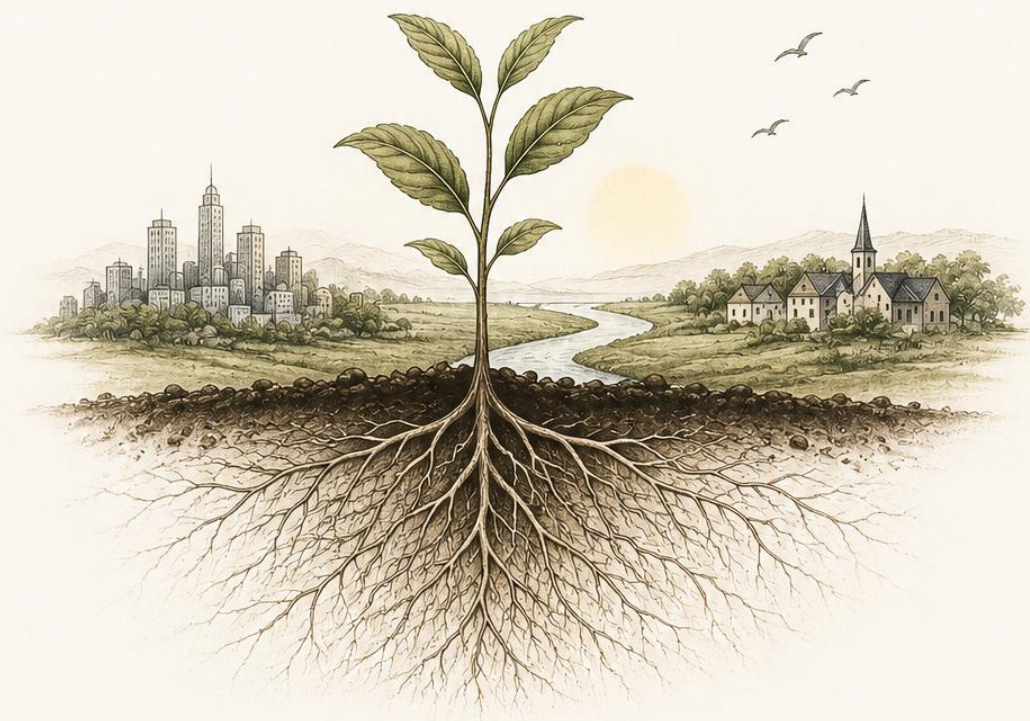


REIMAGINING THE CHURCH

*Recovering the Stewardship
of Imagination*



LORNE BOSTWICK



A Resource for Congregational
Discernment & Ministry Renewal

RESOURCE CENTER EDITION

*Permission granted to reproduce for local church
leadership and study groups.*

Introduction

Recovering the Stewardship of Imagination

Few institutions in history have demonstrated the faithful resilience of the Christian Church.

Across twenty centuries the Gospel has crossed languages, empires, political systems, cultures, and continents. Wherever it has gone, Christians have found new ways for Christ's love to become visible without changing the Gospel itself.

That is one of the Church's greatest stories.

The Church has gathered in homes and cathedrals, around dinner tables and campfires, beneath trees and beside rivers, in storefronts, schools, hospitals, refugee camps, neighborhood centers, and countless other places where people longed for hope. Christians founded monasteries that preserved learning, hospitals that cared for the sick, schools that educated children, shelters that welcomed strangers, and communities devoted to prayer, healing, justice, and reconciliation.

The settings changed.

The people changed.

The needs changed.

Christ's love became visible in new ways.

This, too, has always belonged to the Church's faithfulness.

The Entrusted Gift

For generations Christians have understood stewardship as the faithful care of what God has entrusted to us—our resources, abilities, time, relationships, and the created world.

Yet one of God's greatest gifts is seldom named.

God has entrusted us with imagination.

Created in the image of a Creator, we receive imagination as part of our calling. We do not imagine in order to invent a new Gospel, but so that the unchanging love of Christ may take faithful new forms in every time and place.

- Without imagination, we preserve yesterday's answers while today's questions change.

- With imagination, we discover how Christ's love may become visible wherever God has placed us.

Every generation receives the Church as a gift.

No generation receives it as a finished work.

We inherit the witness of Scripture, the wisdom of the Church, worship, the sacraments, and the testimony of saints who embodied Christ's love in their own generation. We also inherit the joyful responsibility of asking how that love will take flesh within our own communities.

Faithfulness has never required the Church to repeat the past.

It has always asked the Church to embody Christ's unchanging love in changing times and places.

The Particularity of Incarnation

This is the mystery of the Incarnation.

God did not become humanity in general.

God became a particular human being.

In a particular village.

Among particular people.

At a particular moment in history.

Jesus walked particular roads, shared meals with neighbors, knew people by name, and responded to the hopes, fears, and wounds before him.

Incarnation is always particular.

- A congregation in a farming community will embody Christ's love differently from one in the heart of a great city.
- A church beside a university will discover different possibilities from one beside a military base.
- A congregation surrounded by young families will respond differently from one serving an aging community.

Christ's love never changes.

The ways that love becomes visible always do.

The Open Question

This book is not an argument against the forms of ministry we have inherited. Every congregation stands upon the faithfulness of those who came before. Many churches continue to bear beautiful witness through familiar patterns of worship, fellowship, discipleship, and service.

The question is not whether those expressions are faithful.

The question is whether they are the **only** faithful expressions the Holy Spirit may yet call forth.

The history of the Church gives us every reason to believe otherwise.

If the Church has never been called merely to reproduce itself, perhaps our first task is not to ask what kind of church we should become. Perhaps it is to recover the missionary imagination by which God's people recognize where the Holy Spirit is already at work.

That journey begins where the Church has always begun: **in worship, prayer, and listening.**

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What might your congregation discover if it spent as much time listening to its community as it spends talking about itself?

Use the space below to record initial thoughts before sharing with your leadership team:







PART ONE



Recovering Missionary Imagination



Chapter One

Recovering Missionary Imagination

The church in Antioch was worshipping.

Luke tells us they were worshipping the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit said, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" After praying, fasting, and laying hands upon them, the church sent them on their way (Acts 13:1–3).

It is a simple story.

- No strategic plan.
- No demographic study.
- No discussion about institutional survival.

The church gathered to worship.

They prayed.

They listened.

The Holy Spirit called.

The church responded.

Mission began not with human initiative, but with attention to God.

The leaders in Antioch were not trying to reinvent the Church or searching for a more effective model. They were recognizing where the Holy Spirit was already leading. Everything that follows in Acts grows from that posture.

The earliest Christians were not asking, *How do we build an institution that will last?*

They were asking, **Where is God leading us now?**

That question carried them across borders they had never imagined crossing, introduced them to people they never expected to meet, and unsettled assumptions they had long taken for granted.

Amid all that change, one thing remained constant.

The Gospel remained the Gospel.

Christ remained Christ.

Only the places where Christ's love became visible changed.

What is Missionary Imagination?

Missionary imagination is not the invention of a new Gospel.

It is the faithful capacity to recognize where God's Spirit is already at work and to discover how Christ's love may become visible in changing times and places.

Long before churches spoke of innovation or adaptation, missionaries were already living this way.

They expected the Gospel to remain the same.

They expected themselves to change.

No one expected missionaries entering a new culture simply to recreate the church they had left behind. They learned languages, listened to stories, honored local customs whenever faithfulness allowed, and sought to understand the hopes, fears, and longings of the people among whom they lived.

They changed because love required it.

Paul lives this pattern throughout Acts. Wherever he traveled, he proclaimed the same Gospel. Yet he rarely proclaimed it in the same way.

- In the synagogue he began with Israel's story.
- In Athens he began with an altar dedicated *"To an Unknown God."*
- Among ordinary laborers he spoke the language of everyday life.

Paul never confused the Gospel with the form through which it was spoken.

The message remained constant.

The expression changed.

The Antioch Principle & Acts 15

Acts 15 would test whether the Church could hold that distinction.

The debate concerned circumcision. Beneath the debate lay the future of Christianity itself: *Could Gentiles become followers of Jesus without first becoming culturally Jewish?*

Had the early Church answered differently, Christianity might have remained the faith of one culture rather than becoming good news within every culture.

- Peter tells the story of what God has already done.
- Paul and Barnabas describe what they have witnessed.
- James returns to Scripture.

Experience. Scripture. Community. The Holy Spirit.

Then comes one of the most beautiful sentences in Christian history:

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

The Church did not invent a new Gospel.

The Church recognized where God had already gone ahead.

Missionary imagination begins there:

- trusting that grace arrives before we do,
- believing that God is present before our plans,
- joining what God is already doing.

That recognition transformed the early Church. It still does.

Local Flesh: Grace Before Our Arrival

For centuries Christians crossed oceans carrying the Gospel into cultures unlike their own. No one expected a missionary in Korea to recreate Scotland, a missionary in Peru to reproduce Iowa, or Christians in East Africa to become copies of Christians in England.

They understood what the Incarnation had always revealed.

Incarnation is always particular.

Every neighborhood has its own history.

Every community carries its own hopes and wounds.

Every culture asks its own questions.

Missionary imagination trusts that the Holy Spirit is already present within those realities, preparing the way for Christ's love to become visible there.

That imagination does not belong only to missionaries. It belongs to every congregation. It belongs wherever God's people gather in worship, pray for wisdom, listen for the Spirit, and recognize where Christ is already at work.

Antioch reveals where missionary imagination begins: not in restless invention, but in the recognition of grace.

The larger question is how a people formed by that grace learns to see.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Where in your surrounding neighborhood or city can you see God's grace already at work, even before your church has organized a program there?

Reflections for your session or board meeting:

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Chapter Two

Learning to See Like a Missionary

Missionaries have rarely been sent empty-handed.

The Church recognized gifts within its people and sent them into the world as expressions of Christ's love. Teachers taught. Physicians healed. Nurses cared for the sick. Engineers built bridges and wells. Farmers cultivated food. Linguists translated Scripture. Pastors gathered communities for worship. Craftspeople built schools and homes.

Their vocations differed.

Their purpose did not.

Each was sent to embody the love of Christ.

Missionaries did not leave home asking, *How can we start a church?*

They left asking, **How can Christ's love become visible among these people?**

Congregations often followed.

We may imagine missionaries beginning with worship services, committees, and buildings. More often, they began with relationships. They entered communities through the ordinary needs and longings every human being shares.

- Children needed teachers.
- Families needed medical care.
- Villages needed clean water.
- Neighbors needed friendship.
- Communities longed for hope.

Missionaries met people there first.

They listened before they spoke.

They learned before they led.

They became neighbors before they became pastors.

Love became visible long before institutions appeared.

Communities of Relationship

Again and again, this is how the Gospel took flesh in the world. Communities of relationship learned how to become love.

Missionary history reveals the Church's own vocation.

The Church is not first an institution.

Nor is it first a collection of programs.

The Church is a people who, through worship, discipleship, and shared life, are learning to become the embodied love of Christ for one another and for the world.

Missionaries lived this truth where it could be seen clearly. That required humility. Missionaries did not arrive believing they possessed all the answers. They expected to learn. Every community carried a history they did not yet understand, strengths they had not discovered, and wisdom they had not heard.

So they listened before speaking with confidence.

Jesus lived this way. Jesus rarely entered people's lives with assumptions. He entered with presence.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"Will you give me a drink?"

"Who touched me?"

Again and again, Jesus entered people's stories before inviting them into a larger one.

Compassion grew from attention.

Missionaries learned the same posture.

Love begins by listening.

As relationships deepened, communities came into view differently. They discovered gifts hidden beneath hardship. Strengths outsiders overlooked. Hope waiting quietly beneath disappointment.

Mission was never simply the solving of problems. It was the recognition of life God was already preparing.

Vocation as the Place of Incarnation

Within those relationships, vocation revealed its deeper purpose.

- A **teacher** was no longer simply teaching—she was awakening dignity.
- A **physician** was no longer simply treating disease—he was restoring wholeness.
- An **engineer** was no longer simply building a well—she was making health, community, and possibility flourish.
- A **pastor** was no longer simply preaching sermons—he was gathering strangers into a people shaped by grace.

Vocation became a place where Christ's love took flesh.

The same is true in every congregation. Every congregation already holds a remarkable richness of vocation:

Vocations Already Present in Our Midst

- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
| • Teachers | • Electricians | • Social Workers |
| • Carpenters | • Gardeners | • Mechanics |
| • Counselors | • Nurses | • Musicians |
| • Artists | • Business Owners | • Neighbors |

Too often we see only volunteers waiting to fill positions.

Missionary imagination sees something else: **it sees vocations God has already gathered.**

Where Vocation and Place Meet

The question is no longer, *What program should we create?*

The question becomes, **How has God already equipped us to love this community?**

Mission begins where vocation and place meet.

God has already entrusted gifts to a congregation. God has already entrusted that congregation to a particular place. Missionary imagination wonders how those gifts might become Christ's embodied love there.

- A congregation beside a university will embody Christ's love differently from one serving a farming community.
- A church surrounded by young families will discover different possibilities from one serving retired adults.
- A congregation responding to loneliness will not look exactly like one responding to homelessness, addiction, or educational opportunity.

Incarnation is always particular. Faithfulness takes local form.

Missionary imagination begins not with what is missing, but with what God has already provided:

1. *Who has God gathered here?*
2. *What gifts already live among us?*
3. *What relationships already exist?*
4. *Where are our neighbors already inviting us into relationship?*
5. *Where is Christ's compassion already taking shape?*

These are not first questions of strategy. **They are questions of love.**

The Church becomes most fully itself when ordinary people allow their vocations to become expressions of Christ's love.

Teachers become hope.

Doctors become healing.

Builders become hospitality.

Artists become beauty.

Neighbors become companions.

Congregations become communities of relationship learning how to become love.

Yet vocation alone does not reveal what love requires. Gifts must encounter a place closely enough to be changed by it.

Missionary imagination moves from recognizing whom God has gathered to seeing where God has placed them. There, vocation and place meet

under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the community itself becomes the next teacher.

 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

If your congregation looked past "volunteers needed for church tasks" and instead asked "how can the professional and personal vocations of our people express Christ's love in our city," what new possibilities would emerge?

Notes and group brainstorm:

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Chapter Three

Seeing Your Community

"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

— **Jeremiah 29:7**

Most of us know our communities better than we see them.

We know which roads become crowded before work, where to find a good cup of coffee, which neighborhoods have grown, and which have slowly faded. We know the schools, the Saturday soccer fields, the hospital, the courthouse, the restaurants tucked away on familiar streets. We know the landmarks, shortcuts, and faces behind the counters we visit each week.

Knowing a place, however, is not the same as seeing it.

Imagine leaving your car behind one morning and walking through your community with no errands to run, appointments to keep, or task to accomplish. You are simply present.

- A **crossing guard** greets children by name as they hurry toward school.
- A **nurse**, weary from working through the night, walks toward the parking lot while another arrives to begin a new shift.
- A **barber** listens as an older customer tells stories that have become part of the town's history.
- Volunteers unload food for families they may never meet across the street while a **small business owner** unlocks the front door.
- Somewhere a **teacher** stays after school with a struggling student.
- A **mechanic** quietly repairs the only car a young mother has to get to work.
- A **counselor** sits across from someone carrying grief that has become too heavy to bear alone.

Most of these people will never meet. Yet every one of them depends upon the faithfulness of countless others.

The teacher depends upon the mechanic who keeps her car running. The mechanic depends upon the nurse who cares for his aging father. The nurse depends upon the grocery clerk who stocked the shelves before dawn. The clerk depends upon the teacher who helps his children imagine a future larger than his own.

Thousands of lives are woven together through ordinary acts of care that often pass unnoticed.

The Community as a Living Ecosystem

The more closely you look, the harder it becomes to think of a community as a collection of separate organizations.

- The school cannot flourish apart from healthy families.
- Businesses depend upon trustworthy neighbors.
- Hospitals rely on teachers, city workers, first responders, churches, volunteers, and countless others whose work is rarely connected in our minds.

Every relationship strengthens something beyond itself. Every broken relationship weakens something beyond itself.

Without realizing it, you have begun to see the place differently. It is no longer simply a place where people live. **It is a living web of relationships through which life is continually given, received, and sustained.**

We call living systems such as these **ecosystems**. Ecological imagination notices how life is sustained through relationship—and how God is already giving life within a community.

This way of seeing does not begin with the Church. It begins with creation.

From the opening pages of Genesis, life is never presented as isolated parts existing alongside one another. Rivers water gardens. Trees bear fruit in season. Birds fill the air. Creatures depend upon one another in ways both obvious and hidden. Human beings are formed from the earth and entrusted with its care. Everything belongs within a web of relationships sustained by the generosity of the Creator.

Perhaps that is why we recognize beauty when we encounter a place where life flourishes: children playing safely in a neighborhood park, neighbors helping after a storm, volunteers preparing meals for families in crisis, teachers refusing to give up on struggling students, physicians caring for those who cannot repay them, churches opening their doors to people with nowhere else to turn.

Before anyone explains it, we know that something is deeply right.

Life was always meant to be shared—and tended.

Perhaps the first movement in reimagining the Church is not deciding what the Church should do next.

It is seeing the place God has already entrusted to its care.

Jeremiah Changes the Question

When Jeremiah wrote to the people of Judah, they were living in circumstances they never would have chosen. Jerusalem had fallen. Families had been separated. The temple lay in ruins. They were exiles in Babylon, longing for the day they could return home.

Their attention was fixed on what they had lost. They wanted to know when God would restore the past.

Jeremiah answered with words that must have seemed almost unimaginable:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters... Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

— **Jeremiah 29:5–7**

Jeremiah changes the question.

Yesterday's Question

The Missionary Question

How will we survive until we can leave? **How will the city flourish because we are here?**

How will God restore what we lost? **Where is God giving life right now?**

Imagination turns—from preserving a people apart from the city to seeking life with it.

Israel had every reason to withdraw into itself. Babylon was not home. It did not share Israel's history, values, or faith. Yet Jeremiah invites God's people to become attentive to the life of the city itself:

- Plant gardens.
- Build homes.
- Raise children.
- Pray for your neighbors.
- Become people whose lives contribute to the flourishing of the place where God has sent you.

Jeremiah does not tell them to conquer Babylon, to recreate Jerusalem, or to preserve themselves by turning inward. He invites them to **become a blessing where they already are.**

Christians have long heard these verses as a call to seek the flourishing of the communities in which they live. Jeremiah's invitation reaches deeper still: before God's people can seek the welfare of the city, **they must see the city.**

Not simply its streets and buildings.

Its people. Its relationships. Its joys. Its wounds. Its hopes. Its fears. Its gifts. Its possibilities.

We cannot seek the flourishing of a place we have never truly seen. Nor can a congregation love a community it knows only from a distance.

When churches ask, *"What should we do for our community?"* they often begin with ideas, programs, or resources. Jeremiah invites another question: **What is happening in this place that God wants us to notice?**

- We begin not with our plans, but with God's presence.
- Not with what is missing, but with where life is already emerging.

We begin to notice relationships to strengthen, gifts to encourage, wounds to heal, and hopes already taking root. Missionary imagination sees through the eyes of love. It trusts that God's Spirit has never been absent from the places we call home. Long before the Church arrives with an idea, **God is already there.**

Discernment is not the search for a hidden plan. It is the recognition of God's presence woven through the ordinary life of a community.

That recognition grows through conversations on front porches and around dinner tables, by listening to teachers speak about students, nurses about patients, business owners about neighborhoods, parents about children, and young people about the future they hope to inherit. Slowly, a congregation comes to recognize both the beauty and the brokenness of the place it has been called to love.

Seeing is not the end of the journey. **It is where tending begins.**

Missionary Imagination Sees

Most of us have learned to look first for problems to solve, opportunities to pursue, or goals to accomplish. Our vocations often teach another way of seeing.

A **physician** entering an examination room begins by paying attention. A patient's appearance, posture, breathing, and expression become part of the conversation before a test is ordered or a treatment prescribed. Care begins with presence.

A **teacher** notices the student whose usual enthusiasm has given way to silence. A **counselor** listens not only to words but also to hesitation, grief, and hope. A **plumber** studies the pattern of a leak before reaching for a wrench. A **home health nurse** recognizes that today a patient needs encouragement as much as medication. A **parent** senses that something is troubling a child long before the child can speak about it.

Their vocations have taught them that care begins by seeing what others overlook.

A **gardener** does not carry the same answer to every plant. One bed is dry and needs water. Another is overgrown and needs pruning. A young tree must be staked against the wind; another has reached the season when it can bear fruit on its own. Every response grows from attention to the life already present.

Sit beside someone who has just buried a spouse, and love begins searching for a way to bear that grief. Tending may take the form of quiet listening, a meal left on the front porch, a hand held during prayer, a ride to the doctor, or tears shared when words are no longer enough. **Presence has begun to take the form of care.**

A community invites the same posture.

Missionary imagination notices:

- the teacher quietly buying classroom supplies with her own money,
- the physician carrying difficult decisions long after leaving the hospital,
- volunteers serving faithfully without recognition,
- grandparents raising grandchildren,
- young parents searching for friendship,
- business owners investing in neighborhoods they love,
- teenagers wondering whether there is a future worth hoping for.

It recognizes both the gifts entrusted to a community and the places where love is asking for a response.

What does love require here?

Seeing becomes tending.

A Shared Vocation

When a congregation begins seeing its community in this way, another discovery quietly emerges: **no one person can tend an entire community.**

A physician can care for a patient's body, but not every circumstance shaping that person's life. A teacher can awaken curiosity and hope, but cannot provide affordable housing. A counselor can accompany someone toward healing, but cannot repair a broken family alone. A lawyer may help someone navigate the legal system, while a mechanic keeps a family safely on the road.

Every vocation is a gift, and every gift has limits.

Paul understood this when he described the Church as the Body of Christ. He did not imagine a community in which everyone possessed the same gifts or carried the same responsibilities. He imagined a body in which every member contributes something essential to the whole.

The eye sees what the hand cannot. The hand accomplishes what the eye never could. The ear hears what neither can perceive on its own.

We often read Paul's words as an invitation to appreciate differences within the Church. They are that. They also invite a larger discovery: **no single vocation can embody the fullness of Christ's love. Only the Body can do that.**

A congregation is more than a gathering of gifted individuals. It is a community of discernment in which God weaves individual vocations into a shared vocation of love. That vocation emerges as the Body listens together.

Imagine the Body at Work:

Imagine a congregation gathered around tables rather than committees. Around one table sit a teacher, physician, nurse, attorney, retired contractor, social worker, business owner, young parent, and high school student. They begin, not by asking what ministry the church should start, but by reflecting on the life they have encountered throughout the week.

- The **teacher** speaks about children who come to school hungry and unable to concentrate.
- The **nurse** describes elderly patients who return to the emergency room because they have no one to help them recover at home.
- The **attorney** tells of families overwhelmed by legal problems they do not understand.
- The **contractor** notices elderly homeowners living in unsafe conditions.
- The **social worker** speaks of people trapped between agencies that rarely communicate with one another.
- The **student** wonders why so many classmates feel anxious, isolated, and alone.

None of them sees the whole community. Together, a larger picture begins to emerge.

As they listen, connections appear that no individual could have seen alone. Gifts that once seemed unrelated begin finding one another. Possibilities arise that no committee could have designed in advance because they emerge where vocation and place meet.

Someone wonders aloud: *"What if we opened the church one Saturday each month?"*

- The physician could offer basic medical care.
- The nurse could provide follow-up and health education.
- The attorney could help people recover identification or navigate legal obstacles.
- Teachers could tutor children while parents receive care.
- Retired members could welcome guests, prepare meals, and connect families with community resources.
- Students could play with younger children or help serve lunch.

Each person offers the gifts God has already entrusted to them. Together, those gifts become something no individual vocation could embody alone. **The Body of Christ becomes visible in a particular place.**

Missionary imagination does not ask people to leave their vocations behind when they enter the Church. It invites the Church to recognize those vocations as gifts entrusted by God for the sake of the world. Through worship, prayer, friendship, and discernment, individual callings are woven into a shared calling capable of expressing Christ's love in ways no individual could embody alone.

The Church does not gather only to strengthen individual disciples before sending them back into the world. It gathers because together **the Body can imagine and embody forms of love that would otherwise remain impossible.**

Missionary imagination sees. Love tends. The Body of Christ learns to do both together.

Learning to Tend Together

Congregations often begin conversations about mission by asking, *"What should we do?"*

A more faithful beginning may be to ask three core questions:

1. **What life is already emerging in our community?**
2. **What gifts has God already entrusted to this congregation?**
3. **Where do those two realities meet?**

The answers emerge through prayer, conversation, listening, and shared attention to the community. Discernment is seldom the discovery of a single brilliant idea. More often, it is the quiet recognition that many people have been noticing the same thing from different places.

- A teacher speaks about children arriving at school without breakfast.
- A physician describes the growing number of patients whose illnesses are rooted in loneliness as much as disease.
- A police officer talks about the same families encountered again and again during moments of crisis.
- A librarian notices that many older adults come as much for conversation as they do for books.
- Parents speak about raising children in an increasingly fragmented world.

No single observation reveals the whole. Together, their observations begin to reveal the life of the community. The congregation recognizes not isolated concerns, but relationships waiting to be strengthened, burdens waiting to be shared, and places where love might become visible.

Tending begins with attention—to one another and to the place God has entrusted to our care.

As the congregation listens, people begin seeing one another differently:

- The **teacher** is no longer simply someone who volunteers with children; she becomes someone who understands the lives of hundreds of children and families.
- The **physician** brings not only medical knowledge, but insight into the fears, hopes, and struggles carried by the community.
- The **business owner** understands the challenges facing local employers.
- The **retiree** carries decades of relationships and wisdom.
- **Young adults** see possibilities older generations may never have imagined.
- **Students** often recognize needs adults have stopped noticing altogether.

Every vocation becomes another window through which the Body sees its community.

The question is no longer, *"What ministry should we create?"*

It becomes: **"Given the people God has gathered and the place God has entrusted to us, what does love require?"**

No two ecosystems are identical. No two communities carry the same history, relationships, wounds, or hopes. Faithfulness has never meant reproducing someone else's ministry. It means responding to God's life within a particular place.

Missionary imagination cannot be reduced to a model.

It is a way of seeing. It is a way of loving. It is a way of tending.

The stories that follow are not blueprints. Each congregation learned to see its community. Each discovered gifts already present within the Body of Christ. Each found its own way of joining the work God was already doing.

None is a prescription. May these stories seed your missionary imagination, helping you see how Christ's love might take flesh in the place God has entrusted to your care.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

If your leadership sat down around a table to map out your community, not by its problems, but by the ordinary vocations and gifts God has already placed in your congregation, what new connections would begin to form?

Notes for leadership team or session reflection:

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PART TWO



Practicing Missionary Imagination



PART TWO



SECTION ONE

Learning to See Differently



*Noticing with new eyes
the world God already loves.*

Mission begins when we learn to notice what God is doing.

Most transformations begin long before anyone notices. They begin the moment someone asks a different question. Different questions reveal what familiar eyes no longer see.

Most congregations begin somewhere else. We gather around tables asking what we should do next, what ministry we should begin, or what program our community needs. Those are reasonable questions. They simply are not the first questions.

Missionaries have always understood this. Before they teach, they listen. Before they organize, they observe. Before they act, they become students of the people and places God has entrusted to their care. They trust that the Holy Spirit has arrived before they have, preparing hearts, opening relationships, and creating possibilities they have not yet learned to recognize. Their first calling is not to bring God into a community but to discover where God is at work.

The stories that follow are not primarily about successful ministries. They are stories about **transformed perception**.

Attentiveness Over Innovation

Again and again, someone notices what everyone else has overlooked. A congregation stops talking long enough to hear its neighbors. Children recognize loneliness adults no longer see. Teachers become the ones who need encouragement. Students discover they hunger more deeply for belonging than another program.

Nothing changes until someone begins seeing differently.

Missionary imagination is not born from creativity alone. It grows from **attentiveness**—the patient discipline of looking beneath familiar assumptions until we recognize what God has been preparing.

As you read these stories, resist the temptation to ask: *Could our church do that?*

Instead, ask a different question:

What have we stopped seeing?

Once a congregation learns to see with new eyes, it begins to recognize that God has been preparing the way all along. And where the Holy Spirit is at work, new futures become imaginable.

Story 1

We Thought We Needed a Better Plan

Reimagining the Church begins with listening.

The church knew something had to change.

Attendance had been slipping for years. The neighborhood no longer resembled the one the congregation remembered. Every few years they gathered for another planning retreat, armed with demographic reports, fresh ideas, and renewed determination. Every few years they left with another strategic plan. By the following year, most of it had quietly faded away.

Then an elder interrupted the conversation with a question no one expected:

"What if we're trying to answer a question God hasn't asked?"

The question unsettled the familiar conversation. Finally, someone asked, *"Then where do we begin?"*

The pastor answered with a single word: **"Listening."**

The Six-Month Assignment

The next week, the planning committee set its work aside. In its place, the congregation accepted a different assignment: **for six months they would become students of their own community.**

- No one was asked to defend the church.
- No one was told to invite people to worship.
- No one was expected to solve anyone's problems.

Their only responsibility was to become genuinely curious.

They sat on front porches and lingered in coffee shops. They talked with teachers, business owners, first responders, retirees, young parents, social workers, teenagers, and anyone willing to share a little of their life.

They carried only a handful of questions:

1. *What do you love about this community?*
2. *What keeps you awake at night?*
3. *Where have you seen hope?*
4. *If you could change one thing, what would it be?*

The conversations accumulated slowly. Every few weeks the congregation gathered—not to make decisions, but to tell one another what they had heard. Sheets of paper covered the fellowship hall tables. One conversation by itself rarely seemed remarkable; taken together, they began revealing a landscape no one had noticed before:

- Loneliness
- Children
- Affordable Housing
- Mental Health
- Isolation
- Belonging

Someone observed that nearly every conversation eventually turned toward relationships. Another noticed that people spoke less about needing more services than about longing to know their neighbors.

Still, no one rushed ahead. **They prayed. They listened again.**

They read Scripture, asking where they recognized the life of Christ beginning to emerge. They trusted that the Holy Spirit had been walking these streets long before they arrived with notebooks and questions.

"Our Neighbors Did"

The answers did not come all at once. Over time, a shared sense of calling began to take shape—not because one person imagined an innovative ministry, but because an entire congregation had learned to listen together.

When new ministries finally emerged, they surprised almost everyone. None appeared in the strategic plans stacked in old file cabinets. Each one could be traced to an ordinary conversation over coffee, on a front porch, at a school event, or while waiting in line at the grocery store.

Years later, a visitor asked the pastor, *"How did your church come up with so many unusual ministries?"*

The pastor looked around the fellowship hall before answering. *"We didn't."*

"You didn't?"

"No. Our neighbors did."

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What might your congregation discover if it spent as much time listening to its community as it spends talking about itself?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 2

We Thought We Had to Start the Ministry

We don't always have to own what God is growing.

The church had spent years asking what ministry God might be calling them to begin. Ideas were never the problem:

- A tutoring program.
- A food pantry.
- A clothing closet.
- A support group.

Every suggestion sounded worthwhile. Every one required volunteers they didn't have, money they couldn't spare, or energy stretched too thin.

After one more brainstorming meeting, someone finally said what everyone was feeling: *"It seems like we're always trying to invent something."*

No one disagreed. Then an elder leaned forward: **"What if God has already begun something?"**

That question changed everything. The congregation stopped trying to imagine a ministry and began looking for one. Instead of asking, *What should we do?*, members wandered through the community asking: *"What is something beautiful you've seen happening around here?"*

The Neighborhood Barber Shop

The answers were unexpected:

- A retired teacher spent Tuesday afternoons helping children learn to read at the library.
- A mechanic quietly repaired cars for single mothers who couldn't afford the labor.
- A restaurant owner prepared meals each Thursday for families keeping vigil with seriously ill children.

None of them belonged to the church. Most had never met one another. Each had simply seen a need and responded. But one story refused to let them go.

Every Wednesday morning, an hour before opening, a neighborhood barber unlocked his shop. Not to cut hair—**to make coffee.**

Widowers came. Veterans. Young fathers. Recently retired workers. Men carrying burdens they rarely spoke about anywhere else. There was no agenda, no membership, no speeches. Only coffee, conversation, and the quiet conviction that no one should have to carry life alone.

When someone complimented the barber on his ministry, he laughed: *"I just figured people needed somewhere to sit."*

Partnering Instead of Owning

Several members of the congregation began stopping by. At first they wondered how they might help. Before long they realized their first calling was simply to become part of the conversation.

Months later they asked the barber if there was anything he needed. His answer was practical: *"We're running out of chairs."*

The following Sunday a few members quietly delivered tables and chairs that had been gathering dust in a church storage room. Someone donated a better coffee maker. A retired counselor offered to stop in from time to time—not to counsel, but to be another patient listener. Soon a local bakery began dropping off pastries each Wednesday morning.

The church resisted the impulse to take ownership.

- Its name never appeared on the window.
- No brochures were printed.
- No committee was formed.

It simply became another partner in something the Holy Spirit had been nurturing.

Years later, Wednesday mornings at the barber shop had become part of the town's story. Some people came for the coffee; others came because someone remembered their name. Some found friendships that carried them through grief, unemployment, divorce, or illness.

The congregation had not started a ministry. It recognized one. And in joining it, they discovered that faithful mission sometimes begins not by asking, *What should we build?*, but by asking: **Where has God gone ahead of us?**

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Where is someone loving your community in a way that invites you to become a partner rather than a founder?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 3

We Thought Children Were the Future Church

Who sees what you've forgotten how to notice?

Every Wednesday evening the church settled into its familiar routines. Adults gathered for Bible study down one hallway. Children disappeared into the fellowship hall down another. There were songs, crafts, laughter, and Bible stories.

The adults often said the same thing: *"They're the future of the church."*

One evening, after class, eight-year-old Emma tugged gently on her teacher's sleeve.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Why does Mr. Wilson always eat lunch by himself?"

The teacher paused. *"I'm not sure."*

Emma looked toward the fellowship hall. *"The kids at school say he's mean."* Then she added quietly, *"But I don't think he looks mean."*

The conversation lasted less than a minute. The question lasted much longer.

Who Did You Notice This Week?

The following Sunday, during a meeting about children's ministry, the teacher shared Emma's observation. Instead of talking about curriculum, the room began filling with names:

- The man who always slipped out before coffee hour.
- The woman who sat alone near the back pew.
- The custodian everyone greeted but few really knew.
- The crossing guard outside the elementary school.
- The librarian who remembered every child's name.

It slowly became clear that the children were noticing people the adults had learned to walk past.

The next month the leaders tried something different. Instead of asking, *"What Bible story did you learn today?"*, they asked: **"Who did you notice this week?"**

The answers came quickly:

- A lonely classmate.
- A neighbor who always waved but never seemed to have visitors.
- A crossing guard standing in the rain.
- An elderly man feeding birds alone in the park.

The congregation began listening—not because children always see more clearly than adults, but because **they often see without the assumptions adults have spent years acquiring.**

Becoming the Teachers

One Saturday families baked cookies—not for a fundraiser, but for the crossing guards. Another week the children planted herbs in small flowerpots and delivered them to residents in an assisted-living community. They stayed. They learned names. They listened to stories.

A few days later Emma asked if Mr. Wilson might like company at lunch. The next Wednesday she sat beside him. Soon another child joined her. Then another. Within a few weeks the table where Mr. Wilson had always eaten alone had become the noisiest corner of the fellowship hall.

Months later someone asked him what had changed. His face softened: *"I guess I got adopted."*

The congregation had set out to strengthen children's ministry, not to let children become its teachers. Instead, the children quietly became teachers. They reminded the adults that **the Holy Spirit often opens our eyes through people we are accustomed to calling "the future."**

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Who sees your community in ways you've forgotten how to see?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:







Story 4

We Thought the School Needed Volunteers

Listening before acting.

Every August the congregation prayed for students, teachers, and parents as another school year began. Backpacks were filled. School supplies collected. A few members volunteered as tutors. The church genuinely wanted to help.

Yet beneath their generosity lingered an uneasy feeling that they were still missing something.

One Sunday, after worship, a retired principal who had recently joined the congregation quietly said, *"You know... teachers are carrying far more than most people realize."*

No one disagreed. Everyone knew teaching was difficult. But she continued: *"They spend their days encouraging children. Then they go home worrying about them. Many buy classroom supplies with their own money. And very few people ever ask how they're doing."*

The room grew still. No one had ever imagined that the people caring for the children might themselves be quietly exhausted.

Around the Faculty Lounge Table

The following week several members asked if she could introduce them to a few teachers. A few afternoons later they found themselves gathered around a faculty lounge table.

They hadn't come with a presentation. They brought no program, no proposal, no plans. Only a question: **"What makes your work harder than people realize?"**

For nearly an hour they listened. Teachers spoke about:

- anxious children carrying burdens too heavy for their age;
- students who arrived each morning hungry for breakfast—and even hungrier for attention;
- parents doing everything they could while living impossibly full lives;
- stacks of papers waiting long after the school day ended;
- feeling noticed only when something went wrong.

When the conversation finally drew to a close, one elder asked another question: *"What would encourage you?"*

Silence settled over the room. Then one teacher smiled. *"Honestly? It would help just knowing someone noticed."*

Care Without Conditions

The congregation never forgot those words. In the months that followed:

- Handwritten notes began appearing in teachers' mailboxes.
- Once a month volunteers quietly stocked the faculty lounge with homemade soup, fresh fruit, and desserts.
- Boxes of pencils, crayons, glue sticks, notebooks, and snacks appeared without announcement.
- Retired educators became companions for younger teachers who simply needed someone who understood the work.
- When one teacher's spouse was diagnosed with cancer, meals began arriving at the family's home before anyone had to ask.
- At Christmas the congregation invited the entire school staff to dinner—no speeches, no fundraising, no expectations. Only gratitude.

Over time something changed. Teachers who had once assumed the church wanted something from them began saying something altogether different: *"They're the people who always ask how we're doing."*

No education ministry was ever formally created. It simply became a community that cared for the people helping raise an entire generation.

Years later the retired principal reflected on what had happened: *"We kept asking how to reach the children."* She looked around the room and smiled. *"It turned out the Holy Spirit had opened the door. We simply discovered it by loving the teachers."*

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Who is quietly carrying the weight of caring for others—and who is caring for them?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 5

We Thought Students Needed a Campus Ministry

Recognizing the deeper hunger for belonging.

Every August the town changed. Moving trucks crowded the streets. Parents carried lamps, laundry baskets, and boxes into dorm rooms. Coffee shops stayed full long after dark. By September, the community felt twenty years younger.

The church watched it happen every year. And every year it asked the same question: *How do we reach the students?*

Ideas came easily: a Bible study, free pizza, contemporary worship. None of them were bad ideas. None lasted very long. The students who came were grateful; most never returned. Their lives were full—classes, part-time jobs, roommates, athletics, and the exhausting work of becoming adults.

Then someone asked a different question: **"What if students aren't looking for another program?"**

Hungry for Belonging

The room didn't answer. Instead, members began doing something they had rarely done before: they stopped talking about students and started talking *with* them.

The conversations wandered in unexpected directions. Many students lived on inexpensive meals they could prepare in a microwave. Some had never learned to cook. Others admitted that what they missed most wasn't home cooking—it was sitting around a table where someone knew their name.

One member listened for a while before saying quietly, *"I wonder if they're hungry for more than food."*

That observation changed everything.

Once each week the church kitchen filled with cutting boards, vegetables, old family recipes, and laughter. Retired teachers, grandparents, a few enthusiastic home cooks, and a dozen students trying to figure out how to feed themselves gathered together.

They chopped onions, burned a casserole or two, learned how to stretch a grocery budget, and shared stories that somehow drifted from recipes to childhoods. Everyone left carrying containers of food for the week ahead—**but the food was never the real gift.**

Crossing Generations

Long after the dishes had been washed, students remained around the tables. They talked about careers, relationships, faith, parents, and failure. The older adults discovered they were receiving as much as they were giving. Their own lives grew larger as friendships quietly crossed generations.

- When holidays arrived, students who couldn't travel home found places at family tables.
- When illness interrupted finals week, meals appeared at apartment doors before anyone asked.
- Graduation became less a ceremony than a family celebration.

No one ever called it a campus ministry. It was simply a community discovering that strangers become neighbors, and neighbors sometimes become family.

Years later, graduates still remembered the recipes, but they remembered the people even more:

- The widow who taught them how to make soup.
- The retired mechanic who insisted everyone should know how to sharpen a kitchen knife.
- The young family who somehow always found room for one more chair at Thanksgiving.

The congregation did not create another program for students. It recognized a deeper hunger the Holy Spirit had been preparing people to satisfy. The meals simply became the table where that grace could be shared.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Who in your community is hungry for something no program can provide?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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A BRIEF REFLECTION

Seeing differently is rarely dramatic.

More often it begins with a question that refuses to leave us alone. A child's simple observation. A conversation over coffee. A neighbor's quiet longing. Someone notices what everyone else has learned to overlook, and suddenly the world looks different.

Perhaps that is how missionary imagination always begins.

The Holy Spirit has been preparing the way long before the Church recognizes it.

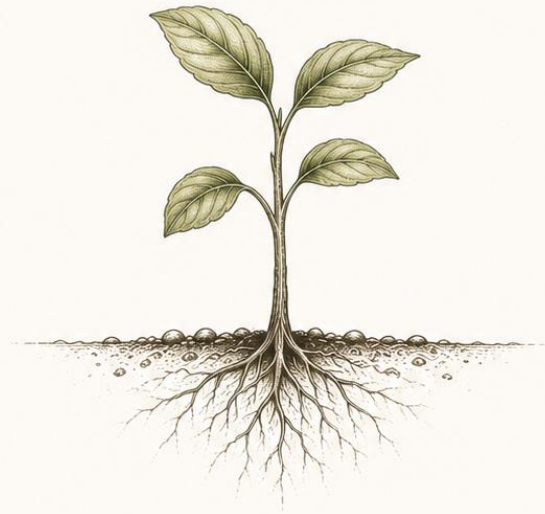
Our calling is not to bring Christ into our communities, but to open our eyes to where Christ is present—and then to join, with humility and joy, the work that has begun.

PART TWO



SECTION TWO

Vocation



*Recognizing the gifts
we have been given
and offering them in love.*

Who has God prepared to respond?

Once we begin seeing our communities with new eyes, another question naturally follows.

For generations, many congregations have quietly divided life into two worlds. Ministry belonged to pastors, missionaries, and church programs. Daily work belonged somewhere else. One happened on Sunday. The other filled the rest of the week.

Scripture tells a different story.

From the beginning, God has worked through ordinary people carrying ordinary responsibilities:

- Shepherds and fishermen
- Builders and farmers
- Merchants and physicians
- Artisans and public servants
- Parents and neighbors

Their work was never separate from God's mission. It was one of the ways Christ's love took flesh in particular places.

The Holy Potential in the Pews

Every congregation is filled with this holy potential.

Each week people leave worship and return to classrooms, hospitals, courtrooms, farms, construction sites, offices, kitchens, factories, neighborhoods, and businesses. They carry skills refined over decades, relationships shaped through years of trust, and opportunities no pastor could ever possess. Many never imagine these gifts as ministry.

They simply call it work.

Missionary imagination sees something more. It recognizes **vocation not simply as a way of earning a living, but as one of the primary ways we participate in God's continuing work of creation, healing, justice, beauty, and hope.**

The Holy Spirit is preparing opportunities within the ordinary rhythms of daily life. The Church's calling is not to manufacture those opportunities, but to help people recognize them.

The stories that follow are not about extraordinary people accomplishing extraordinary things. They are about ordinary people discovering that the work they know can become an expression of Christ's love when offered for the flourishing of their communities.

The Church does not create these gifts:

- **It notices them.**
- **It blesses them.**
- **It brings people together around them.**

And in doing so, it discovers that some of its most significant ministry begins on Monday morning, when people return to the places where God has called—and gone ahead of—them.

As you read these stories, resist the temptation to ask: *What new ministry could we create?*

Instead, ask a different question:

What gifts are sitting in our pews, waiting to be recognized?

Story 1

We Thought Mission Belonged to the Pastor

Very little of what God is doing belongs to the church staff.

The congregation had never thought of itself as especially gifted. It was simply filled with people who knew how to build things:

- Electricians
- Plumbers
- Carpenters
- Painters
- Roofers
- A young welder just starting out
- A couple of retired contractors who could repair almost anything

Every Sunday they worshiped together. Every Monday morning they scattered across the county carrying tool belts instead of briefcases.

If anyone had asked who did ministry, most of them would have pointed toward the pastor. He preached, visited hospitals, and officiated weddings and funerals. Surely that was ministry.

One Sunday he asked a question that lingered long after the benediction:

"What do all of you build every day that I never could?"

A carpenter shrugged. *"Houses, I suppose."*

The pastor looked at the gathered tradespeople: *"I don't think that's all you build."*

Where Life Breaks Down

For weeks the conversation followed people to their jobsites:

- The **electrician** realized he was often the first person invited into a family's home after a fire or hurricane.
- The **plumber** met aging parents quietly struggling to remain independent.
- **Contractors** spent months walking beside families rebuilding their lives after storms.
- **Painters** heard stories that surfaced only after hours of working side by side.
- The **handyman** entered homes because something had broken.

People rarely called a pastor when the roof leaked. They called someone who knew how to fix it. And in opening the door, they often opened their lives as well.

One morning a contractor called a few others before work: *"I've been thinking. Every one of us knows somebody whose life is being held back by one repair they can't afford."*

The Saturday Legal Pad

The next Saturday they gathered around coffee and a legal pad—no committee, no officers, just names:

- A widow whose wheelchair couldn't fit through the bathroom door.
- A single mother living beneath a roof that leaked every time it rained.
- An older couple afraid to use half the outlets in their home because the wiring had become dangerous.
- A veteran still waiting for the wheelchair ramp he could never quite afford.

They decided to help one family at a time. An electrician donated materials. A roofer gave up a Saturday. The plumber came after work. Someone brought lunch. Another quietly paid for supplies when the costs grew beyond donated labor.

Before long local hardware stores were contributing materials. Contractors who had no connection to the church asked if they could join in.

The congregation never advertised. It didn't have to. People weren't talking about repaired houses—they were talking about neighbors who kept showing up.

Months later one contractor reflected on what had changed: *"I used to think I built houses."* He looked down at his calloused hands and smiled. *"Now I think we're helping people stay home."*

The repairs were necessary, but what people remembered was something harder to measure: someone had entered their lives when everything felt broken—and stayed long enough to help make things whole.

The congregation discovered no new program. It discovered that **the Holy Spirit had placed its people exactly where healing could begin.**

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What gifts do your people use every day that your congregation has never imagined as part of God's mission?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 2

We Thought He Needed More Help Than We Could Give

Reimagining the Church sometimes begins with one faithful relationship.

Everyone in the congregation knew Jason: fifteen years old, brilliant, restless, gone from school almost as often as he attended. The police had brought him home more than once.

Adults usually ended the conversation the same way: *"He needs to straighten out."*

One Sunday after worship, Frank happened to overhear them. Frank wasn't a man who spoke often. He drove a long-haul truck. Most weeks he crossed half the country before finding his way home again.

After listening for a while, he finally asked: *"What if he doesn't need another lecture?"*

Someone looked at him. *"What do you think he needs?"*

Frank shrugged: **"A reason to imagine a different life."**

Two Weeks on the Road

A few weeks later he asked Jason's mother if her son could ride with him on one of his cross-country runs. She hesitated, then quietly said yes.

For two weeks the truck became something neither of them expected.

Frank taught Jason how to read freight schedules and weather reports, how to choose a safe route through the mountains, how to inspect tires before sunrise, and how to recognize the sound of a problem before it became a breakdown.

But those weren't the lessons Jason remembered most.

- He saw deserts for the first time, mountains, and cities stretching far beyond the horizon he had always known.
- He saw truck stops filled with strangers whose stories sounded nothing like his own.
- Sometimes they argued about music, sometimes they discovered songs they both enjoyed, and sometimes they drove an hour without saying a word.

Other times they talked until the truck was parked for the night. Jason spoke about school, about his father leaving, and about what it felt like when everyone seemed to have decided who he would become.

Frank never tried to fix him. Mostly he listened. Occasionally he told a story from his own life. Sometimes they wondered together what hope might look like.

Someone to Show the Road

By the time they headed home, not every problem had disappeared. But Jason had discovered something larger than the neighborhood where he thought his story would end.

The next fall he returned to school. He still struggled, but now he carried something he hadn't possessed before: **a future he could imagine, and one person who would always answer the phone.**

Years later, after graduating from technical college, Jason returned to church with his own teenage son. The boy climbed into Frank's truck, running his hands across the dashboard with the same wide-eyed curiosity his father once had.

Jason laughed. *"This truck changed my life."*

Frank smiled and slowly shook his head: *"No."* He looked toward the highway disappearing beyond the church parking lot. *"You just needed someone to show you the road."*

The congregation never created a mentoring program. One truck driver simply recognized that the Holy Spirit had placed him in a young man's life for a reason.

Sometimes that is how the Church changes the world—**one relationship at a time.**

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What ordinary work in your congregation could become extraordinary when shared with someone searching for a future?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 3

We Thought They Needed a Loan

Reimagining the Church as a community that invests in possibility.

Every Monday morning, the church office became a place where people told stories about starting over:

- A woman dreamed of opening a small catering business but couldn't afford the commercial mixer she needed.
- A young mechanic had the skills to repair cars, but not the professional tools.
- A refugee family wanted to sell traditional baked goods at the farmers market but lacked the equipment to meet health regulations.
- A carpenter hoped to build custom furniture in his garage but couldn't purchase the machinery that would let the business grow.

The congregation responded the way many churches do: utility bills, groceries, occasionally rent. Every gift mattered, but one elder couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing: *"We're helping people survive."* He let the words settle before adding: *"I wonder how we help people begin again."*

That question lingered for weeks. Then a retired banker quietly offered another: *"What if the greatest gift we could offer isn't money?"*

Someone asked, *"What is it?"*

"Confidence."

He explained that many small businesses never failed because people lacked talent; they failed because no one believed in them long enough for hope to take root. Sometimes five hundred dollars was enough; sometimes a thousand. But almost always, what people needed first was someone willing to say: *"I believe you can do this."*

A Community of Investors

The congregation never imagined becoming a bank. Instead, they became something much more interesting: **a community of investors.**

Not investors seeking profit—investors looking for possibility:

- Retired business owners
- Accountants
- Marketing specialists
- Entrepreneurs who had known both failure and success

People came with stories rather than applications: *What are you trying to build? Who will benefit? What have you invested?*

The conversations rarely stayed focused on money. Business plans were refined, logos sketched on napkins, budgets adjusted, and hard-earned wisdom shared over coffee. The loans became the smallest part of the gift.

One of the first recipients baked bread every weekend in her apartment kitchen. She wasn't asking for enough money to open a bakery; she only needed access to a commercial oven a few hours each week. Within a year, neighborhood restaurants were serving her bread, and soon she hired two high-school students.

Another recipient purchased the tools that allowed him to open a small repair shop. Years later he returned—not to repay the church, but to mentor the next generation of entrepreneurs.

Not every dream flourished. A landscaping business withered through two years of drought. A woodworking shop never found enough customers. A bicycle repair service struggled longer than anyone expected. Yet no one spoke of failure. Every conversation left people wiser than when they had begun; every setback became another investment in someone else's future.

Making Neighbors

One afternoon a reporter asked whether the church had earned much money from the revolving loan fund. The volunteer laughed: *"We weren't trying to make money."*

"What were you trying to make?"

He looked across the room. A mechanic was helping a young couple think through their first business plan. The baker was encouraging a refugee family. Ideas filled the tables. Hope filled the room.

"Neighbors," he finally said. **"Neighbors who believe in one another."**

Years later people remembered the loan fund—not because of the money, but because it changed the way the town imagined opportunity.

People stopped asking, *"Who deserves a chance?"*

They began asking, **"Who could flourish if someone believed in them?"**

The church did not become a lending institution. It became a place where the Holy Spirit's quiet work of possibility was recognized, encouraged, and shared—one life at a time.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Where in your community are people carrying gifts that have never had the opportunity to grow—and how might your congregation become the community that believes in them before anyone else does?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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A BRIEF REFLECTION

It is easy to imagine that ministry begins when people volunteer at church.

These stories suggest something far more surprising: **each week, ordinary people leave worship carrying gifts the Holy Spirit has been shaping for years.** They return to classrooms and hospitals, construction sites and kitchens, offices and neighborhoods, workshops and businesses. Most never think of themselves as missionaries. They simply go back to work.

Perhaps that is where the Church's imagination must continue to grow.

Our calling is not simply to recruit more volunteers, but to recognize the vocation present among us, bless it, and send it into the world with confidence. The Holy Spirit has gone ahead, preparing places, relationships, and opportunities that only these people can enter.

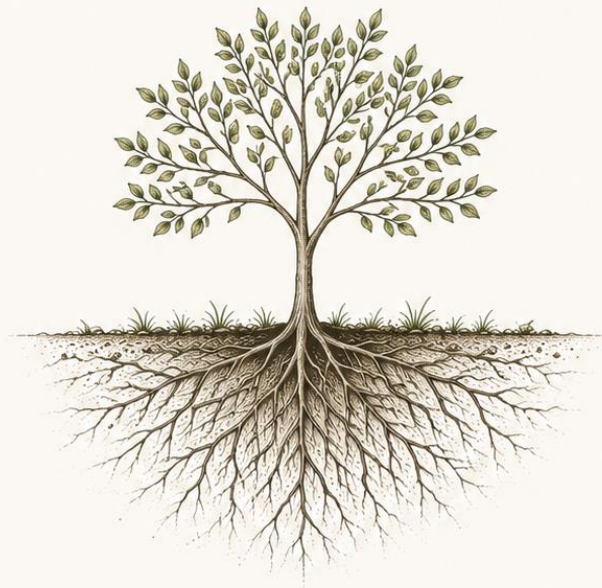
The Church becomes most fully itself when it helps people discover that their everyday work has always been one of the ways Christ's love takes flesh in the world.

PART TWO



SECTION THREE

Loving Place



*Rooted in the places
God has given us,
we learn to love and serve.*

Communities become love by tending the places they inhabit.

Every act of love happens somewhere.

Jesus was born in a particular village. He walked particular roads. He shared meals at particular tables. He knew the names of towns, lakes, hillsides, and gardens. The incarnation was never abstract. God's love always took flesh in a place.

The same is true for the Church.

We often speak of loving people, and rightly so. But people never exist apart from the places that shape their lives. They live in neighborhoods, gather in parks, walk familiar streets, shop in local stores, sit beneath old trees, wait at bus stops, and move through public spaces that quietly shape whether they feel connected or alone.

Missionary imagination teaches us to notice these places differently:

- A **neglected garden** becomes an opportunity to cultivate relationships.
- A **forgotten wetland** becomes a classroom where children rediscover wonder.
- An **ordinary wall** becomes a canvas for hope.
- An **abandoned parking lot** becomes a neighborhood commons where strangers become friends.

None of these places is ordinary once we begin paying attention.

Caretakers of Creation

From the opening pages of Scripture, humanity is entrusted with the vocation of tending creation. We are not simply inhabitants of the world. We are its gardeners, caretakers, and stewards. To love a community is also to love the places where its life unfolds.

Perhaps that is why **beauty matters**.

Beauty reminds us that the world is not merely something to use. It is something to receive with gratitude, cultivate with care, and leave more life-giving than we found it. A flowering tree, a shaded bench, a restored creek, or a public work of art may seem like small gifts. Yet each quietly declares that a community is worth loving.

The stories that follow are not really about gardens, murals, parks, or landscapes. They are about congregations discovering that by tending a place they also begin tending the relationships that grow there.

The Holy Spirit is often cultivating a community long before the Church recognizes it. Sometimes the first invitation is simply to care for a place that everyone else has forgotten.

As you read these stories, resist the temptation to ask: *How could we improve our property?*

Instead, ask a different question:

What place in our community is quietly waiting for someone to love it?

Story 1

We Thought the Garden Grew Vegetables

Reimagining the Church as a place where relationships grow.

Behind the fellowship hall lay an acre of forgotten ground. For years people wondered what it should become:

- Sell it.
- Pave it.
- Save it for someday.

Meanwhile, weeds quietly made their own plans.

Then one spring, during an ordinary conversation about the neighborhood, a middle-school teacher said something no one expected: *"Our students don't know where food comes from."*

People laughed. She didn't.

"They know how to order dinner. They've never pulled a carrot out of the ground." She paused before adding, *"And many of them have never had an adult outside their own family simply spend time with them."*

Suddenly the empty field no longer looked empty.

Digging in the Soil

A few weeks later, several members invited neighborhood teenagers to help prepare the soil. No promises, no recruitment campaign—just a simple invitation: *"Would you like to help us grow something?"*

The first Saturday was anything but impressive. Teenagers arrived late, the tomatoes were planted too close together, someone stepped on the lettuce, and nobody really knew how to use a hoe. Everyone laughed.

Then they came back the following week.

An older member showed them how to recognize healthy soil. Another explained why they never used chemicals. When one teenager asked why worms mattered, a retired farmer handed him a shovel: *"Dig."* Twenty minutes later they were still talking about earthworms.

No one had planned that lesson.

As spring became summer, the conversations kept growing:

- *How do you know when something is ready to harvest?*
- *Why can't tomatoes be hurried?*
- *Why do weeds seem effortless while everything worth growing requires patience?*

Sometimes they talked about gardens. More often they talked about life.

The woman whose grandchildren lived halfway across the country slowly became "Miss Betty." One teenager began stopping by after school, even on days when nothing much needed doing. Another asked if he could build raised beds for older neighbors who could no longer kneel in the dirt.

The Greatest Harvest

By midsummer the vegetables filled baskets every week. Someone wondered if they should sell them at the farmers market. Instead, one of the teenagers asked: *"Who needs these more than we do?"*

The baskets began finding their way to:

- a man recovering from surgery;
- a single mother working two jobs;
- families living in a nearby apartment.

The teenagers insisted on making the deliveries themselves. At first they knocked awkwardly. Before long they stayed to visit—learning names, listening to stories, pulling weeds, carrying groceries, and accepting glasses of lemonade.

One afternoon a church member paused beside the garden. A teenager patiently showed a younger child how to plant beans. Only a year earlier, that same teenager had never held a shovel. Now he was teaching someone else.

People around town admired the church's garden. They talked about the tomatoes, the peppers, and the lettuce. The congregation smiled whenever they heard that—because they knew **the garden's greatest harvest had never been vegetables.**

The Holy Spirit had been cultivating something far deeper all along. In the quiet work of tending the earth, strangers had become neighbors, neighbors had become friends, and young people had begun discovering that caring for creation and caring for one another had always belonged together.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What could your congregation cultivate that would help people learn to care—for creation, for one another, and for their community?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 2

We Thought Beauty Was a Luxury

Reimagining the Church in the image of the Creator.

The church stood where downtown slowly gave way to forgotten streets. Every day people hurried past; few looked up. The sidewalks had cracked with time, storefront windows stood empty, and paint peeled from buildings that had once been loved.

Most conversations about the neighborhood sounded the same: what needed fixing, what had been lost, and why things weren't what they used to be.

Then one afternoon someone asked a question that changed the conversation: "*What if we stopped looking first for what was broken?*" She looked around the room. "*What if we started looking for what is beautiful?*"

No one answered—not because they disagreed, but because they realized they had forgotten how.

Finding the Beautiful

The following Saturday a dozen members gathered with nothing more than notebooks and comfortable shoes—no agenda, no budget, no committee report. Only one assignment: **Find something beautiful.**

At first the task felt strangely difficult. Then someone noticed ivy climbing an old brick wall. A child stood quietly watching sunlight dance across the river. A retired carpenter ran his hand across the weathered railing of a century-old porch, admiring the skill of someone whose name had long been forgotten. An elderly woman pointed toward a magnolia tree she had passed for years without truly seeing.

By the end of the morning the notebooks were full. Nothing about the town had changed. The people had.

Inviting More Beauty

A month later the congregation quietly adopted one neglected corner of downtown—not because it was strategic or because anyone had asked, but simply because **beauty deserved a place to grow.**

- Native flowers found their way into the soil.
- Two simple benches appeared beneath the trees.
- Hanging baskets softened the edges of old brick.
- A local artist quietly installed a small sculpture.

No ribbon was cut and no announcement was made. People simply kept showing up.

And slowly, something else began growing. A neighboring business repainted its storefront. Another planted flowers outside the entrance. The bakery carried a few tables onto the sidewalk.

Soon another block began changing—not because anyone had organized a campaign, but because **beauty has a quiet way of inviting more beauty.**

Months later a reporter asked one of the volunteers why the church cared so much about flowers. Her answer shifted the question: *"We're not really growing flowers."*

"What are you growing?"

She looked down the street where people lingered on benches that had once overlooked an empty lot. **"A town that remembers it was created to be beautiful."**

For years people said the church had beautified downtown. The congregation gently disagreed. The Holy Spirit had been restoring hope there; they had simply learned to join the work of the Creator.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Where has your community stopped expecting beauty?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 3

We Thought the Empty Lot Was an Eyesore

Sometimes the most forgotten places remember how to live.

Everyone drove past the vacant lot. After a while, no one really saw it anymore.

Years earlier it had been a small wetland where children caught frogs, watched turtles sun themselves on fallen logs, and wandered along the edge of a narrow creek. Now it was little more than weeds, broken bottles, and discarded tires. People complained about it from time to time, then drove on.

One Saturday morning a biology teacher from the congregation invited a handful of people to walk the property with her. Near the center of the lot she stopped beside a shallow depression almost hidden beneath tall grass.

"A creek used to flow through here."

No one could imagine it. She knelt, brushed away the grass, and pointed to the damp earth beneath.

"The water is still here. It's just waiting for someone to uncover it."

The lot no longer seemed like an abandoned piece of land. They were looking at a forgotten story.

Who Loves This Place?

The next question wasn't, *Who owns this property?* It was: **"Who loves this place?"**

The answers came quickly:

- The city planner who remembered playing there as a child.
- An elementary school teacher looking for a place where students could learn outdoors.
- Members of the local garden club.
- Neighbors who still talked about catching minnows there years before.
- A conservation group eager to help restore native habitat.

Within months, people who had never met were working side by side. Children hauled away trash with surprising enthusiasm. Retired gardeners taught them the names of native wildflowers. An engineer helped guide water back toward its natural channel. High-school science students began monitoring water quality.

The church did not take charge. It simply kept inviting people back.

Our Creek

By the second spring, butterflies returned. Then frogs. Then birds no one could remember seeing for years.

The elementary school began bringing classes to explore the wetland. Children tested soil, sketched insects, learned the names of trees, and filled field journals with quiet discoveries.

One afternoon a young boy tugged on his teacher's sleeve. *"My grandpa helped plant that tree."*

Her reply made the place personal: *"Then a part of this place belongs to your family."*

Years later people still called it the restored wetland. The children called it something else: **Our creek.**

One day a visitor asked the pastor why the church had become involved in an environmental project. *"We didn't."*

"What do you mean?"

"We simply helped our neighbors remember that this place was still alive."

The Holy Spirit had been patiently tending that forgotten corner of creation long before anyone noticed. The congregation's gift was not bringing life back to the land—it was helping a community recognize the life that had quietly been waiting beneath the surface all along.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What place in your community is quietly waiting for someone to notice that it still has life in it?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 4

We Thought the Wall Needed Paint

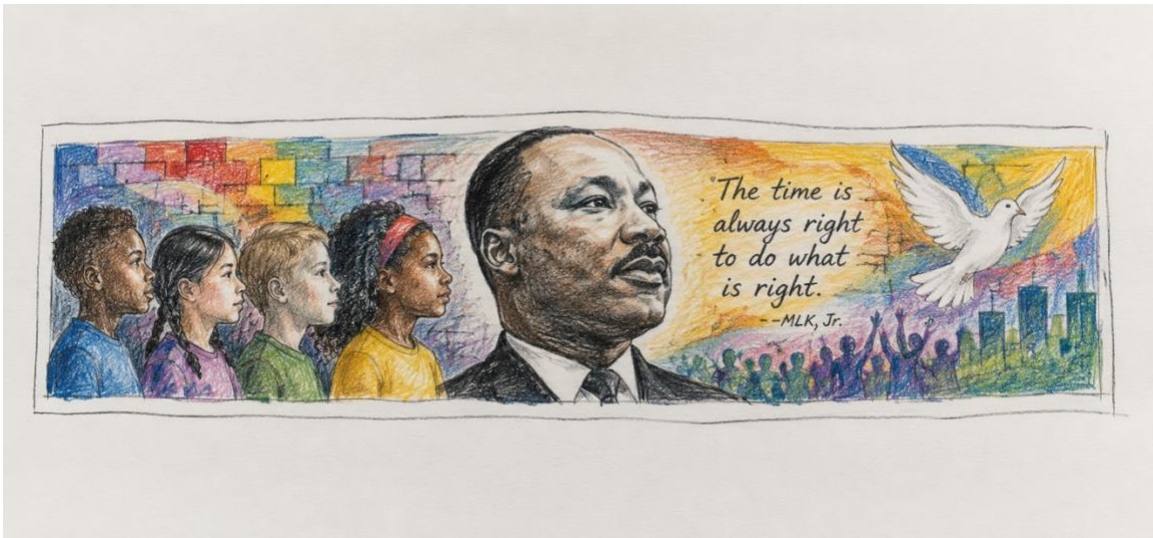
Reimagining the Church as a canvas for the community's imagination.

The wall had become invisible. Thousands of cars passed it every day; no one really saw it anymore. It wasn't ugly—just forgettable.

One January, as Martin Luther King Jr. Day approached, an art teacher arrived at the governing board meeting carrying a stack of sketches. *"I'd like to paint the outside wall."*

The room grew curious. *"What kind of mural?"*

He spread the drawings across the table. At the center stood Martin Luther King Jr. Around him, children of different races reached toward one another beneath a single sentence:



He explained that Black History Month would follow only weeks later. *"I think our neighborhood needs a reminder of who we're still becoming."*

The proposal exposed concerns no one had named. One elder wondered whether people would object to painting the church. Another worried what visitors might think. Then someone quietly laughed: *"If our walls are speaking... perhaps they should have something worth saying."*

The motion passed without another word.

Hope Belongs on the Street

For several weeks the mural slowly appeared. Drivers eased off the accelerator, neighbors stopped on the sidewalk, and people rolled down car windows. The local newspaper came to ask why a church would paint a mural on the outside of its building.

The artist answered simply: **"Because hope belongs on the street."**

The story traveled farther than anyone imagined. Families drove across town, teachers brought students, children posed for photographs, and parents found themselves talking about history, justice, courage, and dreams still unfinished.

Without intending it, the church parking lot became a gathering place. Then something even more surprising happened:

- A photographer wondered about a mural for Hispanic Heritage Month.
- A quilt artist wanted to honor the women who had quietly built the town.
- A member of the Creek Nation asked if the first peoples of the region might finally have their story told.
- A young graffiti artist imagined a mural painted through the eyes of local teenagers.

The church slowly realized that the wall no longer belonged to the church alone. It had become a canvas where the community remembered who it was—and imagined who it might yet become.

Making Room for the Next Story

Within a year a new mural appeared almost every month. Some honored veterans, others celebrated teachers; some remembered the river, the mills, and the farms; others gave thanks for ordinary families whose names rarely appeared in history books.

Each mural invited another conversation. Neighbors who might never have entered the sanctuary found themselves standing together in the parking lot talking about beauty, memory, justice, loss, and hope.

One afternoon a visitor asked the pastor, *"How long do you leave each mural up?"*

"Long enough for it to begin a conversation."

"And then?"

"Then we make room for the next story."

Years later people stopped giving directions by the church's name. Instead they smiled and said, *"You know... the one with the murals."*

The wall became more than a painting project. It surrendered one of its most visible possessions to the imagination of its neighbors. And in doing so, it discovered that the Holy Spirit was writing the story of the community. The church's calling was not to control that story, but to provide a place where it could be seen, shared, and celebrated.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What visible gift has your congregation been protecting that could become an invitation for your community to imagine hope, beauty, and justice together?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 5

We Thought the Empty Space Needed a Building

Reimagining the Church as a steward of place.

For nearly fifty years the church had owned an entire city block beside the university. The sanctuary stood on one corner; across the street stretched a parking lot that had faithfully served generations of worshipers.

Then the congregation built a parking garage a block away. Almost overnight the old lot became unnecessary. The asphalt cracked, weeds pushed through faded parking lines, and a chain-link fence leaned toward the sidewalk. Thousands of students walked past every day, but almost no one noticed it.

The governing board knew something had to change. The ideas came easily: sell the property, build senior housing, construct a youth center, or develop office space. Every proposal made sense, and every proposal quietly lost momentum.

Where Do They Belong?

One evening, after another conversation stalled, an architect in the congregation unfolded a map of the university district. Before saying a word, he asked a question: *"What problem are we trying to solve?"*

Someone answered almost immediately: *"We have an empty piece of land."*

The architect smiled. *"I'm not sure that's the problem."* He pointed to the map: coffee shops, restaurants, residence halls, classrooms, apartment buildings, offices. Then he uncapped a green marker. There was almost nowhere to use it.

"Thousands of people spend their days here," he said. *"They have places to study. They have places to work. They have places to eat."* He looked around the room. **"But where do they simply belong?"**

The silence that followed felt different. For the first time, the congregation wasn't looking at a parking lot—they were looking at a neighborhood.

Instead of hiring a developer, the church called the university's Department of Urban Planning: *"What would happen if we asked your students to imagine what this neighborhood is missing?"*

The faculty embraced the idea. For an entire semester, students interviewed restaurant owners, university staff, neighborhood residents, business leaders, and passersby. Their presentations arrived at the same conclusion: **The neighborhood didn't need another building. It needed room to breathe.**

Building Belonging

Slowly the old parking lot disappeared:

- Native trees shaded winding paths.
- Rain gardens welcomed stormwater back into the ground.
- Tables invited strangers to linger over lunch.
- Movable chairs gathered and scattered with each new conversation.
- Public art reflected the neighborhood's story.
- A small stage welcomed musicians, poets, and student performances.

The square quietly changed the rhythm of the neighborhood. Takeout lunches became shared meals, students stayed after class instead of hurrying home, professors held office hours beneath the trees, young families paused while children chased one another across the lawn, and office workers lingered before heading home. The space had become a place.

One afternoon a reporter asked the pastor why the church had abandoned a project that would have been far more profitable.

The pastor glanced across the square: *"We did build something."*

The reporter looked across the square: *"I don't see a building."*

"No." The pastor watched strangers sharing lunch beneath the trees. **"We built a place where a neighborhood could become a community."**

Years later, visitors rarely knew who owned the square. The congregation considered that one of its greatest successes. The Holy Spirit had been drawing people toward one another; the church simply had the privilege of creating room for those relationships to take root.

Sometimes the most faithful thing a congregation builds is not another building—it is a place where belonging can grow.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Where in your community is there space waiting to become a place—and what might happen if your congregation helped people imagine it together?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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A BRIEF REFLECTION

Places are never merely locations on a map.

They become the settings where lives unfold, memories are formed, and relationships take root. A garden becomes a classroom. A neglected creek becomes a place of wonder. A wall becomes a conversation. An empty parking lot becomes a neighborhood commons.

None of these transformations began because someone saw unused property. They began because someone learned to see a place through the eyes of love.

Perhaps this is one of humanity's oldest callings. Long before we were asked to build institutions, we were entrusted with tending a garden.

The Holy Spirit is at work in the places we inhabit, quietly cultivating possibilities we have not yet learned to see.

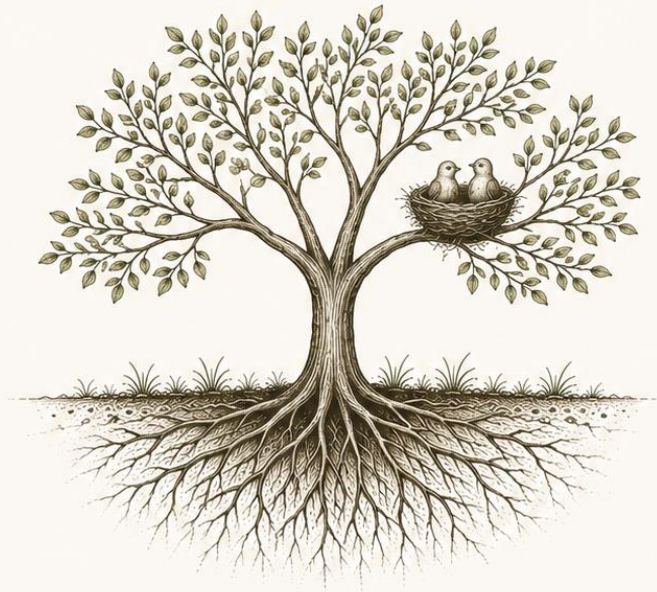
As we care for creation with gratitude and imagination, we often discover that the places God has entrusted to us have been patiently shaping us all along.

PART TWO



SECTION FOUR

Becoming Community



*In relationship,
we discover belonging,
we bear one another,
and together we become the love of Christ.*

The deepest human need is belonging.

It is possible to serve people without ever becoming their neighbors.

We can deliver meals, repair homes, tutor children, distribute clothing, and write generous checks while remaining strangers to the people we hope to help. Every act of kindness matters. But the Gospel always points beyond service toward relationship.

Jesus understood this from the beginning.

Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. Again and again, Jesus created spaces where people who had every reason to remain strangers discovered they belonged to one another. Around tables, beside wells, along dusty roads, and in borrowed homes, barriers slowly gave way to relationships. Those who had been overlooked were known. Those who had been isolated were welcomed. Those who came expecting only to receive often discovered they also had gifts to offer.

Needs vs. Relationships

This is one of the quiet mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

Communities are rarely built by solving problems. More often, they grow as people share life together. A meal becomes a friendship. A shared task becomes trust. A conversation becomes the beginning of belonging.

That is why missionary imagination pays as much attention to relationships as it does to needs.

- **Needs** can feel overwhelming; **relationships** begin with a name.
- **Needs** ask, *What is wrong?*
- **Relationships** ask, *Who is here?*

Those questions lead us toward very different futures.

The stories that follow are filled with ordinary moments. People divide groceries, repair broken appliances, share meals with nursing home residents, cultivate neighborhoods, and help children discover confidence on a stage. None begins with a grand strategy. Each begins when someone creates space for people to know one another.

Perhaps this is one of the Church's deepest callings:

- Not simply to provide services.
- Not merely to solve problems.
- **But to become the kind of community where loneliness gives way to friendship, strangers become neighbors, and neighbors slowly become companions in the shared work of becoming more fully human.**

The Holy Spirit is drawing people toward one another. The Church's calling is to recognize those places where belonging is waiting to be born and help make room for it.

As you read these stories, resist the temptation to ask: *How can we help more people?*

Instead, ask a different question:

Where might we create the kind of relationships in which people discover they no longer have to face life alone?

Because the deepest transformation rarely begins when a problem is solved. It begins when someone realizes, "I belong here."

Story 1

We Thought We Were Just Buying Groceries

Sometimes community grows in the most ordinary routines.

It began with six families sitting around a kitchen table after Bible study. No one was planning a ministry.

Someone mentioned how expensive groceries had become. Another wished they could afford more local produce. One family admitted they couldn't always finish the vegetables in their weekly CSA box before they spoiled.

A retired farmer listened for a while before speaking: *"If we ordered together,"* he said, *"we'd probably all eat better for less."*

That was the whole idea.

Thursdays in the Fellowship Hall

The next month six families placed one order instead of six. Fresh vegetables arrived from a nearby farm. Grains, beans, spices, and oats came from a food cooperative a few counties away. Someone discovered local honey. Someone else found a dairy willing to sell cheese in bulk.

Every Thursday evening they met in the fellowship hall. Long tables disappeared beneath tomatoes, peppers, onions, greens, sacks of flour, and bins of beans waiting to be divided.

Someone brewed coffee. Children argued over whether basil smelled better than parsley. Recipes traveled across the room almost as quickly as the vegetables.

No one called it a ministry. It simply felt like neighbors helping one another eat well.

One afternoon a woman who lived a few houses from the church stopped to ask why so many people gathered there every Thursday.

"We're dividing groceries."

She laughed. *"I've never heard of anything like that."*

"It's saving us quite a bit of money."

She hesitated. *"Do you think I could come?"*

"Of course."

Beyond the Groceries

The following week she brought two neighbors. Then parents from the elementary school began joining in. A young couple new to town wandered through the doors. Little by little the fellowship hall grew louder.

And somewhere along the way groceries stopped being the reason people came.

People exchanged recipes, shared seeds for backyard gardens, compared bread recipes, organized freezer-meal swaps, and passed along herbs that had grown faster than anyone expected. When one member's husband was hospitalized, several families quietly divided her groceries for weeks and left meals on her porch until he came home.

No one organized the effort. It simply felt like what neighbors do.

Even the farmers noticed the difference. Predictable orders gave them confidence to plant a little more each season. Eventually they invited everyone to visit the farm. Children climbed onto tractors, teenagers asked questions about healthy soil, and families who had lived only blocks apart discovered they were meeting one another for the first time.

Months later a reporter asked the pastor about the church's food ministry. *"It really isn't a food ministry."*

"What is it?"

The pastor looked around the fellowship hall. Sweet potatoes covered one table, coffee cups sat forgotten beside recipe cards, and people lingered long after the groceries had been divided.

"I think," he said, **"it's a neighborhood that forgot it was made up of strangers."**

The Holy Spirit had been gathering these neighbors week after week through the simple rhythm of ordinary life. The groceries filled pantries, but the repeated act of showing up quietly filled something much deeper.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What are people doing that could become a place where neighbors naturally belong to one another?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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✍ _____

✍ _____

Story 2

We Thought People Needed Things Fixed

The deepest repairs are rarely mechanical.

It began with a broken toaster.

One member mentioned she was about to throw it away. *"It probably costs more to repair than replace."*

Someone across the table chuckled. *"I could have fixed it in ten minutes."*

That simple comment opened another conversation: How many lamps, clocks, bicycles, radios, sewing machines, mixers, and small appliances were sitting in closets simply because no one knew how to repair them?

The room slowly took inventory:

- An electrician
- A retired appliance technician
- A bicycle mechanic
- A woman who repaired sewing machines
- Someone who could coax almost any small engine back to life

Then one person asked: *"What if we opened the church one evening each week and simply fixed things?"*

No one suggested charging, no one proposed a committee, and no one talked about attracting new members. They placed a small notice in the newspaper:



Workbenches and Stories

The first evening exceeded every expectation. People arrived carrying lamps with frayed cords, coffee makers that no longer brewed, vacuum cleaners, children's toys, and a treasured clock that had belonged to someone's grandmother.

Some repairs took only minutes; others proved impossible. No one seemed disappointed. People gathered around the workbenches, watching repairs unfold, asking questions, and telling the stories behind the objects they had carried through the door.

Someone brought pie. Someone else quietly kept the coffee warm. Children stood wide-eyed as an old radio crackled back to life. A retired engineer patiently showed a teenager how to solder two tiny wires together. The room hummed with conversation.

Months later people still remembered the Repair Café—not because of the lamps or the blenders, but because they remembered meeting neighbors they had never known, learning how things worked, and laughing while waiting their turn.

Mending More Than Mixers

One evening a widow arrived carrying a battered kitchen mixer. *"It was my mother's,"* she explained.

The repair took fifteen minutes. The story she shared while waiting lasted nearly an hour. Before the evening ended, three people had accepted her invitation to come over for pie the following week. The mixer wasn't the only thing repaired that night.

As the months passed, high-school students began apprenticing alongside retired tradespeople. Skills that might otherwise have disappeared found eager new hands. The older volunteers thought they were passing on practical knowledge; in truth, the Holy Spirit was using their craft to weave together a community that had almost forgotten how much it needed one another.

The work was never limited to broken things. It created a place where people discovered that **every object carries a story—and every story is an invitation to belong.**

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What ordinary gifts could become places where neighbors rediscover one another?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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👉 _____

👉 _____

Story 3

We Thought We Needed to Bring Them to Church

Reimagining the Church as a movable feast.

Several members of the congregation lived at the nursing home on the edge of town. Every Sunday volunteers helped them into the church van, settled wheelchairs into place, worshiped together, and returned them home after the service. Everyone appreciated the ministry.

One Sunday morning, while waiting for the last wheelchair to be loaded, a deacon glanced back toward the building. Thirty-seven residents still lived there. Most would never leave.

That number stayed with him through the entire service. At the next deacons' meeting he quietly asked: "*We're celebrating that we've brought six people to church.*" He paused. "*What about the other thirty-seven?*"

The room immediately began solving the problem:

- Buy another van.
- Recruit more drivers.
- Ask families to help.

Each suggestion helped, but none reached everyone. Some residents were too frail to travel; others found leaving the building confusing or exhausting.

Finally someone asked: "**What if, once in a while, instead of bringing a few people to church... we brought the church to them?**"

Moving the Sanctuary

For a moment no one knew quite what to say. The sanctuary had always been where worship happened. Could worship happen somewhere else?

The congregation met with residents, families, nurses, aides, and the home's administrator. Together they decided to try.

The following Sunday the church doors remained locked. A handwritten sign greeted anyone who arrived:

Today we're worshipping at Oak Grove Nursing Center.

You're welcome to join us there.

The dining room filled with wheelchairs, walkers, church members, nurses, grandchildren, and curious visitors. The hymns moved a little more slowly, the sermon became shorter, and Communion took longer because so many hands trembled while holding the bread. No one minded. In fact, no one wanted to hurry.

Becoming a Neighborhood

A few months later someone at the nursing home asked another question: *"What if everyone stayed for lunch?"*

Tables were pushed together and the conversations lingered. Church members who once hurried home after worship found themselves hearing stories of military service, first loves, childhood farms, favorite recipes, and grandchildren whose photographs were carefully tucked into wallets. Before long, lunch had become as important as the service itself.

- Children stopped by after school to play piano and violin.
- The youth group planted flowers and rebuilt raised garden beds.
- Families began inviting residents to birthday celebrations and holiday meals.
- A retired teacher became the honorary grandmother of three children.
- One resident quietly knitted blankets for every baby born into the congregation.
- Another edited college essays for high-school seniors.

People once described as "shut-ins" slowly became some of the most deeply connected members of the church.

Years later someone asked the pastor when the congregation had started its nursing-home ministry. *"We never did."*

"What do you mean?"

He looked around the room where lunch was winding down, conversations still filling the tables. **"We stopped thinking of it as a place we visited. It became one of our neighborhoods."**

The Holy Spirit had been dwelling among those residents long before the congregation arrived. The church didn't carry Christ into the nursing home; it discovered Christ waiting there, inviting strangers to become neighbors and neighbors to become family.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Who has become invisible simply because they can no longer come to where everyone else gathers?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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✍ _____

Story 4

We Thought People Needed Houses

Reimagining the Church as a neighborhood where people belong.

For years the congregation talked about affordable housing. The need was impossible to ignore: rents climbed, young families struggled to remain in the community, and older adults discovered that one unexpected expense could place everything at risk.

Like many churches, their first conversations revolved around what they might provide: rental assistance, emergency shelter, or food. Every idea mattered, but none seemed large enough.

Then someone introduced the congregation to a developer who specialized in tiny-house villages. He listened for a while before asking a different question:

"What if you built a neighborhood instead of another program?"

Building Trust First

The idea was both beautiful and daunting—and far more complicated than anyone imagined. Neighbors worried about property values, others feared crime, and city officials raised questions about zoning, parking, utilities, and building codes. Every conversation uncovered another obstacle.

Before long the congregation realized something important: **building trust would take longer than building houses.**

So they slowed down. They met with neighbors in living rooms and community centers, listened, revised plans, and answered the same questions again and again. The developer patiently redesigned details that most people would never notice but that made the project possible. Little by little, opponents became partners.

Years passed, the first homes were finished, families moved in, and the congregation celebrated. Someone quietly looked around and said, *"I think our work is just beginning."*

Belonging Makes a Neighborhood

He was right. The church hadn't built housing; it had welcomed neighbors.

Relationships grew slowly:

- A retired mechanic taught someone how to keep a bicycle running so they could get to work.
- One resident learned to manage a monthly budget with help from another neighbor.
- Children discovered honorary grandparents.
- Flower beds appeared and shared meals became ordinary.
- When someone found a new job, the neighborhood celebrated; when life became difficult, people noticed before anyone had to ask for help.

The houses were essential. **Belonging made them a neighborhood.**

Years later a visitor toured the village: *"What services do you provide here?"*

A resident looked around before answering: *"We have a few."*

"But that's not why people stay."

"Why do they stay?"

She looked toward children playing while neighbors visited across front porches: **"For many of us... this is the first place we've ever had neighbors."**

The congregation had built more than tiny houses. The Holy Spirit had been preparing a community where strangers could become neighbors and neighbors could become community. The church's gift was helping create a place where belonging had room to grow.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Where might your congregation help create belonging instead of simply providing assistance?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 5

We Thought We Needed More Children at Church

Reimagining the Church as a place where people discover who they are.

For years the congregation had shared its stage with the community theater. Some church members acted in the productions; others built sets or ran the lights. It had become one of those quiet partnerships that no one questioned because it simply belonged to the life of the community.

Then one evening, during a board meeting, a member who also served on the theater board shared difficult news: *"The school district has eliminated the elementary arts program."* Band, theater, visual arts—gone.

No one argued about budgets and no one debated politics. Someone simply asked: *"What happens to the children who discover themselves through art?"*

The question redirected every eye toward the sanctuary. Then someone looked toward the stage: *"We have a stage."*

Another smiled: *"And we know people who know how to teach."*

Echoes of Children's Voices

No one imagined creating a large ministry—just one afternoon each week for six weeks for one age group. If a dozen children came, it would be enough.

The elementary school agreed to send home a flyer. By the next morning every space had been filled. Before the first session even began, parents were asking about a waiting list. Six weeks later the waiting list was larger than the first class. Parents of younger children wanted to know when they could enroll, and parents of older students wondered if there would ever be room for them.

The church added another afternoon, then another. Before long the building echoed with children's voices five days each week.

- Different age groups rehearsed in different corners of the church.
- Costumes slowly replaced folding tables in storage closets.
- Volunteers from the community theater coached auditions, built sets, painted scenery, and celebrated opening nights.

A Place Worth Giving From

The performances were wonderful, but they were no longer the reason people came:

- Children who had barely spoken in class found confidence beneath the stage lights.
- Families who would never have met became friends.
- Retired carpenters taught teenagers how to build sets.

- Grandparents filled the audience because a grandchild had one unforgettable line.

The stage quietly became something more than a stage. It became a place where children discovered gifts they had never imagined were within them.

Years later one of the original students returned after graduating from college. She stood alone on the empty stage before rehearsal began: *"I don't work in theater anymore,"* she said. *"I became a teacher."*

She smiled as she looked across the sanctuary: **"But this is where I first learned I had something worth giving."**

The congregation had not set out to save the arts. The Holy Spirit had planted gifts, imagination, and courage in the lives of those children; the church simply created a place where those gifts could be recognized, nurtured, and shared.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What gifts is your community losing that your congregation has the space, relationships, or experience to help cultivate?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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A BRIEF REFLECTION

Communities rarely appear all at once.

More often they grow quietly through ordinary acts of shared life. Groceries are divided. Broken appliances are repaired. Meals linger around crowded tables. Children discover gifts they never knew they possessed. Neighbors become friends almost before anyone notices.

What begins as a simple act of kindness slowly becomes a pattern of belonging.

Perhaps this is one of the Gospel's quietest miracles:

The Holy Spirit is drawing people toward one another long before the Church recognizes what is happening.

Our calling is not to manufacture community, but to cultivate the places and relationships where belonging can take root. In a culture marked by loneliness and isolation, few gifts are more faithful than helping people discover they no longer have to face life alone.

PART TWO



SECTION FIVE

Reimagining the Church



*Bearing fruit for the world—
not for our own sake,
but for the life of others.*

The Church becomes a steward of the common good.

Every story in this gallery has been quietly asking the same question: **What is the Church becoming?**

That question reaches deeper than attendance, budgets, buildings, or even cherished traditions. Faithful stewardship requires all of those things. But none of them is the Church's deepest calling.

From the beginning, the Church has existed because God loves the world.

The Church is the community through whom Christ's love becomes visible in a particular place, among particular people, at a particular moment in history. Worship gathers us into God's presence. It also sends us back into the world, formed by grace to embody the love we have received.

Everything begins to look different when that becomes our starting point:

- Instead of asking how to **preserve itself**, the Church begins asking how to **bless its neighbors**.
- Instead of measuring success primarily by **attendance**, it begins noticing **lives being restored**.
- Instead of **protecting every resource**, it wonders how every gift—its buildings, relationships, experience, influence, and imagination—might be offered for the **flourishing of the community**.

This is not the abandonment of the Church. It is the **rediscovery of the Church**.

The Gospel Unchanged

Across two thousand years Christians have gathered wherever people live their lives: in homes and marketplaces, monasteries and storefronts, cathedrals and schools, refugee camps, hospitals, village squares, and countless other places. The forms have changed because communities have changed. The Gospel has not.

Every generation receives the same calling: **To discover what Christ's love looks like here.**

The stories in this final section are not about churches becoming successful again. They are about congregations discovering the freedom that comes when they stop asking how to preserve an institution and begin offering themselves as a gift to the communities God has entrusted to their care.

None of these stories is meant to be copied. Each belongs to its own place. Together they invite us to ask a better question:

If Christ were taking flesh in our community today, what might love look like here?

There has never been a universal answer, and there never will be. But every congregation willing to ask that question with humility joins a long tradition of Christians who have trusted that the Holy Spirit has gone ahead—and whose imagination is always greater than our own.

Story 1

We Thought We Needed More Volunteers

Reimagining the Church from programs to relationships.

Nearly a thousand people gathered for worship each weekend. The church was alive with activity: children filled classrooms, the youth ministry overflowed the building on Wednesday evenings, mission trips were planned months in advance, and the calendar rarely had an empty space.

Whenever someone identified a new community need, the response came almost automatically: *"Who can volunteer?"*

People did, again and again.

Then, during a leadership retreat, a physician who had joined the congregation only a year earlier raised his hand. *"I have a question."*

The room turned toward him.

"What if volunteering isn't the greatest gift sitting in this room?"

People smiled politely. He continued.

"Just in this meeting we have physicians, attorneys, architects, teachers, business owners, city employees, engineers, counselors, contractors, bankers, nonprofit leaders, artists, and software developers." He paused. "What if God didn't gather us simply to volunteer? What if God gathered us because together we hold relationships, knowledge, and influence that almost no one else in this city possesses?"

The question lingered.

From "Who Can Help?" to "Who Knows Someone?"

Over the following months the church stopped asking: *Who can help?*

Instead it began asking: **Who knows someone?**

The conversations changed immediately:

- A **banker** knew people exploring new approaches to affordable housing.
- An **architect** had been searching for land suitable for accessible homes.
- A **physician** knew hospital administrators worried about patients returning to unsafe living conditions.
- A **business owner** employed skilled tradespeople eager to donate their expertise.
- A **city planner** knew of abandoned properties waiting for new life.

Individually those relationships solved very little. Together they became something no organization could have assembled on its own.

The church never created a housing ministry. It convened a conversation. Soon bankers, builders, healthcare leaders, neighborhood organizations, city officials, and local businesses found themselves sitting around the same tables. The church provided coffee; everyone else brought the gifts God had entrusted to them.

Connecting Relationships

Within two years abandoned houses had become homes for older adults and families living with disabilities. Young apprentices learned skilled trades alongside experienced contractors, local businesses donated materials, healthcare providers saw fewer patients returning to unsafe housing, and neighbors who had never met began solving problems together.

People often assumed the church had organized everything. The senior pastor always smiled. *"We really didn't."*

"What did you do?"

"We invited people who had never imagined they belonged in the same conversation."

Years later someone asked an elder what had changed the congregation. He didn't mention the houses, the partnerships, or even the families.

He simply said: *"We stopped measuring generosity by how many volunteers we could recruit."* He let the contrast stand. **"We started measuring it by how many relationships we could help discover one another."**

The Holy Spirit had gathered those relationships long before anyone recognized what they might become together. The congregation's gift was not creating the network—it was helping people see the possibilities God had quietly assembled in their midst.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What relationships, influence, or expertise has God gathered within your congregation that your community has never been invited to share?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 2

We Thought We Had to Do Everything

Reimagining the Church as a convener of the common good.

Whenever a new need surfaced in town, someone eventually called the church. Could they organize volunteers? Collect food? Raise money? Provide meeting space?

The congregation always tried. Some efforts flourished; others quietly disappeared because there were never enough people, time, or energy.

Then one evening, during a leadership meeting, someone spread a map of the town across the table: schools, nonprofits, businesses, medical clinics, the college, civic organizations, and other churches.

For a long moment no one spoke. Finally someone traced a finger across the map and said: *"None of us are actually working alone."*

Another smiled: *"It only feels that way."*

The observation changed the question. Instead of asking, *What ministry should we start?* the congregation began asking: **Who needs to know one another?**

Uncomplicated Lunches

A month later they invited community leaders to lunch. The invitation was wonderfully uncomplicated: no fundraising, no speeches, no presentations—only two questions:

1. **What are you working on?**
2. **Where do you need help?**

The first lunch felt a little awkward. A school counselor described children arriving at school without winter coats. Across the table, the owner of a clothing store mentioned that manufacturers often donated unsold inventory. The director of a nonprofit admitted she had nowhere to store it. A warehouse manager quietly offered unused space.

Before dessert, a problem had become a partnership.

The pattern repeated itself:

- A **veterinarian** spoke about older adults worried about pets whenever they entered the hospital.
- A **retired couple** offered to foster animals.
- The **humane society** arranged vaccinations.
- Another **organization** supplied pet food.

No committee was formed. People simply found one another.

Setting the Table

The lunches continued. Teachers met business owners, pastors met mental-health counselors, police officers met youth mentors, and attorneys met families who needed legal guidance. One conversation led naturally to another.

Years later someone thanked the pastor for all the new programs the church had created. He laughed. *"We hardly created any."*

"What did you create?"

The pastor looked around the room where people from every corner of the community were finishing lunch together. **"We created a place where people discovered they had been serving the same community all along."**

The Holy Spirit had been weaving together gifts, relationships, and opportunities throughout the town. The congregation simply set the table where those connections could finally be recognized.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What could happen in your community if the church became known less for its programs and more for its ability to bring people together?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 3

We Thought People Needed a Place to Go

Reimagining the Church as a home for the common good.

For years the congregation kept asking the same question: *"What ministry should we begin next?"*

The ideas were always good: a counseling center, support groups, tutoring, a community meal, clothing assistance, job coaching, or space for nonprofit organizations. Each idea addressed a real need, and each required another committee, another budget, and another group of volunteers. The conversations never seemed to end.

Then one afternoon someone asked a different question: *"What if people don't need another program?"*

The question lingered.

Walking with Curiosity

Instead of planning, the congregation began paying attention. Members walked through their community—not with surveys or clipboards, but simply with curiosity.

They noticed:

- A **mother** caring for a son living with mental illness.
- A **retired teacher** hoping to continue serving.
- A **counselor** who wanted to offer affordable care but couldn't afford office space.
- A **recovery group** looking for somewhere to gather.
- **Neighborhood organizations** searching for meeting rooms.
- **Pastors** longing for places where relationships could grow beyond Sunday morning.

The congregation discovered something surprising: **The community wasn't waiting for another ministry. It was waiting for people to find one another.**

The Front Porch of the Community

One evening someone said: *"What if the church became the front porch of the community?"*

The idea quietly changed everything. Rooms that had sat empty through the week came alive:

- Counselors met with people carrying burdens they had hidden for years.
- Recovery groups gathered around borrowed tables.
- Community organizations discovered partners down the hallway.
- Volunteers found that serving alongside one another was easier than serving alone.

Some people arrived looking for help; others came because they wanted to help. Before long it became difficult to tell which was which.

One afternoon a visitor asked a church member, *"So... what exactly happens here?"*

She looked around. Someone was making coffee, a counselor greeted her next appointment, volunteers stacked chairs after a neighborhood meeting, and laughter drifted down the hallway from a parenting group.

"We make it easier for neighbors to find one another."

The Holy Spirit had gathered people with gifts, compassion, and a desire to serve. The congregation's calling was not to replace their work, but to create a place where those gifts could meet, grow, and become a blessing to the whole community.

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What if your church became the place where people who care about your community could find one another?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:







Story 4

We Thought Saving the Church Meant Saving the Church

Reimagining the Church as a servant of hope.

The congregation worshiped only a few miles from one of the largest military bases in the region. Veterans filled several pews every Sunday. Over coffee they shared stories that rarely surfaced during worship: friends sleeping in cars, families living in motels, long drives to the nearest Veterans Administration hospital, and marriages strained by trauma.

The congregation responded as churches often do: meals, utility assistance, occasional counseling, and emergency help whenever it was needed. The kindness mattered, but it never felt sufficient.

One evening, after hearing another story about a veteran raising children from a motel room, someone quietly said: *"We keep helping people survive."* She looked around the room. *"What we can't seem to do is help them rebuild their lives."*

The congregation filled an entire wall with what veterans truly needed: affordable housing, mental-health care, employment, transportation, legal assistance, case management, and help navigating the VA. The list seemed impossible.

Weeks later a member who directed a community nonprofit studied the wall in silence before speaking. *"I think you've been asking the wrong question."*

Everyone waited.

"You've been asking what the church can do. What if you asked what hope requires?"

Preserving Hope

The question reached beyond strategy to identity. The conversation that followed lasted for months. It wasn't primarily about grants or nonprofit structures; it was about identity.

Was the congregation's calling to preserve itself—or to preserve hope?

Eventually the church reorganized as a community nonprofit serving veterans and their families. Worship continued every Sunday; nothing changed there. Monday morning changed completely:

- Classrooms became counseling offices.
- The fellowship hall hosted employment workshops.
- Attorneys volunteered legal clinics.
- Retired accountants offered financial coaching.
- Licensed counselors were eventually joined by full-time professionals.

The executive director was not a pastor—she was a veteran. Partnerships multiplied with hospitals, the VA, employers, the local college, and housing organizations. One by one they discovered they belonged to the same mission.

Easier to See

Years later funding arrived to build affordable housing for veterans returning to civilian life. The congregation celebrated—not because another project had begun, but because they remembered standing before a wall covered with impossible needs, wondering whether a small church could make any real difference.

They never solved every problem. They became the place where a community learned to face those problems together.

One afternoon a reporter visited the new neighborhood and asked a volunteer if she missed the church that had once occupied the property. She watched children playing while veterans shared coffee beneath the shade of a porch. Then she smiled.

"It never disappeared."

"What do you mean?"

"It just became easier to see."

The Holy Spirit had been stirring compassion, partnerships, and possibility throughout the community. When the congregation stopped asking how to preserve itself and began asking what hope required, it discovered that the Church had never been the building or the organization. It had always been the people Christ was sending into the world.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

What would your congregation become if it stopped asking how to preserve itself and began asking what hope requires in your community?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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Story 5

We Thought We Were Too Small

Reimagining stewardship and identity.

Most Sundays there were twelve of them. The sanctuary had been built for more than two hundred.

Every room carried memories: wedding flowers had once filled the chancel, children's voices had echoed through classrooms now used mostly for storage, and the fellowship hall still remembered covered-dish suppers, youth banquets, and Christmas pageants. The building told the story of who they had been. The budget reminded them who they had become.

The roof needed attention, the furnace was nearing the end of its life, and insurance premiums climbed every year. Every unexpected repair postponed another conversation about ministry.

No one complained; they loved the church. Yet almost every meeting eventually returned to the same question: *How do we keep the building?*

One afternoon, after discussing another repair they could scarcely afford, someone quietly asked: **"What if we've been trying to save the wrong thing?"**

No one answered—not because anyone disagreed, but because no one had imagined the question before.

From Owner to Servant

Over the months that followed, the congregation spent less time looking at its building and more time looking at its town. They noticed neighbors who no longer drove, older adults recovering from surgery with no one to check on them, parents longing for places where people actually knew one another, and community groups constantly searching for affordable meeting space.

For years the town had talked about creating a community center; it simply had nowhere to put one. One evening someone said almost casually: *"What if this building became that place?"*

The idea seemed impossible—until it didn't.

The conversations took months: with one another, with town leaders, with prayer, and with more than a little fear. Eventually the congregation made a remarkable decision: **They decided the property to the town with one hope: that it would continue serving the flourishing of the community they loved.**

The town accepted. Responsibility for insurance, maintenance, utilities, repairs, and scheduling shifted to the city. The congregation continued worshiping there every Sunday. During the rest of the week the building belonged to everyone.

Gaining a Town

The church had not lost a building; it had gained a town:

- **Money** once reserved for furnaces and roofs became available for people.
- **Time** once spent worrying about maintenance became time spent cultivating relationships.
- **Members** drove neighbors to medical appointments, visited people recovering from illness, gathered strangers around monthly community meals, and introduced people whose gifts met one another's needs.

Gradually the congregation became known less for the place where it worshiped than for the way it loved.

Years later few members began their story by talking about the property. They talked about friendships, about neighbors whose names they now knew, and about watching a town slowly become a community.

Looking back, they realized they had never been too small. They had simply been measuring themselves by the wrong things.

The building had been a faithful servant, but it had quietly become their identity. When they offered it back to God, they discovered that the Holy Spirit had been preparing a future far larger than anything they had imagined. The church had not disappeared—it had become what it had been called to be all along: **a gift**.

💡 A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Every congregation has gifts that gradually become identities. What gift has become so central that it now limits your imagination? What might become possible if that gift were offered back to God for the flourishing of your community?

Notes for leadership or team discernment:

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A BRIEF REFLECTION

The stories in this final section invite us to see the Church with fresh eyes.

Again and again, congregations discover that their greatest gifts are not the programs they create or the buildings they maintain, but the relationships they cultivate, the partnerships they encourage, and the hope they help their communities imagine together. As they become less

concerned with preserving themselves, they become more attentive to where the Holy Spirit has gone ahead, inviting them to join in God's work of renewal.

Perhaps this has always been the Church's deepest calling. We are not gathered simply to sustain an institution, but to become a people through whom Christ's love takes flesh in a particular place. Every congregation will embody that love differently because every community is different.

These stories are not patterns to imitate, but invitations to imagine.

They remind us that the Church becomes most fully itself when it offers all that it is and all that it has for the flourishing of the communities God has entrusted to its care.

EPILOGUE



Learning to Ask Different Questions

*Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!*

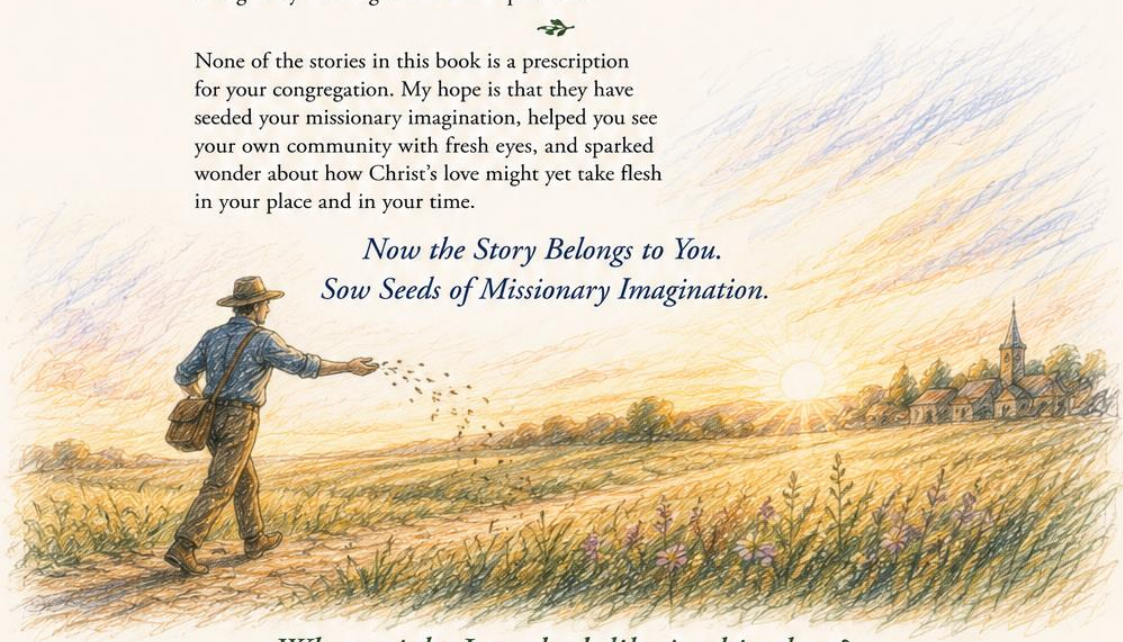
ISAIAH 43:18–19

If you have read these stories straight through,
you may have noticed something.
Very few of them began with a brilliant idea.
None began with unlimited resources.
None began with a congregation asking
how to grow the church.
Almost every story began the same way.
Someone noticed something others had overlooked.
Someone became curious.
Someone asked a different question.
That is how missionary imagination grows.
It does not begin by searching for better answers.
It begins by learning to ask better questions.



None of the stories in this book is a prescription
for your congregation. My hope is that they have
seeded your missionary imagination, helped you see
your own community with fresh eyes, and sparked
wonder about how Christ's love might yet take flesh
in your place and in your time.

*Now the Story Belongs to You.
Sow Seeds of Missionary Imagination.*



What might Love look like in this place?

