how we got here, and where we can be. The Church of Jesus Christ is called to do and be so much more.

In such a polarized world, where everything around us is politicized, or where anyone who thinks or believes differently than “our” group does is vilified; it is important to remember with whom we as Christ followers are ultimately allied. Our true citizenship is in Heaven. Too often we want to say the words, “I believe in Jesus,” and perhaps change a few things in our lives, but not give up too much of our agendas or our wants. We want to have discipleship without any cost. Terry Maples makes it plain that “the radical nature of discipleship necessitates transformation.” Otherwise we might be tempted to “adopt watered-down ‘christianity’ that trivializes the call to follow Christ.”

The Church has been given the mission of making disciples who make disciples, yet we too often settle for much less. At the outset of this series of lessons, we are confronted with this “Christian-Lite” mentality that pervades our Christian culture and given the choice to embark on a different path. One where we choose as believers and churches to form people to look more and more like Christ. As the Church of the Living God, we must dare to believe that God’s will and creative Spirit has places for us to go as we move forward.

I am excited about this resource and the potential it has to open eyes, ears, and hearts to the need to listen again, dream again, and submit again to the nudge of the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus in the way of discipleship. It won’t be easy; but perhaps it’s time to take up our cross and follow.

Response #2

Ashley Harrington

Co-Pastor, Starling Avenue Baptist Church, Martinsville

During this pandemic summer, our congregation slowly made our way through the book of Acts during our weekly Zoom Bible Study time. Our hope was that during this time of being a newly scattered Church, the early followers could offer us some encouragement and enlightenment of how to follow Christ right where we found ourselves, which was mostly at home.

We began our series asking questions we'd hoped to answer during our study. My favorite that we returned to often was, "How did this group of scaredy cats who hid out after Jesus' death become bold leaders who helped the Church to grow and spread?"

From week to week we watched Christ ascend, Holy Spirit arrive, the Church form and take care of each other and those all around them. We watched as they followed the Way of Christ and performed miracles, preached Christ crucified, prayed for boldness, and steadily grew larger and larger and larger. We watched as they were arrested, jailed, persecuted, and some killed in the midst of eventually being forced to scatter from their home base of Jerusalem. We watched them start new churches, empower women and men to lead, welcome Gentiles into this new Way. We did indeed watch a group once gripped in fear step out boldly in faith because it was worth it.

I was reminded that from the very beginnings of the Church, Holy Spirit has been calling us from places of fear to places of power. And not the kind of power that overtakes, lords over, but the kind of power that only comes from Holy Spirit showing up and causing a ruckus. Holy Spirit called the followers out of the shadows of their fear and hiding and called them to places where they spoke Truth to power, healed the sick, raised the dead, called to repentance. Holy Spirit called them to places where they would be so bold as to keep caring, keep loving, keep healing in the face of an Empire that continually tried to thwart, oppress, and even kill them. So, if this was true of followers of Jesus from the beginning of the Church's story, why can't it and why shouldn't it be true now? While we are not opposed by an Empire, we are confronting white supremacy, staunch individualism, Christian nationalism, pervasive consumerism, and the list goes on. There is incredible work to be done and like the early Church, we do not nor can we do it alone. Just as Holy Spirit came disrupting on Pentecost, so she continues to call us to holy trouble. If we but leave the comfort of our fear and feeling overwhelmed and complacency, we might find that we too are empowered to speak Truth to power, heal the sick, raise the dead, call to repentance. Because it is worth it.

Session 2:

Programming Faith vs. Faith Nurtured in Community

Congregational Need Addressed:

Patterns of educating for faith that emerged in the 1950's and 1960's are no longer effective. In this session, we engage in truth-telling about weaknesses in our approach to nurturing faith today and begin looking at a more holistic understanding of forming faith.

What is the state of Christian education in Baptist congregations today? How much attention is given to instructional methods, education that reforms, and formation that shapes Christian character? How much thought is given to the kind of faith being shaped and formed? How do we measure success?

I suspect approaches to Christian education are as diverse as our congregations. Many years ago, a myth was perpetuated: "If church members attend Bible study and worship on Sunday mornings, discipleship training on Sunday evenings, and give a tithe to the church, they have done what is necessary to nurture a faith relationship with Jesus Christ." This myth is still alive and well in many churches! Is it possible this widely held but false idea has resulted in low expectations for individual and corporate (congregational) transformation? This reduction (oversimplification) of the Gospel has yielded faith communities that may enjoy good fellowship but do not embrace and exercise a transformational approach to faith development that results in tangible expressions of mature Christianity.

I wonder how much of what is considered Christian education in Baptist congregations is informed more by culture and tradition (i.e. *we've always done it this way*) than sound theology and good educational philosophy? Following are a few of my observations after serving 27 years as educator in three Baptist churches, from educational encounters and experiences in many congregations, and from facilitating leadership conferences:

- Many teachers assume the educational methods used in school classrooms work effectively in church classrooms. They are unaware faith is more caught (modeled) than taught (didactic/instructive).
- In most classes, the teacher assumes full responsibility for what happens in the teaching/learning process.
- Educational focus is on teaching instead of learning (teacher vs. learner is central to the experience).
- Very little engagement of the student.
- The best learning—discovery learning—is not practiced; instead, the teacher spoon-feeds the students what they must learn.

- PRAXIS (process through which we learn, do something in the real world with what we've learned, and then reflect on the experience) is not a regular part of most congregational educational experiences.
- Reflection on life experiences in light of scripture and tradition is not a regular practice in most classes.
- Spiritual disciplines, other than prayer and Bible study, are not practiced in the classroom.
- The teacher believes his/her primary function is "teaching lessons."
- Many teachers are unaware of the role of the faith community in nurturing faith.
- Teachers and students do *not* come to Bible study expecting to be shaped or transformed (in fact, the word *change* is probably a dirty word in many congregations.).

Primary responsibility for Christian education is usually given to the Sunday school. I'm a strong advocate for Sunday morning Bible study classes, but 50 minutes (or less) of "Bible instruction" is not going to accomplish the task of forming people. At best, we can hope for good fellowship, pastoral care, and some basic instruction. Sunday school was never intended to be the only Christian education process. We need a broader understanding: a firmly held conviction that **every aspect of congregational life educates all the time**. In fact, the congregation truly is the educator. Everything the congregation does has potential to shape and form faith. The whole of life provides contexts for education, not just specific times on Sunday morning or some other day of the week (recall schedule flexibility that evolved during the pandemic).

As a result of our commitment to traditional approaches in Christian education, we ignored the need for ongoing conversion, we neglected the gap between belief and practice, we failed to take advantage of potential for the Christian community to nurture faith, and we gave Christ-followers permission to relinquish responsibility for their growth and maturation to teachers/preachers. In other words, we settled for what made people "comfortable" so they would keep coming. We fostered an environment that reinforced what people already believed rather than one that inspired perpetual curiosity and openness to change (growth).

What is the by-product of this long-standing, deeply-rooted pattern? Dr. Israel Galindo calls the by-product the "null expectancy factor" meaning people do not participate in the life of a congregation *expecting* to be transformed by God's Spirit. Instead, people are taught to be "well-behaved" church members, not disciples who emulate Jesus. (Jesus often "misbehaved," i.e. broke rules established by humans in power.) There must be a better, more effective way!

Learning a Better Way

I'm an avid college football fan. As a proud alumnus of the University of Alabama, I cheer for the Crimson Tide, though I also enjoy watching other teams play.

A couple years ago, Greg McElroy provided color commentary for an Alabama football game I was watching. McElroy, who played quarterback for Alabama under Nick Saban, was asked what it was like to play for a strict disciplinarian like Coach Saban. McElroy recalled how focused and organized coach's personal patterns and behaviors were. Saban approached every game the same way—whether playing for the National Championship or against an SEC foe or other opponent. The part of the conversation that caught my attention was this statement from McElroy, “While Coach is strict about the process he uses to teach the game of football, he is always willing to change and adapt—even when it goes against how he prefers to play the game.” The example he gave related to offensive strategy. For years, Alabama was committed to running the football in most situations, scoring a few points, and keeping the opponent from scoring at all! With the advent of new high-powered, spread offenses, Saban had to adapt—both on offense and defense. The change in Alabama's strategy has been so dramatic it is no longer surprising to see an Alabama offense score 40+ points in a game (and sometimes give up 40+ points in a game!).

Coach Saban's style worked brilliantly for many years (don't mess with a winning formula, right?), and more than likely Saban would not have changed his *modus operandi* unless he had been prodded to do so.

How does this illustration relate to educating for faith in the local church? The success of the original Sunday school model is undeniable but times change which demands evaluation and adaptability. The key is to stick to the overall goal while remaining responsive to new ideas regarding the process.

Some have called the long-standing approach to Christian education practiced in many congregations *programmed piety*—an approach that is no longer effective. During a CBF General Assembly, Dr. Tim Brock pointed to the following as evidence the programmed piety approach no longer works:

- Attendance in Sunday school, in many churches the primary setting for studying the Bible, has for years waned. Brock predicts Sunday school as we know it today will no longer exist in 50 years.
- Most congregations no longer offer discipleship training. Many congregations offer short-term studies, but many of these are superficial at best.
- Participation in Woman's Missionary Union has declined and seismic shifts in mission support have occurred. In many congregations “women's ministries” have supplanted WMU.
- Shifts in worship styles have moved congregations away from graded choir programs to praise choruses.
- Many churches no longer offer Sunday evening worship.
- Many churches no longer hold revival or renewal services.

These ways of practicing piety that were birthed primarily in rural contexts no longer work in suburban and urban congregational settings. Brock continues:

The “programmed piety” approach to faith maturity was based on the premise “knowledge” defined in terms of biblical facts and sets of theological statements, is the primary foundation for Christian formation. The program was based on these assumptions:

- *We can find specific answers to all questions of faith if we study the scriptures and agree on their interpretation and application.*
- *We can maintain theological orthodoxy if we claim basic Baptist principles and then apply these principles in matters of interpretation, ethics, and informed behavior.*
- *We are in “right relationship” with others only when we share a common set of biblical and theological assumptions about matters of faith.*

Undeniably, Baptist congregations benefited greatly from Sunday schools for many decades. Sunday schools emphasized learning and memorizing scripture, inspired church growth, created systems through which members received care and ministry, and fostered fellowship (the primary reason most people participate). I personally witnessed extremely effective classes in which participants were challenged to discover and grow in faith and practice. At its worst, however, the Sunday school approach was blind to injustice, promoted a nationalistic agenda, and sometimes encouraged intolerance. Many folks became disenchanted with the local church when these overt “Sunday school values” clashed with what Jesus taught and practiced. There must be a better way!

According to Cassandra Carkuff Williams in *Learning the Way*:

Effective formation of disciples depends largely on the Christian community’s capacity to communicate, clearly and with integrity, the presence of Jesus in its internal life and in its relationships with the world. I have identified responsiveness, gratitude, grace, communion, and witness as marks of authentic Christian community... These marks serve as indicators of our potential to nurture committed disciples. Only if we acknowledge that our communities do not always successfully practice the presence of Jesus will we be able to turn to the work of becoming effective learners and teachers of discipleship.

Congregations need to “come clean” about the ineffectiveness of their educational efforts to birth the kinds of indicators Williams suggests. Ask yourselves: Is our congregation producing the desired outcome—Christ-followers who pattern their attitudes and actions after Jesus? Israel Galindo and Marty Canaday say it well:

The unspoken truth of Christian education today is that the educational practices of the past have not served us well in shaping persons in

“Christlikeness” because they run counter to the way people need to be educated in faith. A better way to facilitate the process of Christian education is congruent with how Christian faith is actually formed in the context of a community of faith.

It’s time for congregations to invest time and energy in addressing what faith is, what faith is not, and how faith is best shaped and formed in community. This is the focus of Session 3. Only then will our churches discover what it means to become authentic Christian communities. Williams’ five marks of Christian community described below are a good place to start in assessing whether or not current practices align with those evident in the earliest Christian communities. They can help us experience and embody the presence of Jesus today:

- responsiveness – readiness to change to meet new needs in new times while preserving the message and work of Jesus.
- gratitude – lived response to the love God offers us in Jesus.
- grace – God’s attitude toward us revealed in loving actions.
- communion – fruit of the Spirit we hold in common with others in community.
- witness – prophetic presence through which the kingdom is made known in the world.

A Holistic Approach

The word “forming” reminds us conversion is not a one-time or a solo experience but something that happens over and over as we live and serve together in faith communities and in the world. We take seriously that individuals and communities of faith are formed over time, so it matters *how* we engage the process. “Forming” also communicates everything a congregation does for God’s kingdom has faith-influencing potential. Our faith is shaped and molded as we worship together, learn together, serve together, advocate together, share faith stories together, discuss and disagree together, think deeply and grow more mature together, even fellowship together.

The church is always in the process of dying to old forms and birthing new ones. That means the church must always be in the process of re-formation. Phyllis Tickle says the church goes through a major reformation every 500 years or so. She refers to this major shift as a time to clean out the attic, i.e. determine what needs to be kept and what needs to be tossed.

When our thinking is clear, we confess the church *must* continually change. I call it *ongoing conversion*, i.e. staying pliable in the hands of the Master Potter. Each generation embarks on a journey to discover how the Gospel speaks into the current context. We cannot demand the church remain static (secure and predictable) while the world moves on and challenges intensify. Methodologies that worked well in the past are no longer effective. Congregations dare not sit around dreaming of the “glory days” when pews were packed and everyone seemed to be “on the same

page.” Instead, it behooves the church to invest time and energy discerning what faithfulness means now. Our God is dynamic and speaks to all of life at all times. Removing our own “cataracts” and faith-limiting shackles is necessary if the church desires to be prophetic and authentic. Do not fear change! Embrace it! Eagerly engage in a re-visioning process and listen for Spirit promptings. God will blow new life into our faith communities if we say “yes” to directions God is pointing.

Periods of reflection, questioning, even doubt, are necessary for corporate *faithing*. Voicing our doubts, asking hard questions, and searching for answers help us go deep. God honors the struggle. Easy answers may at first seem satisfying but most of us realize living lives of faith can be very difficult and complicated at times. Spirit is ever available to open our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts as we “work out our own salvation”—under God individually and in the context of community. Congregations that rejoice in diversity of thought encourage the spiritual growth of all.

I love the way Kenneth Stokes talks about faith and faithing in *Faith Is a Verb*:

In matters of faith, you can give her a creed, a tradition, and a denomination and say, “These are your faith—do not question them!” They are a total package, and her response will be the result of many factors as she matures. She may adhere to your teachings without question or, in later years, she may well reject it all.

Or you can help her to think, and to worship, to study, to pray—all building blocks of faith—but say to her: “These are the basic components of your faith, but you must put them together in those ways that have meaning for you...Your faith must be your own response to those options you have considered.” This alternative is, for me, the ultimate goal of the faithing experience.

The approach Stokes advocates is not a “believe anything you want” approach to nurturing faith. Instead, he advocates for congregations that support the questions and struggles of faith. Congregations that encourage growth and maturation respond to tough questions with, “We’re glad you are asking these questions. Let’s explore them together!”

Hopefully, you are beginning to see why programmed approaches to educating for a life of faith are no longer effective. This is scary for most congregations, but I assure you the new models (ones that are dynamic, holistic, and focus on formation) will re-shape and re-form our congregations into “schools of love.”

Session 2 Reflections by Art Wright:

- Terry suggests many of us have succumbed to the following myth: “If church members attend Bible study and worship on Sunday mornings, discipleship training on Sunday evenings, and give a tithe to the church, they have done what is necessary to nurture a faith relationship with Jesus Christ” (p. 14). How do you see this myth playing out in your own congregation? What are the shortcomings of this approach to faith development?
 - What might a transformation approach to faith development look like in your congregation?
 - Do you think teachers and students come to Bible study expecting to be shaped and transformed? Why or why not?
- Terry claims that “every aspect of congregational life educates all the time” (p. 15). What does he mean by this? Where do you see this in your own congregation? What “lessons” are there to be learned outside of what we typically think of as “discipleship programs”?
- In Baptist circles, our understanding of the Christian spiritual life has often been reduced to a single critical moment: conversion through accepting Jesus as one’s personal Lord and savior. In contrast, Terry commends an approach to the spiritual life that emphasizes *formation over time* and *ongoing conversion* (see especially p. 18). How does this resonate with you?
- What should be the “desired outcome” of faith formation? What (p. 17) does a spiritually mature person look like? What should be our “goal” in discipleship?
- Why is change scary for congregations and pastoral leaders? Why is it necessary?

Response #1

Matthew Hensley

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There is a picture that hangs prominently in both churches I have served. It is a Washington Irving picture titled, "Sunday Morning in Sleepy Hollow." Perhaps you've seen it. It depicts an 18th century family dressed in their best clothes walking a path, with a church spire in the background. Along the path, they happen upon others on their way to church. It is an idyllic setting among rolling hills and over a stream. Perhaps its prominence in many churches reflects the picture we have of church life.

I've often thought of that picture as compared to life on a Sunday today. For the agrarian society of our nation's past, Sunday marked the day everyone looked forward to. People literally got cleaned up from the dirty work of farming and took a one-day break from hard work. The best food was served on Sunday. There was a chance to visit with others in the community on a Sunday, something the work week prevented. The Sunday sermon gave folks a chance to rest their bodies and exercise their minds. What strikes me most is that Sunday was something people genuinely looked forward to.

Compare that to today. Our society is so busy. For the middle class, we are afforded the opportunity to dress nicely all week long. We have our choice of great food all the time. Technology puts us in front of friends anytime we want and often instantaneously. No longer is Sunday an institution people look forward to in the same way that our 18th century forebearers did. It is just another day with plenty of things to do.

This is the culture in which we find ourselves immersed. It's the culture that Terry Maples invites us to consider when we think about the ways our churches intentionally go about forming the faith of its members. We have been handed a robust faith from generations past. But that faith was built in a context that we no longer find ourselves living. Rather, our shared faith must compete with a miriad of options. Terry is correct that these times are critical for the church to "flesh out the nature of the faith we seek to form and what that looks like today." Our old "scorecards that inspire bold faith" are outdated for the times we find ourselves. Instead of attempting a quixotic mission to move culture back to the "good old days," churches can inspire faithfulness by its desire to engage the here and now honestly as apprentices of Jesus Christ.

In the churches I have served, it is the sense of community forged through worship, care for one another, and fellowship that motivate its gatherings. People love each other! Yet, this gift of community has also become an obstacle for self-reflection, honesty, and growth. I have witnessed frustration from adults who are new to the

faith as they engage with programmed Bible study classes. Looking to learn how to read and interpret the Bible, they often flounder in groups that are heavy on fellowship and light on applied Bible study. While many of our churches state they want to see lives changed, our formation programs reflect a high premium on comfort and belonging. While not bad in and of themselves, comfort and belonging are not the fertile ground needed for forming disciples of Christ.

No engaged church member wants a church that produces the “null expectancy factor” the Dr. Israel Galindo says is prevalent in many church institutions. But unless our churches can honestly reflect and acknowledge, as Cassandra Carkuff Williams suggests, that “our communities do not always successfully practice the presence of Jesus,” I believe the null expectancy factor will continue to stymie formation.

I believe the null expectancy factor especially challenges established churches with any kind of history. New church starts, when successful, often are founded with clear, focused goals that include introducing adults to Christ. They do not have a rich history that for many churches is both a gift and a challenge. The challenge, of course, is our human propensity to settle into habits that are comfortable and safe. Asking groups to change the way they engage with one another often creates a defensive posture. This does not take long to occur. Give those new and exciting church starts 10 – 20 years and they will be dealing with their own gift and challenge of history.

One way to tell if church members are growing in their faith is their willingness to embrace change. I do not suggest that this includes changing just for change’s sake. Rather, spiritual growth occurs when church members have done the work of discernment, putting into practice seeking God’s will above their own, and are able to embrace the discomfort of change with a goal in mind.

The pandemic has caused us all to stop and evaluate our ministry. At Huguenot Road Baptist Church, we have begun to see the disruption in our discipleship process as a gift. The disruption has caused us to ask, “why do we do Bible study?” Seems like a question with an obvious answer. But the more honest and reflective we have been, the more we can see how our programmatic history has led us to often embrace comfort over purpose.

Here are some take-aways that I glean from session two:

- Reflect and evaluate. Take time to ask the big questions. Why do we do what we do? Is it effective? Survey the church. Be brutally honest. Celebrate the ways you are staying clear about your purpose. Take responsibility when you stray from your purpose.
- Stretch but don’t snap. Introduce tried and true ways of listening to God and interpreting scripture that are not a part of the normal discipleship process.

But don't change wholesale. Do not dismiss that current practices are also life-giving.

- Equip rather than teach. Tony Morgan, a church consultant and founder of the Unstuck Group says, "While Bible teaching is very important, thriving churches are shifting their focus to equipping people with the tools and resources they need to engage the Bible, practice spiritual disciplines, and live out God's mission in their lives." Faith formation shouldn't happen only when people sit at the foot of a gifted teacher. We have to equip people to take responsibility for their formation whether they darken the church doors at every opportunity or increasingly twice a month.
- Story telling is powerful – it's the best way to illustrate what faith formation looks like. Invite members to remember how God was faithful in the past, especially during change, and how their faithful response felt.
- Collaborative ministry is formative. When I impose a vision for ministry upon a class, a team, or churchwide, it might get implemented faster, but effectiveness is questionable. In fact, this approach likely contributes to the null expectancy. Inviting a group to discern and create something new together will take longer but those who participate will grow from the experience and the rest of the church will be likely to embrace the ministry. After all, the process or journey is what form us.
- Raise expectations. As consumers, we default to giving people an easy process they can consume and then leave behind. But faith formation is different. Individuals and communities have to take responsibility to put the work in and submit to being stretched. Stop allowing the consumer mentality to lead. Instead, lead with the purpose of transforming lives. There might be some disgruntled members at first but if they stick with it, discomfort is the first step in embracing change and the possibility of transformation.

Faith formation is not for the faint of heart or for those who seek to be comfortable. But the reality is we follow Jesus, whose example of love placed the purpose of his mission above his comfort. Like it or not, God call us to witness to Jesus' mission through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Response #2

Kris Aaron

Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Bristol

One of the blessings and curses of being married to a teacher is that you get to help grade papers. Several years ago, I was helping my wife by grading some science assignments. They were multiple choice except for the last question and my wife, Clary, had given me an answer key. The last question asked students to list three ways they could conserve water at home, and this one student came up with a response that made me laugh out loud. One of the ways he suggested to conserve water was to drink milk! I burst out laughing and showed my wife. She gave the young man partial credit both because he had made her laugh and because he engaged in out-of-the-box thinking, a hallmark of her classroom.

For far too long, as Terry aptly illustrates, the church has been thinking inside-the-box with regards to Christian education even when such thinking has brought with it diminishing returns. In shifting from a programmed faith to one formed in community, the church not only has the opportunity to undo some of the less than helpful patterned ways of being and doing church, but it has the opportunity to expand its understanding of Christian education and allow for more congregational flourishing. Every pastor knows the struggle of finding new Sunday School “teachers” or small group leaders. The common refrain given when people turn down the opportunity lead such groups is “I just don’t feel like I know enough.” Somewhere along the way, we’ve equated faith formation with knowledge. In doing so, we’ve forgotten the adage that one can get an A in Bible and still receive an F in Christianity.

When I think back on my own faith journey, both as someone who grew up in church and now as someone who pastors a church, two particular things stick out. First, the best Sunday School teacher I had growing up was Mr. Whitney Hill. Mr. Whitney was one of the Youth Sunday School teachers at my home church, the First Baptist Church of Hawkinsville, GA, back when I was a teenager. And what made Mr. Whitney such a good teacher wasn’t how much he knew. It wasn’t how strong his pedagogy was. It wasn’t that he was the most eloquent speaker I had ever heard. It was that he was willing and ready to share with a group of teenagers how his faith made a difference in his life. We all saw how his relationship with Christ changed him for the better, and every one of us in that Youth group wanted to have the kind of relationship with Christ that Mr. Whitney did. What made him an effective teacher wasn’t just what he told us, it was who he was and how he lived his life. When I think back on the most impactful Bible studies or Sunday School lessons I’ve led with youth, college students, or adults, they’ve never been ones in which I was particularly eloquent. They were never the ones where it seemed like I had all the answers. They were the ones in which I was transparent about my own questions and struggles and when I encouraged those present to be honest about theirs. They were the ones in which I encouraged people not just to learn more about Jesus but

to live like Jesus. They were the ones in which people were invited to respond and we all ended up learning something from one another. After such experiences, I saw people more willing to serve, and I was, too.

A programmed and programmatic faith will continue to produce diminishing returns when the system itself has changed. And our system has changed. The kind of approach that Terry advocates for here is one that will make many people uncomfortable. There's a loss of control that occurs when admitting to one's questions and struggles. But I'm convinced that we'll find not only a better understanding of the nature of faith and an increased flourishing of the church, we'll find a stronger safety net and support system than we've had previously. Because then it will no longer be the answers found in the back of the book or the knowledge of one person, the safety net will be found within the members of the congregation itself, the people you learn, serve, worship, and do life with together. And that net is always more lasting and impactful.

Session 3

The Nature of Faith & Formation

Congregational Need Addressed:

Thoughtful conversation about the nature of the faith we seek to form is essential. The call of this session is to appropriate fresh understanding of what it means to “form faith in Jesus for the sake of the world.”

One of the things I recognize in those of us who grew up in the Deep South is widespread confusion about the difference between belief and faith. Many think the words mean the same thing. As a congregational educator, I often had opportunity to speak with children who “wanted to be baptized.” As we discussed matters of belief and faith, I often used this illustration to talk about the difference:

Suppose you and I drive out to the Richmond airport to fly to Atlanta. You and I could stand there all day watching the planes take off and land. That would be fun, wouldn't it? So, which do you think is harder—believing the plane could take you to Atlanta or purchasing a ticket, getting on the plane, and flying? Each child could easily recognize it takes a much greater commitment (faith) to place ourselves in the seat, trust the pilot and those who worked on the plane, and fly than to simply believe (give assent, imagine) the plane could take us to Atlanta.

The Nature of Faith

Before we can fully explore what faithfulness is, we must first examine the root word. What is faith? How is faith taught or transmitted? These questions beg thoughtful and reflective responses. How a congregation wrestles with these questions is foundational for life together in community.

First, an attempt to define “faith” is illuminating and helpful. Richard Osmer in Teaching for Faith says:

Faith is a relationship of trust in God whose loving-kindness and faithfulness have been shown in Jesus Christ. This is the heart and soul of Christianity. The core of the Bible is a story of God's faithfulness to creation and to humanity, a story that culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is God's faithfulness that brings Christian faith to life. God is trustworthy, and in faith, we recognize and accept this truth.

Craig Dykstra in Growing in the Life of Faith defines faith this way:

Faith is primarily a response to a gift, an activity of recognizing and accepting God's grace, which gives rise to a way of life—a way of believing, trusting, committing, and orienting all one's thoughts and actions.

In order to “teach for faith” in a local congregation, we need to expand our understanding of faith lest we myopically focus on one dimension of faith to the neglect of others. Osmer’s four sides or components of faith are crucial to a holistic understanding of faith (Teaching for Faith, p. 17):

1. *beliefs* about God serve as the basis of our trust
2. an ongoing, personal *relationship* with God brings us into a relationship with other persons of faith
3. a *commitment* to God as trustworthy shapes the way we invest our time and energy
4. an awareness *mystery* surrounds God and places limits on our understanding and control of God.

Let’s unpack each of these faith components.

Faith as Beliefs

Does it matter what we believe? Of course, it does. The ideas we hold about God matter—a lot, and the church plays an important role in helping folks form beliefs about God and the life of faith. Many are voicing concern about “theological illiteracy” evident in our churches today. Folks aren’t familiar with biblical stories and lack basic understanding of scriptural teachings and Christian traditions that help shape faith. Beliefs must be formed in dialogue with other Christ-followers. Congregational leaders have their work cut-out for them as they address varying levels of biblical literacy in their faith communities today.

Some have focused too much on the importance of beliefs—making Christian faith a “head matter.” In fact, they reduce faith by insisting congregants pay attention to beliefs *about* God rather than nurturing a *relationship with* the object of our faith. Faith cannot be reduced to a particular set of beliefs about God that we all agree upon. Choosing to trust our *human* ideas about God before trusting in a God who far surpasses our feeble descriptions, limits our growing awareness of Holy God (growth happens as we struggle). Beliefs alone are not enough and cause us to exclude faith from all parts of our lives and block important dimensions of life-giving faith (that’s what we mean by *reducing faith*). Most faith traditions seek to capture beliefs in confessions or creeds. These can be helpful to our collective understanding, but these beliefs cannot and do not describe complete understanding of God. To underscore this claim, the preamble to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message is so powerful:

A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation.

Faith as Relationship

The teaching ministry of a church must move beyond simply imparting knowledge about God. An important goal in faith formation is to awaken and deepen trust in the

living God. This is done in Christian community when folks support and nurture their inter-relationship. Opportunities to support and challenge each other on the journey are essential. This happens through meaningful dialogue about scripture that goes beyond “Sunday school answers” to active sharing of lives and struggling with difficult questions about the life of faith. The capacity to “work out our salvation” together requires trust, honesty, transparency, willingness to go deeper, and concern for the growth of others.

Faith as Commitment

We commit to many things in our busy lives. It’s easy to be fooled into thinking faith commitment is simply stating our intention to follow Jesus, i.e. loving the Living God, then deciding how much energy to put into that commitment. Faith as commitment is not primarily about our will. Instead, commitment is our response to God’s loving action (Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection) on humanity’s behalf. The church must present the Good News in such clear, descriptive, meaningful ways folks are compelled to commit wholeheartedly in ways that transform their lives and priorities. When this happens, we begin to understand our personal stories in light of God’s redeeming grace and love. Only when we understand how our stories intersect with God’s stories can we push away concerns of the ego (“it ain’t about us”) in order to embrace the Jesus way of service and sacrifice (give up control for the sake of others).

Faith as Mystery

A mystery is something that remains hidden. Finite human beings cannot fully understand infinite God. Embracing faith as mystery is extremely important because it reassures us God cannot be adequately explained or completely known. We must not get confused or attempt to project our needs, our prejudices, or cultural biases on Creator God. God is beyond any ideas we might construct with our human imaginations. Further, we are powerless to give faith to another or “will” faith to grow—that’s Spirit work. We can create a context in which human spirit connects with Holy Spirit. Faith without mystery is a reduction of the Gospel, i.e. if we can fit God into our tiny box of human understanding then our God is far too small! God always remains “Other.”

Without awareness about these four dimensions of faith, we can easily focus our primary attention on “getting our beliefs right.” Beliefs are important, but they are not enough. This misconception has damaged the church and diminished expectations regarding discipleship. Expanding consciousness about the nature of faith is required if we seek to nurture the kind of trust in God that leads to commitment that extends to all aspects of our lives. In other words, we can’t get to bold faith without understanding the richness of these four dimensions.

Faith: Caught or Taught?

Faith cannot be taught in the same way math and science are taught in school. Why? **Because we seek to educate for faith in the person of Jesus Christ.** Faith is a relationship! This understanding is so much richer than simply learning facts about

Jesus. We cannot cause another to have faith. Faith is a free gift from God that is awakened and enlivened as we respond to God's grace. We know God also uses the witness of faith communities (congregations) to bring faith to life. I love Osmer's understanding of the purpose of teaching in the church:

The purpose of our teaching in the church is to create a context in which faith can be awakened, supported, and challenged.

The teaching ministry of a church is vitally important because it creates a context for faith to live and grow and thrive. Teachers don't give faith to their students, but they do use tools and methods to awaken, support, and challenge the faith of fellow pilgrims on the spiritual journey. In my experience, meaningful formation of Christ-followers demands discovery learning; honest, open exchange of ideas, understandings, doubts, and insights; and meaningful *theological reflection*. This gives learners opportunity to assimilate what they learn from scripture, Holy Spirit, and fellow strugglers into their decision-making, encounters, challenges, and interaction with the world.

Finally, we recognize that our understanding of what faith is and how it is transmitted is also influenced by cultural factors. Challenging the culture can be scary. Many Christians have difficulty examining the human systems that formed them. Ralph Linton said, "For a person to discover culture is like a fish discovering he is living in water." Critical reflection is required of each generation because culture is "man-made." Each congregation is responsible to wrestle with the meaning of faith in light of its history, relationships, and societal events. Ellis Nelson says culture has to be "opened up for critical examination if faith in God is ever to lead us to a different style of life." This is why the congregation is the educator—developing a contemporary understanding of faith before passing it on to the next generation.

Spiritual Formation Defined

Formation captures the essence of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In fact, the big idea coming out of the 2015 CBF re-branding process was *forming together*. From our inception, leaders in the Fellowship movement were confident a new way of being Baptist Christians was being shaped and formed by God.

Forming is key for CBF and drives our understanding:

Spiritual formation is the process of being formed in the image of Christ by the gracious working of God's Spirit in community for the transformation of the world.

This profound definition is a contextual re-wording of Robert Mulholland's seminal work, [Invitation to a Journey](#). This understanding of spiritual formation reminds us faith is formed in and by God, is shaped in the context of Christian community, cannot be programmed, and is "caught" more than taught. We also voice the

conviction our formation is not complete until we invest our lives in others, i.e. Jesus' command to love God AND love neighbor.

Formation is a process much like shaping pottery vessels is a process. As clay cannot become a useful vessel without the careful craftsmanship of the potter, Christ-followers do not arrive at spiritual maturity apart from life-shaping personal and corporate spiritual practices. Though we don't do the shaping – God does – we are prompted by Spirit's forming forces in the midst of our life experiences. Engaging in spiritual practices or disciplines makes us more aware, pliable, and responsive to God's work in our lives. The disciplines exercised by Jesus are foundational, and we benefit greatly from studying and practicing them (more about practices later). The formation of our faith is purposeful and enables us to become more like Jesus—to *want to* emulate his life and ministry. The goal of the ongoing process of spiritual formation is to nurture believers to become like Jesus in attitude, conviction, intent, and action. We discover how to be like Jesus from the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul was fond of using the phrase “in Christ” when encouraging churches he planted. He changed his language slightly when writing to the church at Galatia:

“My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).

Paul's life and ministry were all about telling the story of what Christ did in his life and helping others embark on a similar journey toward God. Paul sees potential for Christ to be birthed in the lives of believers at Galatia. For that to happen, Christ must first be “formed” in them. It seems the Galatian converts responded favorably and showed signs of growth as long as Paul was physically present. In Paul's absence the Galatians appeared to lose their way... an observation that caused Paul great anxiety.

Clearly Paul expected Christ to be formed in the lives of the Galatian Christ-followers, but this formation did not happen immediately or automatically. A variety of interpretations for Paul's use of *formed in you* have been suggested: 1) Paul is referring to Christ being born again in people's lives (incarnation), 2) Paul expects a quality of life that leads to Christ-like behaviors, 3) Paul sees a well-balanced life resulting from moving in a Christ-centered direction, and 4) Paul sees Christ as the core that provides hope, joy, and grounding for daily living.

All who welcome Christ accept the invitation to be shaped and formed. Formation begins with Christ and continues because of Spirit's prompting and our willingness and our efforts to grow (form) into the image of Christ. As Paul “parented” the Galatians in their progress, we, too, seek wisdom and guidance in the process of our own faith formation.

Awakening Consciousness

How can God get our attention in the midst of our own and the world's busy-ness? How does God awaken us to gaps between our current reality and what God desires? We "wake-up" because Spirit invites us and calls us to respond to realities beyond our present perspective on life. Spirit then calls us to redefine and realign our lives in relationship to God in ways beyond our present circumstances and understanding. Some call this realignment *transformation*.

David Benner in [Spirituality and the Awakening Self](#) says transformation is an enduring expansion of consciousness that expresses itself in four ways:

1. Increased awareness
2. A broader, more inclusive identity
3. A larger framework for meaning making (how we understand and make sense of our self, others, God, and the world)
4. A reorganization of personality that results in a changed way of being in the world

Difficult or new life experiences have potential to awaken consciousness (as we observe during this pandemic). Transformation is, however, not the same as self-improvement. We certainly play a role in the transformative process, but true transformation is more gift of God than achievement in the midst of our practicing disciplines of the faith. Transformation possesses a strong element of mystery.

Benner says it this way:

Shifts in our consciousness involve a spiritual response. The spiritual nature of these responses is seen in (the fact that they are) acts of openness to something larger than and beyond our self as it presently exists. In every case this involves a posture of willingness (rather than willfulness), faith and trust (as opposed to fear and caution), surrender (rather than an attempt to control), and consent to awakening (rather than a return to sleep). It means offering a full-hearted yes! to life, to love, to others, to the world...By responding in these ways, we open ourselves to the possibility of becoming more than we presently are.

When Spirit wakes us up, we can choose to hold on to the life we now live, i.e. the status quo. There may be spiritual significance in that choice. Being *stuck* (or going back to sleep) where we are on the journey of faith, however, is not contentment. In fact, Benner says, "It is saying 'no' to 'the unceasing invitation of God's Spirit to become more than we are'."

Too often we speak of the spiritual journey solely in terms of what *we do*, and we become convinced that is how God defines faithfulness. **What God really desires is our consent to be awakened.** If we reduce faith to our own efforts, we run the risk of strengthening the false self and turning the spiritual journey into a self-improvement project. This is disastrous because doing so wrongly convinces the ego it is even more in control than before the spiritual journey began. Ignoring or

running from Spirit's invitation can have devastating consequences for our development.

Again, I turn to Benner, "Awareness is the fruit of such an unobstructed opening of self...The risk of awareness is that we might have to change...More fundamental than what we do or think is our openness to the Spirit." Openness enables Spirit to shape and form us on the journey of faith. How do we discover ways Spirit desires to form us? We turn to the life and ministry of Jesus—the author and sustainer of our faith.

See, I am making all things new.

Revelation 21:5

Session 3 Reflection Questions by Art Wright:

- How do you understand the difference between "belief" and "faith"? How do you think most members of your congregation understand these ideas? Why is this distinction important?
- What stands out to you as particularly noteworthy about Osmer's four components of faith (pp. 28–29).
- In what ways have you seen the tendency to focus "too much on the importance of beliefs" (p. 28)? How can this be harmful in our Christian life? In what ways does your congregation reinforce or resist this tendency?
- How do you respond to the following quote from Osmer: "The purpose of our teaching in the church is to create a context in which faith can be awakened, supported, and challenged" (p. 30)? What is one step your congregation could take now to foster that sort of context?
- What does it mean to you to "expand" or "awaken" consciousness (p. 32)? What role does this play in the spiritual life? How have you seen this in your own life, or in the lives of others? Is there a way to better foster this in our congregations?

Response #1
Melissa Scott
Associate Pastor,
Colonial Avenue Baptist Church, Roanoke

When we as churches can grasp the nature of faith as described in this study (beliefs, relationship, commitment, and mystery), we are better able to understand and live out faith that is formational rather than simply informational.

Because faith is not only an individual endeavor but happens in community, I have found it helpful to think of faith, formation, and discipleship in terms of connections in five areas. First is connecting to God. In the life of the church, this happens in many ways, but most often through prayer and worship, individually and communally. A church that wishes to be transformed by faith must offer ways for people to better know and connect with the object and creator of that faith, God. Connecting to our sacred stories is also a vital part of faith and formation. This means studying scripture together in engaging ways, as well as helping each other see the ways in which our own stories connect to the story of God. Another area of faith formation that is sometimes overlooked but is well addressed in this chapter is connecting to our true selves. We are each beloved children of God, created in God's image to do the good works God has planned for us. We are also fallible humans who need Jesus to redeem us and the Holy Spirit to direct us. Faith formation happens, in part, by committing to see each other as God sees us, to help each other, and to use words to encourage and build up, rather than to tear down. It also includes helping our members discover and use their spiritual gifts and talents and to find their vocation: the place where the things that bring them great joy meet a deep need in the world. Nurturing faith also means that we provide ways for people to connect with our faith community, making sure that they find both friends and meaningful work to do. Finally, if we believe, as stated in this study, that "Spiritual formation is the process of being formed in the image of Christ by the gracious working of God's Spirit in community for the transformation of the world," faith includes connecting with the world, through connecting with local and global field personnel and ministries, through prayer, financial support, and hands-on ministry, as well as helping our church members to become comfortable sharing their testimonies and talking about their faith.

Because faith as described in this study is "caught, rather than taught," it is vitally important that the church find ways to be *together* for faith formation. Rather than relying solely on siloed ministries that separate the church by age or life status (even those these may have an important role to play), we should also use the minimal amount of time we have with our church family for connection and formation together. Intergenerational worship, Bible study, fellowship, and service opportunities provide a way for faith to be awakened and challenged. Adults can learn from the open questioning and enthusiasm of children and the very practical desire for a faith that makes a difference for teenagers, while at the same time

sharing the gift of their experiences and mature reflections. When the body of Christ is formed together, then we can see the church being awakened and becoming open to the transformation of the Spirit.

Response #2

Dan Koger

Senior Pastor, Churchland Baptist Church, Chesapeake

In Philippians 3:10, Paul writes, “I want to know Christ and make him known.” Our western-thinking mind tends to add a word to what Paul says. Without even being aware, we insert “about” so that the verse reads, “I want to know *about* Christ...” In terms of faith and formation, this offers a substantive difference.

“To know” Christ is a relational dynamic. It points us to formation and transformation. “To know about” Christ points us to information. In talking about the critical role of scripture in how faith is formed, Robert Mulholland paints a picture of “informational reading” and “formational reading” (for more, see Terry’s blog of April 27, 2018). In a nutshell, formational reading of scripture is about depth more than breadth. Reading for information focuses on mastering the text and reading analytically, to cover as much content as possible. Formational reading focuses on being mastered by the text and reading receptively, to cover what we need to cover.

Two perspectives have challenged me and helped me to clarify my understanding of the dynamic relationship between faith and formation. One comes from a book by Israel Galindo and Marty Canaday, entitled, Planning for Christian Education Formation: A Community of Faith Approach. They offer a helpful distinction between the religious education model (the typical model of faith formation in most congregations) and the Christian education formation model.

Schooling/Religious Instruction		Christian Education Formation
Classroom	CONTEXT	Community of faith
Text or creed	CONTENT	Person of Jesus Christ
Didactic	APPROACH	Relational
Mastery of content	OUTCOME	Becoming in relationship
Instructional	METHODS	Relational

The other perspective comes from missional engagement and missionary work outside of an American setting. For decades, American Christianity has viewed “faith formation” through the lens of “believing, behaving, and belonging.” In this paradigm, belonging is usually understood only as membership. In order to belong –

to be accepted – a person must first learn the teachings and doctrines of that church. Then, behave accord to the accepted norms (rituals, traditions, who sits in which pew). Then, and only then, one might be invited (or expected) to join; that is, belong.

As I looked back on the development of my faith growing up, I noticed there was a certain order to it. First came believing – in God, in Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit. Then came behaving - believing required that you had to behave in a certain way (do this but don't do that). Lastly came belonging - faith gave you a sense of belonging to a faith community, and yes, even to God.

Missional engagement has offered another paradigm: “belonging, believing, behaving.” This second paradigm is the one I have come now to embrace. The older I get, the more convinced I am that a sense of belonging to God comes first and not last. Only when we realize that we belong to the God who created us and loves us can we then come to believe and then see how both belonging and believing shape our behaving (how our faith is formed).

This sense of belonging as the entry way to faith finds expression through the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus' ministry began as he was affirmed as belonging to God, as God's beloved Son: the one in whom God was well pleased (Matt 3:17). The priority of a sense of belonging continues with Paul: “you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 3:23).

Can one come to faith apart from others? Yes. Does the depth and breadth of one's faith depend – in part or in whole – on being a part of a community of faith? Yes.

The pandemic has reminded me of the value of community. Of being together. We've done so through phone calls, emails, and texts. Many of us have experienced face-to-face community via Zoom. The challenging days have reminded me of how my own faith wilts and grows stale apart from an intentional connection to a community of believers. Whether it's one or two, or ten or twelve.

As Terry quotes David Benner, “awareness” comes in and through relationships built in and through a community of faith. Faith and Formation are not either-or. Faith and formation are both-and. As we come to find a place to belong, a place where we are accepted, we are drawn into a dynamic relationship that forms our faith. And as our faith is formed, God will use us in the forming of faith in others. Then, we will come to know Christ.

NOTE:

In Shaped by the Word, Robert Mulholland says: “The question is not whether to undertake spiritual formation. The question is what kind of spiritual formation are we already engaged in.”

Session 4: Centrality of Jesus to Faith Formation

Congregational Need Addressed:

Jesus came to show us how to live. Jesus' life and ministry as revealed in the Gospels show us what was important to him: unconditional love for all, concern for the marginalized, serving people, being available, breaking down barriers that separate people, spending time nourishing relationship with God, and confronting injustices. Christ-followers today need a Jesus' worldview.

What we know most definitively about God we know through the person of Jesus. Let me repeat that. The revelation of God is primarily through a **person**. What we know about Jesus we learn largely from the Bible, but the authority of the person Jesus supersedes the authority of the book. Faith and trust are essential for a Christ-follower, but if we focus on *our* faith—disregarding the person of Jesus and his teachings—we turn our attention away from the object of our faith.

Jesus showed us by how he lived that God cares about what happens in the material world. He wasn't simply focused on the eternal destination of souls. Jesus spent much of his time showing us how to care for earthly things. Jesus embodied grace and love as he reached out to people. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He spoke in parables using familiar images listeners could understand. He celebrated at weddings and played with children. Jesus' life was marked by compassion for what happened in the world around him. To call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we can do no less.

If we are honest, we admit our tendency to urge others to see things *our* way and in so doing believe we are engaging in authentic discipleship. Again, in our limited understanding and experience, we “have usurped the role of Jesus Christ in these matters. We have determined what is appropriate discipleship, and we have presumed to judge who meets our criteria of personal faith” (David Benner, [Spirituality and the Awakening Self](#)). What happens as a result? The norms we establish for Christian discipleship fall far short of Jesus' teachings, actions, and expectations.

Theologian David Watson says it well:

Instead of serving as salt and light and leaven and seed as Jesus commissioned us, we have created congregational “safe houses,” offering the benefits of salvation, but doing little to further God's salvation of planet earth.

We cannot make Christian discipleship *primarily* about comforting and supporting people. We must take the next steps toward deeper understanding of faith.

Are our congregations producing disciples committed to the Jesus way? There is strong evidence to suggest we are more successful at producing good church members than developing “disciples.” Is this because our discipleship efforts are too focused on our *human* understanding of discipleship, *our* human concept of faith, and our human *assumptions* of what it means to live for Christ? As long as the only objective of discipleship is to strengthen our faith, to deepen our spirituality, to utilize our gifts, or to fulfill our potential, the resulting homogeneity (everyone believes the same) leaves little room to follow Jesus through radical acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion.

Do not hear me say personal growth and spiritual development are wrong. They aren’t wrong. God calls each of us to greater understanding and higher, holier functioning. Here, however, we are considering the life of the community, individuals who band together in faith families for purposes beyond their ability to perform in isolation. God loves each *one* of us, but God sent Jesus to empower our unity for godly influence in the world God created. We are the “bride of Christ” and must not diminish nor underestimate the importance of what we are called to do...together. This kind of commitment is more caught than taught!

What happens when we disempower Jesus’ expectations? We become preoccupied with ourselves. This leads to congregational maintenance and self-indulgence. Instead of places where people come together to be formed into Christian disciples, congregations become places where people seek to soak up the love and grace of God and affirm what they already believe (“null expectancy factor”). Like Abraham, we are blessed and graced to become a blessing to others—we don’t just keep it to ourselves. If we aren’t careful, churches focus on personal growth and development to the neglect of God’s call to be Christ’s compassionate hands and feet in ministry. Jesus’ presence brings grace, peace, and justice to the world—through us. The church does not exist for itself; the church exists for the world (John 3:16).

How does a congregation avoid the pitfall of focusing all its energy and passion on itself alone? I believe it begins with acknowledging the reality **we have removed Jesus from center stage and replaced him with *our* beliefs, *our* perceptions, *our* intentions, and *our* activities.** When Jesus and God’s mission are at the center of congregational life, the reason we are together is obvious. We don’t have to sit around trying to figure out God’s will for the church. The reason the church exists is to see the world God loves with Jesus’ eyes of compassion. God’s will for the church is for the church to act on what it sees by going with Jesus into our daily living to minister (love) and serve (action). We need congregational leaders who center the life and work of the church on the person and teachings of Jesus. Faith communities help believers understand “God’s will” as a compass (point direction) rather than a map (turn by turn direction). God welcomes variation under the umbrella of the Christ ethic and encourages examination and expression of our giftedness, recognition of our personal call to ministry, and response to Spirit nudges both

personally and corporately. Certainly, discernment is necessary to flesh out the details and specifics for each local body, but by allowing Christ to assume center stage in our personal and corporate lives we foster greater clarity in recognizing “God’s will” in all matters.

Jesus’ Mission Statement

We turn to biblical revelation to understand the divine-human relationship. Humankind’s understanding of God has grown and expanded over the centuries. We embrace Leroy Spinks’ declaration in *The Jesus Lens*: “The God behind the encounters bursts forth in love and redemptive grace in a single human life perfectly reflecting the glory of the Father.” An attempt to make all words of scripture equal can distort the meaning of God’s revelation. We must interpret all scripture through the Jesus’ lens. In the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message, we read, “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”

Many are waking up to the reality we need a Jesus worldview. Again, I quote Spink:

**“We need a Jesus worldview, not a biblical worldview.
A biblical worldview just might include slavery, stoning,
judicial mutilation, genocide, hatred, and warfare.
A Jesus worldview rejects all of those for
liberty, grace, redemption, and peacemaking.”**

To form a Jesus worldview, we must determine what Jesus’ priorities were during his earthly lifetime? We look at what I call Jesus’ Mission Statement.

After his temptation in the desert, Jesus’ ministry exploded in Galilee. He preached and healed. News about Jesus spread far and wide. People in Nazareth were so excited when they heard Jesus was coming to town. On Sabbath, people flocked to the synagogue to listen to this person who had done such great things. Jesus stood to read passages from Isaiah that later became his mission (purpose) statement. Jesus went on record about what would give shape and form to his earthly ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19 NIV).

Jesus let the home-folks know he was the fulfillment of this passage from the Old Testament, and all was well until Jesus said something his listeners considered highly offensive. Jesus lifted up specific examples of God’s favor shown to non-Jews – widow in Zarepath and Naaman the Syrian. Immediately the crowd turned on Jesus and wanted to kill him. What made the people so mad? Jesus dared articulate a vision of the kingdom for *those* people—the labeled and rejected ones, the unclean and unworthy. Jesus’ ministry leaned toward those who didn’t for whatever reason

“have it all together”—the poor, the hungry, the marginalized, folks unacceptable to the hometown crowd.

This kind of “good news” is highly offensive to us, too, isn’t it? Imagine Jesus walking into your worship space and announcing the kingdom is not about you—it’s about _____ (you fill in the blank), the people for whom you have the most disdain (hatred?) Our hypocrisy is revealed.

If we desire to be (and I assume we do) authentic Christ-followers, we must wrestle with the implications of Jesus’ mission statement. Reflect:

- In what ways do Jesus’ expectations for his own ministry shape and form our mission statement as Christ-followers today?
- To what degree is there alignment between Jesus’ values and convictions and how we engage the world?

Jesus’ Instruction Manual

An excellent way to become better acquainted with Jesus’ priorities is to examine the new order he describes in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew believes these teachings are central to understanding Jesus and the kingdom he proclaimed. Jesus’ words illustrate the kingdom of God (God’s reign on earth) and give us an “instruction manual” for living the Jesus way. These rich statements from Jesus must, however, be read through different lenses in order to accurately understand their intent. To awaken consciousness about what Jesus means by the “kingdom of God,” I include a summary of Jim Wallis’ comments in The (Un)Common Good. Wallis draws from Matthew’s gospel to articulate what Jesus wants us to invest in and value. His ideas are summarized below:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- Jesus cares about people who suffer from spiritual and physical poverty.
- Caring for those in physical poverty is a frequent subject in the kingdom.
- Caring for the affluent is necessary because they no longer depend on God.
- The kingdom will be a blessing to both.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

- Those who have capacity to see needy people in the world and express compassion for them will be comforted.
- Empathy is seen as strength not weakness.
- To feel the pain of the world is to participate in the heart of God.
- Compassionate people respond to human suffering.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

- The humble are the favored ones (which defies the world’s logic).
- Humility is greatly needed in the highly competitive world in which we live.
- The greatest are the ones who serve.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

- Jesus cares about justice.
- To love the kingdom is to pursue justice for all.
- Pursuing justice in all arenas of life demonstrates we understand God's justice and prove it by our engagement.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

- Christ-followers show mercy and forgiveness.
- Showing mercy and forgiveness acknowledges our own need for God's grace and forgiveness.
- Christ-followers practice reconciliation.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

- To be pure of heart is to have integrity—truthfulness, honesty, and follow-through.
- Only leaders with integrity are trusted; trust is foundational.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

- We need to do more than talk about peace; we must live peace.
- We need leaders who know how to resolve conflict.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- A special place of honor is given to those who sacrifice their lives for just causes.
- Those who sacrifice for the kingdom inspire others to follow in their footsteps.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- If you live according to Jesus' new order, you will be persecuted because you threaten the status quo (you become counter-cultural like Jesus).
- You are in good company with the prophets of old and Jesus himself.
- God rewards good and world-changing behavior (large and small).

Jesus' teachings found in the Sermon on the Mount turn the world upside-down and without a doubt call us to be counter-cultural. Allowing these words to form and shape our everyday lives impacts God's kingdom in powerful ways. **Imagine what would happen if Christ-followers defined faithfulness in relationship according to the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount.** Lives would certainly begin to reflect the Jesus Dash!

The Jesus Dash

As discussed earlier, a significant challenge many Christians face is a tendency to reduce faith to beliefs. This approach causes us to put our trust in a set of

statements *about* Jesus rather than nurturing a relationship *with* the Living Jesus. Statements of belief alone will never capture the essence of God. Also, reducing faith to beliefs weakens the impact of faith on our lives, often causing us to isolate our relationship with Jesus from the rest of our being (rather like saying, “Do what I say, not what I do.”)

Pragmatically, what does “reducing faith to beliefs” look like? Worship may be understood as a singing and preaching event instead of “beggars searching for bread,” bowing knees to acknowledge God is God, and offering praise and thanksgiving to the Living God. Proclamation can become myopically focused on “getting people saved” while ignoring the demands of discipleship (helping people become like Jesus in thought and action). Christian education may be unintentionally limited to “teaching scripture” with no expectation of life transformation or putting hands and feet to our faith. How we think about the Gospel’s ethical demands may be diluted by our political persuasion. Capacity for meaningful conversation about the real stuff of life is replaced with pithy statements backed up with very little substance.

I’ve heard a number of funeral sermons in which a pastor talks about the **dash** of the person who died, i.e. what happened between the birth and death dates—the deceased’s meaningful relationships with family and friends, kingdom impact, service to God, community engagement, etc. The dates carved on tombstones are facts, but these “bookends” reveal nothing about the intervening years or the **dash**.

I fear something similar happens in the church. Much attention is given to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and rightly so. Is it possible, though, we focus too much of our attention on the bookends of Jesus’ earthly life and not enough on how Jesus lived, what he did, his teachings, ways he modeled godliness, etc.? Ought not we who call ourselves Christians (little-Christ) care as much about the narrative of Jesus’ life as we do the beginning and the end?

Our call has always been to focus on the Jesus Dash. We Christ followers are compelled to study and pattern our lives after Jesus. He came to teach us how to live. Reflecting theologically on the Jesus Dash guides us in discerning how God desires to shape and form us for life, love, service, and ministry. This shift can drastically alter our understanding of what it means to be faithful.

Jesus’ Priorities (as revealed in the Jesus Dash)

How do we determine what was important to Jesus so we can discern what is important to his followers today? We study Jesus’ life and ministry to understand what he valued and in whom he invested. Christopher Maricle analyzed the teachings and actions of Jesus and summarized them in *The Jesus Priorities—8 Essential Habits*:

Priority 1: Heal

- Stay deeply connected to compassion
- Say “yes” to strangers
- Do what is within your power to do
- See with the heart

Priority 2: Love

- Show mercy no matter what
- Extend forgiveness without limit
- Love others as your expression of love for God

Priority 3: Pray

- Pray alone
- Pray persistently
- Pray with others
- Pray simply

Priority 4: Spread the Word

- Share the mission with others
- Invite everyone to God’s banquet
- Challenge others and yourself to live the gospel

Priority 5: Build Up Treasure in Heaven

- Detach yourself from possessions
- Maintain an abundance mentality
- Act justly in all things

Priority 6: Seek God’s Will

- Rely on the example of Jesus
- Maintain a sense of urgency by seeking to be in a state of grace
- Focus daily on God’s will
- See all tasks as acts of love
- See sacrifice as gain

Priority 7: Accept Children as Precious

- Protect children
- Welcome children
- Seek to be child-like

Priority 8: Live with Humility

- Rely on God’s mercy—not your own merit
- Presume the lowest place
- Sacrifice your ego

Maricle backs up his convictions about Jesus’ priorities with abundant scriptural support. I encourage you to study the life and ministry of Jesus for yourself. Though your list of Jesus’ priorities may look slightly different than Maricle’s, honestly and accurately describing what Jesus most consistently invested in and practiced, provides us an excellent pattern for forming and shaping faith in Jesus today. At minimum, we have insight into the qualities Jesus followers must desire to emulate.

Make time to evaluate how well you and your congregation reflect Jesus' priorities. Where are the gaps between your current practice and the practices embodied by Jesus? Make time to discuss current cultural practices of your congregation. In what ways are they in alignment with Jesus' priorities/values/mission?

Availability

One thing that becomes abundantly clear as we study the life of Jesus is his willingness to make time for people. We see him engaging "the least" of his people, the outcasts of the day, and those not held in high esteem—the needy, the sick, tax collectors, women, children, and foreigners. He constantly made himself available to meet folks at their point of need. For Jesus, availability was a habit of the heart.

The kind of availability Jesus practiced was not easy for him. That's why Jesus frequently withdrew to be prayerfully present to God's compassion and be reminded he was the instrument of that compassion to others.

This kind of availability is not easy in the world in which we live—especially considering the economic, political, and cultural climate in America today. Like Jesus, we desperately need practices that connect us to the Source of love.

Session 4 Reflection Questions by Art Wright:

- What is your understanding of Jesus? If you had to explain to someone who Jesus is in one or two sentences, what would you say?
- Terry says that churches are often "more successful at producing good church members than developing 'disciples'" (p. 38). In what ways is your congregation's understanding of discipleship focused on Jesus? In what ways might your approach to discipleship need to be re-focused on Jesus?
- How does Terry's discussion of Jesus' "mission" shape how you understand what Jesus was up to in his earthly ministry? What was his goal, and how should that shape our own mission as Christians and as churches?
- Look back at the discussion of the beatitudes. Which one stands out to you as especially meaningful for your understanding of a life of faith? Why?
- Which of the eight priorities of Jesus reveals an area of weakness for your congregation? How so? What steps might you take toward re-prioritizing it?

Response #1

Anna P. Miller

Association Pastor for Adult Education
River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond, Virginia

It stands to reason that, as those who have connected with the Christian faith tradition, we will look to Jesus Christ for much of our understanding of who we are. Faith, in a slightly broader context is discussed in Session 3 of this study. Session 4 now narrows in on the specifics of following the way of Jesus—how he lived.

The content included in this session is rich and we are introduced to deep and valuable content included from excellent writers from the Christian perspective. If you want to create some diversity of voices, I would recommend further digging into female perspectives of Christian faith by reading from Barbara Brown Taylor, Molly T. Marshall, or Diana Butler Bass. For a black voice with strength, perhaps Bishop Michael Curry and his thoughts on faith can be explored. Christena Cleveland, a black, female theologian can lend support in her article *Liberating the Incarnation* at faithandleadership.com.

This *Nurturing Faith in Community* resource is written in a format that can be used to make a strong presentation with thoughtful, helpful truths. If you would like to encourage more conversation and interaction, you may meet with another leader who is doing this study and brainstorm creative ideas for involving participants. Look at the questions posed and determine if these are ones you will ask and allow for response, prior to sharing the suggested answers that follow in the resource.

One example for creating conversation, may be to take the “Priority List” on page 31. As indicated at the bottom of the page, allow evaluation time. Perhaps, have folks write out: What would my life be like if I lived with this priority? Or what would our church be like if we lived with this priority? Sometimes it encourages more open sharing if answers are thought out and in front of you. Follow their writing time with sharing their responses, allowing for discussion. Or, as another option, take the Wallis portion on page 28, where the Beatitudes are summarized. Ask your group to rate on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most and 1 being least, how well they believe the congregation practices this. Then share and think of ways to improve, documenting the ideas that come.

Using this study as a platform for exploring the lived expressions of faith of individuals and the larger community has the potential of narrowing the focus of Christ’s followers and the church, in healthy, practical, live-giving ways that are less tangled in how “we’ve always done it”.

May Christ our Lord guide your interactions with the content, awaken your spirit as you prepare to present, and fill your discussions and study with life-giving insights for living as followers in Christ's way.

Response #2
David Turner

Senior Pastor, Central Baptist Church, North Chesterfield, VA

Video response: <https://youtu.be/6OZSHvdJfCU>

Session 5: Spiritual Practices that Nurture Holistic Faith

Congregational Need Addressed:

To become a disciple of Jesus means to see for oneself the values that energized the life of Jesus of Nazareth, to struggle with them, until, by the grace of God, they become our own. This requires commitment to an ongoing and disciplined enrichment of our relationship to God, the affirmation of human need and worth, the desire to serve life out of love rather than power and reward, and a deep identification with the poor and hungry. Christians today need to rediscover something people of all faiths have known for a long time—you must practice the faith. One can't simply move from "believing" to actuating faith in the world without spiritual practices that free us from our own desires (and those of the culture) in order to fully embrace the Jesus way.

Discovering Your Desire

Matthew 11:28-30 – *The Message*

28 "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest.

29 Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.

30 Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

In a world in which people are burned out, stressed to the max, and struggling with spiritual dryness, this passage sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Don't all of us want to recover our lives, take a real rest, and learn unforced rhythms of grace? To do so, we must "keep company with Jesus." That doesn't happen automatically! We must spend time with Jesus—walk and work with him. **The good news is this: transformation happens when we keep company with Jesus.**

One author has said, "Willpower and discipline alone can never fix your soul. Striving, pushing, and trying harder will not recover your life...it's not about self-mastery or self-effort. The truth is wanting to keep company with Jesus has a staying power that "shoulds" and "oughts" seldom have. Jesus wants us to recognize that hidden in our desperations and desires is an appetite for the Lord and Giver of life." So, how does one practice the faith in a way that transforms *our* desire to desire for God?

The Lord's Prayer came to us as a desire. Jesus' disciples expressed to Jesus, "Teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) This prayer/practice addresses desire for intimate relationship with God (they saw it modeled and wanted it, too).

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray these words from the Lord's Prayer so frequently they roll easily off our tongues. Several years ago, I started practicing a discipline when offering this prayer. I now place the emphasis on the word "thy." With our human tendency toward the tangible, materialistic world, surrendering *my* will to *God's* will makes a huge difference in framing who we are and who is in control. Saying the words is so easy but practicing the sentiment is difficult because our natural tendency is control; focusing on God's will necessitates surrender.

The writings of David Benner have been transformational for me. In *Desiring God's Will*, Benner outlines what he sees as the difference between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God:

Kingdom of Self Kingdom of God

Ruled by self-interest Ruled by love

Grasping Releasing

Achievement Gift

Effort Consent

Independence Interdependence

Holding Releasing

Willful Willing

Clenched fist and closed heart Open hands and heart

Hard and brittle Soft and malleable

Determination Transformation

Most of us would, if we could, keep one foot firmly planted in each kingdom, but Jesus warns us about "serving two masters." So, how do we move from embodying the qualities in the left column to the ones in the right? For sure, we can't fully embrace God's kingdom on our own or by simply willing it (we aren't that powerful!). We can't address our elevated sense of self or understand and fix problems created by our egos, problems like greed, poverty, racism, xenophobia, tribalism, etc. **Only love can transform our willfulness into willingness**; we need spiritual practices to help us fully embrace and embody God's love for all humanity.

Practices help us learn to love God more fully; they help us pay attention to God and what God loves. Unfortunately, most Baptist Christians have not made practice central to the journey of faith. Specific practices are essential and foundational pillars in other faith traditions. For us to take practice more seriously, we must again remind ourselves how weak it is to simply focus on helping people get their beliefs right.

Connection Between Practices and Desire

The early church took seriously the intentional practices that enabled them to keep company with Jesus. The basic rule of life for the first believers is found in Acts 2:42 (commentary added):

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (a practice),
and to the fellowship (relationships),
to the breaking of bread (an experience),
and to prayer (another practice).”

The desire to know and love God fueled these practices, and we know from their stories new practices continued to emerge to address challenges they faced in community. For example:

- compassion (Acts 3)
- witness and intercession (Acts 4)
- service (Acts 7)
- fasting (Acts 14)
- discernment (Acts 15)

For sure, the church has continued to add practices to help folks keep company with Jesus:

- the Didache (an early Christian text) gave us disciplines like stewardship, chastity, fasting, prayer, humility, and the Lord’s Supper;
- the Desert Fathers and Mothers gave us silence, solitude, contemplation, spiritual direction, and detachment;
- the industrial era gave us psychology, ecology and global awareness, journaling, self-care, care of the earth, conversational prayer, small groups, mentoring, and healing prayer; and
- the technological age gave us practices to help us slow down and unplug—rest, spiritual direction, and retreat.

Across the centuries, these practices arose to help transform us into the likeness of Jesus. The focus is not so much on the practice itself but what the practice seeks to accomplish—help us go deeper in our relationship with God. Without Spirit’s work in us, the practices guarantee nothing.

Spiritual Practice Defined

What exactly is a spiritual practice? Marcus Borg offers a good definition of practice in *The Heart of Christianity* (p. 189):

By practice, I mean all the things that Christians do together and individually as a way of paying attention to God. They include being part of a Christian community, a church, and taking part in its life together as community. They include worship, Christian formation, reflective deeds of hospitality and compassion, and being nourished by Christian community. They include

devotional disciplines, especially prayer and spending time reading the Bible. And they include loving what God loves through the practice of compassion and justice in the world.

In summary, the purpose of practice is:

- Paying attention to God
- The formation of Christian identity and character
- Spiritual nourishment
- Cultivating compassion and justice
- Learning to live the “the Way”

How we read scripture can become a barrier if we simply read to ingest content. What we need is an approach to scripture that helps us overcome obstacles and makes us available for an encounter with God. We need an approach that keeps us from reading our desires and wants into the text. We need practices that focus on inner transformation.

Classic Spiritual Practices: Scriptural Understanding

Although it hopefully goes without saying, prayer and Bible study are two essential practices for renewing God’s world. Prayer and Bible study support each other in the process of transformation.

Every Christian practice requires prayer—paying attention to God and opening ourselves to God’s presence. We seek God’s assistance as we wait expectantly and watch eagerly for God to loosen the chains that bind us. In prayer, we express gratitude for God’s love and ask for God’s mercy for ourselves and all of God’s creation.

Every Christian practice also depends on encounters with scripture. As we study the Bible privately and in groups, we interact with biblical characters engaged in spiritual practices, and we find wisdom for our own journey of faith. We are forced to struggle with what intentional faithful behaviors might mean for our lives today.

We also have much to learn from those who have gone before us who nurtured a relationship with God. Robert Mulholland outlines classic practices in the article *Spiritual Reading of Scripture* in *Weavings* (November/December 1988, Vol. III, Number 6). Mulholland insists these practices “pry us open to the re-creating love of God” and lead to inner transformation. The classic disciplines have proven the test of time. They are referred to as “spiritual reading” or *lectio divina*. Here are the movements as outlined by Mulholland:

Silencio – Despite our best intent, we rarely come to the reading of scripture with total openness and receptivity to God. “Time must be given to silence the grasping, controlling, manipulative dynamics of our being.” We need silence to relinquish our lives to God’s control. The goal of this silence is to, as Wesley

said, “know the whole will of God, with a fixed resolution to do it.” Silence helps us release our will to God’s will even before we know where it will take us. I would call that faith.

Lectio – If we begin the process of being open to God in silence, how we read scripture will be different. Instead of trying to control the text with our minds, we approach the reading as an address from God. We may actually say, “Lord, what are you saying to me?” In *lectio* we stay intentionally open and listen for God in, through, and around our encounter with the text. *Lectio* urges attentiveness to God.

Meditatio – In meditation, we examine ourselves in response to God’s address to us. Meditation helps us discover the gaps in our lives—where our lives are out of alignment with God’s intent. *Meditatio* allows God to address where we are comfortable (our pattern for staying broken) and should not be.

Oratio – After we hear from God, we then address God. “*Oratio* is the pouring out of ourselves to God in response to God’s address to us.” More than what we typically call prayer, *oratio* is the deep cry of our hearts to God because we have been awakened to our brokenness, we need to surrender our disobedience to God, or we need to reach a new level of commitment to God. This is an honest expression of our thoughts, feelings, and desires to God.

Contemplatio – At this point in the reading we have heard God’s address to us, wrestled with it, responded to it, and now we simply wait in stillness before God. The purpose of contemplation is to help us be pliable in God’s hands. The change that must occur in our lives won’t happen because of our effort—it’s God’s work. We wait actively, and we yield to God’s transforming presence in our daily living.

Incarnatio – When contemplation is carried into our lives it becomes incarnation. The way we live begins to be shaped by openness and obedience to God. We witness God’s transforming presence in our lives and in the world. When this happens, Mulholland says, “the Bible becomes the word of God—the profound and mysterious reality which has transformed numberless women and men across the centuries and makes them agents of healing love in a broken world that is once again incarnated.”

Lectio Divina can free us from our broken or limited perspectives and keep us from projecting our brokenness or our flawed understandings of God onto the world. The journey begins with heart hunger for God’s transforming love to penetrate our lives. If the members of our churches begin to appropriate this truth, our congregational systems could become houses of transforming love and grace intent upon shining light into the darkness.

Rule of Life

Most of us have “rules” or “guidelines” for living our lives. These guidelines help us stay focused on what we desire, what is important to us, what we value.

What is a Rule of Life? It’s a way of being intentional about the rhythms and responsibilities that shape our days. As mentioned above, Acts 2:42 contains one of the early church’s rules for life: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers.* This rule shaped the lives and hearts of these Christ-followers. It acknowledges the impossibility of becoming like Christ through effort alone. This rule made space to attend to God’s presence and included practices that were distinctively different from those of the culture.

Across the centuries, people have developed Rules of Life. One of the most popular is the *Rule of St. Benedict* of Nursia, a simple Italian monk of the sixth century. The Rule of St. Benedict is still the most foundational piece of monastic spirituality in the Western world. It’s a basic guide on how to be a Christ-follower, how to get along with other people, and wisdom for community living. This rule establishes a way of life rooted in the Gospel and grounded in scriptural principles of charity, humility, stability, and faithfulness. The Rule included these spiritual practices: discipline, humility, physical work, hospitality, spiritual reading, among others.

A rule of life is a simple statement of the rhythms we choose in order to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). **Each rule is a way we intentionally partner with God for the transformation only God can bring.** A rule is not intended to be a list of burdensome “do’s and don’ts.” Instead, a rule is scaffolding that supports our heart’s desire to grow deeper love for God and others (sounds like the Great Commandment).

You may want to consider writing your own Rule of Life, one that reflects what’s most important to you in your spiritual life, one that articulates specific practices you need to grow deeper with God. As you build your Rule for Life, consider these questions:

- For what are you living?
- What is most important in life?
- How do you want to spend your time?
- What does God want for you in terms of worship, study, service, devotion?

A personal Rule of Life is an intentional path of real, concrete steps, taken for the purpose of forming one’s life around an ideal. Dallas Willard once compared a spiritual rule to a “Curriculum in Christlikeness”—and that’s what we as individual Christ-followers and congregations need, agree?

Some CBF congregations have chosen to adopt a Rule of Life. I had the privilege of hearing two sermons Danny Prada (CBF church starter) preached at Heartway Church in South Florida (a multi-cultural congregation). Perhaps this framework for living together in Christian community will inspire your imagination:

- 1. Walking fully in the path of Jesus, without denying the legitimacy of other paths God may provide humanity. (Micah 4:1-5, Acts 17:24-28, John 10:16, Mark 9:40)*
- 2. Listening to God's spirit through daily prayer and meditation, the study of our ancient Scriptures, and the cultivation of mindfulness. (Philippians 4:6-7, Romans 12:2, Psalm 19:14, 1 Corinthians 2:16, 2 Timothy 3:16-17)*
- 3. Seeing Christ in everyone and in everything, with no exceptions; including the earth and its ecosystems, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human. (Genesis 1:31a, Job 12:7-10, Romans 1:20)*
- 4. Celebrating all human beings as image bearers and children of God, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class. (Genesis 1:27, Psalm 8:3-5, Acts 17:28, Galatians 3:28)*
- 5. Seeing peace and justice for the outcast and oppressed, and standing in solidarity with the marginalized and afflicted. (Micah 6:8, Luke 4:16-19, James 1:27)*
- 6. Prioritizing love over doctrine, and praxis over theory. (1 John 4:7-8, Matthew 22:35-40, Matthew 25:31-36)*
- 7. Living a non-judgmental lifestyle rooted in patience, acceptance, gratitude, and love. (Matthew 7:1-5, Galatians 5:22-23)*
- 8. Embracing love and suffering as our greatest spiritual teachers. (Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-4, 1 Corinthians 3:4-13)*
- 9. Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, recognizing that science and spirituality, doubt and faith serve the pursuit of truth. (Proverbs 4:5-9, 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, 1 Corinthians 14:15)*
- 10. Caring for our bodies, and taking time to enjoy the benefits of rest, reflection, and recreation in addition to work (1 Corinthians 6:19, 3 John 2)*
- 11. Placing our faith and hope in God, who brings good out of evil, life out of death, and light out of darkness (Galatians 2:20, Isaiah 40:31, Romans 8:28, 1 Peter 5:10)*

Contemporary Practices

Practices come in all shapes and forms. During the 2020 CBF General Assembly, Blake Kendrick led a workshop on practices to break the vicious cycle of self-centeredness. You can listen to his presentation on the CBF website; I share here the six practices he suggests to counter ego:

1. Be still (quiet your mind, body, and spirit)
2. Marvel (learn to see and appreciate the things I didn't create)
3. Say "No" (I am a limited, mortal creature)
4. Say "Yes" (give yourself to that which is truly worth your life/time)
5. Play (learn to submit yourself to someone else's rules)
6. Give it away (learn to see and give away your privilege)

One popular spiritual growth tool I often recommend is the Enneagram. Many have found the Enneagram to be a helpful guide in understanding self, others, and God. According to Enneagram wisdom, the key to transformation lies in our capacity to be present with our minds, hearts, and bodies. What hinders us from staying awake to our current reality? Enneagram work can free us to discover what drives our ego agenda or false self. If we look closely, we recognize often the church focuses on what folks present to the world (false self) instead of helping people discover their true self in God. Inner work prompted by the Enneagram is a helpful corrective.

For me, the Enneagram has been a valuable process that leads me to better understand my personality, how it was shaped in childhood, and how I can create a path for my soul work (becoming who God created me to be not an image I project to the world). Enneagram shows us how we are broken and how we are healed. In our polarized world, this ancient system helps us realize there are nine different ways of seeing. This knowledge heals us of dualistic thinking or the notion there is only one way to see things—my way! If you are interested in growing personally, socially, and spiritually, this tool and accompanying spiritual practices are rich. To get started, go to EnneagramInstitute.org or check out helpful podcasts and books by Suzanne Stabile and Beatrice Chestnut.

Summary

In our most vulnerable moments, we admit we struggle to fully live into the Great Commandment (love God; love neighbor). Spiritual practices remind us loving God means paying attention to God and what God loves. All spiritual practices—classical and contemporary—give space for Spirit to brood over our souls, birth the ever-present Christ-life within us, and help transform us into the likeness of Jesus for the sake of the world. As our desire to commune with God grows, these practices reveal our false self and the idols of our hearts.

True transformation means we pay attention to both inner contemplation (soul-searching) and outward action (justice for everybody). I would be remiss if I didn't mention an important truth: wise disciples "try on" a variety of spiritual practices because people relate to God in different ways. What is a catalyst for my spiritual growth may not work for you and vice versa? While practices may vary, some form of discipline or practice is necessary to journey the Jesus way. Discover what works for you. It's time to *keep company with Jesus* in order to build beloved community!

Session 5 Reflection Questions by Art Wright:

- Compare David Benner's differences between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God? Which values best reflect your heart? Your congregation? What areas do you or your congregation need to work on?
- What spiritual practices have been most meaningful to you in your own spiritual life?
- Have you practiced *lectio divina* before? If so, what was your experience like? If not, how does this method of reading Scripture compare or contrast with how you typically read the Bible?
- What new insights or ideas did you gain from this session about spiritual practices? Was anything new to you?
- How might spiritual practices be used in your congregation as part of ongoing Christian formation?

Response #1
Christy McMillin-Goodwin
Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Front Royal

This month, I have been preaching a series of sermons on Sabbath Rest. It has been a challenge to preach on rest knowing that some in my congregation are tired of the “imposed rest” of COVID 19 (loss of job, loss of social activities, loss of community) and others do not have time to rest because they have been very busy reimagining their work. The passage from Matthew 11:28-30 has been a pivotal one for our congregation to study.

I like how this session pairs spiritual practices with rest. For many Christians, adding spiritual practices to their already-overloaded schedules seems to be too much to ask. However, this chapter takes the approach that by “keeping company with Jesus” we are led to transformation and to rest.

When teaching about spiritual practices I think it is important to offer many options to people. One size does not fit all! And what fits today or what works today to help me keep company with Jesus, may not work tomorrow. Following are two books which offer many options for spiritual practices:

Paths to Prayer: Finding Your Own Way to the Presence of God by Patricia D. Brown
Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices by Daniel Wolpert

Years ago, I had a spiritual director who listened to me complain about not having enough time for my spiritual practices every day. However, on my day off, I found time to practice my spiritual disciplines. She encouraged me to do the practices when I could and to not feel guilty when I could not. A life-renewing and transforming relationship with Jesus should not make us feel guilty. Instead, this abundant life should be one in which we live “freely and lightly.” This walk with Jesus should be a “real rest.”

Response #2
Drew Herring
Senior Pastor, West Main Baptist Church, Danville

Lectio Divina has helped me find my way back to a more holistic faith in Jesus.

When I went to college, I was awakened to the injustice and inequity of the world. I grew disillusioned with an interpretation of the Bible that was centered on my personal (and mostly private) relationship with God, but did not talk much about the practical ways we could love one another. I grew dissatisfied with an understanding of scripture that prioritized the hereafter but said little about the

here and now. I began to reread the prophets and gospels, energized by the question, “What can I do to follow Jesus?”

In seminary, I discovered a new depth of knowledge beneath the surface of the Bible stories I had known my whole life. I began to see the differences in the original Hebrew or Greek from our English translations, and to learn the cultural, historical, and political circumstances happening around the texts’ composition. I realized how easily we take scripture out of context, making it say things the original authors would find foreign, and even incomprehensible. I committed myself to always asking, “What would these words have meant to their original audience?”

These changes in the way I read the Bible were faithful course corrections that kept my spiritual journey on track, but a few years into full-time ministry my lungs burned and my feet began to grow weary. I felt not just tired, but empty. I realized that in my desire to make a difference, that in my commitment to intellectual responsibility, I had stopped asking God the most basic question, “What is your word to me right here and right now?”

Lectio Divina helped me learn to ask this question again—a question that broke the surface of the doing and thinking I am tempted to hide behind. It helped me to be vulnerable and open before the God who wanted to meet me in my very being. It also helped me find a more holistic faith in which heart and head and hands and feet were reconnected, not as competing responses to God’s word in the world, but parts of an integrated whole.

I try to do a modified Lectio Divina practice in my journal first thing every morning. I write because it is hard for me to focus on my word or phrase without the voice of another reader to center my reflection. My mind wanders less when my pen is moving.

I try to make space for this spiritual practice before I check my email, login to social media, or listen to the news. Otherwise those other voices take up too much space before I listen to the voice of the Lord.

Though I miss many mornings and feel distracted even when I show up at my desk, the repeated asking of the question, “What is God saying to me right now?” has made me more expectant that God might speak into even the most mundane, busy, and difficult moments of my days.

I have led Lectio Divina at the beginning of committee meetings, before mission projects, and in the middle of Bible studies. To be honest this has often felt awkward for both me and the group, unaccustomed to slowing the pace to repeat the words of scripture and listen with each other. But maybe that’s the point? A practice like Lectio causes us to hear new words and ask new questions and ultimately to acknowledge God’s voice speaking into a space we usually fill with our own words and plans. This is disorienting but ultimately transformational. Thanks be to God.

Session 6: Beloved Community & Transformation

Congregational Need Addressed:

This community resource has been building toward Session 6. CBF's goal is to collaborate with God and one another to grow beloved community, to cultivate compassion, and become agents of reconciliation in the world. These actions take our focus off what divides and separates us and leads to the transformation of God's world!

What Is Yours to Do?

I have great clarity the task of each Christ-follower and each congregation is to discern a path forward under Holy Spirit's guidance. No one can tell you exactly how to do that—it's yours to do! However, I have tried to outline a new way of understanding the life of faith, the necessity of embracing a Jesus' worldview, and the power of practices that help us go deeper with God and release us from what we think we want. **You** must discern how to do that in your context. It's a journey of discovery. It's messy. There is no study in a box that will accomplish this work for you. It won't be easy to turn long-held understandings and patterns loose, there will be resistance, and some will say, "I didn't sign up for this." I assure you, the transformation made possible by wrestling with these important matters can lead to greater joy and spiritual vitality that change the church and the world.

Beloved Community

In Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, we are fond of the phrase: "Building Beloved Community." The term "Beloved Community" was coined by early twentieth-century American philosopher Josiah Royce (1855-1916). Most of us learned the phrase from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who often spoke of "Beloved Community" as his ultimate hope and purpose.

After the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, in speaking about the larger movement toward which they were building, Dr. King said:

...the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends.... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men [and women].

Notice, too, what King is *not* saying. He is not saying what we are all too accustomed to hearing in our highly competitive culture—that the end goal is a crushing victory over our opponents. For King, building Beloved Community required the even harder work of reconciliation, redemption, and right relationship, of "transforming opponents into friends."

Dr. King had a global vision for Beloved Community, one in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth:

In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it.

Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace and justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

King's vision is in so many ways what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Following the way of Jesus is about practicing radical kindness and compassion in our day just as Jesus did in his day—a love that transcends cultural and tribal divisions. G.K Chesterton's perspective, I fear, is accurate: Dr. King's vision of Beloved Community **"has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."**

Dr. King identified the three greatest threats to Beloved Community: racism, materialism, and militarism. What's going on in our country right now is proof of how prophetic his assessment was. We desperately need to grapple with systemic racism and white privilege that has created oppressive systems. We need truth-telling about how what money can buy drives so much of what happens in this country. King mused, "What might it look like if we reallocated even 1% of our nation's significant military budget to teaching nonviolent activism? Then 2% the next year? Then 3% and so on?"

Beloved Community is the antidote to what ails our communities, our churches, and our country—and hopefully our political discourse. If we can build capacity to see with God's eyes, we can address the incivility, we can learn to talk with folks with whom we disagree, we can see the spark of the Divine in everyone, we can become compassionate as God is!

Birthing Compassion

"Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36). Do we people of faith take these words of Jesus seriously? Certainly, we acknowledge the existence of too many bombs; too many wars; too many lonely, sick, suffering, grieving, defeated, and depressed people everywhere. I suggest, our survival depends on our ability to cultivate compassion.

Sue Monk Kidd recalled an experience she had when she was twelve-years-old. Under duress, Sue went along to a nursing home with a group of youth from her church. With a bouquet of crepe paper flowers in her hand, she approached an elderly woman. Everything about this lady saddened Sue. Sue woodenly thrust the

bouquet at the resident. The old woman looked at Sue in a way that pierced Sue to her bone marrow. Then the woman spoke these words, “You didn’t want to come, did you, child?”

Sue was stunned by the plain-spoken words. “Oh yes, I wanted to come,” Sue protested. The lady smiled at her and responded, “It’s okay...you can’t force the heart.” Sue tried hard to forget the uncomfortable nursing home encounter. Not until many years later did Sue discover the truth in the lady’s words.

You can’t force the heart. Genuine compassion cannot be imposed from without. It doesn’t happen simply by hearing a sermon on love or being sent on a loving mission...The point is, you don’t arbitrarily make up your mind to be compassionate so much as you choose to follow a journey that transforms your heart into a compassionate space...God is the life of us all and we are one in God together...Our lives are irrevocably bound up with one another.

Compassion literally means with (*com*) suffering (*passion*). Compassion connotes suffering with another or experiencing another’s grief or pain or as Sue Monk Kidd says, “lifting our finger to the world’s teary face.” **While compassion cannot be forced, it can “become a womb where compassion is gestated and birthed.”** The journey of “birthing God” naturally leads to our neighbor.

Joan and I discovered the truth of birthing compassion while living next door to an Indian pharmacist and his lovely wife. Sethu and Valli (and their children) were more than neighbors; they became “family” to us the more we learned about them. Valli, a wonderful cook, frequently brought over unique fare she prepared for various Hindu festivals during the year. I’ll never forget the first time we invited this younger couple over for dinner. Conversation was rich as we discussed life, children, work, house and garden, even politics. We also enjoyed open conversation about their Hindu faith and our Christian beliefs. Toward the end of the meal, Sethu told us it was the first (and only) time they had been invited into an American home. Many months later, we felt honored and humbled to be included in a very special mother’s blessing ceremony before Sethu and Valli’s second child was born. Love, compassion, and understanding were natural responses to sharing community. In the words of another, “we recognized our own humanity in the faces of our neighbors—it was then we recognized the face of God.”

Diana Butler Bass in Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution insists:

Compassion is the whole purpose of any sort of spirituality or morality or ethics. When religion fails at compassion, it fails its own test. To neglect loving your neighbor—to lack compassion—

is the problem underlying all other human problems.

My challenge to all people of faith is to become practitioners of compassion. Our world needs more love, more understanding, and more concern. We move closer to solving humanity's problems if we follow Jesus' model of openness to the lovely and the unlovely, the known and the unknown alike. Put aside preconceived notions and do what Jesus did – Jesus saw, listened, touched, understood, and loved. In this way we gladden the heart of our Creator whom we exist to please.

Reconciliation and Transformation

The Apostle Paul frequently expounded on the concept of reconciliation. We admit today's feeble attempts at reconciliation do not come close to capturing the power and scope of *reconciliation* portrayed in the Gospels.

John de Gruchy, a South African theologian, offers this explanation of reconciliation:

Reconciliation is not merely an action, but a new way of being in relationship with the other, believers to each other, believers and non-believers, individuals and groups, human and animal kin, the environment and the economy, the city and the country. The requirement of these relationships is mutual dignity, voice, and authority. We are literally to exchange ourselves for others and vice versa...or, as Jesus says, to love neighbors as ourselves. The actual contours of the relationship will emerge after solidarity is established. This seems to be the meaning of Paul's term "ministries of reconciliation" in II Corinthians. Yet, this kind of reconciliation is scarce in our world. Transformative action has heavy demands, and Jesus makes this evidently clear. They lead to individual and communal dissonance.

This author's experience with dehumanizing apartheid in South Africa shaped his understanding of reconciliation that then helped inspire the movement to overthrow a carefully crafted and controlled culture of white supremacy. Apartheid was a poisoned way of life. De Gruchy and other South Africans worked to appropriate this understanding of reconciliation because they shared an African worldview called *ubuntu*, roughly translated "human kindness." Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu defines *ubuntu* in this way:

It (ubuntu) is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not, 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong, I participate, I share'.

In the Anglican Bishop Tutu's understanding, God has, through reconciliation in Christ, showed humanity: "We belong in a bundle of life together." We are caught in God's community, restored to it. It's as if God says, "My being is caught up in your being and yours in mine." God's reconciling action is fundamentally a relational process and we are healed by our own trust in its reality.

A few years ago, when I served as Field Coordinator for Tennessee CBF, the focus of one of our General Assemblies was *reconciliation and repair*. Our keynote speaker was Dr. Andy Watts, Christian ethics and New Testament professor at Belmont University. During his presentation, Watts noted:

Reconciliation requires transformative action. What is the difference between a *transformational* (of, pertaining to, or leading to transformation) and *transformative* (that which causes transformation) presence?

Watts contends both are relational terms describing kinds of relationships. He describes the difference in this way:

The term transformational conveys the idea of “changing a condition” while the term transformative hints at “discovering and participating in something new.”

Jonathan Edwards suggested the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century began in community and noted how “transformative faith restores the centrality of God’s power in graciously bringing us into a participation of faith and faithfulness, love and justice, in what God is doing.” He wrote a covenant for the church he served to help the body become more faithful to God’s intent. Below I include a summary to prompt reflection about transformation of faith. This covenant comes from an article *Transformational Faith: A Concrete Discipleship Ethic for Growing Churches* by John P. Dever and Glen H. Stassen (*Review & Expositor*, Vol. 92, No. 4, Fall 1995).

- *Act with justice and righteousness in all we say and do.*
- *Avoid violating justice for private gain.*
- *Avoid doing anything to our neighbor from a spirit of revenge.*
- *Refrain from judging, or speaking ridicule or contempt of others.*
- *Refrain from acting with enmity, ill will, or revenge in our hearts against any of our neighbors.*
- *Be strictly searching and examining our own hearts with respect to enmity or revengeful desires.*
- *Pray for help in rooting out any secret grudge against anyone, that we may all be united in peace and love.*
- *Avoid engaging in freedoms and familiarities in company that stir up lust that we (especially the youth) cannot in our consciences think will be approved by the infinitely pure and holy eye of God.*

Closer to home, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has significant experience in transformative ministries. Much of what we do through *Together for Hope* and global missions seeks to improve life conditions of God’s people who live in poverty by addressing social, political, and economic challenges.

Another vehicle for CBF’s ministry efforts in social, political, and economic arenas is advocacy. Advocacy is the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal. The first

known use of the word “advocacy” comes from the 15th century. It is not a new concept. Advocacy does, however, look different in today’s context. CBF has identified pockets in our society that need the assistance of advocates. Advocacy is essential to heightening public awareness about how to make the world a better place for the abused, disenfranchised, and suffering, then providing pathways and partnerships to work toward those goals.

Just as formation is a relational enterprise and is transformative work, advocacy is also transformative work. Jesus engaged in transformative action. If we hope to be shaped and formed in the image of Jesus, we, too, must engage in transformative action.

One goal of the faith journey is transformation of the world. This happens best in community. The CBF community has delved deeply and reflected long on how best to be part of God’s transformative work. After much prayer, planning, and practice, CBF has chosen to intentionally *partner with others to renew God’s world*. We recognize and celebrate good kingdom work being done by other faith groups and sense God’s delight in our decision to join forces with other faithful God-fearers in serving the “least of these.” I’ve heard it said, “There’s no need to re-invent the wheel...” which certainly encourages better use of resources of all groups involved. Linking arms with those already doing good advocacy work is efficient, strategic, cooperative, impactful, and faithful.

Begin with the End in Mind

Stephen Covey’s Habit 2 from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is instructive: *begin with the end in mind*. I started this resource with the end in mind: the discipleship imperative (becoming little Christs). It is heresy to teach faith as only a belief system characterized by certitude. If our emphasis on faith turns us inward, away from social change, it is individualistic and becomes an evasion of God’s call to participate in justice-making—it’s an evasion of authentic transformation, i.e. a metamorphosis, a repentance, a new birth, a death and resurrection. That’s why we broadened understanding of faith in order to properly reframe faith as a verb—*faithing*. Faith is primarily about relationship. Faith’s original impulse was always about more than intellectual assent. Faith is ultimately about trusting God and God’s redemptive power to build beloved community.

I have sensed and observed that Baptists think discipleship is scary. Saying, “I believe” and staying stuck in patterned, comfortable ways of being and doing church are so much easier than the alternative. Talking about discipleship that transforms us means we have to turn loose of *our* way in order to embrace the *Jesus* way. Staying malleable in the Master Potter’s hands means we must continually consent to being shaped and formed because we are ongoingly converted. Teaching lessons and *assuming* transformation will happen pales in comparison to intentional life-changing, life-altering discipleship. For faith to be effectual in the real world (in all its messiness), discipleship must address every aspect and angle of life. The books we read, what we “ingest,” and what we watch are important. Who we listen to is

important. The practices we engage that awaken us to God are important. When brought into conversation with scripture, tradition, and other Christ-followers, our experiences change us.

So, the end game for *Nurturing Faith in Community* is waking up again and again to Jesus' kingdom imperatives that birth God's compassion and justice in and through us. This reminds me of Israel Galindo's formula for learning (based on neuroscience):

$$\mathbf{L \text{ (Learning)} = \frac{\mathbf{Change \text{ (a, b, k)}}}{\mathbf{R+}}}$$

For learning to be meaningful, we need change in **attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge** retained over time. The knowledge we acquire is of little value by itself. It must be animated. Active faith that builds beloved community is holistic and includes four components: values (heart), beliefs (head), practices (hands), and devotion (will). A congregation that is serious about transformative faith will pay attention to all of these domains.

The Invitation/Calling

We have been on a six-week journey together to reflect on the effectiveness of our congregations in forming holistic faith and building beloved community. We have intentionally held a plumb line against what frequently defines church which proves we need capacity to ask better questions and establish new markers for faithfulness (ones much richer and deeper than bodies, bucks, and buildings). To consider:

- As a result of engagement in our faith community, people desire to know God more deeply and engage in spiritual practices to learn the heart of God.
- In what ways are our churches becoming schools of love where we are more inclusive and embody the unconditional love of God? (This doesn't happen simply by teaching lessons on Sunday mornings.)
- In what ways are we practicing radical hospitality that welcomes strangers?
- In what ways are we lifting up and practicing justice for all?
- In what ways are we being the presence of Jesus in our community—meeting human needs and drawing others to God's grace and love?

David Bosch provides a good summary of what I've attempted to say throughout this community resource:

What God expects of the people of God is the formation of Beloved Community, centered on the person and mission of the community's one Lord, where mercy and steadfast love, as a magnet of hope and life, draw all people, and especially the most vulnerable, toward healing and wholeness of mind, spirit, and body.

I told you what I was going to tell you; I told you; then I reminded you what I told you. Now, the invitation is for you to engage in deep, substantive conversation about what it means to become this type of faith community. Why? Because this is the way of faithfulness. This is the path for flourishing as we move past conversation to action in the world. This ensures we are authentic and grace-filled communities. Most importantly—this approach gives clarity for our witness to the active presence of Jesus in the world! Now is the time to put your new understandings to work in and through your local community. It's time, church, to *get into some good trouble*, as the late John Lewis would say.

If you aren't sure how to engage justice and reconciliation in your own town, you don't need to look far. CBF field personnel Josh and Jessica Hearne work to build incarnational community through *Grace & Main* in Danville. The Hearnes focus on addressing poverty and food and housing insecurity. Greg and Sue Smith work with LUCHA Ministries in Fredericksburg. This intentional work serves addresses the Latino community. In addition, Greg has become very involved in assisting people with immigration issues. Either or both of these couples will gladly serve as your guides as you say YES! to God's invitation.

I leave you with these powerful words from the Apostle Paul:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you (Romans 12:1-2 The Message).

Blessing

Receive this *Franciscan Blessing* from the twentieth century:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Session 6 Reflection Questions by Art Wright:

- When you imagine “Beloved Community,” what does that look like to you? How is it different than the way the world looks today?
- What are the biggest obstacles to building Beloved Community? What obstacles to Beloved Community exist in your church?
- Can you recall an experience in your own life when compassion was “birthed” inside you? What happened? Are there ways in which we might cultivate deeper compassion in our lives?
- How do you understand the word *ubuntu* that Desmond Tutu describes (p. 61)? In what ways does this word resonate with our calling as people of faith? How can we be agents of reconciliation in our churches, communities, and world?
- What is the relationship between discipleship and transformation?
- Looking back over the entirety of these six sessions of *Nurturing Faith in Community*, how have they shaped your understanding of faith formation? What new ideas did you get? What steps might you or your congregation take in the weeks to come in response to your engagement with this curriculum?

Response #1

William Brown

Association Pastor for Community,
University Baptist Church, Charlottesville

Reading this session has caused me to reflect on where we look for Beloved Community. Within our various congregations, we seek to nurture a sense of belonging and embrace, a welcome that is grounded in the love of our Creator. This is, in a real sense, a glimpse of God's Kingdom; it is an expression of Beloved Community, even when imperfectly realized. As we consider the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., however, we see that the Beloved Community he envisioned spans a much larger scale, a societal transformation with tangible implications for all of its inhabitants. And so I wonder: as congregations, how does the Beloved Community we nurture within our walls relate to the broader community beyond them?

In my own context in Charlottesville, the past few years have clearly exposed the persistence of racism and systemic inequity, laying bare the urgent need for racial reconciliation and repair as a prerequisite for Beloved Community. We can't skip to the idealistic end without confronting the painful truths of our past and addressing the injustices of the present. Yet this work seems so daunting. How do we counteract the effects of enslavement, oppression, and structural racism that have accumulated for centuries? Where do we even begin?

For me, one of the beginnings was a breakfast in 2015. Weeks after the horrific shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, an African American pastor in Charlottesville invited an interracial group of local pastors to share a meal. Conversation centered on a simple, yet challenging question: if that shooting had taken place in my church, would I have called you? The honest, humbling answer for many of us was, "no, probably not"—because we did not know one another. And so, under his leadership, we set out to change that. These breakfasts became a monthly fixture in our schedules, and slowly relationships grew. We began calling ourselves the Charlottesville Clergy Collective. None of us knew that two years later, August 12, 2017, our city would be in the international spotlight, as white supremacists clashed violently with counter-protestors in our streets. It was an unsettling season, with no easy answers for how faith leaders might respond—but at least we knew one another now. We had developed a foundation for the hard conversations that would come.

It is easy to romanticize the work of racial reconciliation. We imagine a grand undertaking, with sweeping moral claims and decisive action, the continuation of the (always-capitalized) Civil Rights Movement, building up the Beloved Community King described. But sometimes the reality is much more mundane. Some days it just feels like breakfast. In his book *The Beloved Community*, Charles Marsh describes "the more modest, yet more enduring and more focused pursuits [for Beloved

Community] in particular contexts.” Marsh writes, “The hardest part is not envisioning the end but living in the sluggish between.”

Nurturing community can indeed feel sluggish. Often it is slow, difficult, and tedious, not the broad, sweeping Movement we imagine. I’m sorry to spoil a great story, but the Charlottesville Clergy Collective—so easy to glamorize—has not been perfect. We’ve had messy conversations, meetings that dragged on too long, petty personality disputes, bruised egos, and everything else you should expect from any group of actual people. Yet along the way relationships grow, and a sense of community is nurtured. This is not the arena of dramatic gestures and lofty words, but rather, patient conversation and humble self-examination. The work of reconciliation and compassion is not easy, but it doesn’t have to be grandiose, either.

If compassion, as this session notes, means “suffering with,” we must make a conscious effort to be *with* other people. We must step across the invisible borders we’ve drawn—movement that mimics Christ’s own movement toward suffering, toward outcasts, and toward those understood to be “other.” Our congregations can indeed be expressions of Beloved Community, the compassionate fellowship that we cherish with one another. But the Beloved Community cannot be fully realized in settings where we have withdrawn to our own, familiar sub-communities, safe within our walls. God’s Kingdom is present here, to be sure, but it is incomplete when others are excluded. Let us be bold, then, in seeking to nurture the Beloved Community that fills our congregations and spills out beyond them, as we “partner with others to renew God’s world.”

Response #2
Austin Almaguer
Lead Pastor, Vienna Baptist Church

We were hungry for more from our approach to missions in our community. While we were proud to financially support worthy nonprofits from our budget, we were hungry for more hands-on opportunities to make a difference. After an annual cycle of donation drive after donation drive to support good causes, we were hungry to feel connected to real relationships with real people. We were glad to help families in need, but we were hungry to address the systemic issues that kept the same families needing help to begin with. Have you and your church felt this hunger before?

Dr. King's vision of the Beloved Community was rooted in Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus makes it clear that his followers are called to join God in building a better world of justice, love, and mercy. The world should be a better place because the followers of Jesus are in it. We wanted our neighbors to talk about Vienna Baptist Church (VBC) this way. We wanted to build a reputation for joining in God's movement of reconciliation, redemption, and right relationship.

So, we started talking with people in our town about their needs, hopes, and dreams. As part of this series of conversations and relationship building, I met with the PTA President of our local elementary school. "What is one thing we could change in this community that would make a difference in the lives of families," I asked her. Her answer was surprising: we needed our bus back.

Half of the student population for the elementary school comes from the nearby, 300-unit apartment complex. Most of the residents are immigrants, primarily from Latin America but also from different regions in Africa and Asia. They are working families—some work as janitorial staff at our schools, other clean houses in town, others work various jobs in the area. But due to the high cost of living in Northern Virginia, many live with multiple families in the same one-bedroom apartment—one family in the living room, another in the master bedroom, maybe even a third elsewhere. Many can't afford to own and maintain a car, so they rely on public transportation to get to work, the grocery store, the library, and the doctor's office.

The Vienna Park Apartments was a great location for these families because there was a public bus stop right in front of the complex, part of the 2T bus line that took them into town and beyond. But due to budget cuts by the county, the 2T bus was eliminated even though it met requirements for ridership. The decision was devastating to many families. One mom later told our VBC team how she and her two young daughters had to walk over two miles round trip just to get to the grocery store and could only purchase what they could carry home. Another mom, who moved into a nice new home nearby, chose the location so her elderly mother-

in-law who lives with her could use the bus to go to the library and the community center since she can no longer drive. We heard story after story from people from all walks of life whose lives were impacted by the decision.

Our church decided to partner with the PTA to restore bus service because this was the issue that mattered most to our neighbors. The initiative was rooted in the commitment that it should be those directly affected by the service cuts that should lead the campaign. Our church would simply provide guidance, support, and power. The results have been incredible. We built relationships with incredible leaders like Juana and Dina, two moms who live in the apartments, along with Tracy and Angy, two PTA moms who have been phenomenal leaders as well.

We gathered 80 parents on the playground after school one day to talk about the bus and surveyed over 150 parents outside the school at drop-off and pick-up times. We built a team of parents (none of whom were VBC members) and church members to lead this initiative. Once we realized how many people were affected, our team realized we would need to build more power to get a county-level vote for bus restoration. We partnered with an interfaith coalition of faith communities named VOICE to help us get meetings with public officials.

Our school-church team started meeting with our county's Director of Transportation to design a new route. Rather than waiting on answers from the Director, Dina literally drew on a map where the new bus should travel and Juana used our surveys to determine the ideal service times. When the time came for public comment, church members showed their support by signing comment sheets in the foyer after worship and helping the PTA gather support from parents.

After two years of organizing, our team won a vote by the county to restore bus service to our community with a \$1.2 million reinvestment plan. Parents can now ride the bus to the grocery store, seniors can safely attend classes at the community center, and people can get to work. But more importantly, we have built relationships with parents, neighbors, and community leaders in our town. The PTA President now has such a good relationship with our church that she has members of our missions team on speed dial. Dina and Juana aren't just recipients of our church's charity, they are our co-leaders who have shaped public policy. Our mayor and other public officials now know that Vienna Baptist is a church committed to building beloved community.

If you are hungry for something bigger and bolder in the life of your church, it begins simply with building relationships and listening. You can start by making a list of the people in your community who can tell you about the needs and dreams of your neighbors—the school principals, elected officials, nonprofit leaders, business owners, and longtime residents. As a church team, do a series of listening sessions with these people and other neighbors, especially those who are different from you. Listen to their stories and what they care about. Find those places of resonance with the issues that matter most to them and the work God calls us to do.

Then ask yourself, what policy needs to be changed to address this issue so we don't have to keep meeting this need year after year? And who has the decision-making power to make this change? For us we learned that the bigger the issue, the more partners and people power you will need. So, look for the other congregations and community leaders who will champion this with you. Ask yourself not "who can we do this for," but "who can we do this with." A beautiful outcome of building beloved community is the new leaders and relationships that are created through the process of making change together.

We didn't decide to work on public transportation because our deacons thought it would be a good idea—this was just the issue our community cared about the most. We didn't even start intending to get involved in advocacy—we just needed to hold public officials accountable to make decisions that helped our neighbors. The journey has been transformative for us and given us renewed appetite for missions. We are dreaming bigger for our church and our community than ever before. We are expanding our partnerships to care for our community and others during this time of pandemic. We believe that, little by little, we are restoring people's hope that you can make a difference in this old world when you follow the God who makes all things new.