



S.O.S.

Soil for Our Souls

The Way of Jesus – A Spiritual Path for Today

www.soilforoursouls.com

Uplifted in daily prayer

Nourished through weekly rest and worship

Inspired by daily reading and memorization of Scripture

Testifying about God's love through service and hospitality

Engaged in spiritual friendships and study

Dedicating time, talent, and treasure in gratitude to God

*Emotional, Social and Spiritual ...
Health, Maturity, Wisdom, Sustainability, and Completion*

Practicing not Perfection

Relationships not Rules nor Righteousness nor Results

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Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another.

They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed.

Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

Acts 2:43-47 (TEV)

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Preface

The families, Board and Wednesday Bible Study of Capilano United Church, North Vancouver, BC have been the rich soil in which these seeds germinated. They are indeed the hidden pearl of great value (to switch metaphors). (Matthew 13:46)

The materials presented here are brief introductions to habits and practices that ordinary Christians have cultivated through the ages as a means to nurture their relationships with God, each other, and their world. I hope they will be used to introduce other Boards, study groups, etc. to the blessings of intentional Christian practices.

This booklet is also an introduction to www.soilforoursouls.com, its companion web site, where additional resources are available to enrich the spiritual life of congregations.

My thanks to the Rev. Richard Bott, Saint Andrew’s-Haney United Church, Maple Ridge, BC for the idea of using U.N.I.T.E.D. as an acronym for organizing these ideas. He understands the need for making things memorable and memorizable.

Thanks also the Rev. Elly Bradley who has been my spiritual director for the past 5 years, and my teacher for 40!

And finally, inexpressible thanks to Catherine Ross whose Christian faith, love and companionship are the support without which none of this would have been created.



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Introduction

The following is an article introducing the S.O.S. project.

Rich Soil for Our Souls to Flourish

*It was you who formed my inward parts;
I praise you,
for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Psalm 139

And yet, it is also true ...

*I realize I don't have what it takes to do what is right. I can
will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't
really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.
My "decisions" don't result in actions.*

Romans 7 (from "The Message")

Jesus used many soil and seed images to describe how, in spite of our inability to be *perfect*, we might nonetheless *practice* ways of living so that our God-given souls might flourish in health, wisdom and fruitfulness.

One of the ones I like best is the description of a farmer who prepares the soil, scatters the seed, and then sleeps while the seed grows **all by itself**. (Mark 4:26-29)

Because we live in a culture that is frantic about results, and at the same time has pretty much lost contact with how plants and other wild things grow, we think we will either grow to become spiritually mature and healthy by doing everything, or by doing nothing - not giving any time, thought, or intention to nurturing our soul. Both alternatives are a mistake.

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Our job is to prepare the soil and scatter the seed. It is **NOT** our job to grow the seed. We do need to do some of the work, but not all of the work. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to suggest it is best if take a rest while God is doing God's part.

For the next year, we will focus our attention on becoming good soil in which the seed of our soul can take root and flourish to health and maturity.

As a starting point, we'll use ancient teachings from the Christian past to learn about how to tend the roots of our soul so that it might produce abundant fruit in our life.

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Over the past 1,900 years, the followers of Jesus have found the following practices have stood the test of time as being the best way to provide the good soil in which our souls might flourish. They called it, "**The Way:**"

- **U**plifted in daily prayer;
- **N**ourished through weekly rest and worship;
- **I**nspired by daily reading and memorizing of scripture;
- **T**estifying about God's love through service and hospitality;
- **E**ngaged in spiritual friendships and study;
- **D**edicating time, talent and treasure in gratitude to God.

*(Thanks to Richard Bott, Saint Andrew's-Haney United Church, for the acronym: **U.N.I.T.E.D.**)*

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Exactly what we do and how we do each of these six practices is something we'll need to explore. But that we need to do them is not.

And so I invite everyone who is interested to be part of an "**S.O.S. - Soil for Our Souls**" process with me. This process can include everything from getting together for coffee, email, phone calls, visits, or forming a group who would like to get together. We'll take a look at each of the six practices and clarify what it means to do those today. For example, no one can memorize the whole Bible, so where should a person begin? What would be the first top 10 passages to memorize?

My vision is that by this time next year, we will have developed some, clear, simple, easy to follow, suggestions for what to do and how to do it for each of the above 6 practices. And that we will have begun to intentionally talk together and support each other to nurture our souls to greater health, wisdom and fruitfulness.

I look forward to growing with you all.

David Ewart,
Minister.

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Uplifted in Daily Prayer

Prayer is simply conversation with God. But every time I ask a group, "How many of you feel good about your prayer life," no more than one or two hands go up.

Such negative feelings spring from our good motives. We want to draw close to God, but we also want to do things correctly – and often we're not sure how to pray. We are in good company!

Even the disciples who spent lots of time with Jesus had to ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." And Jesus responded to their yearning by giving the model prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer.

The disciples' request reminds us that praying is something we can learn to do. Many of us are helped by having models for our praying.

There are many models, but the crucial thing for them all is to remember that prayer is about a relationship – it is not about appearances or being "good" or getting results. Think of prayer as spending time with a best friend with whom you can share everything just like it is.

One simple and widely known model is built on the acronym

A-C-T-S:

A - Adoration (worship, praise)

C - Confession

T - Thanksgiving

S - Supplication (requests)

We begin by adoring God, acknowledging who God is. Then we confess our failures and our need for God and ask for forgiveness. Next we express thanks, acknowledging God as the source of all we have, all our blessings. Finally, we ask God for what we need and want. This model

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can help us to pray more freely by giving us a way to search our hearts for what we want to say to God.

Another pattern for our praying can help us as we pray for others. We often say, "God bless you," which is a sort of prayer. Dr. Alvin VanderGriend has created a helpful model that can guide us in praying for others by building on the word **B-L-E-S-S**.*

- B** - Body. Pray for health/healing, for "daily bread"/physical needs to be met.
- L** - Labours. Pray for God's help in the person's work, school, daily tasks.
- E** - Emotional needs. Pray for comfort, reassurance, hope, joy, peace, etc.
- S** - Social needs. Pray for healthy relationships with family, friends, associates.
- S** - Spiritual needs. Pray for continually deepening relationship with God.

Patterns like these can encourage us to exercise the privilege of prayer and to pray more freely and faithfully.

Other models include praying passages of Scripture; meditating on a word or phrase; repeating an ancient prayer such as the Hail Mary, or the Kyrie. We are not all the same, and we will not all pray in the same way. So it is important to find what works for you.

And remember, however you pray, strive to leave space for silence in which to hear the "still small voice" of God. (1 Kings 19:11-12)

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Questions for Reflection:

1. What is your first memory of praying? Who taught you to pray?
2. What questions about prayer do you have? How would you like to grow in prayer? How might you seek support from God and others for your desire to grow in prayer?
3. What settings or situations move you to prayer?
4. Do you have a special place where you go to pray?
5. Do you have special times when you pray?
6. What might be the advantages of having a special prayer place and time?
7. What people and situations do you want to bring to God today in prayer?

Mary Lou Redding

*The B.L.E.S.S. acronym is adapted from Dr. VanderGriend's book, *Love to Pray: A 40-Day Devotional for Deepening Your Prayer Life*, and is used by permission.

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Nourished through weekly rest and worship

Weekly rest is both a sign of remembering God's blessing of creation and of God's saving us – and all people – from slavery; and for Christians adds the celebration God's love conquering death.

The holiness of God and the blessings of God are experienced when our being shapes our doing and not the other way round.

If you can bracket enough rest time on each side of worship time, then worship becomes what it was meant to be: a time for gathering with friends for support, for centering, for giving thanks, for remembering who you are, and whose you, and getting perspective during the good times to have strength for the bad times.

Isn't it a great and good thing that one of the very first and best practices is to take it easy; slow down; rest! Thank you God! If there is one thing that I hear people can't get enough of, it is time – enough time to finally get all the chores and errands done so that there can still be time for rest, for relaxation, for recreation, for reading, visiting, napping. I do not know anyone today who takes 24 consecutive hours with no chores or errands or work or worry. And yet, this is what we called to do, to rest.

Rest is the one thing that all people and all creatures can do. Rich and poor can equally rest. Women and men and children can all rest. Cats and dogs and gerbils can rest. Quadriplegics and Olympic athletes can rest. And God rests. And it is in our resting that we may finally become still enough to notice that we are human **BE**ings not just **DO**ers.

When we work and worry day in day out, 24/7, there is no opportunity to experience our inner self. We become what we do: work, shop, clean, cook, keep appointments. These are not bad things in

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themselves. Even God worked for 6 days. But the wisdom of our scripture is that we must rest in order to connect our inner life with the sacred, and to let our inner life then shape our outer activities.

In this day and age it is not easy to rest, especially for a whole household to rest for a whole day. Which is probably why in this day and age it is even more crucial for us to intentionally set limits together. Each household will have its own unique issues to deal with, but here are some suggestions to get you started:

- How about turning off all electronic gadgets for an hour? No TV. No iPod. No Xbox / PlayStation/Etc. No computer. No email. No MSN. How about no telephone?
- How about trying for a sit down meal as a family and/or with friends?
- Some sort of outing - not shopping - together?
- How about getting a children's bible - even if you are an adult - and reading one of the "classic" bible stories once a week?
- And of course - how about weekly worship?

When worship attendance is one more thing to do in a busy weekend, sleeping in may indeed be the best way to observe the Sabbath. But if you can bracket enough rest time on each side of that, then worship becomes what it was meant to be:

a time for gathering with friends for support,
for centering, for giving thanks, for remembering
who you are, and whose you,
and getting perspective during the good times
to have strength for the bad times.

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No one can make it through life alone. And weekly worship with others is the one practice that connects your self with God and others and teaches how to live in a kingdom way here and now.

Christian life practices are not meant to be arduous burdens. Rather, they are the means by which we live in order to receive and deepen the blessings of God. I urge you to take some time – rest – and re-assess how to make weekly rest and worship part of your practices.



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Inspired by the daily reading and memorizing of Scripture

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (NRSV)

The shepherd calls his own sheep by name, ... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

John 10:3-4 (NRSV)

Three memories constantly remind me of the importance of keeping God's word in our hearts.

The first is from my first year as a new minister when I visited a young woman who had had surgery for ovarian cancer the year before. Among many things we talked about, she told me that one thing that helped her through the terrible months of her surgery and follow-up treatments were the words:

Perfect love casts out fear.

1 John 4:18

As often as fear would rise up and threaten to overwhelm her, she would recall this text and be calmed by remembering God's perfect love for her. These were the last thing she can remember saying before her surgery.

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She had found this text while reading her Bible. But by committing it to memory and keeping it in her heart, she had it with her the instant she needed it, especially in those times and places where a Bible was not at hand.

My second memory is from visiting Lucy Nicholson in the months before she died at the age of 99. Lucy told me that as a young girl she had memorized the 23rd Psalm, and now that she was no longer reading, she still recited that Psalm every day as part of her devotions. The words of the Psalm provided her with assurance of God's steadfast and tender care in the midst of aches and losses:

The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want

Psalm 23

By memorizing these words and keeping them in her heart, Lucy was able to find consolation and deal with adversities long after she could no longer read the Bible.

My third memory is of a conversation with a young woman who had grown up in the United Church, but had started attending a more conservative, "evangelical" congregation. When I asked her what she had found there that she wasn't getting in her home congregation, one of the things she talked about was how her spiritual hunger was being fed by their emphasis on knowing the Bible through daily, devotional reading and memorization.

When I asked her to say more about this, she described how becoming familiar with the Bible had helped her become familiar with Jesus' "voice." Like a good friend whose voice she instantly recognizes on the phone; knowing the Bible had helped her to know Jesus' voice – and distinguish it from all the many "voices" within her head – during her

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prayers, and to feel more confident that she was following his way in her life.

She had always trusted that Jesus is a good shepherd; but now she was learning how to – and trusting that she could – be a good sheep.

In summary then the goals of daily reading and memorizing of Scripture – keeping it within your heart – are:

- Know what God desires of you; what are God's purposes for you.
- Stop feeling confused and uncertain about "what the Bible says."
- Become more confident of your choices.
- Find direction for life-long spiritual maturing.
- Gain perspective on life; increase peace of mind; reduce fear and anxiety.
- Know what sort of person God wants you to grow to become.
- Know what sort of character God's wants you to develop.
- Know what values to cherish and practice.
- Learn basic biblical facts.

Tips for reading and memorizing

Note: The phrase "daily reading and memorizing" does **NOT** mean that you will read **and** memorize a **new** passage every day.

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The goal is to read some portion of the Bible every day. There are many different ways to do this:

- Read an entire book of the Bible from start to finish over several days or weeks.
- Use a guide such as the Upper Room which has a daily Scripture passage, reflection, and prayer.
- Find other guides that suggest readings based on themes such as discerning God’s will for you; responding to loss; etc.

Whatever method you choose, it may be that you will read the same passage several days in a row, or a new passage each day.

In any case, it will not be possible to memorize the whole Bible – everything that you read! There are certain “core” passages that everyone should know. For example:

- The 23rd Psalm
- The Beatitudes
- The 10 Commandments
- The Great Commandment
- John 3:16

And in addition to that, as you read the Bible, you should ask God to draw your attention to any particular verses that you should “keep in your heart.” These selected verses are the ones you should memorize – not everything that you have been reading. So the passage that you are memorizing that day may not be the passage that you are reading.

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There are many techniques for memorization, but here is one approach:

1. Write or print the verse on a card or piece of paper small enough that you can carry it with you.
2. Make sure to include the Biblical reference: Book, Chapter, and Verse; and include this as part of your memorization.
3. Slowly read, and say out loud or to yourself, the words you are trying to memorize. Consciously focus on them and intend to remember them. Repeat this 3 or 4 times.
4. Cover the words and test your recall. Try not to be anxious or critical of yourself. Instead, try to notice where the gaps or uncertainties are. Notice what you have retained, and use these as “hooks” on which to attach the parts still to be learned.
5. Uncover the words, and repeat the slow reading again as in Step 3. Focus on the words that you have successfully memorized, and on key words in the “gaps” or places where you are uncertain.
6. Repeat Step 4 again and continue this cycle until your recall is perfect – or until you have reached the end of your patience for that day. Do **not** try to continue to do this if you have become tired, frustrated, anxious, or critical.
7. Carry the words with you, and see if you can recall them at different times throughout the day, but don’t over do this.

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8. The next day, test your recall again, and as necessary, continue to repeat Steps 3 and 4 until you can perfectly recall the verse and reference. Be patient if this takes a week or more.
9. When finished, tack the words on your fridge or some other visible place as a daily reminder both of what you have succeeded at memorizing, and of your hearing of God's voice.

To help get started, here are the Ten Commandments:

The Ten Commandments

New Revised Standard Version

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord, your God.
4. Observe the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.
5. Honour your father and mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife or possessions.

Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:1-21

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The Ten Commandments

Kid Friendly Version

1. Love God more than you love anything else.
2. Don't make anything in your life more important than God.
3. Always say God's name with love and respect.
4. Honour the Lord by resting on the seventh day of the week.
5. Love and respect your mom and dad.
6. Never hurt anyone.
7. Always be faithful to your husband or wife.
8. Don't take anything that isn't yours.
9. Always tell the truth.
10. Be happy with what you have.
Don't wish for other people's things.

Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:1-21



Testifying about God's love through service and hospitality

Love one another as I have loved you

John 15:12

This new commandment from Jesus to his followers revolutionized the world.

Often it is shortened – and thereby misquoted – as “love one another.” This is good advice, but it is not revolutionary – even thieves and bandits can love one another.

However, loving one another **as Jesus loves us** changes everything. Suddenly, I am no longer simply trying to get along with neighbours, co-workers, family, etc. Suddenly, I am first centring my relationship with others within Jesus' love **for me**. I turn toward others from within Christ's love for me. And suddenly I am also trying to see them as Jesus sees them, and to care for them as Jesus cares for me.

Hospitality

A mark of Jesus' love is his hospitality. He welcomes the rich and the poor; the outcast and the esteemed; the sick and the well; enemies and neighbours; women, men and children.

This open hospitality became a mark of his followers as well. And it revolutionized their world. Because then, as now, hospitality was normally only extended to one's social circle, and even then divided women and men, children and adults.

But the followers of Jesus practiced an open table, open hospitality that welcomed Jews and Greeks, women and men, slaves and free –

everyone – to sit at the same table to eat together, and to love one another as Jesus loved them.

Whether extended to strangers or old friends, hospitality is the generous delight in meeting the other as one in whom Christ is abiding, and seeking to love them in that Christ-like two-fold way of “just as I am,” and “as Christ's love might transform me.”

Service

Whereas hospitality is usually marked by the action of inviting in; service is marked by the action of going out.

But the guiding principle is the same:

Love one another as I have loved you.

It is not possible, nor even desirable, to invite the whole world into our church and homes. But it is possible and desirable to get out of our church and homes to serve.

Just as Jesus leaves the comfort of his home to come to us, so we forego the comfort and security of our homes to go and serve.

This too revolutionized the world of the first followers of Jesus. They became known for serving others and not self-serving. Their communities were marked by attitudes and actions of service and not “serve-us.”

They served others as Jesus did: without thought of personal gain but instead with personal sacrifice.

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Loving God Leads to Loving Who God Loves, The Way God Loves

Some of us will be more naturally drawn to the extroverted activities of hospitality and service – loving others; and some more naturally to the introverted activities of prayer and scripture reading – loved by Jesus.

But service and hospitality that is not centred and shaped by Jesus' love for us will quickly lead to exhaustion and burn out. And prayer and scripture reading that remains private and personal will become shallow and self-righteous.

The temptation to become comfortable and secure with the familiar is challenged by Jesus commandment:

Love one another as I have loved you.

Are we loving as Jesus has loved us? Honestly examining our attitudes and actions toward service and hospitality will answer that question.



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Engaged in spiritual friendships and study

Researchers are constantly finding that going to church is good for you. The April 29, 2008 Globe and Mail reported the most recent findings.

Judith Timson's Life Section column, "Longevity: The New Boomer Status Symbol," listed 9 items that author Dan Buettner had observed in his studies of communities around the world with higher than average longevity.

The first 4 have to do with common sense diet and exercise.

The last 5? In one way or another, all are associated with traditional religious practices:

- Have a strong sense of purpose
- Take time to relieve stress - observe a Sabbath, meditate, pray, nap, play
- Belong - participate in a spiritual community
- Put loved ones first
- Join the right tribe - hang with others who practice a healthy life style.

The key is the last point -

- Join the right tribe

Spiritual Friendships

The road of life is often bumpy and one of the things that helps us through are good friends: bosom buddies, soul mates; close friends with whom we can share everything.

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The stress on **spiritual** friendships is to acknowledge that it cannot be taken for granted that all our friends will be comfortable sharing spiritual or faith concerns.

But if we are going to draw closer to God or Jesus, we need friends here on earth who also share this relationship. We need friends who take God seriously, who read the Bible, who pray, who dedicate their lives in gratitude to God. Because friends like these will help us to grow in this way too.

The other day, Catherine was telling me of her disappointment that after years of dedication, no one from the church came to visit her mother in her final years. She went on to also describe how special it was for her to spend time with her mother reading the Bible, praying together, and talking about the assurance of God's love. It seemed to me that Catherine had been that church visitor; had been a spiritual friend to her mother; and that this is what we need to engage and encourage together.

Spiritual Study

There was a time in the not too distant past when the default position of our society was “nominally Christian.” That is, being a good citizen and being a good person, and being a good church member were part of the same package. But that day has gone for good.

Oddly enough, one of the results of this passing is that many churches have had to wake up to the fact that no one else is teaching people about how to pray, read the Bible, follow Jesus, etc.

We had been taking it for granted that this was all “part of the package.” But now that it is up to us, and us alone, it requires us to be more focused, to be more intentional, and to become less shy talking

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about and encouraging one another in our faith. We have to be more openly religious in church!

In many ways, our society now discourages taking the reality of God seriously, and considers “faith” to be a crutch or – at best – a personal choice. Society will no longer teach you how to have a fruitful relationship with God. It will not help your soul to flourish.

If we want to grow and mature and deepen our faith, we will now have to intentionally take time to learn and study.

“Study” can take many forms: courses; private reading, tapes, or DVD's; discussions with friends; hands on volunteering in new environments; etc.

But whatever form it takes, if we truly desire our souls to grow in health, maturity, and wisdom, there is no avoiding studying, learning, and changing.

The road of life is often bumpy and one of the things that helps us through is the perspective and wisdom that come through studying.



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Dedicating time, talent, and treasure in gratitude to God

Many of us live lives that are held hostage by a flurry of conflicting demands on our time, attention and energy. We have little time for rest and reflection.

On the other hand, some of us have too much time on our hands; routines and habits rule our days.

What's missing in both cases is centering and grounding each day in life-giving gratitude, purpose, and direction. Intentionally setting aside some part of each day for God's claim and calling for us.

Dedicating

Dedicating means setting aside for a special purpose.

If our day is usually jam packed and over scheduled, dedicating means pushing back the demands and clearing some space. Saying, "No." Restraining the urgent so that the important can see the light of day in our lives.

If our day is usually one of routine and habit, dedicating means upping the ante. Saying, "Yes." Breaking routines so that richness can claim us.

Other people, duties and responsibilities (or lack of these) would consume our entire lives if we allowed it. One healthy response is to make sure that some of our energy is spent on self-care: reading, exercise, hobbies, yoga, etc.

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A second healthy response is to intentionally dedicate some part of our time, talent and treasure in gratitude to God. We set them aside for God's exclusive purposes.

Gratitude

It is possible to dedicate time, talent and treasure in grumpiness to God. To do it out of duty; or because your mother makes you, or because you've been told you'll be punished if you don't – or rewarded only if you do. But these sort of attitudes do not enrich the soil in ways that our souls can flourish.

Gratitude needs to be the foundation of dedication.

Gratitude is the spontaneous response to awareness of how much undeserved goodness has come our way. Take a look around. Can you see anything that is good, beautiful, delightful, true, inspiring? How much of that is there because of your labour? Whatever is not personally created by you comes from others, and gratitude is the realization of how much we owe to them.

To God

When we dedicate time, talent and treasure in gratitude to God we lift up that our living is meant to be about more than the mundane, more than chores. Our living is meant to be about delight, joy, and deep satisfaction that comes from living in right relationships with family, neighbours and the earth.

Our living is meant to be God living in us, for us, for our good, and for the good of the whole creation.

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Chores do need to get done. The mundane and routine have to be attended to. But that cannot be all that we are.

Dedicating time, talent and treasure in gratitude to God reminds us of – and preserves – God's holy purposes for our living.

You may have one talent or ten; may have more time than money, or vice versa; but it is helpful and important that you:

- Begin in gratitude
- Hear / See / Respond to the Holy Spirit's high calling for you. It doesn't have to be grand or heroic as the world measures these things, but you can be sure there is at least one thing that God is needing you to do on God's behalf for your good, and for the good of the world. What is that one thing?
- Dedicate some portion of your time, talent and treasure for God. Cover all three bases. It's no good just dedicating some of your money. You must also dedicate some time, and some of your talents. Be personally involved. And also just let it go; let it go to others; let go of control; let go of determining the results; let it be God's.



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Appendix.

The Long Emergency

Note: The following is based on a sermon given February 24, 2008, at Capilano United Church, North Vancouver, BC; the day of the congregation's Annual Meeting.

Every year for the past 40 years, the United Church of Canada has reported membership declines of 1 or 2% per year. Taken one year at a time, a change of 1 or 2% is not a crisis. But 40 years of year after year declines become a long emergency. (See Footnote 1.)

75% of Members Leave Last Year! (Just Imagine)

Imagine what we would be talking about today at our meeting if - instead of reporting a loss by death of two faithful members this past year, bringing our total membership to 60 - we were reporting 40 years of change in a single year - a decline from 245 in 1965 to the present 60! That would be an immediate emergency.

Reading through past Annual Reports it is clear that the congregation has been very aware and concerned about the changes over the past 40 years. There have been many losses, and also many more creative "rising to challenges." We are not in a crisis today because over the years the congregation has been resilient. (See Footnote 2 for a note of caution.)

Paying Bills Without People

For example. Given the huge loss of Members, one might expect that there would be a huge decline in finances. But over that time the congregation has met the challenge. First with special capital fund raising and the work of the women's catering: C.L.E.A. And later with the use of the Christian Education Centre by various groups: currently the day care; pre-school; and dance group.

The result is that even though our Sunday worship offerings have declined by 62% from \$102,500 in 1965 to \$39,250 in 2007, our income from fund raising and the use of the C.E. Centre has increased by 510% from \$19,000 in 1965 to \$115,500 last

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year. In other words, our Sunday offerings have declined from 84% of the total amount raised to 25%. *(See Footnote 3.)*

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the handful of people in our congregation who faithfully and quietly maintain and manage the properties and organize the fund raising events that raise 75% of our income each year. *(See Footnote 4 for a note of caution.)*

So here we are once again. The Church, C.E. Centre and manse have once again had some significant capital improvements done this year: the Church entrance and outside stair covering were re-roofed as was the manse; the elevator was completed; and 3 new furnaces were installed in the C.E. Centre. Everything is fully paid for and we still have a surplus of almost \$22,000 in the bank. Not bad. In fact, way better than that.

Spiritual But Definitely Not Religious

And yet, on Thursday night I had a troubling dream about our congregation. The dream began with a memory of the successful family Valentine's Dance that we held for our community. It was well attended. And there were many families that we normally do not see who were there having fun together. It was great to see them enjoying themselves.

And yet, in my dream I was troubled by the question of why do we not otherwise see these families and their children on Sundays? Surveys repeatedly say that over 80% of adults still believe in God and have a spiritual life. And yet, in our part of the country, fewer than 20% actively participate in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. The largest, at over 30%, and fastest growing religious affiliation is, "None of the Above." People are spiritual, but they have a high distrust of religion. *(See Footnote 5.)*

Perhaps like the past 40 years, we too will agonize over these trends and fail to reverse them in any significant way. I must confess that I do not have a new solution to offer you today.

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My Dreamed Conversation With God

But as I tossed and turned in my sleep, my dream became a conversation with God. I don't normally tell others about dreams like this for fear you will think I'm going a bit more bonkers. But this is a church after all. If I can't talk with you about my dreamed conversation with God, where else can I? So I have decided to take a risk today and put aside what I had prepared in order to share my dream with you.

Serenity, Courage, Wisdom

In my dream, as I turned to God with this question of connecting with our neighbours, the first thing God said to me was that I needed to get a firm perspective on the situation. The fact of the matter was that there were huge issues that were totally beyond our control or influence.

For example, suppose that as well as changes in Membership we had also experienced these other changes from 1965 in one year:

- How many families in 1965 had only one person working outside the home? And that person only worked 40 hours per week - no evenings or weekends. How about today?
- How many families in 1965 had 3 or 4 or more school age - or younger - children? And how many of those children played outside for hours unsupervised with any of the 20 to 40 other kids who lived on their street? How about today?
- How many families in 1965 all sat down together for supper and stayed there until everyone was finished? How about today?
- How many families in 1965 had only one TV (with only 3 or 4 channels), only one telephone (which was hard wired to the wall), and only one stereo (with speakers and no earphones)? And of course there were no cell phones, no voice mail, no email, no internet, no video games, no computers, no iPods, no DVD's. How about today?

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- How many families had everyone home on Sunday, and had all day Saturday to get chores done and take a break from the week? How about today?
- In 1965, how many stores were open on Sundays? How many organized sports? How about today?

These and other broad social and economic trends have had a huge impact on church attendance. And as we know from our own experience, we have not found an effective response.

And so the first thing God taught me in my dream was a new version of the "Serenity Prayer:" (See Footnote 6.)

God, grant me
the **Serenity** to leave in your hands
the things that only you
can take care of;
the **Courage** to take responsibility
for the things that you
are leaving in my hands
to take care of; and
the **Wisdom** to know the difference.
Amen.

As we face together the problem of the disconnect between our neighbours and our church, we will need constant and careful attention to separating what we need God to take care of, and what God is needing us to take care of. Confusing those two things is a recipe for burn out and disaster.

We Are God's Plan "A." (There Is No Plan "B.")

However, just as I was taking great comfort in this prayer - shifting all my anxieties into God's care - God then said:

I hope you have a lot of courage, David, because as you may have noticed, your church is the only church in your neighbourhood.

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I need you to be my church, on my behalf, in your neighbourhood. And I do not have a backup Plan "B." You are it.

I need you to "own" your area. To take personal responsibility for the spiritual care of everyone in it. Well, not everyone, since some are already connected with some other faith group. But most are not. And I need you to be there for them on my behalf.

"Yikes," I said. "God, I do not have the foggiest idea of how to do that." And so God taught me a second prayer:

Dear God,
Show me / Tell me / Touch me / Lead me /
Reveal to me / Command me ...
what to do and how to do it,
on your behalf,
so that our neighbours
may have the relationship with you
that you desire for them.
Amen.

Our Neighbours Are Not The Solution to Our Problems

Notice a couple of things about this prayer.

First, we do not all learn or pray the same way. Some of us prefer seeing, some hearing. Some just want to get moving. Some have a strong intuition. And some just want the person who knows what is needed to order the rest of us to do it. That is why the prayer begins with 6 different options. Read them all, pick the one that you are drawn to, and use that for your prayer.

Second. Notice that the prayer does not ask to be shown what to do, and how to do it, so that our neighbours will come to church. It may indeed be the case that our neighbours will come to church. But that is not what God is asking us to pray for. God is asking that our neighbours have the relationship with God that God is desiring for them. As we think about our neighbours, we need to stop thinking of them as the solution to our problems - we need more volunteers, more money,

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etc., etc. - and start seeing them as God sees them: as beloved children with whom God desires a deep intimacy.

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I still do not have the foggiest idea what to do or how to do it so that our neighbours might have the relationship with God that God desires for them. But I do indeed trust that there really is a God who does desire to have an intimate relationship with our neighbours. And I do have a prayer. And so I trust that God will indeed show / tell / touch / lead / reveal / command us what to do and how to do it.

But we do need to pray.

And that leads me to something that I do have a foggy idea about.

Namely, since **WE** are here in church already, why don't we spend some time deepening **OUR** relationship with God - opening ourselves more fully to have the relationship that God is desiring to have with us?

Turns out that for at least 1,900 years, followers of Jesus have developed 5 or 6 practices intended to help ordinary people like you and me, begin and deepen our relationship with God. They called it, "**The Way.**"

- **U**plifted in daily prayer;
- **N**ourished through weekly rest and worship;
- **I**nspired by daily reading and memorizing of scripture;
- **T**estifying about God's love through service and hospitality;
- **E**ngaged in spiritual friendships and study;
- **D**edicating time, talent and treasure in gratitude to God.
*(Thanks to Richard Bott, Saint Andrew's-Haney United Church, for the acronym: **U.N.I.T.E.D.**)*

Exactly what we do and how we do each of these six practices is something we'll need to explore. But that we need to do them is not.

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Given the excellent shape of our property and finances, I will suggest to you and to the Board, that we re-new our efforts to deepen our own relationship with God, and take up the prayers so that we might be the church God needs us to be so that our neighbours might have the relationship that God desires them to have.

Let us pray these two prayers together ...

David Ewart

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Footnotes:

- (1) "The Long Emergency," is the title of a 2006 book by James Howard Kunstler. His book is about oil, but I thought the title was an apt description of the United Church of Canada's past 4 decades.
- (2) The caution about the successful resilience and creativity is 5 fold:

First. The successful resilience has addressed only two of the three crucial ABC's of congregational life: Building maintenance and Cash. It has failed to respond to Attendance.

Second. The result is that many congregations now have buildings and budgets that are way out of proportion to their actual attendance. When this happens, buildings and budgets become burdens instead of assets. They require a disproportionate amount of the congregation's volunteer time and effort. Fewer and fewer resources are available for supporting and developing attendance.

Third. Since this has been going on for 40 years, we now have two generations of leaders whose only experience has been adapting to decline. Many of these leaders have made sacrificial commitments. They have desired growth but have experienced only decline. Over time, repeated experience become habit and expectation. We have become habituated to decline and disappointment and expect it. It is our "normal." Our structures enable it. It is our familiar feeling; our comfort zone.

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Changing systemic, ingrained habits and expectations is hard, painful work. The shift that is required will be experienced more like death and catastrophic disruption than like “emerging.”

Four. No one intended this, but the truth is we have come to value our buildings more than we value attendance. That is, most congregations would vote to stay in their building rather than leave their building to reach new people. Everyone wants new people of course. But only within the existing building. Congregations will stay in their buildings and allow attendance to decline to the point of closure rather than change habits and expectations, and leave the familiar in order to risk increasing attendance.

Five. As someone who is in “paid accountable ministry,” it is difficult for me to acknowledge this, but we are part of this inherited problem too. Individually, we too have only experienced decline; it is our habit and expectation and training. We too have no effective ideas, expectations or training to reach new people. And because our livelihoods (i.e. food, clothes, housing, etc.) are at stake, it is difficult for us to be real risk takers. Given this “damned if I do, damned if I don’t” bind, it is no wonder so many of us are experiencing disabling stress.

- (2) All dollar figures have been adjusted for inflation and are shown in 2007 values. Of the \$121,500 Total Raised in 1965, \$56,200 was spent on Capital Debt payments. The Total Raised in 2007 was \$154,800 of which \$22,600 was spent on Capital projects.

For the national United Church of Canada the data are: Membership was 1,064,000 in 1965 and 558,000 in 2006, a decline of 48%. And roughly speaking, the Sunday offerings have declined by 16% from \$330,460,000 in 1965 to \$277,044,000 in 2006; while property and investment income, sales, and fund raising have increased by 266% from \$30,556,000 in 1965 to \$111,822,000.

- (3) The caution in the good news about the success of fund raising and property income is 3 fold.

First. The burden of this work often falls to a handful of people. The majority of us are not aware of how much time, effort, inconvenience, and practical

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knowledge and skills are required to manage and repair property. Who will take their place when they are ready to step down? This question reveals the fragile financial context for many congregations. Fewer and fewer people have these skills and knowledge or the willingness to spend their time doing these jobs. Imagine what would happen if next year, everyone who now looks after property stopped doing that.

Second. Congregations do not exist to rent space. As needful as this ministry is to those who use our space, and as crucial to our financial health as the income is, the fact is that property and finances are to serve the purposes of being a church, and not the other way round. However, when the congregation becomes so dependent on this income that its very existence is threatened without it, it is very natural for the leaders to devote their time and energy - and shape their decisions - around property and finance concerns and have little imagination, energy, or zeal for the actual purposes of the congregation. Indeed, it is not unusual for congregations to fall into a pattern of conflict between those who are responsible for property and finances and those who "have imagination, energy, and zeal for the actual purposes of the congregation." This pattern is dysfunctional and deadly since both groups need each other.

Third. Managing property - dealing with tenants, angry neighbours, plugged toilets, vandalism, parking, caretaking, windows left open, doors unlocked, heat left on, broken pipes, etc., etc. take the fun out of being part of the congregation. This is not why people come to church. This is hard work and those who do it, do it with dedication and a good heart. But it can also be discouraging when others do not respect the history and sacredness of the space, and when the hard work does not result in a thriving and growing congregation.

- (4) While the participation rates are higher in the USA (almost double that of Canada), a recent survey by the Pew Forum, <http://religions.pewforum.org/>, reports similar trends.

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- (5) Now commonly associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, the Serenity Prayer was written by the American, Rev. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

- (6) Check the Rev. Richard Bott and Saint Andrew's United Church - Haney, BC, web site here: www.standrewsuc.com/index.html

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