

Vitality Team Report

Applewood Community Church

September 4, 2015

Foreword

From the Council

Dear AWCC Family,

During the past two years a Vitality Team from our congregation has worked to assess the health and missional focus of our church using direction provided by the Evangelical Covenant Church.

The council would like to thank the Vitality Team for their hard work, research, and commitment throughout the process. We have spent time recently reviewing their findings, discussing it with them and what the findings mean for the life of AWCC. After our meetings, the council has unanimously given our approval of the Vitality Team report and would ask that next you, the church family, would prayerfully consider their findings. This fall the Vitality Team is planning on sharing with you their report and also opening up discussion over a series of 4 Sundays beginning September 27th after church and concluding with a family lunch on October 18th.

We want the AWCC family to know that as a council we have been working over the past year to improve many of the things that have come up in the assessments completed by the Vitality Team. Specifically, we have worked on communication and transparency with the AWCC congregation, fine-tuning the process we use to develop our yearly budget, and looking into potentially changing our governance model. We will continue to work with the information from their report to find ways to improve our leadership. Some of the changes based on the report and findings have already occurred, but we realize too that some changes take longer, and we will strive to continually improve and to keep you up-to-date along the way.

We look forward to seeing how the congregation will receive and use the information from the Vitality Team as we all continue in our mission to honor God by developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely,

Chad Lynch
Chairman of Council of the Deacons

From the Vitality Team:

The Vitality Team considers this past two years of work to be a blessing from the Lord for the team members ourselves and seeks to make the results a blessing for our community at AWCC and the surrounding neighborhood as well.

Veritas Journey

In May of 2013 Applewood Community Church began our Veritas (truth telling) journey with a church wide meeting to share our thoughts on the health of our congregation. This effort was born out of a desire to begin a self-examination process of our body to determine our strengths, opportunities for improvement and the calling of God's heart for our congregation. The work of each team is included in this collection of documents.

1. Biblical Story: We have selected Luke 6:12-19 as our Bible story. Using the example of Jesus in Luke 6:12-19 The Bible Story team was challenged to prioritize our time and efforts in the following manner: communion with God, community with our fellow believers, and then ministry. God seemed to repeatedly impress on our team the importance of these priorities and use this paradigm as a guide for our Veritas journey.
2. Relational Covenant: The relational covenant is a document that strives to outline how we relate to one another within the body. The document challenges us to remain focused on Christ and His love for us as our guide and resource when interacting with each other. As a congregation we want to be cautious that we do not seek from others what only God can provide, but at the same time we desire to share freely his intentional and personal gift of love.
3. History: A 20th anniversary celebration was sponsored to celebrate God's faithfulness. The event included a dinner at Abrusci's, bonfire, prayer hike, church picnic and a Sunday morning video celebrating our past. An extensive time line version of our history was compiled and displayed on our basement wall along with a majestic tree displaying a pictorial history of our past. We were blessed as we put words to the stories of God's leading of our congregation. We were once again reminded that He is good and is worthy of our praise. This activity was captured in the events themselves without a formal report. There is no attachment associated with this activity.
4. Internal Assessment: The charter of the internal assessment group was to get a sense of the current reality of the congregation. The intent is to describe the congregation's relationship with God and our individual and collective desire for Him. The group also investigated the community aspects of the congregation to see if people's needs were being met and opportunities to grow were being served. A survey of almost half of the congregation was conducted and is summarized in this report.

Abstract: The internal assessment team details a congregation that is happy to attend Applewood Community Church and enjoys our times of worship and teaching. They expressed a desire to develop more intimate relationships. It appeared that many folks do not understand the leadership structure of the church and newer folks struggle with engaging in church activities. Small groups have provided support and fellowship but at times may struggle to retain a Biblical focus or maintain a spiritual growth perspective.

5. External Assessment: The overarching purpose of this activity was to get a solid handle on the community surrounding AWCC by gauging how well the church is known in the community, and what community needs AWCC may be addressing well—or not. Interviews of neighbors, public safety officers, school leaders, business leaders, leaders

of other churches were conducted. The hope is to identify some unique outreach opportunities, possibly by discovering an intersection between unmet community needs and AWCC abilities.

Abstract: Applewood Community Church has gained a reputation as a place that is willing to help but appears to not be well known by many in our community. For a church of our size we have done some meaningful outreach but we may benefit from an intentional discussion about our activities. At times it appears that we may be over extending the energies of our people and as a result we may benefit from doing less while being more strategic in our outreach activities. We attempt to graciously bless our community with the use of our building.

6. Discovery Retreat: AWCC hosted a Discovery Retreat—Discovering Your Spiritual Formation Journey. Attendees included 14 AWCC congregants and 5 guests from other church bodies. The Vitality Team leadership served as host. We brought this Retreat to AWCC in response to the encouragement of the initial Vitality leader, Mike Brown. He introduced the team to a Henri Nouwen video titled “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry” that presents the example of Jesus in Luke 6:12-19. There is an attached document that in the Discovery retreat report that outlines the Nouwen Video. The Retreat focused on intimacy with God as our primary calling.

What did the Veritas Team learn along the way? As a team, we had a desire to sincerely seek God’s direction and leading in our Veritas endeavors. Under the initial guidance of Mike Brown we were challenged to begin each meeting with a time of “listening to God and each other.” Mike shared, “God isn’t at work out there, rather, He dwells within us.” As a result we would begin our times by meditating on a scripture as a group in an effort to be attentive to God speaking, and then sharing what each felt God had been saying to them. At first this was awkward, but it became a rewarding process as we often sensed a special intimacy with Christ. Starting each meeting in this way helped us adjust our focus from our busy lives and our agenda to a focus on pursuing intimacy with Christ and His agenda. This process of using scripture formatively was outlined for our team in an email from Mike, which is included in the Discovery Retreat document as an attachment titled “Using Scripture ‘Formatively.’”

During our Veritas journey it was initially tempting to allow our activities to distract us from a focus on listening to God and pursuing intimacy with Him. As the journey matured, the group began to sense that God’s desire for us was to spend time with Him. This perspective allowed God to lead and energize our activities. As we pursued listening to God for direction we had renewed excitement and refreshment that spilled over into the work. Our work was God’s work, not our human-influenced efforts cluttered with our inadequacies, but rather the work that God desires, which then flows from His spirit into our lives. While the Vitality reports talk about many issues of community and ministry, the finding that impressed itself most on the Vitality Team was the irreplaceable, primary priority of individual communion with God, which then flows into community and ministry. It is our hope that the centrality of this truth will perpetuate a growing desire for us to pause and take time to pursue intimacy with Him as we seek to follow his leading in our lives, in the life of our congregation, and in His ministry.

BIBLE STORY SEARCH TEAM REPORT

The Bible Story Search Team selected Luke 6:12-19 as our Bible Story because it incorporated the overriding 3-fold theme of the Vitality team of 1) communion with God, 2) community with believers and 3) ministry of Jesus as described in the Henri Nouwen video¹. This scripture portrays the founding story of our Christian faith where Jesus retreats to the mountain to seek the Father's will and then, knowing that will, selects the 12 apostles, including Judas, and then commences his ministry and purpose on earth with the power of the Spirit. We felt that this story paralleled the founding and current state of our church in many ways:

- In the same way our church was founded after considerable prayer;
- Our church founders were followers of Jesus with much to learn; and
- In the power of the Spirit, (most of the time), we have engaged in substantial ministry on earth.

Very importantly, Pastor Guy has proposed devoting a Sunday morning service to communicate this Bible Story to the congregation with the excellent aid of the Nouwen video clip.

This Bible Story also challenges AWCC to be known as a family of believers who are united in God's love, belong to Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:23) and, with the power of the Spirit, purpose to serve and worship the Father.

* Eph. 3:14-21; Col. 3:12-17; Rom. 12:5-16

Luke 6:12-19

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

¹ The Henri Nouwen video is summarized in the essay included as an Appendix to the Discovery Retreat report.

AWCC Relational Covenant

Believing that love for one another, and unity of life together is our most effective witness for the Lord Jesus Christ, Applewood Community Church is committed to growing and nurturing relationships that give witness to the presence of His Spirit at work in our lives.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (From John 15)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

We are committed to praying for one another and listening to the Spirit as He speaks into our relationships the truth of Scripture so that the way in which we relate to one another will bring praise to our Lord and lead others to know God's infinite love.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. (James 1:19-20)

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)

We understand conflict to be a normal part of relationships and choose to view it as an opportunity to grow deeper in Christ and in healthy, authentic relationship with one another. Because unity in our life together is of ultimate importance to our witness for Christ, in times of conflict we will actively and graciously pursue genuine resolution with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1-2)

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (Romans 12:17-18)

Internal Assessment Team Report: An Encouragement toward Growing Together in Healthy Community

Applewood Community Church Vitality Team

Introduction

In May of 2013 AWCC conducted a facilitated Veritas exercise to examine the health and mission of the congregation. This exercise asked participants to share their assessment of the congregation and talk about how their lives had been impacted at AWCC. It was an emotional meeting with several people sharing the profound effect the congregation had on them. The group also rated AWCC as somewhere between Stable and Healthy/Missional with a trend toward the Healthy/Missional direction. Teams of volunteers were organized early in 2014; Jason Brant and Peg McMillen volunteered to lead the internal assessment team.

The charter of the internal assessment group was to get a sense of the current reality of the congregation. The intent is to describe the congregation's relationship with God and our individual and collective desire for Him—this is the “healthy” part of “healthy-missional.” The group also investigated the community aspects of the congregation to see if people's needs were being met and opportunities to grow were being served. The team met monthly with a structure similar to the Vitality team. Meetings began with a time of prayer, a devotional and personal sharing, corporately listening to God and seeking His leading for the team. A survey of almost half of the congregation was conducted and is summarized in this report.

Overall Findings:

1. The overwhelming majority of survey participants are happy to be attending Applewood Community Church. AWCC is viewed as a friendly, welcoming environment that is comfortable and Bible-based.
2. Worship is an important aspect of the AWCC experience appreciated by many through our current praise and worship.
3. There is a strong desire for deeper and more intimate relationships, which many in the congregation are finding difficult to develop at AWCC. They are looking for an environment of vulnerability and mutual support in prayer. However, many indicated the current environment at AWCC does not foster opportunities for those deeper relational connections. Some describe a superficial environment that creates artificial harmony while undermining the opportunity for deeper relationships capable of providing biblical-based instruction and correction offered in a spirit of love.
4. Community groups have fostered deeper spiritual growth and relationships for some, while other respondents have been frustrated by poorly defined and ineffective groups. Some have also found it difficult to join a community group.
5. The leadership structure is not widely understood and leaves many confused about how ministry is pursued. There are questions about how the church decides who leads and how decisions are made, including (but not limited to) what ministries are done, who

oversees them, how they are funded, and how we evaluate their success as far as advancing AWCC's vision and mission.

6. Communication channels are largely effective, save for gaps on community groups, connect groups, and the consistency of information on the website. These gaps have left many, especially newcomers, uncertain of what is going on and how to personally engage.

Before going into details on the survey results, it is useful to mention what the survey and survey results did not cover. Evangelism fell through the cracks between the Internal Assessment and External Assessments teams, and was not surveyed. Also, the survey made a concerted effort to get feedback beyond the superficial, including elements of how AWCC is impacting each respondent's walk with God. However, we did not get a lot of feedback on personal walks with God, including time with God in Scripture, prayer, and listening to the Holy Spirit. In place of these elements, Guy's sermons were the most frequently cited main source of spiritual growth and learning. This may be due to flaws in the survey, or to the fact that this information is difficult to articulate and to capture in a survey format. Still, the fact that this information did not come up much in the survey results might be a little concerning, or at least an area for follow up.

Assessment Process

The Internal Assessment team was formed in early 2014 as a sub-team of the Vitality team, charged with the task of taking a pulse of the congregation. Five members of the Vitality team joined the Internal Assessment team at that time: Kathy Seybold, Sue Miller, Karen Veers, Peg McMillen and Jason Brant. Brant and McMillen volunteered to lead the team. Cheryl Johnson joined the team in the summer of 2014, after recently rotating out of her position as Deacon of Congregational Life. She added much insight into the internal workings of the church.

The team's ultimate goal in this process was to identify key areas for potential growth at AWCC in its pursuit of Christ-likeness. The team met monthly with a structure similar to the Vitality team. Meetings began with a time of prayer, a devotional and personal sharing, corporately listening to God and seeking His leading for the team. As suggested by the Veritas guidebook, the team decided to use a survey as a primary means for gauging the internal health of the church. The team sifted through suggested questions from the Veritas guidebook and the mission statement for AWCC, before settling on two main areas of focus: Communion with God and Community Life. Questions focused on these areas, along with related topics on communication, leadership and worship. They were crafted to be open ended, trusting the Spirit to reveal themes as responses were collated. The final survey and approach are included in Appendix A. Johnson also gathered quantitative data, including a list of internal ministries and participation rates. Full results can be found in Appendix B.

The team discussed interview techniques and consistency before conducting test interviews to improve survey questions and techniques. The team then initiated survey interviews through random selection of church attendees, in accordance with overall congregational demographics and attendance habits. The personal interviews were conducted over a period from August 1 -

November 15, 2014. Overall, 32 personal interviews were conducted with individuals or couples, representing 55 adults or roughly 43% of the congregation². Additionally, the questions were made available to anyone who wished to participate via an online questionnaire. The team received another 13 responses from the website, resulting in a participation rate of approximately 54%³.

Each team member compiled his/her results and redacted names. Brant and McMillen then reviewed the compiled results, looking for trends. An item was considered a trend only if it was expressed multiple times by different sources. Finally, specific themes and findings were organized into high-level topics, as detailed in the following sections.

This report is organized as follows:

- I. Accolades
- II. Themes
 - A. Worship in the Arts
 - B. Church Culture (Authenticity)
 - C. Community Groups
 - D. Leadership
 - E. Communication
 - F. Other Notes
- III. Final Remarks
- IV. Appendix A: Survey Questions
- V. Appendix B: Snapshot of Church Statistics and Activities

These summaries present specific themes derived from overall trends observed by the team.

I. Accolades

The overwhelming majority of survey participants are happy to be attending Applewood Community Church, even as they provided feedback on ways they hoped the church could improve. Respondents tended to provide the most information on these areas of improvement, so the report findings tend to focus on improvement areas. Before diving into those themes, it is worth noting elements cited by respondents as contributing to their overall satisfaction with attending AWCC.

AWCC is viewed as a friendly, welcoming environment that is comfortable and Bible-based. Attendees report that they really enjoy the people and the atmosphere, and find the pastor approachable. Most report that worship is meaningful and the children's programming is engaging. There are many opportunities for involvement. Of particular note was the repeated expression of inspiration through:

- The observed testimonies of people living spiritually healthy lives.
- Acts of kindness and ministries that spur people (and their children) on to do good works.

² Taken from Appendix B, which has a count of 127 adults.

³ We assumed each web response represented one adult in the church, not a couple.

- The Severe Weather Ministry has significantly impacted those who serve and those who simply observe.
- The pastor's sermons are Bible-based, challenging, inspirational, and applicable, and they are an important source for individual spiritual growth.

II. Themes

A. Worship in the Arts

Findings

Worship is an important aspect of the AWCC experience appreciated by many through our current praise and worship. Some mentioned a desire to enhance this time with God through more and longer times of contemplation, prayer, reflection, confession, and lamentation in an atmosphere of reverence. They long to enter into the presence of God by feeling fully present and not distracted by themselves or other activities happening around them. Other forms of worship such as scripture reading, dramatic reading, call and response, liturgy, and dance are desired to be included more often by some.

B. Church Culture

Findings

- *AWCC is viewed as a friendly, welcoming environment that is comfortable and Bible-based.* Respondents note that AWCC is an intimate, family-oriented church where they can gather together in a supportive, relaxed environment among fellow believers and hear the word of God.
- *Deeper connections and honesty.* While AWCC is viewed as a friendly church, there is marked interest among attendees for deeper connection with one another. Members express both a desire to go beyond the superficial and increase honesty, noting that wanting to please or “love” others without biblical-based correction creates neither depth nor growth. While Alafia and other structured activities were noted as available points of contact, it was reported they were not enough for developing deep relationships. There is an expressed desire for trust in relationship that will also look to listen, understand, and empathize without judgment, betrayal, or presumption through a spiritual rather than fleshly response.
- *Authentic relationships.* There were a number of reports of frustration with sensing that people are very friendly, but not really friends and that they feared it was unlikely that anyone really knows or cares about them, would invite them into their homes or would miss them if they left, even if they had attended for a number of years. Some noted a distinction between church friends and real friends, the people who are part of your lives. These individuals describe AWCC as a “Sunday church” that is filled with people that they only feel superficially connected to once a week.
- *Support in cultivating relationships.* Some members expressed a need for support or felt interpersonally challenged but do not know how to achieve deeper relationships within the

church. People responded that personal testimonies during the service make it easier to relate to others, feel more connected and find them personally encouraging.

- *Prayer.* Another area where individuals would like to connect, but find it difficult, is in prayer. Some have struggled to become involved in a formal group prayer (like Wednesday night) because of personal feelings of inadequacy, being easily intimidated by others, or wanting more shared personal depth and vulnerability. These individuals were reluctant to share and to pray in this setting, but also do not feel comfortable putting their needs out to the prayer line.

Recommendations

- *Model depth and vulnerability.* Establish a norm of vulnerability through continued and regular sharing of personal testimonies of congregants and the pastor. Encourage and model regular discussion of what God is teaching us.
- *Encourage deeper connections, honesty, and authenticity.* Encouraging deeper relationships at AWCC could potentially come as an extension of previous sermon series on community. As knowing one another takes time beyond weekly church visits, promoting the commitment and caring of relationships through community groups (discussed below) could begin to foster development in these areas.
- *Encourage a focus on gathering around God's Word and resting in His presence* rather than creating another fellowship activity or ministry opportunity.
- *Enact and model the terms of a relational contract.* Agreement and intentionality, if sincere, can create a new culture of authenticity, if it is the expected norm.
- *Consider a conflict resolution practice.* Address issues that arise directly with the intention to resolve.
- *Understand and accommodate the needs of the disenfranchised.* Knowing that some attendees simply need to be loved, encouraged, and invited personally to events, homes, and outings could go a long way to loving one another and providing needed support.

Additional Questions to Consider

-Are members vulnerable with God?

-Do members look to the church to provide what only God can provide?

C. Community Groups

We use the term '**community groups**' to collectively refer to groups with the purpose of fostering deeper relationships with Jesus and/or encouraging, sharing, and spurring each other on in an environment of authentic community. Groups that could meet this criterion include small groups, Titus 2 groups, mentorships, morning Men's groups, and adult Connect Groups, as well as youth ministries.

Findings

- *Some Titus 2 groups are doing a great job building relationships between women.* For a significant number of women surveyed, Titus 2 groups are the primary way they feel connected to others at AWCC. Women mentioned having attended AWCC for a number of

years, but never really feeling connected to people at the church until they started in a Titus 2 group. We also received feedback that Titus 2 groups help women get to know other women outside of their normal circles.

- *People involved in community groups generally feel support and fellowship in their group.*
- *The structure and purpose of community groups are not always well defined.* The resulting lack of leadership and common focus leads to frustration.
- *People had difficulty finding information about and joining various community groups (connect groups & small groups).* Significant frustration was repeatedly expressed, especially from relative newcomers. Reasons for this include:
 - *Poor communication.* Some found it hard to find up-to-date and accurate information about small groups, especially after the Fall kickoff. It was difficult to find a “go to” source for reliable information about small groups. Optimal times for joining a group are not communicated. For example, if a group is reading Christian books, an optimal time for a newcomer to join is when the next book starts.
 - *Closed groups.* For some, once they found some partial listing of small groups, it turned out that one or more were closed indefinitely. This further limited potential options. One side note for both small groups and Titus 2 groups: in a couple of cases, a group was closed when Person A approached the group, but later opened when Person B approached the group (without following up with Person A again). Unfortunately, this gives the unnecessary appearance of a clique.
 - *Parents with young kids.* Some of these parents merely noted that it was difficult to find childcare for regular community group meetings, special events, or services, and was a reason they were not involved, even though they wanted to be.
 - *For some people, the difficulty in joining a community group led them to give up, or seek a community group outside the church.*
- *Some community groups are not effective.* Problems identified in some ineffective small groups include:
 - Inability to stick with stated purpose of the group
 - Most time spent socializing, little time on Bible study
 - Leader unable to redirect group from “bunny trails”
 - Occasionally unable to correct anti-Biblical ideas

People became less committed to groups with these issues, often causing the group to disband prematurely to the frustration of all.

- *A few people expressed a desire for a mentor,* as a more mature Christian paired with a less mature Christian. We inferred that this desire also implied the desire for some structure or other guidance in facilitating a mentoring relationship.
- *Youth and children’s ministries need to be actively supported.* We did not focus on community groups at the youth level, but wanted to highlight current needs in those ministries. The children’s ministries were just a few volunteers short of an ideal number (where the director doesn’t have to scramble). The Uth ministry recently received an influx of potential volunteers, mostly to serve on an occasional basis. They could still use some regular volunteers/leaders for mid-week Uth Group.

Recommendations

Oversight. Community groups could benefit from some oversight to better enable their successful formation, continuation, and lifecycle. Below are some considerations related to oversight.

- *Assist a new group in defining and structuring itself.* As the group is forming, they should decide the time and place of meetings, the initial group lifecycle (i.e. we will meet for three months, one year, etc), leaders, contact information, and purpose. The purpose could include Bible study, prayer, service, etc. We believe this information is useful to communicate to the congregation to draw in new members and would also help the group stay focused and better meet members' expectations.
- *Provide lifecycle guidance for community groups.* Lifecycle issues for a group might include things like how to get a group started, how a group might multiply successfully, and when/if a group should split, close, or end.
- *Have regular contact with community group leaders.* This could involve many things, but should at least include getting updates on the group. Other items could include: encourage group leaders; listen to difficult problems or exciting praises; lift up prayer requests; and refer leaders to useful resources.
- *Community group communication.* It would be useful to devise a strategy for keeping discipleship information accurate, useful, and accessible by the congregation.

Support. AWCC could provide resources to better facilitate the success of new and ongoing community groups.

- *Consider leadership training.* It can be difficult to keep a group on task, to facilitate the building of authentic culture within the group, or to gently correct an unbiblical interpretation of Scripture. Training could sharpen the capabilities of current group leaders and also facilitate the development of new leaders.
 - This could be as simple as allowing someone to practice being a leader in a simulated group of other leaders, pairing an experienced leader and less experienced leader for a time, or working through a book.
- *Consider increased acquisition and cataloguing of useful resources for community group use.*
- *Brainstorm with parents of young kids and others that have barriers to becoming involved in a community group.* Perhaps take a look at what can and cannot be done by the church to remove these barriers.

Community. Community groups can be fundamental in developing the community and culture of the church.

- *Authenticity.* Small groups can be a safe place to cultivate deeper relationships with God and each other.
- *Do not be afraid of tough issues.* Community groups may be the ideal place to tackle difficult issues. If community groups are not willing to tackle an issue brought up by a member, it is likely to give the enemy a foothold. This is also a safe place to learn how to gently disagree with or correct a fellow believer.

- Consider how to encourage the formation of a network of friendships in the church that looks more like a web, instead of mostly isolated circles. It is likely that a web of friendships can only be established with some regular cycling/shuffling of the membership of various community groups.

Additional Questions to Consider

- Why do so few small groups do a Bible study?
- Do church members feel equipped to study the Bible on their own for meaning & application?

D. Leadership

Only one question on the survey addressed leadership, and it was only directed to those who served in leadership at AWCC. Thus, respondents did not tend to address leadership directly. Nonetheless, we received wide-ranging comments from various questions that pointed to aspects of leadership.

Findings

There seems to be some confusion surrounding the structure of the church governance and its development, reporting, and accountability structures. It appears that decisions and initiatives can be instigated by either leadership or individuals in the congregation with no particular protocol. It also seems that the majority of ministries are spearheaded by a single individual with a good idea. In some ways, this has served AWCC well: we have a wide range of internal and external service ministries for a church our size, various community group opportunities, fellowship opportunities, etc. As people talked about various aspects of AWCC, there was a common refrain that vision and structure are needed as an aid to many fledgling ministries.

- *Ministries.* People commented on how many good opportunities there are for involvement at AWCC, but it is possible that AWCC is doing too many ministries. Each ministry uses the limited resources of AWCC, including congregants' time and effort. Some respondents reported feeling burnt out, and some core ministries are not as effective as they could be.
- *Vision and focus.* Some had questions about the guiding principles for decision making with regard to vision and focus. There was noted curiosity as to how ministries, events, discipleship, retreats, etc. are decided on and what is the driving force, goals, impetus, follow through, or accountability that ties each into the vision and mission of the church. Responders noted that a clear "big picture" vision could enable better decision making as far as when to say "yes" or "no".
- *Leadership and accountability.* The business aspects of the meetings can sometimes usurp the need to call on God. Some previous council members would recommend more focus on prayer and the guiding of the Holy Spirit in meetings. There is some sense that the leadership structure in the church is ambiguous or that there is a lack of a point person in decision making, which can yield tension between council and staff, and occasionally members of the congregation. Council members could benefit from improved leadership transitions. There may be a need to engage in leadership development as they oversee the

church. It was expressed that accountability measures would be helpful and appropriate in guiding the council and leadership.

- *Transparency.* Decision making in the areas of budget plans and priorities, staff hiring, and council member selection was thought to need more transparency. Some want a chance to have more input into the budget process, but have found little information on where and when input should be provided and who is the final decision maker. As far as hiring staff, there was a desire to know more about the process, such as who vets the candidates, how has a position been publicized, the timing for filling a position, and how care is taken to ensure all interested and qualified candidates have an opportunity for consideration. Finally, it seems that the process of filling council positions is mysterious: sometimes people are asked (by whom?), sometimes people volunteer - how does this come about and when in the year?
- *Definition of structure and roles.* Defining and understanding roles, responsibilities, and reporting structure was seen to be a possible way to alleviate communication failures and hard feelings, as well as provide clarity to church members. It has been observed that the church lacks the structure to sustain good communication and communication can break down when disagreements occur. This can be particularly troublesome as staff and council work together and need to communicate decisions and vision.
- *Dealing with Conflict.* There is a need to communicate through disagreements in a consistently healthy way, then embrace a decision made by the group. Along the way, just as in every other walk of life, there may need to be a quick restoration of fellowship ruptured by sin. Keeping peace was noted as a perceived priority over relationship. This was mentioned importantly, but hesitantly, because this process has broken down at each step on a couple occasions, without a restoration taking place.

Recommendations

- *Ministries.* It is possible that AWCC would benefit from doing fewer ministries, but doing them well, with greater depth. Each ministry should have a specific purpose and plan, and it should be periodically evaluated against this purpose. Without a purpose or evaluation, it is difficult to determine if a ministry is successful or should be continued.
- *Vision and focus.* A clear “big picture” vision could enable better decision making and help to understand context. Events such as retreats and conferences could be of greater value if they were either an outgrowth of a ministry already occurring or an initiation of a new ministry that would provide follow-up, discussion, and discipling.
- *Definition of structure and roles.* Clarify the roles and responsibilities of the leadership and communicate these roles to the congregation. The current examination of leadership structures initiated by the Council is very timely.
- *Dealing with Conflict.* Recognize where a significant conflict is taking place and humbly seek God’s direction and vision to resolve it, without shrinking back or ignoring the situation.

Additional Questions to consider

-How do we decide if a ministry should begin and determine its goal?

- How do we evaluate for effectiveness?⁴
- When there is low turnout, what factors are evaluated to determine why?
- Have potential barriers been considered to planned activities and ministries experiencing low turnout rather than assumptions that people are not committed?
- Have lead activity planners extended personal requests for assistance when struggling to get the help they need?
- To whom and how are events communicated?
- What are the expectations? Are the expectations realistic or meeting a need? Is it important to this congregation to meet this need?

E. Communication

Findings

- *AWCC uses many channels for communication to the congregation, but there are some gaps.* Existing communication methods disseminate some information well, but respondents identified gaps:
 - Information on small groups and connect groups
 - An up-to-date church calendar and website.
- *Newcomers find it hard to know how to get connected with the church.* Filling the communication gaps cited above would help, but there is also a need to have information readily available for greeters and others to reference, pointing newcomers to options available in the church.
- *When people know what is going on in the church, they feel connected to the church; when they do not, the inverse is true.* In general, newcomers and even some long time attenders tend to linger in this state of not knowing and feeling disconnected as a result.
- *Some people really like personal invitations to church events.* This can be particularly impactful for newcomers.

Considerations from the Team

- *Decide on a few critical mediums to fill the communication gaps that can be consistently kept up-to-date.* Over time, these mediums will be considered reliable and well-known amongst the congregation. It will also be easy to point newcomers to these well-known mediums, and for them to begin to feel plugged into the church.
- *Information for Newcomers.* Keep updated information on how people can be involved at AWCC, and have it available for greeters every Sunday morning.
- *Think outside the box on communication gaps.* This could take many forms, but here are a few possibilities:
 - Community Groups. Disseminate event information within community groups, allowing for more intimate communication and discussion and easy personal invitations.
 - Lobby display. Keep up to date printouts on community groups, available weekly. Highlight new information, such as a new group forming or an open group embarking on a new study.

⁴ See the External Assessment Team Report for further ministry evaluation criteria

- Send quarterly updates on community groups through an existing communication channel.

Notes

- *A summary of feedback we received for various communication methods currently used:*
 - *PUSH:* Useful for prayer requests. This beautifully crafted combination of prayer and listening to God in scripture has been a source of encouragement
 - *Bulletin:* This is a useful source of information, but not complete, as folks can miss an announcement if they miss a given Sunday.
 - *The pastor's weekly email:* A source for some last minute reminders (in addition to great spiritual enrichment).
 - *Website & calendar.* Looks awesome, but some parts are not updated reliably enough. Most people have learned not to look on the website, except for sermons.
 - *Signup Genius & evite.* Useful, but could benefit from a template for event creators, as key information is too easily left off an invite or sign up.

F. Other Notes (Items that are worth capturing, but did not fit into our main themes)

- Adjust seating after kids leave to fill in space and make room for people in back and late comers
- We need a better system for getting newcomers (and others) integrated
- We need a better way to follow up when people disappear from the church
- We need a better way to perform exit interviews and capture feedback
- A few respondents desired some organization related to the sermon, like an outline, for better retention of the sermon message
- Be Sensitive to individual differences and seek to understand and mitigate. It is important to note that some individuals in the congregation struggle with social anxiety, conversation skills, and the feeling of not fitting in

III. Final Remarks

Considering the information in this report, it seems clear that AWCC would benefit from more well-planned and effective community groups. While the original survey questions were to fall in one of two categories (Communion with God and Community) it became clear early on that it would be difficult to assess an individual's personal walk with God. Consequently, survey questions in this area were more focused on markers such as prayer, worship, and Bible study. Themes became apparent as interview data was compiled and analyzed revealing many points of crossover between the two categories. It is the belief of this team that many of the needs described in terms of desires for deeper relationships and prayer could be satisfied through the availability of (also desired) improved community groups. Whether these groups are homogenous in style or formed by particular interest, they should be open, meet regularly, advertise by a consistent and easy to locate means, and be accountable to the church.

Surveys naturally tend to elicit more growth opportunities than accolades. The team would like to repeat, however, that an overwhelming majority of respondents were happy to be attending AWCC. It was apparent that respondents were delighted for the opportunity to provide feedback to enhance the ministry of AWCC. The team is grateful to all who participated in the survey and provided constructive feedback.

To those who will be utilizing this report, we humbly acknowledge our dependence on the Holy Spirit and we respectfully submit our report findings and subsequent considerations for your review. To God be the glory.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Gathering information that reflects the nature of relationship between individuals in the congregation and God; and one another.

Preliminary Questions:

1. What drew you to AWCC?

Communion with God (frame for interview)

Indicators: Study, apply and integrate the word, spiritual growth across life/attentive to Christ, share faith, prayer, worship in many fashions, stewardship, thankfulness

1. Have you grown in your walk with Christ at AWCC? In what ways? Have the ministries or relationships here played a part?
2. How do you define worship? In what ways does AWCC facilitate your ability to worship?
3. In what ways could AWCC help you grow further in your walk with God?

Community (frame for interview)

Indicators: depth, sharing meals, small groups, knowing one another (authenticity), reciprocity, hospitality, communication, conflict resolution, met needs, service together

1. What helps you feel most connected at church? Past? Present? Do you have that opportunity at AWCC?
2. What kind of fellowship opportunities are you looking for?
3. What resources or activities outside of AWCC help you with your walk?
4. How has AWCC given you opportunities to serve?
5. How do you learn about what is going on at church and the needs of others in the congregation?
6. How do you communicate your needs to the church?
7. What barriers to being more connected to AWCC do you have in your life?
8. If you could change any one thing about our church, what would it be? What is your favorite thing about AWCC?

Leadership (optional)

1. What has your leadership experience been like?
2. Do/did you feel supported and equipped?

Exit Interviews

1. What went into your decision to leave?
2. As AWCC strives to meet the needs of our community, do you have any feedback regarding your experience that you think might be helpful for us to know?

Appendix B: Snapshot of Church Statistics and Activities (From October 2014)

1 – Congregation Divided into Age Categories (Current Approximation)

Children:

Nursery - 5

Toddler - 3

Preschool - 10

Elementary K-3 - 13

Elementary 4-6 - 18

Jr.High & High School: 16

Younger Married Couple without Children: 6

People Between 30-45ish with Children: 36

People Between 45-70ish: 77

People Over 70ish: 8

2 – Average Sunday Attendance Patterns/Past Five Years

2009: 113

2010: 121

2011: 127

2012: 128

2013: 131

There are spikes in attendance during 1) March/April - Easter & 2) December - Christmas

3 – Giving Patterns for Past Five Years

YEAR	General Fund	Designated	Building
2009	\$322,407		
2010	\$333,164		
2011	\$380,431		
2012	\$381,124	\$46,539	\$125,147
2013	\$345,271	\$101,378	\$7,073

4 – Number of Small Groups and People Participating

(varies with definition of small group)

Men's morning group - 5

Women involved in a Titus Group - 30-35

Small groups - 5 groups - 40 adults

6 groups - 52 people

-Currently no real way to enter as most are closed related to size or content

-2 groups have an identified leader and are doing a planned study

-3 groups have organizers and are primarily fellowship/prayer

5 – Opportunities for Serving Within the Church

Ministry	# Needed Per Event	Frequency of Event	#Total Pool of Volunteers	Rough Average Attendance
Welcoming and Enfolding (Greeters on Sunday)	2 per Sunday	Weekly	18	
Newcomer's Lunch	2 organizers 3-4 cooks	Every 2-3 months		12-20
Sunday Morning Coffee	2-3 per Sunday	Weekly	4	
Connect Groups	2-3 leaders per Sunday	Weekly		12-20
Alafia	2 organizers 2 cooks per Wednesday	Weekly	5 (need 8)	20-25
Wednesday Prayer	2 leaders	Weekly		6-8
Prayer Line	1	As Needed		
Community Caring Weekend	1 organizer 5 helpers	Annually		18
Christmas Tree Lighting & Sleigh Ride	1 organizer 6 helpers 12 cookie bakers	Annually		100+
Summer Picnics	1-2 organizers	Annually		50-65
Easter Brunch	1 organizer 4 helpers	Annually		80
Graduate Lunch	1 organizer 4 helpers	Annually		35
Church Lunches	1 organizer 4 helpers	Roughly 1 per month		35-75
September Kickoff Lunch	1 organizer 4 helpers	Annually		65
Helps Ministry (meals, rides, etc.)	2 organizers	As Needed	15	
Praise Team (musicians, slides, sound, choirs)	2 leaders	Weekly	50	
Titus 2	2 organizers	Varies		30-35
Women's Breakfast	1 organizer 2 cooks	Monthly		10-15
Women's Retreat	6 leaders	Annually		27

Men's Breakfast	1 organizer 1 cooks	Monthly		8-12
Men's Retreat	1 organizer	Annually		10-20
Dynamic Marriage Seminars	2 leaders	Biannually (roughly)	4	6 couples
Parents of Little Ones (POLO)	3 leaders			5-10 couples
Community Garden	1 leader			4 plots of 25 filled by AWCC
Garden Ice Cream Social	1 organizer 4-5 helpers	Annually		100
Council	10 positions and pastor (not all filled)	Monthly		
Vitality Team	2 leaders 13 on team total	Monthly		
Children's Ministry	1 staff 8-10 teachers	Weekly	36	
Youth Ministry	2 leaders			

External Assessment Team Report

Applewood Community Church Vitality Team December 2014

Prepared by Matthew Branaugh and Laura Brant

Team members: Matthew Branaugh, Laura Brant, Karen Chambers, Ellen Green, Heather Platt

Introduction: In May of 2013, Applewood Community Church undertook the Evangelical Covenant Church's Veritas/Vitality process. A group of staff and key lay leaders joined for lunch and attempted to identify the health of the church, based on a grid developed by Veritas/Vitality. Each person in attendance rated the church on this four-quadrant grid, and the conclusion was that AWCC is a "healthy and stable church." The Vitality Team was formed in the fall of 2013 to determine how AWCC can move toward becoming a "healthy and missional church." Sub-teams based on Veritas/Vitality's 10 markers of a "healthy and missional church" were formed in early 2014. Matthew Branaugh and Laura Brant agreed to co-lead the sub-team based on the "External Assessment" marker.

Branaugh and Brant sought assistance from members of the AWCC congregation using announcements and personal invitations. Karen Chambers, Ellen Green, and Heather Platt agreed to join, and Doug Benson and Mikki LeVett offered occasional input. The team began meeting in February 2014. In a manner similar to the Vitality Team's approach, External Assessment scheduled regular monthly meetings that tackled key aspects of the Vitality "External Assessment" process and also included time for Scripture study and prayer. The team desired to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, seeking God's direction to find an identity for the team before starting the Vitality "External Assessment" process of interviews with stakeholders from the community-at-large. Interviews took place in the fall of 2014, with notes captured by team members and organized and categorized into spreadsheets by Platt.

The overarching purpose was to get a solid handle on the community surrounding AWCC by gauging how well the church is known in the community, and what community needs AWCC may be addressing—or not addressing—well. We interviewed neighbors, public safety officers, school leaders, business leaders, leaders of other churches, and leaders of AWCC. Our hope was to identify some unique outreach opportunities, possibly by discovering an intersection between true community needs that other organizations, agencies, or churches may or may not address and that AWCC has an ability to address.

Overall Findings: The External Assessment Team identified six overall findings, which this report will summarize in greater detail below:

1. **Based on our interviews and conversations, AWCC is known by some in our community, but not many.** With the possible exception of our immediate residential neighbors and a handful of key government and church leaders, most people know a church exists at our location (which reinforces the value of our location!), but more often than not, many do not know its name or its distinctives.
2. **AWCC has gained a reputation as a place willing to help.** This is largely due to the efforts of Mikki LeVett, who represents AWCC at the Power of Partnership meetings with Jefferson County officials, interacts with other area church leaders, and also responds to the day-to-day inquiries of people who visit the church seeking benevolence. Mikki's work is the primary reason

AWCC became involved with the Severe Weather Shelter Network, and she often serves as the “first line of response” to spur-of-the-moment needs and requests from the community.

3. **For a church of its size, AWCC has done some meaningful outreach—but likely will benefit from revisiting what it does and how.** The church, with roughly 120 regular attenders, has tackled some sizable undertakings for its size. For example:

- The Community Garden;
- The Severe Weather Shelter Network during the winter for the homeless;
- Volunteers, leadership, and resources annually for Royal Family Kids Camp;
- One to two short-term missions teams sent abroad annually; and,
- The fall community clean-up and the Christmas tree lighting and hay rides.

However, in a community as affluent as Applewood, the church may not be meeting some of the community’s truest needs, and may be scattering its efforts too broadly to effectively make a difference with those truest needs.

4. **People power is paramount—and we may be overextending our people.** Efforts like the Severe Weather Shelter Network require significant time and energy. Add in all of the other ways that the church needs and uses volunteers for internal and external activities, and it becomes apparent we may risk burning out our congregation. We need to adopt and follow an agreed-upon process that helps us effectively evaluate what we do, how we do it, how we budget for it, how we schedule it, how we communicate about it, and how we make natural “exits” when an activity or event no longer fits.
5. **As far as outreach goes, AWCC is very building-dependent.** This is a good thing—and it’s also a challenge. The amount of events and activities AWCC does is often possible because AWCC is very generous with its building space. This is a wonderful testimony. Examples include: We open our building to outside groups and do not charge them; we offer plots to neighbors for the Community Garden; we open our building to provide a warm, safe place for homeless to sleep in the winter; we host Easter and Christmas events and services and invite the public; and we’ve offered classes on financial management and marriage support and invited the community. However, this also demonstrates a potential blind spot: Why doesn’t AWCC “go out into the world” of its local community more? In several interviews, we heard about nearby schools that are really struggling. We also heard the Applewood area may draw a lot of traffic, especially on the weekends with bicyclists and mountain-bound motorists, and we may not be engaging these opportunities very well.
6. **AWCC may benefit from doing less and blessing more.** The church may benefit from focusing on a handful of key strategic outreach initiatives while also becoming a “sending” church that affirms its members and attenders in how they are called (whether by vocation, by a cause, or something else). The former may help us narrow our priorities to help address issues of burn-out, budget priorities, miscommunication, and calendar overload. The latter may help us do far more than we ever imagined by teaching our church family that we are all in ministry together—that the congregation can do work, or volunteering, or other community outreach efforts with the blessings and prayer-covering from their church, with possible resource support (building use, bulletin space, announcement time, and so on) given when available and appropriate.

At the request of AWCC Council, here is a list of sources used to help create this report:

- **Homeowners:** Applewood Valley Association; conversation Karen Veers had with her neighbor; conversations Laura Brant had with her neighbors.
- **Businesses:** Steve Basler (State Farm); prior conversations Matt had with the managers of Walmart (Lori Tedesco), Starbucks (Elissa), and First Bank (Renee Fisher) while soliciting resources for the Severe Weather Shelter Network; Applewood Business Association (three attempts to reach Sean Plumb with US Bank, who leads this group, but no response).
- **Education:** Kullerstrand Elementary (Ester Valdez); undividedthemovie.com
- **Churches/Church leaders:** Dave Runyon; Dan Thoemke/Golden Churches.
- **Public Safety:** Aaron and Kelly Fosler (Jefferson County Sheriff's Deputies).
- **Government:** Susan Franklin with Jefferson County; the Power of Partnership group.
- **AWCC:** Interviews with Mikki LeVett, Doug Benson, Cheryl Johnson, Cappi Baumgart, Ellen Baldacci, Jill Richman, Vonnie Nelson, and Matt Branaugh.

The next section of this report provides additional details regarding the six identified findings.

More About the External Assessment Team’s Six Findings

Finding #1: Based on our interviews and conversations, AWCC is known by some in our community, but not many.

Summary: With the possible exception of our immediate residential neighbors and a handful of key government and church leaders, most people know a church exists at our location (which reinforces the value of our location!), but more often than not, many do not know its name or its distinctives.

Background: The Applewood community, past and present, possesses some unique attributes. It was originally founded in the mid-1800s by men and women journeying west in search of gold. But instead of striking it rich, they instead found remarkably fertile soil perfect for growing apple orchards. They settled. And Applewood got its start—and its name. Interestingly, Applewood never became a bona fide municipality. It is a “census-designated place,” with more than 7,000 residents, but it technically resides in portions of Golden and Wheat Ridge. As far as government services go, Jefferson County provides the most support, with Golden and Wheat Ridge playing smaller parts.

This creates interesting dynamics for Applewood Community Church (AWCC). Oftentimes, only residents, natives, and long-timers of the metro area know the location of Applewood, and when you ask about a church in that community, most immediately assume you mean Applewood Baptist Church, a much larger congregation located a few blocks directly east. As one business leader told us, he has always known a church resides at our location, but he has never known its name; as one AWCC member also told us, a friend of hers confused AWCC for the Unitarian church located a few blocks west. We are based in a community that operates invisibly within the west metro area—and AWCC seems to operate invisibly within that!

The community also primarily consists of two large residential neighborhoods that are mostly homogenous, and mostly affluent, with a median household income of more than \$65,000. Schools in the area are mostly stable, however Kullerstrand Elementary, located about a mile from AWCC, has a large population of free-and-reduced-lunch students. One strong homeowners association in the southern portion of the community is active and powerful and it has worked to keep “unsavory” businesses out. This has at least partially led to a limited tax base with only one stretch of office and commercial building space in the most immediate radius to AWCC. The business leader we interviewed tells us the activity in the commercial hub is slowly gaining momentum, especially with the recently completed highway exit road project, and traffic is extensive on weekends because our exit is the last easily accessible one before motorists head west on I-70 into the mountains.

Suggestions:

- Examine how our church might partner with other churches in the area to make Christ known in our community.
- Further explore a possible partnership with Kullerstrand, which is a situation representing true need in the Applewood area (see more under Finding #3).
- Meet with businesses in the commercial hub to see what connecting with AWCC might do to help us better understand our community—and make us known as a spiritual presence in the community.
- Invest in signage that faces vehicles coming off of the westbound exit of I-70.

Finding #2: AWCC has gained a reputation as a place willing to help.

Summary: This is largely due to the efforts of Mikki Le Vett, who represents AWCC at the Power of Partnership meetings with Jefferson County officials, interacts with other area church leaders, and also responds to the day-to-day inquiries of people who visit the church seeking benevolence. Mikki’s work is the primary reason AWCC became involved with the Severe Weather Shelter Network, and she often serves as the “first line of response” to spur-of-the-moment needs and requests from the community.

Background: Being known as a willing giver of our building and providing volunteer support is a strong reflection of Christ to our community. We want this to continue, but we sense it needs to be guided by more than what comes our way.

Our location plays a significant role in what comes our way. Many requests and needs come from needy individuals and families who are in transit and easily find us directly off of the highway. Also, through Mikki’s presence with the Power of Partnership, AWCC has provided an anchoring presence to respond to needs on the northeastern edge of the region Power of Partnership serves.

These two dynamics funnel directly through Mikki, and our church has demonstrated responsiveness often because Mikki has taken the lead. She is a gift. One concern we have is whether these ongoing requests and meetings will affect the limited time she has to offer to her other administrative duties for the church office; furthermore, the ongoing requests and meetings during an extended period of time could potentially overwhelm any one person, including one as gifted as Mikki!

Suggestions:

- Examine the church’s priorities for responding to community needs to see if an expansion of Mikki’s job description (and job) is warranted.
- Examine the possibility of securing a dedicated “outreach team” that would guide our outreach efforts. We would encourage participation on this team to be a part of Mikki’s job description. The team would evaluate all outreach activities using an established criteria. This would allow the congregation and staff to make sure we have the people power, resources, and adequate time to take on a new ministry. This would hopefully build an aggregate view of outreach to include both local and non-local ministries.
- Take an inventory of the congregation’s interests to make certain the volunteer and building space commitments we make are aligned with those interests (as further explored in Finding #3 and #4).
- Establish a vetting process (as described further in Finding #6) that reinforces our church’s reputation as a place that is willing to help.

Finding #3: For a church of its size, AWCC has done some meaningful outreach—but likely will benefit from revisiting what it does and how.

Summary: The church, with roughly 120 regular attenders, has tackled some sizable undertakings for its size. For example:

- The Community Garden;
- The Severe Weather Shelter Network during the winter for the homeless;
- Volunteers, leadership, and resources annually for Royal Family Kids Camp;
- One to two short-term missions teams sent abroad annually; and,
- The fall community clean-up and the Christmas tree lighting and hay rides.

However, in a community as affluent as Applewood, the church may not be meeting some of the community’s truest needs, and may be scattering its efforts too broadly to effectively make a difference with those truest needs.

Background:

Our research and interviews with AWCC leaders revealed a vast universe of outreach efforts past and present. We also found the church struggles with direction because efforts are loosely organized, and little, if any, distinction is made between what AWCC does locally versus abroad. Also, it isn’t clear how AWCC should prioritize people and financial resources for local outreach versus outreach abroad.

For instance, the list below shows the variety of activity underway. Much of it is doing good, no doubt, but AWCC has no way of evaluating any of it to know if its provisions of people, financial resources, or both is advancing its vision and mission for outreach. Additionally, it is difficult to discern whether everything done is a “core fit” with how God has called AWCC. We certainly believe AWCC must play a role locally and abroad, but as a part of this evaluation, it seems the church would greatly benefit by examining what we do, why we do it, and how we might find ways to unite the things we do—both locally and abroad—through a more common, strategic thread.

The list:

1. Three covenant missionaries: AWCC provides financial support overseas.
2. Two annual overseas mission trips to Ecuador: Self-funded and volunteers sent overseas.
3. Royal Family Kids Camp: A local ministry that AWCC provides 12 to 20 volunteers for one week working as camp counselors. Additional volunteers are involved in the welcome back dinner for camp volunteers. Additional volunteers from the church go up during the week to assist with various activities.
4. Severe Weather Shelter Network: A local ministry that uses our building; we provide all supplies and we coordinate all people power (the majority of which hail from AWCC).
5. Community Caring Weekend: Annual one-day neighborhood clean-up event AWCC organizes and provides volunteers and resources to do.
6. Participation in the Golden “Be A Tool” weekend: AWCC recruits volunteers for this local event.
7. Operation Christmas Child Shoeboxes: AWCC asks congregants to prepare and bring boxes that are shipped overseas.
8. Christmas Tree Lighting and Hay Rides: Annual event that AWCC invites the community to attend, which requires financial resources and volunteer support.
9. Covenant World Relief: AWCC contributes to overseas efforts through financial support to this.

This list is not exhaustive, but it immediately demonstrates two interesting dynamics: (1) A high level of activity both locally and internationally; and (2) the local efforts tend to get people power but less financial support, while our overseas efforts consume financial support. We have no process to determine the impact of the outreach AWCC does, and we have no clear way of discerning which activities are core to AWCC. In some respects, it seems we say “yes” to a lot of good things, but it may prevent us from saying “yes” to the very best.

For instance, as we learned more about Kullerstrand Elementary, we discovered a prime opportunity for AWCC to have potentially sweeping effects on the Applewood community through a dedicated partnership that invests in students, staff, and administrators. As local pastor Dave Runyon told us, the single-fastest way for a church of any size to make a tangible mark on multiple needs in a community is through a school partnership. You reach kids, you reach kids’ parents, you reach teachers, principals, and staff, and you reach the residential neighbors who benefit from an improved school. But at this time, AWCC has little to no capacity to even consider such an endeavor, largely because it has people and financial resources expended on so many other things.

Suggestions:

- Develop an annual evaluation process for outreach ministries that ideally measures qualitative and quantitative outcomes of AWCC, the volunteers, and the beneficiaries, and offers prayerful reflection to discern the future.
- Create natural intervals to discern whether AWCC outreach activities have reached their natural “end points.” One theme we discovered through our interviews and discussions is a “we do this because we have always done this” mentality. By creating natural intervals to discuss the life cycles of ministries, we may offer ourselves opportunities to end activities that no longer have a “core fit” with AWCC while creating opportunities to pursue new ones that do.
- As AWCC seriously contemplates its growth into a “healthy and missional” church, and making its mark on the surrounding community, consider exploring a partnership with Kullerstrand.
- Prayerfully consider narrowing our missionary support strategy so that AWCC can provide more funds to one specific effort while also allowing the congregation to more proactively provide prayer, resources, and possible short-term missions teams to help that effort.

Finding #4: People power is paramount—and we may be overextending our people.

Summary: Efforts like the Severe Weather Shelter Network require significant time and energy. Add in all of the other ways that the church needs and uses volunteers for internal and external activities, and it becomes apparent we may risk burning out our congregation. We need to adopt and follow an agreed-upon process that helps us effectively evaluate what we do, how we do it, how we budget for it, how we schedule it, how we communicate about it, and how we make natural “exits” when an activity or event no longer fits.

Background: This finding echoes the observations made in Finding #2 and Finding #3, so the background here won’t belabor the point. However, it’s worth noting that in conversations with AWCC leaders, members of the External Assessment team, and members of the Internal Assessment team, there does seem to be a sense of “calendar fatigue” within the congregation. There seems to be a never-ending stream of activities on the horizon that require volunteer help in some capacity; over time, it becomes taxing on the church when its base is asked to invest time and resources to big outreach things (such as Severe Weather Shelter or a short-term missions trip), little outreach things (such as baking cookies for the annual Christmas tree lighting), and the in-between things (such as internal ministries—i.e. teaching Sunday School, serving on the Sunday worship team, and so on). In addition, this dynamic challenges communication, often relegating announcements to the last minute either in the bulletin or on Sunday mornings.

Suggestions:

- Develop an annual evaluation process for outreach ministries that ideally measures qualitative and quantitative outcomes of AWCC, the volunteers, and the beneficiaries, and offers prayerful reflection to discern the future.
- Take an inventory of the congregation’s interests to make certain the volunteer and building space commitments we make are aligned with those interests.

Finding #5: As far as outreach goes, AWCC is very building-dependent (at the local level).

Summary: This is a good thing—and it’s also a challenge. AWCC invested heavily to acquire the property in 2005 and make improvements since then (including a remodeling and small expansion in 2012). These events have made it possible for AWCC to host numerous events and activities, including ones from outside groups. AWCC is very generous with its building space, and this is a wonderful testimony. Examples include: We open our building to outside groups and do not charge them; we offer plots to neighbors for the Community Garden; we open our building to provide a warm, safe place for homeless to sleep in the winter; we host Easter and Christmas events and services and invite the public; and we’ve offered classes on financial management and marriage support and invited the community. However, this also demonstrates a potential blind spot: Why doesn’t AWCC “go out into the world” of its local community more?

Background: In several interviews, we heard about nearby schools that are really struggling. We also heard about numerous activities that go on throughout Applewood that we haven’t engaged, especially on weekends. Are we missing opportunities right in front of us?

Additionally, the Internal Assessment team has learned that the majority of AWCC’s members and attendees live outside of the Applewood community. With so many already “off site,” how are we equipping them to reach the people in their geographic areas?

Suggestions:

- How do we equip our people to reach out to their neighborhoods (such as the neighboring movement started by Runyon—ArtofNeighboring.com), and observe and respond to their respective community needs? Consider offering incremental steps of commitment, with periodic assessments to help people keep their commitments.
- Per Finding #3, consider exploring a partnership with Kullerstrand.

Finding #6: AWCC may benefit from doing less and blessing more.

Summary: The church may benefit from focusing on a handful of key strategic outreach initiatives while also becoming a “sending” church that affirms its members and attenders in how they are called (whether by vocation, by a cause, or something else). The former may help us narrow our priorities to help address issues of burn-out, budget priorities, miscommunication, and calendar overload. The latter may help us do far more than we ever imagined by teaching our church family that we are all in ministry together—that they can do work, or volunteering, or other community outreach efforts with the blessings and prayer-covering from their church, with possible resource support (building use, bulletin space, announcement time, and so on) given when available and appropriate.

Background: In our research, we learned about an approach Arvada Covenant Church adopted that may have some application to AWCC. If we understand it correctly, Arvada Covenant has committed to five core outreach ministries that it promotes for people power and financial support. All opportunities that come into the church are considered with the five ministries in mind, and if the opportunity fits, then the church goes further. If it doesn't, it is rejected.

As we contemplated this, we liked the simplicity and clarity that such an approach brings. However, we also worried about the opportunities that still merit someone's time and attention—and possibly the blessing of the church. It made us wonder if AWCC might narrow its outreach focus to a handful of specific ministries it considers core to the church's vision and mission, and then commissions the congregation to passionately pursue additional outreach efforts that may fall beyond that core. Such a commissioning would communicate blessing, and provide support when available and appropriate (building use, bulletin space, announcement time, and so on) without locking the church into a more far-reaching commitment.

Suggestions:

- Revisit the vision and mission of AWCC and how outreach ministries support that vision and mission.
- Explore the possibility of narrowing AWCC's “official” outreach activities to just five or six. Evaluate current and future ministries annually to help potentially narrow what AWCC does. Questions may include:
 - a. Is the ministry consistent with Biblical teaching?
 - b. What is our target population?
 - c. Is this something that we can do with our church only?
 - d. Does it require coordination with other churches?
 - e. What kind of support does the ministry need? Financial, volunteer?
 - f. How many volunteers should we have from our church to participate in this ministry?
 - g. What is the commitment timeline?
 - h. Does it conflict with our congregation using our building (if it requires the use of our building)?
 - i. Do we need to provide monetary support?
- Consider creating a “commissioning culture,” that encourages the congregation to engage in ministry, whether as a part of AWCC's core efforts or through one they identify (or someone else within the congregation identifies). Possible ways to do this may include mobilizing the church's small groups when opportunities and needs surface that resonate with one or more of those groups.

- Criteria would need to be clear, and the decision-making body involved would need to clearly communicate how the idea will (or won't) be supported by AWCC. In all instances, prayer covering is a given.
- Organize and unify the church's calendar and communication so that the activities that we "officially" support receive ample planning and scheduling, and ones we bless receive adequate time and visibility.
- Per Finding #5 above, how do we bless and equip the members and attenders of AWCC to do outreach in their own geographic areas (perhaps this is one of the five "focal" points that AWCC adopts)?

Concluding Thoughts

The External Assessment team is grateful for the opportunity to study AWCC's outreach efforts and to offer a report that we pray is realistic and uplifting. We are thankful for the countless hours and dollars this church has invested throughout the years.

The report (and its suggestions) is only as good as what becomes of it. It is our prayer that AWCC leadership and staff will find the report useful. We recognize many other discussions are necessary for the church's short- and long-term direction, be it leadership structure, spiritual development/discipleship, and so on. We believe this report helps inform thinking on these other fronts, and so careful consideration of it is certainly our hope and prayer.

To God alone be the glory.

The Discovery Retreat

The Discovery Retreat, attended and hosted by members of the AWCC congregation, provides one's own spiritual formation journey and equips us to better support others in their journey. Spiritual formation is the process that takes place in the believer, as the like of the Spirit of God transforms our spirit through deepening intimacy with the Trinity, changing our being from the inside out into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Spiritual formation also involves the believer's intentional response to God in the transformation process. The goal in this process in the believer is the reflection of God's glory in love. Through a personal discovery process we better understand how God has grown us thus far and gain insight about how to cooperate with Him in our spiritual formation in the years to come. By relating to the concepts of spiritual formation that serve as the basis for our maturing, we analyze our own spiritual journey, discern appropriate growth strategies, and experience community disciplines that will aid in our deepening relationship with God. Spiritual Formation Discovery is an interactive group process of assessing where you are in your spiritual journey by bringing clarity to your past spiritual experience, in light of a paradigm for spiritual growth, and then discovering how you can cooperate with God more intentionally in your ongoing Spiritual Formation (see Attachment 1 on using Scripture "formationally"). The Discovery Retreat has been created and is facilitated by Imago Christi—the Community of Spiritual Formation in Church Resource Ministries.

February 20-22, 2014: Budd and Lynda Taylor, Paul Veers, Linda Brown, and Matt Granitto attended Imago Christi's "Discovery Retreat" in Denver. Afterwards, they shared a summary of their Discovery Retreat experience with the Vitality Team. Several themes appeared as we shared: 1) they experienced a new understanding, appreciation and desire to be intimate with God, 2) they had a new appreciation for prioritizing our times of communion, community and ministry appropriately (see Attachment 2: "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry" by Nouwen), and 3) while the retreat required a significant time commitment on the part of the participant, all participants were left with an appreciation for the organization and presentation of the event. Overall the retreat nurtured the skills that God is developing in members of the Vitality Team as we focus on intimacy with God and develop a pattern of listening to God in each other.

February 26-28, 2015: AWCC hosted a Discovery Retreat—Discovering Your Spiritual Formation Journey. Attendees included 14 AWCC congregants and 5 guests from other church bodies. Matt, Budd & Paul served as hosts while benefitting from a thoughtful reflection of material that they covered a year earlier.

One month later, attendees at an informal debriefing session shared their observations and suggestions.

- The sense of longing that God has for us; He loves us so and desires to commune with us constantly.
- The emphasis on "*being with God*" in contrast with our often misplaced emphasis on "*doing for God*".
- The desire to "go deeper" in our relationships with God.
- Personal confirmation that this is what God values the most in us.

- 1st Order Calling: love God with all that you are and have; 2nd Order Calling: love each other in like manner.
- Finding the balance between our “Mary” and “Martha” perspectives.
- The value of this sort of Christ-centered, Holy Spirit-directed retreat; that AWCC should strive to see that all its members will experience a similar weekend.
- The importance of a spiritual director who assists us as we seek the Lord.
- Reading of familiar Scripture verses seemed fresh and new; eager to employ different emphasis in Bible study.
- Consider God-centered small group fellowships that stress Discovery Retreat and Vitality Team aspects; meet on Sunday evenings in homes.
- The wealth of references cited by the Discovery Retreat will prove valuable in the future.

We are considering the possibility of hosting an annual Discovery Retreat that would provide this valuable experience to 10 or more AWCC members as well as to members of our community. Further discussions with the Imago Christi have highlighted an opportunity for a partnership between Imago Christi and AWCC in providing a base for their spiritual formation ministry to church leaders in the entire Denver area.

Attachment 1: Using Scripture “Formationally”

Email Note from Mike Brown to the Vitality Team on 2/20/2014

All--

Please forgive me for being remiss for not talking more about the use of Scripture in our time of sharing together.

When considering how to use Scripture within the sub-groups, it is important to remember that there are two ways in which to use Scripture: informationally and formationally.

Gen 1:1 and the Eph 3 passages (see the email thread, below) are great passages, indeed. They can help remind us that this is not our world nor our Church. Col 1:18 is another good one to remind us we are the body but Christ is the head. These are all great passages to use when beginning the sub-group meeting. They will help keep the focus where it belongs: on God and Christ the head of the Church. It will be necessary to continue to remind ourselves of this as we proceed.

And this would be an example of using Scripture **informationally**, which is necessary and fruitful as we learn to participate in the life of the Trinity.

Informationally, verses remind us of the great truths of God and who God is. In my experience with groups, our tendency when given a verse on which to meditate is to approach it informationally, to exegete the passage so that we might recall the great theological truths of God, to bring up the historical context, or to apply it to some pressing social issue. While necessary, as I said, the danger is that it

allows us to keep God "out there," which can be more comfortable for us, but prevents us from letting Scripture live in us (the *living* Word of God).

But...God isn't at work "out there"; rather, He dwells within us. So, we have been using Scripture **formationally** for our check-in time in the main group meeting.

To use Scripture formationally is to use of Scripture be self-focused *with* God. To quote John Calvin: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." Augustine said, "How can you draw close to God when you are far from your own self?"

Therefore, in the context of Vitality, the purpose of the formational use of Scripture, our meditating on a verse together, is to help us listen to God together. That means that the team members must avoid looking for God "out there" and become attentive to where He abides: in me and in you. After all, He is, as Augustine once said, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

In the above example, to use Gen 1:1 formationally the team members should be encouraged and helped to reflect on what it means that *they* are each created by God and to reflect on the struggles and victories *they* each have had dealing with that truth (e.g., the deep feeling we each sometimes battle: God made a mistake in making me.) They might also reflect on the realization that something or someone *they* don't like is also created by God and to talk about *their* struggle with that.

We want the team members to become more attentive to God in themselves and more comfortable openly sharing their own journey. In each other's stories of God-in-us we begin to know ourselves better and to know God better; thus, we begin to hear God tell us why He brought together the group, whether the sub-group, the Vitality community, or the Applewood community.

So, you can surely use the Gen 1:1 passage and others for either purpose, informational or formational; however, the leaders must know the distinction and determine when each use is appropriate.

Our help will come from the Lord.

Mike

Attachment 2: Essay by Henri Nouwen

Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry

by Henri Nouwen

The word *discipleship* and the word *discipline* are the same word -- that has always fascinated me. Once you have made the choice to say, "Yes, I want to follow Jesus," the question is, "What disciplines will help me remain faithful to that choice?" If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we have to live a disciplined life.

By *discipline*, I do not mean control. If I know the discipline of [psychology](#) or of [economics](#), I have a certain control over a body of knowledge. If I discipline my children, I want to have a little control over them.

But in the spiritual life, the word discipline means "the effort to create some space in which God can act." Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you're not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn't planned or counted on.

I think three disciplines are important for us to remain faithful, so we not only become disciples, but also remain disciples. These disciplines are contained in one passage from Scripture with which we're familiar, but one that we may be surprised to find speaks about discipline.

"Now it happened in those days that Jesus went onto the mountain to pray, and he spent the whole night in prayer to God. When day came, he summoned his disciples and picked out twelve of them and called them apostles: Simon, whom he called Peter; and his brother, Andrew; James; John; Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew; Thomas; James, son of Alphaeus; Simon, called the Zealot; Judas, son of James; and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

"He then came down with them and stopped at a piece of level ground where there was a large gathering of his disciples. There was a great crowd of people from all parts of Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and be cured of their diseases. And people tormented by unclean spirits were also cured. Everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him because power came out of him that cured them all" (Luke 6:12-19).

This is a beautiful story that moves from night to morning to afternoon. Jesus spent the night in solitude with God. In the morning, he gathered his apostles around him and formed community. In the afternoon, with his apostles, he went out and preached the Word and healed the sick.

Notice the order—from solitude to community to ministry. The night is for solitude; the morning for community; the afternoon for ministry.

So often in ministry, I have wanted to do it by myself. If it didn't work, I went to others and said, "Please!" searching for a community to help me. If that didn't work, maybe I'd start praying.

But the order that Jesus teaches us is the reverse. It begins by being with God in solitude; then it creates a fellowship, a community of people with whom the mission is being lived; and finally this community goes out together to heal and to proclaim good news.

I believe you can look at solitude, community, and ministry as three disciplines by which we create space for God. If we create space in which God can act and speak, something surprising will happen. You and I are called to these disciplines if we want to be disciples.

Solitude

Solitude is being with God and God alone. Is there any space for that in your life?

Why is it so important that you are with God and God alone on the mountain top? It's important because it's the place in which you can listen to the voice of the One who calls you the beloved. To pray is to listen to the One who calls you "my beloved daughter," "my beloved son," "my beloved child." To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being, to your guts, and let that voice resound in your whole being.

Who am I? I am the beloved. That's the voice Jesus heard when he came out of the Jordan River: "You are my beloved; on you my favor rests." And Jesus says to you and to me that we are loved as he is loved. That same voice is there for you. When you are not claiming that voice, you cannot walk freely in this world.

Jesus listened to that voice all the time, and he was able to walk right through life. People were applauding him, laughing at him; praising him and rejecting him; calling "Hosanna!" and calling "Crucify!" But in the midst of that, Jesus knew one thing—I am the beloved; I am God's favorite one. He clung to that voice.

There are many other voices speaking—loudly: "Prove that you are the beloved." "Prove you're worth something." "Prove you have any contribution to make." "Do something relevant." "Be sure you make a name for yourself." "At least have some power—then people will love you; then people will say you're wonderful, you're great."

These voices are so strong in this world. These were the voices Jesus heard right after he heard "You are my beloved." Another voice said, "Prove you are the beloved. Do something. Change these stones into bread. Be sure you're famous. Jump from the temple, and you will be known. Grab some power so you have real influence. Don't you want some influence? Isn't that why you came?"

Jesus said, "No, I don't have to prove anything. I am already the beloved."

I love Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The father holds his son, holds his daughter, and touches his son and his daughter and says, "You are my beloved. I'm not going to ask you any questions. Wherever you have gone, whatever you have done, and whatever people say about you, you're my beloved. I hold you safe in my embrace. I touch you. I hold you safe under my wings. You can come home to me whose name is Compassionate, whose name is Love."

If you keep that in mind, you can deal with an enormous amount of success as well as an enormous amount of failure without losing your identity, because your identity is that you are the beloved. Long before your father and mother, your brothers and sisters, your teachers, your church, or any people touched you in a loving as well as in a wounding way—long before you were rejected by some person or praised by somebody else—that voice has been there always. "I have loved you with an everlasting love." That love is there before you were born and will be there after you die.

A life of fifty, sixty, seventy, or a hundred years is just a little moment in which you can say, "Yes, I love you too." God has become so vulnerable, so little, so dependent in a manger and on a cross and is begging us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you really love me?"

That's where ministry starts, because your freedom is anchored in claiming your belovedness. That allows you to go into this world and touch people, heal them, speak with them, and make them aware that they are beloved, chosen, and blessed. When you discover your belovedness by God, you see the belovedness of other people and call that forth. It's an incredible mystery of God's love that the more you know how deeply you are loved, the more you will see how deeply your sisters and your brothers in the human family are loved.

Now this is not easy. Jesus spent the night in prayer. That's a picture of the fact that prayer is not something you always feel. It's not a voice you always hear with these ears. It's not always an insight that suddenly comes to you in your little mind. (God's heart is greater than the human heart, God's mind is greater than the human mind, and God's light is so great that it might blind you and make you feel like you're in the night.)

But you have to pray. You have to listen to the voice who calls you the beloved, because otherwise you will run around begging for affirmation, for praise, for success. And then you're not free.

Oh, if we could sit for just one half hour a day doing nothing except taking a simple word from the gospel and putting it in front of us—say, "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want." Say it three times, and we know it's not true, because we want many things. That's exactly why we're so nervous. But if we keep saying the truth, the real truth—"The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want"—and let that truth descend from our mind into our heart, gradually those words are written on the walls of our inner holy place. That becomes the space in which we can receive our colleagues and our work, our family and our friends, and the people whom we will meet during the day.

The trouble is, as soon as you sit and become quiet, you think, Oh, I forgot this. I should call my friend. Later on I'm going to see him. Your inner life is like a banana tree filled with monkeys jumping up and down.

It's not easy to sit and trust that in solitude God will speak to you— not as a magical voice but that he will let you know something gradually over the years. And in that word from God you will find the inner place from which to live your life.

Solitude is where spiritual ministry begins. That's where Jesus listened to God. That's where we listen to God.

Sometimes I think of life as a big wagon wheel with many spokes. In the middle is the hub. Often in ministry, it looks like we are running around the rim trying to reach everybody. But God says, "Start in the hub; live in the hub. Then you will be connected with all the spokes, and you won't have to run so fast."

Community

It's precisely in the hub, in that communion with God, that we discover the call to community. It's remarkable that solitude always calls us to community. In solitude you realize you're part of a human family and that you want to lift something together.

By community, I don't mean formal communities. I mean families, friends, parishes, twelve step programs, prayer groups. Community is not an organization; community is a way of living: you gather around you people with whom you want to proclaim the truth that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God.

Community is not easy. Somebody once said, "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives." In Jesus' community of twelve apostles, the last name was that of someone who was going to betray him. That person is always in your community somewhere; in the eyes of others, you might be that person.

I live in a community called Daybreak—one of over a hundred communities throughout the world where children, men, and women who are mentally disabled and those who assist them live together. We share all aspects of day today living. Nathan, Janet, and all the other people of our community know how hard it is and how beautiful it is to live together.

Why is it so important that solitude come before community? If we do not know we are the beloved sons and daughters of God, we're going to expect someone in the community to make us feel that way. They cannot. We'll expect someone to give us that perfect, unconditional love. But community is not loneliness grabbing onto loneliness: "I'm so lonely, and you're so lonely." It's solitude grabbing onto solitude: "I am the beloved; you are the beloved; together we can build a home." Sometimes you are close, and that's wonderful. Sometimes you don't feel much love, and that's hard. But we can be faithful. We can build a home together and create space for God and for the children of God.

Within the discipline of community are the disciplines of forgiveness and celebration. Forgiveness and celebration are what make community, whether a marriage, a friendship, or any other form of community.

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is to allow the other person not to be God. Forgiveness says, "I know you love me, but you don't have to love me unconditionally, because no human being can do that."

We all have wounds. We all are in so much pain. It's precisely this feeling of loneliness that lurks behind all our successes, that feeling of uselessness that hides under all the praise, that feeling of meaninglessness even when people say we are fantastic—that is what makes us sometimes grab onto people and expect from them an affection and love they cannot give.

If we want other people to give us something that only God can give, we become a demon. We say, "Love me!" and before you know it we become violent and demanding and manipulative. It's so important that we keep forgiving one another—not once in a while, but every moment of life. Before you have had your breakfast, you have already had at least three opportunities to forgive people, because your mind is already wondering, What will they think about me? What will he or she do? How will they use me?

To forgive other people for being able to give you only a little love—that's a hard discipline. To keep asking others for forgiveness because you can give only a little love—that's a hard discipline, too. It hurts to say to your children, to your wife or your husband, to your friends, that you cannot give them all that you would like to give. Still, that is where community starts to be created, when we come together in a forgiving and undemanding way.

This is where celebration, the second discipline of community, comes in. If you can forgive that another person cannot give you what only God can give, then you can celebrate that person's gift. Then you can see the love that person is giving you as a reflection of God's great unconditional love. "Love one another because I have loved you first." When we have known that first love, we can see the love that comes to us from people as the reflection of that. We can celebrate that and say, "Wow, that's beautiful!"

In our community, Daybreak, we have to do a lot of forgiving. But right in the midst of forgiving comes a celebration: we see the beauty of people who quite often are considered marginal by society. With forgiveness and celebration, community becomes the place where we call forth the gifts of other people, lift them up, and say, "You are the beloved daughter and the beloved son."

To celebrate another person's gift doesn't mean giving each other little compliments—"You play the piano better"; "You are so good in singing." No, that's a talent show.

To celebrate each other's gifts means to accept each other's humanity. We see each other as a person who can smile, say "Welcome," eat, and make a few steps. A person who in the eyes of others is broken suddenly is full of life, because you discover your own brokenness through them.

Here is what I mean. In this world, so many people live with the burden of self-rejection: "I'm not good. I'm useless. People don't really care for me. If I didn't have money, they wouldn't talk to me. If I didn't have this big job, they wouldn't call me. If I didn't have this influence, they wouldn't love me." Underneath a successful and highly praised career can live a fearful person who doesn't think much of himself or herself. In community comes that mutual vulnerability in which we forgive each other and celebrate each other's gifts.

I have learned so much since coming to Daybreak. I've learned that my real gifts are not that I write books or that I went to universities. My real gifts are discovered by Janet and Nathan and others who know me so well they cannot be impressed any more by this other stuff. Once in a while they say, "I have good advice: Why don't you read some of your own books?"

There is healing in being known in my vulnerability and impatience and weakness. Suddenly I realize that Henri is a good person also in the eyes of people who don't read books and who don't care about success. These people can forgive me constantly for the little egocentric gestures and behaviors that are always there.

Ministry

All the disciples of Jesus are called to ministry. Ministry is not, first of all, something that you do (although it calls you to do many things). Ministry is something that you have to trust. If you know you are the beloved, and if you keep forgiving those with whom you form community and celebrate their gifts, you cannot do other than minister.

Jesus cured people not by doing all sorts of complicated things. A power went out from him, and everyone was cured. He didn't say, "Let me talk to you for ten minutes, and maybe I can do something about this." Everyone who touched him was cured, because a power went out from his pure heart. He wanted one thing—to do the will of God. He was the completely obedient one, the one who was always listening to God. Out of this listening came an intimacy with God that radiated out to everyone Jesus saw and touched.

Ministry means you have to trust that. You have to trust that if you are the son and daughter of God, power will go out from you and that people will be healed.

"Go out and heal the sick. Walk on the snake. Call the dead to life." This is not small talk. Yet Jesus said, "Whatever I do, you can do too and even greater things." Jesus said precisely, "You are sent into the world just as I was sent into the world—to heal, to cure."

Trust in that healing power. Trust that if you are living as the beloved you will heal people whether or not you notice it. But you have to be faithful to that call.

Healing ministry can be expressed in two words: gratitude and compassion.

Healing happens often by leading people to gratitude, for the world is full of resentment. What is resentment? Cold anger. "I'm angry at him. I'm angry at this. This is not the way I want it." Gradually, there are more and more things I am negative about, and soon I become a resentful person.

Resentment makes you cling to your failures or disappointments and complain about the losses in your life. Our life is full of losses— losses of dreams and losses of friends and losses of family and losses of hopes. There is always the lurking danger we will respond to these incredible pains in resentment. Resentment gives us a hardened heart.

Jesus calls us to gratitude. He calls to us, "You foolish people. Didn't you know that the Son of Man—that you, that we—have to suffer and thus enter into the glory? Didn't you know that these pains were labor pains that lead you to the joy? Didn't you know that all we are experiencing as losses are gains in God's eyes? Those who lose their lives will gain it. And if the grain doesn't die, it stays a small grain; but if it dies, then it will be fruitful."

Can you be grateful for everything that has happened in your life—not just the good things but for all that brought you to today? It was the pain of a Son that created a family of people known as Christians. That's the mystery of God.

Our ministry is to help people to gradually let go of the resentment, to discover that right in the middle of pain there is a blessing. Right in the middle of your tears—that's where the dance starts and joy is first felt.

In this crazy world, there's an enormous distinction between good times and bad, between sorrow and joy. But in the eyes of God, they're never separated. Where there is pain, there is healing. Where there is mourning, there is dancing. Where there is poverty, there is the kingdom.

Jesus says, "Cry over your pains, and you will discover that I'm right there in your tears, and you will be grateful for my presence in your weakness." Ministry means to help people become grateful for life even with pain. That gratitude can send into the world precisely to the places where people are in pain. The minister, the disciple of Jesus, goes where there is pain not because he is a masochist or she is a sadist, but because God is hidden in the pain.

"Blessed are the poor." Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are those who care for the poor"; he says, "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the mourning. Blessed are those who have pain. There I am." To minister, you have to be where the pain is. Sometimes that pain is hidden in a person who from the outside might look painless or successful.

Compassion means to suffer with, to live with those who suffer. When Jesus saw the woman of Nain he realized, This is a widow who has lost her only son, and he was moved by compassion. He felt the pain of that woman in his guts. He felt her pain so deeply in his spirit that out of compassion he called the son to life so he could give that son back to his mother.

We are sent to wherever there is poverty, loneliness, and suffering to have the courage to be with people. Trust that by throwing yourself into that place of pain you will find the joy of Jesus. All ministries in history are built on that vision. A new world grows out of compassion.

Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate. It's a great call. But don't be fearful; don't be afraid. Don't say, "I can't do that."

When you are aware that you are the beloved, and when you have friends around you with whom you live in community, you can do anything. You're not afraid anymore. You're not afraid to knock on the door while somebody's dying. You're not afraid to open a discussion with a person who underneath all the glitter is much in need of ministry. You're free.

I've experienced that constantly. When I was depressed or when I felt anxious, I knew my friends couldn't solve it. Those who ministered to me were those who were not afraid to be with me. Precisely where I felt my poverty I discovered God's blessing.

Just a few weeks ago a friend of mine died. He was a classmate, and they sent me the tape of his funeral service. The first reading in that service was a story about a little river. The little river said, "I can become a big river." It worked hard, but there was a big rock. The river said, "I'm going to get around this rock." The little river pushed and pushed, and since it had a lot of strength, it got itself around the rock.

Soon the river faced a big wall, and the river kept pushing this wall. Eventually, the river made a canyon and carved a way through. The growing river said, "I can do it. I can push it. I am not going to let down for anything."

Then there was an enormous forest. The river said, "I'll go ahead anyway and just force these trees down." And the river did.

The river, now powerful, stood on the edge of an enormous desert with the sun beating down. The river said, "I'm going to go through this desert." But the hot sand soon began to soak up the whole river. The river said, "Oh, no. I'm going to do it. I'm going to get myself through this desert." But the river soon had drained into the sand until it was only a small mud pool.

Then the river heard a voice from above: "Just surrender. Let me lift you up. Let me take over." The river said, "Here I am." The sun then lifted up the river and made the river into a huge cloud. He carried the river right over the desert and let the cloud rain down and make the fields far away fruitful and rich.

There is a moment in our life when we stand before the desert and want to do it ourselves. But there is the voice that comes, "Let go. Surrender. I will make you fruitful. Yes, trust me. Give yourself to me."

What counts in your life and mine is not successes but fruits. The fruits of your life you might not see yourself. The fruits of your life are born often in your pain and in your vulnerability and in your losses. The fruits of your life come only after the plow has carved through your land. God wants you to be fruitful.

The question is not, "How much can I still do in the years that are left to me?" The question is, "How can I prepare myself for total surrender so my life can be fruitful?"

Our little lives are small, human lives. But in the eyes of the One who calls us the beloved, we are great—greater than the years we have. We will bear fruits, fruits that you and I will not see on this earth but in which we can trust.

Solitude, community, ministry— these disciplines help us live a fruitful life. Remain in Jesus; he remains in you. You will bear many fruits, you will have great joy, and your joy will be complete.