

A Life-Giving Way

**Stories, Practices, Challenges
and Some Hopeful Affirmations
from the people of
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church**



An Invitation

What does it mean to live one's faith? This question has animated a project of parish discernment resulting in this handbook of hopeful affirmations about how our Christian faith and mutual love might support us in our personal lives and as part of a community of friends who follow the way of Jesus. We are calling this set of affirmations, "*A Life-Giving Way: Stories, Practices, Challenges and Hopeful Affirmations from the people of St Timothy's Episcopal Church.*"

There is an old name for this sort of exercise. It is called creating a *rule of life*, in this case, a congregational rule of life. By "rule" we do not intend a set of rules and regulations. Rather we use the word in its classic sense, from the Latin *regula*, a ruler, example, or other standard we can use to measure against; a principle to follow or model to aspire to; a pattern or trellis upon which to train new growth. We are used to financial and exercise plans, recommended diets, and other life guidance methods. Consider this congregational rule of life a spiritual exercise plan, a disciples' diet, a life in Christ guidebook.

We invite you to read this booklet slowly and carefully. If you are a current member of our church, you may recognize yourself in some of the stories, practices and challenges we report. Even if you were not part of the fall discussion series that occasioned their telling, you may recognize similarities to your own life. It is our shared stories that support the affirmations set forth in conclusion.

Chew the affirmations over—"read, mark, and inwardly digest" them as our Book of Common Prayer suggests we do biblical readings. Try them out; see if they make a positive difference in your life and adopt them if they do. Report back and let us know what you think. This is a work in progress, a shared journey of faith. The "we" includes the team that composed this Rule (our names are given in the Introduction), but it is meant to include the broader community. We hope it includes you.

Offered to the Parish of St Timothy's during the Visitation of Bishop Ian Douglas on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, April 10, 2011.

Introduction

“The aim of instruction is love.” 1 Timothy 1:5

“Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service.”

The Rule of St. Benedict¹

The question of putting faith into practice is perennial, asked of every generation. “How then shall we live?” is the question the house of Israel put to the prophet Ezekiel, who had warned them of the need to change their evil ways or face the wrath of God. “If you turn and do right,” said the prophet in the name of God, “the sins you have committed shall be forgiven and you shall surely live.”²

We are further instructed as to how to live through the rite of Christian baptism.³ There we pledge to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, putting our whole trust in his grace and love. We agree to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, persevere in resisting evil, confess and turn again when we fall, seek and serve Christ in all persons, love one’s neighbor as oneself, strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being. The vows are taken individually, but they can only be fulfilled communally. An essential part of being a disciple of Christ is that we bring our unique gifts and common needs together, thus “building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”⁴ This is what we mean by following the Way of Jesus.

The question of how to live is perennial, and the gospel answer is simple: turn to God and follow Jesus. But what does a life of faith look like to those of us who attend a small Episcopal church on Greenfield Hill in Fairfield, Connecticut in these early years of the third millennium of the Christian era?

To begin to get at answers, our Rector, Fr. Matthew Calkins put together a group to meet regularly, learn about some of the ways other communities have gone about discernment, including modern Benedictine communities,

¹ *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (RB 1980), ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1982), 1:45.

² Ezekiel 33:10, 16

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 302-304.

⁴ Ephesians 4:12-13

and find a way together to create a rule for our community. This group included the Rev. Diane Peterson, a deacon of the church, Ms. Amy Borruso, the director of Children and Family Ministry, Mr. Chip Campbell, a retired businessman, teacher, and member of the Vestry, and Mr. Gene Kenny, a businessman, father of young children and Warden of the Vestry. The group also included Dr. Terri Bays, Ph.D., a seminarian intern from Berkeley/Yale Divinity School. A number of people participated in subsequent discussions, including Mr. Richard Worth, an author, teacher and consultant, who has become part of the team crafting the rule.

The leadership group convened during the summer of 2010 at Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New

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York, to learn about the Benedictine tradition and current practice.⁵ Benedictine teaching stresses a balanced life of work, prayer, study and rest ordered around community worship— *opus dei*, the work of God. Cardinal virtues of such a community include stability, obedience and constant growth in or conversion to Christ.

We have also drawn upon the work of another order of Anglican monks, the Society of St John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is their recently rewritten Rule⁶ that gave Matt the idea of creating a parish community rule (along with the example of the recently written and received Rule for the Berkeley Divinity School⁷). In an appendix to the SSJE Rule, the authors describe how a parish community may find their example helpful:

⁵ To learn more about this Anglican Benedictine Community of Holy Cross go to <http://www.holycrossmonastery.com/>. We are indebted as well to the work of the Benedictine scholar, Esther de Waal, one of whose many excellent books has inspired our title: *A Life Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1985).

⁶ *The Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, North American Congregation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1997).

⁷ *A Rule of Life for Berkeley, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale* (New Haven, CT: The President and Trustees of Berkeley Divinity School, 2009).

“It is intriguing to imagine a representative team of members of a parish giving themselves the challenge of drawing up a parish rule of life that parallels the rule of a religious order and uses it as a basic model.”

Intriguing, and challenging. Some of the guidelines or rules suitable for monks are not transferable to the secular life. We are not so stable in our pattern of daily life (at least not those of us with children!) or governed by such clear lines of authority. But the search for a more balanced and spiritually centered life is common. Our households cannot convene five times a day for prayer. Yet daily prayer is something we all aspire to and benefit from. Brother Scott of Holy Cross observed that he has been told by busy mothers that they can't find the time to pray in the morning as they used to; they are too busy making sandwiches for their children's lunchboxes. “But this is prayer,” he replied; “making a sandwich for your child is an act of love, and through it God is moving.”

This image of the humble sandwich prayer has guided our work together. Where in our ordinary life experience can we find guidance for living in a faithful and loving way? What are the values, practices, habits and conceptions we hold tacitly, that we can bring into the open light for reflection and community expression? How can we see the holy in the ordinary, and become better, more reflective and intentional disciples of Christ in the process? How might we better see what separates us from the love of God, and how might we help each other overcome the challenges to a joyful, faithful life?

As our next step in getting at some answers, we engaged upon a series of discussions with as many members of the community as we could gather on ten Sundays in the fall of 2010 after both of the two services offered at St Timothy's (8 and 10am). Our leadership group took turns in leading two-week sections in each of the five areas we focused on (as a simple way to get at different facets of our lives): personal, family, work, community and church. Diane began with personal, Amy followed with family, Chip on work, Gene on community, and Matt concluded with two weeks on church.

Each two-week section followed the same basic template: the first week focused on telling stories, usually in one on one conversations, then as shared among the group. The second week solicited a variety of practices in which people integrated faith into their lives in these different spheres, and also asked what were the challenges to doing so.

We also distributed a parish survey to members, both online and through printed copies.⁸ The survey asks a number of questions relating to various practices of faith, as well as questions that gather demographic information, theological and political leanings, and evaluations of parish activities and programs.

In the following pages we incorporate many of the stories, practices and challenges we heard through the discussion series, as well as information from the survey and through observation of parish life. In drafting this Rule, we have tried to set our affirmations within a theological framework set by the Bible, Book of Common Prayer, canons of the Episcopal Church, and our own statement of theological identity, mission and vision.⁹ Recent research in the sociology of religion and child development is cited when appropriate, as well as the work of writers on Benedictine spirituality and other subjects. Matt has been the primary author of this document, which is a part of a Ministry Project he has undertaken to fulfill the thesis requirement for a doctoral degree at Hartford Seminary. The draft of this paper was circulated to the team, through several drafts, and each member submitted questions for further study, summary points, and general comments. Terri has been a keen editor, as well as primary author of the survey. Richard has helped in drafting the summary. Together we submitted to the parish for consideration and comment this set of hopeful affirmations about what it means to live our faith. The first title was, “*A Life-Giving Way: St Timothy’s Rule.*”

Every member received a copy in person or via mail. Members of the congregation read the paper and reflected on it. We discussed it during a Vestry retreat, and conducted a four-week series of discussions during Lent in which to comment and suggest revisions. This draft, slightly retitled and revised, was submitted to the parish and presented to the bishop during his visitation on April 10, 2011. During the service a series of affirmations was incorporated into the liturgy following a Renewal of Baptismal Vows, to express our local adaptation of the universal Christian witness. This is attached as Appendix 2.

⁸ The survey questions and results may be found online on our website: <http://www.sttimschurch.org>. It is still open for taking for those yet to do so.

⁹ See Appendix 1

What's the point of this exercise? What does our adoption of a congregational rule of life mean? It means, at least, that we will have something we can look to when considering mission priorities and church programs. Do they support our affirmed practices or challenge them? We will be able to use this rule as a platform for further study and discussion, allowing us to continue reflection of what it means to live a faithful life together. This booklet will be something we can hand to newcomers visiting our church and use in membership classes. Here is a picture of who we are, a statement about our congregational identity and mission. The concluding sentences of the Theological Statement, included as an appendix, may stand as an expression of our purpose in doing this project, itself part of the vision of a faithful life:

It is our hope that this set of hopeful affirmations will help guide us individually and communally, and serve as a form of evangelism to bring new members into discipleship. It is our prayer that it may be helpful to you wherever you may be in your journey of faith.

As we consider what practices are life-giving, and where the challenges to a faithful life are found, it may be helpful to set out our vision of the goal or end toward which we journey. This is, simply, a life of prayer, in which God is felt and present, a life of rich relationships, in which we are part of loving families and vital, sharing and caring communities, and a life of service, in which we help to heal the world. This is the life abundant that Jesus embodied and calls us to follow, a Christ-like life of service, joy and peace. May such a life be yours, may such a community be ours, and may we together help in advancing God's mission of reconciliation and new creation.

Questions for further study

1. What is your reaction to the idea of creating a “congregational rule of life?”
2. Have you been part of the process of story-telling, or taken the survey, or otherwise been part of the work of this project so far?
3. Please read the theological statement included as an appendix. What do you think about “the mission of God” and the statement’s articulation of the identity and mission of St Timothy’s?
4. Do you identify yourself as a disciple of Christ, a follower of Jesus, and a member of the church? What differences are there in these descriptions?
5. Would you like to be part of the continuing work on this project?

“But this is prayer,” he replied; “making a sandwich for your child is an act of love, and through it God is moving.”

1. Personal Life

For you yourself created my inmost parts;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will thank you that I am marvelously made;
Your works are wonderful, and I know it well.
Psalm 139:12-13

You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face,"
Your face, Lord, will I seek.
Psalm 27:11

Here's a prayer to start the day:

A Morning Resolve

I will try this day to live a simple, sincere, and serene life, repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, impurity, and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity, and the habit of holy silence; exercising economy in expenditure, generosity in giving, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust, and a childlike faith in God.

In particular I will try to be faithful in those habits of prayer, work, study, physical exercise, eating, and sleep which I believe the Holy Spirit has shown me to be right.

And as I cannot in my own strength do this, nor even with hope of success attempt it, I look to thee, O Lord God my Father, in Jesus my Savior, and ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This old-fashioned Anglican prayer, author unknown, may be found these days online at <http://forwardmovement.org/A-Morning-Resolve>. It does, admittedly, set a high bar—beginning with the resolve to live a simple, sincere and serene life!—but what we would like to emphasize as we begin this section is the prayer's mention of "those habits of prayer, work, study, physical exercise, eating and sleep which I believe the Holy Spirit has shown me to be right."

We believe that a person's spiritual life is intimately bound up with the physical, emotional, and mental life and world. Therefore, in beginning with reflection on faith in the personal sphere, we would like to begin with the very basic practices of eating well and mindfully, getting both rest and exercise, and otherwise attending to the care of the body. We soon, however, will encounter stories and challenges that go to the heart of what it means to be human, and how impossible to go through life unscathed, and thus how important personal faith and a caring community can be.

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Stories

In our group discussion, we heard stories about care of self that included taking time for exercise, such as yoga or running—and the challenges modern life presents to creating time for such exercise. We talked about healthy and mindful eating. St Timothy's women's group recently met to watch movies about the food industry and alternative healthy diets, recognizing that our culture of convenience and commercialization has led to problems with obesity, diabetes and other health issues, in addition to moral concerns for the well-being of animals and the sustainability of our environment. We talked about the ways in which rest and recreation can restore us to a sense of balance and readiness.

Resistance to destructive patterns of behavior is also a spiritual act. Several people shared stories of their personal struggles with alcohol and other addictive substances and behaviors, and how small groups and programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous have figured prominently in recovery.

Stories told in our discussion series about the interplay of faith and personal life included moving revelations of spiritual and emotional wounds incurred in childhood. An older man remembered vividly his shame as a child about the impoverished living conditions of his family. Another person talked about old feelings of feeling inferior and unwanted compared to a sibling. Other stories were told about facing old age and increasing frailty. There were fears of being incapacitated, useless, a burden to one's family. Some in the middle of life told of losing a job or a marriage, and feeling personally lost or betrayed.

Stories of how prayer and faith in God help during times of stress included Diane's story of working as a chaplain on an overnight shift at Bridgeport Hospital. During the single night, five people died, ranging in age from very young to very old. She spoke of needing to stop and pray between calls, of realizing that she would not be able in her own strength to be present during the dying and to talk afterward with the grieving families. The sense of the presence of God enabled her to do the work.

Challenges and Practices

Challenges to creating “holy habits” in our personal lives are many. A common observation was that our lives are overly busy and unbalanced. They feel hectic and demanding, even though, considered from the perspective of history and in comparison with many in the world today, we lead lives of comparative ease and abundance. What often gets lost is time for quiet prayer and meditation. People feel driven. A relentless culture of consumption equates “better” with “more.”¹⁰ We are told we deserve luxury, and that happiness depends on getting what we want when we want it. We are led on an endless journey beyond our needs, and often beyond our means. Competition raises many ethical dilemmas, and one's sense of self-worth is made to depend on being judged a “winner” and not a “loser” in a myriad of harsh and perplexing contests in school, community and work. We are fed from childhood on celebrity gossip. No one can meet impossible and constantly shifting fashionable standards of beauty and behavior. It is challenging to see Christ in other people, to truly “welcome the stranger as if welcoming Christ,” as Benedict taught.¹¹ It is challenging amid the busyness of life to be mindful and grateful of all of our blessings, and to see those in need right before us. It was also noted that we are challenged not to be impatient with ourselves, and not insist on perfection or knowing the answer to every question.

The greatest challenges—as witnessed by the remarkable honesty of some of the stories people shared—are facing and overcoming the truly difficult parts of life, whether these take the form of emotional wounds, persistent sins and addictions, current crises, or fears of the future.

¹⁰ See Bill McKibbin, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (NY: Henry Holt, 2007).

¹¹ *RB 1980*, 53:1

Practices that were raised up include setting aside daily time for prayer and meditation, keeping a journal (or, as Diane does, a blog), taking walks or other forms of exercise, listening to music, going on a retreat, and serving as a coach or mentor to others. One person spoke of intentionally practicing a form of seeing the persons she encountered at work as individuals; this was especially moving as her work consisted in providing care to incapacitated residents in a nursing home. Another spoke of being mindful of the presence of angels—messengers of God—in those he encountered, and perhaps in being such a messenger himself with a kind word or deed.

It is the practice of the clergy of St Timothy's, as called to a ministry of prayer and study, to offer midweek offices of Morning Prayer, and times for the study of scripture in addition to Sunday morning worship. Although, given our location and people's schedules, such ministries may be lightly attended, it is hoped that in different ways others may practice daily morning and evening prayer and regular Bible study. Some use booklets such as Forward Day by Day or online resources to pray at home or at work.¹²

A number of us have a personal rule of life concerning "habits of prayer, work, study, physical exercise, eating and sleep." In our retreat at Holy Cross, Br. Scott suggested that when drawing up such a rule, it is better to set out principles and aspirations that will challenge us to grow, rather than goals or targets we are likely to fall short of. We also note that research shows that working with friends or in classes on personal goals helps keep us accountable and on course (another reason to be part of a community of friends).

As a community trying to encourage personal practices of healthy diet and stewardship of creation, we have planted a community-supported organic garden and tied the church property to the adjoining Larsen Nature Sanctuary with walking trails. We have developed a part of the property as a contemplative grove, with a labyrinth, guided prayer walk and log chapel. It is our hope that individuals both within and without the membership of the church will use these areas (and the adjoining playground!) for personal recreation and spiritual restoration. Our church has hosted workshops in healthy cooking and organic gardening in partnership with licensed

¹² 71% of the respondents to the parish survey "somewhat, moderately or strongly" support regular scripture reading. There is an even higher percentage reporting regular private prayer.

nutritionists and with the newly formed Fairfield Organic Teaching Farm. The children in our parish and preschool join in planting and harvesting. In these and other ways, we try to practice what we preach about the stewardship of creation.

Affirmations

We affirm our understanding that care of the body and care of the earth are spiritual acts. As the noted mystic and scholar Evelyn Underhill observed, “A well-ordered natural life is the only safe basis for our supernatural life.”

As a *community of friends* who support each other through times of crisis and recovery, we affirm the importance of honest self-assessment, therapeutic assistance and the need for companionship and prayer in the struggle against addictive and sinful behaviors. We believe that sharing of painful stories helps heal the wounds. We affirm the importance therefore of a caring community in which we can speak honestly of our fears and hurts in the presence of “listening hearts.” We recognize that small groups are an important feature of our community and need to be supported. We all need friends we can talk to and pray with. Such friendship circles are also places of sharing joy and laughter—and these are a means of grace God has provided for our spiritual benefit.

We also affirm that a person is more than the sum of her or his past and current habits, actions, thoughts and circumstances. The good news of God in Christ calls us to an ongoing conversion of self, a transformation and renewal of our minds in turning to trust in God and love of neighbor.¹³ Discipleship is a lifelong process and every step is liable to be accompanied by challenges and setbacks. But we persevere in hope because we have been shown God’s love and forgiveness in Christ. We affirm that personal prayer and meditation, study of the Bible and other religious resources, participation in adult education programs, and the seeking of counsel from clergy and other spiritual mentors are practices that strengthen our personal faith and help us grow “into the full stature of Christ.”¹⁴

Faith in God does not make life’s challenges easy, but it does help us to bear and overcome them. Life’s wounds are no less painful, but through prayer and the gift of the Holy Spirit we gradually heal and may become more

¹³ Romans 12:1-3

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:13

compassionate and better equipped to help others. “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith”¹⁵; through this affirmation, a calming perspective may be gained on a difficult biological family. “We are wonderfully made in the image of God”¹⁶; it follows that our sense of dignity and worth does not rest on the world’s evaluation of our personal beauty and skill. Through faith, even death can be faced with hope.

Questions for further study:

1. What is happening in your life? Describe what you did today, or yesterday. Where was God in all that?
2. If you were asked to write your own “creed” (statement of faith), what would it include, what do you believe in?
3. If faith is more about knowing and trusting in God than assenting to a set of propositions about God, how does that change the way you think about “keeping faith”?
4. What are some concrete ways you can grow in the knowledge and love of God?
5. What is your “rule of life”?

When drawing up a personal rule of life, it is better to set out principles and aspirations that will challenge us to grow, rather than goals or targets we are likely to fall short of.

¹⁵ Galatians 3:26

¹⁶ Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139

2. Family Life

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the human (*Adam*) should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Genesis 2:18)

“Listen carefully, my child, to the teacher’s instructions, and attend to them with the ears of your heart. This is advice from a parent who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.” The opening words of the Rule of St. Benedict

The family is the basic unit of human society. We are all members of one (or more), however intact or broken. As children we learn from our parents, siblings and extended family. As teenagers and young adults we look for relationships of love and friendship, in particular we yearn for the one who will be our “helper as partner” with whom we will form a “one flesh union” and become the genesis of a new family. As parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts, other family members, we model for the next generation what it is to be an adult, and teach the values and skills that enable our children to grow and thrive. The question for this section is: how does our faith help us in our family life?

Stories

In our discussion series, we heard stories about how faith and family mix. Often this meant remembering the examples of parents and attending church as a child. One striking example came from a man who spoke of being taken regularly to church by his mother, a devout Roman Catholic. However, his primary experience of the church teaching of that era was that this life is a test, and at death we receive a grade of the pass/fail sort, either eternal reward in heaven or eternal punishment in hell. Faith in this teaching serves as an insurance policy for getting into heaven. His father, meanwhile, seldom attended church. He was a Christian Scientist whose faith led him to practice daily reading of scripture; he would spend about an hour a day quietly in his chair reading and meditating. His son remembers his comment that he didn’t see the point of faith if it only mattered after life; he needed a faith that made a difference in this life.

This story illustrates, among other things, the broader demographic truth that our congregation reflects the increasing pattern of American religious

intermarriage and congregational and denominational fluidity. We have families of a variety of religious backgrounds, some of none at all.¹⁷

But the traditional model of family faith formation through church nurture is still very in evidence here, both parents attending as regularly as possible with children in tow. One mother spoke of being raised in the Episcopal Church, getting married and discussing with her husband the religious upbringing of their children, agreeing and following through on raising them here. She is still very much involved. The children have grown now, the elder daughter recently married (the service was here), the younger son at college. The daughter attends church and has become active in the community. The son is undergoing an extended post-confirmation sabbatical. But his mother

hopes that when he settles down and has children, he too will come back to church. This story—and hope--was repeated in several forms. However, by

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most accounts, the adult children of our older members are not attending with the same frequency as their parents. This trend has been going on for some time. Some adult children of baby boomer parents spoke of their experience of visiting grandparents and attending church with them as their most significant religious formation.

The stories of faith and family show how important it is to model our faith for our children. We are always being watched, and our behaviors as parents are deeply influential in the spiritual lives of our children. Many of our stories were about an adult who provided the image of a religious person; this was usually, but not always a positive image. Others spoke about parents who were not religious; again this had both positive and negative sides.

¹⁷ See Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010) for documentation. Interfaith marriage has benefits for religious tolerance but drawbacks for patterns of church attendance and institutional loyalty. Of the 30 first respondents to our parish survey, 32% said that their spouse/partner shared the same religious identity. 28% said that their spouse/partner were either fairly different or very different. (Others did not respond to that question.)

Amy told the story of her mother, whose family, though nominally Catholic, did not attend church regularly. However, her mother as a child loved to sing and found a church home through the choir at Trinity Episcopal Church. She grew to love the liturgy and became a member, raising her own children there. Amy now works here as Director of Children and Family Ministry. Her own spiritual life has grown through the process—but now she reports a tension between working at the church and seeing to it that she gets her own children to church. The solution has been to begin bringing them here. Her story illustrates the fact that it usually one parent who takes the lead role in religious education in the family system.

Family patterns have been undergoing change in the past thirty years, and St Timothy's reflects that change. We have in our parish, single mothers raising children with and without biological fathers involved, gay married couples, widowed elders living together and other non-traditional families.

Although much of our discussion around family life centered on nurturing faith in our children, we note that family life also includes the search for a partner with whom to share one's life. This brings up the question of the relation of faith and sex. In the past, the church's rule was simple: sex outside of marriage is always sinful; marriage is for life and solely between a man and a woman. Cultural norms have changed. There is a wide acceptance of sex outside of marriage among mature adults. Divorce is no longer stigmatized. Remarriage is acceptable, and co-habitation is widespread. Marriage and civil unions among gay and lesbian persons are increasingly seen as morally and legally equivalent to those of straight couples. There are continuing debates and newly arisen questions about reproduction: the permissibility of contraception and abortion, and the variety of technologies available for enabling fertility. What should be our faithful response as Christians to these changes in cultural and sexual norms and practices? We will discuss these matters in conclusion.

Challenges and Practices

Diminishing patterns of regular church attendance reflect a trend in the national culture. Although many of our members were raised going to church every, or nearly every, week, few of our younger parents manage to attend with the whole family more than twice a month, and many attend less often. For a few, family gatherings on Christmas and Easter, and baptisms, weddings, and funerals, are the only occasions for church attendance. Even for committed families, the encroachment on Sunday morning of sports, the

increased pace of life and consequent need just to rest, has made it difficult to maintain practices of regular church attendance. This is obviously a challenge for the church, but the point for this section is that the spiritual formation of the next generation is receiving short shrift. Mind and body are nurtured and trained in school and sports, but what about a child's spiritual nurture and training?

While church attendance is an obvious part of a family's faith life, if God is spoken of only on Sunday then something even more important is missing in our lives. We had a lively exchange about challenges and practices of family faith formation. Perhaps the most common practice in which God is intentionally brought to mind during the week is through grace at meals and prayers and stories at bedtimes. These classic patterns are challenged these days by, once again, the busy patterns of contemporary life, in particular the challenge of coordinating family meals. But, regardless of their frequency, family meals are a key time for family togetherness and an opportunity to reflect on our blessings. One member spoke of having her children create their own graces; this fostered in younger siblings a sense of responsibility and pride.

The practice of saying prayers at bedtime was more frequently cited than reading the Bible together—although a number of people told Bible stories to their children when young. Along with irregular church and Sunday school attendance, this results in what some have called increasing biblical illiteracy—another challenge to faith. It is more common among our members to watch TV shows or movies together than to read the Bible as a family.¹⁸ A number of parents spoke of their practice of using these occasions as teachable moments, during a pause or drive, to talk to their children, especially those in or approaching adolescence, about the moral questions raised by the plot and characters. Members spoke about reminding children about the teaching of Jesus when confronted by bullies—that we ought to pray for our enemies—and how to do so.

¹⁸ However, as noted above, a high percentage of the respondents to the parish survey strongly, somewhat or moderately support regular scripture reading. There is an even higher percentage reporting regular private prayer. This may indicate that prayer and religious study are felt to be a private matter even within families.

Affirmations

Families and individuals must find their own pattern and rhythm of participation. Nevertheless, we affirm that regular church attendance by the whole family is a good practice and one which leadership will strive to uphold and support with excellence in worship, education and fellowship programs

Studies have shown how important it is for children to have respected adults in their lives in addition to parents, and how beneficial an “authoritative community” is for their moral and spiritual development.¹⁹ We affirm the importance of providing opportunities for children and parents and other adults, youth and children to gather and pray, work and play together. We affirm the value of being a community of moral and spiritual support for children and families.

We learn by doing. Therefore we affirm the importance of providing opportunities and roles for all ages to participate together in worship, especially Holy Communion, stewardship, and outreach in order to feel a valued and contributing member of the parish family, whatever one’s age.

In regard to contested moral issues, the truthful answer is that we have not reached a common mind on many of these questions, whether as a nation, a church, or a congregation. However, we have had a great deal of discussion and some practical responses. Our survey results indicate a predominately liberal and moderate stance in politics, but not without a significant number of conservative members as well. This is hardly surprising, given that we are part of the Episcopal Church and as such we support our national and diocesan teachings on the permissibility and prudence of family planning, including the use of contraceptives to prevent pregnancies and prevent sexually transmitted diseases. We are not of one mind on the issue of

¹⁹ See *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, by the Commission on Children at Risk (New York: Broadway Publications, 2006). This pioneering report draws upon a large body of recent research showing that children are biologically primed (“hardwired”) for enduring connections to others and for moral and spiritual meaning. The Commission on Children at Risk is a group of thirty-three children’s doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals. It is an independent, jointly-sponsored initiative of the YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School, and the Institute for American Values. The Commission’s principal investigator is Kathleen A. Kovner Kline of Dartmouth Medical School.

abortion and limits to its availability, but remain opposed to making it illegal under any circumstances. We allow that divorce is a tragic reality for many marriages, and permit remarriage with the consent of priest and bishop, after extensive discussion and counseling.

Along with the wider church, we affirm that our sexual nature is a gift of God. The human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and therefore must be treated with the dignity and care, and not abused. We uphold monogamous marriage for life, and resolutely oppose promiscuity and sexual abuse in any form. In regard to same-sex marriage, neither the national church nor our congregation has reached full consensus, but our priest has written a paper setting out scriptural arguments in support of same-sex marriage and has participated in the celebration of such a marriage, giving a blessing but not officiating (in line with diocesan policy).²¹ We support the norms and practices named in Resolution D039 of the 73rd General Convention (2000) of The Episcopal Church, which calls all in relationships of sexual intimacy to the standard of “life-long commitment characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.”

We affirm the liberty of individual conscience, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, informed by scripture and the teaching of the church, and enlightened through reason in community with people of good will and diverse experience and perspective, to reach faithful decisions on contested moral issues.

Questions for further study

1. Identify the key roles you inhabit in your family sphere (e.g. wife, husband, mother, father, grandparent, so, daughter, step-parent...). As you consider each of these familial relationships, reflect on the impact your faith life can have to strengthen and nurture the bonds. How best can your personal "discipleship" of Christ be expressed through your family

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:12

²¹ The Rev. Matthew H. Calkins, “Partner as Helper: Three Scriptural Arguments in Favor of Same-Sex Marriage,” which may be found at www.helperaspartner.blogspot.com/ or through links on the St Timothy’s [website](#).

connections?

2. We have affirmed that community worship feeds family spiritual life. Think about your family's worship patterns. Identify (to yourself and with your family members) those worship experiences that you already engage in as a family. Then, consider which family activities might become more worshipful if you chose together to make them more conscious and intentional.

3. In the personal stories shared by parishioners, we heard about family movie/book discussions, bedtime prayers, mealtime graces, etc. What practices or "small moments" can you build into your daily/weekly routine that will allow you to share your values or spirituality with individual family members? Focus primarily on one-on-one interactions, and do not limit your focus to parent-child relationships; peer, sibling and spouse/partner relations are also opportunities for spiritual sharing and growth (or not!).

Families and individuals must find their own pattern and rhythm of participation. Nevertheless, we affirm that regular church attendance by the whole family is a good practice and one which leadership will strive to uphold and support with excellence in worship, education and fellowship programs

3. Work Life

So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot. *Ecclesiastes 3:22*

Collect for Labor Day

Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer, 261

Work, outside the home or within, is a major part of adult life (and for full-time students, school may be considered a sort of work). How does living one's faith interact with making a living? Where is God in the workplace?

Stories

Chip led the discussion series, starting off with stories of his own work life, and with some quotes and questions: St. Benedict said, "Prayer is work"; is it also true that work is prayer? Aristotle claimed, "We work so we can have leisure," but the often-quoted Anonymous says, "Work is what drives us in the modern world." For what and for whom are we working?

One young businessman told of a recent change in jobs—from a position within a large corporation to a new internet start-up—in order to give him more time with his family, and to have a more direct voice and stake in the success of a business. This story suggests that work is important in many more dimensions than merely providing the money to pay the bills.

One woman spoke of looking for something to do as her children got older and less dependent. She learned about the insurance business her husband worked in and became an agent herself, selling insurance to firefighters and other service workers in New York. This was an experience she found challenging, rewarding in many senses, and unexpectedly enjoyable and interesting. Work can be a significant source of value and dignity.

Others spoke of their frustrations at work, of being constantly called upon to demonstrate their worth and compete against others even within the same company. Stories reflected the great insecurity of the modern workplace and the dangers of losing one's job. One person had been very successful in the financial field but found himself unemployed during the long recession, and increasingly wondering what he had to do to find a job. For a modern person, one's sense of self-identity and worth are very tied in with what one does for a living (this may be especially true of men).

For some of the women present, work has included raising children, making a home and being integral parts of a community through volunteer work. For women working outside the home, pursuing a professional career has meant not less work at home but less time for community involvement and the nurturing of friendships.

Part of what we as a church also need to do is to learn from successful business models. For instance, one of our members remarked upon the difference between sales and marketing. Salesmanship is skill at persuading people to buy what one has to sell. Marketing is skill at listening to what people want and finding out what they need so that a business can make and sell those things to them. Just so, we cannot in this day and age wait around for people to come to our church, or try and persuade them that they need what we have to offer on a Sunday morning. But we must go out and listen to people, to their stories and their struggles, to hear how hard it is in this world to make an honest and dignified living, provide well for one's family and do good for the world

Challenges and Practices

In the session devoted to challenges and practices, the discussion began with Chip talking about values such as honesty and respect for other people. What is your "nitty-gritty theology"—where the rubber hits the road—in the workplace? Of course, we have moral guidelines like the Ten Commandments—do not murder, steal, lie, covet. We should not break the law or cheat to get ahead. But we are also called in our Baptismal Covenant "to respect the dignity of every human being." This means we are called upon as people of faith and moral integrity "to manage down as well as up." That is, we should treat those who report to us with the same respect we bring to those in positions above ours. This, it was agreed in discussion, is not always as easy to do as to affirm.

The competitive environment of the workplace (and school) is also a challenge. One of our leaders spoke of the subtle kinds of competition that find their way into the academic world. Indeed, competition is a fact of life in the Darwinian marketplace where only the profitable survive. Yet, it was noted, a very successful competitive strategy can include a great deal of cooperation and team building. This involves understanding that personal success depends on helping the whole group succeed. Values and practices that promote this kind of success, such as empathy, patience, willingness to teach and mentor, are very much in line with Christian values. One member cited author Jim Collins' description of a "level 5 leader" (the highest ranking) as a kind of

servant-leader, whose focus remained on the corporate goal rather than the personal and who was remarkably humble about personal contributions while quick to credit others.²² The presence of chaplains in the

The competitiveness of the modern world, the relentless pace of change and the "conspicuous consumption" of the affluent and celebrity class, especially those whom our children look up to, are challenges to a faithful life and future world.

corporate world—a relatively new phenomenon--was remarked upon, as well as the importance of taking time during the workday to pray or do some religious reading. One member talked about the persistence and belief in oneself needed to make a documentary movie she recently completed.

Inspiring as these stories and individuals are, it remains our experience that the competitiveness of the modern world, the relentless pace of change and the "conspicuous consumption" of the affluent and celebrity class, especially those whom our children look up to, are challenges to a faithful life and future world. How do we strive for and achieve balance, sustainability, and economic and social justice in world of relentless competition? The common theme is that modern work life presents a significant challenge to our family, community and spiritual lives.

²² Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Collins, 2001), 17-40.

Affirmations

The faithful community can be a support in a culture that overvalues material goods and individual success, and undervalues social capital and the diversity of gifts. We affirm the values of cooperation, mutual encouragement, and respect among all members of society, beginning with those with whom we work each day.

We affirm that God has given everyone certain gifts, and these are to be used for the common good.²³ We hope through our work to create something of value in the world, to make a positive difference in people's lives, and to develop skills and understanding. Therefore we affirm the importance of teaching methods of spiritual and career discernment that enable individuals to find and do what they have a passion for, so that one's work life has something of the quality of a spiritual journey and process of discovery.

We affirm the importance of incorporating faith into daily life, into work and school, through a variety of practices and the development of character. We encourage daily prayer and study, putting commuting time to good use, and such spiritual discernment practices as seeking a spiritual mentor or being part of a prayer or study group at work. Understanding the importance of personal example, we pledge to model moral integrity and servant leadership, maintain respect for others and oneself, and keep a sense of balance and humor. Above all, we affirm that the goal of life is not material accumulation but personal relationships and the peace of God, that is, love not money.

How can the good news of Christ be proclaimed in new ways so that the voice of wisdom can be heard in the marketplace as well as the temple?²⁴ The church has to learn new answers to this age-old question. We affirm that those working in the church need to listen better to those working in the world, the better to understand their needs and aspirations and address them. We need, as one of our elders said, to market, not sell our goods. We also

²³ "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." 1 Corinthians 12:7

²⁴ "Does not wisdom call on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, beside the gates in front of the town, and at the entrance of the portals?" Proverbs 8:1-3

affirm that those members of our community working in the marketplace do not leave the word of God behind them at home and church, but remain bound by their baptismal vows to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” in whatever way seems best. It is encouraging that 96% of those who responded to our parish survey indicate that some, most, or almost all of my colleagues at work know I am a Christian.

Questions for further study

1. Test the balance: do you think you work too much (too many hours, too much emphasis, etc.)? Do you think your spouse (partner) works too much?
2. What price is paid if life becomes unbalanced in favor of work? What are the rewards?
3. How does your faith affect how you conduct yourself in the workplace? Can you think of a specific example or incident?
4. How does your work help God’s mission of healing the world?

We affirm the values of cooperation, mutual encouragement, and respect among all members of society, beginning with those with whom we work each day.

4. Community Life

Prayer of Archbishop Oscar Romero

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.

What is community? It comes from a Latin root, *communis*, meaning ‘shared by all or many’. From our biblical tradition we have a word, *koinonia*, that is sometimes translated fellowship and other times communion (as in the Anglican Communion or fellowship of churches descended from the Church of England). Churches in the Anglican tradition worship using a prayer book entitled *The Book of Common Prayer*, meaning prayer that is said and shared

in community.²⁵ Of course, the highest kind of communion is the Holy Communion in which we share in the body and blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Through this sacrament, we share in the very life of God.

Community, then, is an important sphere of life. As used in our discussion series, it had a somewhat fluid meaning. Sometimes it referred to the church acting as a community of support, other times we talked about being part of geographical community, such as the town of Fairfield or greater Bridgeport area. Sometimes community, like the word society, can signify the realm of volunteer cooperative activity as distinct from the political world or the economic market. In community what matters are relationships, not transactions; the currency is trust and friendship, not money or power.

Most of us are involved in a variety of community activities, as citizens who vote or otherwise involve ourselves in politics, as volunteers who donate our time or money to various charitable organizations, to help out at schools or soup kitchens, as members of country clubs or fraternal or sports clubs, and in a wide variety of social networks. How then does faith impact our community involvement?

Stories

In the first week of our discussion on community, Gene asked this question: when has a community supported you in a time of need? He told the story of the church community supporting him and his family when his sister was dying of cancer. He read a prayer from the martyred bishop Oscar Romero, which spoke of not trying to understand everything or finish every work, but of realizing that we are carpenters, not architects; and although we will not see the end of the project (God's kingdom), we have our part to do in advancing it. What then can we do as part of a community to help each other, to care for those in need, to advance, even a little bit, the healing work of God?

²⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer* in use in the Episcopal Church is a descendent of the original *Book of Common Prayer* first published in 1549. The current edition was authorized for use in 1979, and there are liturgical supplements published since then. The original "Preface" to the 1549 Prayer Book may be found in the current BCP on page 866, among other Historical Documents and formularies of the Anglican tradition. We are part of a community of time, the communion of saints.

Stories were told of being helped and of giving help. Often it was a little thing, but little things count. A kind word, a thank you note, just showing up in support and encouragement. We all need to know we are not alone, that others are there for us. An interesting result of this conversation was the connection made for occasional childcare between a young mother and an older woman whose own children and grandchildren were far away.

What can we do as part of a community to help each other, to care for those in need, to advance, even a little bit, the healing work of God?

One member told of his becoming involved with a music enrichment program in the Bridgeport public schools, and of helping out at a pre-school learning center for parents and children who can't afford pre-school. He remembered that the priest who encouraged him to become active said it was not a question of what he could do for the children, but of what they will do for him. He receives great satisfaction from both activities.

On the other hand, another member told of getting involved in a school's fundraising for its football team, of organizing dinners and other fundraisers—very successfully—but of then not receiving any message of thanks or feedback on how it helped.

Many spoke of working in various volunteer capacities, sometimes finding a good fit, other times wondering just how their presence was helpful. Sometimes a person has to carve out a job, other times there is simply not a good fit or a poorly run organization. A story of how a wonderful neighborhood association was formed and continues its tradition of welcoming new neighbors and hosting annual parties revealed how important it is to have an individual who takes it upon herself to be the sparkplug that gets things started or the communicator who coordinates the various people and tasks.

There are times when the community calls on us to step up and be a leader as well. Gene spoke in week two about being asked to serve on the Vestry, and his deliberations about that responsibility. This is also true in work-related volunteering: a pharmacist spoke of going out on his own time to give flu shots, and spending extra time in consultation with poor people

without access to health care professionals. His example led to a new policy at his workplace, which was one of many of this national franchise. One person can make a big difference. Another member began a project of taking books from this community back to her home country of the Philippines, where she was able to start new libraries in elementary schools in the mountains (this is one of our Millennium Development Goal companions in mission projects). One of the school libraries was awarded a state prize for excellence. We were shown pictures of the children and teachers receiving the books after the arduous journey by ship, truck and mountain path. It was inspiring.

Referring to that member's inspiring volunteer effort, one mother spoke about how difficult it is to do anything of heroic significance while caring for small children. Of course, this was her primary responsibility. Still, she was looking to do something for the MDG team (in addition to the bake sale she coordinated)—and so suggested to her local school that their book donation drive be directed to this ministry—and it was. Hundreds of books made it to a remote school as a result. Similarly, another young mother, finding out about how few books were available in a Bridgeport middle school, arranged a conversation between a book publisher she knew and the school principal which resulted in a large shipment of free books.

Challenges and Practices

Stories like these reveal that community involvement and leadership take many forms. Often they follow our life cycle progress, especially as we care for our children. Chip talked of being involved as a driver for his youngest daughter's theatrical cohort, while also helping out with his older daughter's ministry to LGBT youth (she is a UCC pastor in town). One woman spoke of getting invited to participate in a charitable group and finding tremendous satisfaction in making a difference in the lives of people on the margin, and in the process making new friends. A retired executive spoke of helping young entrepreneurs learn skills. Several members contribute simply by bringing food and clothing to those without resources. It is a question of one's schedule, as Gene pointed out—and where to put community involvement in the balance with family and work. You need to pick your spots, follow your passions and bring what skills and experiences life has given to you to bear on the world's needs.

Community development and volunteer work in general depend on people stepping up, showing up, and taking their part. It fails when only a few have

to do too much, leading to burnout, or there is no sense of leadership and coordination, only confusion. A number of people related stories of poorly managed fund-raisers, rubber-stamp boards and ineffective committees. Time-wasters like these are why we are tempted to avoid community involvement.

Another challenge to our community life was brought out in reflection on how the experience of our members differed from that of the members of Diane's home church, an inner-city African-American parish. In an affluent suburb such as Fairfield, community involvement often takes the form of charity work. In a city such as Bridgeport, the work of community organizations is striving for justice. The challenge is that our view of community is too close and parochial. We fail to see that our community involves those outside our immediate circle of acquaintance. This is surely a reflection of the racially and socio-economically segregated communities we live in as Americans.

Affirmations

One of our members, a veteran volunteer organizer and event-planner (including recent service as co-chair of our first annual FallFest!), had advice which may serve as a set of hopeful affirmations for community involvement: Do something for a good reason, get to know people of all ages, have fun, and don't listen to too many negative thoughts. Work together, include young people, and encourage arts and creativity.

In addition to what we can do as individuals, it is important to realize we can make a large difference as part of a group working together. This is also true of individual congregations, as we discover by being part of a congregation-based community organization. We affirm that our community is not formed by barriers that divide us but by bridges that unite us. We will contribute our part of both "bonding" and "bridging" social capital²⁶ to the common wealth of our community.

²⁶ These are terms used in the sociology of community. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

We affirm that when caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison and otherwise serving “the least of these” members of our community, we are visiting and serving Jesus himself.²⁷

Nor is it sufficient to stop at our regional or national borders. We are members one of another throughout the world. If we wish to be with God, then we must recognize that God is with the poor and outcast of the world. Bono, lead singer of the rock band U2, a Christian and a leading activist in the fight against AIDS in Africa, said this at the National Prayer Breakfast in 2006 (President Bush and other dignitaries shared the dais):

Look, whatever thoughts you have about God, who He is or if He exists, most will agree that if there is a God, He has a special place for the poor. In fact, the poor are where God lives.

Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone.

I mean, God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill... I hope so. He may well be with us as in all manner of controversial stuff... maybe, maybe not... But the one thing we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor.

God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house... God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives... God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war... God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.

We affirm that we will do our part in the mission of God to restore the beloved community, reconciling people with God and each other, and ushering in new creation.

Questions for further study

1. We are members of many different communities (including this faith community). List as many as you can think of. How do they overlap? Where is there tension between them?

²⁷ Matthew 25:40. See The Rule of St Benedict 36:1: Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ.

2. Of all the things you do in the community (or communities), what do you most enjoy? What least? What is most valued by your friends and peers? What is something you do as part of a community that no one else (or few) knows you are involved in?

4. Where is God in community?

Do something for a good reason, get to know people of all ages, have fun, and don't listen to too many negative thoughts. Work together, include young people, and encourage arts and creativity.

5. Church Life

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 1 Corinthians 14:26

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. Revelation 2:7

What should the role of the church be at this time, in this place, in our lives? Will attending church help me get closer to God? Will being part of the church community challenge me to be a better person, help me become a more faithful disciple, and connect me to a community of friends who are also trying to do these things? If we have an affirmative answer to these questions, then we are doing our job as a church; if not, not.

Many of us are drawn to church so that we may draw closer to God, transform our lives and help us grow into the people God created us to be. We encounter and become part of a community of fellow disciples of Christ. We become friends and together nurture our faith and that of our children. We share the joys and are strengthened to bear the burdens of life. We reach out to a world in need in Christ's name.

At least, that is what we hope. Perhaps we are also animated by nostalgia, curiosity, or old habits. We are tempted to seek fulfillment without self-offering. We have doubts, misgivings, inconstant faith. After all, we are fallen creatures of an imperfect world. But if what the church teaches is true, then we are made to worship our Creator, give praise and thanksgiving to the one who gives us life, calls us to follow, and offers the hope of glory. In return, we are given freedom (in service) and promised life abundant and joyful.

We are hungry for spiritual food. That is why we have embarked upon this project. We have reason to believe that we are far from alone. Here is what two respected researchers on the changing role of the church have to say:

Ours is a time of widespread spiritual hunger. People seem to be searching for something, though they often have a hard time

articulating exactly what it is. Sometimes the search is for meaning, sometimes for worth or belonging. Sometimes this elusive something is called “spirituality.” Whatever they call it, many people feel that something is missing from their lives. Yet it is clearly not some *thing* that they are lacking. The search is not for *more* but for *kind*, for a qualitative dimension. It is for a kind of life, a way of living, a way of being and doing that is truly alive to God, neighbor, and self—a way of life that, to use a biblical phrase, chooses life.²⁸

Here is what we have heard you say.

Stories

Matt led the two-part discussion on church life. A number of stories were told of being taken to church as a child, of being bored at first but later finding a peer group and challenging activities. Gradually, a parent’s church became one’s own. Other stories were told of being taken to church, but later rebelling and wandering away. These stories often ended with an account of finding in mid-life a different kind of church experience that was more meaningful. Presumably, our purpose here is to become the vehicle of more of these stories.

Church can be challenging—and not always in a good way. Chip told a story of his mother sitting in church during the Vietnam War and listening to the priest deliver a sermon on how all was well with the world. She got up and walked out—and in the process taught an indelible lesson to her son. Another member, who had been very active in the church as a college student, did something of the same thing.

Will attending church help me get closer to God? Will being part of the church community challenge me to be a better person, help me become a more faithful disciple, and connect me to a community of friends who are also trying to do these things? If we have an affirmative answer to these questions, then we are doing our job as a church; if not, not.

On the other hand, Terri spoke of how the church she found a home in as a young woman attending college became a community of support for her when she had a showdown over

²⁸ Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, “Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith,” in *Churches: The Local Church and the Structures of Change*, edited by Michael Warren (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press of Oregon Catholic Press, 2000).

making a life choice—getting married—against her mother’s fierce resistance.

Amy has talked about how her work as the Director of Children and Family Ministry has deepened her faith life, yet, paradoxically, made it more difficult to worship together with her family. Church can be a place we push against, or a place that pushes us.

One woman told the story of her faith journey. She was raised Roman Catholic but increasingly questioned church doctrine as a college student and ceased attending. She went on to join the Peace Corps, tutor in the inner city, volunteer as a foster parent—in short, do many of the good works the church encourages. But for many years she missed the sense of transcendence that liturgical worship provides. Her mother had also drifted from the church and not attended services for many years. However, when near death, her mother asked to see a priest. The daughter spoke movingly of how her mother found peace as a result of that conversation, and she realized she did not want to wait until her deathbed to do so.

The sense of something missing was echoed in other stories. Another woman said church was part of her life growing up, but, after a divorce, she found she was no longer accepted in the same way. She remarried and her husband is a non-believer—they have raised their children as Unitarians. But still something was missing, the sense of sacramental worship, a kind of prayer, a faith in Christ. Then it clicked—the church is here to help you pray.

Mary was one who rebelled against the strict authoritarian model of her early church upbringing. She spoke of visiting a variety of churches and even Buddhist retreat centers. The silence and contemplation of a Quaker meeting or a Zen retreat spoke to her. When she experienced her first Episcopal service she was struck by a sense of community, something she hadn’t felt growing up.

These and other stories reflect the diverse nature of our religious experiences and faith backgrounds. Many of the members of our congregation were raised in a non-Episcopal denomination, including several in non-Christian and non-religious households. But for all who spoke during the discussion, there was a sense that this church provided an important service: a place to

worship and pray, a connection to God, a group or community with whom they had become friends, and spiritual food for the week ahead.

Challenges and Practices

Church life can also be discouraging—as made clear by stories that tell of repeated appeals for money or volunteer time that threaten to burn out a subset of the congregation. Church life can feel like just one more demand on one’s time, energy and money—rather than a place to restore balance and strengthen spirit. Sometimes the behavior of clergy or members is at odds with the teaching of the church or the model of Christ.

Some told of being discouraged at the low attendance of our small congregation. It can be dispiriting to walk into a

Church can be challenging—and not always in a good way. Church can be a place we push against, or a place that pushes us.

mostly empty church. Years ago average attendance was much higher, and it was easier to field a youth group or other small group. Regular attendance is down across mainline Protestant denominations, and our church has been part of this trend. As a small church, we struggle with raising enough money to finance our staff, programs and maintain the property. Volunteer time and institutional loyalty are both sharply down from mid-twentieth century high levels. It has never been easy to be an involved church member but now it is no longer socially expected. In light of these local and cultural challenges, it is all the more important that participation in church be something that makes a real difference in all the parts of our lives.

The role of the church is anchored in its practice of worship; its primary identity is as a local Eucharistic community. Sunday morning is when the community comes to praise God, listen to scripture, and hear a sermon applying the scripture to today’s life. Here is a time and place to pray and to receive Holy Communion. These practices strengthen us for the week ahead and restore our sense of connection to God and community.

Despite the challenges of our culture, there is a core group for whom regular attendance with their children is a fundamental part of family life. As they tell it, this has several benefits: One, regular attendance gives both children and adults a greater sense of belonging and a strong friendship group. Two, regular attendance, like regular exercise, strengthens one’s faith, through learning and reflection. After awhile, church attendance becomes such a part

of one's life that something seems to be missing if one hasn't gone to church. Three, habits of regular attendance reduce arguments from reluctant children!

And what happens on Sunday morning does often enough affect the rest of the week. One member spoke of how at work a discussion of something said in the sermon helped spark a discussion that thawed a frosty working relationship. Another spoke of a sense of having a clean slate, a new beginning, after the service. Someone said that praying for people during the service helped remind her to reach out and make calls and contacts. Sunday morning worship is for many of us a strengthening, challenging and comforting experience.

We like coffee hour too, whether that is simply a time of fellowship or includes adult education programs (such as the series behind this paper). Table fellowship and potluck meals are a core practice; we are able to put people and food together without the need of a great deal of organizing. When we do go all out and organize a big event, we do it well indeed (witness our recent FallFest). Parish activity is, for most of us—though not all—a place of friendship and connectivity (some prefer to remain apart, and that is their choice). Our developing practice of encouraging one-on-one and small group relational meetings, a practice adopted from our participation in a regional congregation-based community organization, has led to deeper understanding and appreciation of each other. We are continually surprised and awed by the complex history, rich interior lives and diversity of gifts and perspectives that individuals bring to the community. In practice, we are a genuinely welcoming congregation—although we continually need to refresh our perspective and maintain a vigilant concern be as open and inviting as we *think* we are.

In addition to worship, friendship and Christian formation, the church is involved in reaching out to the larger community and the world. This can take the form of charitable works, such as preparing and serving community suppers in Bridgeport, supporting Operation Hope and the Connecticut Food Bank, clothes and food drives, participation in Habitat for Humanity and other such efforts. We are involved in advocacy for social justice through a regional community organization. We are companions in mission with a parish in Malambo, Colombia, a seminary in Tanzania and an educational effort in the Philippines. We walk each year together with the other Episcopal parishes in town in support of the cathedral school in Haiti. Matt

is very involved in diocesan mission development. These are active ministries, but it is a challenge to broaden our participation beyond raising money and fielding a small team of activists.

We strive, and often succeed, in creating a place of beauty where we gather for inspiring worship, nurture our children and ourselves in faith, and work together in serving the world in Christ's name. We believe we have a wonderful legacy in the property, a very good staff, strong and dedicated lay leadership, and consistently provide a high standard in worship and programs. These are strong and characteristic practices of a vital congregation, enabled by the capable leadership of clergy, staff and lay members. The challenge is sustaining the effort with a small membership and diminished resources. The challenge is growing the church.

Affirmations

We affirm that we are **called** by God to follow the Life-giving Way of Jesus Christ. We are **gathered** as a local Eucharistic community in regular worship and sacramental celebration, part of a great Communion of congregations, churches, saints of all ages and indeed all heaven and earth. Holy Communion and Baptism are the core practices of the church, those in which we “become participants in the divine nature.”²⁹ In so doing, we re-enact and embody the presence of Christ among us. Finally, we are **sent** out to do the work we have been given to do, to love and serve the world in his name. Each day and in every part of our lives, we hope that we may be strengthened and challenged and comforted by our participation in this community of faith.

We affirm that there is no self-fulfillment without self-offering, beginning with the offering of praise and thanksgiving to God in worship.³⁰

We affirm our self-description as “a community of friends who follow the Way of Jesus.”

We affirm we need to be more focused than we have been on our evangelical task of inviting visitors and incorporating new members. We are called to proclaim the good news of God's saving work in Christ, and witness to transformation in our own lives. We are called to welcome the

²⁹ 2 Peter 1:4

³⁰ See *The Rule of the Society of St John the Evangelist*, “Worship,” 32.

stranger as if Christ himself, as Benedict put it. We are called to make and nurture disciples, with all members partaking in ministry both within and without the church.

We affirm that the church does not exist for its own sake. The church is the body of Christ, charged with the mission of making disciples and continuing the work that Jesus began, the work of reconciliation—healing, justice and peace. We affirm that the essential measure of a church is in the transformed lives of its members, not in its size or the quality of its programs.

We also affirm that we are a small part of a much larger whole, the church universal. We are part of God’s mission to heal the world. In common with the rest of the Anglican Communion we affirm the [Five Marks of Mission](#)³¹.

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
To respond to human need by loving service
To seek to transform unjust structures of society
To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

We have been given a legacy of teaching, sacraments and physical and human resources to use in the continuation of Christ’s reconciling mission. We are therefore called to be good and faithful stewards. We affirm the church’s dual call to prudent management and bold investment, remembering the parable of the talents.

We affirm our hope that all members of St Timothy’s will strive to be “faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.”³² We affirm that in order to fulfill our mission and be faithful to our trust, we will strive to be a place of **inspiring, joyful worship, a welcoming community of friends, transforming lives as part of God’s mission of healing the world.**

³¹ For more go to <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>

³² This is the definition of *communicants in good standing* according to the canons of the Episcopal Church (Title I, Canon 17, Sec. 3)

May the good Lord help us put into practice the Life-Giving Way of Jesus we covenant to follow as a community of friends, the parish family of St Timothy's Episcopal Church. May we indeed become a school of instruction for the Lord's service, and may the aim of our instruction be love.

Questions for further study

What has been your experience of church? As a child, as a young adult, currently?

Would you agree that "Ours is a time of widespread spiritual hunger"? How would you characterize your own search for meaning and purpose, for a kind of life that is truly satisfying?

What difference does regular church attendance make in one's life? Can't we pray as well on the golf course or during yoga class?

What problem(s) do you have with church?

How would you characterize your "ministry"? What gifts do you bring to it? What is the best thing about it? What is the hardest part? What is something you would like to try but have never been asked or have been reluctant to begin?

We affirm that there is no self-fulfillment without self-offering, beginning with the offering of praise and thanksgiving to God in worship.

We affirm our self-description as "a community of friends who follow the Way of Jesus."

We affirm that in order to fulfill our mission and be faithful to our trust, we will strive to be a place of inspiring, joyful worship, a welcoming community of friends, transforming lives as part of God's mission of healing the world.

Appendix 1

Theological Statement:

Our Identity, Mission and Vision

We, the members of St Timothy’s Episcopal Church in Fairfield, Connecticut, are a community of friends who follow the way of Jesus. We join this community through Baptism and share in Christ’s life through Holy Communion. We are inspired by the Holy Spirit to carry on his work.

Therefore our mission is Christ’s mission, the mission of God: to restore all people (and all creation) to unity with God and each other.³³ This is the same mission known to the people of Israel as *tikkun olam*, the repairing of the world.³⁴

As Christians, we have a particular role to play in this mission. As Isaiah prophesied³⁵ and Christ made incarnate, we are to be a light to the nations, a leaven and a seed, a sign and sacrament of the beloved community and new creation God is bringing about. This is the Gospel we proclaim: The kingdom of heaven has come near; God is love and commands love; Jesus himself is the Messiah promised to Israel, the Son of God, our Savior and our Lord. This is the Great Commission he gave us: “Go and make disciples of all the nations.”³⁶

We are a branch of the vine that grew from the Word, a member of the body whose head is Jesus. As members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, we share our faith with Christians around the world and across the generations. We are a local Eucharistic community, a congregation or parish, part of the Episcopal Church, a member of the Anglican Communion.

³³ *The Book of Common Prayer (1979)*, “An Outline of the Faith,” 855.

³⁴ The Rt. Rev. Ian Douglas, the current Bishop of Connecticut, described the mission of God this way in his first address as bishop to the Diocesan Convention (October 22, 2010): “God’s mission, the mission of God, is that profound restoring, reconciling action in the world by which the goodness and possibility of a bountiful, loving creation in and through God is made new. God’s mission, God’s desire, is to bring about healing, wholeness and right-relationship.” Archbishop Tutu sometimes describes this as the “God’s dream.”

³⁵ Isaiah 49:6

³⁶ Matthew 28:19

We are a small part of a large whole, yet we have our distinctive mission and focus of ministry. We discern this mission through discovery, expression and execution by clergy and lay membership together, and it may take various forms as times and circumstances change. One abiding mission focus is simply to know and love Jesus Christ, and to share him with others, a mission statement adopted at a Vestry retreat in 1997. More recently we have come to feel a need for the articulation of those practices of faithful living that will enable us to grow as disciples into the full stature of Christ in all the parts of our lives— using the personal, family, work, community and church spheres to begin with. This process has resulted in a booklet entitled, “A Life-Giving Way: The Rule of St Timothy’s.”

It is our hope that this set of hopeful affirmations will help guide us individually and communally, and serve as a form of evangelism to bring new members into discipleship. It is our prayer that it may be helpful to you wherever you may be in your journey of faith. May God be with us in every step, for it is only through the power and love of God that life itself is given, and it is only through the grace of God and the light of Christ—and not by our own merits or efforts-- that we will reach our goal.

As we consider what practices are life-giving, and where the challenges to a faithful life are found, it may be helpful to set out our vision of the goal or end toward which we journey. This is, simply, a life of prayer, in which God is felt and present, a life of rich relationships, in which we are part of loving families and vital, sharing and caring communities, and a life of service, in which we help to heal the world. This is the life abundant that Jesus embodied and calls us to follow, a Christ-like life of service, joy and peace. May such a life be yours, may such a community be ours, and may we together help in advancing God’s mission of reconciliation and new creation.

Appendix 2 A Litany of Hopeful Affirmations

Having renewed our baptismal vows as part of the body of Christ, the Church universal, let us now pray that each day and in every part of our lives, we may be strengthened, challenged and comforted by our participation in this local Eucharistic community of faith, St Timothy's Episcopal Church, by joining with our bishop Ian in the following hopeful affirmations:

People:

- We affirm that there is no self-fulfillment without self-offering, beginning with the offering of praise and thanksgiving to God in worship.
- We affirm that care of the body and care of the earth are spiritual acts.

Children: We will praise the Name of our Creator.

Bishop: May the words of your lips and the meditations of your hearts be acceptable to God, our rock and our redeemer.

People:

- We affirm the importance of incorporating faith into daily life through spiritual practice and the development of character.
- We affirm that God has given everyone certain gifts, and these are to be used for the common good.

Children: We are the hands of Christ in the world today.

Bishop: May you grow to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

People:

- We affirm our identity as a community of friends who follow the Way of Jesus.
- We affirm our call to witness to transformation in our own lives and to be a community of moral and spiritual support and friendship for children, families and individuals.

Children: God's word is a light upon our path.

Bishop: May God speed you on the way of Jesus.

People:

- We affirm that we will do our part in the mission of God to heal the world, reconciling people with God and each other in Christ, and ushering in new creation.
- We affirm that that true community is not formed by barriers but bridges, and when we visit the sick or serve those in need we are serving Jesus himself.

Children: They will know we are Christians by our love.

Bishop: How good and pleasant it is when sisters and brothers live in unity and peace!

People:

- We affirm the church's dual call to prudent management and bold investment.
- We affirm our call to be faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.

Children: I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

Bishop:

Most gracious Lord Jesus Christ, in whose service we are freed to love; you have called and gathered this community of friends, the parish family of St Timothy's Episcopal Church; help them so to live their faith, to put into practice their hopeful affirmations, that they may indeed become "a school of instruction for the Lord's service," and then send them out, with your blessing, as a light, leaven and seed of the Kingdom into a world of wonder and need, in the power of the Spirit, and to the glory of God. **Amen.**

These affirmations were made following Renewal of the Baptismal Covenant during the Episcopal Visit of the Rt. Rev. Ian Douglas on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, April 10, 2011