

## Prayer: Letting Go and Letting God

### Grounded in the Word

Read Luke 11:1-13

- What importance does prayer have in your own life and in the life of your congregation?
- When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, what did Jesus teach them? Name a time that the Lord's Prayer has been especially meaningful to you.
- In verses 7-10, what does Jesus teach about being persistent and expectant in prayer?

**Practice:** Effective rural congregations are spiritually alert, regular, and intentional in their prayer life and activity. They seek Jesus' power, guidance, and direction in their planning and ministry.

### From the field, for the field

In *Wondrously Sheltered*, a collection of writings by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he writes of prayer (pg. 15):

Prayer is a person's strength.  
To pray is to draw breath from God.  
To pray means to confide in God.  
Prayer is the heart of Christian life.

Indeed prayer is "the heart of Christian life" and the heart of Christian congregations. And so it is only fitting that prayer is the first core value in the Discovering Hope process.

Your congregation can find hope in the midst of failing rural economies, declining populations, congregational conflict, the lack of young families, or whatever the challenges of your ministry setting. However, this hope has only one source—God!

And so, in order to discover hope and build hope and grow hope and share hope, your congregation must be connected to God in prayer.

*Prayer is the way that vital congregations tap into the holy, discern God's will for their ministry, and find the energy to embrace the mission opportunities that surround them. (DH pg. 27)*

Prayer needs to be practiced at three levels:

1. Individual Prayer: Are you, as elected leaders, engaging in prayer for your congregation and its mission and ministry? Are members of the congregation encouraged to pray for each other? Don't forget shut-ins and those in the nursing home. There are some wonderful prayer warriors in this group of people, just waiting to hear from you the needs, blessings and people for which they should be praying.
2. Small Group Prayer: Are there prayers at the beginning of each small group in your congregation: choir practice, youth group, quilting group, altar guild, congregation council, etc.? Each meeting or event your congregation conducts should begin with prayer.
3. Public Worship: What kind of intercessory prayer is a part of your worship service? Are people able to request intercession for specific people, concerns or thanksgivings during worship? Do they feel comfortable doing this? How are they invited to do this?

*It is clear, and needs to be unequivocally stated again. Prayer is a crucial ingredient for effectiveness in congregational mission and ministry. Without a strong focus on prayer, a congregation will not be truly transformed. A praying church is a vital church. A vital church is a church meeting the needs of its members and a church in mission to its neighbors. (DH pg. 32)*

### Consider this

- In addition to the above three levels, how is prayer practiced in your congregation?
- Is the pastor the only one who prays in public? How are lay people taught and encouraged to pray in public?
- Name two prayer activities that you would like to implement over the next six months.

### Additional Resources

*Wondrously Sheltered* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Augsburg Books, Minneapolis; 2006; ISBN 0-8066-5281-0.

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 2; "Discovering Hope" video – Segments 2 & 3.



## Worship: Building Community and Hope

### Grounded in the Word

Read Psalm 100

- The worship in this Psalm is highlighted by joy, gladness, thanksgiving, and praise. How do you experience these elements in your congregational worship?
- How does your worship service show hospitality to, and include, guests?
- On a Friday, what would you be most likely to remember from the prior Sunday's worship service?

**Practice:** Effective rural congregations provide vital and vibrant worship experiences that celebrate the mystery of the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, cast a vision of hope and meaningful discipleship, sometimes even in the face of hopelessness and build a sense of family and community in places where there can be loneliness and isolation.

### From the field, for the field

From traditional to contemporary, from liturgical to free-form, worship takes on many shapes in rural congregations. However, it is not the content or method of worship that gives power and vitality. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the congregation.

*Consider the worship services in your congregation. Is the atmosphere warm, family-like, informal, spontaneous, relational, and fun? Is it OK to laugh in your church? Members of vital congregations often talk of an energy that is infectious, a spirit that is contagious, a sense of awareness and expectation that the Holy Spirit is present and very much a part of their worship encounters. (DH pg. 37)*

On my 40th birthday, each congregational member came to church wearing black. There were black streamers decorating the church and dead flowers on the flower stands. We had guests that Sunday and one had to wonder how they would react. They enjoyed the spirit of humor, joy, and celebration and eagerly joined the church a month later.

*Vital congregations have vibrant, creative, energetic worship that speaks to the needs of the people who gather in their community, that utilizes the available resources in their midst and is experienced as genuine and God-shaped by those who gather to experience it. The key is neither style nor content, but instead doing whatever they do well and with feeling. (DH pg. 37)*

So then, who is at the other end of every risk that you take? God! God is there, not only at the end, but at the beginning, in the middle, and every step along the way.

And what if you do take a risk and you do happen to fail? If you fall, you fall right into the arms of God. And that is not such a bad place to be. God will let you rest in those arms for awhile, and then God will set you back up on your feet, and send you forth again, to do what? To risk.

To me risk taking is a matter of faith. Trusting that the risk, the idea, the venture, the change has been inspired by the Holy Spirit. And then, it is about having faith that God will see me through this process that has been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

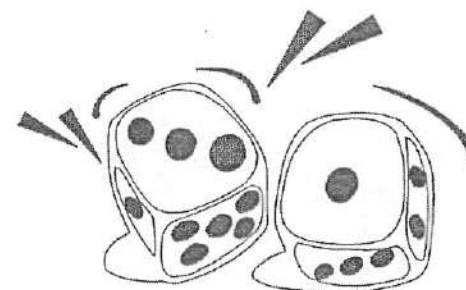
Some of my best ideas have been laughed at when presented to people just like you. But if you are connected to the Spirit, feel the Spirit filling you, empowering you, and inspiring you, then the Spirit will not abandon you. Go forth through doubts, laughter, and, yes, even questions of your sanity. Follow God's lead and I think you might be surprised and delighted at where you and your congregation will end up.

I want you to dream, a bit. If you could do anything in your congregation (money is not an object), what would it be? Dream big, there are no limits here. As a group try to make a list of 20-25 Big Dreams. If you choose, invite the entire congregation to do the same thing. Then use this list as a visioning tool. Pray about these dreams and then listen to the Spirit and follow the Spirit's lead.

And remember, all things (all the dreams on your list) are possible with God. (Mark 10:27)

### Additional Resources

"Discovering Hope" video – Segment 1; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 3.



## It's Risky Business

### Grounded in the Word

Read Hebrews 13:8

- What is the same about Jesus Christ yesterday, today, and forever?
- In this world of constant change, how does this verse speak comfort to you?
- As changes happen in your congregation, sometimes it is easy to confuse tradition with faith foundations. As traditions are changed these changes sometimes seem to shake the faith of congregational members. How can you as leaders respond to this?

When embraced, the Discovering Hope process most surely will lead to change in your congregation. Although change is constant in our lives as each day we grow older, change physically, grow intellectually, mature, and hopefully grow in faith; still change is often viewed as a bad word, especially in the context of congregational life.

Change in our congregations involves a certain element of risk. And for some risk is not so easy. How many of you are risk takers? Share a recent risk that you have taken. How did it turn out?

You know the best way not to fall off a ladder, don't you? Don't get on it in the first place. But if you have some painting to do at home, you won't be able to complete the whole job unless you get up on the ladder.

If you truly desire new life and transformation in your congregation, if you want to discover and build and embrace hope, then you are going to have to climb the ladder of risk.

Some would say, "I would be willing to take a risk, if only I knew what was at the other end." But then, that wouldn't be a risk, would it?

But let's go with that thought. Would you take a risk if you knew what was at the other end? Would you? Well, I want to help you to know and claim what or rather who is at the other end of every risk.

Find these Bible verses and read them out loud to the group: Psalm 46:1, 1 Chronicles 16:11, Philippians 4:13, Psalm 126:3, Psalm 32:10, Psalm 127:1, 1 Chronicles 16:34.

One of the most important elements of worship is the pastor's sermon. And so, pastors, ask yourselves and your council members these questions. Do people feel like they are being talked to or talked at? Can people apply the message of the sermon to their daily lives? Does the sermon motivate people and empower them to walk with Jesus? Are biblical concepts brought into the context of daily living? Is the pastor viewed as genuine, caring, and authentic?

Worship is often the first encounter a guest has with the church community. How are guests welcomed into your worship services? Is it easy for them to follow your order of worship? Do people in the congregation take time to get to know guests and develop a relationship with them? It has been said, "People are not looking for a friendly church; they are looking for friends." And there is a difference.

One pastor implemented the three-minute rule. Each Sunday, after the benediction everyone was asked to find someone they did not know and talk to them for at least three minutes. This took conversations beyond the "Hi! How are you?" stage to really getting to know the person and developing a relationship that could lead to friendship.

### Consider this

- What is happening in worship right now that you like?
- What is happening in worship that you would like to change?
- Name two worship activities that you would like to implement over the next six months.

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 3; "Discovering Hope" video – Segments 2 & 3



## Making Disciples: Learning to Live Jesus' Way

### Grounded in the Word

Read Colossians 3:16-17

- How would you define discipleship?
- How are people in your congregation encouraged to "live Jesus' way"?
- When was the last time you read the Bible outside of church?

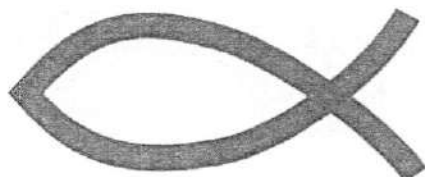
**Practice:** Effective rural congregations encourage people to join the adventure and journey of discipleship by creating a culture in which Bible study and devotional reflection are central. Learning to follow Jesus with one's whole heart, mind, and body is the aim. The teaching focus, while certainly content-based, aims more at equipping adults, youth, and children to live a lifestyle that is Christ's style.

### From the field, for the field

A father was doing some work at home on the computer. His young son kept coming and interrupting him, wanting his attention. Frustrated the father picked up a magazine, leafed through the pages and found a map of the world. He tore out the page and then tore the map into several pieces. He gave it to his son saying, "Here is a puzzle, go and put it together and when you are done, bring it back to me."

In just a few minutes the young boy returned. Amazed, the father asked, "How did you do that so quickly?" The boy replied, "I looked at the other side of the picture of the map and there was a man's face. When I got the man together, I turned it over and the world had come together."

So it is in our congregations. When we as individual Christians get ourselves together, then the congregation "comes together." Or in other words, if individuals are growing spiritually, then the congregation will grow spiritually; if members are growing in discipleship, then the congregation will grow in discipleship, etc.



If we don't feel the Spirit's activity in our lives, it's tempting to think that we need more of the Holy Spirit. Well, my friends, you were given the gift of the Holy Spirit. You've got all you're gonna get!

So the question becomes not how much of the Holy Spirit do you have. But how much of YOU does the Holy Spirit have.

How much are you asking the Spirit to fill and control your life? How often do you pray for the Spirit to lead and guide you? Do you ever sit in silence before the Lord and ask for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Are you actively watching for and then grasping opportunities for service offered to you by the Spirit? Do you pray for the Spirit's activity in your life and congregation?

There needs to be a spirit of expectation in our lives. An expectation that this Spirit who dwells in us will fill us and empower us. An expectation that the Spirit is going to stir us and move in us.

The more we empty ourselves of "self," the more room there is for the Spirit to fill us and work in and through us. We need to empty ourselves of pride, presumption, self-dependence, selfishness and be filled with the Spirit.

This means that when we make decisions for our congregation's ministry, we don't base these decisions on selfish desires, but on what is best for our mission as we join together as the body of Christ.

In a congregation which had gradually switched over to having contemporary worship every Sunday, a woman who had been in the church her whole life long, said at an annual meeting, "I miss the *LBW*, but if going back to it means we wouldn't have all these young families in our congregation, I gladly give it up." What a powerful witness to putting the ministry of the congregation before her own personal needs.

How are you putting the needs of your congregation before your own personal needs? How is the Spirit empowering you to do this?

### Additional Resources

*The Fire that Ignites: Living in the Power of the Holy Spirit* by Tony Evans; Multnomah Publishers, Inc.; 2003; ISBN 1-59052-083-1; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 3.

## The Holy Spirit at Work

### Grounded in the Word

Read John 14:15-17

- In your baptism, you received from God, the gift of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to you that this Spirit dwells in you?
- Can you give an example of how you have felt the Holy Spirit guiding or directing your actions?
- In Acts 1:8, we read of how Jesus promised the disciples that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit, power to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Do you think that the Holy Spirit empowers you to be a witness? How?

The power of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of your congregation's ministry cannot be under emphasized. So once again we will focus on the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit.

As recipients of the Holy Spirit, we have the challenge of considering why this Spirit actively empowers some people's lives and why this Spirit seems to lie dormant in others.

In *The Fire that Ignites: Living in the Power of the Holy Spirit*, Tony Evans compares the power of the Spirit to some common things: a satellite dish and a car engine.

Think of the Spirit as a satellite dish, deep within us. This Spirit is the receiver for invisible divine signals. Just as a satellite dish is always receiving signals, but we have to turn on our TV in order to receive them, so too, the Spirit is always receiving communication from God. So the question is, what do we have to do to receive these signals?

Or think of the Spirit as an engine in a car. You can sit in the car, put the key in the switch, adjust the rearview mirror, put on your seat belt, and ready yourself for a journey. But unless you turn the ignition on, you won't go very far. How do you switch on the Holy Spirit?



This growth must begin with the leadership—the pastor and you, the elected leaders of this congregation. Are you engaged in personal devotional time during the day? Are you involved in a Bible study at church? How are you making opportunities to grow spiritually?

Each of the council meetings in the congregations I serve begins with at least 30 minutes of a combination of scripture, devotions, prayer, and visioning for the congregation. All this before we embark on the day-to-day business of running the congregation. I believe that if the leadership is not growing spiritually, they are unable to lead the congregation in spiritual growth.

Beyond the leadership, all members of the congregation should be encouraged and provided opportunities for spiritual growth. How many Bible studies or Christian education opportunities are offered in your congregation? Are these available for all ages and groups of people? After all, learning is a lifelong process. What age groups are being missed?

The sermon on Sundays is a powerful avenue for teaching discipleship. Pastors, ask yourselves, "What does the Bible reading today have to do with 'living Jesus' way"? And just as powerful as the sermon, is the children's message. How are children being taught to "live Jesus' way"?

*Effective rural congregations find creative ways to continually remind people of their call to discipleship. They work at it and are strategic about it. They are consistently "in the face" of their members with the invitation and opportunities to go deeper in their walk with Jesus. (DH pg. 55)*

### Consider this

- Is learning fun and adventurous in your congregation?
- What percentage of your active members is engaged in some kind of discipleship training or activity?
- Name two discipleship activities that you would like to implement over the next six months.

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 4; "Discovering Hope" video – Segments 2 & 3; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 1.



## Evangelism: A Way of Life

### Grounded in the Word

Read Matthew 28:18-20

- What do these verses mean for your life as a Christian?
- Jesus and his disciples felt an urgency to share God's good news. In your congregation, is there a feeling of urgency to share God's good news? Why or why not?
- How many of you have ever invited anyone to church? Did they come? Why or why not?

**Practice:** Effective rural congregations exhibit a holistic approach to evangelism built on relationships, centered around events, and focused on meeting the specific needs of people in the community.

### From the field, for the field

Evangelism is often a misunderstood word and concept. What does this word mean to you? Inviting others to come to know and develop a relationship with Jesus, proclaiming the good news that Jesus is our Savior, extending an invitation to come to church and then offering a ride to that person—all of this is evangelism.

*For the people in effective congregations, the motivation for reaching out to others is Jesus. Sparked by a strong sense of the power of Jesus in their own lives and in the life of their congregation as community, they live knowing they have good news to share. They feel compelled to share with others their experience of this 'community.' The belonging they feel in Christ, and the sense of community they feel in the congregation. More often than not, the evangelistic invitation is first to the church, to an activity, an event, a worship service, or a small group gathering. But make no mistake, while it starts with an event or gathering at the bottom line the invitation is always ultimately to Jesus. (DH pg. 60)*

There you have it—the bottom line is Jesus, developing a faith relationship with Jesus. Money, survival, the need for specific talents—none of these are good reasons to add members to your congregation. Jesus is the reason—offering the opportunity for people to come and see and know Jesus.

There are many ways to invite through media, mailings, brochures, door hangers, etc. But by far the most effective way to invite is through personal invitation. Yes, pastors can and should do this, but invitations from you, the council members, are even more effective.

What happened to the balloons? Did they stay in one place? No! They moved. That's just like the Spirit—always at work, always moving, motivating, and empowering.

Could you predict where the balloon would go? No! You never know where it might end up. That's just like the Spirit—so unpredictable, touching us in surprising and often delightful ways, calling us to ventures never imagined, enlightening our thinking, and opening us to new opportunities.

What did you hear in the room when the balloons were flying around? Laughter? Did you hear laughter? That's just like the Spirit—bringing joy and laughter into our lives, surprising us, delighting us, renewing us.

Sadly, it seems that the work of the Spirit, is often not recognized as such. Sometimes we call the Spirit's work coincidence, or fate, or luck. But the Holy Spirit is at work in your life and in the life of your congregation.

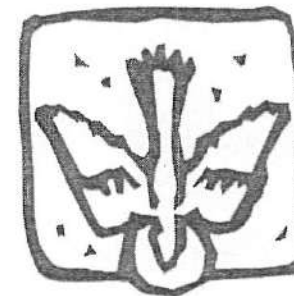
*(This is a great activity for a children's message, or better yet, get the whole congregation involved.)*

The Holy Spirit changes, challenges, moves, motivates, empowers, surprises, calls, gathers, enlightens, opens, brings joy, renews, and delights. Think about your life as a Christian. Think about your congregational life. How have you seen the Spirit working in these ways?

Pray that you will be more open to recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit in your life and in your congregation. Look for and expect the Spirit's activity.

### Additional Resources

*The Fire that Ignites: Living in the Power of the Holy Spirit* by Tony Evans; Multnomah Publishers, Inc.; 2003; ISBN 1-59052-083-1; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 3.



## Who is the Holy Spirit

### Grounded in the Word

Read John 16:5-16

- Who sent the Holy Spirit to us? Why?
- What do you know about the Holy Spirit?
- What would you like to learn about the Holy Spirit?

Throughout the *Discovering Hope* book and companion and follow-up videos, the Holy Spirit seems to be an essential power in the transformation of congregations.

Poling-Goldenne and Jung write in Chapter 1 of *Discovering Hope*: “This is a story about God’s heart for rural congregations and the power of the Holy Spirit to awaken new energy and build a renewed focus that results in congregations that grow in influence, numbers, and impact on people’s lives. Welcome to a journey of discovery that may have significant implications for the ministry of your rural congregation.” (pg. 14)

So what then of this Holy Spirit that awakens energy, that revives, empowers, leads, guides, and inspires?

If you are like most Lutheran Christians, you have a good understanding of God, as Father, and of God, as Son—Jesus, our Savior. But you are probably a bit confused and possibly feel uneducated about God, the Holy Spirit. Is this true?

Let’s participate in a hands-on activity. (*Ideally the leader will have read through this devotion before the council meeting and brought a balloon for each member of the council.*)

I want you to blow up your balloons. Blow them up BIG. Don’t tie them, just hold them. What did you notice about the balloons as you filled them with air? Recall that we often speak of the Spirit as being the “breath of God.” The balloons changed didn’t they?

When you encounter the Spirit’s activity in your life, you will almost always be led to change—and your life will become larger, fuller, more encompassing.

Now on the count of three...let your balloons go. Ready?

1-2-3...Let them go!

There are people with whom you rub shoulders every single day, who do not know Jesus or who do not attend a church on a regular basis. They are literally everywhere—at the post office, at morning coffee, in the grocery store, at work, at school, across the fence, sitting next to you at the concert, fixing your car, cutting your hair, etc.

Making evangelism a way of life means that when you encounter one of these people in your life (and you will), your first thought should be to invite them to church. And then don’t only think it—do it!

After you have invited someone, then talk to other members about your invitation. See if other people in the congregation know these same people and encourage them to invite them, as well. Being invited by many makes them feel wanted and takes away some of the risk of entering into a new faith community for the first time, because they are already familiar with a core group.

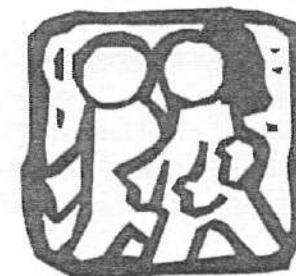
Do you know how risky and intimidating it is for a person to walk into your church for the first time? Talk about this. Why would this be? To ready your congregation for guests you need to “turn up” the hospitality. How can you do this?

### Consider this

- Are all members of your congregation encouraged to do evangelism?
- How are members being taught to make evangelism a way of life?
- Name two evangelism activities that you would like to implement over the next six months.

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 5; “Discovering Hope” video – Segment 1; “Building Hope” video – Chapters 1 & 2.



## Caring Ministries: Serving as Jesus Served

### Grounded in the Word

Read Matthew 25:31-46

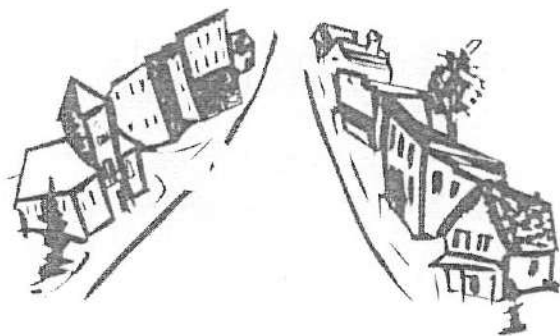
- Tell about a time when you have fed the hungry, given a drink to the thirsty, shared clothing with the unclothed or visited those in prison.
- When we serve others, we serve Jesus. How is this statement lived out in your congregational life?
- In your congregation, what priority is given to serving people's needs in your community, in the world?

**Practice:** Effective rural congregations make Christ known and develop positive, attractive reputations by stepping out into their neighborhood and world through acts of caring service and social ministry. This social outreach is a natural expression of their discipleship and an ingredient within the mix that contributes to vitality and spiritual energy.

### From the field, for the field

*"The church exists for the sake of the people who aren't here. Our call is to grow and go." This first section of the mission statement from Christ Lutheran Church in Whitefish, Montana, demonstrates the way most growing congregations define their purpose: they are there to serve others. This outward focus, an expected outcome of their own faith experience, introduces Jesus and the congregation to the world outside the church doors. (DH pg. 75)*

Suppose your membership were asked, "Why do we exist?" What do you think their response would be? Do you agree that the church exists for the sake of the people who aren't here, yet? Why or why not?



tourist community by offering a Drive-In Worship Service during the summer months that reached far beyond the services held in their church building.

The rural congregations I serve in Nebraska responded to a congregational need and developed a summer camp program. Since the synod's camp was located four hours away, the children and youth were not getting a summer camp experience. Therefore, the congregations assessed community resources, located an available campsite and now plan and sponsor their own church camp program.

The result of this effort has reached far beyond initial expectations. Not only are children and youth receiving a quality camping experience, but, in addition, this new two-point parish has joyfully embraced their partnership as congregations. This program has also served as an outreach opportunity, with several families joining the congregations as a result of community children and youth being invited to participate in camp.

A key to developing effective programs that meet the needs of congregation and community is to link need with resource. This offers an opportunity for unique programming within your ministry setting, because needs and resources are different in each ministry setting.

What are the strengths of your current ministry? What does your congregation do well? List them.

What is unique about the community context in which you do ministry? Try to define the context as it really is, not what you wish it to be. List the attributes.

What are the needs of your congregation? What are you not doing that should be done? List these needs.

Now compare your strengths with community and congregational needs. How can these strengths serve the needs? What resources are available in your setting? What programs can be developed to meet these needs?

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 8; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 2



## Discovering the Gift of Place

### Grounded in the Word

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

- In these verses, Paul is describing how he has become all things to all people, so that he might save some. List the different groups of people that comprise your ministry setting. For instance, are there a large number of farmers? Is there an emerging ethnic group in your community? Is it a retirement community or tourist community? Are there many single parents?
- What are the specific needs of these people? If you don't know, how can you find out?
- How is your congregation responding to these needs?

There was once a baby camel talking to its mother. "Why do we have such big feet, Mother?" The mother replied, "So that when we walk across the desert, we don't sink into the sand." "And why do we have such long eye lashes, Mother?" The mother replied, "So that when the wind blows the desert sands, our eyes will be protected." "And why do we have this hump on our backs, Mother?" The mother replied, "So that when we make the long journey across the desert, we can survive without water." "So, Mother, let me understand this, our feet keep us on top of the sand, our eye lashes protect our eyes from the sand, and our humps enable us to make long journeys across the desert." "That is correct, my son." "So then, Mother, what are we doing in the San Diego Zoo?"

God has indeed gifted your congregation for mission in this time and place. The Spirit provides the gifts that you need in the context in which you are called to do ministry, not in San Diego and not in the desert.

The thought should never be, "We could do these things, if only...." Don't look at what you don't have, look at what you do have and then build upon these things.



In the "Building Hope" video, Chapter 2, First Lutheran Church in Milford, Iowa, responded to the needs of this

Serving Jesus means reaching out to others and serving them. In order to serve others effectively, first the needs of the community have to be discovered. What are the specific needs, hopes, and problems of people and families in your area? As a congregation, how can you help address these? If you don't know these needs, where can you go to discover them?

*Growing congregations do not engage ministries of service primarily as an evangelism strategy. Their motivation is to love others as Christ has loved them. Nevertheless, the outcome is often evangelistic. People outside the congregation come to know it as a caring community and often find themselves drawn into this community and a relationship with Christ. (DH pg. 76)* Have caring ministries drawn others into your congregation? How did this happen?

*There is a tendency for effective rural congregations to focus their caring ministry effort locally, and then move from the more local context to the wider world beyond them. It is difficult to say which is the stronger priority: reaching out to neighbors near at hand, such as delivering meals-on-wheels, offering grief support, or providing child-care services; or reaching out to neighbors half a world away, for example, by contributing funds to the Heifer Project to send a water buffalo to a village in India. Vital rural congregations view both local and global efforts as important. (DH pg. 77)* In what global ministries is your congregation engaged?

As congregations are involved in caring ministries, so often they discover that they receive much more than they give. In fact, these caring ministries have a tendency to create vitality and energy within faith communities.

### Consider this

- List the caring ministries of your congregation? Are opportunities offered for all ages?
- How has your congregation grown from being involved in caring ministries?
- Name two caring ministry activities that you would like to implement over the next six months.

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 6; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 1.

## Leadership: Who's Driving the Tractor?

### Grounded in the Word

Read John 13:1-17

- What qualities do you admire in a leader?
- In these verses, what is Jesus teaching about leadership?
- How do you understand your role as leader in relation to these verses?

**Practice:** Effective rural congregations model a shared leadership in which the pastor's role is significant, yet not dominant, the role of laity is active rather than passive, and Jesus is seen as the primary leader for all the congregation to follow.

### From the field, for the field

*Ultimately, Jesus is the leader everyone in the congregation seeks to follow. Through prayers, Bible study, and conversation, pastors and lay leaders in vital congregations seek to discern Jesus' will for their work together. They pattern their activities and their leadership style on Jesus. (DH pg. 85)*

Who is viewed as the leader in your congregation? Is Jesus viewed as your ultimate leader? Why or why not?

*For the most part, effective congregations are leaving behind older models that position the pastor or a few pillar families as the ones 'driving the tractor.' Instead, these congregations are experimenting with new patterns of shared leadership drawn from the model of Jesus as servant-leader and uniting pastor and laity around a common vision for their future.*

*Indeed, this practice of shared leadership appears to be a necessary ingredient to congregational vitality and renewal. As people are empowered to work together and embrace their baptismal, God-given calls, an energy is released that allows the congregation to accomplish significant ministry for members and others. Shared leadership ultimately means more people are engaged. The team spirit that emerges from shared leadership helps lay members view ministry as the work of the people—a joyous privilege instead of a duty, an opportunity instead of a task. (DH pg. 84-85)* Describe the leadership model in your congregation. Is it effective? How could it be more effective?

Take a look around the room. What is the average age of your council members? If you are like most rural congregations there are probably more of you over age 50 than under age 50. Is this true? If so, then I suggest you look at ways to pass the leadership of your

What is your attitude toward doing ministry? What is the attitude of the majority of your members? Are you hopeful or doubtful? If it is doubtful, how can this change?

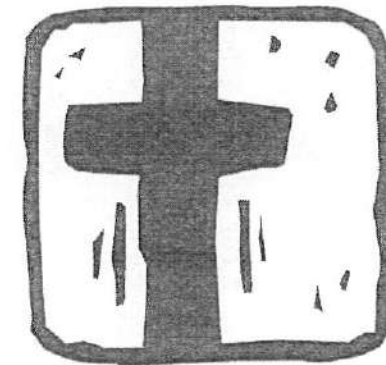
Another important ingredient for effective ministry is a balance in leadership between the pastor and lay leaders. Joining in partnership in mission is absolutely essential. How is this happening in your congregation? Is leadership shared? Do the pastor and congregational leaders work together? Are they striving for the same goals? What are these goals?

Participation in leadership results from a climate of permission-giving. Permission-giving leads to shared leadership and a generous sharing of spiritual gifts. Has this climate been created in your congregation? How is this evident? If not, what steps can be taken to create such a climate?

In Chapter 1 of the "Building Hope" video, Rev. Mark Nelson describes a sense of joy when a congregation moves from the burden of taking responsibility in a congregation to participation in life-giving activity. The Discovering Hope process seeks to move your members to experience the life-giving event of being joyful, active, participatory members of your congregation. These members can and do experience joy in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 1; "Discovering Hope" video – Segment 2; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 1.



## Finding Hope Where You Are

### Grounded in the Word

Read Jeremiah 29:11-13

- As a congregation council, how are you seeking the plans that God has for your congregation?
- To what kind of hope and future is God leading your congregation? Do you feel there are a hope and a future?
- God promises us that as we seek God with all our heart, we will find God. What does it mean to seek God in this way?

It is good to begin this study with self-reflection; to consider your current ministry and to discover hope therein. As you work through this devotion, take time to reflect upon the questions contained in the narrative. Allow time for each person to respond and then listen carefully to the unique perspective each member brings.

First, let's look at your ministry and talk about what is going on in your congregation. Is your congregation alive in mission and ministry or just hanging on? Let's expand upon this by using the six core values of the Discovering Hope process. What is happening in your congregation in the areas of prayer, worship, discipleship, evangelism or outreach, caring ministries, and leadership?

Attitude is all-important as you seek to discover hope in your ministry. Of course, you can be doing more. Every congregation could say this. But take time to celebrate all that is already happening in your congregation. With these ministries currently in place consider your glass to be half-full rather than half-empty and DISCOVER HOPE!

At East Lake Andes Lutheran Church, one of the congregations included in the Discovering Hope study, a change in attitude was the beginning of new and exciting ministry. The old attitude was, "Look at our church located out here in the middle of the country. Who would ever want to come to church way out here?" Their glass seemed more than half-empty. The new attitude became, "Look at our church. We are located in the middle of the country, surrounded by many small towns. We could pull people from all of these towns and the surrounding community."

With their glass half-full, change and growth began to happen. As East Lake Andes Lutheran reached out to minister to the lives of the people in these small towns, the people began to respond and accept invitations to become involved in the congregation.

congregation down to the next generation. And I would like to suggest that you pass on leadership without giving up ownership in your congregation.

First identify younger people in your congregation who have the spiritual gifts that will enable them to be strong leaders in a specific area. Ask and encourage them to run for council or get involved in other ways.

And then when they start taking leadership, don't step back from them. Encourage them, mentor them, tell them how well they are doing, support their programs, and praise them in public. And above all—do not criticize them or what they are doing. Sure what they are doing may be different from what you might have done, but ask yourself, "Is it working?" Then be open to a new way.

It is important that the older generation stay involved in the life and vitality of the congregation, lending their wisdom and their very presence to the ministry of the congregation.

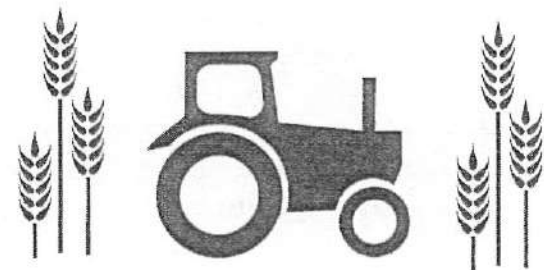
If you can do all this, you have a recipe for passing down leadership and growing a vital congregation.

### Consider this

- Who are potential leaders in your congregation?
- How can you nurture their gifts and invite them into leadership roles?
- Name two leadership activities that you would like to implement over the next six months.

### Additional Resources

*Discovering Hope* – Chapter 7; "Discovering Hope" video – Segment 1; "Building Hope" video – Chapter 3.



## Mission: Possible— Discovering Hope for the Future

### Grounded in the Word

Mark 10:24-27

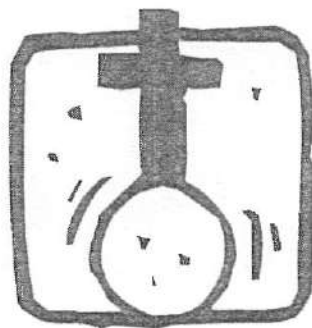
- Consider your congregation, what changes or transformations are desired, but seem out of reach, seem impossible?
- How do these verses bring hope in the midst of this kind of thinking?
- All things ARE possible with God. How will your trust and faith in this statement be reflected in your approach to ministry?

### From the field, for the field

*On the Mission: Impossible TV show of the 1960s and 1970s, the leader of a group of special agents received a message at the beginning of each episode. "Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to..." Each mission was remarkably complicated and almost impossible to complete. But somehow through wit, cunning, and special gadgetry, it always turned out possible after all.*

*Sometimes ministry feels like Mission: Impossible, particularly in rural congregations. Limited size, financial constraints, congregational history, and negative self-image can cause pastors and members to feel hopeless and ineffective. (DH pg. 106)*

Vital, effective, growing ministries are possible in rural congregations despite the above factors. There is hope and lots of it! The 26 congregations involved in the rural research study resulting in *Discovering Hope* experienced it. I have experienced this personally in three congregations now—one in the open-country, one in a town of 750 and one in a town of 1200. And you can experience it, too. Right?



## Introduction

This devotional book is based on *Discovering Hope: Building Vitality in Rural Congregations*, the companion video "Discovering Hope: Stories of Hope in Rural Congregations," and the following up video "Building Hope: How small town and rural congregation apply Discovering Hope's six core values to build hope and joy inside their walls and outside into their communities."

The Discovering Hope project identified 26 rural congregations across the ELCA that were vital and growing despite being in areas of declining populations. The results of this study are included in the above named resources.

The beauty of *Discovering Hope* is that it is from the field for the field. All of the ideas contained in these resources have actually been implemented in rural congregations—congregations just like yours.

This devotional book is written as a resource for rural congregations. These devotions are designed to be used at the beginning of monthly congregation council meetings. Discussion questions are included throughout the narrative of the devotions. Ideally, you are asked to stop the narrative and take time for congregation council members to respond to these questions.

Allow time for each person to respond and then listen carefully to the unique perspective each member brings. It would be helpful, if you appointed someone to take notes during the discussion times. Record key ideas and responses. This will be helpful at the end of the process as you begin to develop plans and strategies.

Pastors or others who will lead these devotions are asked to read through the devotion before the council meeting. While it will take little prep time for these devotions, in one section you are asked to have balloons for the group, so come prepared. You may also consider showing a portion of the videos during your devotion time.



Don't give up! All things ARE possible with God. Yes, it will take time. Yes, it will take planning and strategy. Yes, it will take an unshakable faith. But YES, it is possible.

### **Building an action plan for your future**

Go back and review discussions from all the devotions. What have you learned? What is God calling your congregation to be and do?

Now focus specifically on the six core values of Discovering Hope: prayer, worship, making disciples, evangelism, caring ministries, and leadership.

- Under each core value list some key insights. Include insights from all the devotions, as well.
- Identify two action steps for each core value. Make sure that these action steps are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely). Identify who will take responsibility for implementing each action step. Draw from a wider group than just the council. Ask others to take leadership in the implementation of these actions steps.

If you are still unsure about how to step forward into vital ministry, consider expanding the Discovering Hope process in your congregation. Form small groups to study through the *Discovering Hope* book and video resources. Empower these small groups to vision and formulate action steps for your congregation. At any time during the process, if you are feeling lost, go back to the basics: prayer and Bible study. God will see you through. Just listen to God and ask the Spirit to stir and help you to discern direction for your ministry.

Speaking at the 2005 Nebraska Synod Assembly, Rev. Dr. Bernice King spoke about possibilities in ministry. She spoke of how it is exactly when we strive for the impossible that we meet God along the way, because it is only through God that all things are possible. God makes what seems impossible to us, possible. So don't hesitate, strive for the impossible, meet God along the way and join with God as you strive for vital, effective, growing ministry!

To quote Edward Lindemann: "Hope is the music of the future, faith is the courage to dance to it!" Are you ready to dance?

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This resource is written as a result of the Discovering Hope affinity group of the ELCA. This group seeks ways to encourage and teach rural congregations to become vital, effective, growing congregation.

**About the author:** Pastor Nancy Nyland served East Lake Andes Lutheran Church in Lake Andes, South Dakota, for almost 13 years. East Lake Andes Lutheran was one of the 26 congregations involved in the Discovering Hope project. She currently serves St. Peter Lutheran Church in Bassett, Nebraska, and St. John's Lutheran Church in Atkinson, Nebraska. These congregations are a part of the study that resulted in the follow up video, "Building Hope." As a former evangelism partner for the ELCA, a member of the Nebraska Synod Outreach Committee, and a member of the ELCA Discovering Hope affinity group, Pastor Nancy speaks at many state and regional conferences bringing a word of HOPE to rural congregations.

#### **Resource Information**

*Discovering Hope: Building Vitality in Rural Congregations;* David Poling-Goldenne and L. Shannon Jung, Augsburg Fortress, 2001, ISBN 978-0-8066-4147-8.

"Discovering Hope: Stories of Hope in Rural Congregations;" filmed and edited by Jim Petersen; ELCA Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission Program Unit; 2001; ISBN 978-6-0001-3326-9.

"Building Hope: How small town and rural congregation apply Discovering Hope's six core values to build hope and joy inside their walls and outside into their communities;" filmed and edited by Jim Petersen; Brent Dahlseng; 2006; ISBN: 978-6-0002-0870-7.

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Congregational Leaders





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God's work. Our hands.

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