

# Finding *a* Place *in* God's Plan



A process  
for discovering  
our unique gifts  
and ministries  
through  
Scripture,  
prayer, and  
reflection



### A Prayer for Inspiration

**C**ome, Holy Ghost, and fill the hearts of thy faithful people; and kindle in them the fire of thy love. Amen.

### A Prayer for Guidance

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

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# Why are we here?

God has a purpose for us.

We know this because the holy Scriptures show clearly that God works with purpose through his creation. This truth was part of God's revelation to the people of the Old Covenant, as we read in the Old Testament.

- The LORD tells Moses to say to Pharaoh:  
"FOR BY NOW I [the LORD] could have put forth my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth; but for this **purpose** have I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." (Exodus 9:15-16)
- Job suffers tragedies which he does not understand; but acknowledging the mystery and majesty of God, he confesses:  
"I KNOW THAT THOU CANST DO ALL THINGS, and that no **purpose** of thine can be thwarted." (Job 42:1)
- David offers a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance:  
THE LORD WILL FULFIL HIS **purpose** FOR ME; thy steadfast love, O LORD, endures for ever. Do not forsake the work of thy hands. (Psalm 138:8)
- The writer of the Proverbs says:  
MANY ARE THE PLANS in the mind of a man, but it is the **purpose** of the LORD that will be established. (Proverbs 19:21)
- Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD says:  
"FOR AS THE RAIN AND THE SNOW COME DOWN from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I **purpose**, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11)

God's purpose is also a recurring theme of St. Paul, who discovered in a dramatic encounter with Christ that God will work his purpose when, where, and through whom he wills. He shares this

truth with the people of the New Covenant, and we read Paul's words in the New Testament in his letters to the Church and to individuals whom he mentors.

- Paul tells the believers at Ephesus of God's plan for those whom he calls:

[GOD] DESTINED US IN LOVE to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the **purpose** of his will.... (Ephesians 1:5)

- He reminds Christ's followers that they have a vocation:

FOR WE ARE HIS WORKMANSHIP, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

- And he assures the members of the Church:

WE KNOW THAT IN EVERYTHING God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his **purpose.**" (Romans 8:28)

Most of us will read these passages and readily agree that God works with purpose. But some, if not many, of us will likely acknowledge that we're unsure of the *specific* purposes for which God has individually gifted us, and of the *specific* opportunities for which he has planted us where we are. Many believers, too, find it difficult to articulate *specific* purposes for the particular parish or other group to which they belong.

To discover God's purposes for us, individually and collectively, we must understand our relationship to God and one another; we must understand the mission of the Church and its members; and we must diligently prepare to fulfill our mission under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

# Our relationship to God and one another

In the book of Genesis, we are told that:

GOD SAID, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness;..." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Here we learn one of the most important truths about ourselves: We are made in God's image and after his likeness. Former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, in *The Bible for Everyday Life*, explains that "image" and "likeness" suggest that:

- we bear the stamp of ownership by God; and our image, though marred by sin, still bears the marks of particular "family traits" of God, such as beauty, love, and holiness.
- although we are not God, we reflect God's character, like a mirror reflects an image of the actual thing. St. Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is the actual – "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) – and reminds us that "we... are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another..." (II Corinthians 3:18).

A second truth about ourselves is that, created as persons for communion with God in three Persons, we share in God's dignity. In the Psalms, David marvels at the goodness of God in so blessing us:

WHEN I LOOK AT THY HEAVENS, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:3-5)

So, understanding our nature as persons created in and by God's love, our response to God should *be* love.

AND [JESUS] SAID TO HIM, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." (Matthew 22:37-38)

And because God gave us and our brothers and sisters in humanity inherent dignity, we should love one another as well.

“AND A SECOND [COMMANDMENT] IS LIKE IT, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:39-40)

Love for God and neighbor, Jesus says, is the basis for all standards (law) and admonishment or exhortation (prophecy) concerning human behavior. And love for God and neighbor should compel us to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. This is the mission of the Church as defined in “An Outline of the Faith” from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p.855.

# Our life and mission as a community of Faith

## The Church defined in *The Book of Common Prayer*

**A**s we seek to know and fulfill the unique purposes God has for us, a good starting point is the description of the Church found in “An Outline of the Faith,” from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979).

Q. What is the Church?

A. The Church is the community of the New Covenant.

Q. How is the Church described in the Bible?

A. The Church is described as the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and of which all baptized persons are members. It is called the People of God, the New Israel, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and the pillar and ground of truth.

Q. How is the Church described in the creeds?

A. The Church is described as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Q. Why is the Church described as one?

A. The Church is one, because it is one Body, under one Head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Q. Why is the Church described as holy?

A. The Church is holy, because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, consecrates its members, and guides them to do God’s work.

Q. Why is the Church described as catholic?

A. The Church is catholic, because it proclaims the whole Faith to all people, to the end of time.

Q. Why is the Church described as apostolic?

A. The Church is apostolic, because it continues in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles and is sent to carry out Christ’s mission to all people.

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

- Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?  
A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

## The Church defined in Jesus' words and deeds

A look at passages from the Scriptures can help amplify our understanding of the Church and its mission. First, let's look at the example of Jesus, who taught what we are to do and modeled our mission in his words and deeds.

After each passage of Scripture, answer the question(s) that examine(s) the purposes of the Church that Jesus modeled for us.

**“YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH;** but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”  
(Matthew 5:13-16)

What do you think it means to be “salt?”

In the Gospel according to St. John, Jesus says, **“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD;** he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). In the passage from St. Matthew above, Jesus tells his disciples *they* are the light of the world. What explains this apparent contradiction? What does it mean to be “light” to the world?

AND JESUS WENT ABOUT all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. (Matthew 9:35)

What four things does this passage say Jesus did?

“COME TO ME, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

What two things will Jesus do for those who come to him?

“AGAIN I SAY TO YOU, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:19-20)

When and where will we find Jesus in our midst?

AND ONE OF THEM, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:35-40)

What must we do to fulfill the two commandments Jesus gives?  
To whom should we do it?

"AND THIS GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14)

What does Jesus say will be done until the end comes?

"THEN THE KING WILL SAY to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee

sick or in prison and visit thee?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:34-40)

What specific ministries to the least of our brethren does Jesus say demonstrates our love for him?

AND JESUS CAME AND SAID TO THEM, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

What tasks does Jesus commission his followers to do?

“...WHOEVER WOULD BE GREAT AMONG YOU must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45)

What did Jesus do, and what must we do, to be “great?”

**“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME**, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (Luke 4:18-19)

The Spirit that was upon Jesus was given to the Church at Pentecost. For what was he anointed that we also are called to do?

**BUT HE SAID TO THEM**, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.” And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea. (Luke 4:43-44)

For what purpose did Jesus say he was sent?

**“BUT THE HOUR IS COMING**, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.” (John 4:23)

What does Jesus say the Father seeks us to be and do?

“I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.” (John 10:14-16)

What two groups does Jesus beckon? What does this suggest the Church should do?

“A NEW COMMANDMENT I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

What must we do to be known as Christ’s disciples?

JESUS SAID TO THEM AGAIN, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” (John 20:21)

From what you know of the activities for which Jesus was sent, what, in turn, does he send us to do?

## The Church defined in The Acts of the Apostles

We can also better understand the Church and its mission by looking at the early Church and the words and deeds of its first missionaries, the apostles.

In his introduction to The Acts of the Apostles (a continuation of his Gospel), St. Luke reminds us that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit's presence would come to and remain with those whom he commissioned:

IN THE FIRST BOOK, O THE-OPH'ILUS, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama'ria and to the end of the earth." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:1-11)

Jesus' word was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost:

WHEN THE DAY OF PENTECOST HAD COME, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

Inspired and empowered, the apostles immediately began the work that Jesus had commissioned them to do.

After each passage of Scripture, answer the question(s) that examine(s) the purposes of the Church that the apostles and the early believers modeled for us.

AND PETER SAID TO THEM, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." (Acts 2:38-40)

St. Peter *testified* and *exhorted*. What do these two words mean, and what do these two activities suggest the Church should do?

What things did Peter tell the people they must do?

What gift did Peter promise those who did?

SO THOSE WHO RECEIVED HIS WORD were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)

What did the newly baptized people do?

What things were accomplished through the apostles at this same time?

What manner of living and what activities characterized the community of believers?

How did the people among whom this community of believers grew regard them?

NOW THE COMPANY OF THOSE WHO BELIEVED were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

What did the apostles continue to do?

What was the company of believers' response to those in need?

As the believing community grew, the apostles encountered jealousy and opposition from the Jewish religious leaders, who charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and had them beaten. But when the apostles left the presence of the leaders,

THEY REJOICED THAT THEY WERE COUNTED WORTHY to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (Acts 5:41-2)

What did the apostles not cease to do?

In what places did they perform their ministry?

NOW IN THESE DAYS when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Proch'orus, and Nica'nor, and Ti'mon, and Par'menas, and Nicola'us, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1-7)

What did the believers do in response to the widows' need?

What did the apostles devote themselves to?

## The Church defined in the Epistles to the people of Faith

As the number of believers in the resurrected Christ grew, the Faith could not be contained in Jerusalem, but spread quickly to other cities and regions. St. Paul wrote several letters containing advice for communities he founded on his missionary journeys, as well as letters to Timothy and Titus. Other letters are attributed to Peter, John and James. Together, the Epistles add to our knowledge of the Church and its mission.

After each passage of Scripture, answer the question(s) that examine(s) the purposes of the Church through what the writers of the Epistles taught believers to be and do.

I APPEAL TO YOU THEREFORE, BRETHREN, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:1-8)

According to Paul, what is to be the attitude and condition of our bodies before God?

As baptized believers, what is to be the condition of our minds?

How does Paul say we should regard ourselves?

What things does Paul say individual members of the body may be gifted to do?

**WE WHO ARE STRONG** ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:1-7)

How ought we respond to the weak, according to Paul?

The word “edify” incorporates the same root as the word “edifice.” What does it mean, literally and figuratively, to “edify” our neighbor? (Look it up in a dictionary, if necessary.)

What does Paul pray that the God of steadfastness and encouragement will grant us to do? What will be the result?

Upon seeing each other, and for the glory of God, what does Paul say we should do?

FOR JUST AS THE BODY IS ONE and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were

an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

Think about your own body – your head, eyes, ears, hands, feet, limbs, and organs. If one part of your body is unable to function as God designed it, if it is weak, or if it is in pain, how do you respond to it? What do you do for the afflicted member?

According to Paul, how does the body respond when a single member suffers? How does it respond when a member is honored?

What does this suggest, then, about our responses to each other as members of the body of Christ – the Church?

According to Paul, what are the ministries God has appointed various members of the Body of Christ to do?

THEREFORE, IF ANY ONE IS IN CHRIST, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. (II Corinthians 5:17-6:1)

The definition of *ambassador* is “an authorized representative or messenger.” From whom do we get our authority / whom do we represent?

According to Paul, of what ministry are we the messengers?

What is the goal of the ministry of reconciliation? (Hint: Look back at the question in The Outline of the Faith, "What is the mission of the Church?")

**F**OR YOU WERE CALLED TO FREEDOM, BRETHREN; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another. (Galatians 5:13-15)

According to this passage, what should we be in our relationships to one another?

What must we do to fulfill the law?

**B**RETHREN, IF A MAN IS OVERTAKEN in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1-2)

What are we to do if our neighbor trespasses?

What must we do to fulfill the law of Christ?

SO THEN YOU ARE NO LONGER STRANGERS AND SOJOURNERS, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

What does Paul describe the Church as being?

As members of the Church, with whom are we fellow citizens?

With Jesus as its cornerstone, what is the Church designed to become?

...THE GENTILES ARE FELLOW HEIRS, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Ephesians 3:6)

The first believers in the resurrected Christ, and the founders of the Faith, were Jews. As their message spread, though, they soon welcomed believing Gentiles – outsiders to the temple – as “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise.” What does this imply for us?

AND HIS GIFTS WERE THAT SOME SHOULD BE APOSTLES, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

For what purposes does Christ gift his apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers?

What benefits do we derive as we attain spiritual maturity?

[CHRIST] WE PROCLAIM, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me. (Colossians 1:28-29)

What three things does Paul say he does, that every hearer may be presented mature in Christ?

AND LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE IN YOUR HEARTS, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:15-16)

As the peace of Christ rules in our hearts, what are five things we can do?

THEREFORE ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER and build one another up, just as you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

What are two responsibilities we have to one another?

...AND LET US CONSIDER HOW TO STIR UP ONE ANOTHER to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

What should we not neglect to do?

What should we do for one another?

**OBEY YOUR LEADERS AND SUBMIT TO THEM;** for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

What is our responsibility to our leaders (spiritual mentors)?

What is their responsibility before God?

**BUT YOU ARE A CHOSEN RACE,** a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

As a "chosen race...royal priesthood...holy nation...God's own people" and recipients of his great mercy, what are we called to do?

**THIS IS THE MESSAGE** we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:5-7)

In what two ways do we benefit from "walking in the light" with God?

**B**ELOVED, LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ... We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:7-11, 19-21)

By what action and gift of God do we know that he loves us?

What ought we do because God first loved us?

# Preparing to know and do God's will

As individual creatures of God, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14, KJV) – or as the New Living Translation renders the same verse, “wonderfully complex.”

St. Paul explains our differences as part of God's purpose for us:

FOR AS IN ONE BODY we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

But how can we know our unique individual role in fulfilling the mission of the Church? As St. Paul asked,

ARE ALL APOSTLES? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Corinthians 12:29-30)

The answer, of course, is no. We cannot each be all things. However, we can prepare ourselves to fulfill the purpose God has for us, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, confident that our unique gifts and opportunities will be revealed, and assured that we will be blessed for the mission.

The Scriptures provide some especially vivid metaphors for how we should prepare for and carry out our mission. Here's one:

THEREFORE TAKE THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:13-17)

And here's another:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

These two metaphors are very different, but they illustrate the diligent preparation that must be part of every mission. The soldier clothes and arms himself for battle. The athlete disciplines his body for the contest. We, too, must prepare ourselves for whatever purposes and opportunities God reveals to us.

Ways in which we can prepare to do God's will are to:

- Abide in, trust, and obey God
- Be transformed by the renewal of our minds
- Be in community with others in Christ; rejoice, pray, and give thanks
- Learn about ourselves, our gifts, and our opportunities
- Discern God's will
- Confirm the vision

## **Abide in God**

St. John's gospel provides an extended description of Jesus' last night and final words with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. In part, he says:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done

for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

When we abide in Christ, God the Father tends us so that we may grow stronger and bear more fruit. That fruit may be the outcome of any ministry for which God gifts us and provides opportunities, whether it's proclaiming the Gospel, teaching others, meeting their material needs, praying for or comforting them, performing acts of service, and more. By our fruit we prove to be Christ's disciples, we make him known, and we glorify the Father.

If we're not bearing fruit, we must question whether we're truly a part of the vine or just something else growing alongside in its shade. Are we connected to the vine through complete faith, obedience, and dependence on Christ? Through an active prayer life? Through regular presence at the Eucharist? Through participation in the life of the parish? Through our witness where we work and associate? Through ministry to others in his name?

## Trust

As we abide in the vine, we become free to acknowledge a wisdom that is superior to our own and a design for our lives that is greater than anything we can envision.

**T**RUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

These two verses come from what one commentator describes as "the most religious section" in the book of Proverbs. In fact, each two-verse pair in Proverbs 3:1-12 contains the name of the LORD and connects true wisdom – more than merely practical knowledge – with one's relationship to God.

Left to our own insight, we journey down crooked paths to our own destinations. Acknowledging God's superior wisdom, we travel the shortest distance between two points – a straight path – to God's intended destination for us.

## Obey

"OK, here's the plan: Quit your job, leave your family, and follow me. I can't promise you any wages; I don't know when we'll

eat or where we'll sleep. In the end, I'll be killed and you'll have to carry on without me. Oh, and eventually you'll be killed because of me, too."

Imagine that you were one of the men chosen by Jesus to be his disciples. (See Mark 1:14-20, when Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John.) Imagine that he had explained God's plan for the rest of your life as in the preceding paragraph.

Is it any wonder God doesn't reveal everything to us at once?

God's design for our lives is greater than anything we can comprehend in full. The prophet Isaiah says:

"FOR MY THOUGHTS ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS, neither are your ways my ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

So God requires that obedience precede understanding. As St. Paul urges the Church at Rome:

I APPEAL TO YOU THEREFORE, BRETHREN, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

Throughout his writings, Paul uses the word "bodies" typically to mean "selves." And here he uses an analogy to sacrificial worship to put the appropriate response to God in terms that any Jew of the time would understand. In a vivid illustration of obedience, Paul tells his brothers and sisters in Christ to throw themselves on the altar of sacrifice and give up their lives to God. Paul's appeal recalls the following words of Jesus, which are recorded nearly identically by Matthew, Mark and Luke:

FOR WHOEVER WOULD SAVE HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24)

Only when we recognize that our lives are not our own and we obey our way to understanding can God transform us for his purposes.

## **Be transformed by the renewal of your mind**

Immediately after urging that the faithful make themselves living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, St. Paul says:

DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2, see also Ephesians 4:23 and I John 2:15)

Here, the apostle admonishes believers to live as belonging to the kingdom of God, and not as subjects to “the world rulers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12), so that we may have sure knowledge of God’s will.

How should we then live? St. Paul tells us to love one another, repent of the works of the flesh, and be known by the fruit of the Spirit.

FOR YOU WERE CALLED TO FREEDOM, BRETHREN; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another. (Galatians 5:13-26)

## **Be in community with others in Christ; rejoice, pray, and give thanks**

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we exhort you, brethren, admonish

the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (I Thessalonians 5: 11-18)

## Learn about yourself, your gifts, and your opportunities

How well do you know yourself – your likes and dislikes, your preferences in work and social situations, your demonstrated abilities and hidden talents, your spiritual gifts?

The Internet has made many self-assessment tools readily available and easy to use. One of the more useful assessments is the “Myers-Briggs” Type Indicator, which attempts to identify one’s characteristic tendencies and general personality type. A second useful assessment is a “gifts inventory,” which attempts to identify one’s practical abilities and spiritual graces.

**“Myers-Briggs” tests.** Also known as the Jung Typology Test, these assessments are based on the personality theory of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, who said that all individuals can be classified into personality types according to the combination of three indicators:

- Extroverted vs. Introverted orientation
- Sensory vs. Intuitive information-gathering
- Thinking vs. Feeling decision-making

Isabel Briggs Myers added a fourth indicator, Judgmental vs. Perceptive application of information, and she developed the MBTI test instrument to assess the various strengths of these indicators in a person and to identify the person as one of 16 types.

Knowing your type and its characteristic tendencies can help you better understand your own tendencies in different environments and situations. Following are addresses of Web sites that present interactive assessments based on the Myers-Briggs model. Two cautions: First, none of these is the actual Myers-Briggs test instrument, which is copyrighted and licensed. Second, a single assessment is not definitive. Still, these can be instructive when

two or more are taken and the results are compared.

- <http://www.humanmetrics.com>  
Click on the link to the Jung Typology Test.
- <http://keirseych.com>  
Click on the button or the link to the Keirseych Temperament Sorter II. (After linking to the assessment site, you'll be asked for your e-mail address.)
- <http://similarminds.com>  
Click on the link to Myers-Briggs Tests. A number of other assessments are available here – many are fun!

**“Gifts inventories.”** Like the personality assessments, the online gifts inventories differ. Some recognize seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, while others number up to 20 different gifts. Some distinguish “functional” gifts vs. “spiritual graces.” Some carry denominational overtones. Again, taking two or more of these assessments and comparing the results can be instructive.

- <http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi>  
Click on the “Click here to continue” button.
- <http://buildingchurch.net/g2s.htm>  
Scroll down and click the link to begin the “Gifted 2 Serve” inventory.
- <http://www.fbhsv.org/ministries/discipleship/gifts.html>  
Read the study materials and/or click the link for A Spiritual Gifts Inventory
- [http://www.woodburylutheran.org/resources/spiritual\\_gifts.php](http://www.woodburylutheran.org/resources/spiritual_gifts.php)  
Read the introduction, then click the link to the assessment.

When you have tentatively identified your personality characteristics and gifts, you may want to share the results with one or more persons who know you and whose wisdom you can trust. Often, it's easier for others to recognize our talents than we can.

**Seeking opportunities for ministry.** It's important, too, to learn about the world around you – your neighborhood, workplace, church, community, or larger venue – so that you can recognize opportunities to use your abilities and spiritual gifts.

For individuals, this may simply be a matter of asking for the

Holy Spirit to bless oneself with greater sensitivity, then doing something intentional like introducing oneself to an unfamiliar neighbor or a fellow worshipper at church. For a church, it may be a matter of corporately asking for guidance, then doing something intentional like a neighborhood survey or walking tour, or hosting an event to bring visitors to the church.

## Discern

Discerning (distinguishing the different aspects of) God's will involves sensitivity to various tangible and intangible signs and promptings, personal passion, and opportunities. There are several aspects to discernment:

**Abiding words.** What are the repeating themes that occur in your life, your studies, your thoughts, your prayers?

**Sacred patterns.** In which areas of your life have you known accomplishment? Failure? Where have you recognized sequences or patterns of events? When have you been confronted with a "stop sign?"

**Spirit promptings.** When have you been nudged to think "I wonder..." or "what if...?"

**Personal passion.** Has God planted a passion in you for people? for an activity? for a cause? What's the one thing you can't *not* do and still be content?

**Circumstances.** What opportunities for ministry are available? What resources can support it? Will it take time? Money? Transportation? Organization? Am I / are we prepared, spiritually and practically, for this ministry? What obstacles will I / we face?

## Confirm

Before acting on what is perceived to be God's will, confirmation is essential. A ministry should resonate with the person or group undertaking it: Does it fit me/us? Does it excite me/us? It should have communal affirmation: Do others see this as a "fit" for me/us, and are they supportive of it? And finally, it should have providential corroboration: Is God providing for this?

# Self-Assessment

To help define your unique role in the mission of the Church, complete the following. Take your time and answer thoughtfully. Use extra pages if you need to. The more complete your answers are, the better you'll be able to describe yourself, your abilities, gifts, and interests as you seek opportunities for ministry.

## Personality assessments

1. According to the results of the "Myers-Briggs" tests, what is your personality type? (Most assessments provide an acronym, such as "ENFP," for the type, as well as a descriptive phrase, such as "Visionary Thinker" or "Inspector." Write both below.)

2. Was the classification of your personality type the same on two or more tests? If no, what differed between the results?

3. Summarize the description of your personality type:

4. Does the classification/description of your personality type fit with how you already perceived yourself? What was confirmed about your self-perception? What differed or surprised you?

5. What characteristics of your personality might be a good fit for existing ministries in the church or in a group?

6. What characteristics of your personality might make you uncomfortable in or less likely to pursue a particular role or ministry in the church or group?

7. Is there a strong aspect of your personality that you feel you must subdue in the church or group?

## Gifts inventories

1. According to the results you obtained from the gifts inventories, what are three dominant practical or spiritual gifts you may have?

2. Were the results the same on two or more tests? If not, what differed between the results?

3. Do the results fit with your perception of your abilities and gifts? What was confirmed about your knowledge of your abilities and gifts? What differed or surprised you?

4. What people or cause do you have a passion for?

5. What's one thing in your life you can't *not* do and still be content? Don't think "ministry," think *activity*. Can you envision a way for God to use that activity to bless other believers or visitors?

6. What abilities and gifts might be a good fit for existing ministries in the church or in a group?

7. What abilities and gifts are you not using as fully as you'd like?

8. What ministry or ministries that currently don't exist in the church could you establish to use your abilities and gifts more fully?

# Focusing our vision

## An exercise to define our unique purposes as a parish

To help us collaborate on an understanding of our unique purposes as a parish, please respond to the following three questions. Use other sheets of paper if you'd like. The more ideas you record, the more we can discuss.

1. Review your responses to the questions following the Scripture passages in "Our life and mission as a community of Faith." What purposes, functions, and activities of the Church seem to occur repeatedly? In other words, how does the Church consistently act, and what does it consistently do? Please list these model behaviors, one by one:

2. What *specific* purposes, functions, activities, or roles can we perform to fit the consistent model of the Church you described in your response to question #1? You can name current activities and ministries in your answer as well as new ideas. What opportunities exist around us or are currently emerging?

3. How can we improve in a specific activity/ministry in which we are currently involved? What would it take to begin a new activity or ministry you identified in your response to question #2?



### **A Prayer of Self-Dedication**

**A**lmighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and to the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **A Prayer for the Parish**

**A**lmighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth, mercifully hear the supplications of us thy servants, and grant unto this parish all things that are needful for its spiritual welfare; enlighten and guide its priests; strengthen and increase the faithful; visit and relieve the sick; turn and soften the wicked; rouse the careless; recover the fallen; restore the penitent; remove all hindrances to the advancement of thy truth; bring all to be of one heart and mind within the fold of thy holy Church; to the honor and glory of thy Name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

