

Year One, Section 6



The Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: Week 4

Empower Servant Leadership

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,
By the work of your hands, you created all that is good. You formed us in Christ's image, and you fashioned us with spiritual gifts according to your will. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:4–5). Created in your image, Lord, we have been made to serve and glorify you. Lord, help us to strengthen our gifts, and live empowered by your Spirit. Help us to find strength in serving one another, for we can accomplish far greater things in your name. And may we be your disciples, who help nurture and encourage the gifts of all others, without envy or strife. God, we know the harvest is plentiful, so make us to labor together in the grace and love of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: John 13:1–20

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to "depart out of this world to the Father," gathers with the disciples around table fellowship in this ultimate act of love. This narrative of Jesus begins "the Book of Glory" (chps. 13–21) leading to the crucifixion. Christ, as teacher and Savior, leads by example in this symbolic act of washing the feet of his beloved disciples. This memorable act of service is one of equality, one where there is no social status among the company, and our Savior is humbled in service. Gerard Sloyan writes, "Being bathed by Jesus means being symbolically taken into the event of the cross. It is likewise a model of service for the disciples." In this event, we see that we must be washed clean by our Savior, and in turn, we are sent out to do the very same.

This is the call for the people of God to practice Empowering Servant Leadership. Yet it is a rite of those who believe, who witness and testify to the final hours of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Notice, John begins this "Book of Glory" by stating that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (v. 1). Jesus showed great love to the end, to the ultimate expression of washing the feet of the disciples whom Christ loved. We remember that the table was prepared and the invitation extended to the Savior who bids us come, but John's Gospel message reminds us that the Savior is also the servant, leading by this ultimate example of love. For all who are in Christ, who have been created in the image of Christ and cleansed by the blood of our Savior, we are empowered and gifted by the same Spirit that was in Jesus to be Servant Leaders. It is not just in some, but all who are beloved disciples to the very end.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
 1. What does it mean that Jesus washed the disciples' feet, even Judas and Peter, as one of His final hours?
 2. Can you name your spiritual gifts? How do you use them for servant leadership to the glory of Christ?
 3. Recall a time when someone exercised servant leadership in a way that inspired you?
 4. How does your church cultivate, nurture, and support servant leadership?
 5. What gets in the way of all disciples using their spiritual gifts for servant leadership?

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Empowering Servant Leadership.*

Additional Resources

- Janet O. Hagberg, *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2003).
- Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey into The Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1991).
- James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: a Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).
- N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence and Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).
- Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).

Additional Videos

- Simon Sinek–Why good leaders make you feel safe (TED talk) https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_why_good_leaders_make_you_feel_safe
- Orkidstudio – EMPOWERMENT (Nakuru Project in Kenya) <https://vimeo.com/113384190>
- Ken Blanchard–Servant Leadership (London Business Forum) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctZHSa4Qhd4>
- Theocademy–Being Leaders (Ordered Ministry series) https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=275&v=VICZ4qownvI

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis:

For children:	emphasize that foot washing was one of the dirtiest jobs back in Jesus' day. Talk about "dirty jobs" today (e.g., scrub toilets, mop floors, pick up trash, clean dishes, etc.) and ask them what it would look like if they saw Jesus doing those jobs. Talk about examples of how Jesus leads, but also serves.
For youth:	focus on Jesus' question (v. 12) "Do you know what I have done for you?" How can we learn about servant leadership from Jesus' actions in the room that night? How can we learn about servant leadership from what Jesus has already done so far in his ministry? How can we learn about servant leadership from what Jesus is about to do?
For younger adults:	look for examples of servant leaders (past and present) who have impacted the world. Talk about what made them a servant leader and question how their impact might have been different if they had not been. Discuss qualities of servant leaders they have seen in mentors and they might see in each other.
For seasoned adults:	discuss servant leadership alongside of Jesus' statement (v. 17) "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." Ask for examples of how servant leadership not only is beneficial for the world, but for the servant leader as well. How can servant leadership change over a lifetime (teen, working years, retirement, etc.)?

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore:

- Sit around the outside of a children's swimming pool and take turns washing each other's feet
- Look for opportunities to volunteer "behind the scenes" in an attempt to embody service
- Read your congregational mission statement and ask what leadership might be helpful
- Begin a collection of soaps, shampoos and towels to give away
- Plan a churchwide supper before your next Maundy Thursday service to break bread together
- Identify and name servant leaders you know—write them a thank-you letter



Year One, Section 6



The Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: Week 5

Spirit-Inspired Worship

Opening Prayer

God of all praise and glory—you call us to rejoice in you, to praise your name, to find comfort in your presence, to stand in awe, to bow in confession, to come and worship. And in your worship, you meet us in ways we understand and do not understand. You meet us there. Your Spirit proclaims truth, your Word anoints us with wisdom, and your roots grow deeper in our soul. Lord, you deserve our worship each day. So, please forgive us when we forget what it is about; when we think ourselves too busy. Forgive us when we make it about what we desire or what entertains us. This sacred gift of wonder and love was meant to be so much more than we often make it. Yet we long to experience you, God. We need you. So inspire our worship with your Spirit that our hearts and our lives are transformed by your wonder. This we pray to the living God who encounters us in worship. Amen.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:9—5:10

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

The writer of Hebrews uses thematic language in order to inform the reader that we have “a great high priest,” one who is sympathetic, in whom we find rest on the Holy Day of Sabbath. The writer wants believers to hold fast to confession, because Jesus himself was tempted in every way and yet was sinless. This affirmation of the priestly nature of Christ explains why we, who are sinners, can approach the throne of our Savior. Christ fully understands the nature of our humanity, and in loving sympathy, Christ bids us to come and worship. It is an active call to obedience, just as Christ was obedient to the will of God in suffering death on a cross. “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (v. 16).

Too often our worship can become about us—our wants, our preference of style, our comfort in not being exposed, our way of going through the motions with little thought to the traditions. Yet, Spirit-inspired worship calls us into the presence of the “great high priest,” the one who suffered in obedience so that we might find rest, receive mercy and cling to grace. Spirit-Inspired worship holds fast to the truth that when we come into God’s presence, “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (v. 13). Spirit-Inspired worship exposes us, brings us to our knees in confession, and offers us freedom and rest in the Savior’s arms. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (vv. 7–9). It is Jesus Christ who lives and allows us the freedom to come into God’s presence in Spirit-Inspired worship.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
 1. Describe a time when you encountered the wondrous presence of Christ in worship.
 2. What does your church do to faithfully engage in Spirit-Inspired Worship?
 3. What things stand in the way and distract your church from Spirit-Inspired Worship?
 4. What prevents us from *obedience* in worshipping in spirit and in truth, in full exposure before the Savior?
 5. What does it mean for your life that we have “a great high priest” who has granted us Sabbath?
 6. How do you experience God’s presence in daily worship? Does your church equip you to worship daily?

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Spirit-Inspired Worship.*

Additional Resources

- Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012)
- Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis, MN: sparkhouse, 2010)
- Kimberly Braken Long, *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009)
- Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007)

Additional Videos

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56ysMeLUApI> (*John Crist, humorous*)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvVz-YtEpr8> (*Skit Guys, The Skinny on Worship, humorous*)
- https://www.ted.com/talks/nabila_alibhai_why_people_of_different_faiths_are_painting_their_houses_of_worship_yellow (*worship goes beyond the Sunday morning hour*)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_WZUNfIobQ (Porter’s Gate worship songs and collaborations) and <https://www.portersgateworship.com/> (*website information on Porter’s Gate*)

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children:	have them walk through your worship space and let them explore. Let them get behind the pulpit and pray or read scripture. Ask them questions about what happens in this space, let them answer and ask them what they would do for the different parts.
For youth:	encourage them to be active leaders in the worship space, not just ushers and greeters but liturgists. If your church doesn't already, consider having a youth-led Sunday morning; let them preach and sing and lead worship. Have them write the prayers and re-frame the creeds. Ask them to think about different places where worship could be held—Fellowship Hall, outdoor on the lawn, in a prayer room, etc.
For younger adults:	dig deeper, asking them where they connect in the worship service. Do they find rest during worship? If so, elaborate. If not, how could they find it? Consider that young adults are a generation that champions authenticity and relevance. How does or does that not play into our worship?
For seasoned adults:	for seasoned adults: is there unresolved grief over worship? Are there emotions that need some air, need to be heard to continue to move forward? What are our adults missing in worship, and what would excite them? How can they be the leaders that say, "Listen, the Spirit is doing something new!"

Suggestions for Engagement Opportunities

- Try to employ the senses during worship: we are good at hearing and speaking; what about touch and smell or seeing using visuals?
- Do a pulpit exchange with a minister of a different denomination. Invite them to observe how the worship of your church is Spirit-filled and challenge yourself to see the Spirit in their worship. Then exchange ideas!
- Form an Arts Committee for your worship space—how can the arts enrich our worship?
- Get outside your four walls! Change up your worship setting to explore how space speaks to our worship.
- Encourage your worship committee to watch other worship services that might be online. Encourage your youth and young people to bring back worship ideas from Montreat and youth retreats, camps, conferences, etc.
- **DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRY NEW THINGS!**



Year One, Section 6



The Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: Week 6

Caring Relationships

Opening Prayer

God of perfect love—we are cleansed and claimed by the love of Jesus Christ, our Savior. We are redeemed and restored by the self-emptying, sacrificial love poured out. And we are called to love you and all whom you call beloved children. Open our hearts to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to love as Christ loves: reconciling conflict, supporting all people in tragedy and triumph and daily surrendering our will for the sake of walking with others. We know that in our own accord, we will be imperfect at this. We will fall short. We will disappoint others and miss opportunities. Yet, Lord, help us to show up, to share Christ, and to be a beacon of hope, justice, love and joy to all whom you call us to care for in our lives. For this we pray in the name of the one whose perfect love casts out all fear, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: Galatians 6:1–10

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (v. 2).

If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit (v. 8).

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith (v. 10).

He never felt as if he had a place to belong, a place where he was accepted. For 20 years, life circumstances had left him homeless. Yet life had not left Steven bitter. On the contrary, Steven quoted the Word of God in all things. He walked through the breakfast line in the basement of the church every single morning and would greet you with a resounding testimony to the glory of God and the blessed assurance of a new day now dawning. Every day, as he came in off of the streets, he testified to the new day's opportunity to praise God.

Steven's friendly demeanor and constant affirmation of the Lord made him an easy relationship for the youth of the church. As the youth began to worship with the homeless community in the sanctuary on Sunday evenings and to dine around table fellowship afterwards, there was an evident shift, a sort of softening about Steven that began to intrigue me. After one Sunday evening worship service, Steven approached me to say a simple phrase: "You've done a good thing, Rev." What initially threw me in this exchange was that Steven's disposition was more somber and serious. "What's going on with you," I asked? "Rev," he said shaking his head, struggling to collect words. "I've been coming into the basement of this church for 20 years for y'all to serve me breakfast. And I've been grateful. Lord knows I've been grateful. But you know this is the first time I've ever been invited and feel welcomed to come into God's house, into the sanctuary of this building, and worship!?"

Caring relationships. Whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith, because we reap what we sow. It is the most simple and significant of commands, “to love the Lord your God, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet it is, in truth, the most difficult thing to live into. Christ’s true and perfect agape-love is when the Spirit of Christ dwelling within me meets the Spirit of Christ in you, regardless of all else.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. How does your church sow and nurture caring relationships?
 2. How does the church equip and empower you to see opportunities for caring relationship in Christ?
 3. Name a time when you have experienced Christ’s agape-love? Did it happen in the church?
 4. What prevents, hinders, blinds us from opportunities for true caring relationships?

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of caring relationships.*

Additional Resources

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, Publishers, 1954).
- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987).
- Pablo Polischuk. http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200703/200703_048_hlthchr.cfm. *The Healthy Church: A Commitment to Loving-Caring Relationships*. (Assemblies of God Journal)
- Sara Miles. *Take This Bread* (New York, NY. Ballantine Books, 2007).

Additional Videos

- https://youtu.be/9pgTG5-C_qs Different is Good. David Walker (TED Talk)
- https://youtu.be/cfW_2tzusyI Amazing Physics Teacher
- <https://youtu.be/4z7gDsSKUmU> How to Change the World (Kid President)
- <https://youtu.be/q0qD2K2RWkc> I Am Not Black, You Are Not White
- <https://youtu.be/oACYWh5UKsQ> Community Chaplain Training—Building Caring Relationships
- <https://youtu.be/zcruIov45bI> Happiness Is Helping Others
- https://youtu.be/eL_ofpwicsc Maya Angelou—Human Family

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children:	concrete thinking about what is “right” and “good” is instilled by trusted adults. Have children explore what is “right” and “good” when it comes to loving other people the way Christ commands in caring relationships. Allow them to name caring relationships in their life.
For youth:	explore the characteristics of caring relationships, and the negative impacts when we do not sow caring relationships. Enable youth to explore how they determine “right” and “good” in caring relationships; pointing to Christ—the exemplar of all caring relationships. Lead youth in conversations of cause and effect to how they live out caring relationships in their everyday life.
For younger adults:	spend time in theology of the incarnation of Christ and the doctrine of atonement. How does Christ forgive? How does Christ command us to do “good” and “right” in caring relationships? How do we fall short of the glory of God? Expand conversations to civic responsibilities, engagement in our everyday lives, and the truth of our broken world and creation. Engage in more complicated discussion of biblical texts where Christ’s caring relationships push socio-cultural norms and engage in today’s headline news stories.
For seasoned adults:	ask them to reflect on the characteristics, gifts, stories of the caring relationships in their lives. Focus on how they might continue to extend caring relationships today. Let them name the challenges/changes of today’s caring relationships. Help them explore the biblical mandates of loving brothers and sisters in Christ, while determining “who is my brother and sister in Christ?”

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore

- Engage and expand in interracial, multicultural, intergenerational, and economic conversations
- Explore “good” and “right” in Caring Relationships in civic arenas: prisons, hospitals, schools
- Find ways to nurture caring relationships for all ages, in the church, accountability, and a platform to air grievances and pray together.
- Have congregation sow neighborhood seeds of caring relationships throughout the week.
- Create a prayer and response ministry where all ages can identify those in need of a caring relationship.



Year One, Section 6



The Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: Week 7

Ecclesial Health

Opening Prayer

Loving God, we want to live faithfully. Teach us the joy that is living our faith in a community. Lead our churches into the deep reward of gratitude. Help us extend the same grace we are given. Make room in our hearts so that outreach and mission become part of our daily lives. In Christ's name, who calls and sends us all, Amen

Scripture: Matthew 15:1–9

- *Have someone read scripture passages aloud.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

In Matthew 15:1–9, Jesus is approached by the religious leaders of his day. These leaders are the “gatekeepers” in religious society and they are not happy that Jesus’ disciples are blatantly cavalier with the rules. Jesus quickly subverts their intentions by turning the tables. It seems the religious establishment is at fault for their traditions. Congregational cultures and habits can be deeply ingrained and all but impossible to change. The Pharisees might have been the first to say, “that’s how we have always done it.” Whatever “it” represents, the church can never rest on traditions that draw us away from our calling to discipleship. Ecclesial health is a way for us to identify the “sacred cows” in congregational life that are not healthy or life-giving.

In verse 6, Jesus states his primary opposition to the Pharisees’ leadership. They are keeping practices that do not serve God’s purpose. Jesus rightly identifies many of their practices as self-serving instead. The practice Jesus cites here is called “Korban,” a way to bend the rules. By using this custom of Korban, children could abandon their obligation to family to gain stature in the religious organization. The Pharisees concern over unwashed hands is wallpapering over traditions that do great harm to people.

In quoting the prophet Isaiah, he links his present age with that of their ancestors. In other words, this is nothing new. People (including us) have a propensity for circumventing rules or justifying traditions that help or serve our needs. Jesus calls on the religious establishment to look carefully at customs and traditions and make changes when they do not serve God’s purpose.

The scribes’ and Pharisees’ piety is no doubt sincere, but also competitive, exclusive, self-serving and ultimately destructive of relationships and community. Jesus, in contrast, emphasizes the relational character of true piety and devotion...Jesus does not disdain the law or tradition. Rather, he is concerned with defining the criteria by which we evaluate the integrity of our interpretation of the law and the legitimacy of our traditions. Tradition can be used to demarcate status and to build walls between people.

—Stan Saunders

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
6. What does ecclesial health look like in our text?
 7. How often is change stifled by historical practice?
 8. How might we realign our practices to what we believe?
 9. Name the “sacred cows” in the congregational life.
 10. What is at stake when traditions of a congregation cause harm to the ministry of Christ?

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Ecclesial Health*

Additional Resources

- Heifetz, Ronald, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009.
- Gunderson, Gary. *Boundary Leaders: Leadership Skills for People of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004
- Steinke, Peter L. *Healthy Congregations: A System Approach*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 1996
- Steinke, Peter L. *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 1993
- Steinke, Peter L. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006

Additional Videos

- MidAmericaRegionUUA –Anxious Times <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPA8vSO71Bo>
- The rarest commodity is leadership without ego: Bob Davids at TEDxESCP https://youtu.be/_QkUQkn7dS0?list=PLvd0jP3hpcyMxI6GC3hDBzDLM9NVFDQJs

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children:	rules can be confusing. Walk with children through the rules they have at their homes or schools. Ask them if they know why those rules are kept and why they are important to safety or community. Ask if they know what would happen if rules aren't kept. How would communities suffer if rules only benefited one group over another?
For youth:	explore the idea of Korban. You could talk about loopholes in rules and the ways they are used. Are rules put in place for some to take advantage of others? What are some rules in the church? Do they have a good and meaningful purpose in the congregation?
For younger adults:	explore the idea of community through the lens of rule-keeping. How are rules helpful and how do they prove harmful? How does the congregation evaluate traditions? In what ways are the congregational traditions helpful and in what ways do they harm? Take a look at all the places people say, "We've always done it that way."
For seasoned adults:	have conversation about the traditions they are passing on to the next generations in the congregation. Why were traditions and practices put in place? Look carefully at those practices to see if they would be expressed in the same way today. What traditions have been harmful to the life of the congregation over the years? What new practices are needed in today's world?

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore

- Multi-generational conversations about practices and culture of the congregation.
- Study the Great Ends of the Church in a sermon series or Bible study.
- Seek out other congregations to consider their best practices.
- Congregational conversation about what they value about the congregation.

