

# reCONNECT

prayers - presence - gifts - service - witness

**Start Here, Start Now**

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**A workbook for personal and group study**

*originally created by*

**Rev. Dr. Jim Harnish**

Senior Pastor, Hyde Park United Methodist Church Tampa, Florida  
with Kendra Lee and Deborah Richards

*Modified For*



Experience God's Love  
Know Jesus Christ  
Grow in His Image

# Welcome to reCONNECT at Bethany United Methodist Church

This workbook/study is a holistic approach to stewardship that considers more than just our financial gifts. reCONNECT invites us to understand that faithful stewardship involves all that we are and have. In the United Methodist Church, in addition to our financial gifts, this includes our prayers, presence, service, and witness.

Originally developed by Hyde Park UMC in Tampa, Florida, reCONNECT is a churchwide program intended to connect people to God, to each other, and to the world around them. It is designed to “reconnect” people with God’s power through prayer, God’s presence in worship, God’s generosity in giving, and God’s transformation of the world through our service and witness.

Here at Bethany, where our vision is that we are leading people to experience God’s love, to know Jesus Christ, and to grow in His image, we believe that intentionally “reconnecting” to God, to others, and to God’s creation is vital to fulfilling that vision.

This workbook was originally designed and created by the Rev. Dr. James A. Harnish, Senior Pastor at Hyde Park UMC, and a team of writers. With permission, we have edited and modified some of the material to reflect who we are at Bethany UMC but have kept as much of the original text as possible.

It is our prayer that this workbook will be helpful to you individually, as well as in the context of a small group where you can share your experiences.

## **reCONNECT**

A workbook for personal and group study

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# INTRODUCTION

Do you ever feel disconnected?

Do you ever feel that your life is like a computer trying to connect to the Internet? You know that there is a larger world out there, a world filled with all sorts of amazing things, but some glitch in the program is keeping you from connecting to it. Do you ever feel like you are waiting for something to happen, watching for something to appear on the screen, anticipating some new discovery?

Would you like to experience a more intimate connection with God? Do you want to find a spiritual connection that makes a tangible difference in your life? Would you like to move from knowing about God to knowing God as an energizing power in your life?

Would you like to experience a deeper connection to other people? Have you ever been lonely? Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have a real friend and not just a collection of acquaintances?

Would you like to be connected to something that is making a real difference in this world? Do you wrestle with how to use the resources that God places in your hands in ways that bring hope and healing to others?

Would you like to be connected to the needs of others? Have you ever prayed, “God, why don’t you do something about the shape this world is in?” only to discover that God is asking you the same question?

If you can answer “Yes” to any of these questions, or if you are curious about why anyone would ask questions like them, this six-week experience is for you!

This six-week experience of study, worship, sharing and prayer is designed to help you to experience a new or renewed connection with God, with God’s people, with God’s generosity and with God’s transformation of the world.

But how? With all the demands on our time, how can we connect and stay connected? Perhaps your experience is like Deborah, a former television news reporter, who responded to my [Harnish’s] invitation to join the writing team for this project.

When Jim called me to work on his project I felt “chosen” and believed God would fill my mind with the right words to make this a success. After all, this was not some TV package I needed to make deadline with and hoped to win an Emmy. This was Holy Work. With God

inspiring me, writing would be a breeze. Since I am home with four kids, the best place to start was to carve out time in my day and presto we'd be on our way to a best-seller.

But that time never came at the right time. It typically came at night when the kids were asleep and my brain was fried from kindergarten spelling tests and four-year-old imagination play.

I took my material to the pool, only to engage in a three-hour conversation with a stranger regarding the difference between mothering boys and girls. I made an appointment for a mammogram, went to the dentist, had a garage sale, and spent way too much time looking up useless information on the Internet. Even with God on my side, the work was not getting done. Which led me to the word *ACT*. We can only be connected, energized, powered by God if we *do* the work...when we choose to act.

This workbook invites you to *ACT*. It's an invitation to make a disciplined change in ordinary patterns of your life that will open the way for you to experience new connections in your life. You can take action in three specific ways.

### **1. Connect to scripture.**

On the final page of his gospel, Luke tells us that the Risen Christ “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45-46). Our connection to Christ is inescapably connected to the words of scripture. This workbook is designed as a daily guide for personal study and reflection. We invite you to act by making time in your schedule each day to connect with the words of scripture.

### **2. Connect in worship.**

The last time we see the disciples in Luke's gospel, they are in worship. “They worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52-53). This experience is centered around life together in the worshiping congregation. We invite you to act by making your own commitment to be in worship in the congregation.

### **3. Connect with others.**

Luke's account of the early church in the book of Acts will serve as the Biblical guide to this experience. Acts opens with Jesus ordering the disciples to spend the next fifty days together in prayerful anticipation of the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). And they did! Luke records, “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14).

Like those first disciples, we experience our connection with Christ in our connection with other disciples. We invite you to act by being a part of a small group with whom you can share your experience along the way.

Jesus' last promise to His disciples was that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and that by that power, they would be His witnesses throughout the world (Acts 1:8). Talk about being connected! That's exactly the kind of connection we expect to find as we share these days together.

Consider that there were fifty days between Easter when Christ rose from the tomb and Pentecost when the Holy Spirit infused the lives of the disciples with wind and fire, energizing them to be the agents of God's life and love in the world. It took fifty days for isolated individuals to become a cohesive community, for spiritually empty strugglers to become Spirit-energized witnesses and for fearful followers to become the daring disciples who would go out to change the world.

Like the book of Acts, this workbook emerged out of a Spirit-led community that served as a writing team in which we shared all things in common (Acts 2:44). Kendra Lee wrote the daily reflections and questions. Deborah Richards developed the personal witnesses and practical steps. John Barolo and Ferdie deVega designed and edited the workbook. Shannon Hitchcock wrote the children's workbook with assistance from Marsha Harnish, Deborah Richards and Sylvia Maye. Eric Johnson and Keith Cate led the production team for the accompanying DVD. Justin LaRosa, Martha Chamberlain, Matt Horan and Vicki Walker offered helpful critique. Together, we have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in the process and offer it to United Methodist congregations throughout the world with high expectations for the way the Spirit will use it in our life together.



Jim Harnish

Pentecost, 2008

***Notes for Bethany UMC – for 2011: Some reflection questions have remained the same; others have been added. Additional quotes and “daily connections” have also been added. A new opportunity for family reflection has been added. The personal witnesses are from Bethany UMC members. The modifications and edits have been done by Emmeline Aguirre and Rev. Sheri Clifton.***

*“O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste for which you have not: What is tedious at first will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life: there is no other way, else you will be a trifler all your days.” -John Wesley (1703-1791) [Letter to John Trambath, August 17, 1760]*



# How To Use THIS WORKBOOK

reCONNECT is an individual and group study. It's important that you faithfully devote 20-30 minutes every day to read, think, reflect and pray. For many people, finding this time is easiest first thing in the morning. For you, it may be different. Choose a time and place where you are able to focus. In addition to your workbook, you will need a Bible, something to write with and possibly a highlighter to underscore words that resonate. Sometimes, our tendency will be to breeze through the lesson, but slow down and savor it. Let God work on and through you during this spiritual experience.

The reCONNECT workbook is divided into six weekly sections. Interviews with some Bethany UMC members are incorporated into each week. Take time to learn about these individuals and how they have grown in their faith and as disciples.

There is also a weekly Psalm. Read the Psalm each day before beginning to study, asking God to open your heart and mind to the passage. Let the words speak to you. Be honest with yourself and with God when answering the reflection questions. No one is going to collect your workbook and read it.

In the margins, you will find quotes from faithful Christians, prayers, and daily connections for you to make.

The purpose of this daily study is spiritual growth and discipline, not perfection. All or some of the readings and questions may be meaningful to you. Others will not. Don't be discouraged. Let the Holy Spirit be your guide through the readings and the questions. Do what you can, and don't worry about what you think you can't do. After all, this is your own personal journey. It may be one of the most important ones you ever take.

At the end of this experience, you will be asked to make commitments in the practice of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Bethany UMC will provide you commitment cards that outline each spiritual discipline and allow you to indicate your prayerful decisions.

**Week 1** Longing for Connection: Start Here, Start Now .....7  
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**Week 3** Presence: With God, With God’s People .....29  
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Week 1 | Psalm 63; John 15:1-11

# LONGING FOR CONNECTION

When the hurricane passed by, the power went out. We were left in the dark, without air conditioning, lights or a way to connect to the Internet. We watched for the repair teams to show up on our street. We waited for the power to return. We felt cut off from the rest of the world. Finally, when the repair crew came we felt the burst of new energy that surged through the reconnected power lines. We were connected again!

Maybe that's what the disciples experienced between the ascension of Jesus and the day of Pentecost. Jesus had promised that they would receive power. It may not have been the kind of power the disciples expected, but it was the kind of power they would need. It was the power to represent, indeed, to re-present Jesus in the world. That power would take these confused, disconnected, frightened, inadequate disciples and make them divinely adequate to become the living witnesses to what God had done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It would form these isolated individuals into a community that would become the living demonstration of the Kingdom – the reign and rule of God revealed in Jesus Christ – coming on earth as it is already fulfilled in heaven.

That's still Jesus' promise for each of us. It's the promise that we can be reconnected to the power of God's Spirit. Whether we acknowledge it or not, it is the connection we most deeply desire and need.

In this introduction week there are no daily readings. We invite you to consider Psalm 63 and John 15:1-11 throughout the week. At the end of the chapter there are some reflection questions to consider over the course of the week.

The writer of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Psalm named the spiritual hunger within every human soul: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you." (Psalm 63:1) The Bible says that our

searching for a connection with God is the result of God's insatiable desire to connect with us. St. Augustine said, "O Lord, thou hast put salt on our tongues that we may be thirsty for Thee." John Ed Matheson captured that hunger when he said, "Psychologists tell us that most people in America are unsatisfied... Something deep within us is still crying out for the real deal... Nothing will feel right until we get it" (*The Treasure of the Transformed Life*, p. 8).

Those first followers of Jesus were longing for the kind of connection with God that they shared when Jesus was among them. Having just experienced the horror of their Master's brutal death and inexplicable mystery of His resurrection, they were confused, conflicted and hiding out in fear. They sensed that something was coming, but I doubt they expected it to come the way it did.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit swept into their lives with the force of a rushing, mighty wind (Acts 2:1-2). The same Spirit who breathed life into the first creation (Genesis 2:7) breathed new life into them, creating nothing short of a new creation in the Risen Christ.

**Like the first disciples, we search for a connection in which we know that we are loved.**

You don't have to be a Waylon Jennings fan to know how it feels to be "looking for love in all the wrong places." The longing for love is an essential part of the image of God within us. We are created for it, desperate for it, and we will do almost anything to find it. Beneath our searching for finite, human love, is the deeper hunger for the infinite love of God.

The Holy Spirit energizes our connection with God to fulfill Jesus' promise around the Last Supper table that we will not be left as orphans, but will know that we are connected to God and to each other in the bond of love (John 14:18-21, 15:12-17).

**Like the first disciples, we search for a connection that will give us meaning. We want to know that our lives count – that it matters that we are here.**

When South Africans greet each other in Zulu they say, "Sawubona," which literally means, "I see you." The other person replies, "Sawubona," meaning "I see you." It's their way of acknowledging that both persons are really here, fully present with each other. We are connected.

We all need to know that we are needed, that it matters that we are here. The irony is that we discover that we matter when we discover what we have to give.

The culture around us tries to convince us that everything that matters is within the narrow confines of our own self-interest. But something deeper within us wants to break out of the paralysis of self to live in a larger world. We long to discover the way our little story can be connected to a bigger story. Life is not just about my story or our story, but the story of God's transformation of the world into a tangible expression of the Kingdom of God.

That's no small deal! By the power of the Spirit, we are connected to the living Christ in ways that fulfill Jesus' promise that our lives, bound together with His, will bear fruit for His Kingdom in this world (John 15:1-2).

**With these first disciples, we search for a connection that will give us wisdom and power to deal with the always complex and often confusing issues we face.**

Jesus never promised us a rose garden. Quite the opposite, He predicted that His followers would face difficult challenges in a world that is often hostile to the way of His Kingdom. But He promised that the Spirit would lead His followers into truth and would give them the power to overcome the challenges the world would throw at them (John 14:25-31, 15:18-27, 16:32-33).

Peter W. Marty describes the windy, spring day when his four-year-old daughter asked, “May I go out and play with the wind?” And she did. Out on the back porch, she twirled, and swirled and swung with the wind in ways that reminded her father of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s words, “She lives most life whoever dances the most wind.”

Watching his daughter dance in the wind caused the Lutheran pastor to think about “the pushiness of the wind” that shook the first followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost. He wrote:

If God is going to deal with the wreckage of the world in any substantive way...God is going to have to offer the extraordinary power of the Spirit...God breathes life into the church through a mighty rush of wind because nothing less will work... When the wind of Pentecost blew through Jerusalem, a new world came into being...The people of God began to discover that their old ways of relating to one another and thinking of God had been blown out the window (*The Christian Century*, May 8, 1996, p. 509).

The deepest longing of our souls is to dance in the wind of the Spirit so that the same Spirit that energized the first followers of Jesus will put our feet to dancing!

This week reflect on Psalm 63 and John 15: 1-11.

**Personal Reflection:**

1. How am I connected with God? With others?
2. How might I be disconnected from God? From others?
3. What gets in the way of my connection with God? With others?

**Family Reflection:**

Talk with your children/youth about what it means to be connected to a source of power. It might be helpful to talk about what electricity allows us to do. What happens when we don't have electricity? Talk with your children/youth about how church is special for us because through it we connect to God, to other people, and to things that make a difference in the world. Talk about how we stay connected to family and friends by making phone calls, sending emails, and going for visits. Ask them if they feel like they are connected to God, and what that looks like for them.

## Perspective on Connecting



### Lisa Blackwood

*How did you find a place of connection within the larger congregation of Bethany UMC?*

It is a large world out there with amazing things. However, intimate connection is necessary as humans. We are born to be in community. This enables us to be better connected to God. Choosing to be in a small group is being in a common love with other disciples of Jesus. I am humbled, in that I know one needs to be “connected in community”. Honestly, I am the one blessed when connected to others, and that was done by getting involved. Becoming an accountable person with a smaller number of people comes by finding a group with similar interests, experiences, and a passion for Christ.

Over the years, my husband Neal and I have been involved in many small groups within the Bethany family as well as in the Austin community. Connecting to small groups helped Neal and I get connected to this church and to Austin, especially when we first moved here. We would not have felt a part of the community had we not participated in smaller groups where we found friends and support for our spiritual growth.

*How did you participate in reCONNECT last year?*

Neal and I participate in reCONNECT with our Sunday School class. We used the workbook to guide us and different people in the class took turns leading the discussion each week. We challenged each other to work through the workbook individually as well and share spiritual growth and insights with the group.

*What was the impact of reCONNECT on your sense of how our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness connect us with God and with one another?*

The impact of the workbook and small group participation empowered our Sunday School class to stay accountable to one another. The experience reaffirmed for me personally the desire to meet the challenge of becoming who I want to become in this faith community. The readings, questions, and daily connections helped me stay connected to who God is, who I am, and how I am to live as one of His disciples.



Week 2, Day 1 | Psalm 25

# PRAYERS: PRAY FIRST, PRAY MOST

The power goes off. The lights go out. The Internet connection is interrupted. The cell phone goes dead. We all know how it feels to lose our connection. And we know how it feels to get reconnected.

Have you ever felt that way about your relationship with God?

We believe God is out there...somewhere...watching over the world...caring about birds and flowers and the rotation of the planets. But sometimes we have a hard time feeling connected. We question whether the same God who reigns over creation is present within our lives.

The writer of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Psalm must have felt that disconnect when he cried out,

“For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
From Him comes my salvation...  
For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
For my hope is from Him.”  
(Psalm 62:1,5)

We long for connection with God. The critical question is, “How do I find it?” How can we reconnect with God’s Spirit in a way that releases God’s power in our lives?

Faithful people who have walked this Christian journey before us confirm that the primary means by which we experience our connection with God is through prayer.

Many people say they believe in prayer. It bears witness to our innate longing to be connected to something or Someone larger than our own human resources. But do we believe it can make a

difference? How can we experience a connection with God in prayer that is more than curling up in the lap of a cosmic Santa Claus in the hope of getting what we want?

The Gospel of Luke tells us that during the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, the followers of Jesus were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). Given their fear of the world on the outside and the confusion, anxiety and doubt that was on the inside, my guess is that their praying was more than a polite pastime or a quaint religious tradition. It was the kind of soul-stretching, heart-opening prayer that created a whole new place in their lives for God’s power to be released.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink described the creative power of prayer when he wrote: “When we pray, we are not sending a letter to a celestial White House where it is sorted among piles of others. We are engaged rather in an act of co-creation, in which one little sector of the universe...becomes...a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe” (*Engaging the Powers*, P. 304).

This week we explore the basic disciplines by which we experience our connection to God through prayer. We will see the way Jesus teaches us to pray in the Sermon on the Mount.

### **Jesus teaches us the purpose of prayer.**

A frightened soldier dove into a fox hole where he found the chaplain huddled in the corner. The soldier grabbed the cross hanging around the chaplain’s neck and shouted, “Quick, Padre. How do you work this thing?” Far too often, we see prayer as a spiritual good luck charm to grab in an emergency. But that’s not the way Jesus defined the purpose of prayer.

When Jesus taught us to say, “Our Father...,” He used the Aramaic word, “Abba,” which could be translated “Papa” or “Daddy.” Addressing God as “Abba” locates prayer in the intimacy of a parent-child relationship. The primary purpose of prayer is to engage us in an intimate, growing relationship with God. Prayer is the discipline by which we share our life with God, and God shares life with us.

If the purpose of prayer is to develop an intimate relationship with God, it means there are a lot of things prayer is not. Prayer is not magic, although there is mystery to it. Prayer is not ritual, although it is formed through the spiritual traditions of the church. Prayer is not a shopping list that I send off to a cosmic Santa Claus to get what I want. Prayer is the way I allow my life to become what God wants. Prayer is not the means by which I align God’s power with my desires, but the way my desires become aligned with the reign and rule of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### **Jesus calls us to the practice of prayer.**

Prayer is a natural response to our innate desire for a connection with God, but prayer doesn’t come naturally. Prayer takes practice. Jesus’ words “When you pray...,” indicate that prayer is a disciplined practice in our lives.

Prayer is like physical exercise. We know we need it. We might even want to do it. But it's so easy to say, "I'm too busy for that today," or "I'll get around to that tomorrow." The result of our lack of discipline in prayer is the same as our lack of exercise. Our souls become flabby, unhealthy and weak. When the crisis comes, we don't have the spiritual strength we need to face it.

When Don Shelby was the pastor at First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, California, he wrote:

Prayer is not only quiet contemplation, it is also hard work... Prayer is not always like a cloister; it more often is like a workout gym, a rehearsal hall, or a batter box... A weekend golfer sometimes gets off a great shot, a passenger assisted through radio instructions can land an airplane in an emergency, and an amateur writer sometimes turns an unforgettable phrase. But to win the British Open, to command a transcontinental jetliner or to garner the Nobel Prize in literature takes more than an occasional experience and natural ability. It requires practice... There is no fast faith outlet, no cheap devotion, no coattail virtue ("Santa Monica Sermons," July 24, 1983).

### **Jesus invites us to find a place for prayer.**

In Matthew 6:6, Jesus tells us to go into our room and shut the door. The Message paraphrases that verse to read: "Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God."

In developing a regular practice of prayer, it helps to have a specific place to pray. When we enter into that place, we know that we are focusing our attention on God. Your place may not be the same as your spouse's, your friend's, or your neighbor's. That's okay. Wherever it is for you, it helps to find a place for prayer.

### **Jesus describes a pattern for prayer.**

"The Lord's Prayer" is more than a formal prayer we repeat in worship. It also provides a basic pattern for prayer.

We name the One to whom we pray: Our Father in heaven.

We affirm the greatness and goodness of God: Hallowed be Your name.

We order our lives around God's reign in Christ: Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We name the essential needs of our lives: Give us this day our daily bread.

We confess our sin, experience God's forgiveness, and are called to forgive others: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

We confront the reality of evil and temptation: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

We affirm the ultimate victory of God's reign in this world: Yours is the kingdom, the power and glory forever.

### **Jesus calls us to trust the promise of prayer.**

Jesus promised, "Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." The "reward" in prayer is not a prize we win at the end of rigorous competition or the "gold star" award that we are given for being a star pupil. The reward of prayer is not a result of our performance, but the product of a richer, deeper, relationship with God. The result is a life that is connected with God's life in ways that release God's life into the world through our lives. The reward comes in becoming part of God's transformation of the world.

A woman who survived cancer told Rev. Harnish that she went through the Bible and wrote two "p's" in the margin wherever she found what she called a "precious promise." When she began to feel that promise being fulfilled, she added a third "p" to indicate that "precious promise" had been "proven" for her.

Jesus' promise is that as we get clear about the purpose of prayer, as we begin the practice of prayer by finding a place and a pattern for prayer, that God's presence begins to transform who we are so that we can become part of God's transformation of the world.

### **Question to start the week:**

When you see or hear the word "prayer", what images come to mind?

### **Prayer of the Week**

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.



# Prayer

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER



### Danny and Jackie McSpadden

#### THE POWER OF PRAYER IN OUR LIVES

The ability to pray to a loving God is a beautiful gift given to us. We are told in Mark 11:24 – *“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”*

Last March Danny developed a serious illness. It started with the sudden onset of fever. After a few days, he began having excruciating backaches resulting in a trip to the emergency room at St. Luke’s Hospital in The Woodlands. We immediately sent out e-mails requesting prayers for healing.

Blood cultures revealed a diagnosis of MRSA – a serious variety of staph infection in the blood known as the “bad staph” because of its resilience to many antibiotics. The MRSA had spread to the back and created large abscesses along the spine. There was also involvement in the tricuspid valve of the heart. An emergency surgery to drain the abscesses was performed and was successful. After spending 9 days in the hospital, there were daily trips to the infectious disease doctor for 25 days where powerful IV antibiotics were administered.

From the moment Danny entered the hospital, prayers were continually being lifted for him. There were prayers requested for an accurate diagnosis, wisdom for the doctors in their decisions, successful surgery, tolerance and effectiveness of the antibiotics, and complete healing. Every one of these prayers was answered.

Though we did not know it at the time, the situation for Danny was life threatening because 20-40 percent of those with staph in the blood do not survive. The doctors also told us that the abscesses could have cut off blood flow and instant paralysis could have resulted.

We are so thankful for all who prayed and grateful to our Lord for His merciful healing. During the hospital stay, our spirits were lifted when we received personal phone calls from Tom and from Sheri, who prayed for Danny over the phone. We really felt the presence of God’s love given to us through the prayers of so many people. There were many cards and words of encouragement from the Searchers Class daily.

Even though we pray and experience God’s love daily, it is when we go through the trials

of life that our faith is strengthened. Somehow when we no longer have control and give it over to God, we experience His “grace” even more fully. He gives us a special peace that is beyond our understanding.

*2 Corinthians 4:16-18 – “So we do not lose heart. Though the outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For the slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”*

Life is a precious gift that God has given us. We are thankful that through prayer we are in continual communication with Him. Our fervent prayer is that His will always be done in our daily lives.

**Daily Connection**

*When you pray,  
remember the acronym  
ACTS: Adoration,  
Confession,  
Thanksgiving, and  
Supplication.*

**Reflection Questions:**

1. When have I experienced the presence and power of the Holy Spirit?
2. How do I experience God's power through prayer?
3. How does prayer personally connect me with God?

**Family Reflection:**

Ask the children or youth in your home – who is God to them? How do they experience God?

Talk about how the Holy Spirit is like the wind. We can't see the wind, but we can see what it does; we can see and feel evidence of its presence. Ask them how and where they see God.

*“As my prayer became  
more attentive and  
inward, I had less and  
less to say. I finally  
became completely  
silent... This is how  
it is. To pray does  
not mean to listen  
to oneself speaking.  
Praying involves  
becoming silent, and  
being silent, and  
waiting until God is  
heard.  
-Soren Kierkegaard ”*

**Prayer of the Week**

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER



### Bill and Terry Sewell

#### Bill Sewell

A few years ago, a friend and I had one of those late night email exchanges that sometimes just happen. The caller had recently lost his mother, and I had lost mine in 2001. We were trying to work thru these losses, and we began to explore the impact of prayer in such situations. We concluded that we really didn't understand why some people you pray really hard for live many more years, and some don't...why sometimes the prayers of many people seemed to really make a difference and sometimes they don't...

why sometimes you just really struggle with how to pray for people who are dying (or are very ill), and what to pray for them, given our finite view of things. After a couple of hours back and forth in which we shared our confusion (and sometimes frustration) we finally came to one conclusion that we could both totally agree on...when you pray for someone, there are two things that always happen – your prayer is an *act of faith* because you are praying to a God who you feel will hear those prayers, and the other is an *act of love* toward the person for whom you pray. We concluded that maybe it's not necessary to have your prayers answered the way you think they should be, but that committing those two acts when you pray for someone is very important!

#### Terry Sewell

For a long time I thought that prayer was coming to God with a list of needs and requests. Now I realize that prayer is a conversation with God. Sometimes I talk and He listens. Other times He talks and I listen. I am working hard on the listening part now, but for years I really wasn't worried about that part of my relationship with God. I'm not exactly proud of that fact, but I am a work in progress. God isn't finished with me yet. One of the ways I listen for God to speak to me is through scripture. When I read listening for God's voice, I find that the Bible has a lot to say to me about how I can grow in Christ's image. I talk to God before, during and after my reading. I hear from God about big and little things in my life. The greatest thing I have learned is that God loves me enough to keep helping me grow. I am like a big block of stone and God chips pieces off me. Sometimes I am like a sand castle and the Living Water just washes away some of me. Either way, God is molding me more and more into His image.

**Daily Connection**

*Write down one barrier that keeps you from praying. Eliminate that barrier.*

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Jesus' followers asked for God to stretch out His hand to heal and to allow them to perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus. When have I experienced power like that?
2. What would it mean for me to pray for that kind of boldness?
3. When have I offered that kind of prayer?

**Family Reflection:**

Teach your children/youth the 5 finger prayer.

1. Thumb=pray for those closest to you.
2. Pointing finger=pray for those who teach, instruct, and heal.
3. Middle, "tallest" finger=reminds us of our leaders. Pray for the president and other leaders in government, business, and industry.
4. Ring finger (our weakest finger)=pray for those who are weak, in trouble, or in pain.
5. Little finger=pray for self.

Use this prayer to pray with them this week.

“If I do not spend a reasonable amount of time in meditation early in the morning, then I feel physical discomfort – it is worse than having forgotten to brush my teeth!  
-Desmond Tutu  
[[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/143/story\\_14326\\_2.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/143/story_14326_2.html)]

**Prayer of the Week**

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER



### Jan Daugherty

I experience God's love through prayer in two different ways:

Last year while waiting in the pre-op room of Seton hospital, Mary Ann Price just happened to be there seeing another Bethany member/friend of hers. I knew Mary Ann from my Bible Study class, but only casually. Somehow word got to her that I too was in the hospital, so she dropped by for a short visit. Being the charming person she is, Wayne and I both were touched by her kindness in coming by, but that's not all. Prior to leaving, she offered up the most incredible, loving, sincere, touching, comforting, caring prayer I believe I have ever heard. When she left, I looked at Wayne in a daze and said, "I believe she is an angel." We definitely experienced God's love through the prayers of Mary Ann Price! From that day forward during my illness, when so many were praying for me, I felt God's incredible love from my "Bethany angels"... they were definitely crawling out of the wood work... I was amazed. My relationship with Mary Ann is no longer casual... I love that lady with all my heart... a true example of God's love sent from above.

I also experience God's love through my prayers by being completely open to Him. When I pray, whether it is a lonnnnnnnng one, or just simply what I call a "drive by" prayer, I open my heart to Him. It's my one-on-one time with my heavenly Father. Usually I see His kind face (what I envision Him to look like), and feel His loving, comforting arms around me... you talk about love, now that's the purest love there could ever be.

### Daily Connection

*Today, focus on praying specifically for the world or your community.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. What are my personal prayer habits?
2. What are some barriers to establishing a personal prayer connection between myself and God?
3. What kind of discipline can I establish that will help build that connection?
4. What misconceptions might I have about prayer?

### Family Reflection:

What are your prayer habits as a family? Ask your children/youth what prayer means to them.

Find a time to pray together where each person gets an opportunity to say something, or do an “echo” prayer in which you pray one line, and the others in the family repeat it.

*“Our prayers are the proper test of our desires; nothing being fit to have a place in our desires which is not fit to have a place in our prayers: What we may not pray for, neither should we desire.  
-John Wesley [Selected Writings, p. 111] ”*

### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER



### Mary Ann Price

*How do you “connect” with God through prayer? If you have ever felt disconnected from God, how did prayer help you “reconnect” with God?*

I connect with God through prayer because I believe I am under God’s sovereign hand. I always “Praise Him” for His attributes, thanking Him for the many blessings He has given to my family, others and myself. He continues to reveal to me He is greater than my circumstances. He fills me with peace as I leave my request with Him.

I felt very disconnected from God when I was going through depression. In the midst of this depression, I cried out to God and He opened a door for me to study the Book of John and through that study my negative emotions were pushed back and He gave me hope, contentment and peace through prayer.

*How do you experience God’s love through prayer?*

I experience God’s love through prayer when I focus on Him and John 3:16. He created me to have a relationship with Him. The more time I spend with Him the more I am filled with His love.

*How do you know Jesus Christ more through prayer?*

I know Jesus Christ by spending time in prayer and focusing on His provision and care for my life. When my husband and daughter were going through cancer at the same time, He gave me His peace that passes all understanding and carried me in His arms of love. I spent many hours at Jesus’ feet in prayer. He was always there to comfort me. He showed me HIS JOY IS MY STRENGTH.

*How do you grow in Christ’s image through prayer?*

I grow in Christ’s image by coming to Him in prayer, dying to my desires and asking Him to fill me completely with His Holy Spirit. I ask Him to open my heart to reflect His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control to others. I experience a real closeness to them. Many times I don’t know who I am praying for, but the Holy Spirit prays through me for them and I know His love is flowing to them.

*How does prayer help you connect with others? With the world?*

As I pray for our world, I experience being a part of a large group of prayer warriors – making a difference in our world through the power of prayer.

### Daily Connection

*Today, focus on praying specifically for your leaders – government leaders, church leaders, teachers, even your boss!*

### Reflection Questions:

1. What makes me want to look to others for approval, even when I know what I am doing is right?
2. What holds me back from being more charitable with my gifts or my time?
3. Is fasting a regular part of my faith experience? If not, what keeps me from making it a part of my faith experience?
4. What will it mean for me to develop a personal pattern of prayer?
5. A central theme of the Lord's Prayer is the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not enough to just pray for the kingdom; we must help create the kingdom. Prayer without action is unfulfilling. What steps can I take to bring action to my prayers? What small step can I make this week to begin bringing about the Kingdom?
6. Why do I need to pray for forgiveness? Is there anyone whom I need to forgive in order to reestablish my connection with God?

### Family Reflection:

Teach your children the Lord's Prayer. Consider using the Lord's Prayer as part of your daily prayer time together.

### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.

“*Come now, little child. Turn awhile from your daily work; hide yourself for a little time from your restless thoughts, put aside your wearisome distractions. Give yourself a little leisure to talk with God, and rest awhile in Him. Enter the secret chamber of your heart, shutting out everything but God, and that which may help you in seeking Him.*  
-St. Anselm (1033-1109) [The English Spirit, p. 16] ”

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER



### Paul Draper

*How do you “connect” with God through prayer? If you have ever felt disconnected from God, how did prayer help you “reconnect” with God?*

The main two things that happen are these: I share my day with God, including all the joys, but also all the things I’m not able to deal with on my own, and the act of giving those things up to Him helps me to fall asleep at night. The other thing I do is listen, just waiting to see if God has something to tell me. Sometimes he does, sometimes he’s just happy to sit with me.

*How do you experience God’s love through prayer?*

God just makes sure that I’m aware of Him there. This is enough. God is able to soothe when that’s what’s best, and to provoke when that’s needed. Sometimes, all that I need to know is that something larger than I am finds all of these petty human matters pretty funny but also endearing.

*How do you know Jesus Christ more through prayer?*

The best image I have is one of Jesus coming to where I am standing, sitting, or kneeling, and then standing or sitting or kneeling next to me. It’s the same feeling you get when you have your eyes closed and a friend approaches and you sense his presence and know who he is even without opening your eyes.

*How do you grow in Christ’s image through prayer?*

I don’t know whether these are questions I ask myself or ones that I hear Christ ask me, but it’s often that I hear “So what would you like to do about that?” This usually stirs things deep inside that I know are true. The word of God is burned in our hearts.

*How does prayer help you connect with others? With the world?*

I have the blessing of being one of the small army of prayer ushers at Bethany. Praying with someone or for someone who really needs company in the presence of God is a very powerful shared moment. It binds and uplifts. We always go together to God, one way or another, even in our darkest, quietest times.

### Daily Connection

*Today, focus on praying specifically for your loved ones – family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. When have I been in a difficult situation? Did I turn to God for help?
2. How have I felt God's strength in a hard time?
3. What can we learn from Jesus' prayer about how we might pray?

### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth if they have ever had a particularly hard day at school or with friends. Ask them to share how they responded to that difficulty (for example: Did they tell you or another grown-up about it? Did they tell the teacher? Did they cry? Did they get angry? Did they pray?).

Share with them about a difficult day or situation you've had and how you responded. Talk about how prayer can help in difficult times (reminds us of God's love for us; reminds us that God cares about what's happening in our lives; invites God to help us through that difficult time).

*“It would be well for us to consider that our Lord has taught this prayer to each one of us, individually, and that He still teaches it to us at this very moment. The Master is never so distant that His disciple need raise his voice to be heard. On the contrary, He is very near.  
-Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) [The Fellowship of the Saints, p. 281]* ”

### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. This week we considered that Jesus teaches us the purpose of prayer, calls us to the practice of prayer, invites us to find a place for prayer, describes a pattern for prayer, and reveals the promise of prayer. Consider the question: what is one thing I have learned about God, about myself, and about my relationship with God?
2. How do I feel today about my level of commitment with regard to prayer?
3. Pray about how God may be inviting you to grow in strengthening your commitment to prayer.

**Family Reflection:**

Talk about what you have learned together as a family this week. Ask your children/youth what they like about prayer. Ask them what questions they still have. Consider continuing or starting some kind of prayer activity (daily or weekly) with your family.

**Daily Connection**

*Today, focus on praying specifically for yourself.*

**Prayer of the Week**

O God, give me strength to follow Your way, even when that way is hard. Give me the strength that comes in praying for Your will to be done in me. Amen.

*“A man who prays without ceasing, if he achieves something, knows why he achieved it, and can take no pride in it... for he cannot attribute it to his own powers, but attributes all his achievements to God, always renders thanks to Him and constantly calls upon Him, trembling lest he be deprived of help.  
-Dorotheus of Gaza ”*

# Prayer

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH PRAYER



### Jeanne O'Dell

*How do you “connect” with God through prayer? If you have ever felt disconnected from God, how did prayer help you “reconnect” with God?*

Connecting with God is easily done when one is willing to pray often, yes a “quiet time,” but as Oswald Chambers says, “Prayer is the Life.” As I go through my day, Jesus and I have developed a close relationship, and I converse with Him off and on all day. Although I feel blessed to have that kind of relationship with Jesus, this blessing is available to everyone that answers His call to “Come to Me.” The Prayer Counseling ministry that I have is a wonderful way to intercede for others and allow them time to connect with Jesus who is the Counselor. By allowing some time for silence, a person learns to communicate with Jesus by talking to Him, but mostly by “listening” with his/her heart.

*How do you experience God’s love through prayer?*

Even though I have a loving husband, because I had a difficult life as a child, I find life to be difficult because of some uneasy relationships. Through the years I have found that only Jesus can meet my needs for love and acceptance, and He gave me a husband to help me know how much He loves me.

*How do you know Jesus Christ more through prayer?*

As I said in the above question, knowing Him is what He wants, and if we take time to spend our lives conversing with Him, He directs our lives. As Dallas Willard said in his book *Divine Conspiracy*, “We are co-conspirators with Jesus to overcome evil with good in the world.”

*How do you grow in Christ’s image through prayer?*

Again, as we spend time with Him, we begin to change into the person He created us to be. I ask for His traits by name, because I tend to be naturally self-focused, so I ask for humility every day!

*How does prayer help you connect with others? With the world?*

Prayer helps me have wisdom about how to handle everything in my own life, and to intercede for people, always asking the Holy Spirit to direct me in every way. I also ask Him to interrupt me if I’m on the wrong path. I also pray that He takes His Hands and puts them on either side of my path (I also pray for this for others) and not let me turn to the right or the left.



Week 3, Day 1 | Psalm 84

# PRESENCE: WITH GOD, WITH GOD'S PEOPLE:

The African concept of *ubuntu* is at the center of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's theology and laid the biblical foundation for his struggle against Apartheid.

In African traditions, *ubuntu* captures the essence of being human. It means we are people only through connections with other people. A “self-made man” is an oxymoron. I am who I am only because you are who you are.

We see the spirit of *ubuntu* in Luke's account of the early Church. In the opening chapters of Acts, he consistently uses plural pronouns to refer to the followers of Jesus, culminating in the beautiful description of their life together in Acts 2:43-47. The readings this week also include Paul's description of the Church as the Body of Christ. In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul challenges us to “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

The New Testament declares that our connection with God's power is directly related to our connection with God's people. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote, “The slogan of the church's life is ‘not one without the other’: no I without a you, no I without a we” (“In God's Company,” *The Christian Century*, June 12, 2007, p. 23).

Two disciplines maintain our connection in the Body of Christ. Corporate worship in the gathered congregation and Christian community in small groups have been the essential elements in every major movement of the Spirit of God in Christian history. They establish the non-negotiable patterns of spiritual discipline that connect us with each other and with the Spirit of God.

Woody Allen said that 80% of success is showing up. But in the Body of Christ, being present – in worship and in community – is more than just showing up. It means showing up in the spirit of *ubuntu* with the full expectation that our presence really matters!

### **We are connected by our presence in worship.**

Luke tells us that Jesus returned to Nazareth, “where He had been brought up; and, as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (Luke 4:16 KJV).

John Ed Matheson described a Sunday when there was an ice storm in Montgomery, Alabama. He was amazed when he saw an elderly woman making her way across the icy street toward the church. When he told her that he was surprised she had decided to come to worship that morning, she replied, “If I had waited until this morning to decide, I wouldn’t have come. I decided last November when I turned in my commitment card that I’d be here 48 Sundays this year. I know four Sundays I plan to be out of town, and this isn’t one of them” (*Treasures of the Transformed Life*, p.111).

At the conclusion of this reConnect experience, each of us will be invited to make a commitment to being present in worship on a regular basis. In preparation for that commitment, let’s think together about why our presence is so important.

### **Worship connects us with the rhythm of the Sabbath.**

In the 1970s, McDonald’s taught us to sing, “You deserve a break today...” In this high-speed, hyper-active, high-achieving, high-stress, high-anxiety world, the break we most deeply need is what the Bible calls “Sabbath.” It’s the day on which God “rested from all the work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Genesis 2:2-3).

If the Almighty God deserved a break, a holy day of rest, don’t you suppose that we need one, too?

Luke described the Sabbath break in Jesus’ life. “At daybreak he went into a deserted place” (Luke 4:42). “He would withdraw to deserted places and pray” (5:16). “He went out to the mountain to pray” (6:12).

If Jesus deserved a holy break from the work of ministry to renew His relationship with God, why do we think we can get along without it?

Eugene Peterson describes the Sabbath as “a deliberate act of interference, an interruption... so that we are able to notice, to attend, to listen, to assimilate this comprehensive and majestic work of God... Sabbath is a workshop for the practice of eternity” (*Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, p. 110).

Because Sabbath is holy, it’s more than just taking a day off to go to the lake or play golf, although those are good things to do, too! Worship is essential to the Sabbath because it is the way we enter into the holiness of God. Peterson calls worship “the primary means by which we immerse ourselves in the rhythms and stories of God’s work... the primary way in which the people of God stay in rhythm with their creation” (p. 112, 114).

The discipline of Sabbath worship creates a “holy break” in the hectic patterns of our world. It is a sacred interruption in the chaotic pace of our lives during which we reconnect with our Creator.

## **We are connected by our presence in community.**

Hebrews challenges us to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” For most of us, holding fast to hope can be a tall order. Being present in worship and being in community with other disciples is the most effective way to do it. There are times when I come to worship or to my small group to affirm the faith I hold. There are other times when I come so that the faith of others can hold me.

John Wesley gathered thousands to hear the gospel in a Methodist revival that swept across England in the 18th century. The key, he said, was in the way he organized his followers into small groups called “class meetings.”

Whatever name we use to describe them, these small communities of faith always include intensive Bible study, mutual sharing, personal accountability and communal prayer. Friendships are developed, faith commitments are sustained, and ordinary people become disciples of Jesus Christ as we are connected in Christian community.

Presence in worship and in community makes a difference in our lives, but it’s not all about us! It also makes a difference to others. Paul said that we are one body and members of one another. The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes said, “Two are better than one...for if they fall, one will lift up the other... A rope made of three cords is hard to break” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Your smile may bring joy to a person who is in pain.

Your handshake or hug may affirm one who is lonely.

Your singing may lift someone whose heart is too heavy to sing.

Your insight into scripture could open God’s Word to someone who is searching for truth.

Your acknowledgement of your need may release another person’s gift of encouragement.

Your prayer might draw another person into God’s presence.

The consistency of your presence could result in new commitment for a person who is struggling.

Your presence may be the presence of Christ to someone else.



John Wesley records that on May 24, 1738, he went “very unwillingly” to a small group that was meeting in Aldersgate Street in London. He went unwillingly, but he showed up. He was present. That night, the Spirit of God touched his heart. He wrote that “about a quarter before nine, while one was reading from Luther’s preface to the epistle to the Romans, I felt my heart strangely warmed.” His experience ignited a spiritual awakening that swept across England and became the Methodist movement around the world.

Can you imagine what might *not* have happened if Wesley had not been present that night?

I can’t promise that your heart will be strangely warmed every time you come to worship or every time you gather with your small group, but I can promise that you won’t experience it if you aren’t there!

**Question to start the week:**

When you see or hear the word “presence”, what images come to mind?

**Prayer of the Week**

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I’d like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

## Day 2

### Psalm 100, Psalm 95:1-7

#### Reflection Questions:

1. How do I define “worship”? What does worship mean to me?
2. What does worship look like?
3. How do I experience God’s presence when I am present in worship?
4. Why is it important to worship as part of the community of faith, and not just by myself?

#### Family Reflection:

Does your family attend worship together? Why or why not? What are some of the barriers that might keep you from doing so?

Ask your children/youth what worship means to them. Ask your children/youth what they like and don’t like about worship. Let this be a discussion starter that may generate some ideas from them.

What are some ways your family could worship together?

#### Prayer of the Week

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I’d like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

Week 3: Presence  
With God,  
With God’s People  
Psalm 84

#### Daily Connection

*When you come to worship this week, introduce yourself to someone you don’t know.*

*“The church is not primarily a place where we go, but a people we promise to be. The church is the community where people through baptism are initiated into a way of life... what baptism begins must be constantly rehearsed in worship.”*  
-Paul J. Wadell  
[*Becoming Friends*, p. 53]

# Presence

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH OUR PRESENCE



### Silvia Villarreal

*How are you “present” at and for Bethany UMC?*

There are many ways that I feel “present” – involvement with not only the traditional Sunday school class but with groups such as Alpha where I got to experience growth in my spiritual journey. Being on team for Alpha is an opportunity where I see people’s lives change, have questions answered and grow. Attending my Emmaus reunion group keeps me accountable and grounded on my spirit work.

Being a prayer usher/communion server allows me to share the love of Christ with many. Volunteering for VBS each summer leaves me in awe when I see the children (preschool, elementary age) experience the love of God in a way they can understand. By the end of the week, I am changed by this experience. This summer, my 3-year-old granddaughter came with me. She went home and told her mother, “Jesus is watching over me.” How awesome is that?

*How do you experience God’s love, know Jesus Christ and grow in His image through “presence”?*

When I come to any of the worship services, I always feel more connected with God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The resounding message I received this past year was “Be still and know I am God,” a powerful message that has guided me in many areas of my life. The service where I feel closest to God’s love is the Taize chapel services which allows me to be open and let God’s love flow through me. The quietness allows me to feel His presence.

*How does being present at and for Bethany UMC help you connect with others? With the world?*

If I weren’t connected, how could I share my Christian walk? I have become friends with many members of all different ages and life experiences which allows us all to embrace each other with love, compassion and support. Bethany has allowed me to be aware of what’s out in the world by the involvement of the church in many missions that we support. Bethany’s connection with the world allows me to be aware of what is going on in the world, not just my local community.

*Why is being present an important part of staying connected with God and with others?*

I know my journey would be a lonely road if I wasn’t connected to God and others sharing the same walk with me.

## Day 3

### Acts 2:41-47; Mark 1:9-11

#### Reflection Questions:

1. Baptism is an important ritual, welcoming new believers into the church and into God's family. What rituals did my family have when I was a child or do I have with my family now and that help me feel connected?
2. Why do I believe baptism is important?
3. How would the church be different if we cared for each other the way Acts describes? Does the joy in this chapter permeate our lives?

#### Family Reflection:

If your children/youth have been baptized, talk with them about it. Find pictures if you have them. Tell them your own baptism story. Consider with them how "remembering our baptism" reconnects us with God and God's love for us, and reminds us that we belong to God. This may be especially important in the midst of difficult times or struggles.

#### For more information about baptism:

Visit [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org), click on **Our World** and then **MethoPedia**. Scroll down to **Spiritual & Theological** and click on **Baptism** ([www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.1697379/k.9027/Baptism\\_Overview.htm](http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.1697379/k.9027/Baptism_Overview.htm)).

#### For more information about baptism at Bethany UMC:

Visit [www.bethany-umc.org](http://www.bethany-umc.org), click on **Worship** and select **Baptism**

#### Prayer of the Week

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I'd like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

Week 3: Presence  
With God,  
With God's People  
Psalm 84

#### Daily Connection

*What is it really going to take to get yourself and your family to worship this week?*

*“The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life... A Christian congregation, the church in your neighborhood, has always been the primary location for getting this way and truth and life of Jesus believed and embodied... [It] is a company of praying men and women who gather, usually on Sundays, for worship, who then go into the world as salt and light. -Eugene Peterson [The Jesus Way, p. 4-5] ”*

# Presence

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH OUR PRESENCE



### Carl and Jan Dodd

When we lost my mom and our son in the space of four days two years ago, Jan and I were hurting in a way and to a degree that is difficult to describe. There was little anyone could say that helped. We quickly discovered that what helped was people who said little, cried with us, and hugged us. What we needed was their loving presence. What we experienced was God's healing

grace flowing to us through those He brought to us but didn't know to ask for.

We are grateful to God and those who served Him by being present in our time of need. Out of that gratitude, we have sought opportunities to be present with others who are hurting. One way is through Bethany's Healing Touch Ministry, which gives us the opportunity to hurt with, and care for, those who have lost loved ones. And I'm sure we get more out of it than those we minister to.

Jesus commanded us to love God and others, and He showed us how to love through service to God and others. It turns out that "just being there," being present with someone, is healing because He is working through us to serve others.

## Day 4

# 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

### Reflection Questions:

1. With what attitude do I approach communion?
2. Why is communion a communal event?
3. Does my experience of communion influence my commitment to stay connected to other disciples in the church? How?

### Family Reflection:

Do your children/youth participate in Holy Communion? Share with your children/youth why Holy Communion is important to you and how it keeps you connected to God.

### For more information about communion:

Visit [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org), click on **Our World** and then **MethoPedia**. Scroll down to **Spiritual & Theological** and click on **Communion** ([www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.2247711/k.C611/Communion\\_Overview.htm](http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.2247711/k.C611/Communion_Overview.htm)).

### Prayer of the Week

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I'd like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

Week 3: Presence  
With God,  
With God's People  
Psalm 84

### Daily Connection

*Ask someone to come to worship with you. Show them where to park, sit, connect. Make it easy for them to feel at home at Bethany United Methodist Church.*

*“We shall not have access to God by prayer, unless we are joined together... We must agree together, and be bound in a bond of peace, before we can come nigh, and present ourselves to God.  
-John Calvin (1509-1564)  
[The Fellowship of the Saints, p.270] ”*

# Presence

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH OUR PRESENCE



### Hollin, Gail, and Leahana Haberman

*How are you (and family) “present” at and for Bethany UMC?*

We attend the 8:15 a.m. worship service almost every Sunday. Also, we attend Sunday School. Hollin sings in three choirs (SonShine Singers, Sanctuary Choir and Journeyman Chorus).

*How do you experience God’s love, know Jesus Christ and grow in His image through “presence”?*

Every time we gather at Bethany, we experience God’s love.

We see Christian friends and share how God has blessed our lives. We see teachers from Leahana’s elementary school (Faubion) and share our common bond. We pray with each other about concerns and celebrations. Prayer Ministers have prayed for us and with us. Wynn has met and prayed with Hollin after the death of his father Ervin. By the way, Ervin made the long trip from San Antonio to hear Hollin sing a solo in the Christmas Cantata.

*How does being present at and for Bethany UMC help you connect with others?*

Leahana told us that most of her fellow students in the fourth grade do not attend church. Leahana expressed concern that they do not know their Creator. Leahana looks forward to church and greeting the Pastors after the 8:15 a.m. service.

We especially enjoy passing the peace (greeting others at the worship service). Hollin has led a Bible study for his Sunday School Class and found it an enriching experience.

*With the world?*

We appreciate Bethany’s Special Collections for people suffering from natural disasters.

*Why is being present an important part of staying connected with God and with others?*

The Bible says, “Where two or three are gathered together I will be with you.” We see the impact of “gathered Christians” during the lighting of the congregational candles at the Christmas Eve Service.

## Day 5

### Romans 15:1-7

#### Reflection Questions:

1. How do we accept those who are not like us?
2. When is it time to offer encouragement and guidance toward change and when is it none of our business?
3. How do we find common ground?
4. What do I do when I sense that someone in the church is going to disagree with me?

#### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth what it feels like to them to be in a disagreement.

Ask them what it feels like when a disagreement is resolved, and what it feels like when it remains unresolved.

Talk about how we don't always have to agree with one another in order to live in "harmony" with one another. Perhaps share a personal example of how that's true in your life.

#### Prayer of the Week

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I'd like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

Week 3: Presence  
With God,  
With God's People  
Psalm 84

#### Daily Connection

*Think about other places, outside of church, where you can worship. Make an effort to spend time with God in that place.*

*“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.  
-Rupertus Meldenius  
(This quote was used by John Wesley and has become a key thought in Methodist theology.)”*

Week 3: Presence  
With God,  
With God's People  
Psalm 84

### Daily Connection

*Pick one person in your life (family, friend, neighbor, etc.). See that person. Study for a moment how this person makes a difference in your life and the lives of others. Tell them how they are needed.*

## Day 6 Acts 5:12-16

### Reflection Questions:

1. People held the apostles in high esteem. How is this different than the way the church is perceived today?
2. The early church reached out to people beyond its membership. Is the role of the church simply to care for its own? How important is it to offer up the hope of salvation to those outside the church?
3. How have I seen or experienced some kind of healing through the church?
4. How have I experienced reconciliation in the body of Christ?
5. When have I felt most deeply connected with God's people in worship? In a small group?

### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth if they know anyone who isn't connected to a church. As you talk as a family about the importance of being connected to a church, a community of faith, ask your children/youth what they might like to do to reach out to the less connected.

*“The greatest spiritual danger for our times is the separation of Jesus from the church. The church is the body of the Lord. Without Jesus there can be no church; and without the church we cannot stay united with Jesus.”*  
-Henri Nouwen  
(1932-1996) [*Letters to Marc About Jesus*, p. 83]

### Prayer of the Week

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I'd like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

## Day 7

# Hebrews 10:19-25

### Reflection Questions:

1. What is my current attitude toward worship?
2. What is my current commitment to being in worship each week? How has being present in worship blessed me? How have I been a blessing to others by being present in worship?
3. What is my current level of commitment to a small group? How has being present in a small group blessed me? How have I been a blessing to others by being in a small group?
4. What is keeping me from participating in a small group?
5. Do I need to cultivate a different attitude toward being present in worship and a small group?
6. How will I reaffirm my commitment, or make a new commitment to being present in worship and a small group?

### Family Reflection:

As a family, consider how important your presence is to one another. Then consider how important your presence in the community of faith is to God and to other Christians.

Invite your children/youth to think about how they would like to make sure worship is part of their lives each week. Also ask them if there is something at church in which they would like to participate – children’s choirs, family social events, mission events, MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship), Bible studies, etc. Help them find a way to make this happen.

### Prayer of the Week

Lord, there are times when I would like to go it alone – times when I think I’d like to be a Christian by myself. But then I hear Your word and feel Your Spirit and know that by myself I can do nothing, but that in community with others, I can participate in Your healing work in the lives of others.

You remind us that Your mission to save the earth involved physically coming and being present among us through Your son Jesus Christ. Call us to that same commitment; to be present with You and one another in the community and ministry of Your church. Amen.

Week 3: Presence  
With God,  
With God’s People  
Psalm 84

### Daily Connection

*Plan for one other way to be at church this month – Wednesday night dinner, new small group, mission project, choir. Your presence makes a difference.*

*“If the Lord is to be Lord, worship must have priority in our lives... Our lives are to be punctuated with praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. Service flows out of worship... If we long to go where God is going and do what God is doing, we will move into deeper, more authentic worship.”*  
-Richard Foster  
[Celebration of Discipline, p.161]

# Presence

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH OUR PRESENCE



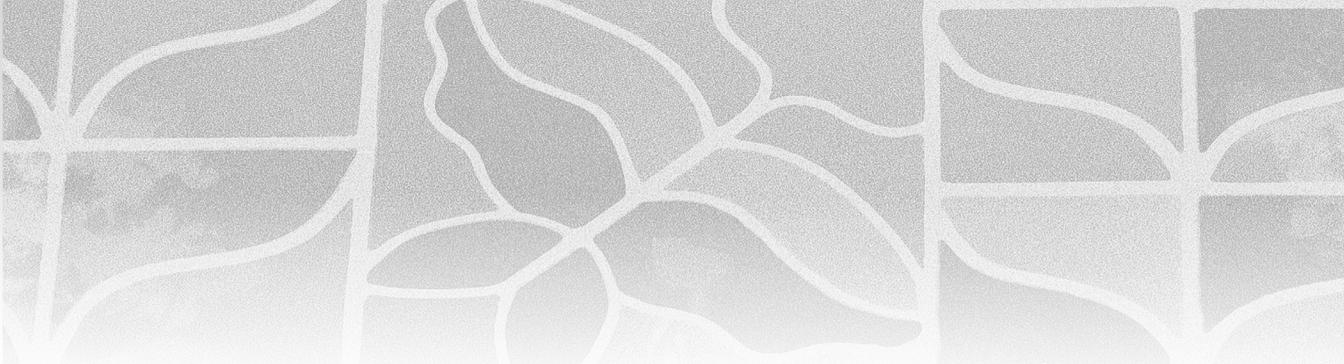
### **Josh Bredahl (15 years old)**

*What do you enjoy about being at church?*

I enjoy learning about my Savior and how He expects us to show His love and mercy through every day, and mimic the example He gave us.

*What are your favorite things to do at church?*

I enjoy the youth events – the way they help me to connect to God as well as being very enjoyable at the same time.



Week 4, Day 1 | Psalm 103

# GIFTS: LIVE WITH JOY, GIVE WITH JOY

Luke tucked an ugly story between two beautiful descriptions of life in the early church.

In Acts 4:32-35 Luke showed us how beautiful life can be when Christians are connected in “one heart and soul.” The first Christians lived with amazing generosity, sharing everything they had and “there was not a needy person among them.”

In Acts 5:12-16, Luke reported that the Christian community was held in high regard by folks outside of it. As a result, everyone found healing and wholeness.

That’s how good life can be when people are really connected to God and to one another in the Body of Christ! But then Luke shows us what life looks like when they aren’t (Acts 5:1-11).

Ananias and Sapphira never got connected. They pretended to be part of the community, but when Ananias had a good day in the real estate market, he brought a portion of the profits to the apostles while secretly hoarding the rest. When Peter uncovered the deception, Ananias fell dead at his feet, and some of the younger men carried him out to bury him.

Three hours later, Sapphira showed up, wondering why her husband hadn’t come home. She, too, lied about the gift. She, too, fell over dead, and the same young men carried her out to bury her with her husband.

A crafty preacher might be tempted to use the story of Ananias and Sapphira to scare church people to give to the building fund, but I don’t think that’s the point. I think Luke links these three passages together to demonstrate the contrast between the goodness of generosity and the foolishness of greed.

## **The goodness of generosity**

Our readings this week include Paul’s “fund-raising” letter to the Corinthians. The apostle set a

high standard for Christian generosity when he wrote: “You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Christ-like generosity begins not in what we do, but in what God has done in Jesus Christ. “We love,” the epistle of John says, “because he first loved us and gave himself for us.” We give because Jesus gave. The Christian life is a response of gratitude to God for the gift of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ. We get connected with the generosity of God at the foot of the cross.

Christian people are not generous because of what they have, but because of who they are as followers of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Christ-followers measure generosity not by what they give, but by what they have been given by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Christ-followers find joy, not in what they hold, but in what they share. Christian generosity is modeled after nothing less than the extravagant generosity of God’s love to us in Jesus Christ.

### **The foolishness of greed**

By contrast, greed is foolish because it consumes the consumer in an insatiable desire for more. It is sinful because it turns our hearts away from the self-giving love of an extravagantly generous God and defines the value of life in the things we possess. As Ananias and Sapphira sadly found out, greed is deadly because it turns life in on itself and breaks our connection with the life-giving generosity of God.

According to the Bible, the only antidote for greed is generosity. The only way to reconnect with the generosity of God is to practice generosity ourselves.

### **The practice of generosity**

To encourage generosity among the affluent Christians in Corinth, Paul lifted up the example of the poor Christians in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8). Using the generosity of poor folks to motivate the generosity of affluent folks is not just a Pauline fund-raising gimmick. It’s a fact of life. Lower-income folks consistently give a larger percentage of their income to charity than affluent folks do. Perhaps that’s why Jesus defined generosity not by the amount a person gives, but by the percentage of its impact on the life of the giver.

Everyone noticed the way the rich folks brought their gifts to the Temple. They could hear the loud clank as the gifts dropped into the offering box. Only Jesus noticed a poor widow who dropped in two small copper coins. But Jesus said that the poor widow gave more than the rest because they gave a small percentage out of their abundance, but she gave a gigantic percentage out of the little she had (Luke 21:1-4).

Jesus was not as concerned about how much the giver gave as He was about how much the giver had left over. He focused our attention away from the size of the gift and onto the difference the gift made to the giver.

## The discipline of the tithe

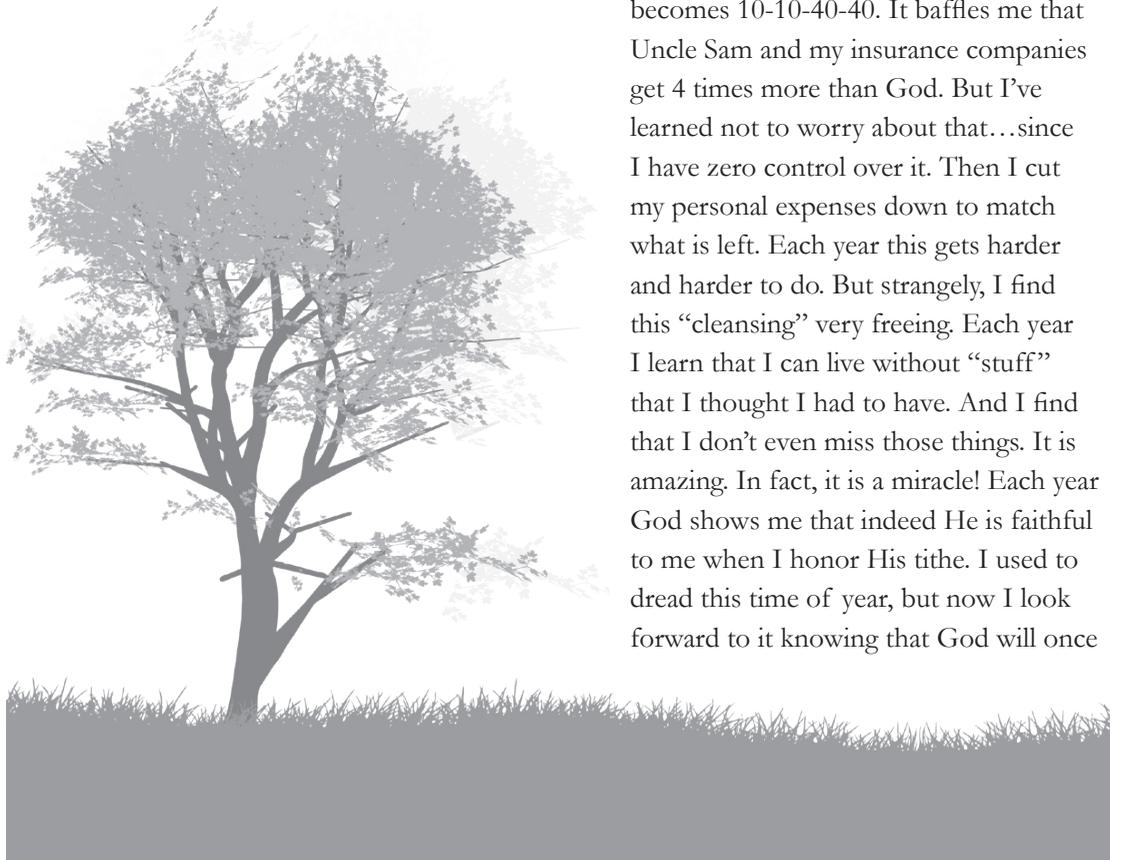
The tithe is the spiritual discipline by which Christian disciples practice generosity. The Old Testament law required that the first 10 percent of the harvest be given back to God in gratitude for God's generosity. In fact, the prophet said that if we don't give the tithe, we are robbing God (Malachi 3:8).

But for those who have experienced the generosity of God at the cross, the law is only the beginning. The tithe is the bare minimum below which we do not allow our generosity to fall. One person in the congregation at Hyde Park UMC (Tampa, FL) says that the tithe is a good place for generosity to begin, but a bad place for generosity to end. We are called to go beyond the law and to give in extravagant generosity in response to the extravagant generosity of God.

The amazing thing is that when we practice generosity, we experience more of the generosity of God. During the stewardship emphasis at Hyde Park UMC a couple years ago, I received an e-mail message from a man who had been out of work for some time. Here's what he wrote.

Each year, at this time, I take a long, hard look at my budget. I begin by first subtracting the 10 percent tithe. Then I subtract ten percent for savings. That leaves me 80 percent, right? By the time I subtract those expenses I have no control over: taxes, insurance...the 10-10-80 formula

becomes 10-10-40-40. It baffles me that Uncle Sam and my insurance companies get 4 times more than God. But I've learned not to worry about that...since I have zero control over it. Then I cut my personal expenses down to match what is left. Each year this gets harder and harder to do. But strangely, I find this "cleansing" very freeing. Each year I learn that I can live without "stuff" that I thought I had to have. And I find that I don't even miss those things. It is amazing. In fact, it is a miracle! Each year God shows me that indeed He is faithful to me when I honor His tithe. I used to dread this time of year, but now I look forward to it knowing that God will once



again teach me something new. Well, I guess I better get busy on my budget for this year. I can't wait!

### **The promise of a generous God**

Paul concludes his letter to Corinth with a bold promise.

God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work... You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God (9:8,11-12).

What goes around comes around. It's a circle of generosity. God's generosity to us results in gratitude which we express through our generosity, which results in gratitude which expresses itself in generosity in them until all our lives overflow with gratitude to God.

On Consecration Weekend each of us will have the opportunity to indicate our financial commitment for the year ahead. May the Spirit guide us in our response to the generosity of God.

*"What may then...can we take that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is only one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who 'gain all they can' and 'save all they can' will likewise 'give all they can' then, the more they gain the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven."*

-John Wesley [*A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader*, p. 32]

### **Question to start the week:**

When you see or hear the word "gifts", what images come to mind?

**SPECIAL NOTE:** Make plans to participate in the Great Weekend of Service – October 8 and 9.

### **Prayer of the Week**

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

## Day 2

### Acts 4:32-37

#### Reflection Questions:

1. What is hardest for me to share? My money? My time? My expertise?
2. What is my gut reaction when I hear about tithing?
3. Would people outside the church realize I am a Christian on the basis of my generosity?

#### Family Reflection:

What discussions have you had as a family about money? Ask your children/youth why it might be important to give to the church and to give outside the church.

#### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

## Week 4: Gifts

Live with Joy,  
Give with Joy  
Psalm 103

#### Daily Connection

*Make good on your  
pledge to the Church.*

*“The way of the kingdom of God calls people to a higher concern than self or national interest: namely, concern for the common good. And for Jesus, achieving the bottom line for profit and financial success without concern for the common good qualifies one uniquely – not for the heaven of the Fortune 500 – but for hell.  
-Brian McLaren  
[Everything Must Change, p. 208] ”*

## Week 4: Gifts

Live with Joy,  
Give with Joy  
Psalm 103

### Daily Connection

*If you haven't worn it, used it, opened it, in the last year give it on to someone who can.*

## Day 3

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

#### Reflection Questions:

1. If our command is to follow Jesus, how do we become poor?  
Does that mean volunteering until we are burnt out and end up with the flu?
2. Is there a practical way to approach this self-sacrificial giving?  
What makes me willing to give?
3. Can I imagine what an equitable world would look like?

#### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth what it means to be generous. As a family, have each member tell about an act of generosity they've seen in another family member.

“*Giving reflects the nature of God. We give because we are made in the image of God, whose essential nature is giving. We are created with God's nature imprinted on our souls; we are hard-wired to be social, compassionate, connected, loving, and generous.*  
-Bishop Robert Schnase [Practicing Extravagant Generosity: Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving, p. 56] ”

#### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

## Day 4

### Mark 12:41-44

Week 2: Prayer  
Pray First, Pray Most  
Psalm 25

#### Reflection Questions:

1. When have I witnessed someone giving selflessly?
2. What other characteristics stood out in that person?
3. What was my response to their giving?
4. What prevents me from giving a portion of my income to God?

#### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth to tell about the best gift they have received.

Ask your children/youth to tell about the best gift they have given.

Ask your children/youth if they have considered giving gifts to God.

Ask them what that might look like.

#### Daily Connection

*Have a discussion with someone about tithing. Write down the figure your tithe should be.*

#### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

*“Giving helps us become what God wants us to be. Giving is not merely about the church’s need for money but about the Christian’s need to grow in generosity. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit, a sign of our spiritual growth. God uses our giving to change the world for God’s purposes, and God uses our giving to reconfigure our interior lives and to change us!  
-Bishop Robert Schnase [Practicing Extravagant Generosity: Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving, p. 7]”*

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH OUR GIFTS



### Kathy Mayes

I often ask myself why...why was I so fortunate to have had such a wonderful childhood, such great parents, a fabulous husband and blessed marriage. Why was I born to such riches? I know there is a reason... I don't think I've found that reason yet. I know I must share what I have been given, my time, my talents, my "gold." I know I must share them in many ways. To the poor on the street corner, the sick in the hospital, those who might seek shelter at Bethany, those who might need just a friend. That part is easy, I can make a difference there, but how can I reach out and make a difference in ways I can't see, to people I do not know? It's by generously contributing to my other home...my "church home."

Bethany is part of a large "corporation," "God's Universal Corporation." An "investment" in no other corporation can reap such a return, an everlasting return. No other investment can help so many for so little, can build houses for the poor, feed the hungry, help comfort the sick and dying. Is there any other investment that can comfort you in your darkest hour? No other investment can guarantee that "You will be enriched in every way so that you may be generous on every occasion, which is producing through us thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:11).

Before I said I don't know why I've been so blessed, but maybe in writing this I know. Have I been blessed because I carried my pennies to church as a child, put my little white envelope in the plate as a young adult and continue to give and meet my commitment to giving even when it's been a tough year and I need to dig into savings to make it happen? I've been blessed because I taught the little children, tended to the sick and dying, and shared my "Bags of Grace" with those I did not know. I will continue to give, because indeed I have been enriched by God's blessings.

"Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled completely, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3: 9-10).

And, I really like the wine part!

## Day 5

# 2 Chronicles 31:5-10; Malachi 3:8-12; Proverbs 3:9-10

### Reflection Questions:

1. Many people believe that the church manipulates the idea of tithing in order to extract money from its congregations. What can we expect from the church in return for our gifts?
2. What if we feel it is irresponsible in our financial situation to offer a 10 percent tithe?
3. What difference could the spiritual discipline of tithing make in the ministry of the church? In my life? Am I willing to give the tithe and trust God to guide me in the wise use of the other 90 percent of my income?
4. What is Jesus' approach to tithing (Matthew 23:23, 6:1-4, 19-21)?
5. How would my life change if I decided what I could financially offer to God at the start of each week, instead of scrambling to check my banking account before church so that I can make sure my offering check doesn't bounce?
6. How can I learn to give willingly, gladly, the way that Christ did – instead of offering whatever time, talents, money I have left over after chasing after my worldly pursuits?

### Family Reflection:

What “things” are most important to you as individuals? As a family? If your children/youth get an allowance, do they have parameters about what they do with that money? Tithe? Save? Spend?

### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

## Week 4: Gifts

Live with Joy,

Give with Joy

Psalm 103

### Daily Connection

*Pray about the amount you can cheerfully give this year.*

*“Gratitude becomes an act of defiant contemplation, expressing rebellion against the thousands of advertisements a year that tell you to want what you don't have, and not appreciate what you already have. Instead, gratitude celebrates what you do have... In so doing, it bonds the heart to the ultimate source of the gifts – God.  
-Brian McLaren  
[Everything Must Change, p. 213] ”*

## Week 4: Gifts

Live with Joy,  
Give with Joy  
Psalm 103

### Daily Connection

*Give an anonymous gift of yourself today. Thank God for the opportunity to spread His will and take pleasure in not telling a soul about your act.*

## Day 6

Matthew 25:14-30; John 10:7-10

### Reflection Questions:

1. What does abundant life look like to me?
2. Do I tend to live with a “scarcity mentality” or an “abundance mentality”? Do I live in fear that there won’t be enough, or that God is trustworthy to provide all I need?
3. In practical, day-to-day ways how do I acknowledge that all I have is a “gift” from God?
4. Do I consider that God invites me to “invest” the gifts God gives to me, gifts of money, time, energy, passions? How well am I doing with these “investments”?

### Family Reflection:

Talk with your children/youth about the difference between abundance and scarcity. Perhaps even ask them if they feel like they “have” a lot, or not enough. You can talk in terms of material things, but also things like love, time, abilities.

What are some ways, as a family, that you can live “abundantly”?

“*Christians don’t give because they have received material blessings. Christians give even when they have not received material blessings... They give generously because they pattern their life after the example of Christ.*  
-Mark Trotter  
[*Journey to the Center of the Faith*, p. 113] ”

### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

## Day 7

# 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

### Reflection Questions:

1. Can I tell when someone really wants to help and when they are just going through the motions?
2. Do I believe the motivation behind our generosity really matters to God?
3. What blessings have resulted from my willingness to give?
4. How do I feel today about my current level of commitment with regard to giving?
5. Pray about how God may be inviting you to grow with regard to giving.

### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth to consider what “gifts” they’ve given to God recently.

Ask them to consider what “gifts” they would like to give to God.

If your children/youth don’t have an ongoing habit of giving to God, consider helping them make a plan to do so.

### Prayer of the Week

O God, give me a generous heart; a heart that enables me to see the way my own good is bound together in the common good for all of Your children. Amen.

## Week 4: Gifts

Live with Joy,

Give with Joy

Psalm 103

### Daily Connection

*As a family, go through your home and find all the loose change. Bring it to church and give it as an extra offering of joy.*

“*We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give. -Sir Winston Churchill*”



Week 5, Day 1 | Psalm 67

# SERVICE: BLESS OTHERS, BE BLESSED

Jesus promised His followers that they would be His witnesses throughout the world, but no one was more surprised than they were when it happened! The book of Acts is the dramatic story of the way their connection with the power of the Holy Spirit energized them to become the agents of God's transformation of the world.

I suspect that many of us are just as surprised as they to discover that through our prayers, presence, gifts and service, we are connected to the same power that energized those apostles and that God intends to use us the way He used them as God's agents of transformation in this world. But that's exactly what happens when we get connected to God's power, live in connection with God's people, share in God's generosity, and invest ourselves in God's service.

Our connection with the Spirit means that we are not here to sit on the sidelines, but to get into the game as the agents of God's transformation. Jesus never intended for His followers to merely show up at a spiritual Starbucks on Sunday morning for a hit of religious caffeine to make it through the week. He intended for every disciple to make God's love real to this world by serving in and through the ministries of Christ's body, the church.

This week's readings reveal the peculiar way God has chosen to be at work for the transformation of the world. God has chosen to redeem this world through the church. Transformation happens when individual disciples discover the unique gifts the Spirit has given them and release those gifts in Christ's service.

## **Who? Me? A Minister?**

The New Testament calls the work of Christ in the world "ministry." People who do it are "ministers." And by the power of the Holy Spirit, that's what *you* are! According to the New Testament, every baptized follower of Jesus Christ is called, gifted and empowered to serve in

the name of Christ. On Consecration Weekend, you'll be invited to make your commitment of service for the year ahead. Every person is critically important to this ministry. Every gift of service makes a difference!

### **Ministry happens through the church.**

At the center of ministry is the New Testament promise that every baptized follower of Jesus is given a unique spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit. We believe that spiritual gifts are:

- Special abilities that are energized by the Holy Spirit, discovered in community and affirmed in the Body of Christ;
- Gifts of God's grace, not something we generate on our own;
- Given for the common good of the Body of Christ and the transformation of the world;
- To be used in alignment with the mission of the church and the passion God has placed in our hearts;
- Encouraged and supported by the "connecting" ministries of the church;
- The means by which God's love is made real in this world.

Bethany provides two practical tools to help each disciple discover his or her spiritual gifts and find a place to use those gifts in ministry. One is an initial Spiritual Gifts Assessment, found on our Web site at [www.bethany-umc.org/spiritualgifts](http://www.bethany-umc.org/spiritualgifts). The other is a more in-depth look at your spiritual gifts in the "My Gifts and Passions" workshop. In addition, you can talk one on one with a Connections Consultant. These are lay persons who are trained to help other persons discover their gifts and find the place to serve that fits their passions and availability. For more information, contact:

Cecilia Barrentine at (512) 258-6017 x231, [cecilia.barrentine@bethany-umc.org](mailto:cecilia.barrentine@bethany-umc.org)

Frank Jacks, Jr. at (512) 258-6017 x261, [frank.jacksjr@bethany-umc.org](mailto:frank.jacksjr@bethany-umc.org)

### **How ministry happens**

Within days of each other, I [Harnish] received two e-mail messages that affirmed the way people are finding their place to serve in this congregation [Hyde Park UMC]. The first came from the wife of one of the guys who serves in our parking lot ministry.

Every week he comes home pumped up about something. He can see that people really appreciate what the team is doing. He can see the importance of creating a more welcoming environment. He can see how hard a time some people have just finding a place to park and what a difference it makes to help them. He knows that he is one of the ones through whose life the love of God is made real in this world. It's working! It's a beautiful thing!

The other message came from one of the leaders of our equipping ministry team.

I can't describe the joy I feel when I am operating out of my giftedness and using my

spiritual gift of encouragement. When I am walking alongside someone in their faith walk and they are deepening their relationship with Christ (or developing a new one), or when I am working with a team to create some new ministry that builds up disciples and the church, it's clicking and I feel great JOY.

### **Ministry reaches out from the church into the world.**

When Kirbyjon Caldwell was appointed as pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston in 1982, there were 25 members. Today, it is one of the largest United Methodist Churches in the nation with 15,000 persons engaged in ministry. Dr. Caldwell said, "The point of church growth is not to collect new people and cage them with church programs. The goal of church health is not to fatten up church members for show... The church exists to equip people in order to release them back into the world, grounded in truth and community, dangerous for the gospel" (*The Equipping Church*, p. 9).

God intends for the ministry that begins in the church to flow into the world through the life and service of every baptized follower of Jesus Christ. God's love in Christ is made real in this world through ordinary men and women who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, become the extension of the church's ministry in the world.

Wayne Cordero leads the New Hope Community Church in Honolulu. I remember hearing him ask how we think God intends to make His love real to firefighters, teachers, business people, lawyers or teenagers. He acknowledged that God could send a preacher or a professional minister, but that would be a pretty inefficient way to do it. God has a better plan.

When God wants to make His love real to firefighters, He takes a full-time, baptized servant minister, disguises him or her as a firefighter, and sends that person into the fire house to express His love to other firefighters and to invite them into the body of Christ.

When God wants to make His love real to teachers, He takes a full-time, baptized servant minister, disguises him or her as a teacher, and sends that minister into the classroom to demonstrate God's love to other teachers and students and to serve them in the Spirit of Christ.

When God wants to make His love real to business people, God takes some full-time, baptized servant ministers, dresses them up like business people, and sends them into the business world where the witness of their lives and character becomes an unmistakable expression of the Body of Christ.

When God wants to let teenagers know that He loves them, He takes some full-time, baptized servant ministers, dresses them up like high school students and sends them onto their school campus to demonstrate His love with other teenagers.

Harnish's daughter, Carrie, majored in journalism and rose to the position of Executive Producer at the NBC affiliate in Orlando. Shortly after her second child was born, she left the newsroom

and became an independent producer. She's also been a visiting faculty member at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg which specializes in ethics in the media.

Her sister, Deborah, earned her Masters' degree in Social Work and serves in a Catholic social service agency near Charleston. She also spent two years as a short-term missionary with the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. All of that is background for Carrie's response to Wayne Cordero's image of full-time servant ministry.

OK... gotta admit... I remember struggling with my job in TV news while Deb was out "saving the world" as a social worker and missionary. All those people who she has directly touched... for awhile I wondered if I was doing any good at all. Then at Poynter one year... when they were talking about ethics, and morality, and doing what was right... it hit me. BREAKING NEWS: I can be a Christian in a newsroom! I realized that I could make a difference by the way we reported the news, by the way we treated the people we interviewed... even by the way we treated fellow reporters and producers. I never really had a way to put it into words... but your message did that. I was a "minister" disguised as a news producer!

When Harnish asked if he could share her message with his congregation, she went on to say that she "got it" at Poynter while working with a news director in Austin, Texas, who died of breast cancer. Her motto was "There's never a wrong time to do the right thing." Carrie went on to say, "That applies to news because you're always under deadline, always trying to beat the competition, always trying to get the story on first. But it also works for people trying to live the way God wants us to live." All Harnish could say in response was, "You got that right, kid!"

*"The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility; the church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world" [The United Methodist Book of Discipline, para. 128].*

### **Question to start the week:**

When you see or hear the word "service", what images come to mind?

### **Prayer of the Week**

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

**Daily Connection**

*Surprise a neighbor,  
teacher, co-worker  
with an act of service.  
Watch their reaction.*

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Where has God been calling me to serve?
2. Have I been ignoring the call? Why? Does fear hold me back from offering certain gifts?
3. Do I truly believe God can use me for His good and His glory or do I believe I am not worthy?

**Family Reflection:**

Ask your children/youth what it means to “serve” someone else. What does it look like? Ask if they can think of anyone in the community, or in their lives, who “serves.” Consider talking about people such as police, firefighters, waiters/waitresses, school teachers, Sunday School teachers, etc.

Ask your children/youth to identify ways they could serve others.

“*The laity had come to see, with a shock, that they were the front line soldiers of the Church. They, not the clergy, were the representatives of Christ who were actually present in the factories, shops, offices, schools and homes of the country. If Christ’s compassion was to get into those situations, then they, the laity, must be the channels through which it would come. If Christ’s truth was to be spoken, then they must speak it.*”  
-Stephen Verney [Fire in Coventry, p. 20] ”

**Prayer of the Week**

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. In what area do I strive to gain the world's attention? How has that striving benefited or been detrimental to me?
2. Do I expect to be recognized for my gifts in the church? How much of that expectation is pride driven and how much is spiritualized?
3. Are there certain gifts I value above others? If so, why?
4. How can we, as the Body of Christ, reach out to a world that is broken?
5. What will people see in us that will make them want to connect with Christ?
6. How do we foster unity, a willingness to see problems and try to solve them?

**Family Reflection:**

Talk with your children/youth about our bodies and how different parts do different things. Talk about how important it is for each part to do its job in order for the whole body to work well.

Set up an opportunity for your children/youth to experience what it might be like if parts of their bodies didn't do their job – Examples: Use a bandana to cover their eyes and have them navigate through the house. Use ear plugs or cotton balls to put in their ears and then try to have a conversation with them with their hearing “impaired”. Have them put their “dominant” hand behind their back and use their “non-dominant” hand to do things like eat, get dressed, brush their teeth.

**Prayer of the Week**

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

**Daily Connection**

*Serve someone a surprise cup of coffee, an ice water or a lemonade. Watch their reaction.*

*“I don't know what your destiny will be but one thing I know, the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.*

*-Albert Schweitzer  
(1875-1965)*

*[Quoted in Returning:  
A Spiritual Journey,  
p. 201]* ”

# Service

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH SERVICE



### Denise McGlothlin

*What does “service” look like to you? Why do you think “service” is included in the vows we take for membership in the United Methodist Church?*

Service, I think, is simply being out in the community and sharing with others. In service, we share with the community the gifts God has given us, and in return we find ourselves receiving amazingly more.

Remember the miracle of Jesus feeding the crowd of hungry people with five loaves of bread and two fish? Thousands of people had followed Jesus to a remote place. Jesus had compassion for the crowd, He taught them, and when it was late and they were hungry, Jesus instructed His disciples to give them something to eat. The disciples were able to round up only 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish. But as the people sat down in large groups, the miracle happened: Jesus gave thanks and divided the meager food, and the thousands had plenty to eat, with enough leftover to fill 12 baskets.

My experience is that when I offer my meager gifts in service with others, the result can be goodness and abundance. As a CASA volunteer, I work with a group of talented people, and advocate in court for the best interests of a child to whose case I’ve been appointed. These court-appointed children are often the victims of abuse or neglect. In my “service” I have seen parents work hard to make a better home for their children by taking parenting classes and using other services available to them; or grandparents taking in their grandchildren to raise them as their own; or folks with hearts the size of Texas who go through the adoption process to unconditionally love a child forever. This job takes me to parts of Austin that are very different from our little northwest neighborhood. I won’t kid you: I’ve been a little scared. Yet, mainly I connect up with people who just want a healthy, safe home for their families – people like me! With a lot of people working together, I am privileged to witness a child go from “brokenness” to the beginnings of healing and growth – and that is just like the miracle of the meager food to the abundant meal with leftovers!

We pledge our “service” when we take our vows of membership because Jesus instructed His disciples to feed His people. By being in community and sharing what we have with one another, we may experience God’s love (that little tickle in your heart), we can see Jesus in the eyes of others, and together we are able to become the people God has always wanted us to be – people who love each other fully.

*Do you have any words of encouragement to people who might be afraid of “service” or reluctant to “serve”?*

When my sons were younger and still living at home, I considered becoming a CASA volunteer. I clearly heard in my heart: “not now.” Good enough for me! Years later, when my husband John and I became empty nesters, I reconsidered the idea. This time, I did not hear “no” (but I didn’t hear “yes” either). So, I went through CASA training and then took on my first case. The Holy Spirit was right: there was no way I could have successfully been a CASA volunteer while my boys were still at home and I was involved with their activities. Maybe the absent “yes” was just a test of my faith – I don’t know. But the timing was clearly a Holy Spirit “thing!”

## Day 4

# Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Romans 12:1-21

### Daily Connection

*Thank someone who serves you at church.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. Do I know what my spiritual gifts are? What skill do I have that I could ask God to nurture?
2. What difference does it make to know that my gifts are needed in the Body of Christ? How have I seen my gifts affirmed in the community of this church?
3. What keeps me from being consistent in my service?
4. When do I feel myself becoming prideful? Where is the line between self-assuredness and arrogance?
5. Am I focusing on being thankful for the gifts that each person has to offer or am I fixated on my own offerings?

### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth what they believe they are “good” at. Ask them what they are “passionate” about; what they really like to do.

Talk with them about some of the “gifts” listed in today’s Scriptures. Ask them if they recognize any of those gifts in themselves.

Tell your children/youth what you see in them that is a “spiritual” gift, a God-given ability through which you have seen them make God’s love real in the world.

As a family, celebrate the different “gifts” that you have.

### Prayer of the Week

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

“*Service is not a list of things that we do... but a way of living. Just as there is more to the game of basketball than the rule book, there is more to service than specific acts of serving. It is one thing to act like a servant; it is quite another to be a servant.*”  
-Richard Foster  
[*Celebration of Discipline*, p. 134] ”

**Reflection Questions:**

1. When have I had an opportunity to bless someone else and acted on that opportunity? What was the outcome? How did that feel?
2. When have I had an opportunity to bless someone else and chosen not to act? How did that feel?
3. Do I look at the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, those in prison and see Christ? Do I tend to see them as part of the family of God to which I claim to belong, or outside of the family?
4. What is my typical reaction and response to the people on the street corners asking for help?

**Family Reflection:**

Ask your children/youth their thoughts about the people they see on the street corners who are asking for help. What is your family's typical response?

Do you know someone who is sick or having a hard time? Consider making that person a card to encourage them with God's love.

**Prayer of the Week**

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

**Daily Connection**

*Take the Spiritual Gifts Assessment at [www.bethany-umc.org/spiritualgifts](http://www.bethany-umc.org/spiritualgifts) or take the "My Gifts and Passions" Class. Contact Cecilia Barrentine at (512)258-6017 x 231, [cecilia.barrentine@bethany-umc.org](mailto:cecilia.barrentine@bethany-umc.org) or Frank Jacks Jr. at (512)258-6017 x 261, [frank.jacksjr@bethany-umc.org](mailto:frank.jacksjr@bethany-umc.org)*

*“The Company of Jesus is not people streaming to a shrine; and it is not people making up an audience for a speaker; it is laborers engaged in the harvesting task of reaching their perplexed and seeking [brothers and sisters] with something so vital that, if it is received, it will change their lives.*

*-Elton Trueblood (1900-1994) [The Company of the Committed, p. 45] ”*

# Service

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH SERVICE



### Rita Auerbach

*How does “service” keep you connected to God? With others? How does “service” nurture your relationship with God? With others?*

It is impossible for me to serve God according to HIS will unless I stay connected to Him through continuous prayer and daily reading of the Scriptures. I try to always be in a state of expectation, believing God will reveal to me who He has placed on my path that may need encouragement or help in some way. By staying connected to “the Vine” (John 15) not only am I nurtured and supported by God, but by and through that same source, Jesus Christ, I am supplied with all I need to be in the right place at the right time in order to serve Him, if only I keep my eyes, ears, and heart open to His guidance. On my Walk (108) to Emmaus in 1998 our verse was “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to offer His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus is my role model. Serving God is a way of giving back to Him a portion of what He has given to me. With each kind word, thought or deed, God is honored. By serving others I am given the opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ to others while serving Him as well, as stated in Matthew 25:35-40.

*How do you experience God’s love, know Jesus Christ, and grow in His image – in the midst of “service”?*

I find that not just knowing of God’s love, but actually EXPERIENCING it always occurs when I am serving Him by serving others. But what is it like, to “experience God’s love”? If you’ve ever watered a wilted plant only to see it become revived when the water has reached its parched roots, you can begin to understand. If I were to only read His word, attend worship and do nothing to serve Him, it would be like setting a pitcher of water by a thirsty plant; nothing extraordinary would occur. No miracle there! Yet when I serve where Jesus Christ leads me, it is as though I am “drenched” in Him and from that great source of Living Water (John 4:10,13) I am allowed to be a vessel from which His grace can be poured out upon others who are “thirsty.” I am never alone when I serve, for Christ serves alongside me (Luke 22:27), allowing others to not see me but rather Jesus working through me.

*What does “service” look like to you? Why do you think “service” is included in the vows we take for membership in the United Methodist Church?*

To me, service means being the hands of Christ reaching out to help others. If I see or hear of a “need” and respond, God is glorified. Matthew 5:16 says, “Let your light shine before

men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in Heaven.” Serving, born out of a heart filled with gratitude, brings glory to God. Ephesians 4:12 tells us that serving “builds up the body of Christ.” Serving at Bethany gives us an opportunity to return some of what we have gained from being a part of this wonderful body of Christ. Without serving, this body of Christ that we call Bethany UMC will fail to grow and will become stagnant. A stagnant church, like stagnant water, serves no good purpose. Service is serious business; it’s not an option but rather a necessary component for church growth.

*Do you have any words of encouragement to people who might be afraid of “service” or reluctant to “serve”?*

The first thing I suggest is attending a Spiritual Gifts class offered here at Bethany. We ALL have God-given spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-11) that are to be used to serve Christ and to build up our church. Not knowing exactly what those gifts are can cause us to serve in an area we aren’t “designed” for and may lead to frustration. Learn what your Spiritual gifts are. You may be surprised! For those who are fearful, pray that God will increase your trust in Him. When you consider serving and you “hear” any condemnation or excuses (I can’t do that! I’ll fail! I’ve served enough. Let someone else do it!), that’s not Jesus you’re listening to. Any excuse that keeps you from serving is not of God. “The Lord does not call the equipped; He equips the called.” HE will never set you up for failure. You have wonderful friends you’ve never met, friends who will come alongside you and serve with you, friends who are like “Jesus with His skin on,” but you won’t meet them until you serve with them. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and to reveal where it is that God is calling you to serve. Do all this with prayer, Bible study and Christian fellowship, all the while expecting to experience God’s love, to know Jesus Christ and to grow in His image as you seek Him and His will for your life.

### Daily Connection

*Find an opportunity today to spread the love of God. Let someone ahead of you in line, let the other driver in, walk at the same speed as your children.*

### Reflection Questions:

1. According to James, what is the relationship between faith and works?
2. In the past week, when has my faith been demonstrated in my “works”?
3. Are there other needs besides “bodily needs” (v.16) that invite us to put our faith into action? If so, what are they?

### Family Reflection:

Spend some time thinking about the food in your pantry and the clothes in your closets. Is there food you could donate to a food pantry like Hill Country Community Ministries? There are collection barrels at Bethany UMC. Are there clothes in good condition that you no longer can or want to wear? Consider donating them so that someone else can wear them.

Consider learning more about Bags of Grace – gifts for the least, the least and the lost that contain food, water and other basic items that we take for granted, but which are precious and rare to the homeless. These gifts are a way to reach out to others with the love of Christ. These bags are available at Bethany UMC.

Visit [www.bagsofgrace.org](http://www.bagsofgrace.org) or [www.bethany-umc.org](http://www.bethany-umc.org) and click on **Mission-Outreach** then **Bags of Grace**.

Consider learning more about IHN (Interfaith Hospitality Network), a network of up to 13 churches that provides homeless families a warm, clean place to sleep, hot meals, a place to bathe, wash their clothes, do homework, and feel safe. Bethany UMC is part of IHN-Family Promise.

Visit [www.bethany-umc.org](http://www.bethany-umc.org) and click on **Mission-Outreach** then **IHN-Family Promise**.

### Weekly Prayer

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

*“It’s important to realize that equipping is really the Biblical understanding of the church...when we begin to see that the church is a volunteer body and every member is gifted to function in a certain way, then that in my mind makes it mandatory – I don’t have an option – to be an equipping church...this is the way God has designed the church, and it’s our responsibility to fill that.*

*-Vernon Armitage  
[Church Volunteer  
Central, June 3,  
2008]*

”

## Day 7

# Colossians 1:3-14

Week 5: Service  
Bless Others, Be Blessed  
Psalm 67

### Reflection Questions:

1. How do I feel today about my current level of commitment with regard to service?
2. Pray about how God may be inviting you to grow with regard to service.

### Family Reflection:

As you and your children/youth review the week, talk about where you've witnessed acts of service or blessing in one another.

Ask your children/youth if there are particular areas of service in which they would like to participate. Find ways to nurture that desire to serve. Make a plan to "serve" as a family.

### Daily Connection

*Give an anonymous gift of yourself today. Thank God for the opportunity to spread His will and take pleasure in not telling a soul about your act.*

### Weekly Prayer

O God, who by Your Spirit has given to each of us unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, give us wisdom to know our gifts, courage to claim them, and power to use them for Your glory. Amen.

*“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can. -John Wesley ”*

# Service

## CONNECTING TO GOD THROUGH SERVICE



### Meghan Eldridge (college student)

*How does “service” keep you connected to God? With others? How does “service” nurture your relationship with God? With others?*

Serving God’s people allows me to step outside of my own world, outside of the chaos of schoolwork and time spent with friends and family. I’ve never experienced a time when I’ve felt closer to God, both physically and spiritually. Serving His people aligns my priorities and connects me not only one-on-one with God, but also with my

brothers and sisters in Christ.

*How do you experience God’s love, know Jesus Christ, and grow in His image – in the midst of “service”?*

It amazes me during many moments of service just how selfless and genuinely content so many people whom I serve can be, despite what we may find to be hardships. These people represent the embodiment of God’s love and what it means to truly live from a place of gratitude. To me, serving is a direct method of growing closer to Jesus Christ and growing in His image.

*What does “service” look like to you? Why do you think “service” is included in the vows we take for membership in the United Methodist Church?*

I believe that it isn’t possible to honestly be called a Christian and a Methodist without serving Christ’s people. Without serving, we become closed off from the needs of others, and can oftentimes exclude these people from our thoughts and awareness. To me, service means providing hope and sharing God’s light with all of His people, whether that is done through handing out food to a homeless man downtown or participating in a summer mission trip.

*Do you have any words of encouragement to people who might be afraid of “service” or reluctant to “serve”?*

I think that people stress too much over their hang-ups like how and where they’re serving. There’s no doubt about it, serving the “least, the last and the lost” (Matthew 25:45) involves breaking free of the constraints of our comfort zones. In my experience, as long as you go into a service opportunity with an open mind, ready to love the people you’re serving, God will meet you where you are and remove all fear.



Week 6, Day 1 | Psalm 105:1-6

# WITNESS AND COMMITMENT: START HERE, START NOW

One of the most significant findings in a recent study of church life in America was captured in the words of a lay woman who said, “My country club expects more from me than my church does.”

The study found that many good, faithful church folks give more of their time, energy and money to their country club than they do to their church. In most churches, 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the ministry, and 20 percent give 80 percent of the financial support. The conclusion of the survey was that far too many churches expect far too little commitment of their parishioners.

Bethany United Methodist is “above average” on both counts! Over 45 percent of our people are actively involved in ministries of service and witness in addition to attendance in worship. We’re ahead of the national statistics in giving, too. We can praise God for the way the Spirit has been moving us toward the New Testament vision of a church in which followers of Christ are experiencing the joy of being connected to God through prayer, connected to each other through presence, connected to God’s generosity through their gifts, connected to God’s transformation of the world through service and witness in word and deeds. But we still have a long way to go!

The readings this week bear witness to Christian disciples who made bold and often costly commitments to Jesus Christ. As we prepare to make our commitments of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness for the year ahead, let’s think about why our commitment matters.

## **Our commitments matter to the church!**

The survey mentioned above confirms that the church is sometimes like a football game, with 80,000 fans in the stadium in need of exercise and 22 players on the field in need of rest! Our

commitment matters because it is through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness that God's work gets done in the ministries of the church.

The practical fact is that no church can afford to hire enough "professional" ministers to fulfill its mission in the world. The Biblical fact is that God never intended the ministry of the church to be done by ordained clergy while lay persons sit in the pews. Our commitments matter because the biblical vision of the church is one in which every person is connected in worship and witness, each person offering their time, talents and resources to accomplish God's work in the world.

Our financial commitments matter because choirs need music, Sunday School teachers need materials, outreach ministries need support, utility bills need to be paid, and mortgage payments come due with irritating regularity. The church has no other source of financial support than the tithes and offerings of the people who believe in its mission. Our financial commitments provide the only basis upon which our Finance Committee can practice responsible financial stewardship for the congregation.

### **Our commitments matter to others!**

It's not all about us! Our commitments matter because:

- There are broken people who need to be healed, hungry people who need to be fed, lonely people who need to be loved, lost people who need to be found in the community around us;
- There are children who need to be taught, youth who need to be encouraged and disciples who need to be equipped for ministry through the mission of Bethany United Methodist Church;
- There are spiritually searching people who desperately need to experience the love of God in the context of this congregation;
- There are mission and outreach ministries in the Austin area and around the world that will not happen without our support.
- There are people who may never find the eternal life that Jesus came to bring unless they find it through the life and ministry of this church.

### **Our commitments matter to us!**

The commitments we make, make a difference in our lives. In Acts 3-4, Luke tells the dramatic story of what happened when Peter and John went to the Temple for worship. They found a man who had been "lame from birth." My guess is that they had no idea what would happen when Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

Talk about commitment! They offered what they had and stood back in amazement as the lame man jumped up and went walking and leaping into the Temple. The story doesn't end there.

They were arrested, dragged before the Council, and ordered to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. But they replied, “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). They returned to their friends with great joy, and “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

That’s commitment! The kind of commitment that makes a difference to the church, a difference to others, and that makes a radical difference in the way we live.

Like those first apostles, we are called to give what we have in the name of the Risen Christ – and then to watch in amazement to see what God can do through people who are connected to God through prayer, connected to each other through presence, connected to God’s generosity through our gifts and connected to God’s transformation of the world through our service and witness.

Are you ready to make that commitment?

### **Question to start the week:**

When you see or hear the words “witness” and “commitment,” what images come to mind?

### **Prayer of the Week**

“I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
To thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

Week 6: Witness  
and Commitment  
Start Here, Start Now  
Psalm 105:1-6

### Daily Connection

*Invite someone to  
attend Sunday school,  
a small group or Bible  
study, worship service,  
or an event at Bethany  
with you.*

“*Christ has no body  
but yours,  
No hands, no feet on  
earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with  
which He looks  
Compassion on this  
world,  
Yours are the feet with  
which He walks to do  
good,  
Yours are the hands  
with which He blesses  
all the world.  
Yours are the hands,  
yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you  
are His body.  
Christ has no body  
now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on  
earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes  
with which He looks  
Compassion on this  
world.  
Christ has no body  
now on earth but  
yours.  
-St. Teresa of Avila  
(Christ Has No  
Body)*

## Day 2

### Jeremiah 29:11-14; Acts 1:6-8

#### Reflection Questions:

1. How am I a witness for Christ in my daily life?
2. Does witnessing mean evangelizing?
3. Are my words more important than my actions?
4. What is the most meaningful witness that I have encountered?
5. How does knowing that God has a plan for my life (Jeremiah 29) influence the choices and commitments I make with my time and energy?

#### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth what it means to be a “witness” in general.

Talk about what it might mean to be a “witness” for Jesus. Share stories about how you have seen other people be “witnesses” for Jesus.

#### Prayer of the Week

“I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
To thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

” John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

## Day 3

### Acts 2:36-42

#### Reflection Questions:

1. Does *my* life convey hope, faith and love?
2. How can I live in this world, yet stand apart from it?
3. What does “repenting” mean to me?
4. What would need to change in my life in order for me to respond more faithfully to God?
5. If I were to share *my* story, what would I say?

#### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth what they think it means to live out their faith. What does it mean to be a Christian at church? At home? At school? Tell them what it means to you to be a Christian in your place of work and/or in your community.

#### Prayer of the Week

“I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
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And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
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Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

Week 6: Witness  
and Commitment  
Start Here, Start Now  
Psalm 105:1-6

#### Daily Connection

*Make a list of how you can be a blessing to Bethany United Methodist Church and beyond its campus.*

“*Living with Jesus is a great adventure. It’s the adventure of love. When you admit Jesus to your heart nothing is predictable, but everything becomes possible. He asks everything of you, but gives you more in return.*

*-Henri Nouwen  
[Letters to Marc  
about Jesus, p. 85] ”*

### Daily Connection

*Catch yourself judging someone today. Say to yourself, “God loves him or her just as much as he loves me.” Repeat!*

## Day 4

### 2 Corinthians 5:11-20

#### Reflection Questions:

1. Name one time where you made a quick judgment about someone, based on outward appearances or insufficient evidence.
2. Why is it so easy to point out the flaws in others?
3. What does it mean to me that we have been given the “ministry of reconciliation”? How does that influence how I respond to others, especially in situations where I feel like I have been wronged?
4. How good am I at self-reflection?
5. Is there a place in my life where I need to be reconciled with God? With someone else?

#### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth if they have ever made a decision not to be someone’s friend based solely on how the person looked or even based solely on what someone else might have said about that person.

Ask them if they believe someone else has ever made a decision not to be their friend based on how they (your children/youth) looked or based on what someone else told them. How did that feel?

Talk with your children/youth about what it means to be an ambassador. Ask your children/youth what it might look like to be an ambassador for Christ.

Ask your children/youth what forgiveness means to them. If they don’t know the word “reconciliation” talk about how forgiveness can affect a relationship that has been injured or broken.

#### Prayer of the Week

John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

*“Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ... He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other[s] the kind of life He has... Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”*  
-C. S. Lewis [Mere Christianity, p. 154] ”

## Day 5

### Ephesians 5:1-2, Colossians 3:12-17

#### Reflection Questions:

1. How well do I “imitate” God and live as Christ loved me?
2. How often am I “clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience”? Who do I know who is? What can I observe in how they live their lives that might encourage me?
3. Do I believe that my “witness” has to be in the midst of something big and “church-y”? How is my “witness” expressed in “whatever I do”?

#### Family Reflection:

Have fun letting your children/youth take turns “imitating” you – make silly faces, do a crazy dance move, talk with “different” voices. Talk about what it means to “imitate” someone. Ask them how they could “imitate” Jesus in how they act and how they love others.

#### Prayer of the Week

“I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
To thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

Week 6: Witness  
and Commitment  
Start Here, Start Now  
Psalm 105:1-6

#### Daily Connection

*Take a stand for something right. Make a phone call, send a (polite) e-mail, donate, voice your Christian opinion.*

“*Christian spirituality has to do with the formation of the self by the Spirit of God into the likeness of Jesus Christ... It is God’s Spirit encountering and transforming our sinful selves into the self we were meant to be Coram Deo, before God.*  
-Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) [The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. xiv]”

Week 6: Witness  
and Commitment  
Start Here, Start Now  
Psalm 105:1-6

### Daily Connection

*Pick a name out of the phone book and send that person a note or card (anonymously or signed) letting them know God loves them.*

## Day 6 Romans 12:1-2

### Reflection Questions:

1. Can I say I am willing to live my life for Christ?
2. Is living for something as important as dying for it?
3. What would it mean for me to be transformed by the renewal of my mind?

### Family Reflection:

Ask your children/youth about the difference between having a bad attitude and having a good attitude. Ask them how they think their attitude influences how they feel about something, as well as influences how they choose to behave. Ask them for ideas about how to turn a bad attitude into a good attitude.

*“In every phase of my search I’ve discovered that Jesus Christ stands at the center of my seeking. If you were to ask me point-blank, ‘What does it mean to you to live spiritually?’ I would have to reply, ‘Living with Jesus at the center.’ What matters is getting to know Jesus and living in solidarity with Him.  
-Henri Nouwen  
(1932-1996) [Letters to Marc About Jesus, p.7]*

”

### Prayer of the Week

“I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
To thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

## Day 7

# 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

### Reflection Questions:

1. How do I feel today about my current level of commitment to Christ and being a witness for Him?
2. Pray about how God may be inviting you to grow in your commitment to Christ and being a witness for Him.

### Family Reflection:

As you and your children/youth review the week, talk about where you've witnessed someone else's commitment to Christ, a commitment that influenced their words and actions.

Talk with your children/youth about what it means to make a commitment to someone or something. Talk about what kind of "commitment" they want to make with their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

As a family, pray about what your commitment will be to Christ and to Bethany United Methodist Church.

### Prayer of the Week

"I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
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John Wesley's Covenant Prayer

Week 6: Witness  
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Psalm 105:1-6

### Daily Connection

*Share your salvation story with someone you would like to know better.*

*"I am first, always, and last a servant of Christ. His task must be my task, His calling must be my calling, His way must be my way. Any other loyalty, whether to nation, family, people or party, must be subservient to this and must be looked at in its light. I know that on the Day of Judgment, all that I have lived for will be tested against this measure.  
-Peter Storey [With God in the Crucible, p. 56]"*

# HOW TO USE THE COMMITMENT CARDS

1. You will receive two cards. One is for your financial commitment toward the operations of the church and the other card for your commitment to prayer, presence, service, and witness.
2. Please confirm or print your name, e-mail address, and phone number on the space indicated on each card. Please note that the Financial “Gifts” card is to be separate for privacy purposes upon submission.
3. Please have each adult household member mark those areas of service for which he/she is already serving or ready to commit to serve. Please have students and children fill out their respective cards.
4. You will receive a confirmation letter detailing your service commitment(s) and needed ministry information. Expect to be called or contacted. A separate confirmation letter will be mailed about financial commitments.
5. Place your cards in the offering plate on October 22 or 23 or return them to the church office. Additional cards are available in the pews or in the church office.



(512) 258-6017 • [www.bethany-umc.org](http://www.bethany-umc.org)  
10010 Anderson Mill Rd. • Austin, TX 78750