

# Faith Networks

A Newsletter for Cooperation in the Churches of God

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## The Passover Towel: A Tribute to Wilhelmina

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My Mother has Alzheimer's disease. Wilhelmina is an energetic, eighty-three-year-old mother of seven children, who loves antiques, garage sales, dark chocolate, and, except for the fact that she's losing her mind, can probably out-walk most people twenty years younger than she.

Wilhelmina's German parents immigrated to the United States through Ellis Island, and spoke only German. As one of three children born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, she started elementary school not knowing English.

Always finding school a struggle, Wilhelmina quit high school to get a job and became part of the World War II war effort. In 1945, she married and set a course to become a homemaker and mother of five daughters and two sons.; however, while raising a family, she rediscovered a passion for learning. She signed up for every imaginable adult evening course the high schools had to offer: conventional French, auto mechanics, Tae-Kwon-Do, furniture making, guitar, belly dancing, and oil painting, to name a few. If she wasn't learning it in night class, she was teaching herself. Her upholstery and furniture refinishing skills were second to none.

Not happy with her decision to quit school, and wanting to set an example for her children, Wilhelmina finished high school and got her GED in 1974.

During her most trying menopausal years, Mother up and decided to go to school to become a licensed practical nurse. And that she did. In 1976 she finished nursing school and drove herself to Columbus, Ohio, to take the state board test. She passed. Never actually working as a nurse, she was asked by our father why she went to all that trouble to become one. Her answer—"to prove I could."

Ironically, she actually used those skills in 1992 after our dad died, as a hospice volunteer, to help others with dying loved ones. When that became too depressing, she switched gears to become a 5-foot, 90-pound, middle-aged model—and got work!

Mother began showing the signs of Alzheimer's disease a couple of years after our dad died. Having always walked to the beat of a different drummer, the peculiarity of Mother's behavior was not particularly evident to her children. Always generous by nature, Mother began giving away heirloom and household items whenever one of us came to visit. She'd make up the strangest little "care packages" for her children to take home: the grocery ads, a knick knack, a used toothbrush, some chocolate, a pine cone, a banana... One particular time, she was not going to let me leave without taking a bath towel. Now, Mother's collection of towels was enormous and mismatched. These

were all collected while “garage sale-ing.” I remember telling her several times that I didn’t need a towel, even going as far as telling her kindly that our styles were too different (she’s eclectic antique, I’m transitional contemporary). After about the eighteenth time of turning her down, I agreed to take a cream, beige, and black brocade “wallpaper-looking” towel that was as close to my decorating style as it was going to get. I figured that I’d save it as my Passover towel since it wasn’t going on display anywhere in my contemporary bathroom. And that I did. For two or three years I brought the wallpaper towel to the foot-washing services.

As Mother’s Alzheimer’s progressed, the family began having meetings concerning her care (without her knowledge) in order to keep her living in the four-bedroom house she loved. We learned interesting things about Mother and each other at those meetings. When I was twelve, my mother decided she no longer wanted to be called “Mom” but “Mother.” She had to be kidding! I hated that word for her. It was so formal. She insisted, I resisted, but she won. Begrudgingly, I learned to call her “Mother.” Apparently, she told this only to me and one other brother. So my answer when the other siblings asked me why I call Mom “Mother” was, “because she told me to.”

With these meetings, we created a schedule where every son or daughter would spend some time each day over at Mother’s house. It was the responsibility of the daughters to address hygiene issues that were becoming very apparent. A self-proclaimed loner, and someone that only a couple of times in her life went to a hair salon, Mother initially resisted the “spa days” we created, but soon became tolerant of our interference with her personal care. One time, on my turn for spa

day with Mother, there wasn’t a towel in the house. She had a paper towel hanging where the towel should be. A bewildered call by me to other family members, and the mystery was solved. Mother had given all her towels away. Back came all the towels she had given away, including my wallpaper Passover towel. And this time, most were hidden so it wouldn’t happen again. Unfortunately, this routine became harder and harder as the disease progressed. Alzheimer’s medications didn’t help for many reasons, but mostly because the pills have to be taken twice daily, and you have to remember to take them. Also, keeping Mother in her house by herself was no longer an option. We had already taken away her car, but thinking about all the potential hazards of an adult with the mind of a five year old living by herself... was unsettling.

On June 24, 2005, the day after her eighty-first birthday, the family placed Mother into an assisted living facility for persons with Alzheimer’s disease. That was one of the worst days of my life.

Over the next several months, as my siblings and I were cleaning and vacating her house, one of the last places we cleaned out was our hiding place for all those towels. I remember taking very few of Mother’s things, because the other family members got the antique gene, and I got the dark chocolate gene. However, as I stood there looking in the hiding place and seeing the wallpaper Passover towel, I announced to the others, “I’m taking this towel.” So back it came to my house, and back it went into my linen closet for next year’s Passover service.

In April 2006, I remember tossing the wallpaper towel on the front seat of the car along with my purse and Bible, turning off the radio, and heading down the road to Passover services. This quiet

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time was a chance to think about Christ's sacrifice for us. As often is the case when my mind tends to wander, I began to reflect back on the past few years and all the family had endured to keep Mother happy in her home for as long as possible. As I glanced over to make sure I remembered to bring a towel, I was struck with the meaning of what that towel had come to represent to me. It had served to wash my Mother's hair; to help dry her off after a bath; to place her foot on in order to catch the flying toenails when it was time for a pedicure; and to show me the lesson of humility firsthand more than any foot-washing service has done up to this point. (John 13:1-17) I have become the servant to my mother, along with my brothers and sisters, and we will continue to do so even though the job reinvents itself as the disease progresses.

For the most part, Mother has adjusted to her new living arrangement. She still resists personal hygiene at the Alzheimer's facility, and certain family members have an easier time getting her to cooperate with cleanliness more than the aides do. I usually see her on Saturdays, before church services, and we typically go out to lunch. I have to cut her food and show her how to use the fork, and we brush our teeth together when we get back to her room. We usually have the same conversation dozens of times. When she remembers my name and who I am, it's particularly rewarding.

As for the Passover towel, I don't care that it is not my style. It will be at every Passover service I attend, and will remind me that Christ's sacrifice for us was so much more than anything I can do for my Mother. As I take someone else's foot into that towel, I am reminded of Christ's sacrifice, His example, and the need to be humble. Remembering to be a servant doesn't end with your own family. It just begins there. 

## “It’s Not About Numbers”

“It’s not about numbers!” I’ve heard that statement dozens of times, most often from church leaders defending a small church as they reminisce about large congregations of the past. Even people who’ve started a home fellowship to escape the oppression of Machiavellian leaders in sheep’s clothing fight discouragement associated with diminished numbers. It’s understandable. We are accustomed to numbering church attendance in the hundreds and Feast attendance in the thousands. A fellowship group of 10 or 15 can seem miniscule by comparison.

Does God want a congregation to remain tiny? It’s reasonable that people prefer the warmth and intimacy of small groups. Interactive Bible Studies are edifying and exciting. You’re more than a spectator at a performance. You’re involved in the group and missed if you’re absent. Large congregations often lack the personal touch.

But there is a larger issue. When Jesus commanded his disciples to go, baptize, and teach all nations to observe his commandments did he expect the congregation to remain small forever? Or is growth natural for a healthy congregation just as it is for a healthy plant? Let’s face it, if a seed never grows, what benefit is it?

It’s easy to be critical of large groups because the fact is, it really isn’t about the numbers! The mission of Christians is not to build a large political organization. It isn’t to change the world by weight of political influence. It isn’t to overwhelm people through mass appeal to conform to our doctrines.

So why not be content with 5 or 10 people meeting in a living room? Is that

God’s purpose for us?

Not long ago a family in our group asked for congregational prayers for their granddaughter. The little girl was 13 months old and weighed only 11 pounds. The parents had discussed their concerns during visits with the pediatrician, and at first he dismissed them, believing the child was just small. Eventually tests were ordered which revealed the presence of liver cancer. Lots of prayers went up, there was medical intervention, and the cancer was eradicated. She is now a healthy 6 year old engaged in all the happy activities of others her age.

The family didn’t love their daughter more after she gained weight than before. Nor did her intrinsic value increase. In other words, their relationship with her was “not about numbers,” but the lack of weight told them something was wrong. And it would have been sheer lunacy to refuse to look at the numbers because they loved her. In fact, it was because they loved her that they admitted the lack of growth indicated a health problem.

What parent isn’t thrilled with the innocence of an infant or the pure joy of a toddler? But does the parent want his child to stay that way? As much as we love children when they are small, we want to see them grow. And parents would be heartsick if a child stayed small indefinitely. God seems to feel the same way about congregations. “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” (John 15:8 KJV)



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What if the first century church had been satisfied with no growth? The answer is simply this: Christianity would have died a quick death. It would never have been more than a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish sect.

In fact, it appears the early Christians were often satisfied to be just that. Two things caused the church to change. The Apostle Paul was instructed by God to go to the Gentiles. He obeyed. The second impetus was persecution from some of the most infamous tyrants of history. Christians were forced to flee for their lives, and they took their beliefs with them, telling strangers in all parts of the world the good news of Jesus Christ. And the Church grew!

In his book *Natural Church Development*, author Christian Schwarz cites Jesus' example in Matthew 6:28: "See the lilies of the field, how they grow." The Greek word for "see" is *katamathete* which implies more than the English word "see." Schwarz says the Greek word means to "diligently study." Jesus is telling Christians to diligently study how the lilies grow to understand the principles of the Kingdom of God.

## **The mission of Christians is not to build a large political organization.**

There's a good reason to study the growth process diligently since the cause of growth is not visible from the surface. What's apparent from plant growth is the existence of an underground root structure that feeds the plant. If an observer looks only at the flower, he will miss how life is supplied to the plant.

Secondly, growth occurs automatically. It's built into the structure. Something must be wrong with the plant for it not to grow. If it isn't growing, there

must be interference with the intrinsic growth process. So, like our friend's granddaughter, lack of growth indicates something is wrong.

Jesus seems to be saying that a congregation has a responsibility to look for the offending elements and remove them. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:8)

The responsibility to bear fruit cannot be overestimated. In one parable, Jesus used a fig tree as an example for the church. When the fig tree did not bear fruit, he commanded that it be cut down. "Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why encumbereth it the ground?" (Luke 13:8)

The fig tree was "encumbering" the ground, that is, it was taking nutrients from the soil but producing no good fruit from them. God provides for the life of fruitful trees, and he also provides for the life of the congregation. Each time church services begin we ask for God's Spirit to be present, and when we conclude we thank him for being with us. We ask for inspiration, healing, solutions to problems; the list is endless. And God is good to hear and answer our prayers. He even says he will never leave us or forsake us.

He expects in return that Christians not interfere with the growth process.

It is important for a congregation to understand the growth processes just as a vinedresser should understand plant growth.

In this and subsequent issues of *Faith Networks*, we will discuss some elements of a healthy congregation that cause congregational growth. Check out the article by Bill Jacobs in this issue which describes one of the most important characteristics. [FN](#)

# A Tale of Two Kings

Two of the most prominent kings in the Old Testament are Saul and David. These two are quite different, and comparing them yields many lessons for us. As Christians, we can see “what God is up to” even today.

## Saul

Saul was Israel’s first king. The Israelites were fed up with a system of judges and lack of a glamorous central authority. They came to Samuel and asked for a king (1 Sam. 8:5, 19-20). They wanted a king because that is what all the other nations had. They also wanted somebody who stood out when they went into battle. God warned them what this choice meant but the Israelites insisted anyway. And when God chose Saul, he was giving them the kind of king they wanted.

Saul was physically impressive. He was, in fact, the tallest man in the land (1 Sam. 10:23-24). Looks and height matter with people, and that kind of thinking still holds sway today. How much chance would a short and ugly candidate running for U.S. president have, even if he is wise? People judge much by outward appearance, but God does not (1Sam. 16:7).

Saul, however, had not been first tried and shaped in the fire. He was thrust into the limelight without character development first. God gave him his Holy Spirit, and Saul had the chance to succeed. Saul, however, became self-willed and obsessed with hanging on to power. A demon also began to bother Saul (1Sam.16:14).

God doesn’t train kings the way this world does. Historically, heirs to a throne

are pampered and kept away from troubles and “the common people.” Is there any wonder why so many kings have been abusive, arrogant, and power hungry? But God practices a different type of king training, as he demonstrated with David.



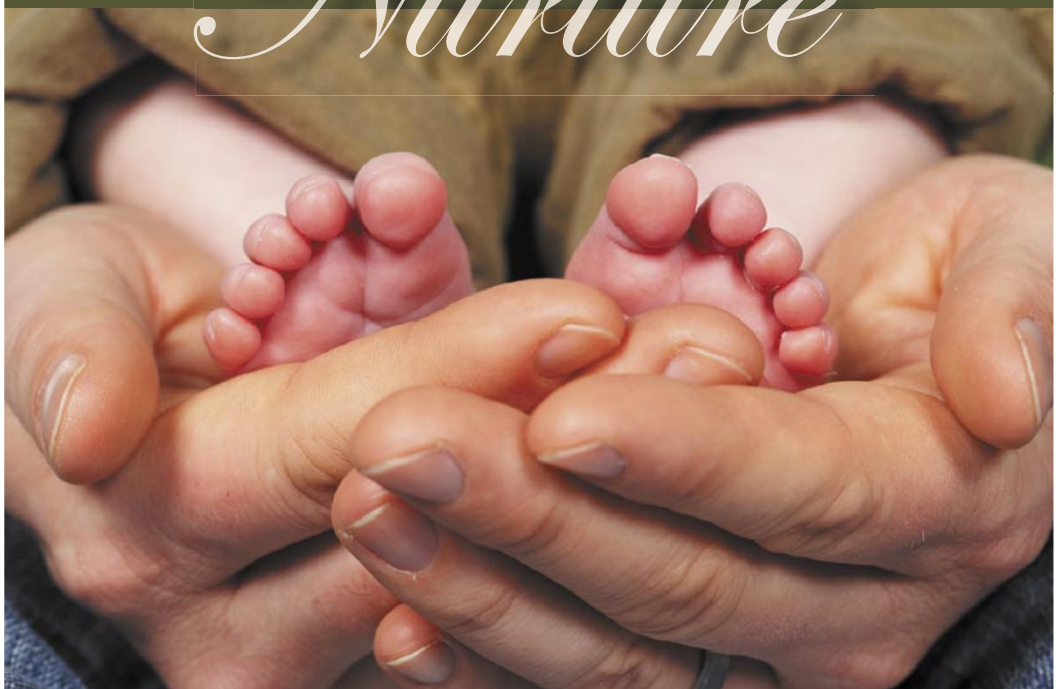
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## David

God chose David because he wanted a man after his own heart (1Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). But how did David become such a man? Did David already have such a heart? Is that why he was chosen? There is more to it than that, because Saul also seemed to begin with a right heart. Saul appears to have been genuinely humble when he was chosen (1 Sam. 9:19-21; 11:22). Unfortunately, Saul didn’t remain small in his own sight. Only time and hard problems form us into the kind of person with a right heart—and with a heart that doesn’t turn away.

David was anointed king as a youth (1Sam.16), but God didn’t install him as king. Instead, David had to flee for his life, live apart from his people for years, live in caves, associate with a group of people rejected by Israel, and trust God while fighting to survive. Indeed, David would not have survived had God not directly saved him at critical points. On one occasion, David and his men were on one side of a mountain running away while Saul and his men were closing in on them. At that very moment, Saul received word that the Philistines are attacking Israel, and Saul had to break off his pursuit of David (1Sam. 23:25-29).

# Nurture



## Learn the Eight Qualities of Congregational Health

God is a relational being. He wants a family. That's why he has created us as relational beings — so we will desire to be a part of his family. God has even given us a physical group of people with whom we can share our spirituality — the congregation.

We are told in scripture that the Church is our spiritual mother. All of us, children, teens, and adults, need a healthy congregation to nurture our spiritual growth. Since each congregation is made up of individuals, we can help each other when we know how and endeavor to function together in a spiritually healthy way.

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So God rescued David, but why let him go through all that anyway? Could it be that God knows something we don't know, and that he still works with Christians the same way?

David had to live a hard existence rather than being in a palace. I wonder how many times he wondered about the promise made to him in 1 Sam. 16—a promise that he would be king? Is it possible that David wondered if that promise was conditional, and he had become disqualified? Don't we think like that when we are under stress? Some of the Psalms David wrote while hiding from Saul make me wonder if he felt the same way.

But God had not rejected David as the future king of Israel. What was really happening was that God was molding David and making him into what God wanted via tough times and long-term experience. We as people don't see things properly at times.



## Health and Wealth Gospel

One of the most insidious teachings extant today is what is known as “the health and wealth gospel.” In effect, the idea is that God “blesses” those who are truly his. If someone has serious financial or health problems or any other types of troubles which never seem to go away, then it is obvious he or she is doing

something that doesn't please God. After all, God “blesses” those who serve him with a comfortable life, security, money, and few troubles.

This kind of thinking has penetrated everywhere, and may even be in the minds of some readers of this article. Below the conscious level, this thinking gets absorbed into Christians without careful and critical thought as to whether it is true or not. It affects how we feel and act.

In the 1960's, when I lived in southern California, I often bought a Sunday edition of the Los Angeles Times. Included in that newspaper each week was a full page ad by “Reverend Ike.” His ads were so outrageous that I can remember them to this day. They included a poem each week, and the words would vary a little from week to week. The poems would go something like this:

“If you want pie-in-the-sky,  
By-and-by, when you die,  
Then Reverend Ike is not your man.  
But if you want money,  
And you want it now,  
Then Reverend Ike is for you.”

The ad was followed by the times and places where you could go hear him preach.

That version of the health-and-wealth gospel is blatant and off-the-wall. Most modern preachers and authors are much more sophisticated and subtle. Some of these preachers are very well known and respected. They not only preach their “gospel” on radio and TV but write best sellers. You may have some of these books in your home.

God didn't practice the health-and-wealth gospel on David, and he doesn't on us either. God made David go



through tough times for many years. What we are counts for more than what we have or the troubles we face. God is going for long-term results. He wants each of us to be a person after his own heart.

The God who knows what he is doing, and is training us, summarizes our earthly state in Deuteronomy 8:15-16:

*He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.* [FN](#)

## Touched by Our Weaknesses

There is a scripture in the Gospels that I have never understood. I've heard explanations in sermons and articles, but at one time or another I've had to confess to God that I thought the explanations were missing the mark. A recent experience taught me the lesson of this scripture.

This last November I accompanied my wife Boni to the funeral of her dear and lifelong friend Wanda. Wanda and Boni had been close friends since the sixth grade. Wanda was the Matron of Honor at our wedding. She and Boni remained in close contact after Boni's marriage to me and our subsequent move more than one hundred miles away.

About nine months ago, Wanda discovered that she had advanced breast cancer. We prayed for her daily and did what ever we could to help and support her. Sadly, Wanda died on November 1, 2007.

At the memorial service, I experienced something remarkable and unexpected. This experience lit up that scripture for me in a way that nothing except personal experience can do. I had not been close to Wanda. I only saw her a few times, and

had only known her for six years when she died. I was not experiencing the same kind and intensity of grief that Boni was feeling. I was serious and sobered by the nearness of death, but I was not gripped by the aching loneliness and sense of loss that the death of a close friend or loved one brings.

At the service, Boni made eye contact with Wanda's sister, Cheryl. Immediately, they were drawn toward each other at a run, as if a magnetic force was accelerating them. They threw their arms around each other. Their faces both contorted into a grimace of anguish and grief, and their eyes filled with tears. Their bodies were wracked with sobbing. Never in my life had I seen such a spontaneous and intense release of emotion. Immediately, in an uncontrollable torrent of empathy which I did not anticipate, my throat choked, my eyes filled with tears too, and I had to draw in my breath in an involuntary sob. If I had not been ashamed to cry in front of a hundred strangers, I would have lost control completely.



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In that instant, but never before, I completely understood this passage from the book of John, describing the resurrection of Lazarus:

*When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. (John 11:33)*

Perhaps we have all wondered why Jesus wept. He knew that Lazarus would live again in a few moments, so He should have been filled with joy. I have heard that Jesus wept because of the lack of faith and the hardness of heart of those at the gravesite. I heard a more plausible explanation later, that Christ was crying from the grief that was a normal reaction to the death of a loved one. I believed that until Wanda's memorial service. Now I know that Christ wept from empathy! Notice it was the sight of the mourners weeping that caused the emotional response in Jesus. The implications of this knowledge are important to us!

Jesus was moved to tears because He sensed the mourners' grief. His tears were an empathetic reaction to the emotions of others. He wasn't mourning the faithlessness of the people, and He wasn't feeling grief over the death of Lazarus. Jesus Christ was overcome with empathy! This realization gives life to this scripture:

*For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)*

Jesus Christ feels empathy for us! He feels our hurts, our pains, our fears. He rejoices with us in our victory when we overcome. He delights with us when we learn something vital by combining our life experiences with the truth of the scriptures, as I am convinced that I did at the service. When we know that Christ experiences our lives vicariously and that He is connected to us emotionally, we can have a greater appreciation for His willingness to give aid in time of need. He will be motivated emotionally to help us!


*Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)*

We can see that the following scripture isn't only good advice for humans; it characterizes one of God's behaviors:

*Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. (Romans 12:15)*

God rejoices or weeps as the tides of His people's fortunes ebb and flow. We don't worship an uncompassionate God who does not appreciate our emotional state. Our God is in touch with us and is moved emotionally by our lives. He is moved to act on our behalf.

I'm saddened by Wanda's death, but grateful for the experience that taught me about Christ's empathy for mankind. I also learned something about spiritual wisdom. It can't all be learned from a book. We must learn by living it, following in Jesus' footsteps.

(A collection of Hugh's writings can be seen on his Friday, Sunset website at <http://fridaysunset.net.>) 

## Just How Far?

While driving to work one early morning, I stumbled across a song on Shine FM, a Christian radio station. The song was called “East to West” by the group Casting Crowns. It spoke of a profound and deep message of the cross, and how Jesus knew the distance that had to be traveled to bring mankind close to God again. Here were some of the lyrics of the main chorus: “Jesus, you know just how far the east is from the west, from one scarred hand to another.” As I began to think more deeply about this, I realized that in the literal sense we can’t measure something immeasurable, to what distance the east is from the west. But in a practical way it implies without limit or measure.

We find the basis of this song in the scripture found in Psalms 103:12, expressed by King David, “As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.” There is a similar parallel to this found in Micah 7:19: “He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” This is another illustration of immeasurable distances. What a promise and comfort we find in these scriptures, that our sins and transgressions will be that far removed from us, as we repent and ask forgiveness from God.

This song makes an interesting point on how Jesus knew the fullness of that distance by his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus knows the separation that sin brings between us and our Creator, and He showed it by one pierced left hand and one pierced right hand. The prophet Isaiah puts it clearly and accurately in Isaiah 59:1-2:



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*Behold the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that he cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.*

So sin obviously brings separation from God and his presence. I thought about this, and it’s clear to me that Jesus knew that full distance of separation on the cross, and what it had to take to reconcile all of humanity to himself.

Jesus Christ had to go to the vast distance of darkness, rejection, betrayal, loneliness, and persecution in order to bring man closer to God. We have a good picture of that again by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 53:3-6 says,

*He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

We can try to imagine the distance that he went for us, but it’s hard to comprehend.

Often times we come to moments in our lives where we experience loneliness, rejection, and perhaps even persecution.

We should find comfort in the words of Jesus from John 16:33: “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulations: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” We might think of driving across the country as a long distance, or maybe even flying across the world. But that doesn’t even scratch the surface of the distance Jesus Christ traveled for you. Jesus went to the outermost places of the universe to deliver and redeem our souls from sin and death. In Revelation 1:5 we read, “And from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, and the first of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth, Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.”

I’m reminded of the words of another song that goes like this: “I’m forgiven because you were forsaken, I’m accepted—you were condemned. I’m alive and well, your spirit is within me because you died and rose again.” In times of hardship and pain through the raging sea of this world, may we not forget the gentle voice of Jesus crying as he says, “I have been there.” When we find ourselves doubting and questioning his love towards us, we might ask Jesus, “How much do you love me and to what degree of worth am I to you?” And with a selfless and willing heart, he will stretch out his left hand, and stretch out his right hand, and say “This much, my child.” [FN](#)

## The Truth Will Set You Free

A few blocks from where I sit is a thoroughfare named after a certain Todd George, a respected citizen of Lee’s Summit, Missouri from generations past. Not only was he a civic leader, he was also, as legend has it, one of the big shots in the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. (See page 170 of Truman, by biographer David McCullough).

Thankfully, this community has put away that sordid attitude, but local legend also has Todd George crossing paths with one Harry S. Truman when the latter was running for office in Jackson County.

It seems that Judge Truman was one who refused to toe the Klan’s line, and the solution from the Klan’s view was to smear Truman and even threaten his

family. Not being one to shrink from a fight, Harry Truman knew that a threat against his family had to be confronted directly. He showed up at one of the Klan’s powwows in Lee’s Summit and told them that “being farm kin,” they should recognize manure when they see it. (Mr. Truman’s words were more colorful than those I use here).

In light of what passes for newscasting these days, I am sad that more of us don’t have a farming background so that we too can recognize manure when we see it. The purveyors of information, whether they be public officials or professional newsmen, have managed to master the art of propaganda. Images, sound



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bites, clichés, slogans, spin, and semantic gymnastics pass for news, and the public loves to have it so.

Jesus warned us to “take heed that no one deceive you” (Matt 24:5), and surely the whole purpose of propaganda is to do just that. We must not be ignorant of the Great Deceiver’s devices (II Cor. 2:11 ). The swill being spread today as food for thought was just as deep in Jesus’ time, and Jesus saw it for what it was (John 2:23-24). He warned us not to judge by appearances, but to judge righteous judgment (John 7:24 ).

The enemies of Jesus knew their craft well. If the evidence witnessed against them, they would try to destroy the evidence (John 12:10 ).

They would try to discredit the evidence with rumor and innuendo (Matt. 28:11-15).

They claimed their credentials trumped the facts (John 7:45 -48, 9:34 ).

They would smear the reputation of the righteous (Matt. 12:24 , John 8:41 ), and when all else failed, they resorted to name-calling (John 7:52 ).

They were masters of timing, carrying out their plots by night when the light of day could not shine on their sordid deeds (Matt 26:3-5).

If there was no evidence to support their case, they would spin the truth until right and wrong were indistinguishable (Mark 14:58-59, Matt. 26:59-62, Isaiah 5: 20-23).

They refused to answer relevant questions and demanded that their accusations be accepted at face value (John 18:30).

They assembled a malleable mob, taught them a simple-minded slogan, and drove them into a frenzy (Mark 15:



6-15, Acts 19:28-34).

They applied the rule of law only when it suited their purposes. And of course the ends always justify the means (John 11:49-50, 19: 7).

In these days of the lying spirit, where are those who will stand for truth and proclaim it from the housetops in spite of the venom that will be


heaped on those with such courage? Too many today have become timid for fear that what they say will be used against them, but they seem to forget the devices of the Deceiver. For the Deceiver will twist anything a righteous man says and use it against him, even as they did with our Savior (Mark 14:58-59).

In *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S Truman* (pp. 127-128), author Merle Miller asks Truman the following question: “Mr. President, under the circumstances mightn’t it have been wiser not to go out and tell off those Klanners?”

Truman replied, “It might have been, yes, but once a man starts thinking that way, about what it’s wise to say and what isn’t, why, he might just as well cash in his chips and curl up his toes and die.

“I tried never to act that way, and for the most part I think you can say I succeeded. Sometimes I was advised to hold my fire on this and that because they said telling the truth would offend people. But whenever I took such advice I never thought much of myself.

“If you keep your mouth shut about things you think are important, I don’t see how the democratic system can work at all.”

Our nation is in need of some plain speaking, and may we all know the manure when we see it. 

Rather than cover the same ground in that manner, let's approach the topic from a psychological perspective. What do people experience as empowering? Recent brain research has produced some amazing answers to that question.

It turns out that the human brain contains an area that is closely related to empowerment. We can call it the motivational center of the brain. When people find themselves motivated to do anything, brain-imaging scientists can see a lot of activity in this part of the brain.

Researchers have also discovered that there are four elements to this motivational center. If we can activate each of these four elements in others, they will not only be empowered, but also motivated to action on behalf of Jesus Christ. Let's look at each of these four elements.

## Service

When people are involved in service, caring for others, helping others, all kinds of good things begin to take place in the brain. Growth hormone is produced, along with a host of other "feel-good" brain chemicals. I've noticed for years that involving people in altruistic, humanitarian activities not only produces a sense of well-being and self-respect, but it also bonds people to those who are involved with them in these activities. Hard science now supports my experience.

It is interesting to note that one of the eight qualities of congregational health is *need-based evangelism*. Instead of browbeating people with religious slogans or giving them a stack of literature, taking care of people's spiritual and physical needs tends to make more of an impression on them.

God obviously knows all about how to motivate people. Perhaps that's why he has given each of us a spiritual gift that we are to use to serve the congregation. He knows that to be motivated, we need to serve. And he has given each of us a way to be successful at serving and contributing. If you sometimes feel like you don't belong, or don't know what to do to fit in to your congregation, perhaps it would help to take a deeper look into the gift God has given you.

We may also think about what Jesus said to the disciples the night before he died. He explained that he and the Father are one, and that they both want all of us to be one with them and with each other in the same way they are one. Taking care of those who can't help themselves is one way to approach this godly ideal. That leads us to the second aspect of motivation.

## Mastery

Science has now made a solid connection between motivation and mastery. When we know how to do something well, we are naturally motivated to do it. It's rather obvious, isn't it? But now we have science to support what we have known all along.

How can we use this knowledge to move the congregation forward? Anything we can do to help people develop their physical and spiritual skills not only helps them become more complete and sharper instruments to glorify God, but helps to bond them with the congregation they are serving. How much of your congregation's budget is dedicated to adding to the abilities of the people in your group? How many activities has your congregation sponsored that provided opportunity for its members, including those who are younger, to develop spiritual and physical skills?

Ephesians 4 tells us that one responsibility of the ministry is the equipping of the saints for the work of service. Think about Jesus when he instructed and then sent out the 70 two-by-two. He knew that the experience would bring them back on a completely different level than when they left. Of course, he had to be *equipping* and *empowering*, instead of *controlling*, to allow such a process to take place. This observation about how Jesus led his disciples naturally flows into the third element of encouragement.

## Autonomy

Before people can serve or develop mastery, they need some space to operate, to make mistakes, to learn by doing, to grow. Space, in this case, is a metaphor for autonomy. Giving people something to do, the skills to do it, and the freedom to do it, produces encouragement. The evidence for this is now documented.

It's not a complicated concept. But because there are so many insecure people in leadership positions, it's more difficult to find autonomy in our congregations than any of the other things. Giving people autonomy means giving up some control to them.

The concept of empowerment (as in *empowering leadership*) fits most essentially under autonomy. If people don't have the freedom to act, they are not empowered.

What happens when we provide these three elements for congregational members? They will be motivated to participate and to serve. And when that happens the fourth area happens almost naturally.

## Inclusion

The three previous elements, service,

mastery, and autonomy, tend to create a powerful feeling of inclusion. But there are also other ways to generate this vital feeling.


Social activities “reverse-engineered” to optimize inclusion work well. Don't just have a social—plan specific ways to draw in all the kids, the elderly, the shy, etc.

Scheduling board meetings so that more people can attend them, inviting everyone to attend and give input, expressing appreciation for attending— all these send a message that everyone is needed and wanted.

Think about all the children who have grown up and no longer attend the church congregations that their parents took them to when they were young. When I talk to many of them, they tell me they never felt like they belonged. They didn't feel like they belonged because we didn't do enough to create that vital sense of inclusion. They need to feel that the congregation is “my church” instead of “my parents' church.”

## Intentionality

Sometimes we read management or motivational books that are based on the experience of the writer. These four elements, service, mastery, autonomy, and inclusion, are based instead on nature, on brain structure, on God who created them.

Any more, when I want to make something happen, I try to think backwards and ask how we can include all these elements in our event, activity, project, etc. I do that because I know they work. If I am going to spend a lot of precious time and resources on some project, I want it to be a success. I know it will more likely succeed if I am in line with nature and God instead of out of step. 

## Essentials for Congregational Health: Empowering Leadership

The *Natural Church Development* (NCD) survey of over a million people identified eight elements that are essential for building and maintaining healthy congregations. Having an *empowering leadership* is one of those essential elements.



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But what should leaders empower congregational members to **do**? The purpose of the church, according to Jesus' words to us in Matthew 28, is to "make disciples." Church leadership, in healthy congregations, then, empowers the members to make disciples.

To go a step further, the research from this monumental project confirmed that when congregations are healthy, growth (disciple making) happens, "all by itself." Consequently, making disciples translates to producing a spiritually healthy congregation.

So when we boil it down, good congregational leaders empower the members of the congregation to engage in the other seven health-producing elements that were also identified in the NCD survey.

Nearly every business or church management book on the market these days has a large section explaining why leadership needs to be empowering, and how to go about it.

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