THE CHURCH

The Church is the Body of Christ given for the world. In other words, the Church does not exist for itself. Some have said the Church is the only institution that exists for non-members! Certainly, the Church is a place where members should be able to count on encouragement in the face of life’s challenges and support in their Christian discipleship. But ultimately, the role of the Church is to be the presence of Christ in and for the world.

So how, exactly, do we do that? We do that by utilizing our God-given gifts or talents to further the mission of Christ. This process begins with our willingness and commitment to be available wherever and however God needs us. Sometimes our interest in spiritual gifts can become narcissistic as we become so focused on personal gifts, we are unwilling to do anything that does not allow us to showcase them. Certainly we are gifted in unique and special ways. But we must be willing to be used by God in whatever way the Holy Spirit guides us.

In the gospel of Mark, chapter 1, we read of Jesus calling his first disciples who were fishermen. Mark tells us that they responded to Jesus’ call with immediacy:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea— for they were fishermen.
And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”
And immediately, they left their nets and followed him.
As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John,
who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them;
and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Mark 1.16-20, NRSV

God places a call upon all of our lives. If we are willing to make ourselves radically available to God, God will use us; for, as we offer ourselves to Christ, his Holy Spirit moves within us by guiding us, directing us and equipping us. On our own, by our own strength and abilities, we could not hope to discern and fulfill God’s call; but it is the Spirit of Christ within us who accomplishes this work.

This guidance of the Holy Spirit within us is demonstrated in the sacrament of baptism. In the early Church, people were baptized by immersion. It was a powerful symbol, revealing that, by offering our lives to Christ, we desire our sinfulness and selfishness to be “drowned to death” so that the loving and life-giving Spirit of Christ may “rise up” within us.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life...
So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6.3-4, 11

How can we become people who can be radically used by God to accomplish his work in the world? By allowing the Holy Spirit to put to death our ego and pride that cause us to serve for our own glory or satisfaction, or only to respond when it is convenient. It is the work of the Spirit to lead us into a new way of living that reflects Jesus’ servant ministry and is a demonstration of God’s love and grace.

Yet even so, we do acknowledge and celebrate that each of us, created uniquely in the image of
God, has been given distinctive gifts which with to serve. These are known as spiritual gifts. The apostle Paul speaks of these gifts often in his letters to his churches. We should not consider Paul’s lists as exhaustive. Paul wrote about the gifts both evident and necessary within those first century Christian communities. In our 21st century world, some of those gifts are still much needed and, therefore, undoubtedly still bestowed upon believers. However, there may be other gifts needed for our cultural context today which the Spirit also gives in order to carry out God’s mission in our current time.

So, how do we go about discerning and discovering our spiritual gifts? One way is to exercise self-awareness. If we discipline ourselves to take time periodically to prayerfully reflect on our lives, we can better discern God’s call. Our life’s experiences are used by God to shape us and guide us.

A second way to discern our gifts is to receive affirmation or confirmation from fellow believers. Our relationships are also used by God to shape us and guide us. In particular, brothers and sisters in Christ (like the ones in this group) who are willing to listen, to pray and to respond with truth and love can serve as spiritual guides. (Spiritual Gifts Inventories can also be helpful in discerning our spiritual gifts. If you are interested in completing an inventory, let your facilitator know.)

Sometimes exercising our spiritual gifts fits nicely into our lives and requires little change to our normal routine. But, at other times, exercising a spiritual gift may disrupt our life as we know it and may even require personal sacrifice. Yet, either way, we will discover that answering God’s call and exercising our spiritual gifts allows us to participate in the mission of Christ to bring about redemption for God’s world.

Before your group meets together, take some time this week to evaluate your past in order to better discern God’s call upon your future. Richard Peace writes: “For the follower of Christ, it is important to become what God wants us to become… One way to discern God’s future for you is to pay attention to the past.” Using a journal to review your past, consider the following:

- What particular skills do you have? In what areas have you demonstrated proficiency and been affirmed by others?
- In what ways have you volunteered or served to meet the needs of others? What experience/s did you find especially gratifying?
- In your work, in your play, in your relationships and experiences, what has been the greatest source of joy to you? What is it that consistently energizes and delights you?
- What need draws your attention and causes great compassion to well up within you?

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1 See Romans 12.3-8; Ephesians 4.1-6.11-13; 1 Corinthians 12.4-11, 27-31.

ii Spiritual Journaling: Recording Your Journey Toward God by Richard Peace; Navpress; p. 54.
**Session Five: Leader**

(Materials needed: candles, copies of Wesley’s Covenant Prayer for all group members, anointing oil)

- Remind the group of the format for your time together. Begin by lighting candles; hear a word of scripture; take a few moments to breathe deeply and relax; and, have a prayer time that will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

- Light a candle and explain that it is a reminder to us of Jesus’ presence with us since Jesus is the light of the world. Invite members to come forward at their own pace and light a candle.

- Share this scripture based on 1 Corinthians 12.4-7 [or another scripture of your choosing]:
  
  *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

- Invite members to take a few moments to close their eyes and breathe deeply and slowly using these few moments to begin to relax and let go of the day’s tensions.

- Invite group members to name anyone or any situation for which they desire prayer. All they need to do is speak the name of the one in need since God already knows every need. Let them know that the prayer time will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

- Remind members that this week we were to spend some time reflecting on our past in order to better discern God’s will for our future and the call he places upon our lives. Together we considered:
  
  - Our **skills**
  - Our **service** to those in need
  - Those things that bring us great **joy**
  - Those things that evoke our **compassion**.

  Invite participants to each take a turn discussing their reflection on one of the four things listed above. Instruct the group that individuals will share as they are ready. Each person’s time of sharing will be followed by a brief time of silence to better reflect on what has been shared. Then, other members of the group are invited to identify ways in which they have seen evidence of the particular skill or joy or compassion that was shared. (Note: Depending on how well the participants have grown to know one another, you may need to take the lead in this time of affirmation. As facilitator, you may want to take some time during the week, prior to the group meeting, to pray for and reflect on the gifts or passions you have noticed or heard reflected in the participants’ sharing over the past few weeks.)

- Invite participants to listen as you read the story of the loaves and the fishes recorded in Mark 6.30-44.
  
  *The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran...*
there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34 When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. 35 And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. 36 Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." 39 Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. 41 And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And they all ate and were satisfied. 43 And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

Let participants know you will read the story a second time; this time pausing to pose questions after portions of the story. Encourage them to take their time to share their responses to the questions posed. Let them know that we’ll not discuss our responses (i.e. no “cross-talking”). We will simply offer our responses and quietly receive the responses of others.

30 The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.

The word “desolate” is a translation of the Greek word eremos. It means a place that is uninhabited. Particularly in Mark’s gospel, Jesus seeks out these uninhabited places so that he may have quiet time alone in prayer.

What has it meant for you to have this “desolate space,” a quiet place and space to get away for prayer, reflection and sharing over these past five weeks? Do you ever feel like you “pass yourself coming and going?” How has this group allowed you to pause and center yourself? [pause here for reflection and response]

33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.

The people sought Jesus out to minister to their needs. What are some of the needs people in our community have? What might they be seeking? And how, as a church, are we demonstrating our compassion? What more might we do to respond to the needs we see in our community? [pause here for reflection and response]

35 And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. 36 Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."
Can you imagine the fear and the panic on the part of the disciples? In what ways do we, as a congregation, demonstrate fear or anxiety that we will not have enough resources to meet people’s needs? [pause here for reflection and response]

39 Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. 41 And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And they all ate and were satisfied. 43 And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

Through this story we discover that, our meager resources in the hands of Jesus are more than enough to meet the needs of a hungry world. How has this week’s focus on spiritual gifts and call changed or impacted your perspective on what you as an individual and all of us as a congregation are able to do to carry out God’s mission in the world? [pause here for reflection and response]

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

- Invite members to come forward to extinguish their candles. Conclude with this benediction from the Book of Numbers:
  The Lord bless you and keep you;
  the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
  the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.
John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer:

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