Studies on Transformation
A 13-part Bible study

*Including the sub-series, “Like a Tree”*

The following text is adapted from material written by Van Rathbun, pastor at Central Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa. It first appeared in issue 92 of the Sunday School Guide. The material is adapted and republished here with permission.
Part 1: Seeds of Revitalization

Growing new crops in an established field

It’s time to pull up the garden. Maybe we’ll get another few weeks of fresh tomatoes, but the growing season is pretty much over. Next spring we’ll replant. Each season, I like to discover the “volunteers”—the seeds from last year’s crop that fight their way out of the soil, ignoring the boundaries and rows, persevering through weed plucking to survive, grow, and bear fruit. The church is built with such volunteers—stalwarts who bear the same fruit in the same soil as their planted counterparts, but who may do so just outside the box where we expect to find them.

Such is the work of the revitalizing church—continuing to nurture a lifetime of committed souls for Christ and creating space to grow new relationships with the living God.

Why is revitalization important? The church that is not revitalizing in some form is dead. Revitalization does not mean establishing a program, taking a survey, or planning an event. Revitalization takes a long view of health and vitality. It breeds, fosters, and encourages expectation and hope. Without these, the church can slip into a season of despair.

A life cycle of revitalization is as natural for the church as it is for our lives. The church enjoys events that naturally create periods of revitalization. Birth/church planting is one such period. But once the congregation is established, it is no longer a “new church” and other forms of vitalization must occur.

Periodic changes in church life have the potential for revitalization. The arrival and installation of a new pastor or staff member is an example of this. Another life-giving event is the receiving of new members. We fail to recognize, though, the potential created when some members of the church leave. New leadership opportunities are created when those who have been active move away or step down from a position. Similarly, when disgruntled or dissatisfied people move on to another church, it can be a breath of fresh air in what was a stale environment.

If we take God’s calling seriously in our lives, then we have to believe that when the Holy Spirit nudges us toward something—either for our own spiritual growth or for a body of believers—God can, and does, lead us to new areas of ministry in the church. God also leads us into and out of churches. That naturally happens with job changes or other relocations, death, or other life changes, but can also happen when God calls us to step into a new role.

Congregations can ride the wave of rejuvenation in a relocating, rebuilding, or renovation project. These can be opportunities for members to pull together, set aside or work through differences, and establish a new framework.

However, these exterior symbols of renewal are often mistaken for the real thing. Building projects, new programming and staff, or relocations are often mistakenly viewed as the impetus for a revitalization happening in a congregation. In reality these events or changes are the product of—not the start of—renewal. The true seeds of renewal are sown years before these outward appearances of fruit appear.

I have been part of various renewal efforts, new church starts, building projects, program implementations, and staff changes. I have also led and participated in strategic planning sessions, as well as focusing and refocusing exercises. These experiences don’t make me any
more of an expert on revitalization than other pastors. But my experience has led me to a deeper understanding of what is really at the root of a revitalized congregation and what may be merely window dressing.

A renewed congregation begins with lives renewed by Christ. When Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus responded, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Congregational transformation begins with the Spirit of God moving in the lives of God’s people. That isn’t limited to the installed pastor—it must include the support, encouragement, and ownership of several key lay leaders, too.

In this process, we come to realize the many seasons of the church. A season of growth may be followed by a season of rest and refreshment. There may even be a season of seeming dormancy or pruning. We get frustrated with ourselves, each other, and even God when a particularly difficult season lasts longer than we would like. During this time, it’s easy for us to fluctuate between “Hurry up and do something!” and “Wait upon the Lord,” because our nature tells us to “do something,” but we aren’t sure what. This is exactly when we ought to seek the long-term perspective of God’s divine spirit, knowing that his love for the church is greater than ours.

In the corn and soybean fields of northwest Iowa, which is my home, the crops are planted in the spring and harvested in the fall. But in western Michigan, where I grew up, fruit trees are planted and continue to produce for decades. Similarly, congregations in the midst of struggle, decline, or trauma often look for signs of renewal in a short harvest cycle, when what may be needed is a long-term view focused more on pruning, shaping, and cultivating for a more gradual, steady harvest.

Natural life cycles of the local church can be traumatic and life-changing. While that can be read as a threat, it doesn’t have to be. That would be like someone saying, “Congratulations on your wedding—now you’re in for it!” and not be joking. Both the high and low points of our communal past carry us to the present. We can resist our past, bury it, celebrate it, or sugar-coat it, but it’s still ours.

The good news here is that God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. That promise is life-giving for the people of God. It demonstrates God’s faithfulness in the past (especially through traumatic events), validates God’s current “walking in our midst,” and provides a clear and certain hope for the future.

To gain this perspective, churches need to develop a long view of their life together. Maybe we don’t want to celebrate all that’s happened in our past, but we still should recognize it, confess it, forgive each other for it, and then move on. The long view of ministry reminds us that our past doesn’t define us, and the future is still unknown. And an unknown future is brighter when we know God walks with us.

**Questions for discussion**

1. Draw up a timeline for your church. Include both celebrations and hurts. How have these past experiences made you stronger?
2. If corporate renewal begins with personal renewal, what changes will you ask God to make in your life that will help you be more aware of what God wants to do in your church?

3. Take a look around your congregation for signs of renewal. It doesn’t need to be something dramatic or congregation-wide. What do you see? Encourage it, bless it, talk about it, or appreciate it; it may be the next thing that bears fruit in your church.
Part 2: Replacing Jealousy with Grace

“Now the elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’

“Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf for him!’

“Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’”

—Luke 15:25-31

What prompted the older brother to disdain his sibling? If you said jealousy, you’re right. Jealousy can be one of our most debilitating characteristics, both personally and in the church. Biblically, jealousy runs rampant. Read about Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Mary and Martha, Simon the magician, or even Jesus’ own disciples, James and John: the texts drip of jealousy and sibling rivalry.

My first official car was a 1968 Pontiac Catalina. It was a hand-me-down when my dad bought another vehicle and our family made the jump from a one-car to a two-car family. The significance here isn’t that I had the freedom to drive this eight-cylinder, pea-green, boat of a car. What’s significant to this conversation is that my three older sisters never had the privilege of using the “second car.” I was oblivious at the time. But years later I learned the impact was not lost on my sisters.

What can be true for individuals or for families can also be true for the church. What another church has to offer in the way of programing, staffing, location, property, or financial stability can be sources of jealousy and hard feelings.

Reading Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, it appears that early Christians relished in one-upmanship to cause others to be jealous. “You are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:3-4).

I mentioned Simon the magician earlier. His story is recorded in Acts 8. Simon was either a mystic with supernatural power, a very convincing magician/entertainer with great boasts, or a fraudulent con man. Either way, he saw the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit exhibited in the life of the disciple Philip, and he wanted it. He wanted it so badly he was willing to pay dearly for the anointing of the Holy Spirit so he could perform great miracles too. The crowds around Samaria were already praising Simon for his “divine power,” but he wanted more.

So it seems to follow that the church of Jesus Christ—the body of Christ gathered each and every week for worship—often feels like it’s a failure and needs something else to boost production. But why is this? If the Holy Spirit has expressed itself in the gifts of men and
women—teaching, giving, administration, mercy, healing, and service—how is it that we become dissatisfied? Can it be that the local church has been given multiple gifts, but according to our own sinful nature it’s not quite enough—we’d like a little more?

Thankfully, in the process of renewing the church, Christ offers us the opportunity to trade in our jealousy for grace.

Christ calls us to dispense with our discontent over our church and get into the blessing of dispensing grace. Grace is unmerited favor—a free gift. Grace can show up as forgiveness over a broken promise, an unkind word, or unintended consequence for our action. Grace shows up in hospital rooms, kitchens, nursing homes, and school classrooms. Grace is mercy in action. Grace doesn’t need a building, drums, and a praise team. The grace-filled church doesn’t require an all-purpose building or such a large parking lot.

I have a friend named Dennis; he is our UPS delivery man. I envy Dennis’ job. Aside from the stuff we order through the internet for ourselves, Dennis gets to deliver unexpected packages to unsuspecting recipients. Who of us hasn’t oooohed and ahhhed over a simple brown paper box, speculating on what could be inside? And Dennis has the pleasure of seeing the look on the recipient’s face as they accept it! He didn’t send the package, but he gets to deliver it.

If grace is really a gift from God’s hand, we are God’s “Dennises”—God’s delivery system. Who of us wouldn’t want to deliver the blessings of God to an unknowing, unsuspecting, and maybe even undeserving person? What an opportunity: to see the face, hold the hand, give the hug, or offer the encouragement that communicates the very words of Christ. What a thrill to sense the moving of the Holy Spirit in our lives, actions, and words. This is living faith at its best: stepping out of ourselves and into Christ, delivering grace, and being God’s hands and feet in the world.

The church that focuses on delivering “grace packages” is the church that senses the renewal of the Holy Spirit. When a congregation is able to stop being jealous about what other churches have that they don’t, and when it begins to relish in delivering blessings, the spirit is quickened. It is then that the core of revitalization happens. We become sensitive and aware that God is truly at work in the lives of the people we meet every day. We become exposed to hurts and joys in a whole new way. We begin to see the hand of God at work, and we have the privilege of being a part of it.

Questions for discussion

1. Make a list of the great gifts God has given to your church. Include people, programs, surprise blessings—but keep it local and keep it current.
2. Whose life has been blessed in the past week? Were you part of that blessing? How? Thank God for allowing you to be a part of his plan of grace.
3. Awareness of God’s action takes practice. Keep your eyes and heart open to the people whose path you cross. Pray for God to allow you to be patient and attentive to where his spirit is at work, and then deliver some grace.
Part 3: Rebellion vs. Reformation

If change is not easy, transformational change can be downright disruptive and painful—but it can also be energizing and fulfilling. We approach transformational moments with a mixture of glee and dread. Apprehension and eager anticipation are equally valid feelings with which we view upcoming changes in our personal and corporate lives. But our viewpoint may tip us one way or the other if the pending changes are positive or negative.

For the church to maneuver through a process of revitalization and renewal it must face pivotal changes with a healthy dose of enlightened skepticism. Not every change is positive and life-giving, nor is every change a threat to the core values of gospel proclamation and the kingdom of God. As the need or desire for congregational revitalization arises, some congregation members can feel like they are leading a reformation, while others in the same church believe they need to quell the rebellion.

Picking out the “good guys” and “bad guys” in the Biblical narrative isn’t that confusing. When we read about the Israelites going up against the Egyptians, Canaanites, or Philistines, it is easy for us to pick the reformer. When Jesus calls the Pharisees a “brood of vipers,” we practically cheer. But remember, the Pharisees were the traditionalists of their day. They saw this Jesus of Nazareth as a rebel reformer who needed to be stopped. Still, wasn’t Jesus reforming the kingdom of God from within? Jesus even said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

Prior to and during the Great Reformation, theologians (including Francis of Assisi, Hus, Tyndale, Wycliffe, and Luther) worked from within the Roman Catholic Church to bring about reforms that would lead people to a deeper, clearer relationship with God. To the Roman Catholic Church, however, some of those named were heretics, not reformers.

So, does the definition of “rebel” or “reformer” depend on which side of the fence one is on? Patriots fought in the American Revolution so they could establish their own laws, taxation, and trade independent of the king of England. Yet, a little more than one hundred years later, the northern states took up arms against the southern states to keep them from doing the exact same thing. A revolt can be both positive and negative.

When we consider great transitions in the Bible from a transformational viewpoint, we discover there were often far fewer people in favor of the transformation than opposed. A quick read of the Noah’s ark story shows a pretty small minority of people were open to God doing something new among his people. While it took Pharaoh ten plagues to be convinced to let the children of Israel leave Egypt, it is possible that it also took that long for the Israelites to come on board. We don’t know how many of them may have elected to stay in Egypt where their lives seemed secure and safe.

When challenges face the church someone will often quote Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” But more questions arise when we start to ask what that purpose is.

When our church was going through a particularly challenging time, one elder challenged the congregation with these words: “We’re going to get through this, and one of our goals is to still
like each other when we’re through.” We can’t assume that everyone wants to be part of a revitalizing process. To get through it together and still like each other is a high ambition.

Toleration for change can be graphed on a bell curve, such as Rogers’ Bell Curve that measures the acceptance of a new product or innovation. Around 2.5 percent of people can be called “innovators,” folks that like every new idea and jump from one great thing to the next. The next 13.5 percent are “early adopters,” who need a little more time to accept the change but are generally excited about it.

On the other end of the spectrum—at the opposite part of the bell curve—are the “laggards,” the 16 percent of us who might never be ready for anything to change. They may be rooted in tradition, or locked in an emotional or theological frame of reference that doesn’t allow them to see change as a positive.

In the middle of this bell curve is about 68 percent of the population—people who may lean one way or the other but who often need to be convinced. They aren’t really opposed to change, but they don’t want Uncle Harry to be offended. They may not like changes in music or the new trends, but they see the positive effects on the youth of the congregation. This middle majority understands the value of unity. But they also know that the skeptics will always find something to be skeptical about. So they patiently evaluate and offer a qualified approval, disapproval, or a “wait and see” response to the renewal process.

The goal of church leadership is to discern which opportunities for transformation are realistic, which are threats, which belong on a wish list, and which can be dismissed. Not every idea for renewal is a good idea for every congregation. Good leaders recognize this.

Reformation can seem a awful lot like rebellion when ideas and programs take precedence over God’s will. But, if the ultimate goal of the renewing congregation is to love God and love each other, then many things are possible. God can work through many differences of opinion, taste, and tradition if the hearts of people bend toward each other and their desire is to lift up the name of Christ.

**Questions for discussion**

1. Think about major transforming moments in your life (i.e. weddings, graduations, illness, death). What kinds of emotions are attached to these events? Are they all positive?
2. Within your group, can you discern whether most of you are innovators, laggards, or somewhere in the middle? What does it take to sway you one way or another?
3. When it comes to making changes in your church, are you more motivated by reaching someone new with the gospel or by trying to not offend a person or group?
Part 4: From Gossip to Trust

“...God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil…”

—Romans 1:28-30

Wait a minute! Gossips and slanderers? Come on—those folks are just passing on prayer concerns. Aren’t they?

Idle chit-chat and spreading rumors under the guise of exchanging information is often not meant to do harm, but it can be catastrophic for the church all the same. Especially in today’s digital age, literally thousands of people can learn of an event in just a few short minutes—and they rarely question whether the information being communicated is true or not.

In the transforming church that is transitioning from weakness to strength, one of the building blocks of strength is trust. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust 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.” A straight path begins with trust. But trust is fragile. When a church leader experiences a moral lapse that affects the church, the whole church grieves. Depending on the offense, that leader’s credibility may be rebuilt over time, but it takes a lot of work by the church toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Far more subtle but equally damaging is the church member who spreads a rumor or half-truth. This person enjoys “stirring the pot”—getting attention by pointing to the faults or frailties of others. This action not only thwarts the morale of the church, but in the midst of congregational renewal it can cast suspicion on those who may be doing Christ’s work. This type of attack on the church comes when someone who is trusted casts doubt or suspicion on the person or character of others. It can be cloaked in a desire to protect the church or uphold long-held values, but it often prevents the church from moving forward.

Following are five principles to follow regarding information shared within a congregation that is trying to rebuild its witness and effectively reach out with the gospel.

**Is it true?** This should be a simple test for every piece of information you receive. It is much more fun to pass along something that sounds juicy than to ask the obvious question: is this true? Every few months I get an email about the Federal Communications Commission shutting down religious broadcasting. The appeal includes a petition to sign, circulate, and send to the FCC. This rumor is shared so many times that the FCC has a page on its own website saying that it is untrue! Yet churches continue to circulate the rumor at the cost of their own credibility. If that is true with internet rumors, how much more important is it that we check the facts on the story we just heard about a fellow church member or visitor?

**Is it responsible?** Does this person have permission to share privileged information? I remember the days when new admissions to the hospital were read on the news of our local radio station. But today private information is supposed to be, well, private—in fact, we have privacy laws in place to do just that. Some people like to post private information on Facebook,
but in the church it is still prudent to recognize and respect which information is public and which news is private. Even if the information is true, it may not be our information to tell.

**Does it unite?** When a church gossiper shares everyone else’s news, it can easily tear down rather than build up the church body. So it’s good to ask, is this information going to be helpful in uniting the congregation, or will it divide us? Information is a commodity that can be used to build alliances or walls. When we build up the body of Christ, we do so with information that Paul says is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8-9).

**Is it sensational or sensible?** The more times a piece of news is told, the further from the truth it can become. The game of “Telephone” is a perfect example. One person whispers a simple message into the ear of another player, who passes it on to others in the group. When the circle has been completed, the group compares the last version of the message to the original, and deciphers when and how the original message became distorted. The more sensational the news of a fellow church member or staff member appears, the more important it is to make sure it’s true.

**Is it timely?** Knowing not only what information needs to be communicated, but when it needs to be communicated, can be helpful for a transforming congregation. The staff search process can be a perfect example. Search teams may need to classify some information in order to maintain an equitable interview process. Information leaks or breaches of confidentiality can hinder the overall process. Leadership teams who are conscious of the timely flow of information to the congregation and update a congregation on what is happening at the appropriate time will help to build cohesion and trust.

These five principles of properly sharing information—evaluating whether the information is true, knowing if it is responsible to tell it, discerning its uniting potential, knowing if it is sensible information, and sharing in a timely manner—all build trust in the congregation.

For any congregation to move forward on the path to transformation, its members must learn to trust God and each other. Trust is an act of grace—it’s a gift we give one another. But the gift is fragile, and trust needs to be continually cultivated to be maintained.

When we trust God fully, we also trust that God is working in and through our congregation. We trust that God calls people into leadership as pastors, elders, and deacons to equip people for the work of ministry. If there is a breach in a trusting relationship between the leadership and congregation of a church, it may point to a deeper breach in the trust we have in God’s call in our lives together.

**Questions for discussion**

1. Play the “Telephone Game” in your group. Talk about how important it is to get the message right when we talk about others in the church.
2. Does your church tend to be supportive or suspicious of its staff and elected leadership? What events or breakdowns in communication may have caused the trusted relationship to falter?
3. Evaluate how you talk about your church, church family, and church leaders. Do you tend to be upbeat and positive, or negative? Does it have anything to do with how information flows in your church? What might you do to help make it better?
Part 5: Trading Division for Love

“But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your lips.”

—Colossians 3:8

Spite, malice, holding a grudge—these are all forms of the same destructive behavior that needs to be transformed by the love of Christ, and our love for each other, to rebuild the ailing church.

A friend in ministry told me the story of a new pastor who observes an eerie coldness during elder meetings. The behavior of two of the elders disrupts the working of the whole group. Either they sit in stony silence, or when one speaks the other is sure to disagree. The sad twist to this story is that the two elders are brothers who haven’t spoken to each other for years. It makes me wonder: How has this church been able to raise up these two men as spiritual leaders for the needs and concerns of the church when they are unable to fix their own issues or submit to the spiritual guidance of their pastor and peers?

The fact is, long-held disagreements, gripes, or feuds destabilize the church and stymie the proclamation of the gospel. This is especially true for today’s multi-generational and multi-cultural congregations. A congregation with what appears to be a common language can be largely diverse and can harbor underlying biases and prejudices. But cultural and generational differences can introduce tensions and resentments that divide the congregation and leadership, unless these issues are recognized and resolved.

A local church that reaches out to the Latino community is a prime example. To the majority of Anglos, the Hispanic community is a pretty homogeneous group. But when the Latinos gather for worship they come from seven or eight different counties. Even those coming specifically from Mexico may hail from any one of Mexico’s thirty-one states or the federal district around Mexico City. Differences in language, dialect, worship traditions, and family and cultural variations become challenges to this small congregation. At the same time, it is a marvelous opportunity to display the gospel’s power to unify.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to cut through these walls that divide and bring light and unity into the darkness of spite, division, and strife, the gospel message is amplified. The bridges between cultural divisions, generation gaps, or racial discord all have the same foundation: the rock-solid love of Jesus Christ exposed at the cross.

When I was a young pastor serving an urban church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, I was sent on a pulpit exchange to the Nardin Park Reformed Church in Detroit. Early on a Sunday morning my wife and I drove across lower Michigan, from our very white, middle-class neighborhood to the African American neighborhood of Nardin Park.

With each approaching mile I became more and more nervous—our cultures are so different, will they accept me, will they understand my sermon illustrations, will I even find the church? We found the church, and our hostess, one of the elders, was even more nervous than I was. But somewhere between the youth choir’s third round of “Do Lord, Oh Do Lord, Oh Do Remember Me,” and the fourth or fifth “Amen” from the congregation, the Holy Spirit spoke to me: “I am
here—relax and let the gospel speak.” We had a much more enjoyable ride home because the Spirit had cut through my pride and prejudice.

A few years ago I was preaching in the Latino church I mentioned earlier, Amistad Cristiana in Sioux Center, Iowa. After I spoke each phrase in English, our translator graciously interpreted the message as I patiently waited. I had preached the same sermon that morning in my own church, but I was struck with how differently the message needed to be tailored. Some stories, illustrations, and phrases just didn’t seem to work.

When I was finished I sat next to my daughter, who is bilingual, as the service progressed. As one woman spoke my daughter leaned over to interpret her words. “She’s thanking God for your message and the opportunity to hear it again,” my daughter said. As it turns out, the woman was in the habit of listening to my congregation’s radio broadcast as a form of worship and also to work on her English.

I was humbled. We broadcast our worship as an outreach to the community and to serve the homebound, but I had never considered that the broadcast would cross cultural and language barriers to help a different population worship and learn the English language. When we allow the love of God to tear down walls built up over months or centuries of distrust and strife we find that there is far more that unites the body of Christ than there is that divides it.

The biblical narrative of the building of the Tower of Babel describes the confusing sound of many languages and how it divided people. We have become much more sophisticated at dividing ourselves today. We can use language, social and economic status, ethnicity, race, or parentage. We can even subdivide the church by age, hobby, gender, music preference, parking lot, and seating choice. Many times we make these choices enough times that they become habits, which then divide a congregation even more. Far more insidious are the intentional choices we make to build alliances or wall ourselves off from those that may have other preferences. However, the love of Christ supersedes any divisive walls we can erect and brings the church together under God.

Ephesians 2:14-16 says it best: “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.”

Questions for discussion

1. Are there any long-held grudges in your heart or church? Pray for God’s forgiveness and take some intentional steps that lead to unity, purity, and peace.
2. As a class, read through the Belhar Confession together. What steps can you as a congregation take to break down walls of racism and prejudice that exist in your community?
3. Sit in a different part of the sanctuary for the next few Sundays. Talk about how something as simple as that can break down walls within your congregation.
Part 6: Trading Anxiousness for Peace

The process of transformation/revitalization and renewal is a visible, tangible celebration of the presence of Christ in the local church. It is Easter every week. The cost of renewal is high, however, and some congregations may be unwilling to pay the price.

Romans 13:12 says, “The night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Moving from darkness to light demands action: constructive, soul-searching, tear-inducing action. The path of renewal we’re talking about here isn’t quick, but it doesn’t have to be painful, either. As we start new initiatives and try new things, we should also take an honest evaluation of what has transpired in the past—both good and bad.

There is a “death and resurrection” quality to personal and congregational transformation. Sometimes that quality is manifested in wanting to root out some source of evil. But rather than going on a witch hunt, it is more important for church leaders to search out the barriers that separate and divide people within the church and confront those walls of separation.

Consider this a process akin to rebuilding the foundation of a house. Some years ago, over the course of the summer I, witnessed such a process. A house was jacked up and the old basement and foundation excavated. New footings were poured, a new floor established, and walls erected. Finally the house was set back down. But it wasn’t really the same house anymore. What followed was redecorating, new landscaping, and a new swing set for the kids. An old house became a new home. Its transformation began as the weak foundation was torn out, stone by stone, and a firm foundation was established.

I love the hymn “Christ is Made the Sure Foundation,” because that’s the essence of renewal: Christ, not local church tradition. Christ, not the founding pastor. Christ, not the ruling family. Christ becomes the sure foundation.

It is crucial that these walls of separation in the church be identified, dismantled, and reshaped into useful tools of reconciliation in order for a congregation to move forward with hope. In the next several meditations we will be looking at many of these barriers and the biblical characteristics that God has given the church for building up the body of Christ. We will also examine some of these destructive tendencies that tear the church apart and the not-so-new building blocks that Christ uses to build up the church.

This starts with trading anxiousness for peace.

Romans 15:1-3 says, “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’”

In the winter of 1914, at the height of World War I, a series of widespread, unofficial ceasefires took place along the Western Front in Europe. In the days leading up to and including Christmas Day 1914, British and German troops exchanged seasonal greetings and songs. In some places tensions eased to the point that individual soldiers walked across enemy lines to exchange small gifts of cigarettes or chocolate and souvenirs. For a time gunfire was exchanged for
singing, laughter took the place of taunts, and the only skirmish was a pick-up football game.
The informal truce became a symbol of momentary peace and humanity in the eyes of war.

Conflict in the church bears little resemblance to the threats of a world war, but the presence of underlying animosity can have a long-lasting effect on the church. Years of pain and conflict are not only defeating for the people within the church, but also become a barrier for anyone considering attending or joining. What may be left after such conflict, that is imperceptible to long-term members, is a pervading anxiousness. Rarely do we exhibit open hostility in the church, but neither do we address the conflicts, differences of opinion, or preferences that divide us. These underlying differences become cause for avoidance and anxiousness.

One evening at my church, George stood up in a consistory meeting and made an impassioned speech about a particular line item in the budget. The whole consistory was stunned and left speechless. The next day George called me on the phone, wanting to resign from the consistory. I invited George to meet with me and asked another elder to join us. I described a vision I had had of George walking away—down a railroad track, in fact—and me doing nothing to stop him. George then described his frustration. Years earlier, another consistory member had “rammed through” that particular budget item, he said. All those years he had remained silent. But now, in the absence of that member—a longtime friend that he felt he could not confront—he took the opportunity to speak.

As members of a congregation, we are called to love, which we sometimes interpret as disallowing confrontation. But addressing our differences can be freeing and renewing. And differences in the church abound when we discuss music, building use, disciplinary action, budget allocations or staffing. Just recognizing that there is a conflict can begin to desensitize the issue. Coming out of our entrenchments to offer a truce can be life-giving while we search for the larger solution that will bring peace.

The counseling world has introduced the practice of a non-anxious presence: keeping a cool mind and heart in the midst of erupting emotion and chaos. This is an important practice for pastors and church leaders to learn as well. The discipline of attending to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives—listening to the living Word of God in prayer, praise, mediation, and other spiritual disciplines—prepares church leaders to look beyond the fray of immediate unrest or conflict. In this way Easter is celebrated, and Christ is invited into the midst of the present chaos.

Questions for discussion

1. Are there underlying issues in your congregation that need to be addressed? If no one else is raising the question, is God prompting you to be the one to ask?
2. If you have been in conflict with someone, can you commit today, by the power of Christ, to extend a hand of peace?
3. If there are larger unresolved issues in your congregation that you’re not sure you can conquer alone, do you know of any resources in your community or denomination that can help you address these conflicts?
Part 7: Four Stories

Congregational transformation, renewal, and revitalization is a fulfilling ministry for the local church, especially if the church has been hurt by strife and division. We’ve been learning about how a congregation can strengthen its ministry by tearing down walls that divide and laying down new foundations of behavior with purpose. We’ve looked at trading negative behaviors for new forms of spirit-filled ministry: trading jealousy for grace, rebellion for reformation, gossip for trust, division for love, and anxiousness for peace. The congregation that recognizes its failings, confesses its sin, and can successfully remove at least one of those barriers will be a healthier congregation—one that is better able to live out its call and ministry.

Today I’d like to share some true stories of congregational members who embody some of these qualities. I tell these stories because, as effective as pastoral leadership can be, the involvement of the congregation is key to living out the church’s kingdom mission. These are real stories involving real people, and I’m using their names with their permission.

Jim

When I was getting to know Jim, he said this about change: “If we move the piano one inch at a time, by the time it’s close to where we want it, nobody will think it’s a big deal.” As culture or circumstances gradually worsen we can be caught unaware by the sin or negative effects that surround us. But the same can be said for affecting positive change: as small positive changes happen, the cumulative effect is powerful.

Congregations, especially those mired in negativity or unhealthy circumstances, may resist abrupt change. We have a natural tendency to maintain the status quo. Change involves trust and there can be a wide variance of opinion on who or what to trust. As congregations begin to trust their leadership more, complicated changes will be tolerated more, especially when there appears to be a clear purpose and goal in mind for the change.

Lena

Our worship services were becoming a little more contemporary in style and we were trying to strike a balance that would be appropriate for our congregation. Eventually our worship became, as we call it, “a blending of the best,” using worship elements both historic and modern. I had been in the habit of using a very small Bible during my sermons, or reading the scripture from a screen. A dear soul, Lena, known for her fabulous homemade pies, came into my office. She wasn’t angry, but she was concerned. The changes, she worried, were watering down the gospel. “You don’t even read from the Bible,” she said. “I do read from the Bible,” I protested. I told her the projected words were scripture and showed her the Bible I carried. “How are the kids going to know the words on the screen are scripture,” she argued, “and do you call that a Bible?”

I thought about what she said—not the words, but the intent. How highly do we value scripture? The next Sunday I left my pocket Bible on my desk and brought out the much larger, leather-bound edition. I read from it rather than from off the screen and held it open as I preached. After the service Lena approached me with tears in her eyes. “Thank you,” she said. In the midst of so many other changes, Lena was looking for the elevation of the Word. She yearned for stability in rocky seas. She wanted her grandsons to know the preacher read from the Bible.
Rod

Rod met with me to pray for me often on Sunday mornings—just the two of us. He’d pray for revelation, power, and conviction. As we talked after one of these prayer sessions, Rod asked about the value of some of the conferences, seminars, and classes that people from the church, including himself, had attended. “It seems we go, hear how others are making changes in their church, but nothing comes of it,” he lamented.

Rod isn’t afraid of change, if it is for the right reasons. He valued the conferences, the learning, and the exposure to new or different ideas. He had an appreciation for how our church was changing, with new leadership being raised up, allowing ourselves to try and even to fail, and gaining awareness for other ways of applying the gospel. He verbalized something that struck a chord with me. He said, “It’s like we have to figure out all over again who we are, our strengths and weaknesses.”

Rod hit the nail on the head. And so we held a congregational retreat. We spent a great deal of time in prayer. We asked the congregation what it thought our strengths and weaknesses were. We discovered our strength lay in the gift of mercy. It was a hugely positive moment. It gave us renewed purpose and joy to know who we were!

Mary

I was standing in the center aisle one Sunday morning after worship. I overheard Mary talking with someone. I couldn’t help it—she was talking loudly and everyone in that room could hear her. I think she meant it that way. She was saying, “No, we aren’t going anywhere! Bruce was raised in this church. This is our church. We raised our girls here. We have no intention or reason to leave and go to another church. Sure, we’re going through some struggles right now, but we’re committed for the long haul.”

Mary had just exemplified another key component in the renewal and transformation process: a clearly articulated and unwavering commitment. I don’t know who Mary was talking to, but they got the message and so did everyone else in the sanctuary at the time.

When people, especially those who aren’t in leadership at the time, vocalize their commitment, it changes the dynamics in a church. Especially if there were others with waver ing commitment within earshot, Mary’s declaration was almost like a dare. It was a proclamation, like drawing a line in the sand or pounding a stake into the ground and tethering herself and her family to it. *We’re not jumping ship and I defy anyone who says otherwise.* That type of commitment when others are questioning their loyalty is priceless.

Not all of the stories in my church, or any church, have a happy ending. There are plenty of times that people leave the church over misunderstandings, miscommunication, or alternative agendas. My hope and prayer is that when changes are made, people are turning to something—like pursuing a deeper walk with Christ, or following a calling in their life—and not running from something unpleasant or difficult.

The transformation process is a collective adventure. It is not reserved just for the mountaintop or for a few chosen leaders to chart the course. When Joshua asked the people of Israel to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15), they signed on to a new
vision, a new mission, and a renewed sense of values, rooted in the long-standing promise of the Lord, yet taking on a whole new character. He shouted his question and the people shouted back, “We will serve the Lord.” I’m enough of a skeptic to believe that not everyone was fully on board with Joshua, even as some grumbled against Moses. But I’m confident that Joshua had his Jims, Lenas, Rods, and Marys who both challenged him and encouraged the other Israelites to accept Joshua’s leadership and make the transition into the promised land.

Questions for discussion

1. How far do you think the piano needs to be moved? What small, seemingly insignificant changes can be made without fanfare that would have a positive effect on your congregation?

2. Are your agents of change building bridges or blowing them up? Are there any symbolic measures you could use that would signal to the whole congregation you value their input and involvement?

3. Are there fence-sitters in your congregation? Are they unsure of your commitment? Could it be they’re waiting to hear about your commitment to the transformation process?
PART 8: CREATED TO GLORIFY GOD

(LIKE A TREE, PART 1)

An image from my childhood that endures in my memory is of a tree in the side yard of my grandfather’s house. It was (perhaps it still is there) a weeping willow. Willows are pretty common in western lower Michigan; this one grew in the bend of the creek that made the western border of my grandfather’s property. There was a pretty steep wooded grade on the opposite bank, forming a type of bluff. This creekside weeping willow is the image that comes to mind when I read Psalm 1:

Happy are those
   who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
   or take the path that sinners tread,
   or sit in the seat of scoffers;
   but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
   and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
   which yield their fruit in its season,
   and their leaves do not wither.
   In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
   but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
   nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
   but the way of the wicked will perish.

In other words, blessed is the way of the righteous, for they are like a tree!

As we consider congregational transformation, revitalization, and renewal, Psalm 1 holds an earthly example for the church, giving us a picture and description of what God intends for the church.

We begin with very philosophical, but very basic questions: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Let me offer a couple of thoughts in response. The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first question and answer reads, “What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Psalm 148:13 says, “Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.” Jesus tells the Pharisees on the road to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that even if the crowd doesn’t cry out, the rocks themselves will recognize their creator.

So, trees exist, along with all of creation, to bring glory to God and enjoy him forever. And so do we.

This morning when I woke up, although I know I exist to glorify God, I wasn’t in a glorifying mood. My neck was stiff and I had a headache. I was groggy, self-absorbed, and just a little cranky. Then I looked out the window at the trees in my yard. They greeted the morning sun with outstretched arms. Their canopy of leaves reached far into the sky and the leaves trembled at the presence of the
almighty. Their branches moved with the wind—anchored, yet free. They stood steadfast before their creator, reflecting the glory of God. What a contrast to my pathetic and apathetic nature.

How does a naturally self-absorbed person live with everlasting joy in the presence of the living Lord? How can I—how can our church—be transformed from rebellious, cantankerous, and critical human beings into life-giving, God-glorifying, saints of the kingdom?

In the process of transformation and revitalization, God is at work to rearrange our lives like letters on a Scrabble board—moving from “stain” to “saint.” The Holy Spirit is working in and through individuals and congregations. The Lord promises this. And when believers’ hearts are changed—collectively—the church is transformed.

Practically, that means my cranky, groggy, self-absorbed self can claim the promise of Philippians 4:4 so that I can “rejoice in the Lord always.” It means I can claim Romans 12:2 to be “transformed by the renewing of [my mind].” Through the work of the Spirit and by God’s love we can “be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). To do everything to the glory of God as Paul suggests to the Corinthian church means a change in the attitude of our souls. We migrate from apathetic to glorifying the creator in all we do. The transformation of the person precedes the transformation of the congregation.

In this transforming work we are reminded of our complete dependence on the creator. We are humbled by the reality that there is nothing we can do to add even one second to our lives. It means that God has knit us together so intimately and completely that our physical, emotional, and spiritual “systems” are integrated, so that when one part of us experiences pain or trauma, the whole of us hurts. It means we live lives of gratitude for the rich blessings of each new day.

If that is true for us individually, how much more so for our congregations! We can celebrate that God is continually at work in our congregation. Our church exists primarily by the will of God for no other reason than to direct our praise to the creator of the universe. We can also celebrate the fact that any resources we have are at God’s disposal. Included in this are the tangible resources—facility, money, and members—but also the intangible resources, like the skills, gifts, and talents of those members. When we add in the working of the Holy Spirit’s gifts and the fruits of the Spirit, we discover that we are far richer than what we might think.

In our backyard is a large ash tree. It has seen better days. Each spring as the Midwestern winds blow we are apt to lose another significant branch. A few years ago I had a “tree doctor” assess it because I was wondering if it should be taken down. He looked me square in the eye and said, “Don’t get me wrong, taking out trees is my business, but I value trees. I don’t like to take trees out. This is not a pretty tree. It has a lot of dead branches and it is misshapen. But I still would hate to see it come down.”

He didn’t say it, but I want to believe what he meant is this: A tree is here to give glory to God. And while a tree can get gnarled and lose some branches, it doesn’t take away from the fact that the tree still reflects the glory of the creator.

Similar to that tree, congregations may have experienced pain and loss. There may be members or families that have died, left for another church, or are depressed. That impacts an entire congregation. But its primary purpose of glorifying God and enjoying God forever is still
intact. The life-giving spirit continues to flow in its veins and the breeze blows through its branches.

**Questions for discussion**

1. As a group, make a list of synonyms for the words “to glorify.” Describe some of the things we do that God likes.
2. Make another list of things that you and others in your group have enjoyed this past week. How are the two lists similar? How are they different? If God has made everything for his pleasure and we are part of that creation, shouldn’t the things we enjoy doing also bring glory to the Father?
Part 9: Sinking Deep Roots
(Like a Tree, part 2)

Blessed is the way of the righteous, for they are like a tree (adapted from Psalm 1).

The way of transformation is like a growing tree. Often the key to establishing a tree is a well-watered root system. Shallow roots won’t anchor the tree in times of storm and don’t reach the water in times of drought.

Similarly, the spiritual stream we are planted near may be dry as a bone, and as a result we suffer from lack of “nutrition.” The seeds of revitalization, renewal, and transformation begin to take root when the seed of why we exist—to glorify God—takes root. In the parable of the sower in Mark 4, Jesus says, some seed “sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.” In order to flourish, our churches need to be watered by the Word.

When I talk here about sinking deep roots into the life-giving source, I mean knowing God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is experiencing God as creator, redeemer and sustainer of all of life. We experience the fullness of God’s presence in our lives through his gifts of grace, forgiveness, and inspiration. We experience God in the everyday happenings of our jobs, families, hobbies, and friends.

We soak up God through what he has done for us. We know God in our interaction with creation, whether that’s in our own backyard, at a beach, on a golf course, or on a vacation to a canyon, mountain, or urban center. As we connect with God’s creation we connect with God’s people. We discover the characteristics of God as they become alive and vibrant in the lives of the people we love, because in and through them God expresses his love for us.

God speaks to us through the inspiration of his written word. We’ll dig into this more later, but for now just consider the Psalms and why they were written. Some Psalms exalt the character of God, praising God’s faithfulness, eternalness, and steadfastness, and underlining that God is unmovable and unshakeable. God is identified as our rock and our deliverer.

Many of the Psalms deal with conflict and our source of help in distress. I relate particularly well to David’s Psalms that crave God’s protection and defense from attack or remind me of my inner fears. They emphasize that God is an ever-present help in a time of trouble.

Another thing that Scripture teaches, along with who God is, is who we are. We learn that we are called by Christ. Often in my teen years, as I was headed out the door, my mother would call from the kitchen, “Remember who you belong to.” She was offering the constant refrain of the Heidelberg Catechism: “I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.” It was her hope that the reminder would root me in the depth of God’s love.

Knowing that we are rooted in the Word of God allows us to regularly and constantly draw on it as a source for bringing glory to the Father. Whether you are farmer, accountant, scientist, physical therapist, teacher, or café barista, you’ve gone through steps to learn what you love to do—why would it be different in your walk with God? While learning your chosen profession, you likely read some books on the subject. You began to study, carefully choosing instructors
who shared the same love of the topic. You observed their methods, and critiqued, questioned, and checked sources with careful scrutiny. You may have interned in the field.

It is no different for us in the “classroom of God.” The church becomes the classroom in which disciples of Jesus Christ are grown. We underestimate ourselves if we think the only education we receive can be in Sunday school or at a Bible study. We can develop new roots in many places that will help us in our interaction with God.

One purpose of a tree root is to anchor the tree into the ground. Here’s what a faith rooted deeply in God’s word looks like. Romans 8:38-39 promises, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Tree roots, either down deep or spread wide, will hold a tree stable in strong winds. Likewise, faith fixed on Scripture holds firm. James 1:5-6 describes it this way: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.”

Finally, knowing where your spiritual roots are leads to wisdom, as Paul writes in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”

To be rooted in God’s word we need to know it well—to let its depth and passion consume us. To be rooted in the Word means hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on it continually.

There’s an experiment I call “the Bible grip” that can tell you how good of a “handle” you have on Scripture:

First, balance the Bible on your pinky finger. This represents hearing the Word. Romans 10:17 says, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” This position doesn’t give you a very strong hold on the Word, but unfortunately, hearing the Word read or spoken by others is all that many people get.

Now try holding the Bible with your pinky and ring fingers. This represents hearing and reading God’s word. Revelation 1:3 says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.” We feel accomplished when we hear a sermon and do our daily devotions, but that’s not the same as truly “knowing” the Word.

Let’s add studying to the mix. Go ahead and hold the Bible with your pinky, ring, and middle finger. Studying Scripture takes more time and effort and can be accomplished alone or in a group. 2 Timothy 2:15 urges us, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.” Studying gives us more balance, but not a great grip on Scripture.

Next, use four of your fingers—but not your thumb—to hold the Bible. This represents memorization. Psalm 119:11 says, “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not
sin against you.” Memorizing the Word of God gives us a false sense of security. We think we have it, but the book can easily be slapped out of our hands.

Finally, grip the Bible with your full hand. Wrap your thumb around the spine and hold on tight. This adds the component of meditation. Joshua 1:8 reads, “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it.” The combination of hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on the Word of God in a joint effort strengthens our grip on scripture. A whole congregation practicing the disciplines of knowing the Word will experience transformation. It is just the same as roots giving a tree a firm grip in and on the ground.

Questions for discussion

1. Read Romans 12:1-3. What are some of the benefits of knowing God through his word for the transforming congregation?
2. Discuss your devotional life with the rest of the group. How much of the Bible do you read? Only a few verses, or whole chapters at a time? Consider the benefits of challenging each other to read the Bible in a year.
Part 10: Exchanging Hurt with Grace  
(Like a Tree, part 3)

I’m no scientist, but for my college science requirements I took a class in plant growth. In that class I learned the value of a plant process called photosynthesis. Photosynthesis, says the Encarta Dictionary, is “a process by which green plants and other organisms turn carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates and oxygen, using light energy trapped by chlorophyll.” More simply put, plants use carbon dioxide and produce oxygen, while humans use oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. It’s far more complicated than that, but that’s the gist of it.

The air we breathe contains a level of carbon dioxide at a concentration of less than one percent. The human body can tolerate slightly higher concentrations for short periods of time, but if the concentration of carbon dioxide rises to seven percent or higher, it induces dizziness, disorientation, and eventually, due to lack of oxygen, suffocation.

But, thanks to photosynthesis and God’s great imagination, green plants have the ability to take in carbon dioxide, a waste product from the human respiratory system, use it in their own growth, and then expel oxygen as a waste product.

Remember, “Blessed is the way of the righteous for they are like a tree (adapted from Psalm 1).”

As a people of God we are called to be a blessing. Thus, one role we have as a church is to take in the most damaging effects of a poisonous environment, allow the power of the Holy Spirit to process them, and then release a whole new grace-filled product. We are called to exchange hurt with grace, just as plants exchange carbon dioxide for oxygen. That’s what Christ does for us: He takes in our sin, our ugliness, the very things that are life-taking, and puts them on himself. In this process, we are transformed—cleansed, healed, restored, and forgiven—and then released back into the world to live for God.

The church that is searching for transformation, restoration, revitalization, and renewal will find it as it becomes a place where God is allowed to exchange life-threatening effects of the world for life-giving effects of the Spirit.

There is no clear direction for the church to follow so that this can take place. It is a lifestyle that God grows in us. The lifestyle of the grace-filled church is one in which God’s spirit is at work in a healing, restorative way. I’m indebted to my friend and colleague Deon Wynia for the points that follow. Deon is a licensed mental health counselor working with Bethesda Midwest, and assists congregations with conflict resolution, team-building mediation, and leadership training.

Being a congregation that is grace-filled begins with knowing the depth of our own forgiveness. More than once, in a board of elders meeting about a “concern” or a “fall from grace,” I have heard an elder mutter, “Except for the grace of God, there go I.” Being real, genuine, authentic, and honest about our own sins helps put in perspective the sin of others.

When we do fail, make mistakes, or encounter problems, we ought to take responsibility for our actions. Instead, we often become quite proficient at the blame game, making excuses that place the harsh light of criticism on others rather than ourselves. Congregations become very adept at this when analyzing why membership has dropped, why the young people don’t stick
around, or why there has never been an adult baptism/profession of faith in the history of the church. Circumstances, the former pastor, and changing demographics do play a role—but current leaders are equally responsible for owning the past, dealing with hurt and pain, and seeking healing and restoration.

A large, active, vibrant congregation I know suffered a huge loss when the private lives of its senior staff became public. It devastated and divided the congregation. Twenty years later, after staff changes and membership losses, a sense of remorse and fear still prevailed. A specialist was brought in to help diagnose the issue, only to find that the problems that had happened 20 years earlier hadn’t been addressed at that time. Even more troubling, some of the present leaders had never been told and didn’t even know their own church’s past. The transforming congregation needs to be fully aware of and own its collective past in order to experience God’s healing grace.

The church in the midst of transformation has a heightened awareness of others who are seeking a transformed life. Jesus demonstrated this awareness over and over in his earthly ministry. Like blind Bartimaeus, whose story is recorded in Mark 10, there are still people who cry out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” They don’t necessarily cry out to the church because—I fear—the church can often appear deaf and mute on the subject of a transformed life. The Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the leper all knew well the state of their depravity. They had lost hope in the religious culture. Yet Christ met them with a heightened awareness and pursued the next question, “What do you think you need?” He didn’t necessarily supply the answer, but he prompted the question.

Another mark of the transforming church is the ability to speak the truth in love. As we become accustomed to naming the source of our own sin, pain, and sorrow—individually and collectively—we find that people may be actually attracted to the transforming power of the gospel as they witness it in the life of a church. This shouldn’t surprise us, but it does. People value transformation and renewal. They seek Christ for his forgiveness and grace, and value an honest appraisal humbly and patiently expressed. This is not permission to publically “call out” people or talk about them behind their backs. Rather, when we are honest with ourselves and about ourselves, we gain permission to be honest with others.

Therefore, grace leads us into messiness, not order. Not everyone grew up in the church. Not everyone had the benefit of a Christian home. In our own lives and the lives of others we have a natural desire to get “over it” or “through it.” But sometimes God calls us to live with it and seek Christ in the midst of it. When the pastor, church leaders, and congregation members open themselves to people who are reaching out to Christ for the first time, or who are exposed to the church and don’t know yet that Christ is at work in them, we are tempted to try to fix the problem. Unfortunately, we may end up trying to fix a symptom of the problem, instead of the root concern. We need to fight the temptation to dole out cheap grace because hard grace is messy. We should acknowledge the messiness and find the image of God stamped on a person’s soul. We experience God’s love and grace when we know ourselves, and that becomes life-giving as we seek it in others.

As we live authentically, take responsibility for our actions, seek transformation, speak the truth in love, enter the messiness where God is working to create order, and see the benefit and
beauty of others, we begin to trust one another. The leadership, members, and staff of the renewing and transforming church must develop and maintain a culture of trusting relationships. A culture of trust and open communication allows for the exchange of ideas, opinions, and variations without hidden agendas or power struggles. The grace-filled church seeks unity, purity, and peace that is built on mutual respect and trust.

We live in a dark world. Christ affirmed that we move from darkness into light. He turns our mourning into joy, our sadness into gladness. The church that is truly becoming alive again identifies its role in the world as being the place where the exchange is made. This church sees itself as the possessor of spiritual photosynthesis that captures the hurt, pain, and sorrow that this world offers, brings that pain to the foot of the cross where the blood of Christ washes over it, and returns us cleansed and renewed. We want that for ourselves—it's what we have to offer to a broken world.

Questions for discussion

1. How well do you know each other? Are you honest and open about your struggles personally or as a church? This may not be the setting for full disclosure, but coming to grips with our own strengths and weaknesses is a freeing experience when done in a context of love and trust.
2. Who is the last non-Christian who came to your church? If someone showed up today honestly seeking a new relationship with God, or at least open to the possibility, how would they be treated?
3. Find a used furnace filter. Do you see all the dust and dirt that's been floating around your house that you've been protected from breathing in? What kind of crud is floating around the air at church that you would like the grace of God to filter out?
Part 11: Safety and Protection  
(Like a Tree, part 4)

We’ve been talking these past several weeks about a church in the midst of transformation. Churches will naturally experience cycles that include both vitality and loss. We are grateful for seasons of growth and opportunity, and we grieve times of conflict and doubt. We’ve looked at some of the behaviors that need to change for the church enter a season of vitality, such as exchanging gossip for trust, or rebellion for transformation. In the past few weeks we’ve looked to Psalm 1 and its paraphrased message as a guide: “Blessed is the way of the righteous for they are like a tree.”

As we consider congregational transformation, revitalization, and renewal, Psalm 1 holds an earthy example for the church and gives us a picture of what God intends for the church. Like a tree, the righteous are created for God’s pleasure. We are called to dig our roots deeply into the soil of God’s word, where we will not only be nourished but also be anchored in our faith. The church, like a tree, becomes a place where cleansing takes place. Words of hurt, shame, guilt, and disgrace can be exchanged for freedom, forgiveness, hope, and joy.

Today, we explore the idea that the renewing church is called to provide a place where people can find safety and protection. The hurting and battered in the world want and need a place to recover and renew. That’s why Psalm 46 is so appealing. Look it up and read it out loud. I love what it says about God:

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

[...]

He makes wars cease  
to the end of the earth;  
He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.  
“Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

If the almighty God can hold up against landslides, earthquakes, raging tidal waves, and war, doesn’t it make sense that we would flee to God when our world seems to be falling apart?

I believe people want to turn to God when they’re experiencing trauma in their lives: when they’ve experienced loss; when they are trying to free themselves from a drug, alcohol, or pornography addiction; when someone they love is facing an unplanned pregnancy.
The church can be pretty good at taking care of its own when a diagnosis of cancer or other illness is presented. People line up to bring meals, offer rides for treatment, or babysit the kids. But when the diagnosis is depression, chronic mental illness, suicide threat, or one of the other issues mentioned above, many in the church seem unprepared to call upon the God of refuge and strength for help.

Just as a tree offers safety and protection from the elements and predators, a community of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit provides an environment of safety and protection for the wronged, a haven for the recovering, and a launching platform for the whole and restored.

For the church to experience renewal, individual believers’ lives need to be renewed. For the church to be revitalized, we need to know that the life-giving Spirit is moving in someone’s life. For the church to experience transformation, we shouldn’t be surprised when someone whose life is shattered turns to the church and its source of refuge and strength.

Although I was raised in a Christ-loving family and devoted to the church, I took a little “vacation” in my third year of college. I fooled myself into thinking I had only left the church, but not God. I believed with confidence that God had not left me. But still, something was missing. And so I roused myself out of my temporary slumber and ventured into a local church. I felt like I was on unfamiliar territory. I needed God, but I wasn’t so sure that I needed the church.

I entered after the final bell rang; the choir was singing a call to worship. I climbed the stairs to the balcony, finding a spot in the corner of the last row. I figured if I got struck by lightning I would mercifully only take a few folks with me. When the pastor announced the greeting, my hand was immediately grabbed by one of my college professors. He called me by name, welcoming me as warmly as if we were meeting at the campus coffee shop. My inhibition began to melt away. I had ventured into the mouth of the lion and hadn’t been bitten. I walked into the fortress, looking for consolation and protection, and the wall didn’t cave in on me.

God exudes strength and confidence, a reassuring presence in the same way my professor was for me at that church. When storms come, we know to head for cover. When the tornado siren sounds, most of us duck inside. Then, from the place of protection, we watch the sky. We can be pretty brave while we’re protected. We laugh at the people we see out in the storm, those who are unprotected, yet we don’t always call them in to our place of shelter.

When the storms of life rock our world, those of us within the church send out prayer requests, gather with a small group to pray, and/or anticipate a call from the pastor or elder. That’s great, but we’re already inside the fortress. God’s hope for the church is that it becomes not only a place of solace for the saved, but also a place of refuge and strength for the weak and beaten.

We can and should understand that within the confines of the church there is recovery—a place to relocate our courage. We shouldn’t be surprised when people who are disoriented in life, walking in darkness, come into our church looking for hope. The church can experience the thrill of providing a place where the lost and broken of the world come to find joy again.

Can your church provide time and space for the eyes of the disillusioned to dry? Can your church be patient with someone running from the demons within? Can your church be strong enough to hold someone, especially someone they don’t know, in their place of trauma until
recovery takes hold? Can your church “be still and know” the power of God’s protection and experience transformation and renewal?

**Questions for discussion**

1. When is the last time your church attempted to reach out to someone outside the church? What was scary about that? What became of that encounter?
2. How does your church follow up with visitors to the church? How might you do a better job embracing someone you don’t know?
3. We can feel threatened when we step out of our comfort zone into a new experience. Imagine the obstacles someone must go through to walk into your church. Is it welcoming to all? Do you allow space and protection for those who are hurting?
I have always believed that the canopy of God’s grace extends to the whole of God’s creation. If we confirm our belief in the doctrine of the complete sovereignty of God, then we believe that nothing happens outside of God’s omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent domain.

I like how John Macleod (1872-1948), principal of the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh, defines the sovereignty of God. In the introduction of an address that was published in *The Evangelical Quarterly* in 1941, he wrote:

> The Lord is the true God and an everlasting King. He is the Maker of all things and as such He is their Lord. They are His work which He has made for Himself. They belong to His Lordship or Kingdom. They owe their being to His will and word. In the wide range of derived or created being which all belongs to His realm and is embraced in His decree there is not only the region of the inanimate or the merely sentient there is that also of animate and intelligent or spiritual being which was made to hold fellowship with Him from Whom it has come. Angels that excel in strength belong to this realm. We also who are of an order that was made a little lower than they belong to it as well. And we have a closer and more personal concern with the truth that bears on our race and on ourselves than we have with what holds good of another, albeit a higher rank of being than our own.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is so far-reaching that we can get lost in its many applications. But one I want us to explore today is that the grace of God also extends to those outside the kingdom. Using our analogy of the tree, the kingdom of God acts as a fantastic leafed canopy that benefits everything nearby with its all-encompassing shade.

How does God want those of us within the kingdom to treat those outside his kingdom? Ephesians 2:12-13 says this about our relationship with God: “...remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Remember Jabez’s prayer from 1 Chronicles 4:10, “Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!’ And God granted what he asked.”

How large are your church’s “borders”? Are they limited to the active worshipping community, the membership, extended family and friends, the physical neighborhood around the church, the whole community or parish, the state, the nation, or the world?

To use our tree analogy, the kingdom of God is a place for those who seek its protection, but also a place of rest and shade. Matthew 13:31-32 records Jesus’ words on this: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”
I think it is conceivable that people outside of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ would still fall under the canopy of grace/shade. But in this case, rather than coming to the “tree,” the shade goes to them. This happens in the benediction/blessing/commissioning at the close of a worship service when the people of God are released to do the work of the kingdom in the places they go.

Imagine the people of God being released to bring the shade of God’s covenantal relationship to a world of people who are far from God. I like that! It enlarges the borders. When we are in a relationship with Jesus Christ we carry with us the energizing power of the Holy Spirit wherever we go, spreading out the shade that encompasses the people God would like to bring near—like the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the prodigal son. The canopy of grace gives shade to the planted seed that might otherwise burn up in the harshness of the sun. Under the canopy, God’s net is cast. The best part is, those under the shade may not even know it—but they’ll like it.

When the Holy Spirit dwells in us, amazing things happen. The fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control) are observed and experienced. There doesn’t need to be a spoken sermon, altar call, or offering. The work of the church happens wherever the people of God are.

A friend of mine, “Bill,” recently told me he’s been praying for God to open doors of conversation to him in his work. He was at a business conference when the speaker, in the middle of a 45-minute talk, made a 30-second reference to his faith. In the ensuing social hour Bill offered a word of encouragement to the speaker, knowing that sharing one’s faith publicly can be a challenge. That comment was overheard by another conference attendee who had made it clear he was not a believer. This led to a 45-minute conversation about the grace and forgiveness Bill has found in Christ. The shadow of God’s grace covered Bill, and he didn’t even know it.

The church that is experiencing transformation—or that wants to do a “U-turn” in its ministry—might question how far its reach extends. The wider and broader, the better! Not only does much of the work of the kingdom happen outside the confines of the church building, but it can also take place in a context that you may not have considered.

But if we truly believe in the sovereignty of God—if we honestly believe that every part of creation is under the watchful presence of God—then we must believe that God is already present wherever we go. And if God is already there, the seeds of the gospel are already being sown. The beauty of church revitalization is that it doesn’t need a program. It can’t be downloaded from another church’s website. It happens when people of God are released to the world armed with grace and truth, wise as serpents and innocent as doves, watchful and attentive to where God is already at work—and then with boldness, courage, and humility, allow God to speak through them.

**Questions for discussion**

1. On a map of the world, the United States, or your state/province, have the participants in your group plot the places they’ve been in the last six months. Consider that this is how far your church’s reach has been extended. The canopy of God’s grace has shaded a much larger area than what you may have thought.
2. When was the last time you had a conversation about God with someone outside of the church? How did that make you feel? Scared? Alive?

3. Pray each day this week that you will listen intently and identify new places where God is at work. (If you discover a place where you seriously doubt God would want to be, know that God is already there.)
Part 13: Bear Fruit
(Like a Tree, part 6)

“After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every
town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but
the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his
harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.’

When we think about what trees do, one of the first things that comes to mind is, “bear fruit.” In
the church, bearing fruit usually gets assigned to an evangelism committee—its members may
be willing, but they aren’t always effective in the work.

Our motivations may not be entirely pure, either. Survival is a pretty strong motivator for some
churches. The pews start to seem emptier, the nursery hasn’t been full in a while, and we shrink
at the thought of bringing a friend to church. Bearing fruit seems more like a loaded guilt trip
than an exciting road trip.

Chastising the church for not bearing fruit might be more like telling a sapling to grow apples—it
just isn’t ready. While it may be reasonable to believe that a church that has been organized for
50 or 100 years (or more) would be mature enough to bear fruit, these are often the churches in
which the sap has stopped flowing. Spiritual growth and commitment become the tools the Holy
Spirit uses to grow disciples in the kingdom.

Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the
Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). There is no fast track to congregational revitalization
and renewal, but Peter’s confession is a pretty good jumping-off point. The first question in the
Reformed Church in America’s liturgy for a new member’s profession of faith is this: “Do you
believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and do you confess Jesus Christ as your
Savior and Lord?” I love asking that question in an elders meeting or during worship. I’ll even
ask our elders to reaffirm their faith; why would we tire of affirming that we are in a relationship
with Jesus Christ?

Secondly, growing in the character of Christ increases our witness and ability to bear fruit. In
Matthew 7:16-20, Jesus says, “You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from
thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree
bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree
that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by
their fruits.”

Third, discipleship isn’t about reproducing ourselves. Discipleship is not filling slots in Sunday
School leadership, the choir, or on committees; it is not finding someone to bake a pie for the
church supper. It is about watching others grow in their relationship with Christ. Christ
reproduces himself in those we come to know and love.

The key question is, in the roles we might fill, do we imitate Christ in them? That’s bearing fruit.
Philippians 2:1-5 says this, “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from
love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the
same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind...Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 5:1-2 says, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” I like how the New Revised Standard Version uses the word “imitators” here. I think it has a stronger tone than something like “follower.” “Imitator” has a sense of wanting to be like. The church that looks beyond maintaining the status quo and desires to imitate Christ will be blessed.

Finally, workers need to go out into the field and bring in the harvest. The farmer needs to know what a ripe product looks like, and then go out and get it. Apples, blueberries, corn, soy beans, alfalfa, kiwi, and acorn squash all have their own growing season and ripening time. When it’s ready, it’s ready—not before and not after! So one goal of the church should be to know when people are ripening in their spiritual lives. When that happens, the church must be ready to ask them, “How can we help you grow in your walk with Christ?”

Bearing fruit normally leads us into thinking about numbers: membership, attendance, baptisms, etc. That’s not a bad thing; farmers are huge numbers people when they are evaluating their harvest. Numbers can give us an objective way to measure whether our goals are being met. While growing in numbers isn’t a bad goal, it shouldn’t be the only goal. Growing in unity, commitment, or organization (i.e. getting our act together) are other ways the church can bear fruit. But the bottom line is that those goals all point to understanding and learning when and how people are drawn into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Harlan Van Oort, chaplain at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, says he finds many young people want to love Jesus but don’t necessarily love the church. Maybe they see the church doing more busy work than harvesting work. While Christ is life-giving to those in need, the church can tend to be a place where ministry is maintained, rather than developed or innovated. Sending people out into mission is different than recruiting members for the local Kiwanis club.

Paul wrote the Colossians to tell them of the glorious opportunity we have to be involved and engaged in God’s plan of redemption—not merely as recipients or spectators, but as participants. He says, “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me” (Colossians 1:24-29).

Questions for discussion

1. What does bearing fruit look like in your church? Make a list of ideas that fit your context.
2. What might be some other ways that other churches—maybe not yours—can bear fruit?

3. Split up into pairs and pray for the Lord of the harvest to send you out as a worker in the field. Pray fervently for wisdom, strength, discernment, and joy; then be alert for the doors the Spirit opens to you.