

# *Engaging the Spirit*

## **Biblical Work for Congregation Reform**

The Spirit is doing a new thing. The context for ministry--the communities and congregations in which we serve--has moved far beyond the hopes fears and expectations that we anticipated being here in 2011. The Reformation Project of the Alaska Synod is designed doe congregations to shift how and with whom ministry happens. It takes as its starting point the Holy Spirit that is already present in the community and our places of worship, stirring up new questions, new energy, and new possibilities for being the Body of Christ in the world. It is nothing less than asking the question: How are we to re-form our ministries and leaders to be Christ's Church in the time, in this place?

One of the critical dimensional of this "re-form" is to delve deeper into scripture and let the scriptures inform and guide the congregation's progress. "Biblical Work" describes how this use of scripture is more than just "study." It is a way in which the Living Word of God enters into the life and movement of the congregation. This resource is best used with leadership of the congregation over a seven to ten week framework near the beginning of the congregation's dialogue about its reform.

## Session I

## Who is the Good News for? The Mission of the Church

### Prayer for our Church

*Grace and peace from God our Father.*

*In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the Word of truth, the Gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.... For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:3-6, 9-14*

This prayer is for your congregation.

What does it tell us about the God we believe in? What has God already done for us?

What is God saying about us? What does God want for us and from us?

What is the Word of truth, the Gospel, we are to hear and share?

Hearing the Word of truth, the Gospel, that we are rescued from the power of darkness, transferred into the Kingdom now, redeemed from our slavery to sin and brokenness, and enabled to share in the inheritance of the saints...WHAT THEN? What phrase does Paul repeat?

What if it is true:

- ~The Gospel is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world!
- ~The Gospel is bearing fruit among you from the first day you heard it!
- ~The Gospel is bearing fruit in that now even you can comprehend the grace of God!
- ~Be filled with the knowledge of God's will!
- ~Lead lives worthy of the Lord as you bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God!
- ~Be strong with all the strength that comes from God's power!
- ~Be prepared to endure everything with patience while joyfully giving thanks to the Father!
- ~Go proclaim this Gospel to the whole world (where it is already bearing fruit)!

To whom will our congregation go? Who do we send?

**Beit Sahour- Place of the Shepherds (Aramaic) or Place of the Magi (Arabic)**

Beit Sahour Evangelical Lutheran Church is a Christian community in the hill country of Palestine which sees its roots going back to the shepherds who paid homage to the Messiah in the village of Bethlehem. For this small Christian community caught in the struggles of Israelis and Palestinians, they see their witness to Christ as that of the shepherds over 2000 years ago; to share the Good News of God to all who can hear-- Christians, Jews, and Muslims. This public proclamation calls for faithful conversations, justice for the dispossessed, and education for children of all faiths. To whom do they go...to neighbors whether they be Muslim or Jew, to government and leaders seeking justice, to Christians throughout the world to bear witness and fruit for what God is doing and what God wants done.

*'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. John 10:11-14*

*For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. Ezekiel 34:11-16*

Who are the "other" sheep that do not belong to this fold? Who are the ones that desire to hear the shepherd's voice?

God equips us with the truth of the Gospel and strength of the power of God to bear fruit in worthy lives of doing the good work set before us. To whom will we go? Who does God send?

Is this true? If so, what must change in our congregation for this to happen? What must change in my own beliefs, attitudes and behaviors for this to happen?

**What action will I take in the next 50 days? Who will I invite into accountability and action?**

**Metanoia...Change of Heart, Mind and Behavior!**

## **Biblical Work Engaging the Spirit**

### **Session II New Beginnings, A New Creation**

The Spirit shows up in surprising places and critical times: bringing order out of chaos in Creation, breath of life into humanity, the winds that dry the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the quail to feed Israel, Moses' authority shared with leaders, Solomon's temple filled with power, Ezekiel's dry bones given new life, and Isaiah's proclamation, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me: he has sent me to bring good news...." *Ruah* is the word used for both God's life-giving breath and for the wind of God's will.

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. Gen 1:1-5*

*In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. Gen 2:4b-7*

*But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, Gen 8:1-2*

*The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.' .... Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD. Ezekiel 37 1-6, 11-14*

Our God is both the God of Creation and of the New Creation. God breathes life into clay and dry bones. God's *Ruah* is breath of life and the wind that brings God's will among the people.

Is this the time for God's Spirit to be moving among us, showing us God's will, and breathing new life into our communities? Is this the time for our congregation to boldly live into God's mission and ministry in new ways?

Is our congregation a "dry bones" community? Does God's breath need to give us new life?

Some congregations are already asking these questions, others are not ready for the reality of their situations. Some recognize that their current situation is not sustainable; that their numbers are flat or declining around one or more of the measurables for a healthy congregation: worship attendance, financial support, children in Sunday school, adult baptisms, and new ministry activities. For each generous, extra mile contributor we do

not have five to seven new contributors in the pipeline to become such supporters (that is what research has shown). Leaders are not coming forward as they did a generation or two ago. There is just not the same energy we had when we started or when programs were strong. Our congregation has worked hard, tried new things, everyone going the extra mile...yet...

What have we tried over the past 40 years to grow the ministry of the congregation, get young families here or be more visible in the neighborhood? How successful have we been?

What if what is required is not a new thing or pastor, but a radical change of heart, mind, and behavior; a true metanoia event? Is this asking too much from the congregation?

*From Romans Chapter 8*

*...if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you...*

*14For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. 18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Do we believe this? Christ is in us; the Spirit gives life to us; God has adopted and claimed us as His own; the Spirit bears witness to our spirit that we are children, heirs and co-heirs with Christ in work, suffering and glory. As children of God, we are co-creators (co-birthers) of this new creation which has been groaning in labor pains UNTIL NOW! Even when we do not know what to ask for, the Spirit intercedes and God will do what is needed.

If our congregation is to be changed by the Holy Spirit, we must be in Christ for it is in Him that we will see the work of the Spirit. We have all the credentials--daughters and sons of God, co-heirs in Christ, co-birthers of the new creation-- we need to begin this work in our congregations. Step 1..Pray. Pray together and separately, pray for this new creation and Spirit life for our congregation. Pray when we are not sure where to go next. Pray to see the resources God has already placed for our use. Pray for the Spirit to reveal what is before us...opportunities, challenges, and partners. Pray for Metanoia, that radical change of heart, mind, and behavior. Step 2...Make everything we do worship God. Step 3...

Extra credit: Read Romans 8:27-39

## **Biblical Work Engaging the Spirit Session III**

### **Impossible! The Need to Change...Metanoia for our Congregation**

**What's in a Wall? Nehemiah...**Nearly a hundred years have passed since the exiles had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. Though the Temple had been rebuilt, the city was barely occupied and the walls had not been rebuilt. More Jews lived in the outlying villages and towns because bands of marauders would regularly plunder Jerusalem and the Temple. Foreigners still controlled much of what was happening in the area. Nehemiah served in the court of King Artaxerxes and was given authority and resources to rebuild the city much to the anger and displeasure of local authorities.

*Nehemiah 1:1-3 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*

In Nehemiah's day, most believed that nothing could fix their situation. It was simply impossible to tackle such a task. They knew something needed to happen but they could not imagine how to get started, how to overcome the resistance, and what it would take to accomplish it.

**Is our congregation facing situations that are challenging and may even seem impossible? What are the symptoms of these situations? What is "broken down" or breaking down in our congregation?**

**From the list above, can you identify causes without assigning blame or shame?**

*Nehemiah 2:11-20 So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.' I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, 'What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?' Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.' \*\*\**

Do you see the emerging model to Nehemiah's approach: a) listen to those closest to the problem (*the man from Jerusalem who had come to his brother*), b) praying and putting this work in God's hands c) observe what needs to be done (*going around the wall and the city to actually see*), d) identify the self-interest of those that may work with you (*come let us rebuild the wall...no longer suffer disgrace*), e) recognize those that will resist or challenge this work (e.g. Sanballot, Tobiah, and Geshem), and f) affirm that this work is from God (*God will give us success*).

**In facing the deep concern and challenges of our congregation, this process takes time and is never an easy fix. Each step in Nehemiah's approach has strengths that help lead to successful work. What are the strengths of these steps and how they can benefit our situation?**

<b>Listening to those closest</b>	
<b>Praying by setting this before God</b>	
<b>Observing the work to be done</b>	
<b>Identifying self interest of partners</b>	
<b>Recognizing resistance inside and out</b>	
<b>Affirming God's involvement</b>	

We have received a promise from God that is extraordinarily powerful. It comes to us from Ephesians: 3:14-21 *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*

**Do we believe God's promise? God's power at work in us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.**

**What can you imagine God wants accomplished in our corner of the world? How will we find out what is needed?**

**What specific actions will I take to clarify what work we will be about at this congregation?**

## **Metanoia...Change of Heart, Mind and Behavior**

## **Biblical Work Engaging the Spirit Session IV**

### **Resisting Change...Beliefs, Barriers and Blocks to Metanoia**

*Nehemiah 4:1-15* Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burnt ones at that?' Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!' Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work. But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. But Judah said, 'The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish, so that we are unable to work on the wall.' And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work.' When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, 'From all the places where they live they will come up against us.' So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.' When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.

**When a congregation talks about doing something different, there are always folks who discount, even challenge, what others are trying to do. At each stage of our reforming work we may have to ask: What are the beliefs, barriers and blocks that are stopping us from moving forward? What are some of the things that people might say?**

**What negative attitudes or beliefs within the congregation persist as we try to do this new work God is calling us to?**

**What are the barriers that are in the way of moving forward? How can we get around them?**

**Are there roadblocks that will not let us go the way we thought we should go? What other ways could we keep moving forward?**

**Can leadership "speak the truth in love" about who is likely or already is resisting doing this work?**



If we read Nehemiah 3, the work of rebuilding the wall and gates falls on those who will most benefit from that particular section of wall or that particular gate being rebuilt.

*Above the Horse Gate the priests made repairs, each one opposite his own house. After them Zadok son of Immer made repairs opposite his own house. After him Shemaiah son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, made repairs. After him Hananiah son of Shelemiah and Hanun sixth son of Zalaph repaired another section. After him Meshullam son of Berechiah made repairs opposite his living quarters. After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, opposite the Muster Gate, and to the upper room of the corner. And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants made repairs*

**Renewing and reforming the faith community can only happen when it addresses the self interest of the individuals involved. "Doing good because it is the right thing to do" does not work (though some may disagree). For ministry to be successful, it must be tied to the passion and self-interest of those doing the work.**

**How have we determined what needs to be done in our congregation? How much listening have we done? Do we know people's passions, pain, and concerns?**

**Can we identify our folks' self-interest? Where does self-interest match up with what needs to be done? Can we recruit them to be part of this work?**

It takes leaders to identify the resistance, and to see and hear the self-interest of individuals in the faith community. Leaders are called to be honest about what they want done while weighing that against the self interest of the larger community. It calls for leaders and the faith community to share in the unity we have in the Spirit. In Ephesians 3, the call is clear:

*I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

**One community, yet with many gifts of those sent out to proclaim, speak the truth in love, share the Gospel, care for people, teach young and old...all to equip the saints for the work of ministry.**

**What is your self interest in doing the renewal and reforming work?**

**What is your calling to do this work or is it just one more thing to do? Can you give this work your personal attention? What would motivate you to make this a priority?**

## Biblical Work Engaging the Spirit Session V Unity and Disunity

*Nehemiah 3:15* When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, who were building the wall. The burden-bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, 'The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us.' ...

The project may have been rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, yet there were other concerns weighing on leaders and workers. When a congregation commits itself to reforming the life of the community, it must also deal with the pressing concerns and issues that always seem to be present e.g. finances, facilities, and the folks. Leadership has to stay committed to the work of reforming and care for the community in the Now.

Examples: change the council's agenda and what work happens when, create a "dream team" (that has the complete support and confidence of the council and pastor) whose primary purpose is to strategize and implement reform ideas within the community, use congregation ministry planning sessions to advance both what has happened before as well as new ideas and ministries.

**Revisit why the congregation needs to do this reforming work. So far, what is the work to be done?**

**Brainstorm ways that the council, pastor and congregation can keep the "reforming" work a priority:**

**How can you keep the congregation informed about what is happening? How can you "rally" support for this work?**

### Distractions and other Necessary Stuff

*Nehemiah 3:5* Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, 'With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.' There were also those who said, 'We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.' And there were those who said, 'We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.'

*I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, 'You are all taking interest from your own people.' And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, 'As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!' They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, 'The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain,*

wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.' Then they said, 'We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.' And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, 'So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said, 'Amen', and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

Nehemiah gives us another critical example of how reforming work must occur. When someone in the community is acting in ways that disconnect or discount other people, we are called to speak out on this issue, "to speak the truth in love." Yet, the reality is that in most congregations, we let those causing disunity continue unchecked until someone is hurt and leaves or starts to fight back. Our Christian responsibility is to speak directly to those who are causing the conflict, speaking inappropriately, or just being naysayers. Always go with the support of the elected leaders, always go in pairs, and always speak the truth naming what is happening and its impact. When such behavior is addressed directly and early, it is more likely to lose whatever energy it had behind it.

**How could we "organize" this work to include the maximum number of people yet not be stopped by naysayers?**

**Who are the people with whom you need to have first conversations? This is not to ask for their blessing, but to keep them appropriately informed.**

**Getting those involved in a dispute or conflict to agree upon or promise how they will act in the future is a powerful tool. How might such a promise be structured?**

## **Re-finding our Unity in God**

*Nehemiah 6:15-16 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*

The key is focusing on what God is accomplishing in and through us! When we can bring God's Word--in scripture, sacraments, and the Risen One, Jesus Christ--into this work then all the naysayers and resisters are quieted (at least in public). If our congregation loses touch with God--because we are not praying together, not doing biblical work together, not listening to each other, not holding each other accountable--then our unity is at stake.

**What can the leaders of this congregation do to foster our unity in God? Be specific.**

**What challenges that unity right now? What can be done about it? Be specific.**

**What is your prayer for the congregation at this time?**

## Biblical Work Engaging the Spirit Session VI

### Outside the Tent: Where the Spirit is Working

The promise "...the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." John 14:26 "...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So how does the Spirit do its work? What does this Advocate do? How are we baptized with the Holy Spirit? Where can we see the Holy Spirit working in our congregation? Are we paying attention?

The Spirit seems to go where it will, blow and breathe (the meaning of the Hebrew word *Ruah*) inside the believers and those outside the faith community. Here the story of Moses calling the elders to service:

*Numbers 11:16-25 So the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. 17I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. 18And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, "If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt." Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. 19You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, 20but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"' 21But Moses said, 'The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, "I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month"! 22Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?' 23The Lord said to Moses, 'Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.' 24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. 25Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.*

**How is the Spirit working inside the tent, inside the congregation? What are the gifts or "fruit" (Gal 5:22-23) being manifested?**

**Does our congregation even ask the question: What is of the Spirit and what is not? How might a congregation discern where the Spirit is present? Hint: Think about the fruit.**

*Numbers 11:26-30 Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' 28And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men,\* said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' 29But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!' 30And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.*

The Spirit clearly is working "inside the tent" but also outside as well. This is not the first nor the last time this will happen: the Israelites saved at the edge of the Red Sea, the quail blown in to feed the Israelites, God speaking in the wind to Elijah, and a virgin is with child by the Holy Spirit. Acts of the Apostles are full of the Spirit working outside the tent: all gathered in Jerusalem hear the Gospel proclamation--not just the righteous Jews; Samaritans--hated by the Jews for corrupting the tradition--receive the Spirit, an Ethiopian eunuch--one maimed and therefore unacceptable--is baptized, Cornelius and household--Roman Gentiles--demonstrate that through the Spirit God fully accepts them without circumcision.

**Can you identify a time or ministry when the Spirit was working outside the tent? When did the congregation "discover" a ministry, a group of people, or a new opportunity outside the walls and programs of the congregation?**

**When the Spirit works "outside the tent" there is often a complaint or issue raised (example: think about Mary being pregnant and not married). When new ideas or something different is presented, how does the council, committee or pastor react?**

**What would make your congregation more receptive to new ideas and things from "outside the box?"**

The history of Christianity from the Apostles to today is filled with innovation coming from the outside to reform the Church: Gentiles welcomed as full participants in the work of the Gospel; use of Greek philosophy and Roman administration to help structure the faith; monasticism as a reforming movement; Renaissance transforming church buildings, education and theology; the printing press as the Reformation's tool; incorporation of secular tunes for sacred music; or modern technologies as ways to communicate the message of Christ.

We have to open our minds and hearts to new ways of living into God's mission. To continue as congregations, three things are true: 1) if new people come, they will look and be different than those in the pews today; 2) most new ministry opportunities will be outside our walls not inside; and 3) collaboration with non-church communities and agencies will be the norm. Each of these imply that the Spirit is already at work beyond our tents. The Spirit is working the same way it did in the time of the prophets and the times of the apostles. Already people, ministries and collaboration are unfolding in the Spirit that we do not know about yet. When they are ready, will we be?

**Who are potential ethnic/racial/language groups already in our community? Have we made any effort to engage them in conversation? Have we offered assistance or a place to meet?**

**What are the needs in our immediate neighborhood or village? What are the concerns of our neighbors?**

**Who are potential collaborators--co\*laborers--in doing our work in the community? How does our presence and action accomplish what our checkbooks cannot? Can we see the Spirit's work?**

## Biblical Work Engaging the Spirit Session VII

### Life in the Spirit Prayer

Promised by the Prophets, John and Baptist and Jesus, the Holy Spirit is often underestimated and misunderstood. Martin Luther had a fear of the Enthusiast of his day and placed a lot of structure and definition around the Third Article of the Creed. Luther would write the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy both the individual and the church. Many Lutherans have been uncomfortable with too much Spirit in our spirituality.

The Spirit revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments is creating, imaging, and transforming the people of God. In the scriptures, the Spirit **drives** Jesus into the desert, **compels** Paul to witness to Christ before the authorities, **possesses** Gideon to overcome his fear and battle against the enemies of Israel, **stirs up** the young man Samson to be strong in the Lord, and **lifts up** the prophet Ezekiel to God's faithfulness even while in Exile. There is no stopping the Spirit from pouring into, entering in, rushing in, or filling up all the flesh of the earth. And when the Spirit is poured out things are turned upside down.

*Joel 2:<sup>28</sup> Then afterwards*

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.*

<sup>29</sup> *Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

How is this turning things upside down? Sons and Daughters shall prophesy? The old are suppose to see visions, the young are the ones that have dreams. Slaves, male and female, do not receive the Spirit because many of them would be foreigners. This is radical change--again the word is METANOIA.

So how does the congregation come to understand what the Spirit is doing in our midst. *Acts of the Apostles* show how the earliest believers relied on the Spirit to lead and direct them through prayer.

*Acts*

2:42 *...They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

3:2 *going up to the temple for prayers at the three o'clock hour*

4:24 *they raised their voices together to God*

4:31 *...When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...*

4:32 *...Now the whole group of believers were of one heart and one mind*

6:6 *...who prayed and laid their hands on the (new leaders)*

8:15 *...Samaria had accepted the word of God, sent Peter and John...*

*who prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit*

8:22 *..."Repent of your evil ways and pray to the Lord to pardon you"*

9:12 *...Saul praying*

10:2 *...Cornelius prayed constantly to God*

12:5 *...While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.*

13:3 *...Saul and Barnabas Then after fasting and praying they laid hands on them and sent them off.*

Prayer is a means to create one heart and one mind within the community. This as formal worship prayer, praying for these in need, prayer that calls the Spirit or God to action, prayers for leaders, and prayers of discernment.

**Identify the different ways the congregation prays: Formal, informal, worship, etc.**

Congregations need to be people and places which pray expecting answers. Communal prayer will mold us together giving us common understanding of what needs to come next. Communal prayer frames questions and needs in new ways that none of us saw before. Communal prayer centers us where and with whom we need to be: God in Jesus Christ. Communal prayer moves us beyond my wants or desire, even beyond our wants and desires, to what God wants and desires.

Communal prayer is the most important job of leaders in the congregation. If you are not praying together (not just the short 2 minute devotions), how do you expect the Holy Spirit to do its work in the church? If you read Acts of the Apostles, believers pray for direction, help in crisis, what to do next, in praise of God's gracious work, for new leaders called to service, for enemies who persecute them, in thanksgiving for healing and release, and for so much more.

**How God answers prayer? Some ideas...**

- +Presence** God's promise to the church with abiding presence.
- +Convergence** Views or ideas come together to provide a common way to move forward.
- +Images and Words** Seeing a future or required action with clarity.
- +Fruit of the Spirit** The results of our actions bear the Spirit's fruit (Galatians 6)
- +Gift of Friends and Strangers** In relationships--new and old--help and wisdom is found.

When two or more are gathered in Christ, Christ is there. In worship, we pray each week the Prayers of the People, but do we actually expect an answer from God? Maybe we should! Prayer can bring about the convergence of all the needs and ideas out there; in prayer some will find connection to others, some will disappear, doors or previous priorities may be left behind while new windows and doors opened. In prayer, a vision or strategy for mission and ministry can appear with words and relationships attached. In prayer, the Holy Spirit will do its work among us, work that will challenge us to our core only to find God already there. In prayer, the gifts of the community will find full expression and suddenly strangers become neighbors and collaborators in God's mission.

**As the congregation looks to God's future for this community, how will prayer guide us?**

**How will we know what the Spirit is calling us to do and be as Christ's Church?**

**What will be the likely resistance to praying and listening more?**

**Who are the folks we turn to in times of need? Who might be our prayer leaders?**