

Gathering the Seekers

by
Dr. James Newby

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Tried small group ministry and failed? Then try one more time with Jim Newby if you want to:

- Empower participants to be more effective ministers regardless of profession;
- Increase the biblical and theological literacy of participants;
- Deepen the ability of adults to reflect on the twin poles of life and faith; and
- Revitalize congregations and edify community.

Based on his successful workshops that have changed lives and churches, Newby presents a practical program for developing small group ministries that work. He shows clergy and lay leaders how to select, train, and motivate small group leaders and their groups. You will discover how small group ministry can become the linchpin of your church's revitalization.

Gathering the Seekers was originally published as a book by the Alban Institute in 1995. The Congregational Resource Guide heartily thanks Dr. James Newby, the Alban Institute, and Lilly Endowment Inc. for enabling *Gathering the Seekers* to be made available online. (Parts of the original book have been modified to allow you to use this site more easily as an online tutorial.)

Please take a moment to read about the author and sponsors of this tutorial. Then join Dr. Newby as he shares the processes and resources for launching a vital small group ministry in your congregation—Nurturing Experience Theologically (NET) groups.

We welcome your feedback on this tutorial; please let us know how it was helpful to you, how you would like to see it improved, and what additional resources you would recommend. Visit us online at www.congregationalresources.org/Seekers/Feedback.asp and complete our feedback form.

If you have additional comments or questions for either the CRG team or Dr. Newby, feel free to contact us at crg@alban.org.

Thank you, and welcome!

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About the Author and Sponsors

A proven church consultant and workshop leader, Dr. James Newby currently serves as Minister for Faith and Learning at Wayzata Community Church in Wayzata, Minnesota.

Previously he served as director of the Trueblood Academy at the Earlham School of Religion. He also was executive director of the Yokefellow Institute.

Newby's work with small groups is the culmination of a major Lilly Endowment grant on congregational renewal.

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The Closing of the Christian Mind

If we could first know where we are and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it. -- Abraham Lincoln

A young boy's parents were taking him through the "potty training stage." One evening the little fellow came to his father, tugged on his pant leg, and let him know in no uncertain terms that he needed to be taken to the nearest bathroom. All parents who have been through this process know that when your child says, "It is time," you do not wait to finish your sentence; you go right away!

The facility to which the father escorted his son was just off the kitchen. It had no window for outside light, so the only source for illumination was controlled by an electrical switch outside the door. After the father had placed the little fellow on the seat, he turned, closed the door as he left the bathroom, and inadvertently switched off the light. After a brief period of silence, a little voice cried from behind the closed door, "Where did I go?"

Many within the church are asking the same question these days: "Where did we go?"

The Unexamined Life Syndrome

In her Gifford Lectures, entitled *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt states that her interest in "mental activities" had many sources, but was most immediately influenced by the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In observing Eichmann respond to questions, she wrote that he showed no evidence of being able to "stop and think," but rather spoke in "cliché-ridden language."

To "stop and think" and to examine our actions in a reflective way, is becoming less and less a part of our lives. "Cliché-ridden language" abounds. Although we may not experience the demonic ways of Eichmann, we know something about the thoughtlessness of his existence. Most of the generation that more fully embraced the value of reflective examination is passing. The sight, sound, and action generation is becoming dominant. Thoughtlessness abounds everywhere in today's world, the by-product being minds without rudders, floating in a sea of confusion. And for many the Christian faith has been unable to provide the necessary certainty to clarify the confusion.

To be human is to need to perceive ultimate certainty and meaning in life. The human being is a very tough creature who can withstand a great deal. Humans cannot live, however, with the sense that their lives have no meaning—that there is no ultimate certainty and no reason for their existence on this earth.

In Luke's Gospel, a Pharisee asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him what is written in the law. The answer: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus replies: "Do this and live."

To love God with the mind leads to the examination of one's life. Examination leads to questions. Questions lead, in the end, to spiritual growth. The **need** for such examination can come at many entry points in our lives—the result of human failure or tragedy, transition or triumph, or just a deepening hunger to know and be known by the Living God. Whatever the impetus to life examination, the consequence can only be spiritual growth.

"Life can only be understood backwards" wrote Soren Kierkegaard. But Kierkegaard also said that life "life has to be lived forwards." One of the secrets of faith is to appreciate the transforming moment and the lessons of life it teaches, and then learn to know when to keep moving forward. To believe in a God of continuing revelation is to recognize that possibilities for new moments of transformation are always before us. These are what give the journey of life meaning, and to live in the expectant rhythms of such moments is to learn the secret of

living, in the fullest spiritual sense of that word.

Soren Kierkegaard also wrote of the "leap of faith" that one must take after letting theological inquiry and examination take us as far as they can. What concerns me is that so many of us are willing to take this "leap of faith" long before we have adequately struggled with our "teachable moments," which lead to the "Why am I here?" question. In this way, it becomes a "**cheap** leap of faith!" One of the reasons **why** so many shy away from the struggle is that they believe it is too **difficult**. Of course, life examination, study, thinking, and the pursuit of the question, "Why am I here?" are **difficult**. The fruit of such inquiry, however, is what makes life meaningful.

Life examination can be difficult. We need to learn, however, to appreciate and love the difficult in our life examination and transformational moments because of the growth that will surely result.

Biblical and Theological Illiteracy

The problem of biblical and theological illiteracy among congregants has been well documented by George Gallup and the Princeton Religion Research Center.

A personal experience helped me to understand our current situation. A newspaper reporter interviewed me about the history of the Yokefellow Movement. To help him understand some background, I quoted the great "Yoke passage" from Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The response from the reporter was certainly not what I expected. He said, "That is beautiful. Are you quoting from someone or did you write that yourself?" Searching for a twinkle in his eye that would have revealed a hidden taint of sarcasm, I was dumbfounded when he continued to stare at me straight-faced, waiting for a response to what was, for him, a serious question. This man was the "religion reporter" for his newspaper!

Much of the illiteracy of church members in the areas of Bible knowledge and theology is, in some respects, linked to the general decline of our culture's ability to educate effectively. Three best-selling books, *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom, *Cultural Literacy* by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and *Killing the Spirit* by Page Smith, as well as numerous government studies on "Why Johnny Can't Read" or "Why Jane Can't Do Math," and Carnegie Foundation Studies of the same sort, decry the terrible decline of the educational system in America. Among the many reasons for our difficulties in education in general, is one specific concern that anything **old** cannot contain contemporary truth. What is the Bible in the eyes of many in contemporary culture, including some within the Christian community, except an old book? This is chronological snobbery. Truth is truth regardless of the time in which it is written.

If biblical knowledge is weak, then we would surely be forced to classify our understanding of theology as very weak. The major problem with the theological enterprise is that it has become so professionalized that the average church member is confused by the technical terms that keep this discipline so elite. Words such as "justification," "sanctification," "eschatology," "epistemology," and even "sin," "atonement," "revelation," and "conversion" carry little meaning in the lives of contemporary Christians. At its core, however, theology is simply the process of reflecting on God's past and present moments in our lives. Whenever we reflect on our doubts, anxieties, and questions, we are theologizing—whether we know it or not. And yet "theology" remains a mysterious word for most laity.

This concern about biblical and theological illiteracy among congregants carries more with it than just their inability to spew forth biblical and theological information. The important question is not whether we should teach more biblical and theological **information**, but rather this: **How do we make the Bible and theological information meaningful and life-changing on the farm, in the office, or in the classroom?**

A Loss of Connection Between Faith and Life

Church members today find it difficult to connect what happens to them on Sunday morning with what happens to them on Monday morning. And most laity are quite comfortable on the periphery because they have never been encouraged to move beyond a mere supportive role in the religious enterprise.

Although an understanding of the "priesthood of all believers" has been a part of the church since Martin Luther (and, with few exceptions, every successive Christian generation since then has sought to make this understanding a part of its practice), we are still struggling to find ways to make it work. At the present, ministry is not something that is understood as involving the whole people of God. It is not seen as an all-encompassing way of life for Christians, regardless of their occupation. And most clergy seem unable to help laity to identify in specific ways how they can link their faith with their work-a-day world.

Forty years ago, Elton Trueblood wrote a book entitled *Your Other Vocation*. Trueblood sought to convince his readers that the term "laity" should be abolished. With this abolition he urged an enlarging of our understanding of the term **ministry**, or what he would call "the **universal** ministry." In the New Testament the term "laity" means all of the people in the early Christian movement, the **laos**.

Unfortunately, the separation still remains and divides these Christian functions. The pastors/priests/ministers—the "professional" religionists—are viewed as distinctly different from all of the other Christians, the laity. This is a false separation. Our understanding of "professionalism" in ministry lets those who are not "professional religious leaders" off the hook and makes them second-rate citizens in ministry function. The architectural structure of church buildings reinforces this false separation—with pews facing toward the "stage" (altar) and "spectators" (laity) watching "performers" (pastors).

When we gather for worship, we gather to be spiritually "refueled," and thus become more effective in our ministry and in the world. An old Quaker story tells about a visitor coming into the silence of a Friends' meeting for worship and asking the person sitting next to him, "What time does the service begin?" The Quaker's response was, "When the worship is over." Service, or ministry, is **everyone's** task. If we do not connect our life experience to our biblical faith, we can be highly religious personally without being the Christian ministers God is calling us to be.

Rampant Individualism

We are a nation of individuals. There is little within our national tradition that emphasizes community. This individualism has been with our culture since its beginnings, and involves giving priority to the concerns of an individual's private life and fulfillment over a concern for the whole of society. Within the realm of religion this involves giving priority to individual spiritual needs over the mission of the faith community.

Both a private life and a communal life are important to the spiritual growth of individuals. Many observers of contemporary society, however, believe that there has been a growing (and now rampant) tendency to give the individual precedence over the community. Most Americans view their religious involvement in a church as a journey among individuals rather than as a community moving together. And since the revolution of "individualism" in the 1960s, this has intensified with mainline religion.

Many factors directly or indirectly contribute to this focus on individualism. One is certainly the fragmentation of the family. With both parents in a household working, and children involved in everything from soccer and music lessons to the latest martial arts and tennis programs, modern families are run ragged. There is not enough time during the week to complete all of

the work that needs to be done, so the weekends become a time of picking up after the week has just passed and preparing for the week to come. Although Sunday morning is still the traditional time for most Americans to attend worship in a faith community, athletic programs for kids are beginning to be scheduled during this time, and free weekday evenings are becoming even more scarce.

Coupled with the fragmentation of the family and the crunch of time is the effect of television and assorted technological wizardry on our communal existence. We are a society that has fallen in love with our technology. A trip to a local appliance or computer store offers a firsthand look at the tremendous advances we have made in the distribution of information and the easing of work loads. This is good. What is **not** good, however, is the sacrifice of personal interaction that such technology causes.

There is evidence that the twenty-first century is becoming a time of (1) an intensified search for meaning in life and (2) a search for more meaningful relationships. This is a time when millions of Baby Boomers are reaching midlife. During the time of transition for this large segment of our population, the faith community could be the place where this meaning and relationship is sought. The remaining question, however, is whether or not this "movement" will be the spiritual journey of separated believers with no interest in community, or a move toward balancing the need for community and "one another" in a society where individualism still remains rampant.

Opening the Christian mind and nurturing the souls of a seeking generation will require more from the local congregation than a weekly forty-five-minute Sunday school lesson and twenty-minute sermon. It begins when Christians desire more—more meaning in life and more meaningful relationships in the community of faith. In small groups designed to reflect on life experiences and then connect these experiences with the larger Christian story, new meaning can be found, the Christian mind can be opened, and people can be spiritually empowered. That process begins by first understanding the major theological issues presumed in such a statement of renewal.

Spiritual Growth and Renewal

We can create a new form of learning, suited to the needs of this age. -- D. Elton Trueblood

The underlying premise of this tutorial is the belief that (1) adult Christian religious education is an important part of the nature of congregational life, and (2) small groups are the most effective way to educate and spiritually empower individuals and congregations. Ever since Peter wrote in his First Letter, "Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you," (1 Peter 3:15) the church has been concerned with Christian religious education.

Simply put, **the task of Christian religious education is to bring people into an understanding of the issues surrounding the Christian faith. It is that area of congregational life where we reflect on our experiences, inviting the intellect to help us understand how God is working in our lives—thus helping us to clarify what we believe and why we believe it.**

With this reflective task comes empowerment. The NET Groups program, as outlined in this tutorial, is a process that helps people reflect on their experiences and make connections between their faith and their life in ministry, regardless of profession.

The Congregation: A Center for Practical Theological Discourse

Many today are asking about the necessity of education in the congregation and if living religiously with others might be all that is needed. Living religiously with others is indeed educational, but the chaos and transition in which people in modern society find themselves calls for a **deliberate** vehicle through which Christian values can be transmitted and in which meaning in life can be found. The question is, "what **kind** of vehicle is effective?"

As it is practiced in most local churches, adult religious education is not very effective. I believe it is ineffective because it fails to connect a person's **experience** with the relevancy of the faith. To reflect theologically **together** has always been an important part of congregational life. What is needed is to make such reflection more intentional. The congregation should be that "safe place" where all questions about God can be asked, without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. To love God with all of my **mind** means to ask questions about God's relation to me and to the world. The Christian faith is not a questionable religion—but it is a religion which allows, even encourages, you to ask questions.

We live in a world that is surrounded by mystery. To accept the fact that most of us live in a tension between affirming our faith in one breath and asking questions about our life and faith in the next, is a liberating experience.

There are times in the process of life and faith examination when it takes more courage to "stop and think" and stand by your reflective questions, than to stand by beliefs that have not yet been tested by your experience. In the trustworthiness of religious experience lies the affirmation that seeking and questioning will eventually lead to finding...**and to more questions**. In this spiritual context, "**why**" becomes a sacred word.

The center of "practical" theological discourse, where the "why" questions can be asked, is the congregation. **The congregation is the one place that seeks to ground theological discourse in the practical life experiences of everyday Christians.** These believers, who are living their lives as best they know how with the help of their genuine faith commitments, need the congregation to be that place of inquiry into theological issues that are forever being raised in their practical experiences of life. It is in the life experiences of church members that theology moves from the abstract to the practical, and the congregational setting is where these practical issues can be reflected upon.

Adult Christian religious education will always be part of the nature of congregational life,

whether this education is intentional or happens unintentionally. Humans are gifted with the capacity to think, and it is impossible for us to leave our minds outside the circle of our congregational life. Whether formally or informally, the questions of the Christian faith will be asked. What remains to be decided by pastors and Christian education leaders is how **effective** we will be in responding to these questions.

Life Experiences as a Place to Begin

The continuing revelation of God through the Living Christ led to the development of the **NET (Nurturing Experience Theologically) Groups** program. It is designed to make everyday human experience the criterion for theological reflection. The hope is to establish an atmosphere for the individual to "pay attention" to how God is being revealed in the "everydayness" of human activity.

By simply asking the central question, "How is God working here?" participants are responding to a "God on the move"—a God who is constantly creating and interacting with the creation, including the experiences of our lives. God is not merely a God of "I am who I am," but a God of "I am **becoming** who I am **becoming**."

We are grateful to remember a God who created, who acted, who loved, and who forgave. But the God-in-process of the NET Groups program is a God to be known as one who is creating, who is acting, who is loving, and who is forgiving. The primary symbols of our faith point to a God of process—the Exodus for the Jews and the Resurrection for the Christians.

By its broadest definition, a person's life experience is the basis for **all** religious expression. What is the Bible, in its purest form, but a number of people interpreting the experience of God in their lives and in their corporate existence? What is all of the preaching and teaching of the church for 2000 years except, in its most basic sense, an effort to understand the experiences of God in our lives and in our world? Whether we recognize it or not, we are "experiencing" all of the time and "theologizing" all of the time. The NET Groups program contextualizes the experience and encourages participants to ask the most pertinent theological question: "How is God working here?" This leads into reflection, followed by an opportunity to introduce the Christian story and vision.

Formation of the Laity for Ministry

The NET Groups program begins with the theological premise that all who claim the name "Christian" are called to be ministers. Theological inquiry and discourse are the responsibilities of the entire people of God. Theological education must be viewed as a corporate activity of the church and not the private activity of a few professionals.

Intellectually, the church understands this. Practically, it is very weak in **applying** this understanding to the mission of particular congregations. For the most part we have failed to form the laity for ministry

And yet we try and will continue to seek ways in which Christian religious education can be about this formative task. Such formation requires more than cognitive knowledge of the Bible and certain theological presuppositions. Wholistic Christian education should be affective and behavioral as well as cognitive.

Through its various dimensions, the NET Groups program is a model of wholism. Yes, there is an alarming deficiency in biblical and theological knowledge. More information, however, does little good in the ministry if it does not "touch the heart" in an affective way, and then lead to behavioral changes that will move the Christian to be a transforming witness in the world. To love God with our minds and to express such love in a caring fellowship will inevitably lead to transformation of self and efforts by the self to transform the world. Love implies relationship, and when in relationship the self is transformed.

Today there is a significant move toward activity, relationship, and experience with regard to learning. **Experience** as the criterion for theological reflection is certainly the central piece of the NET Groups program, but it goes beyond developing a more effective learning model for the church. NET Groups are designed to help Christians understand that their many and varied experiences can be **occasions for ministry**. A most important task of the local congregation is to help people discern their gifts in ministry and then activate those gifts for witness and ministry in the world.

What the NET Groups program seeks is a vision for ministry, where the laity can see themselves as part of the transformation process, being used by God to help build a better world. Of course, an important part of the transformation process, and the first part, is to see their own transforming experiences in their understanding of who they are and what they could be. The central question in this program is, "How is God working here?" But this question is always followed with, "How could I have been a more effective minister in this situation?"

The golden biblical text for the role of Christian religious education in the formation of the laity for ministry is Ephesians 4:11-12: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (NRSV). "To equip" is the role of Christian religious educators, who are also apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

Empowering Congregants...Renewing the Congregation

"Can God work to renew an entire congregation through the spiritual growth of individuals who belong to a small group?"

As a consultant to many churches of various denominations, I enter into a relationship with these congregations by asking about the nature of their fellowship. One of the first questions I ask is, "How many small prayer and study groups do you have going in your church?" Although my methodology is not very scientific, I can conclude (based upon the scores of churches with which I have consulted) that there is, indeed, a direct correlation between a congregation's overall spiritual vitality and the number of its members involved in small prayer and study groups. If individuals within these small groups are experiencing spiritual growth in their own lives, then this seems to have a "spill-over" effect into the entire congregation.

Behind the truth of this conclusion are these theological presuppositions:

Our God is a God of transformation, and, in the words of Christ, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20 NRSV). In small group fellowship, lives can be transformed. Elton Trueblood calls this the "incendiary fellowship," where each loving heart sets another heart on fire. Such spiritual vitality is intrinsically a part of any small group where finite souls seek relationship with the Infinite, and **expect** to find it! If we truly believe that Christ is a presence of transformation, then lives can be changed. And when lives change and exhibit movement toward spiritual maturity, this cannot be kept by the individual because he or she will be interacting with people who will also be affected. What we prize we share, and if one "prizes" the spiritual growth occurring in his or her life, it will be shared with others. Such excitement and vitality becomes contagious.

Our God is a God of renewal and revitalization. "Can God work to renew an entire congregation through the spiritual growth of individual congregants who belong to a small study group?" **Yes**. How it is done will vary somewhat from congregation to congregation, depending upon the temperament of the individual congregants and the leadership positions they hold within the congregation. The truth that runs through all temperaments and positions and congregations, however, is this: **transformed church members and attenders renew and revitalize congregations**. The Holy Spirit will not be squelched, even in the most deadening of religious institutions. The "spill over" of new life will affect everyone with whom the transformed person interacts. As we provide the means for personal spiritual renewal,

people are empowered spiritually. That also energizes the entire congregation in its ministry and mission abilities.

A Strategy for Vitality

It is the new shoots that you have to look after. -- Malcolm Muggeridge

The NET Groups program is an educational process that **Nurtures Experience Theologically**. It offers people a way to "think through" their life experiences, making worthwhile connections between matters of faith and life. In short, it is an integration of experiences where divine and human meet, training participants to ask the question, "How is God working here?" It is, I believe, a "new shoot" of spiritual vitality.

The NET Groups program has four goals:

A. To empower participants to be more effective ministers regardless of profession.

This is not a new goal for Christians, but has been at the heart of our belief system since the apostolic church. **How** to empower the laity has been the difficulty, moving from a statement of belief to practical action. Too often "lay ministry" has meant "church work," whether teaching in the Sunday School program or serving as an usher.

The NET Groups program, however, challenges participants to see ministry as something practiced in everyday life. There are ministries of teaching, law, business, refuse collection, auto mechanics, and many others. The important point is to sensitize people to ask, "How is God working here?" as a matter of course, every day, all day—and "How am I being called to minister to my fellow human beings (or fellow creatures) as a result?"

B. To increase the biblical and theological literacy of participants.

If we believe that knowledge of the Bible is essential to the ongoing spiritual development of believers, and that the knowledge of God is helpful in asking such questions as "Why am I here?," then this goal is important. How do we begin to turn the tide?

There are many different ways of learning, and the "teachable moments" will occur in people's lives at different junctures. For most adults, these moments will come out of **experience** in everyday life. Experience is **first**, and then we can ask, "What does the Bible say about this?" NET Groups move people to make connections with Scripture out of the dailiness of their existence.

C. To deepen the ability of adults to reflect upon the twin poles of life and faith.

It is so easy to compartmentalize our lives, relegating our "religious life" to something we do on Sunday and before meals. The NET Groups program begins the process of integration, breaking down the artificial walls that we have erected between our day-to-day lives and our religious beliefs.

In a world of fast-moving images, reflective thinking is a process that takes discipline. To sit down in a small group with fellow Christian strugglers, and reflect upon the important issues of faith and life, is an essential step toward discovering—experientially—the answer to the "Why am I here?" question. And if it does not lead to an answer, it will, at least, lead to deeper and more profound questions about the importance of our lives on this earth.

D. To revitalize congregations and edify community.

Congregations that are filled with people yawning and slouching in the presence of God can be transformed. Such renewal and edification will not come primarily through the worship experience—although it will find some expression there. And it will not come primarily out of the business meetings—although, once again, the renewed vitality will be manifest there. The renewal occurs when Christians meet in small groups to share their pilgrimage and relate this journey to the life of the ongoing congregation.

Building upon these four NET Group goals and asking the question, "What's in it for me?" professional congregational leaders can expect to discover:

- Renewed life in your congregation;
- A method to foster spiritual vitality;
- A process that develops theologically mature adult Christian members;
- A way to make the ministry of every Christian a reality; and
- A way to foster small groups.

And, for the lay leader who becomes a NET group participant:

- A way to develop leadership skills;
- A way to deepen your own spiritual life;
- A path to self-awareness in learning about the gifts and talents God has given you;
- A way to broaden your biblical and theological understanding; and
- A way to be of service to others.

Process

In its ideal form the NET Groups process begins in September and ends in May. The six elements that are woven into the NET are:

1. A spiritual autobiography
2. Journaling
3. A common devotional reading
4. A common theological reading
5. The Ministry Experience Report or MER
6. Theological discussion among NET Group members.

In addition to these elements, an opening event or retreat and a closing celebration are encouraged. Keeping in mind the summer doldrums and the need for a Christmas break, a typical year might follow this pattern:

September 12

Dinner and Opening Event
Basic orientation
Group building
Spiritual autobiography assigned

September 26

Sharing of spiritual autobiography
Journaling method taught
Ministry Experience Report taught
Devotional reading agreed upon

October 10, 24; November 7, 21; December 5

Group meets 2 1/2 hours each evening for discussion of devotional reading and theological reflection upon two Ministry Experience Reports each evening.

January 9, 23; February 6, 20

Group meets 2 1/2 hours each evening to discuss readings. These readings center on the major theological issues that have surfaced from the previous Ministry Experience Reports.

March 12, 26; April 9, 23; May 7

Group meets 2 1/2 hours for a second round of discussion of devotional reading and theological reflection upon two Ministry Experience Reports each evening.

May 21

Closing celebration

Each congregation can tailor the schedule to meet its own particular needs. Some may want to meet more often for more in-depth discussion, and others may find that more frequent meetings cause a scheduling burden. The point is this: Be creative!

Spiritual Autobiography

Writing your spiritual autobiography is one of the best ways I know to help you grow spiritually. It requires you to think reflectively about your life and purpose, and encourages sensitivity to the working of God in your earthly journey.

NET Group participants write this autobiography during the two-week break between the opening event and the first session. This is not turned into the leader, but is solely for the benefit of group members. When the group gathers for their first meeting they want to be able to share insights gained from this writing. It is a way for the group to begin to make connections with one another and a good way to start the process of building trust.

Two possible outlines for writing a spiritual autobiography follow; participants may develop their own.

Method One

- A. Quickly list the important markers of your life. This list should not be made with careful consideration and extensive reflection. Rather, it is a "this is what comes to mind when I reflect upon my life."
1. Significant people in your life
 2. Significant events in your life
 3. Significant experiences in your life

Note: an **event** is a one-time episode: the birth of a child, graduation from college, a wedding day, the death of a parent. An **experience** is a process: pregnancy, your first job, serious illness.

- B. On a second day join the people, events, and experiences in a chronological sequence. Include only those persons, events, and experiences that seem significant to you now.

As you make these connections between people, events, and experiences, look for:

1. Trends or patterns;
2. Ways that God is active in your life;
3. Principles you use to evaluate whether God is active in your life.

You may also include your reflections of:

4. An understanding of your relationship with Christ;
5. Theological concepts that have been illumined by your life experience;

6. Commitments you have made as a result of your life experience;
 7. A sense of Christian vocation that has developed;
 8. Ways that you have matured spiritually, or a pattern in your devotional life;
 9. Areas that represent successes, and areas that remain ongoing concerns.
- C. Take an intuitive leap into your future:
1. What do you see as forward directions to be pursued?
 2. Are the goals to be achieved or commitments to be made?

Method Two

- A. Develop a lifeline in any manner you wish (examples might include a line, spiral, diagram, or timeline). Focus on transitions, changes, decisions, new directions, marker events.

It is often helpful to show location, school or work setting, role status (child, single adult, married), significant figures and events, and the pluses and minuses of each period.

- B. Identify key transition periods. Evaluate each one as easy or difficult on a scale of 1 (easy) to 10 (difficult). Think about the reason for each rating (examples might include "Not ready to move on," "A disturbing external event," or "Experienced much inner suffering.")
- C. Reflect upon your timeline using the following questions:
1. Where did I experience God's presence or absence?
 2. Over which transitions did I have the most control? The least?
 3. Where were the high points? The low points?
 4. What issues were dominant during various periods?
 5. Where any issues left unresolved?
 6. Are there patterns or trends?

The writing of one's spiritual autobiography should be a joy and not a chore. It is a good way to begin the process of reflective thinking and leads into the discipline of journaling.

Journaling

What is the value of keeping a spiritual journal on a regular basis if we are engaged in ongoing dialogue with others? Theological reflection both feeds and follows spiritual reflection; therefore, many have found a journal to be a valuable resource for integrating the theological and spiritual processes. For NET Groups, the journal is requested as a means of helping the participant to see more clearly the connections between life and faith.

Keeping a journal is very much like maintaining any other relationship—it is a project! Like relationships with family, friends, children, and God, relationship with the journal must be nurtured to be most effective. The NET Groups program considers the journal to be a process rather than a product. It can be seen as a safe place for thoughts and feelings to be recorded.

You can count on a great variety in procedure, quality, and quantity of writing! The following information should be seen as suggestions rather than rules. Participants should feel free to share or not share their journals with others, including the leader.

"Materials," "motivation," and "methods" are the three parts of the journal writing process. These need to be taught to participants at the first orientation meeting. This allows for participants to digest the information before the next meeting and discover any questions or problems.

"Materials" is self-explanatory. "Motivation" is what enables the participant to use the journal for theological reflection, in addition to psychological process. "Methods" are suggested to help ease people into the procedure, especially if they are unfamiliar with journal writing.

Materials

When it comes to keeping a journal, **time** is indeed material. How much time does the participant need or want to spend on this process? The amount of time spent, as well as the length of writing, will vary and will not affect the learning that takes place. Ten minutes spent writing one or two pages about a frustrating work situation may well be sufficient to discover how God is present. Reflection on a passage of Scripture or other reading may take several days of writing for longer periods.

The important element is that participants attempt to set aside a regular time for journal writing. This time becomes honored each day as an important appointment. Participants should attempt to write in their journals several times a week. Some people respond well to a daily writing routine.

Finding the right **place** is also important. Quiet surroundings are best. It is helpful to have a particular setting, such as a table or desk with a comfortable chair and good lighting. Routine seems to help the creative process; variety of setting often does not.

The **kind** of writing materials used should be left to each individual. What seems right for you? Loose-leaf paper and a variety of pens and pencils are appropriate for many journal keepers. Bound books somehow seem more permanent and can create a hesitancy to write. The loose-leaf binder allows for moving entries around. It allows for the destruction of entries that suddenly seem inappropriate. Having a variety of pens and pencils allows the writer to express passion or apathy in colors or black and white, with bold strokes or wimpy ones.

Motivation

In each of the following categories we suggest questions to guide the participant in doing his or her own theological work. Please make other suggestions appropriate for your context. Recommend that your group members find their own way into the process. Since this is a program of theological reflection, the following questions may be helpful as a way to begin the journaling process:

- Who is God to you?
- Who is Jesus?
- Who is the Christ?
- Who are you?
- Are humans "fallen"? Sinful? Ignorant?
Why? How?
- What is sin?
- How have you experienced God? Jesus? The Holy Spirit?
- How important is the Bible to your faith life? Your work?
- What are your favorite Scripture passages or devotional readings?
- Why are they meaningful?
- What is grace?
- What is forgiveness?
- What is salvation? How do you get it? Does it come from outside yourself? From within?
- When have you experienced grace or forgiveness?
- When have you forgiven another?
- How does God fit into your experience of human forgiveness?
- What does transformation look like? How does it occur?

- Can you see patterns of dying and coming alive again in your experience?
- What have been your resurrection/transformation moments?
- Who/what has been instrumental in these experiences?

Finally...

- What was your day like today?
- With whom did you relate well? Poorly?
- How could you see God moving in any relationship today?
- What happened today (or this week) that relates to your theological perceptions (of God, Jesus, sin, grace, faith)?
- What changes do you see in your life that may be related to a new understanding of your faith?

Methods

These suggestions help group members become unstuck about journal writing without becoming unglued. NET Groups present them as **options only**, trusting group leaders and participants to derive their own best methods.

The key here is to be comfortable, but to risk a challenge occasionally! Trying new methods of journal writing will often open new insights. Incidentally, neatness does not count!

- You might begin with **lists**. This is an easy way to get started on a slow day. Start with a question such as "Where have I seen God?" or "Which people seem to reflect Christ's love to me?" Begin writing down answers without attempting to censor them. Brainstorm!

Example:

Who reflects Christ's love?

Phyllis, mother, Mother Teresa, Lawrence, Aunt Ruth, Bill, Carol.

Later you may choose to work further with lists, using some of the other methods to reflect more deeply on what you have learned.

- Another method is **free expression**. This is the most common of all journal writing. You simply begin to write, expressing yourself comfortably and openly.

Example:

When Jim told us we were going to have to change offices, I began to get angry. Then I began to reflect on the burst of anger, asking "What is beneath the anger? Fear of change? Not liking to be out of control?"

- A third method is **dialogue**. You can hold a conversation with yourself in your journal, acknowledging that each of us is really "many voices." You can use your name to designate your ego-state and use another name or title for some other person, internal or external.

Example:

Judith: I don't understand why I am feeling so confused today.

Karole: Is it your faith? Are you struggling spiritually?

Judith: Yes. Why does God allow evil to happen? Why is the world filled with such bad news when I worship a God of Good News?

Karole: There is a lot of mystery in the world that we do not understand.

Judith: I suppose that I must be content to live in the mystery, but I feel so discontent.

Karole: Be patient. We see through a glass darkly.

Judith: Yes. Be patient. Thank you, Karole.

- **Prayer** is another way to enter into the journaling process. If you are a newcomer, let the journal be a place to experiment with prayer. If you are familiar with prayer, experiment with different forms of prayer. The journal can be a place where anger at God can be expressed and explored. You may want to experiment with sentence prayers or breath prayers, to find one that is most comfortable.

Example:

Lord Jesus Christ, take over.

Come, Loving God, into my heart.

Surround me, O God, with your love.

- Finally, one can use his or her journal for **artistic expression**. Drawing is an appropriate journal-keeping technique. It can often awaken cognitive learning. One journal writer found herself sketching the cross on several entries. She began to write poems with each drawing, asking Jesus to explain the crucifixion and resurrection to her. She developed a new understanding of Christ. Her feeling was she moved from a vague "Jesus is a nice guy" to more of an understanding of "Look what God has done for me."

Example:

(early poem)

I don't know why

you're hanging there

on that stupid rough-hewn cross!

You could be having a beer with the boys...

or walking Mary Magdalene home.

So, why are you hanging there

on that stupid rough-hewn cross?

Journals are personal. It is one of the most effective tools for reflection, recognizing each person will do it differently. Trust God to work in all methods!

Devotional Resources

A common devotional reading connects NET Groups in another important way. The following list of twenty-five classics provides an ample selection, but NET Groups could also benefit by using some more recent writings, such as *Listening to Your Life*, by Frederick Buechner; *Lighting a Candle: Quotations on the Spiritual Life*, edited by Molly Young Brown; *Living in the Presence*, by Tilden Edwards; or *Finding Your Own Spiritual Path*, by Peg Thompson. Also, Richard Foster's work with the Renovare (www.renovare.org) devotional material would complement the reading of the classics.

1. *A Testament of Devotion*, by Thomas Kelly
2. *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, by William Law
3. *The Private Devotions of Lancelot Andrewes*
4. *Meditations of the Heart*, by Howard Thurman
5. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*
6. *Confessions of St. Augustine*
7. *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas a Kempis
8. *Pensees*, by Blaise Pascal
9. *The Journal of John Woolman*
10. *A Diary of Private Prayer*, by John Baillie
11. *The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life*, by Hannah Whitall Smith
12. *Surprised by Joy*, by C.S. Lewis

13. *No Man Is an Island*, by Thomas Merton
14. *Dr. Johnson's Prayers*, edited by D. Elton Trueblood
15. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan
16. *Creative Prayer*, by E. Herman
17. *Fruits of Solitude*, by William Penn
18. *I and Thou*, by Martin Buber
19. *Devotions*, by John Donne
20. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, by Francis of Sales
21. *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence
22. *The Dark Night of the Soul*, by John of the Cross
23. *Reality in Worship*, by Willard L. Sperry
24. *The Journal of John Wesley*
25. *The Journal of George Fox*

Reflective Queries on Devotional Reading

A common set of queries is a way to keep NET Groups participants focused in their reading.

1. What **one** word describes your feelings about the devotional reading? Why?
2. How can this reading be applied to your present life situation? Does it "ring true" for your experience?
3. At what points do you agree with the author? At what points do you disagree? Why?
4. How is God working in your life through this devotional reading?
5. Briefly, closing your eyes, what images come to mind as a result of this reading? How are these helpful?

Theological Resources and Discussion

Throughout the NET Groups process, theological issues will arise out of the devotional readings and discussion, but especially out of the **Ministry Experience Reports (MER)**. (See the "Ministry Experience Report" topic in "Connecting in a Disconnected World"). It is important that leaders keep a list of these issues, which could include "prayer," "the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ," "the afterlife," "grace," "guilt," and many others. All of these are important theological issues that require reflective thought and discussion.

And so, what are your resources? Books are fine, although lengthy. Articles, chapters from books, cassette tapes, videos, current movies, Internet sites, and other media are all helpful as theological topics are introduced. Here are a few books which may help:

- *A Place to Stand*, by Elton Trueblood
- *Beginning to Pray*, by Anthony Bloom
- *The Kingdom Within*, by John Sanford
- *Invitation to Pilgrimage*, by John Baillie
- *Ring of Truth*, by J.B. Phillips
- *A Reasonable Faith*, by Tony Campolo
- *The Nature of God in Plain Language*, by David Hocking
- *The Problem of Pain*, by C.S. Lewis

Magazines are often developed around themes and include articles pertinent to many of the theological issues addressed in NET Groups. At this point the NET Group leaders must be prepared to take the initiative in locating materials that speak to the issues of a particular group. Once again, be creative!

As with any small group, discussion can be the most empowering spiritual element, but, if not closely monitored, also the most destructive. NET Group leaders should guard against one or two persons dominating the group and carefully encourage participation by even the most reticent. There is no exact formula for making sure a group will have dynamic discussion, but the pitfalls of failure could be avoided at the very outset via the **recruiting process**.

Preparation

The first step in preparing to begin a NET Group is **recruitment**. Appropriate recruiting of group members is one of the most critical steps in the NET Groups process. First, the DON'Ts! Then the DOs!

1. **Do not recruit your group through the newsletter or the bulletin.**

This may seem like a democratic and open process, but you may also attract people for whom this program is not right.

2. **Do not use NET Groups as a way to involve your fringe members.**

If someone has not been able to involve her- or himself in such safe places as worship, a committee meeting, a fellowship event, or a work project, then the intimacy of a small group is not the place for this person to begin church/meeting involvement.

3. **Do use an intentional process in recruiting NET Group members.**

Think through your membership. Are there key leaders who could use a sabbatical from lengthy service on committees, boards, and work groups? Are there trusted new members who would find a place in such a group? What members are always at worship and moderately active elsewhere?

Here are some descriptive words that come to mind when we think about candidates for NET Groups:

Open	Pliable	Nonjudgmental
Vital	Seeking	Questioning
Initiating	In transition	Self-aware

4. **Do ask yourself: What kind of Group do I want to lead?**

Members of heterogeneous groups have different backgrounds, are of different ages, and share a wide diversity of perspectives. Such a group can promote greater group interaction and enrich the theological mix.

Members of homogeneous groups are similar in age, background, education, and the like. This group may reach a trust level more quickly, bond as a group, and do the work.

Whether a group is heterogeneous or homogeneous, the group should be homogeneous in regard to the goals and expectations of group members. This is why the intentional recruiting process is so important.

Extraverts often help "get the ball rolling" when it comes to discussion. In order to find out what they think or feel, they talk about it.

Introverts often sit in silence as others speak and then offer a well-thought-out

conclusion. In order to find out what they think or feel, they need to ponder it. Introverts sometimes welcome a gentle invitation to contribute to the group.

5. **Do recruit an appropriate number of people.**

The optimal size is five to ten members. Fewer members limit the opportunity for learning and more than ten members limit individual participation.

6. **And then...**

Send each person a mailing explaining the NET Groups process. I would include:

- Cover letter (see Appendix B)
- Vision, purpose, and goals of NET Groups
- Key elements of the process
- Tentative schedule

Follow up this letter with a phone call.

If there is interest, invite the people to a meeting where you can talk face-to-face about NET Groups.

You will likely pay long-term for shortcuts in the recruiting process.

Group Management

1. **Do not delay in dealing with an EGR (Extra Grace Required).**

It may happen that you find yourself with someone who constantly disrupts the NET Group meeting. This person may completely dominate discussion, or refuse to share because "I don't trust anybody in the room," or block group process with inappropriate questions or comments.

This is not a support group or therapy situation. It is hoped that your congregation has resources to deal appropriately with this person. However, do not let this person control the group. You may need to ask him or her to leave. If so, this experience could become meaty theological food!

2. **Do lead the group.**

It is your job to know what is happening and move the process along, to the best of your ability.

3. **Allow for a variety of theological positions.**

As a group leader you want to create an environment where members can freely say where they are on any given theological consideration. Accepting what is said and moving the process onward are your key challenges.

The Net Groups program does not turn out doctrinally pure Lutherans, Methodists, or Quakers. Instead, it helps people become conscious of their own theological positions. Once these positions become conscious, NET Groups help men and women consider whether their viewpoints are still useful or whether another perspective might be more nurturing.

4. **Do insist on a rule of confidentiality for NET Groups.**

Create an atmosphere where women and men can become more open and sensitive to

the Holy Spirit moving through their lives and the world around them. The material in the Ministry Experience Reports, the thoughts and feelings of the group members, contents of shared journal entries, and spiritual autobiographies are all confidential.

Opening Event

The Opening Event is a time of orientation, where scheduling is discussed as well as all of the aspects of the NET Groups program. It can be planned for an evening, or it can be a day-long retreat. Also, it should be a time of **fun!**

There are numerous books and ideas floating around that help groups become acquainted and develop a sense of trust. Brief and fun "getting to know you" exercises, interspersed with the more serious work or orientation, should be the pattern for such an event. You might consider the exercises suggested in *101 Best Small Group Ideas* or the *Small Group Idea Book*.

At this time in history, there are intensified—and intertwined—searches for meaning and relationships. Meaning can be found in our relationships with others, and the most satisfying relationships will be instrumental in the search for meaning in life. Whenever we are in a time of accelerated change, there is a corresponding need to clarify meaning **and** to know that we are not alone.

Although the industrial age and the age of technology have provided many benefits, the toll they have taken on **community** is enormous. The individual who is seen as a functional cog in a smoothly running machine is symbolic of our day. We become oriented around achieving tasks, when what we really want—as spiritual beings made in God's image—is to be accepted as persons...who are **loved**...who are **growing spiritually**...who are **vital**.

The NET Groups program is **one** avenue toward being loved, growing spiritually, and remaining vital. Being a part of such a process, however, is hard work. Some difficult and emotional issues of the spirit are dealt with in NET Groups. Through such struggling and sharing, however, there is growth.

By creating such small centers of loving fellowship and study, individuals can be transformed and, in turn, infect the world. As Elton Trueblood has written at the close of *The Company of the Committed*, "Whether the world can be redeemed in this way we do not know, but it is at least clear that there is no other way."

Connecting in a Disconnected World

God is...a richly related being whose innermost nature is in his ceaseless participation and sharing. -- Alfred North Whitehead

There are special places in all of our lives where we would like time to stand still. One such place is the neighborhood where we grew up. For many in difficult home situations, "the neighborhood" is a source of stability. Each day brings many changes, but the old neighborhood is known territory. When I was growing up, I knew every alley, yard, tree, and fence within a two-mile radius of my front door. I knew which opening in each fence I could pass my bike through, and which yards to avoid because of hostile adults or big dogs. There was a sense of security in knowing all of this. I knew that there was always one area of Muncie, Indiana, where my knowledge of the territory provided a safe place.

I recently went back to my old neighborhood to walk, to reflect, and to remember. It was an important exercise—connecting my past with my present, seeking to understand the twists and turns through which God has led me and continues to lead me. It was hard to believe that I was in the same place. Many things were familiar, but so much had changed. But then, so had I.

There is an old neighborhood in each of us—a place where we were formed and that we helped to form. The only place where it has stayed the same is in one's mind, for we know that time cannot stand still. The houses now look smaller and need repair, the streets seem narrower, the trees are larger, and the people are older. But this is still home, still "my neighborhood."

In his best-selling book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum writes: "There are places we all come from—deep rooty, common places—that make us who we are. And we disdain them or treat them lightly at our peril. We turn our backs on them at the risk of self-contempt. There is a sense in which we need to go home again—and can go home again. Not to recover home, no. But to sanctify memory."

Connecting. To **remember** means to gather together. It is a process of connecting the past with the present and of searching for meaning in each step along the way, asking, "How **was** God working **there**?" And because of who I am and what has happened on this journey, "How **is** God working **here**?"

A walk through the old neighborhood is one way to participate in the sacrament of memory—a place where we were formed and that we helped to form. It is a way to acknowledge that ours is a sacramental universe, and that each tree climbed, each alley walked, and each lawn mowed is part of our very beings. It is an exercise that sensitizes us to the truth that God is an active participant with us in the process called life, and that only from some distance can we see the mixture of shadow and light that our past represents.

We live in a disconnected world, where to dis-member rather than re-member is the operating norm. The NET Groups program is about **connecting**—the past with the present, faith and life, ministry and job, person with person, story with story. And at the heart of such a NET Groups connecting process is the **Ministry Experience Report (MER)**.

The Ministry Experience Report (MER)

The Ministry Experience Report (MER) was inspired by the case study method used in many clinical trial settings. As developed for the purpose of NET Groups, the MER draws upon the following four areas of personal experience:

1. The work setting
2. The extended family and family of origin

3. The faith community
4. The social network

Out of any one of these areas, the NET Group participant may encounter these or other experiences:

- a business meeting that was difficult or exciting
- a strained relationship or a warm and loving exchange
- a heated church board session
- a complicated holiday visit home
- an exchange with a neighbor, or a walk through an old neighborhood and a meeting with an old friend.

Such experiences make for rich Ministry Experience Reports for participants in a NET Group. Following each incident, it is important to write up the conversation as quickly as possible, capturing the encounter with as much exactness as you can. If it is a lengthy encounter, you can write up the crucial parts and summarize the others.

Two models of MERs follow, as well as two examples of MERs. The two examples are of people who took incidents from their everyday lives and found opportunities for ministry. If we are sensitive to life's common experiences, we will find many potential ministry experiences in our professional lives, personal lives, social relationships, and faith communities.

Note: it is important that the experience in the Ministry Experience Report be **genuine**. A NET Group member should not use the most dramatic event in her or his life as a MER. The purpose of the NET Groups program is to connect your faith and theology with **everyday experience**, so that you become a more effective person of faith in the world.

Model A

1. Background Information

What do we need to know in order to understand the context of your experience?
What is your relationship to the other person(s) in the report? Please remember that **all** pertinent information should be shared so that group members can understand the experience fully.

2. Dialogue

Write up the dialogue as much as possible. For example:

Larry: I have been "down" all week. I have so many pressures on me—financial, family, this job. I am really depressed.

Jim: It sounds as if you are struggling. Want to talk about it?

Larry: I do and I don't. What's the point of sharing my problems with you? You're not a counselor!

Jim: But sometimes it's important to begin to share a difficult situation with a friend. I am your friend, Larry.

Larry: I know you are. I just hate to burden you.

Jim: Talk to me.

The conversation provides an opportunity for group members to see what you said in a "real life" situation. It cannot be exact, since it will be written following the experience. An honest recollection of the event, rather than exactness, is needed here. It will be the main entry point into the theological reflection of the group.

3. **The Dynamic Reflection**

What has the conversation revealed about the reported experience? The other person(s) involved? Do you see problems and strengths in your interactions?

4. **Theological Reflection**

What theological principles, concepts, or ideas are present in the experience? What theological reflection will shed light on this experience? Questions to consider:

- How is God working here?
- What does this experience say about the nature of life?
- What meaning is present here?
- How does this experience challenge the way I look at the world?

5. **Self-Critical Appraisal**

Without becoming involved in self-judgment, ask yourself these questions:

- How do I feel as I minister with this person?
- Was my response adequate?
- After a period of reflection, what would I do differently?

Model B

1. **Preliminary Data.**

Who are the main characters in this incident?
Give a brief description of the role of each person.

2. **Choice**

Why did you choose to report on this incident?
What do you want to learn by presenting it?

3. **Plans and preparation**

What was your previous knowledge of the person(s) and issues involved?
What expectations were there?

4. **Impressions**

Describe the physical setting as you observed it. What is located in the area—furniture, windows, personal items? Where do people (including yourself) stand or sit? As the encounter begins, what are your general impressions of the other person(s)—dress, facial expression, tone of voice, attitude? What is the mood of the room? Help the reader experience the setting as you experienced it.

5. **Description of What Happened**

Report the conversation as accurately as possible.

John: How are things going, Mary?

Mary: I've been feeling pretty low lately (looking at the floor).

6. **Reflection**

- a. Evaluation

Set forth what your study of the conversation has revealed about the experience reported and the other persons involved.

b. Self-Reflection

What are the strengths and weaknesses of your responses? How well did you hear what the other person was trying to say? What were the critical points in the transaction? To what extent were the expectations met? What would you do differently and why?

c. Theological Reflection

What theological principles, concepts, or ideas help you better to understand the reported experience? What theological reflection comes to mind as you look at the process in this experience? How is God working here? How is God working through you in this experience? What would you like to say to God about this incident? In what ways was this experience "ministry" for you?

The next two examples of Ministry Experience Reports illustrate how our lives—if we pay close attention—present ministry opportunities to us.

Example 1

Background Information

I am the office manager for a privately held corporation that owns several franchised locations of a major car rental company.

As the administrative center, the Wilmington office includes both administration (staff) and operation personnel. Other locations are "operations only."

Because we are a service company, our prime objective is to provide the best customer service. The customer always comes first—no excuses, no exceptions. To meet our objective, it is often necessary for staff persons to become operational and for operations to become administrative.

All our locations are open 18 hours per day, seven days a week. The paperwork of all locations is sent to our Wilmington office for processing. As the clerical staff has the weekends off, Mondays are very busy, noisy days.

The morning of Monday, October 8 was unusually tense. My own office day had begun at 6:15 a.m. It was raining very hard. The cleaning crew was still in the building. By 7:00 a.m., we had taken three "no start" calls, one of our locations was 25 cars short in meeting their morning reservations, and an unknown person—attempting to receive a "free" tank of gas—had driven away from the service area, dragging the entire gas pump behind him. We had received word that we were not getting the 60 cars we had ordered and needed. The owner, my boss, had fired one of two Wilmington service agents—someone who had been involved in an accident while driving a rental car. About noon my boss, Mr. X, sat down in my office, popped open his first beer, and asked, "Why is everyone out to screw me?" Upon my comment that "It's just one of those days, part of the nature of rent-a-car," he announced his departure for another town nearby.

About 12:45 I walked out of my office to refill my coffee cup and overheard bits of conversation between one of the clericals and my assistant. I was annoyed by what I overheard and hoped I would not hear more about it. No such luck.

Dialogue

June: Mary, can I talk to you about something?

Mary: (attempting to keep my expression warm, although my body was tensing): Certainly.

June: (blushing) Sarah has been complaining that Martha never goes back to the counter. I've noticed it, too. Just last week I had to leave my desk and go help a customer while Martha stayed at her desk. Did you tell her she did not have to do counter work?

Mary: (slumping back into the recess of my chair) Rules, rules, rules. This seems awfully petty to me right now. Two hours ago Bill had an accident while driving a car in from Ramada Inn South. Mr. X terminated him on the spot—out in the rain, waiting for the tow truck. Then X comes into my office, sits down, pops open a beer, says "Why is everyone out to screw me?," and leaves town.

Bill has had no other accidents during the two years he's been with us—not even a speeding ticket. His wife does not work outside the home, and they have a two-year-old child. His wages were low, but he was always at work. And frankly, I thank God every morning a service agent shows up for work— it's an awful job.

Accidents are part of our overhead. And this was not one of our cars; we don't even have to provide the PL and PD on it—that always goes with the vehicle. So this discussion seems pretty petty right now.

Martha is a new employee. Did anyone think to ask her if she was uncomfortable about her counter skills? Did anyone say, "Martha, will you help me with this rental?" Some of these things are up to you people to work out among your selves. I know, we all want rules, rules, rules. I suppose I could issue instructions regarding who answers the phone first, second, third, fourth—who goes to the counter first, second, third, fourth—and schedule it by alternate weeks. But really.

June: (slumping and flushed) Gee, Mary, I'm sorry. Some people are concerned with themselves, I guess. But I thought I should talk to you about Martha.

Mary: (regaining normal posture) June, I'm sorry. No problem in our office is more or less than any other. I know that during these busy times everyone gets a bit on edge. I had noticed that Martha was not going to the counter. She is wonderful on the phone, though. I think she probably just needs clarification. As a new employee she may feel uncertain about her place. I will be happy to chat with her, but I think that by talking with her yourself you will both benefit. Just be positive and nonthreatening—ask her how she feels about going to the counter.

June: Okay, I'll talk with her. I didn't think about it that way. Sarah just brought it to me and I thought you should know about it.

Mary: I know. I was aware, but was ignoring it in hopes that you would work it out yourselves. Sometimes I wish you all would learn to deal with these things among yourselves. Learning to discuss the situation in which one or the other of you feels taken advantage of would probably be a positive step for each of you. Again, I apologize for making your problem seem trivial. Let me know how you work it out.

Dynamic Reflection

The "petty problem" here is really the larger, more serious issue—the inability of people to communicate honestly. The young service agent losing his job is sad and unfair, but his own choices were involved.

Theological Reflection

It is easier to be "good" and follow the rules. If there is a rule for everything, we don't have to reach inside ourselves and struggle with making a decision. In Sarah and June we see the martyr: "Martha doesn't take her turn, I had to go and wait on a customer myself." It's an example of the "I am good, I do everything" syndrome. Though they were both aware of disliking their "martyrdom," neither had a solution. Uncomfortable and angry, they didn't ask for clarification from Martha. They didn't communicate with her. They decided to take the problem to the person in charge and get a "ruling."

As Christians, do we often want too many rules? Rules complicate our lives, but as Christians we are called to simplify our lives. Jesus was a simple man who taught by simple example and simple, honest communication. To simplify is difficult; it requires us to let go, reach inside, and connect with God. But isn't that the point of Christianity? We have God's grace, undeserved love, and mercy—no matter what our failings.

Self-Critical Appraisal

I allowed Mr. X's behavior to control my attitude and feelings. I took responsibility for his behavior. I did not simplify; I was angry. Though I feel I ultimately gave June caring, positive, and nonthreatening advice, my initial response was totally inappropriate. I'm reminded of an example given to me about "feelings": A child gets angry because his mother has told him "no." The anger is understandable; it would be appropriate if the mother acknowledges his anger. It would be wrong for the child to kick his mother. I kicked. I learned.

Another example of a MER follows, this time from an encounter between two church members.

Example 2

Background Information

The Women's Fellowship organization at Cedar Grove has always played a key role in meeting the needs of the congregation and the local community. Over the years it has ministered by furnishing meals for the sick, making baby blankets for newborns, having money-making projects to benefit the church, collecting clothing for the poor, and offering a host of other services. As they serve others, the women at Cedar Grove have found a rich blessing of fellowship and community.

In earlier years, the Women's Fellowship was the primary social outlet for many women. Most did not work outside the home. Although today Cedar Grove remains a rural church and many women members work inside the home, more women now work outside the home. Most have social contacts other than the church—school, civic groups, co-workers, and blended families.

In the last few years, the Women's Fellowship has seen a drop in attendance. Several meetings are held during the day for sewing or cleaning projects. Some are held in the evening, and there are a few special events.

About a year ago, I had a conversation with a young mother. As we were sharing the joys and frustrations of motherhood, we agreed that a support group for moms would be a great idea. Since we are intentional about incorporating new members into the life of the church, the Moms' Support Group seemed the perfect way of helping this young mom get involved in an area of interest to her. She responded enthusiastically, and as a result, the Moms' Support Group was formed to provide fellowship, support, and Bible study for women with children.

The support group has grown and flourished. At a recent meeting, the group evaluated the effectiveness of the ministry. The consensus was that the group's needs were being met. Then the following conversation took place.

Dialogue

Mom 1: I heard someone mention at the women's workday last week that they don't understand why we need a support group. They wondered why we couldn't just come to the regular meetings of the Women's Fellowship.

Linda: Do you feel that the purpose of our group is misunderstood?

Mom 2: Yes. Some feel we're in competition with the Women's Fellowship.

Mom 3: But we're not. Our purpose is totally different. We meet for Bible study and support in raising our children.

Mom 4: Going to an all-day meeting to sew is fine for the women who have the time, but it doesn't help me to be a better mom or wife. That's what I need at this point in life. This groups gives me the support I need to carry on at home.

Mom 3: You know, some of the older women have so much to share. They could really help us by telling us how they handled situations in their families.

Linda: Well, how can we make this situation better? Sometimes there is misunderstanding when people are misinformed. Is there some way we can communicate better what we're about so that we're not seen as being in competition with the Women's Fellowship?

Mom 3: Why don't we invite the women to one of our meetings?

Mom 5: Yeah, we could have a brunch. Everyone could bring a breakfast item to share.

Mom 6: Then we could do a lesson together and let them see what goes on at one of our meetings.

All: Sounds great! Let's do it!

Dynamic Reflection

The conversation continued a little longer as plans were made for the brunch. Everyone was excited and there was a spirit of cooperation, as well as a genuine desire to improve understanding and communication with the rest of the Women's Fellowship. Conversation was unemotional and nonjudgmental. The brunch is now scheduled for April 25.

Theological Reflection

There appear to be several issues raised from this situation:

1. How does a growing church in a changing society meet the needs of an inter-generational group of women?
2. How can individuals learn to recognize that "my needs are different from yours," without feeling that "my needs are more important than yours"?
3. How can individuals learn to recognize that "my needs are different from yours, but that's okay. We can meet them in different ways"?
4. How can individuals learn to recognize that "my needs are different from yours, but I'll help meet your needs. I'll share with you, and you share with me. Let's work together"?

There are several Scriptures that would seem applicable here:

Titus 2:3-4	Bid the older women likewise to be reverent in behavior...to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children.
Prov. 27:17	Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.
Ecc. 4:9-10	Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.
Eph. 4:2-3	...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
Phil. 2:1-2	If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Self-Critical Appraisal

I feel good about the conversation in the Moms' group. There was no gossip, no backbiting or pointing fingers, but an honest appraisal of the situation and a desire to make it better.

This issue should not be seen as more controversial than it is. There are no big divisions or hard feelings being generated because of it. It is more of a subtle, underlying current of confusion that needs attention before it becomes a bigger problem. I feel we are taking some positive steps toward a better understanding.

For more practical samples of Ministry Experience Reports see Appendix C.

Format

The NET Groups format is best designed around a two-and-a-half hour time slot. Such a plan might look like this:

1. An opening time of quiet worship followed by prayer.
2. A time for updating. How have you been since we met last? Problems with the reading? With journaling? A general, "How is it going?"
3. A brief review by the congregant on her or his Ministry Experience Report.
4. Discussion of the report. Some questions that might be asked: "Was (Joe) right to ask that question?" "What would you have said?" "Have you had similar experiences?"
5. An opportunity for the one presenting the report to respond to fellow NET Group participants.
6. At mid-point, after an hour, take a brief break, and then return for a second MER.
7. Close with prayer.

The session could be designed to allow for just one Ministry Experience Report, with more discussion of the theological issues contained therein. However it is designed, it is important to remember that we are living during a "time famine." People want fellowship and an opportunity to share with one another, but they are in NET Groups primarily to **learn**. It should be productive.

What Has Been Learned?

In brief, these ten conclusions have been gleaned from the NET Groups prototypes:

1. First, NET Groups are **not** for everyone. It is not for those seeking a support group where their problems can be processed. A NET Group is first a theological reflection program, not a place primarily concerned with dissecting the feelings of one another. People should be recruited with this clearly in mind.
2. The pastors' support of NET Groups is essential. Without their enthusiasm for NET Groups and their help in the important process of recruiting, the program's success would be limited.
3. A "safety net" for people who do not belong in this type of group needs to be provided. A leader must quickly handle what has come to be known as an "EGR" (a person for whom "extra grace is required"). An EGR can sidetrack a NET Group, and so must be dealt with quickly and firmly, but always lovingly. An example: "Joe, I don't think this group is for you, but you would make a significant contribution in this other group" (the safety net).
4. The size of the group is important. Ten people is the optimal group size for theological reflection; a larger group is difficult to manage. There is no required minimum number of group members, but for a group seeking to edify the larger faith community, no fewer than five or six should be involved. Of course, the size of the congregation will make a difference in the number of groups.
5. The group's leader should be a part of the group's selection process.
6. The weakest area in the congregants' Ministry Experience Reports will be theological reflection. For many, this section has become a place to list biblical verses supporting the issue or to use trite phrases. In the opening event and in the group work following, **how** to use this section of the MER needs to be constantly stressed. In its simplest form of explanation the group should be told that it is asking the question, "How is God working here?"
7. Because of this weakness in this area of the MER, I raise the question about the need for a theological primer. Many congregants who can easily use language from psychology or sociology do not know how to use the language of theology—at least in the classical sense. This raises the question, "Have we outlived the usefulness of the classical language of theology?" or "Do words like *justification*, *sanctification*, or even *sin* make sense in modern experience?" Is a new language needed to interpret the work of God in the lives of modern people?
8. A complaint often heard by congregants in this program is, "It is difficult to find time to read." Books are fine for some, but difficult for many. Brief articles and audio or video tapes (sometimes in CD or DVD format) could be helpful alternatives. Most publishing houses, as well as Amazon, make such items available.
9. Net Groups are well suited for people comfortable with paper, pens, books, and other baggage associated with the academically inclined. Those attracted to such materials will find the program more helpful than those who are not.

10. Those in middle age will find this program most appealing. This particular age group is more attracted than others to this type of learning.

Evaluation

Every program needs to provide participants an opportunity to evaluate their experiences. To this end, a 22-question evaluation form has been developed, as well as "Nine Quick Reflections for Evaluation." Leaders in the NET Groups program will find these useful for continued development.

Name: _____

Church/Meeting: _____

Address: _____

Date: _____

1. **The NET Groups program was adequately explained so I was able to make an informed decision about becoming involved.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2. **The Opening Event was a helpful way to begin NET Groups.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

3. **I found writing a spiritual autobiography to be helpful in my Christian life.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4. **The spiritual autobiography was helpful in getting to know other group members.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

5. **I felt involved in my group.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

6. **I looked forward to coming to my group.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

7. **I felt included in my group.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

8. **I felt adequately prepared to begin journaling.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

9. **I made entries in my journal on a regular basis.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10. **As I look back, journaling has contributed to deepening my faith life.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

11. **When my NET Group ends I will continue journaling.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

12. **In spite of individual differences, a feeling of unity exists in my group.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

13. **The Ministry Experience Report (MER) was adequately explained so that I was able to feel good about completing this task.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

14. **I learned about myself, God, and others through my own MER.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

15. **I found that the MER process helped me develop a theological language.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

16. **Because of the MER process I have developed a more reflective lifestyle.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

17. **I feel it would make a difference to the group if I were not here.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

18. **I feel close to members of my group.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

19. **The readings and resources were helpful in expanding my theological understanding.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

20. **The discussion with other group members was helpful in expanding my theological understanding.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

21. **I felt my group was safe enough to share something of importance to me.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

22. **The NET Groups program has made a significant impact on my Christian life.**

Disagree Agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Nine Quick Reflections for Evaluation

Name: _____

Church/Meeting: _____

Address: _____

Date: _____

1. **The most helpful component of NET Groups?**

2. **The least helpful component of NET Groups?**

3. **The most helpful resource?**

4. **The least helpful resource?**

5. **If I could change anything in NET Groups it would be...**

6. **I would be interested in continuing my group a second year.**
Yes _____ No _____

7. **If my group continues, I would like to see us expand our focus to include...**

8. **I would be interested being trained as a NET Groups leader.**
Yes _____ No _____

9. **I would be willing to assist in helping the NET Groups program expand in my church/meeting.**
Yes _____ No _____

Responding to a New Generation of Christian Seeker

The Faith is an anvil which has worn out many hammers. -- Lord Tweedsmuir

The drive from Richmond, Indiana to suburban Chicago is a familiar one for me. I had made it many times before. On this particular trip, I was quickly tiring of the miles of interstate highway that stretch north of Lafayette through some of the flattest farmland this side of the Mississippi River. For diversion, I exited Interstate 65 and traveled west on Route 24 into Illinois—a decision calculated to change my pace and provide a welcome change of scenery.

As I moved west through such communities as Remington, Crescent City, Gilman, and Forest, I began to be intrigued with a common pattern in the towns and small cities through which I was traveling. On street corner after street corner, through town after town, there were the familiar 19th century church buildings with all of the familiar "mainline" names.

All of them displayed on their front signboards (most of which were in need of repair) the same dull-sounding sermon titles and the same true, although trite, "God loves you"-type sayings. All "welcomed" passersby to worship on Sunday morning, and all looked as if they had not had a visitor traverse the intimidating steps in a **long** time. You could almost smell the "mustiness" emanating from the basement as you drove by.

On the other side of the street, often on the opposite corner, were the video stores filled with people. Just down from the video stores, you could usually find the local high school—a large brick structure, built within the past 20 years, and filled with activity from morning until night. Reflecting on this drive through America's heartland, I began to consider some unpleasant questions: "Had the church become an anachronism in the culture of modern America?" "What does it mean to relate to a 21st-century society from behind the stained glass windows of 19th-century structures?" "Is the church prepared to respond to the new realities in a different world?" "Has the church become—quaint?"

The NET Groups program responds to the needs of a new generation of Christian seeker, to the new realities of a rapidly changing world. It provides a portion of the meaning and purposes needed if the institutional church is not to become quaint. Combining everyday experience with theological reflection and the fellowship intensity of the small group, the program brings spiritual empowerment. I believe it is one option for congregations who would like to breathe new life into their communities of faith.

NET Groups can be an important part of the five factors which I have discovered to be essential to spiritually alive and growing congregations:

1. **An openness to an experiential relationship with the Living Christ** and a worship setting that provides opportunities for such a relationship to develop. Experience as opposed to a spiritually stifling tradition—and "acquaintance with" as opposed to mere "knowledge about" Jesus Christ—are the most basic factors needed for an attentive and spiritually alive congregation. Good leadership, of course, can be the key to setting the tone for this important experiential dimension of the faith.
2. **A strong sense of community where the members and attenders truly love one another.** We know from recent studies that the word we respond most favorably to, besides our own name, is **care**. The tremendous success of the Stephen Series and its emphasis on "caregiving as a way of life" is largely due to this hunger for a sense of community in the local congregation. First time attenders to your church can quickly sense whether or not this concern for one another is present. Coming out of the competitive and individualistic secular world to which we all along, people today are hungering for a place where they can be accepted and loved.
3. **A clearly articulated belief system where the members and attenders can coherently explain what they believe in.** This does **not** mean a fundamentalism

that provides no room for the questioning process so essential to spiritual maturity. It **does** mean that spiritually alive congregations have members who are studying and struggling with the tough issues of the faith, finding their own "place to stand" amidst all of the remaining questions. Churches experiencing a new life that will be sustaining have not opted for a "cheap leap of faith," but have faced the hard questions of life and Christianity and are dealing with them. They know that it is only through the maze of complex thought that one can truly experience the release found in a profound simplicity, where one can say, "This is what I believe."

4. **An understanding that "Christian" and "minister" are synonymous terms**, and that if you claim the name "Christian," you have a responsibility in the ministry. Spiritually vibrant and growing churches have moved from an understanding of the ministry of the few to an encouragement of the ministry of **all**. In these congregations the pastors are not threatened by the ministry of the laity, but rejoice in equipping them for their Christian service to the world.
5. **Finally, spiritually alive congregations do not focus on their own survival. Instead, they look outward from their institutions to the needs in the world.** They know that when their attention is focused outward in ministry, rather than inward in survival, concern for their future is where it should be, in the hands of God.

"Change," said Alvin Toffler, "is the process by which the future invades our life." Beyond the focus on numerical decline and spiritual inertia, we have an opportunity to change—by becoming **open to** an experiential **relationship** with Jesus Christ; by **building** a strong sense of loving **community**; by **developing** a clearly articulated **belief** system; by **enlarging** our understanding of **ministry**; and by **focusing** our attention **outward**, to the needs of the world. Wherever these things are happening, hope is renewed, and spiritual vitality is present. Through the NET Groups program, such hope and vitality can find concrete expression and a positive response is made to a new generation of Christian seeker.

Appendices

The appendices included here are for NET Group leaders and participants who would like clear examples of three essential program components:

- a spiritual autobiography,
- a letter of invitation to participate in the NET Groups program, and
- Ministry Experience Reports.

Please remember that there is no set formula for writing any of these pieces. Everyone's story is unique, as is everyone's experience of congregational life and life beyond the congregation.

What you communicate will need to be adapted to the people and contexts of your congregation, as well as the sizes and configurations of your congregation's small groups.

That having been said, these examples may be helpful as you think about creating and implementing your Net Groups program.

Appendix A: A Spiritual Autobiography

The following is an example of what you might do in writing a spiritual autobiography. Remember: there is no set formula for such a writing.

I was born in 1949 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My parents were Quakers, and my father was a Quaker pastor. The Newbys, as far as I can research, have been Quakers for as long as there has been a Quaker movement. The only slippage in this tradition was when my great, great, great grandfather was **disowned** for marrying a Methodist!

I am a Christian and I am a Quaker because I was born a Christian Quaker. And so the first stage of my faith development was **tradition centered**. It did not take me long to learn how unique this tradition is. Throughout my years of schooling in Minneapolis and Muncie, Indiana, where me moved in 1958, I was the **only** Quaker in my class.

Some summers ago, while studying at Princeton Theological Seminary, I was perusing some of the latest book releases in the campus bookstore. I saw a biography about James Dean, the film actor. Knowing that he grew up in a Quaker home and Meeting, I quickly opened the book to learn what the author had said about the Quaker influence on Dean. The biographer opened the chapter on the subject with these words: "A Quaker is one who can take the pomp out of any circumstance!" Needless to say, I was hurt and disappointed!

As I reflect on my grade school and high school years, I made every effort to put the pomp back into every circumstance. I was rebellious by nature and enjoyed all the trappings of a popular social life. I was attending parties every Friday and Saturday night, and my 1956 Chevy became, for me, a spiritual icon!

After my 1967 graduation from high school in Muncie, I moved with my family to Wichita, Kansas, where my father became pastor of University Friends Meeting. I became a freshman at Friends University. The fall of 1967 through the spring of 1971 were my college years, and they were confusing. Vietnam, civil rights, campus unrest, social revolution were happening all around me. In this four-year period, I moved from being merely "tradition-centered" in my faith to being "activist-centered." My Christian Quaker faith took on new meaning as I began to understand the radical dimensions of Jesus' teachings. The Quaker concerns for peace, equality, and simplicity provided a springboard for my own social activist concerns. I majored in sociology and prepared to become a social worker in the inner city where I could clean up all of their problems within a few weeks. I couldn't graduate fast enough!

In 1969 I was married, and I began to discover other outlets for my youthful energy. I

accepted a position working the 3-11 shift in Respiratory Therapy in a local hospital, and found myself appreciating my father a lot more. I began listening to his sermons more intently and even began considering the possibility of becoming a pastor. Six months prior to graduation, Central City Friends Meeting, Central City, Nebraska, invited me to become their pastor. **I accepted.** In the fall of that year I learned I was to become a father. **I fainted.**

Alicia Marie was born in February of 1972, and became the newest member of Central City Meeting. As I continued in my pastoral work, I was feeling rather inadequate. The more I read in the area of Christian Quaker thought, the more I realized the need for some more education.

In 1973 I received a letter from Elton Trueblood encouraging me to attend the Earlham School of Religion (ESR). After securing a pastorate in Ohio, not far from Richmond, I began my studies for the Master of Divinity Degree at ESR. As I had moved in my faith development from **tradition center** to **activist centered**, I was now moving from **activist centered** to **intellect centered**. I became captivated by the pursuit of knowledge and the development of the intellect. "It is the vocation of Christians in every generation," wrote Elton Trueblood, "to out-think all opposition." I took this challenge seriously, and devoted myself to the search for God through reason. I would go to class at ESR in the mornings, and then in the afternoon I would go over to Elton Trueblood's study, Teague Library, and study with him.

I graduated from ESR in 1977, and moved from pastoral ministry to the Yokefellow Ministry in 1979 (an ecumenical church renewal movement founded by Elton Trueblood). This was followed in 1987 by a position on the faculty of the Earlham School of Religion, where I have been ever since. My father died in 1985, and Elton Trueblood died in 1994. Although I still enjoy the academic pursuits of my life, a new dimension is emerging. This new direction is best expressed in some words from an essay I wrote on *Faith and Knowledge*:

"In the cosmic theater of life, I have been pondering just how important all of this attention to academic excellence is. It's a question I raise each time I hear of a student suicide or learn about a student selling his or her ethics down the river to secure a good grade. There is a lot of pressure in a good academic institution. The torch of knowledge is the center of worship.

"And yet what is knowledge without the wonder of faith? Learned information is of little use to the world if it is not coupled with the formation of the spirit. A good liberal arts college will try hard to keep spiritual growth and academic success balanced in the lives of its students. But deep down I believe that if push comes to shove, they would sacrifice their concern for spirituality on the altar of academic achievement.

"The idolatry of reason is a big problem at good colleges and is a bigger problem for the professors who live and die in the world of academia. I find that the wonder of faith can temper this academic disease, and I am always impressed by learned persons who not only have a 'clear head of reason' but also have a 'tender heart of faith.' It is a difficult combination to keep in balance, but it is this combination, I believe, that will lead to human wholeness."

My faith journey has taken me through a number of stages, from (1) **tradition centered** to (2) **activist centered**, to (3) **intellect centered**, to (4) **heart and experience centered**. Regardless of the center, it is important to understand the need for **all** of these different emphases in the life of faith.

Paul writes about growing up, every way, into Christ, "from whom the whole body, joined and knit together...when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." (Eph 4: 16 RSV) Although Paul is writing about the various parts of the community, this is also good advice for our personal faith journeys. When we have a healthy understanding of our tradition, when we make that tradition live **today** by being **active** in peace and social justice concerns, when we are able to defend our faith intellectually, and when we are sensitive to the concerns of the heart and experience the Living Christ **now**, we "grow up" into Christ in a wholistic way. This is not to say that my personal faith journey encompasses the whole, but it does seem to me that a wholistic Christian faith will at least hold **in tension** the

elements of **tradition**, **activism**, the **intellect**, and the **heart**.

Finally, as one moves into a heart-centered faith—open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in even the most minute of circumstances—**control**, being in control and allowing others to control us, becomes less possible. A heart-centered faith is a faith centered on the Living God, and is captured in these words from Thomas Kelly, which seem an appropriate conclusion:

Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. God is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well -- from *A Testament of Devotion* (124).

Appendix B: A Letter of Invitation (Example)

Dear Darrell:

Studies from numerous sources show that many—if not most—adults in America do not have a strong theological grounding for their faith; faith represents what church, parents, or friends have taught. Few have the opportunity to do theological reflection that would result in a more mature faith development.

NET Groups is a project designed to discover whether adults can make deeper connections between their daily lives and their understanding of the Christian faith. I would like you to be one of ten people who participate in this project here at St. John's.

What will it mean for you if you participate in this project?

1. You will be asked to participate in an opening retreat so that we might set the ground rules for our work together. We might do this in a long evening or on a Saturday early in September.
2. The pilot project uses a "case study method." This is a method whereby you write up an experience from one of four areas of your life: (a) family life, (b) professional life, (c) personal spiritual growth, or (d) social relationships. The group will use the case studies for theological reflection. Over the course of the project, each participant will present two case studies.
3. Each participant will be trained in "journaling," which is a way to record one's experiences and reflect upon God's presence in those experiences. The journal will be shared only with the group facilitator (me).
4. Each participant will be reading devotional and theological works each session.
5. In between the two rounds of case studies, we will be doing group reading on the theological issues that have been raised by our case studies.

I would appreciate a call the week of August 6th so we can talk about the status of your involvement.

Personally, I am very excited about this project and do hope that you will seriously consider being a part of this pioneering effort.

Sincerely,

Appendix C: Ministry Experience Reports

Example 1

Background Information

Three years ago I received a telephone call at 11:00 p.m. The voice on the other end asked if my wife and I were willing to make a quick career move due to my company's needs. "You have 48 hours to decide—you're our choice, Bill as this could well be a difficult assignment, given the circumstances. We need you in Washington." At 7:00 a.m. the next morning, another call, this time with "We need you to drive into the home office today. We need your decision today."

And so we came to Washington—under urgent problematic conditions, without any true knowledge of the career impact this move would have. While we found most of the situation agreeable and the people involved professional and willing to adapt to this abrupt change, we were ill-prepared for some of the latent problems to be encountered.

Changes in management are seldom totally palatable for those being managed. Differences in age, style, philosophy, technique, and values contribute to feelings of being threatened on the part of many employees. There is often a real trauma.

Specifically, the inherited office staff, while being promoted as a "workable team," proved to be a true three-year source of concern, tension, and frustration. Staff personnel in our business are very important in relation to our efficiency and effectiveness, not to mention to our public relations.

One month before my arrival, our second staff member resigned due to her pregnancy and her husband's relocation assignment. My predecessor and co-manager conducted a 20-minute interview and announced our "new gal." Ugh! I had absolutely no selection input!

Our office manager, also newly promoted by my co-manager, was not skilled enough for this position, but was offered a raise and promotion as a "reward" for several years in the organization.

Two months later my co-manager died. Being in a new environment, with a torrid transition and a staff I was not wholly comfortable with, I realized just how tough an assignment I had accepted.

Over the past three years I have dealt with numerous situations that involved staff—personality conflicts, book-work problems, and others. I employed a number of avenues to resolve these problems: outside consultants, internal consultants, a psychologist, group training, individual conferences, and finally, probation.

A few months ago I finally released my last staff member and hired two new people to replace the office manager and our other "new gal."

Dialogue

Bill: After much evaluation and repeated attempts to resolve matters/concerns/ problems earlier documented, I have made a decision to release you from our organization.

Staff: I can't believe this, Bill. We've worked hard for you!

Bill: True. You have, but what we need—what I've stressed—is efficiency and effectiveness. Harder isn't always better.

Staff: What else do you expect? You're just not very understanding of our workload.

Bill: We agreed, for example, that several new computer systems would enhance our efforts. That was over eight months ago and they're still not being used.

Staff: But Bill, we're too busy to learn this stuff.

Bill: Yes, but we've designated time on the job to allocate for the learning time needed. Plus, you have a computer at home you said you could learn on.

The Dynamic Reflection

The basic difference appeared to be in the philosophy of how an office should be run (automated) and what role the staff plays. The staff saw computerization (one element of many disputes) as an unnecessary annoyance. I saw it as a necessity to enhance our operation. Communication and understanding are also key factors.

Theological Reflection/Self-Critical Appraisal

I terminated my inherited staff. The guilt, concern, and frustration I have experienced have caused me a lot of "down time." The issue, I suppose, is one of treating men and women fairly. "Roles" complicate this tremendously.

The decision to terminate the staff was my last resolve. Christ teaches us to turn the other cheek, to understand, to compromise, to be kind and forgiving. My prolonged experience with this staff caused me to lose perspective on my Christian commitments. While I made many efforts to resolve the problems, none worked to my satisfaction.

Does Christianity so complicate my decisiveness that I tolerate unacceptable behavior from others? Does my faith wobble when I need it most in the work place? Does this type of situation warrant calling upon my faith or is this type of daily situation outside of my faith?

The anguish I have experienced is very real. I guess my frustration is in myself for not being able to help my staff overcome or implement the changes of automation and to understand the need for change.

Somewhere, religious beliefs and trust in our beliefs must guide us both in behavior and thought. And where does faith help us resolve these types of situations—within ourselves and with others?

Example 2

Background Information

The following conversation is a small part of several hours of discussion that took place between my wife and me and my parents during a three-day visit at my parents' home in Seattle two weeks ago. My wife and I decided to make the trip specifically to repair a severely damaged relationship with my parents that had been making our own relationship difficult for many years. Darlene and I had been working with a marriage counselor for many months, and had discovered that a major obstacle to improving our relationship lay in our feelings toward parents and their feelings toward us.

Darlene had long felt a deep sense of rejection by my father, and I had grown to resent that, as well as her consequent rejection of him. In addition, my parents seemed to feel that we wanted little to do with them. These feelings had been suppressed for years but, of course, managed to manifest themselves periodically in many ways, which had led to bitterness and suspicion in our dealings with my parents and anger between Darlene and me.

Through our work in counseling, Darlene and I were able to break through my denial of the

problem. We were able to talk frankly about it and discovered that to at least get healthy ourselves, if not repair the relationship with my parents, we had to express how we felt about the original incident and how we feel today.

The incident described here is but one of many that caused problems, but seems to be the most crucial.

My parents are strong, life-long Roman Catholics. My father is a proud man. Mom tends to be passive; she often defers to my father. Darlene is a life-long Lutheran. I joined the Lutheran Church after we were married.

The incident referred to in the dialogue occurred more than 20 years ago. Darlene and I had courted for two years, from 1966 to 1968, while I was a student at Minnesota. I was drafted into the Army in 1968, and we decided to get married during my Christmas leave. Initially Darlene had tried to arrange for a Catholic priest to participate in the wedding, but for his own reasons, the Catholic priest she spoke to refused to take part in the ceremony. She then made arrangements with her family's Lutheran church.

My father was outraged. He tried several times to stop the wedding and, by telephone, verbally abused and threatened Darlene. Our wedding took place in a Lutheran church. My parents attended reluctantly. For several years after that my father would occasionally pull me aside and ask when we would be married "in the (Catholic) Church."

This dialogue involved Darlene and my father. It was a small but important part of our discussions, as the incident referred to formed the foundation for Darlene's feelings toward my father and was a crucial and painful incident in our early lives together. Just preceding this dialogue, Darlene had explained that she found many things about Catholicism un-Christian—mostly in its rigidity, seeming intolerance, inability to accept the whole human being, and failure to be there when people need the church the most.

Dialogue

Father: Darlene, are you saying that you hate the Catholic Church and me for being Catholic?

Darlene: No. Let me try to explain how I feel. I have several Catholic friends. I like them very much. Their being Catholic is not a problem for me. I think that while I find it difficult to understand how they can agree with or believe some things about the Catholic Church I find incompatible with being fully human, that doesn't interfere with my friendship. They don't impose those beliefs on me or use them to interfere with my life. When you threatened to stop our wedding and so abusively threatened me, I saw it as you rolling up your religion into a stick and wounding me with it. The message I got was that my church was not good enough, that I was not good enough—somehow sinful—and that you rejected me.

Father: Darlene, I hope you can understand this. When Catholics marry, they make a promise to raise their children in the Catholic Church. It is wrong for a Catholic to marry outside the Catholic Church. At that time I believed that part of my responsibility to my son and to my church was to make sure he didn't make a grievous error, to make sure he married in the Catholic Church.

Mother: Sam, you went too far!

Darlene: I have never felt accepted by you as your daughter-in-law. It hurts terribly.

Father: Darlene, I apologize for causing you such anguish. I did what I believed was my responsibility at that time. I hope you understand that it was not a personal attack, but rather how I view my responsibility to my religion.

Darlene: I understand what you are now telling me and one of the things I must work on is accepting your unquestioning adherence to your religion without regard to how it is wounding

your human relationships.

The Dynamic Reflection

I believe that without God's grace Darlene and I would not have found the courage to go to my parents and try to heal the relationship. We were there hoping to communicate our feelings honestly, without blame, and to achieve understanding of my parents' feelings. I think that we were somewhat successful in achieving a mutual understanding of one another. Much work remains for us to do about acceptance.

Theological Reflection/Self-Critical Appraisal

The dialogue illustrates for me some of the contrasts between what the role of the church should be and the dangers of religious rigidity. My father exemplifies how the Catholic Church is able to create unquestioning obedience to rules that are just, after all, man-made. Religious self-righteousness can create great suffering. In contrast, I see the openness and conscious desire for growth at our congregation as an acceptance of all people as they are, not as man-made rules have deemed they "should" be—acceptance as fellow members, part of the family of Christians.

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