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Worship, Wonder, and Way

Reimagining Evangelism as Intentional Participating in God’s Mission

Grant Zweigle

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Introduction

On my twenty-fourth birthday, I experienced what some people might call a spiritual awakening. It happened in the middle of an ordinary worship service in an ordinary Church of the Nazarene in Idaho (USA). I don’t remember any particular thing the preacher said or song the worship team sang that precipitated this experience. But as the pastor prayed that morning, I discerned a voice speaking clearly to the inner depth of my being saying, “Grant, repent of your sin and come follow me.” It was Jesus.

I first heard the name Jesus when I was a young child. I learned about Jesus from my mom and dad, as well as from Sunday school teachers and preachers in the churches I attended throughout my youth. I learned about Jesus in the Christian university from which I graduated. Jesus was a familiar and friendly figure to me. I believed in him. And I knew that calling people to repent and follow him was one of the things Jesus did. But, up to that point in my life, I can’t say I had ever experienced him calling me to turn from my sin and follow him in such a clear, direct, and personal way.

The next morning, I was at my pastor’s doorstep, asking if he would help me become a follower of Jesus. I knew enough about Jesus to know that following him is not a solitary pursuit. I knew I needed guides for this journey. And I knew enough about Jesus to know that he would want me to guide others on the journey as well. I also recognized that I didn’t know how to do that.

Over the next several months I met with my pastor, Orv Halley, on a weekly basis. He prayed with me and taught me from Scripture. He listened to my joys and struggles as I adapted to a life of Christian discipleship. He shared his heart for the nations with me, and spoke excitedly of his dream for our little church in a small corner of the United States to send a team to plant a church in a closed access country in central Asia.

Another young man in the church met with us. This man would eventually move his family halfway around the world to start a church among an unreached people group in central Asia.

Orv’s love for God, his love of people, and his enthusiasm for the mission of God in the world were infectious. It did not surprise him at all that Jesus would speak to a young man like me, calling me to follow Jesus and join his redemptive mission in the world. Orv understood the gospel to be wide and expansive, inclusive and generous. Orv’s understanding of God’s mission in the world was rooted in the Old Testament, in places like the creation story; in God’s calling and choosing of Abraham to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth; in Psalms that spoke of God’s heart for the nations; and in God calling Israel to be a light to all the nations of the earth. Orv believed that the Holy Spirit was active in the world, seeking young women and men just like me, desiring to enfold us into the triune life and love of God and send us out, on mission, for the life of the world.

As he discerned the gifts and graces God had given me, Orv began to give me little assignments in the life and mission of our local church. One day, several months after we began meeting, Orv asked me to share the gospel with Shelly, a woman who was on the margins of our church. Shelly was someone Orv believed showed signs of spiritual openness. I had never shared the gospel before, with anyone, so I asked him to help me. I could sense by the hesitation in his response that he wasn’t exactly sure how to guide me.

First, he pulled a book off his shelf and suggested I read it. Recognizing that this might be too much for me to digest in a short amount of time, he offered me a small tract titled “Life Can Have True Meaning” as a guide. As I flipped through this tract in preparation for my meeting with Shelly, I found the way it talked about the gospel to be quite small in comparison with the more robust and compelling vision Orv shared with me in our weekly meetings and in his preaching and teaching. Perhaps this was the reason for his hesitation?

Have you ever been trained to share the gospel with someone? Did you learn a particular method or plan of salvation? How do you feel about that method today? Does it still make sense? Is it still effective? Or have you needed to tweak it?

The next day I met Shelly in the church office. Opening the tract on the coffee table between us, I talked while she listened, following the point-by-point explanation of the gospel found in the tract. At the end of my talk, I asked her if she would like to accept Jesus Christ as her personal Savior. Much to my surprise, she said yes. Following the instructions in the back of the tract, I led her in a prayer printed in the tract and, afterward, I assured Shelly that she had been saved.

It was a wonderful, yet, I’ll admit, somewhat confusing experience. There was nothing in the tract about following Jesus or joining God’s redemptive mission in the world. Nothing about God’s heart for the nations and God’s desire to enfold all people into God’s triune love. I’m not sure what sort of transformation took place in Shelly’s life, but something happened inside me. My interest in evangelism ignited.

Several months later, when filling out my application to attend Nazarene Theological Seminary (USA), I ticked the box next to the word “evangelism.” Within a short time, I received an enthusiastic call from Chic Shaver, professor of evangelism at the seminary, who heard about my interest from the registrar. By the time our conversation ended, Chic had invited me to join him and his wife, Nancy, on a series of revival meetings he was holding. By the time I returned from that trip, Chic had convinced me to enroll in a course he taught called “personal evangelism.” That course changed the trajectory of my life. By the end of my first semester at seminary, I switched from my declared degree of master of arts in Christian thought and history to master of divinity with an emphasis in evangelism. Later that year I became Chic’s faculty assistant, and by the next year, I was serving as assistant pastor of evangelism at First Church of the Nazarene in Kansas City (USA) and managing director of the Chic Shaver Center for Evangelism. It was at First Church that I met my wife-to-be, Aisling, whose mother had received a visit from First Church’s personal evangelism team, led by Chic, when Aisling was just a little girl.

How does your understanding of Scripture or church tradition affect your practices of evangelism? Are there tensions between your theological worldview and certain practices of evangelism that you have seen or participated in?

Chic’s passion for evangelism was infectious, and I was inspired. But, as I continued my seminary education, I could sense that other students and certain faculty members were not enthusiastic about the methodology used in the evangelism courses*.* As I grew in my own understanding of church history, ecclesiology, soteriology, biblical studies, and Wesleyan theology, I began to see why certain aspects of the methodology taught in my evangelism courses were not congruent with other aspects of the seminary curriculum.

But at the same time, I was a first-hand witness to the fruit of Chic’s ministry, and my appreciation of him and growing friendship with him kept me from becoming overly critical or dismissingly cynical. Instead, I chose an appreciative posture, in order to learn as much as I could from a man who was clearly blessed with the gift of evangelism and had a deep love and concern for people, while resolving at the same time to study and develop practices of evangelism that were congruent with my growing understanding of a Wesleyan, biblical, and theological perspective.

That opportunity came with my first assignment after graduating from seminary. In 2000, I was appointed pastor of the Beacon Hill Church of the Nazarene, a small, multicultural church in an urban neighborhood of Seattle (USA). The church was labeled a “mission church” on the district. The forty or so regular attenders represented at least a dozen different nationalities. I moved from pastoring in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the United States to one of the poorest. The church in Kansas City was religiously, politically, socially, and economically homogenous. The church in Seattle was diverse, with attenders who had Orthodox, Catholic, and various strands of Protestant backgrounds; lawyers, single mothers on welfare; conservative, liberal and independent voters; citizens, immigrants, refugees, undocumented persons. My context in urban Seattle was significantly different from suburban Kansas City.

Seattle is part of what is known as the Pacific Northwest of the United States. It is a place where skepticism, cynicism, and criticism characterize people’s attitude toward Christianity and the church. My new neighbors were “happy pagans” who had very little interest in the church and felt no need for it. The diversity of our community put me in regular contact with people from other faith traditions, as well as immigrants from countries like China, whose outlook on life was totally different from mine. Many of these immigrants had an Eastern spiritual worldview, as opposed to my Western materialist worldview. Yet they did not believe in God, in contrast to the dominant theistic belief system of the West.

All of this created a challenge for me. The methodology taught at seminary assumed that I had common cultural ground with the people with whom I would share the gospel. The gospel I was taught was a series of narrow propositions that assumed the hearer’s familiarity with the wider Christian story. My own experience of conversion was built on familiarity with words like “repentance,” and my prior knowledge of and familiarity with Jesus. When I heard Jesus calling me to follow him, I recognized the voice. My new friends and neighbors did not know this voice was Jesus. I now pastored among a people who did not share my culture or my worldview, and who were unfamiliar with the basic trajectory of the Christian story. Some were people who had never heard the name Jesus before.

In Seattle, I was first introduced to the vision of the missional church: the church as a people who are sent by God into the world, for the well-being of the world. As we began to shift our ministry programming toward engaging the community and creating a hospitable, welcoming community of worship, we experienced growth and renewal as we walked with people on the journey of becoming followers of Jesus.

In 2005 we moved from Seattle to pastor First Church of the Nazarene in Vancouver (Canada). Much like our church in Seattle, the church in Vancouver was multicultural, located in an urban neighborhood where two-thirds of our neighbors spoke a first language other than English, our mother tongue. Seattle and Vancouver share a similar cultural outlook, but it became clear rather quickly that my new Canadian friends and neighbors in Vancouver were not only skeptical, cynical, and critical of Christianity like those in Seattle; they also vacillated between the extremes of total indifference toward the church and outright hostility toward it.

I was taught a propositional approach to evangelism in seminary. However, the logic, argumentation, and rhetorical moves that approach used to “seal the deal” are viewed in Vancouver as manipulative, disrespectful, and antithetical to Canadian multicultural values. Faith is relegated to the private, interior space of people’s lives, and not to be shared with others in a way intended to change hearts and minds or secure converts. As a result, my neighbors were on their guard against any perceived attempt to proselytize. One evening over dinner at a neighbor’s house, my neighbor looked at me with what can only be described as an expression of bemused amazement and said, “I never imagined I’d ever have a pastor over to my house for dinner.” In another conversation, a neighbor grilled me about what my church believed for an hour and a half on a frigid elementary school playground. At the end of the conversation, he was still hostile toward the Christian church but said, in a manner I assume he meant as a compliment, that “at least you aren’t one of those religious fundamentalists.”

How would you feel if you learned that a friend from a different religion or denomination viewed you as lost and in need of saving?

In the context of ministry in both Seattle and Vancouver, I began to develop a theology and practice of evangelism that are congruent with a Wesleyan, biblical perspective but also appropriate in my unique context. It was also during this time that I began to delve deeper into what has come to be known as missional theology, the origins of which can be traced to Lesslie Newbigin, who, upon returning to his home country of England after serving as a missionary in India, realized he needed to apply the same tools of contextual analysis and missiological reflection to the practice of ministry in England that he had in India. The context had changed, and so, too, did the methods of evangelism.

In this book, I set out to share some of my reflections on a theology and practice of the witness and evangelism of the local church that I have found useful in my congregational contexts in Kansas City, Seattle, and Vancouver. Much of the content of this book was originally conceived as a series of teaching sermons developed for my church in Vancouver as part of a pastoral research project for my doctor of ministry degree. Good preaching needs to be informed by deep, theological study and biblical reflection, but it also needs to be relatable and understandable to the person in the pew, folding chair, barstool, or whatever people are sitting on when they receive it. This book will be successful only if it is understandable to the average reader but also opens avenues for deeper reflection by those who are more theologically attuned.

Scattered throughout the book are reflection questions for personal or group use. My hope is that this book will be a resource for local churches seeking to reimagine evangelism as a missional practice of their churches. The questions are designed to help congregants and congregations apply the content of the book to their unique contexts.

The theological vision for this book is shaped by a set of core convictions that I have come to hold about evangelism and the mission of the church. This theological vision did not originate inside of me; rather, it is a synthesis of the reading and reflection I did for my doctoral degree. As a pastor, I worked out this theological vision in the context of congregational ministry. This is not armchair theology; it was developed and tested in the trenches.

Chilcote and Warner present six propositions concerning evangelism that strongly influence the theological vision of this book. Through my pastoral experience and doctoral research, I developed, adapted, and added to these propositions for my own use. In quick summation, they are laid out thus: First, evangelism is a vital part of something larger than itself, the mission of God. Second, evangelism has discipleship to Jesus as its primary *telos,* or goal. Third, evangelism is an invitation to participate in the kingdom of God. Fourth, evangelism is designed to provide a good start in the process of conversion. Fifth, evangelism is a missional practice of the whole people of God together. Sixth, my additional proposition, evangelism must be inherently personal. And seventh, evangelism is inescapably contextual.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As any working pastor knows, time is a precious commodity. And the time it took to complete my doctoral degree and write this book was often borrowed from family, friends, and my congregation. I want to thank my wife, Aisling, and my sons, Graiden and Abram, for their support and patience during the research and writing of this book. My parents, Gary and Eleanor Zweigelt, as well as my wife’s family, have all been tremendously supportive along the way. I am blessed with a family who desire to be part of God’s redemptive mission in the world, and who support and encourage me to develop the gifts God has given me for this mission. Thank you!

Who encourages you to develop the gifts and graces God has given you? What are your favorite ways of participating in God’s redemptive mission in the world?

I am also grateful to the congregations of Kansas City First Church of the Nazarene, Seattle Beacon Hill Church of the Nazarene, and Vancouver First Church of the Nazarene for the privilege of being their pastor and for everything they taught me about what it means to be witnesses together. I love pastoring. My love of pastoring is directly related to the people I have pastored. It has been a joy to pastor these wonderful people!

Since beginning this book, I completed a doctor of ministry at Nazarene Theological Seminary (USA), and accepted the position of dean of students at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines. I am grateful for the fine schools of the Church of the Nazarene, and for opportunities to both learn from and serve our schools. Moving from North America to the Asia-Pacific region provided me new opportunities to explore and learn about evangelism in a different context.

I am also indebted to ministry colleagues who have read portions of this book and provided valuable feedback along the way. I learn from others, and it would be dangerous for me to try to list all the wonderful women and men who gave input into the theological and practical vision that inform this book. You know who you are! Thank you!

I appreciate the fine women and men at Nazarene Publishing House (USA) who encouraged me to write and who kept this book alive through some difficult and challenging days. A special thank you to Audra Marvin for her many suggestions to improve the original manuscript.

Finally, I cannot express enough gratitude to the two most significant mentors in my life: Orv Halley and Chic Shaver. Both of these men invested long hours in me and taught me how to pastor with a global vision that is at the same time attentive to the persons around me who are not yet following Jesus and need a guide for the journey to Jesus. Orv completed his journey and is now with the Lord. Chic continues to witness with boundless enthusiasm and energy.

My life is not my own. I am eternally grateful to Jesus for calling and choosing me to be his follower. That Sunday when Jesus called me to follow him forever changed the trajectory of my life. Through Jesus I came to know a Father who loves not only me but the whole world, and through Jesus I have received the Spirit, who equips and empowers me to serve others in Jesus’s name. Through Jesus I have indeed learned that life can have true meaning. All glory be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

1

Mission as Witness

Acts 1:8: But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Driving home on a sunny day in beautiful Vancouver (Canada), I stopped at a traffic light and noticed a sign tacked to a telephone pole just outside the passenger side window. It said: “Witnesses needed.” I leaned over the empty seat to get a closer look and read that there had been an accident at that very intersection. It gave the date and time of the accident and asked for anyone who had seen the accident to call the phone number listed. It was such a simple request: witnesses needed. But it was a weighty request as well. Without a witness, the victim’s ability to resolve the issue with the police and the insurance company was significantly diminished. Without a witness, the circumstances surrounding that event would never be fully revealed. Without a witness, the truth of what occurred at that intersection would never be known.

The operation of a country’s legal system hinges on the willingness of credible witnesses to report what they have seen and heard. A witness often appears in the courtroom as part of a trial. “This witness is in every way one of the people, but … is placed on the stand because of two credentials: the witness has seen something [that is of importance to the outcome of the trial], and the witness is willing to tell the truth about it—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

But not every act of witness takes place in the courtroom. Every day we tell truthful stories to one another, bearing witness to things we’ve seen, heard, felt, learned, and experienced. We bear witness to truth in a variety of ways. Some people are natural storytellers who take you on a journey in their retellings. Others prefer to speak directly and get straight to the point.

A good novelist writes stories that witness to the truth of human experience through the use of fictional characters. A director instructs actors to perform in such a way that truthfully bears witness to a story written by another. A symphony bears witness to a piece of music by performing it truthfully before an audience—interpreting, but not deviating too far from the notes originally penned by the composer. Artists bear witness to the full scope of human experience through the media of paint, pencil, canvas, computer, stone, or clay. Historians bear witness to the past by reconstructing events into a truthful timeline, discerning meaning by connecting pieces from the past. Scientists bear witness to the validity of their experiments by publishing their research in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals.

What we know about life in this world, how we understand the past and present, and even what we expect of the future is constructed largely on the basis of witnesses. As a people, we are constantly adding to our understanding of the world we live in through the witness of those who are willing to tell the truth about a whole range of human experiences. So, too, is our knowledge of God based on witnesses who are willing to speak truthfully about the God who comes near, entering human history in both powerful and humble ways.

The people of ancient Israel—the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were the first to bear witness to the God we’ve come to know through the Bible as YHWH, the Lord, Creator of the heavens and the earth. They bear witness to the truth that the God who creates is also one who calls and makes covenant promises. The Lord is a God who blesses and one who sends. This God also liberates, rescues, saves, and redeems. The children of Israel personally experienced the redeeming and liberating power of the Lord in the Exodus event. They wrote songs that truthfully sang the story of how God delivered them from the powers of Egypt. They told this story to their children, and instructed them to pass it on to their children. It was important to the Israelites that every generation bear witness to the next generation of how the Lord delivered them from bondage and brought them into the Promised Land.

The tabernacle in the wilderness and, later, the temple in Jerusalem bear witness to the wondrous—and, at times, dangerous—presence of the Lord among the people. The law of Moses organizes the life of Israel in such a way that it bears witness to a way of living in the world that expresses the holiness, mercy, and justice of the Lord. And through the witness of prophets, priests, and kings, the word and way of the Lord are made known to the people of Israel and the nations. When the people fail to bear witness to the saving deeds of the Lord, they lose their identity as a people and are sent into exile, where they remember who they are and whose they are. Also, while in exile, the longing is cultivated for a faithful and righteous king to come and make Zion a place of healing for the nations.

Israel’s vocation at this time, as a people chosen by God, is to bear witness to the truth of God among all the nations of the earth. “You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord in both Isaiah 43:10; and 43:12, “that I am God”; and in 43:13, “Yes, and from ancient days I am he.”

If you were to name a person in the Old Testament who witnesses God’s saving, rescuing, or healing power, whom would you choose? Why? What makes this person a credible witness?

When Moses goes up Mount Sinai, the Lord says to him:

This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Exodus 19:3b-6a

Reflecting on this scripture, Michael Goheen writes: “It is hard to overestimate the importance of these words for understanding the role and identity of Israel.”[[3]](#endnote-3) He continues:

Israel is to embody God’s creational intention for all humanity for the sake of the world, living in such a way as to draw the nations into covenant with God. Or, to use the later language of Isaiah, Israel is called to be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6).[[4]](#endnote-4)

There is no question that when Jesus comes preaching and teaching in Galilee, he understands his mission as an extension of and fulfillment of Israel’s missionary vocation. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus says in John 8:12, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Israel is called to be a light to the nations. Jesus is the light of the world.

In Revelation 1:5, John calls Jesus “the faithful witness.” Israel’s witness is imperfect. Jesus’s witness is perfect. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:1-3a).

In what ways does Jesus fulfill Israel’s calling to be a witness to the nations? How is Jesus’s witness different from Israel’s witness?

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Jesus truly and fully embodies God’s creational intent for every person. Through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus witnesses to the presence and reality of the kingdom of God that is now open to everyone who will believe, enter, and receive. Jesus announces and embodies the good news that, through repentance and faith in him, all people everywhere are set free from the powers of darkness and death; forgiven from the guilt and healed from the scourge of sin; and welcomed as children into the eternal-life-giving, loving fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. And to all of this, the Holy Spirit bears witness in the life of believers.

This is a story that needs to be told. It is a story that is for the life of the world. Jesus is the first fruits of the new creation that is coming, the one who will reconcile the whole creation to God the Creator. The Christian church today is called to bear truthful witness to this story. The church bears witness to the wonderful truth that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel as well as the true Lord of the rest of the world; that, in Jesus, the reign of God has come near and is open and available to everyone who would receive; that the Creator God has reached into the world through the Son and the Spirit to enfold all people into God’s rescuing, redeeming, and reconciling embrace, where we find life. Christians are sent to bear witness to their experience of and participation in the kingdom of God. The “abbreviation” for this news is the gospel. Christians are a people whose life together in the world bears witness to the gospel.

Once upon a time, I was taught that the gospel was a set of logical propositions about God, humanity, sin, and salvation. I believed that witnessing to the gospel meant presenting these propositions in such a way that would convince a person to give assent to these facts by praying something that was called “a sinner’s prayer.” The problem with this approach is that this is not the way the Bible talks about the gospel. In its Old Testament usage, the word gospel was used for the good news that the reign of God—which sets captives free, brings exiles home, reconciles estranged peoples, and renews the whole creation—has come near. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the gospel is the good news that the reign of God the Old Testament prophets spoke about has finally arrived—in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are the gospel!

According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, the gospel message includes the news “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.” But that is not the extent of it. Paul goes on to include in his telling of the gospel the good news that Jesus Christ now reigns as King, and he will one day hand over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power, including the power of death. The gospel, therefore, tells the whole story of Jesus and the rescuing, redeeming, and reconciling implications of his life, death, resurrection, ascension and imminent return for all people and all creation.

To bear witness to Jesus in our world today is to represent the whole story of Jesus for our whole world today. It is to speak and live the truth and nothing but the truth—the whole truth—about Jesus. This includes our witness to Jesus’s ministry as a prophet greater than Moses, who graciously restores our knowledge of God’s will for human life.[[5]](#endnote-5) Jesus is the greatest teacher who ever lived. For example, in what some call the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus presents a compelling vision for a whole and integrated life. But it is also Jesus’s prophetic ministry that calls us to consider the ways we fall short of the righteousness of the kingdom of God and our need for forgiveness and reconciliation and re-creation, the new birth made possible by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The whole truth about Jesus includes witnessing to Jesus as our great high priest. On the cross, Jesus took our sin upon himself, making full atonement for human sin. Through Christ, our priest, “we are each assured of the pardon of our sin, a pardon that initiates our restored relationship with God and that maintains us in that relationship.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

We live in a world that is vandalized by sin on a daily basis. We participate in this vandalism both willingly and unwillingly, burdening ourselves with guilt. And we are vandalized by the sin of others, which fills us with shame. Christ our priest atones for the guilt of sin and removes our shame, reconciling us with God and one another.

What is happening in the world today that causes you the most concern? What is happening in your life today that causes other people to be concerned about your words, thoughts, or actions?

The whole truth about Jesus includes witnessing to Jesus as King, the Shepherd-King with healing in his wings, who makes all things new, restoring the image of God to those who have been reinstated in his favor and reigning at God’s right hand until all things have been reconciled to him.[[7]](#endnote-7) This includes the hope of Revelation 11:15, the day when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” This is good news for the life of the world because it means the end of injustice, tyranny, pain, oppression, evil, sin, and death. Jesus is the King the world longs for, the King the whole creation groans for. Jesus is the one who makes all things new.

Who will do this? Who will bear witness to this good news? Who will tell the truth, the whole truth, about Jesus and the reign of God? “You, church!” Jesus says in Acts 1:8. We will be Jesus’s witnesses.

This, then, is our vocation, the mission of the Christian church, our mission of witness. But it is more than just a vocation, more than just a job, more than a task, more than a mission we are obligated to fulfill. Witness describes our very identity. Witness is who we are called and chosen to be. When Jesus says, “You will be my witnesses” in Acts 1:8, he is making a promise to his disciples, not giving them a command. And, by extension, he is making a promise to us today; we will be witnesses to Jesus Christ and the reign of God in our cities, neighborhoods, towns, and villages.

Of course, when Jesus first speaks these words to the apostles in Acts 1:8, he is speaking to those who have been physically with him from the very beginning of his public ministry, starting with John’s baptism, throughout his ministry in Galilee, right through his rejection, passion, death, and resurrection, up to the time he returns to the Father in the ascension. He is speaking to those who have personally experienced the power of the kingdom of God through his miracles: restoring sight to the blind, healing lepers, rescuing people from demonic possession, raising the dead, forgiving sinners, preaching the good news to the poor.

But we, in the Christian church, are also those who have experienced the rescuing, redeeming, liberating, reconciling, and life-giving power of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. We can speak truthfully about times in our lives when we experienced release from the guilt and shame of sin; about times we experienced the grace and love of God enfolding us into the mysterious, triune life of God in wondrous ways; about times we experienced God’s help to love and serve others in ways contrary to our very nature; about how God worked in the lives of our families. For example, I can bear witness to how the Lord rescued my great-grandparents from the oppressive powers of communist Russia and delivered them safely to Canada. We witness to what we have learned and heard, and also to what we have personally experienced.

And we are not alone in our witness. The apostles are not the only witnesses to Jesus. In John 5:31-47, Jesus provides a list of other witnesses, including John the Baptist; the miracles he did; the Father, who says at Jesus’s baptism: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased;” and the Scriptures, the entire Bible, bear witness to the truth about Jesus.

When you add these witnesses to the witness of the apostles and now—two thousand years later—the witness of the entire Christian church down through the ages, it is encouraging to know that we stand today among a great cloud of witnesses! We are not the first witnesses, and we will not be the last. And we are not asked to be lone, solitary voices crying out in the wilderness. We now stand shoulder to shoulder with all God’s people through the ages, around the world, and gathered together in our local congregations. Together with all our sisters and brothers, we live as witnesses to Jesus and the rescuing, redeeming, and reconciling implications of his life for every person and the whole of creation.

So, it is not just each one of us as individuals who are called to witness, but all of us together, as the body of Christ, as Christians. Everyone who has been captured by this story and the good news of God’s reign in the Old and New Testaments; all who have looked to Jesus and found rescue, redemption, and reconciliation; all who have been baptized and have received the Holy Spirit; all who are filled with the love of God and desire to share God’s love with others immediately become a part of the community of witnesses. We are all, together, by the power of the Holy Spirit, witnesses to Jesus Christ.

For a long time, I imagined the Christian witness as a solitary, lonely business. When I thought of an effective witness I thought of someone like Billy Graham, a towering figure standing alone behind a pulpit, preaching about Jesus while the masses looked on. I thought of a witness as a woman on a street corner, alone, handing out tracts to those passing by, pleading with people to listen. I imagined a witness as a missionary couple, saying goodbye to family and friends, getting on an airplane and flying to some far-off land to tell people about Jesus. In fact, most of the time when I thought of witnessing, I thought about activities I was supposed to do apart from the Christian church, activities I would pursue away from the community of faith. I even, for a time, believed that the main role of the church was to equip me to be a witness and then send me out there on my own. I heard sermons that exhorted me, as an individual, to go out there and reach people for Jesus. Perhaps I mistakenly heard and understood this as an individual pursuit, or perhaps I sometimes heard misguided preaching. It certainly didn’t come across to me that being a witness was designed to be a team effort.

When you think of someone witnessing, what comes to mind? Do you imagine a solitary activity, or an activity done with others?

I imagined witnessing as a solo activity, and I believed that it was my individual responsibility to witness to my friends, neighbors, coworkers, and unsaved family members. This often felt like a huge burden to bear. And I felt, at times, that if I wasn’t individually pursuing opportunities to witness to unsaved individuals on my own, then, somehow, I was letting God down. I was failing. I wasn’t doing what God expected me to do. I don’t believe this anymore. And it is not what Acts 1:8 says.

Jesus is speaking to his community of disciples. He is speaking to the women and men who have been with him, and who will now constitute the new community called by his name. This doesn’t come across in the English language, but in the Greek, all the pronouns in Acts 1:8 are plural. You all will receive power, Jesus tells them. The Holy Spirit will come on you all. And you all will be my witnesses. All together!

We never witness alone. We have the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, dwelling within us. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you,” Jesus promises. You will receive, and you will be. These are words of gift and promise. Our vocation, our mission of witness, is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

But, like every gift of the Spirit, the gift is given to us, but it is not exclusively for us. The gift is given to us for the world. Our witness is to be a public witness for the life of the world. The witness is for others; for those “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus believes that the world needs a witness. Jesus believes that the world needs to taste and see and hear and experience the good news of the kingdom of God. The world needs to taste and see and hear and experience the gospel, the good news that God’s reign in Christ has come near and is open and available for all who will turn and receive. Our vocation as a Christian congregation is, therefore, both a gift and a calling. It is a gift given to your church for the life of your neighborhood.

Witnesses are needed in places like Seattle and Vancouver, where I lived. Vancouver is a city in which the most people do not know or have forgotten the story of Jesus. A few years ago, a couple from China who were visiting professors at the University of British Columbia moved into our neighborhood and found our church. They came to our conversational English group and stuck around because of the warmth and hospitality of our congregation. At one meeting of the group, the family heard about the hanging of the greens, a tradition where we decorate the church for Advent and Christmas. They showed up and asked if they could help. A woman in our church named Faye gave them the job of setting up the crèche, the manger scene. When they unpacked the figurines, they asked Faye, “Who are these people?” They did not know the story of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and baby Jesus.

But it is not just immigrants from China who are unfamiliar with this story. The same month that Faye shared this story with me, she also told me of an experience she had when attending a Christmas program at another church in Vancouver. A stylish Canadian woman in her early thirties sat near Faye. She leaned over and asked, “Who do those figures on the table in front of the sanctuary represent?” She was asking about the crèche. She didn’t know the story of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and baby Jesus either! Witnesses are needed in Vancouver.

As we consider our witness in our cities, neighborhoods, towns, and villages today, I wonder if we can imagine the geographical scope of the witness that Jesus spoke to his apostles about in Acts 1:8—in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth—and apply it to the people in your local context, where your church has its home. Rather than using geographical proximity, perhaps we might think of being witnesses in Jerusalem as referring to our witness among those who are closest to the story of Jesus. Already among us are those to whom we bear witness. This is our witness to the beloved children of the Christian community. Our witness as a Christian community begins in our homes, in our children’s Sunday school classrooms, in our sanctuary, at the dinner table, the small group, in service to others together, and through the normal routines of family and congregational life. Our children, youth, young adults, adults, and seniors are all constituents of our witness. We witness to one another all that we have seen and heard and know about Jesus. God loves all the children of the church, young and old. The beloved children of the Christian church are the first constituents of our witness—the first to whom our witness together is directed. Our Jerusalem is one another.

Expanding this metaphor, Judea and Samaria could refer to our witness among those who once were a part of the Christian community but have disconnected from the church for one reason or another. Walter Brueggemann calls these folks “forgetters.” Forgetters are “insiders to the faith who have grown careless, weary, jaded, and cynical about the faith.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Beloved children of the community become forgetters for a variety of reasons. Sometimes disagreement within the church pushes people away. Others are unable to resolve the tough questions of faith and life and consequently disengage from the church. In North America, where Sunday worship is no longer protected as sacred time, forgetters are often those who just got too busy with life, work, sports, kids, recreation, shopping, etc., to pay attention to God.

Brueggemann points to affluence as a major contributor to “forgetfulness” in Israel’s life in the Old Testament: “In a context of affluent prosperity, Israel would eventually forget its memory, scuttle the God of the memory, disregard the demands of that God and forfeit the joy of covenant with Yahweh.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Today only 2 or 3 percent of people in Vancouver are meaningfully connected to a local Christian church. Some of the 97 percent who are not connected to the church are “forgetters.” There is some Christian memory. They might show up on Easter Sunday or ask us to baptize their children or perform their weddings. Most are indifferent to the church, while others have grown judgmental of or even outrightly hostile toward Christians.

The Christian church is to persevere in its witness among forgetters. God has not forgotten the forgetters. Forgetters are the lost son, the lost sheep, and the lost coin of Luke 15. They are precious to our Father in heaven. We must continue to bear witness to the truth about Jesus in a world that has, in many ways, intentionally sought to push the church out of public life and seeks to relegate the Christian witness to the interior, private arena of individual souls. But we cannot keep quiet about what we have seen and heard! The gospel is for the whole world, not just for church folks. The gospel is good news for forgetters.

The third constituency for our witness is outsiders. If we apply the geographical scope of the church’s witness to our local context, then “the ends of the earth” may refer to those in our cities, neighborhoods, towns, and villages who are truly outsiders to the story of Jesus. This would include those who have never received a true hearing of the story. It might include those who have never truly seen the gospel in action. It would include those whose parents never bothered to talk to them about spiritual things. It would include forgetters who have been away for so long that they have become outsiders.

In Jesus’s parable of the great wedding banquet, which is all about the invitation to enter the kingdom of God, the insiders ignore the invitation to the feast. “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full’” (Luke 14:23). God sends God’s servants to find and welcome outsiders into God’s presence. In my context, we see many immigrants to the United States and Canada that are truly outsiders to the story of Jesus and the reign of God. They view Christianity as a Western religion. They associate Christianity with the worst forms of cultural imperialism.

God loves the outsider. God loves those who don’t know that the kingdom is open to them. The kingdom of God is for outsiders. Witnesses are needed among outsiders. The ends of the earth have moved next door. The Master has prepared a lavish feast and wants them to come in! Is your church a witness among outsiders? Do the immigrants, strangers, and unchurched in your neighborhood know that they are welcome in your church or at your dinner table?

Have you ever been an outsider in any context, like immigrating to a new country or being a visitor to a church with unfamiliar traditions? What was that experience like? Who welcomed you? Who helped you fit in and understand your new surroundings?

It is not easy to be a witness today. But it’s never been easy. In Greek, the word for witness is martyr. Today, a martyr refers to those who suffer or are put to death for their witness. We need to keep the words witness and martyr together so that we are not surprised by the difficulty and cost of being a witness to Jesus. But before Jesus revealed the cost, he promised his divine help in Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Be encouraged by this promise. God is fulfilling that promise today in the places you worship, fellowship, raise families, work, play, and serve. You have received power. You have the Spirit. You are not alone. We are witnesses together.

2

Our Witness of Worship

Acts 1:11: “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

“Quirks & Quarks” is an award-winning, science-focused radio program of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Every week the host interviews the people behind the latest discoveries in the physical and natural sciences. One Easter Sunday, after our worship service, I was driving home and listening to a conversation between the host, Bob McDonald, and Justin Barrett, who is one of several researchers looking for the roots of religious belief in our brains. The question he is asking is this: How and why are humans built, biologically, to believe in a divine being?[[10]](#endnote-10) Barrett suggests that humans have what one researcher calls “an agency detection device” hardwired in our brains, which is the ability to identify intentional beings in the environment around us.

Think of it this way. Have you ever been outside enjoying a walk when, suddenly, something that seems to be an alert signal goes off in your head, causing you to wonder: What was that rustling noise? In response, you find yourself searching for what you perceive to be the presence of another being around you. Or, you are at home alone at night and suddenly the question “Who’s there?” pops into your head when you hear a creak in the other room. Barrett believes this cognitive mechanism is highly tuned because detecting other intentional agents in the environment was extremely important to our ancestors. It was important to know whether that rustling noise was a friend or foe.

Humans are hardwired to stay tuned to the presence of other beings. We are social creatures, who are by nature attentive to others among us. This ability, according to some theories, explains the development of religion, when “the other” was perceived to be a divine being or spirit. At the end of the interview, host McDonald asks Barrett if he is religious himself. Barrett answers, “I am,” and explains that he is a Christian. He asks Barrett if his Christian faith is ever challenged by his research on the natural foundation of belief. Barrett responds:

“Not at all. From a Christian perspective, the notion that there is some kind of natural foundation for belief, something in our brains, something hardwired in our cognitive structure that makes us attentive to the divine other should not surprise us. God has created us with some kind of sense of the divine built in, and this would have to be worked out in some kind of cognitive architecture.”

Have you ever been suddenly aware of God’s presence? What was that experience like? Where did it take place?

We were created with the capacity to know and be known by God. We were created with the ability to be attentive to the presence of God in our midst, and to respond, turning our attention toward the divine presence.

In the story told in Genesis, the first man and woman are created with the ability to be attentive to the presence of the Lord in their midst. They are created for communion with God. They delight in his presence until the day they yield to the temptation to stop trusting his good intentions for them. They seek to develop life apart from God, lusting after the knowledge of good and evil without reference to him. After the woman and man reach out their hands, grasping and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they hear a rustling noise in the garden. You might say that their agency detection device activates. And they perceive that it is the Lord. Now they face the choice of whether to hide or to present themselves to the Lord. For the first time they find themselves asking: Is God a friend or foe? With their knowledge of good and evil and the awareness that they have disregarded God’s command, they are afraid, and they choose to hide.

People have either been turning toward the Lord or turning away from the Lord ever since. Yet people continue to want to find ways to respond to the divine presence that is rustling in the world. Down through the centuries, Christian theologians—from St. Augustine to Blaise Pascal to C. S. Lewis—have suggested that there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. Some reject the God who created them and construct gods in their own image as a way to fill this God-shaped hole in their hearts. In the language of Romans 1:25, people “exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.”

The Bible is clear that God is lovingly concerned that people know and worship him alone. The God to whom the Bible bears witness is the God who creates and redeems; the God who saves and rescues; the God who calls and sends. The Scriptures are clear that this God, the God the apostle Paul first knows as the Lord God of Israel then comes to know as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is forever praised. Though many in our world today have turned away from God and no longer worship their Creator, he is forever praised. Day after day, the creatures “in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them” continue to praise God, “saying: To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:13).

Whenever and wherever Christians gather for worship, we join this chorus of praise, lifting our voices together with creation and all the saints down through the ages, bearing witness through our worship to the one who reigns. This is the one who sought us and called us by name. This one rustled in our lives and got our attention, and, in turning to this one, we found life and joy and salvation!

Christian worship is founded on God’s revelation of self in Jesus Christ, and involves our corporate response, turning our attention together in praise, as those who have come to know this one as savior, redeemer, and friend. In worship we turn our attention toward the divine other, the holy one in our midst, joining the eternal chorus of praise to the one we have come to know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Worship is, therefore, one of the central ways the Christian church bears witness to the presence of the living God in our world today. In worship we give a name to the “intentional agent in our midst,” the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all things, the one for whom our hearts long.

In worship we show and tell the story of a God who sought us out; a God who entered human history in order to rescue, redeem, heal, and save.

How, in your worship services, is the congregation’s attention turned toward the presence of Jesus in your midst?

In worship, we publicize the good news of the reality and availability of the reign of God revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. In worship, we re-present him to the world, making him known through our prayer and praise; through the reading and preaching of the Word; through the arts, drama, and symbolic action; through the fellowship we share with Christ and one another through the Spirit; through economic sharing, collecting, and distributing of gifts to the poor in imitation of the God who gives good gifts to God’s children and cares for the orphan and widow; and through the breaking of bread at the table and drinking from the cup of the Lord. Christian worship is Christian witness. Christian worship is a witness to all the peoples of the earth that the God who seeks our attention is not an unknown other, but one who loves us and desires to dwell among us. His name is Immanuel; he is God with us.

The way Luke tells the story in his gospel and in the book of Acts, the ascension of the risen Jesus becomes the source and foundation of Christian worship. Marva Dawn writes:

For Luke the ascension is the key. …The ascension is so important because that is when Jesus received his glory again. …In the ascension Jesus again became the resplendent Lord of the kingdom and made all its joys available to us.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

In one of the earliest recorded Christian worship songs, the ascension of Jesus is identified as the energizing source of Christian praise that brings glory to God the Father and bears witness to Jesus’s exalted position as the world’s true Lord. Our witness of worship is witness to the risen, ascended Jesus, the one who emptied himself, becoming obedient to death; the one who now reigns on high and will one day come back to reign on earth as he now reigns in heaven. Our witness of worship is therefore a witness to the kingdom of God and its present and coming King, Jesus.

The ascension of Jesus is also the starting place of the Christian mission of witness. “Don’t just stand there staring up in the sky,” the angels say in Acts 1:11. “It’s time to go!”

“You will be my witnesses,” Jesus had told them, “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” We are sent into the world as worshipers who come together regularly, most often on the first day of the week, to proclaim the praises of our risen King. Many of the world’s global cities today are crowded with people who have yet to recognize the presence of the risen and ascended Jesus who is right now active in the world through the Spirit to liberate, rescue, redeem, and save. These people’s “agency detection devices” are not tuned to the activity and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Vancouver is a city full of people who are spiritual seekers. It is full of gods—literally filled with idols. If you walk into any number of restaurants or grocery stores in East Vancouver you will see an idol to the land Buddha on the floor, or a representation of the sky Buddha near the ceiling. You might see a portrait of Krishna on the wall or a Sikh guru. People are trying to connect spiritually, but they do not know that Jesus is the one seeking them!

How are people trying to make spiritual connections in the city, town, or village where you live?

Our God desires to be known. God created us to know and be known. Jesus came and walked among us, not as some ghost that goes bump in the night, but as a real, flesh-and-blood person so we could know what God is like. God is seeking us. As Christians, we believe that true human fulfillment and flourishing will not happen until all the nations come to know and worship the true and living God. He is seeking worshipers.

In the Old Testament story of the people of Israel, we learn that one of Israel’s purposes is to proclaim God’s glory among the nations through their worship, so that God’s glory can fill all space and all history and bring God’s joy and peace to the nations.[[12]](#endnote-12) Consider Psalm 96:

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth

Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.

Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns.”

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

Mission happens, it is often said, because worship does not. Our worship is witness when we show and tell the world the good news about God’s reign and invite others to join the praise. The worship of the Christian church is witness to outsiders, forgetters, and the beloved children of the church.

John Dickson, a New Testament scholar and evangelist from Australia, tells the story of his friend Emma, who, in his words, was “a groovy young mum” who worked as a TV producer in his city. When John met Emma, she claimed to be an atheist. In one of their first important conversations, she said to John, “Look, I’m an atheist, I was raised an atheist, so don’t bother trying to convert me, will you!”[[13]](#endnote-13)

One Sunday, Emma came to the church that John attended in order to support some mutual friends whose child was being baptized. The baptismal ceremony was not the focus of the service; it was included as one of the kinds of things many congregations do week after week: announcements, singing, reading of Scripture, praying, collecting offerings, and preaching.

Emma could count on two fingers the number of church services she had been to over the years, but she left that worship service, in her words, “struck by the spiritual feeling of it all.” She came back the next week, and the next, and the next. Each week she said the same thing [to John]: “Look, I’m not religious, but boy, I like this stuff!”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Emma’s agency detection device was going off in her brain, alerting her to the deepest longings of her heart. Through the worship service she became attentive to the presence of the Lord who loved her and sought her. She returned to that church for worship over and over again. Emma has since become a follower and worshiper of Jesus Christ. It didn’t happen all at once but slowly, over time.

For Emma, it was the very thing she once disdained—a Christian worship service—that drew her into fellowship with the risen, ascended Christ. The worship services Emma attended were not specifically designed to reach outsiders. They were simply the normal, weekly services of a local church, where praise, worship, confession, prayer, the preaching of the Word, and fellowship at the table were faithfully practiced. These worship services were led by ordinary, humble women and men of God. But it was precisely in the context of the ordinary witness of worship that Emma became attentive to the God of redeeming love in her midst; to the one for whom her heart longed. The worship of a people who declared the glory of God, and told the story of Jesus, bore witness to this God who sought her, in love. This is our witness of worship.

For outsiders, it may be a weekday ministry of your local church that will make the first connection, long before they enter a Sunday worship service. Many of the outsiders who found their way into worship services in Vancouver entered first through the classes where they came to learn and practice English.

The Vancouver church regularly has men and women in worship services who have never heard the story of Jesus before but who come because of the relationships that are built through outreach to our immigrant neighbors. In the worship service, they are hearing for the first time the name of the God who loves them and has been seeking them. In worship they begin to understand why these people are so hospitable and kind. Worship that is witness is directed to God, not pitched to outsiders. But it is for outsiders, in the sense that, in worship, we invite them to come, taste, and see that the Lord is good.

Visitors to church can easily feel threatened if they suspect the whole event is directed at them. But when they feel the freedom simply to observe what Christians do—praying to the Lord, giving thanks to him, listening to his Word—visitors are often more at ease, less defensive and more open to the things they hear.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Christian worship is also witness to forgetters, those who once may have been part of the church, may have some knowledge of or experience with God, but who no longer actively participate in the witness of worship. And because they ceased to worship, eventually, they forgot about God.

In the summer of 2006, researchers conducted a survey of 469 formerly churched adults in North America to better understand what it would take to bring them back. “We were delighted to see such a large percentage of the formerly churched willing to consider church again in the future,” said Scott McConnell, who directed the research. The most common motivation of those who would consider returning was “to bring me closer to God.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

Cloe was a forgetter who found her way into the worship service in Vancouver through the invitation of an acquaintance who didn’t even attend the church. Disgusted by the abuse and corruption of the church she grew up in as a child in Quebec, Cloe stayed away from church for years. But she retained a love for Jesus and a desire to know more about the God she first heard about as a child. Now, as an adult, she was searching for a way to reconnect with God.

During the singing of an old hymn in the morning worship service, Cloe’s heart was flooded by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and she made the decision to continue worshiping the risen, ascended Christ with our church. On Easter Sunday, that congregation offers adult forgetters the opportunity to remember their own baptism during the baptismal part of the service. One Easter, Cloe stood before the congregation and reaffirmed her baptismal vows, publicly confessing her faith in Jesus Christ and her desire to live as a faithful follower of Jesus. Year after year, there are an increasing number of adult forgetters in Vancouver who want to reaffirm the faith of their childhood, a faith that perhaps grew cold for a season but has been rekindled through active participation in the life and worship of the local church.

How does your church help forgetters find their way back into regular, corporate worship? Is there a generation gap in your church? If so, where have these people gone?

The regular, faithful—at times, predictable—Sunday worship service bears witness to forgetters who find their way into the service through the invitation of a friend or other means. Churches need to be attentive to the forgetters among them. They may have been away for a while, but we want them to know they are welcomed back when they return.

The weekly worship service is also witness to the beloved children of the community, both actual children as well as adults. In worship we witness to one another of all that we have seen, heard, and experienced. In worship our children learn the story of God through singing the songs of our faith. They see the generosity of God in action as we collect offerings and tell stories of how these gifts are used for the life of the world. They listen to the stories of the Bible and how these words apply to our lives through the reading and preaching of the Word. They experience the holy other through artistic and symbolic expressions of God’s presence. They learn to pray as they overhear the prayers of the people.

Our children are affirmed as full participants in the community of worship through baptism in a worship service, and are encouraged to share their gifts in the worship service as musicians, Scripture readers, ushers, or performers of dramatic arts. Regular and active participation in Sunday worship is one of the primary sources of spiritual formation for our children, as well as youth, and adults. As a child in the church, I learned about God’s grace by singing a hymn called “Wonderful Grace of Jesus.” I still remember my dad holding the hymnal for me and following his finger as they passed over these words: “Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus, deeper than the mighty rolling sea! Higher than the mountain, sparkling like a fountain, all sufficient grace for even me, for even me!”[[17]](#endnote-17)

I recently overheard my elementary-age son singing to himself in the other room: “Jesus, he can move the mountains; Our God is mighty to save, he is mighty to save,”[[18]](#endnote-18) a song that is popular in our church today. The songs change, but the spiritual formation of worship remains. Our worship is witness to our children, youth, and adults, to all the beloved children of the church.

Worship that is witness is shapes the lives of Christians in the world. In other words, the pattern of the worship service itself equips us for our witness in the world. “Gathered in the community of saints, we are formed by the truth taught in worship’s music and word to be Church so that out of our Christian character will flow the witness of our words and deeds for the sake of the world,”[[19]](#endnote-19) One of the best ways to equip a congregation for their witness in the world is regular, corporate worship. The rhythm of Christian discipleship moves from worship to witness. We come, week after week, gathered in the presence of the risen Lord, and are sent back into the world to represent God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. Every week we engage in the pattern of discipleship that we see in Jesus’s own ministry with his twelve disciples and the seventy-two in Luke 10: gathered to Jesus, sent by Jesus; gathered to Jesus, sent by Jesus. We are gathered in worship then sent as his redemptive agents in the world, as his witnesses.

In many cities in North America, many people have ceased to make time for worship. This makes what the church does on Sunday mornings, or at other gathering times during the week, more important than ever before. But it is not easy to maintain a regular worshiping community today. There is so much pressure on families, like mine, to cut worship out of the calendar and fill Sunday mornings with other things. To participate in the witness of worship will cost our congregants something. But we need to help our congregations see that their regular, faithful participation in worship is witness to the God who draws and calls all nations and all peoples, young and old, to himself. Pastors and worship leaders need to continue to renew their worship service so they can witness to the gospel in ways that communicate effectively in their contexts and build up their communities of faith for their common witness.

Paul Chilcote illustrates the formational importance of the church in worship as he retells a story told to him, about Frank and Nellie Baker, who served a small Methodist church on the northeast coast of England during World War II. A prisoner-of-war camp was located near their home, and Frank and Nellie felt called by God to reach out to these captured soldiers. So, they went to the prison commander and received permission to take a different German prisoner with them to church each Sunday, and then to their home afterward for a meal. So, throughout the whole of World War II, the Bakers ministered to and hosted a number of various German soldiers, one of was Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann went on to become one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, writing passionately of a Christian theology of hope in the midst of a world gone wrong. And, according to Moltmann himself, as Chilcote writes the story, “The seed of hope was planted in my heart around Frank and Nellie Baker’s Sunday dinner table.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

The Bakers lived the integral nature of worship and witness. I am absolutely sure that, if you had asked, “What are you doing?” Frank or Nellie would have said, “Well, we are simply doing what Christians do. We are spending time together in the worship of our good God, breaking bread together and eating our food with glad and generous hearts.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Historically, Christian worship has consisted of two movements: Word and Table. The communion table represents the integral nature of worship and witness. Eugene Peterson speaks to this when he writes:

We become present to what God intends to do with and for us through worship, become present to the God who is present to us. …We bring ourselves to the eucharistic table and enter into that grand fourfold shape of the liturgy that shapes us: taking, blessing, breaking, and giving—the life of Jesus taken and blessed, broken and [given]. That eucharistic life now shapes our lives as we give ourselves, Christ in us, to be taken, blessed, broken, and [given] in lives of witness and service, justice and healing.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Taken, blessed, broken, and given. On the night of his resurrection, Jesus appears among his disciples behind locked doors in the room where they shared the Passover meal together three days before. Who is this one who has appeared in their midst? As Jesus speaks, they begin to recognize him. This is the one sent from the Father to reveal God to the world. The Father took, blessed, broke, and gave Jesus, for the life of the world. Jesus now sends us the same way, as witnesses. It is through our corporate worship that we bear witness to the God who takes, blesses, breaks, and gives. It is through worship that we are now taken, blessed, broken, and given, for the life of the world. This is our witness of worship.

In what ways has God taken, blessed, broken, and given you for the life of the world? Try sharing your personal story using these four words as an outline to shape the narrative flow of your story.

3

Our Witness of Wonder

Acts 2:17: In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

My friends Benji and Abbi live as witnesses to the good news of the kingdom of God in one of the most spiritually challenging places on the planet. It is not a country where Christians are imprisoned or killed for their faith, nor is it a tribal culture where local shamans ward off evil spirits. In fact, they live in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle in the United States, where, in Benji’s words, “intellectualism, the occult, materialism, apathy, addiction, brokenness, deceit and religious woundings have combined to create a canyon between this land and divine Love.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

In Benji’s neighborhood, and perhaps where you live, most of his neighbors are either turned off by or tuned out to the church, preachers, and Christians in general. Realizing this, instead of opening a church, Benji and Abbi opened a community living room where they serve coffee and hold conversations about whatever is on people’s hearts and minds. Their purpose was not to move to Capitol Hill and start doing things to try and reach people but to simply sit there for a while: meeting, loving, listening to, and serving their neighbors. As Benji and Abbi began to live and move among the people of their neighborhood, building friendships rooted in genuine love and mutual respect, they began to discover that many of the people in their neighborhood were in pain of some kind, whether physical, emotional, mental, relational, or spiritual. The pain of his neighbors troubled Benji: “How do I confront intense problems like mental illness, cancer, depression, skepticism, unbelief, and so forth?” he asked himself.[[24]](#endnote-24) He felt powerless. The heavy, gray clouds of Seattle mirrored the spiritually oppressive mists that clouded his own soul.

One day, while Benji prayed for his neighbors, he began to sense the Holy Spirit interceding for him–praying for him–and he says that as he prayed, he caught the sound of the conversation going on between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[[25]](#endnote-25) Romans 8:26-27 came to his mind, where Paul writes:

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

As he prayed, Benji felt suddenly affirmed and reminded that he was a son of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He was the child of a King who understood the challenges he faced in Capitol Hill. This same King once moved into a neighborhood in first century Palestine, lived among a people in pain, poured himself out on their behalf, emptied himself for the life and healing of the world. This King suffered and died for the world he loved. But death could not defeat him! This King ascended to the right hand of God the Father almighty, where he now intercedes on behalf of those he loves. This King gives gifts to his children for their work and witness in the world, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This realization was a great encouragement to Benji. “To be Christian is to be filled with the power of God and endued with the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” he writes. “[God] has given us his Holy Spirit and an anointing which has furnished us with the powers and gifts necessary to carry on doing what Jesus was doing on the earth…setting captives free, bringing healing, deliverance, truth and liberty. It is humbling to think that we have been made capable of carrying on the ministry of Jesus in the same way that he ministered. But it’s very true.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

This realization transformed Benji and Abbi’s witness where they live. Their ministry now focuses on prayer, interceding for and praying for those in pain, joining their prayers with the prayers of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Their prayer is that God’s kingdom would come and his will be done in their city as it is in heaven. Rather than try to convince people that Jesus is Savior, hollow words for people whose ears are closed and whose resistance is up to Christians, Benji and Abbi humbly seek to demonstrate Jesus’s saving power through simple prayers for people who are in pain. Their mission is to set captives free, releasing those held prisoner by an enemy who blinds them to the truth of the gospel. Benji regularly prays for people in pain, wherever he meets them, whether in a coffee shop or as part of their worship gatherings.

But physical healing is not the main point of Benji and Abbi’s ministry. They understand their offer of healing as witness to the wonderful and healing and saving and delivering good news of the reign of God now at work in the world through the Son, by the Spirit. “In the gospels,” Benji writes, “healing is simply one of God’s obvious manners of revealing his nature, his will, demonstrating his goodness and his kingdom, and meeting people in their pain and cry for relief and saving.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

After several years, they formed a worshiping community in Capitol Hill, offering their church as a community of healing, calling themselves The Church of the Undignified as a sign that their church is for people who don’t have it all together; a church for people in pain; a church for people who need the wondrous work of the Spirit in their lives to make them whole. The small and humble Christian community that now gathers in their neighborhood under Benji and Abbi’s pastoral care participate in a witness of wonder. In their context, this wonder comes through being attentive to the power and presence of the Spirit at work among them, and forming a community where the healing power of the Spirit is offered to people in physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, or economic pain.

How does your church cultivate a sense of wonder? How does your congregation stay attentive to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit at work among you?

You can’t read the book of Acts without noticing that the witness of the early Christian church goes hand in hand with signs and wonders, including physical healing, deliverance from the demonic, restoration of damaged and broken lives, and the spread of new communities throughout the Roman world that are filled with wonder, love, and praise.

Signs and wonders continue to be a vital part of the witness of the church in many parts of our world today. But as someone who was raised in North America, my education trained me to be skeptical about claims of the miraculous. There are many religious charlatans in the world today who promise miracles as a way to fatten their wallets, widen their fan bases, and satiate their lust for power. Because of this, many Christians are cautious and suspicious of churches that promote themselves as being places of miracles. In some churches and public ministries, the promise of miraculous healing or prosperity has been horribly twisted to be seen as a sign of a an individual’s level of faith, not as a sign of the in-breaking kingdom of God. So it is right to be cautious and discerning. Yet, I’m becoming more and more convinced that, in a context where—on one hand people believe faith to be irrational, and on the other hand people are coming from cultures attuned to the spirit world—perhaps signs and wonders are needed today to open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears and set captives free. After all, wonder is at the heart of the revelation of God in the world.

Pentecost itself is a wonder-filled event that bears witness to the coming of the promised reign of God in the world. Think about what happens on Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4: a sound like the blowing of a violent wind; something that seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on Jesus’s followers; the sudden ability to speak in other languages and bear witness to the story of Jesus’s wonderful reign!

“What in the world was going on here?” the people of Jerusalem wonder. “Are these people drunk?” they ask. No, it isn’t something “in the world” that is going on here! If you know the story, then you know that what is going on at Pentecost is the intersection of two worlds, heaven and earth coming together in the formation of a wonder-filled new community, instituted by Christ and constituted by the Holy Spirit. This community will be characterized by eschatological joy, the joy of the last day when God sets the world right again and brings healing to all the nations of the earth. The joy of the emerging Christian community is a wondrous witness to the people in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, who witness in the life of the early Christian community the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The way Luke tells the story in Acts, the wonderful events of Pentecost are a consequence of the ascension of the risen Jesus to the throne of heaven. In the Old Testament, the ascension of a new king to the throne is followed by the distribution of gifts to the people, celebrating the consolidation of the king’s reign. Pentecost fulfills the wondrous promise given to Israel that God will return and take his rightful place as the long-awaited and promised King. And when the King takes his throne, he gives gifts to the people.

The gift that the people of Israel have been looking forward to is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Ezekiel 36:26, the Lord promises: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” The Spirit will enable the people of Israel to live under the peaceable rule and reign of God, cleansed from sin, filled with the life and love of God, able to keep the Lord’s command to live together as lights that shine brightly in the midst of the darkened world. The Spirit will make them a holy people unto the Lord, a people among whom God will live, by the Spirit. Arriving at the end of his journey, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, and the Christian church is born. This is a community created to show and tell the wondrous presence of the kingdom of God on earth, and to announce and demonstrate the coming reign of Christ to all the nations of the earth. They are to live together as witnesses of wonder.

How would you describe your experience of the Holy Spirit? Where or when do you feel most spiritually alive?

In the Old Testament, the temple is a place of wonder where the majestic glory dwells. Like ancient Israel and the early church, we were created to be a community that is attentive to God’s wondrous presence among us, and to witness to God’s presence in the lives of those whom God is drawing into the triune life. Our God is wondrously at work in the world around us and in the lives of our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family. When the Spirit of God is preveniently working in the lives of our children, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, and acquaintances, it is our calling, as a community of wonder, to be attentive to this work of the Spirit and act as midwives, of sorts, helping to bring the new life of the Spirit to birth.

My friend Ming is a follower of Jesus today through the “midwifery” of his Christian friend Peter and a church in a nearby town that was attentive to the wondrous work of the Spirit in Ming’s life. Ming grew up in Hong Kong. Life was very hard for him and his family. He worked to help support the family when he was only six years old. When Ming was eleven, he began hanging around with a gang. One day, he was arrested for possession of an illegal weapon and given ten lashes with a cane by the police. Ming says at that time, he began to realize he needed to change his life. He could see that his life was headed nowhere.

When Ming was seventeen years old, his family was approved to come to the United States. Ming hoped that coming to America would enable him to change his life and get a new start. But once he arrived, he was recruited by a Chinese “association” in Seattle’s Chinatown that hired new immigrants to do their dirty work, including illegal gambling, smuggling, or worse. Things went from bad to worse for Ming in America; it was not the place of salvation and opportunity he had hoped it would be, and his life remained dark and hopeless.

One night, with his life unraveling, Ming says he remembers standing on his back porch, staring into the night sky and calling out to the sky god of his religious upbringing for help. He told the sky god that he hated his life and wanted to change. He had done this many times before in the Buddhist temples in Hong Kong, but this time he was not facing the Buddha statues; he stood on his back porch and cried out into the dark, starry night sky. One week after this prayer, while wandering around the streets of Chinatown, Ming ran into the wife of the one Christian friend he had in the whole United States—a man named Peter.

Peter lived in the nearby town of Walla Walla, and his wife, Millie, happened to be visiting Seattle that day. Was it coincidence that they just happened to see each other on the street that day, or was it the wondrous work of the Spirit on Ming’s behalf to heal, liberate, redeem, and save? Ming desperately wanted to get out of Seattle, so he asked Millie if he could come visit them in Walla Walla. She agreed, so after borrowing thirty dollars from his mother, Ming took the bus to visit Peter and Millie. When Ming’s friend Peter saw him, he could see that Ming was not doing well, and he gave Ming a job washing dishes in his restaurant.

Looking for help to get his life together, Ming took his friend’s advice and found a local church. It happened to be a Church of the Nazarene. For the next year, Ming went to church each week and, through their witness of worship, began to hear stories about Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to heal, transform, and change lives. During this time, Ming had many bad dreams about the things he had done in his life. When he told a new, Christian friend about his nightmares, his friend was attentive to the work of the Spirit in Ming’s life. He suggested that in response to these nightmares, Ming should talk to Jesus, ask forgiveness for the things he had done, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit.

Ming went to the pastor and said, “I want to be baptized.” The pastor took time to share the story of Jesus with Ming and asked Ming if he would like to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. Ming became a follower of Jesus in May of 1991, and was baptized soon after. By the time I met him a decade later, Ming was well established in his faith and hungry to grow in his walk with Jesus.

Prayers in the night. Coincidental encounters. Dreams. A desire to be changed from the inside out. The Spirit was wondrously at work in Ming’s life. Thankfully, Ming’s Christian friends Millie and Peter and the Church of the Nazarene in Walla Walla were attentive to the wondrous work of the Spirit in Ming’s life and were able to share the hope of Jesus Christ and the promised gift of the Spirit with him. Ming’s story always reminds me to be attentive to the wondrous work of the Spirit in the lives of the people around me.

Can you identify a time in your life when a seemingly coincidental encounter turned out to be the wondrous work of the Holy Spirit?

We live in a wondrous world. Thomas Long reminds us that:

In terms of contemporary religious experience, the world is full of…events in nature, personal experience, and history that point toward the mystery of God. …A daffodil opens in all its spring beauty and glory, a troubled relationship is healed, a child is born—all these experiences and countless others draw our attention to the divine mystery that pervades and pushes through human events.[[28]](#endnote-28)

But without the witness of a Spirit-filled community, people would not recognize these wondrous moments for what they are. Our witness of wonder must include Spirit-empowered words of wonder, when we humbly yet confidently call attention to the life and work of the Spirit of God in the world around us.

In 1 Peter 3:15, Peter writes: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” We bear witness to the wondrous work of the Spirit with our lips. Through words of wonder, we share a wondrous hope that includes:

∙ the coming kingdom of God that is turning the world right side up again;

∙ eternal life given as a gift of God’s Spirit as we are drawn into the loving fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from whom not even death can separate us;

∙ forgiveness of sin that makes us right with God and the ongoing transformation of life from the inside out, renewing us into the wondrous image and likeness of Christ;

∙ healing for those in pain, restoration of broken relationships, and the making of all things new;

∙ finding meaning and purpose in life through active participation in the life and mission of God for the life of the world;

∙ a community empowered to live the joy-filled life of the Spirit in mutual love and common service to one another.

Our witness is not always filled with wonder, though. We need to grapple with the fact that the way we often imagined witnessing in the church is by using words aimed at the head, based on rational argument and salesmanship-like persuasion, using logic to convince people to give their assent to a set of facts—rather than opening a window to the wondrous work of God in the world, through the Son, by the Spirit.

In my experience, I do not find the logic-based, rational approach to witnessing very helpful today. Pressure techniques, salesmanship, and rationale are not cutting it. These methods turn people off and push them away. But people are hungry for a connection with the divine. They are open to spiritual conversations if you take time to build trust and show genuine interest in people as individuals, not simply as objects to be reached.

Would you describe the ways you’ve learned to share the gospel as “filled with wonder” or “filled with logic”? Why?

The cities in the Northwest of the United States have a low percentage of Christians but a high percentage of people who seek authentic spirituality. People have questions about the spiritual life and how to overcome the barriers in their lives that hinder their fulfillment and joy. People wonder about life and death and whether there is a power greater than them at work in the world. But people want to be listened to, not just talked to. They are in pain and looking for healing. Who will listen? Who will pray? Who will heal? These are the things a church that lives in the wonder of the Spirit has to offer. The Christian church is not offering an invitation to join a religious club, or even to help people punch a ticket to heaven. We offer an encounter with the risen and ascended Christ, who transforms us, and who will one day transform the whole creation. The King who reigns is coming with healing in his wings! We are agents of the one who gives generously of the Holy Spirit to all who ask, seek, and knock.

Our witness of wonder must include words of wonder that speak of this coming King and the life of the Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he does not use “cunning speech” when he shares the gospel, nor does he distort the word of God, but sets forth the truth plainly. Paul understands that if the veil of unbelief is going to be lifted from the eyes of unbelievers, it will come as a wondrous gift of God, whose light shines in the darkness. Paul speaks with simple faith and a humble confidence that God is wonderfully at work in the world, and “that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:15).

Perhaps we need to be encouraged and trained and equipped in how to share Jesus out of our own sense of wonder, the wonder of our own shared participation in the life and love of God, infused with the wondrous stories of Jesus in the Bible, with confidence that God’s grace is being poured out all around us. We prepare ourselves to give an account of the wondrous hope we have in Jesus Christ by familiarizing ourselves with the broad outline of the gospel as summarized in the apostolic preaching in Acts and in the Gospels themselves. These passages tell the wondrous story of Jesus, who lived, died, rose from the grave, and is coming again to renew the whole creation. Building on these stories, we then share the wondrous story of how Jesus has renewed and transformed our lives and communities. Our witness of wonder is, therefore, intimately connected to our own spiritual formation.

How have you experienced the help and presence of the Holy Spirit in your life in the past few days? What spiritual disciplines or means of grace help you cultivate a sense of wonder?

In the New Testament, signs and wonders of the kingdom and words of wonder are always accompanied by, infused with, and surrounded by prayer. Prayer is, therefore, an essential part of the witness of wonder of the Christian church. One of the early fathers of the church, Clement of Alexandria, once said that “prayer is keeping company with God.”[[29]](#endnote-29) This insight helped former Regent College president James Houston understand prayer as a transforming friendship with God. “Christian prayer is prayer to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit,” writes Houston.[[30]](#endnote-30) It is prayer to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit that shapes us to be a people who bear witness to the wondrous presence of God in the world. A community that prays is a witness to the wondrous presence of God.

The beloved children of the church need our witness of wonder. Children are natural wonderers. They come into this world full of wonder, and they are open to the reality of a God who seeks to share life with them. We need to nurture this sense of wonder in our children and youth through our life together in our homes and churches. Teaching our children and youth to pray and to be attentive to the voice and presence of the Spirit is a way to nurture them in the witness of wonder.

Christian adults need to retain the wonder of childlike faith. In adult spiritual formation groups and Bible studies, take time to witness to one another the wondrous presence of God at work among you. When you gather in small groups or Sunday school classes, encourage and be encouraged to share where and how you have sensed the work of the Spirit in your lives since the last meeting. As you share your stories of how the Spirit is at work in your life and how you are attentive to the Spirit in the wider world, you are engaging in a witness of wonder to one another.

When adults lose their sense of wonder, they easily become forgetters. Forgetters need to be reminded of the wonder that perhaps once touched their lives but no longer characterizes their relationship with God. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus is pictured knocking at the door of a house that has shut him out. This was written to the church in Laodicea, a church that had grown lukewarm because of its comfort and prosperity. It is a church in danger of forgetting the wonder of their first love. Forgetters need to be reminded of the promise, wonder, and hope of the Spirit-filled life. Sometimes, like in the book of Revelation, this includes warnings and signs and wonders that are intended to get the attention of those who slumber in their faith. The fear of the Lord is part of our witness of wonder, in particular among forgetters who at one time held the Lord in reverence.

Miracles, prayer, and words of wonder also witness to outsiders whom God seeks to include and enfold into God’s divine life. Our witness of wonder includes the wondrous good news that those who were once outsiders to the covenant people of God are now included. Through the new birth of the Spirit of God, outsiders become insiders in God’s kingdom.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to find, in our divided, fractured, and religiously violent world, a community in which everyone—the beloved children of the church, forgetters, and outsiders—was welcomed, loved, and included? A community that was inclusive of all, no matter how old or young, not divided by social status or income level? A community where Africans, North and South Americans, Europeans, Asians, Islanders, Israelis, Arabs, and First Nations persons lifted their voices together in wonder, love, and praise? Would not such a community be full of wonder? Is not the breaking down of ethnic barriers, the honoring of the aged, the empowerment of the youth, the embracing of the poor, the communion of people of differing abilities, incomes, and political viewpoints, wonderful (as in, full of wonder)? A community of inclusion and Trinitarian hospitality, where there is a place at the table for everyone? Is this not what God seeks to do in the world today? Forming new communities in all the cities, suburbs, and rural towns of our world as embassies of God’s wondrous, inclusive life and love?

This is a wonder-filled vision of the church. The wonder to which we bear witness flows from the church being an inclusive, Spirit-filled community, who live their lives together, in this world, as witness to the wondrous reign of God in Christ, by the Spirit. This is our witness of wonder.

4

Our Witness of Way

Acts 2:44-45: All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

As a young boy, Jesse was offered music therapy by the Variety Club, which met at the Academy of Music, a prestigious institute in Vancouver. The Variety Club had contributed a substantial sum of money toward the purchase and construction of the facility with the agreement that the academy would provide space for music therapy for at least ten years for students who, like Jesse, have a mental handicap. A short while after taking Jesse to attend classes, his mother was asked to bring him in by the back door and wait in the hallway, instead of coming through the main door and waiting in the reception area. Apparently, Jesse’s presence made other patrons uncomfortable. His mother refused.

Over the years, attitudes toward people with mental disabilities have changed. Jesse’s mother has experienced more tolerance and sometimes acceptance but never excitement over Jesse’s presence. She has frequently been thanked for removing Jesse when requested because he is too small, too big, too young, too old, too low functioning, too uncooperative. When Jesse requested to attend the church his autistic friend Geoffrey attended, his mother, who did not attend church, was reluctant and apprehensive but felt she had an obligation to honor the request.

From his first Sunday, the congregation welcomed Jesse with warmth, love, and encouragement. His mother later said to me, “I never expected Jesse to be welcomed with so much respect and worth; to be embraced and encouraged to become part of the church family. This is something that you may see as the way you are, your church’s way, but make no mistake: This is not the way of the larger world out there. I have never been thanked for bringing Jesse, nor been told that he has enriched a community, as you and others in your church have said to me.” Because of the way the church welcomed Jesse, his mother now attends worship services even when Jesse is unable to. As she explained to me, “I don’t know why I want to keep coming here. But there is something going on in your church and worship services, something about the way your congregation lives out your faith, that has become meaningful to me.”

Has anyone ever expressed appreciation to you for the way your church lives its life together in the world? If so, what did they appreciate or notice that was different?

Before they were called Christians, the earliest Christian communities instituted by Christ and constituted by the Spirit that spread from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth after Pentecost, were simply known as “those who belong to the Way.” Luke summarizes their way of living in Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Their way of living includes their witness of worship and their witness of wonder, but it also includes fellowship, mutual service, and economic sharing: the distribution of material goods to anyone who has need.

This emerging Jesus community is filled with people who are generous and joyful, whose fellowship is characterized by gladness and sincerity. Their public way of living life together earns these first followers of Jesus goodwill in their city. And the result of the witness of their way of living publicly before a watching world is that the Lord adds to their number daily those who are being saved.

Jesus himself set the pattern for their way of living. The way of life of the early church flows from their devotion to the risen and ascended Jesus and their loving obedience to his recent teachings. Each week they gather to worship their ascended Lord. And, through the telling and retelling of the way of Jesus in their public worship and in their homes in private gatherings, they continually rehearse God’s generous story and encourage one another to live out the teachings of Jesus in their everyday lives in the world: the way of forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation, and love of enemy. God demonstrated God’s way of being in the world through God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and now invites the Christian community into this way of being in the world through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This, then, is a way of living that flows from the wondrous hope of the gospel: the good news that the kingdom of God has come near in Jesus Christ; that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s new creation is breaking into the old; and that we can now, in this life, by the power of the Spirit, begin to live out the life of the kingdom that is coming.

These first followers of Jesus understand that the Christian church is to bring the first fruits of the coming kingdom of God to fruition in their homes, villages, towns, and cities. They are to be a sign, a pointer, a demonstration garden in the midst of the world, however small and humble and seemingly imperfect. They are mustard seeds, a bit of yeast, seemingly insignificant, but bursting with kingdom potential.

Christopher Wright says:

[Christians] are a representative people. Our task is to represent the living God to the world, and to bring the world to acknowledge the living God. …An essential part of the mission of God’s people is nothing other than to be what they are—by living out the holiness of God in practical everyday living.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Bryan Stone writes:

The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ. It is the very shape and character of the church as the Spirit’s “new creation” that is the witness to God’s reign in the world and so both the source and aim of Christian evangelism.[[32]](#endnote-32)

In other words, our ecclesiology (who we are, as the church) is connected to our missiology (what we do, as the church). We do what we are, and we are what we do.

The way of the early church changes the trajectory of the world. “There can be no doubt that it was the changed lifestyle of the early Christians which made such a deep impact upon classical antiquity,” writes Michael Green.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Rodney Stark describes the world into which the church is born as a place of “squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity.”[[34]](#endnote-34) In the pagan world of that day, mercy was regarded as a character defect because it provided unearned help to those in need.[[35]](#endnote-35) In contrast, the earliest Christians teach that God is merciful and that therefore God’s people must be merciful. The first church committee ever formed was created in order to ensure that widows in the community were fed and properly provided for. But it isn’t just that the Christians cared for and loved one another. Their care and love extended outside the Christian community.

John Dickson argues that it is the good works of the Christian community that conquer the Roman empire. All around the Mediterranean, churches are setting up food programs, hospitals, and orphanages that are available to believers and unbelievers alike. This is an innovation. Historians often point to ancient Israel as the first society to introduce a comprehensive welfare system that cares for the poor and marginalized within the community. Christians inherit this tradition but open it up to Jew and Gentile, believer and unbeliever alike.[[36]](#endnote-36) The result of this radical care and compassion is that, within two and a half centuries, “Christians had gone from being a small band of several hundred Palestinian Jews to the greatest social force in world history.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

But not all the attention their way of life attracted was good. In fact, in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Julian became fearful that Christianity “might take over the world forever by the stealth of good works.”[[38]](#endnote-38) The empire was threatened by the growing influence of the church, which led to persecution. But it was the way that Christians faced trials, hardship, and persecution that also contributed to the growth and spread of the early church. As Michael Green writes:

The capacity of Christians to face criticism, hatred, persecution and death, not just with equanimity but with joy must have had a tremendous impact. We know it did. You could mow these Christians down, you could throw them to the lions, but you could not make them deny their Lord or hate their persecutors. …A resolute courage which can endure “as seeing him who is invisible,” confident of life after death, has an uncanny effect. It disarms the violence of the tormentors.[[39]](#endnote-39)

This is, of course, the way of the cross. When Christians live the way of the cross—turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, praying for those who persecute them, returning blessings for curses—they bear witness to the reality and possibility of the peaceable rule and reign of God in Christ come near. The way of the cross is the Jesus way. Our witness of way is witness to the way of Jesus.

If a newcomer attended your church for a month, would they characterize your congregation as peaceable? Why or why not?

It was the Jesus way that inspired Phineas Bresee to start a new church more than a hundred years ago. In the late 1800s, Bresee was assigned to be the pastor of a Methodist Church in Los Angeles, one of the best appointments possible in the denomination.[[40]](#endnote-40) From this privileged position, Bresee noticed that Los Angeles was undergoing an urban transformation. New immigrants from Japan and China livedand worked among Hispanics, African Americans, and whites. Along with urbanization came “a growing underclass of urban poor, trapped in cycles of despair, alcohol, and addiction.”[[41]](#endnote-41) As a follower of Jesus, Bresee was compelled to respond to the need. But, as a follower of Jesus, he also understood that he could not just swoop in from the outside, remain aloof from the poverty of the city, and magically save souls. That would not be the Jesus way. That would not be the way of the cross. The Jesus way was for the church to become incarnational, to take up residence in the midst of brokenness, eating and drinking and sharing life with outcasts and sinners, demonstrating to new friends a way of living together that was shaped by their vision of the kingdom of God, and inviting them into that way. This is a way of living that is for the life of the world. So Bresee resigned his comfortable appointment and started a church in one of the worst parts of the city, calling it the Church of the Nazarene. “Let the poor be fed and clothed,” Bresee wrote, “let us pour out our substances for this purpose; but let us keep heaven open, that they may receive the unspeakable gift of His love, in the transforming power of the Holy Ghost.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

The cities and villages the church finds itself in today are places in need of people whose lives together bear witness to the way of Jesus in the world, a people who live in the power of the Holy Spirit, demonstrating to the world through their shared life together what the life of the kingdom of God looks like.

Tragically, I haven’t met very many people lately who perceive the Christian church as a people who live the way of Jesus in the world. In fact, one of the first things I noticed when I moved to Vancouver was how much disdain and distrust of the Christian church existed among my Canadian friends and neighbors. I had neighbors who, knowing I was a pastor, looked at me with suspicion every time I came around. Many of my Canadian friends and neighbors view Christians as narrow-minded, bigoted, myopic, colonial, selfish, and judgmental. But these are not traits we see in Jesus, are they? These are not the fruits of the Spirit. How did the church come to be viewed this way?

Some of it is based on the church’s failures to live the Jesus way. In Canada, clergy abuse scandals and the residential school experience of the First Nations people in Canada has soured many people to the church as a whole. Then, there are those who have had personally negative experiences with the church. As a pastor, I’ve listened to stories of people who have been harmed by division in the church, gossiping, abuse, power grabs, and other political posturing that drove them away. I don’t think all of the scorn that is heaped on the church today is warranted, but we need to be humble enough to admit the times when our life together has not witnessed to the ways of the kingdom of God but instead conforms to the corrupt and violent ways of this world. “A divided, split and fighting church has nothing to say or to give to a divided, broken and violent world,” suggests Christopher Wright.[[43]](#endnote-43) And where we fall short, we need to confess our faults humbly and seek the promised renewal and correction of the Spirit. A reactionary, defensive church that is unwilling to admit its shortcomings and unwilling to change its ways is not a witness to the way of the kingdom. The kingdom way includes praying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, being willing to say to the watching world: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Why do so many people today view the church as narrowminded, bigoted, myopic, colonial, selfish, and judgmental? What is your church doing to change public perception about Christians?

You see, how we live our lives together, as the church, matters. How we live our lives before a watching world matters. And the way we respond to the changing context, where many are suspicious and hostile toward the church—that matters too. Think for a moment about how a congregation’s way of living is witness to the three constituents of the church’s witness: the beloved children of the church, forgetters, and outsiders.

The beloved children of our community watch how we live together. Our children and youth pick up cues from our life together as a church community about what being a follower of Jesus looks like and whether they want to be part of a community like this. The Jesus way of living that is witness to the beloved children of the church includes obedience of all the great “one another” passages commanded in the New Testament, including:

Mark 9:50—Be at peace with one another;

Romans 12:10—Be devoted to one another and honor one another;

Romans 14:13—Let us stop passing judgment on one another;

Romans 15:7—Accept one another;

Romans 15:14—Instruct one another;

Galatians 5:13—Serve one another;

Galatians 5:26—Do not provoke or envy one another;

Galatians 6:2—Carry one another’s burdens;

Ephesians 4:32—Be kind and compassionate to one other and forgive one another;

Ephesians 5:21—Submit to one another;

Colossians 3:9—Do not lie to one another;

1 Thessalonians 4:18—Encourage one another;

James 4:11—Do not slander one another;

James 5:9—Don’t grumble against one another;

James 5:16—Pray for one another and confess to one another;

1 Peter 4:9—Offer hospitality to one another;

Jesus’s command to his disciples in John 13:34 sums up all of these: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Jesus himself speaks of the public witness of the way of love when he says in the very next verse, 35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The way of love is our first witness to the beloved children of the church.

Our love is also witness to forgetters, a witness to those who have walked away from the church. When the Spirit draws lost sons and daughters home, will they find a church that embodies the loving welcome of the Father as in the story of the prodigal son, or will they find the judgmental elder brother?

Kassy was a forgetter whom the Spirit drew home through the witness of our church several years ago. Kassy grew up in a Christian home and was active in the church until, as a young adult, she drifted from God, married a man who was negative about Christianity with whom she had a son, and ended up living in our neighborhood. My wife, Aisling, met Kassy through the local community center soon after we moved to Vancouver, and we frequently ran into her family at community events. Our friendship blossomed on the sports field at a local park, where our son Graiden played on the same team with her son, Wyatt. Through conversations at the ballpark, Kassy learned that we pastored a Church of the Nazarene near where she lived.

In 2007, Kassy’s marriage broke up, and she found herself in a desperate situation. As she sat at her kitchen table, she remembered the God of her earlier years and found herself saying, “Okay, God, it’s time. I’ll come back. I’ll get to know you again. I’ll stop trying to not think about you. I’ll stop thinking I don’t need you.” Because of her friendship with my wife, Kassy knew on that day that it would be the Church of the Nazarene where she would go to find God. On September 9, 2007, Kassy walked through the front doors of our church and found a warm welcome. I still remember the tears when our eyes met in the foyer. She started attending worship services, signed up for a Bible study class, volunteered with children’s church, and even found herself on the stage that first year for the Christmas play.

Reflecting on that time, Kassy said to me, “Every moment I was building relationships with women and men of faith who to this day encourage me and help me learn to hear God and believe in his plans for me. I’m so thankful for each one of you.” In April of 2008, Kassy watched another woman in our church being baptized. “I remember thinking how cool it was she had decided to do that,” she says. This baptism was a witness to Kassy, and she was baptized the very next week!

Kassy kept attending and growing and learning and loving and being loved and noticed how her son, Wyatt, thrived. All the questions he had for her as a toddler about the meaning of life became so much easier for her to answer. As she reengaged the Christian life as an adult, Kassy sought opportunities to learn more about the Jesus way of living through the power of the Spirit. “I decided to take the Alpha course in an effort to gain insight into Christian life from my adult perspective,” Kassy remembers. During the Alpha course, Kassy experienced the wondrous, healing power of the Holy Spirit. “The healing night was special. Three ladies in the church—Regina, Sandra, and Jessie—laid hands on me as I prayed for my broken heart to stop giving me physical pain. When I felt the heat come over my chest I wrote it off as embarrassment, but when I woke up the next morning there was no more pain.” Kassy wrote that she stuck around our church because we never judged her or turned her away; instead, we invited her and her son into our homes and into our lives.

It was the congregation’s way of living that witnessed to a forgetter named Kassy and her son, Wyatt. The love for Kassy and Wyatt expressed through the people of the church opened the way for her to come home to her heavenly Father. This is our witness of way. Forgetters need this.

This way is a witness to outsiders as well. Outsiders who come into contact with the church wonder if this community is any different from the other communities in which they live and move and have come from. Outsiders live in a broken and divided world. Outsiders live in a world where the powerful dominate the powerless, where people spend massive amounts of time and money amusing themselves, and where loneliness and isolation is a common experience. They tend to wonder if there is another way to live? Christians who love one another and love their neighbors; who extend themselves beyond their holy huddle; who work for justice and serve with compassion; who eat and drink with sinners; who pour themselves out for the life of the world; who love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God—these Christians live as witness to Jesus.

In what ways are the attitudes, actions, economic values, and lifestyles of the people in your church similar to or different from the surrounding culture?

I visited Kenya in November of 2011. In Nairobi I saw a witness of the way of local churches in the slums of Kabete and Kawangware, where congregations sacrificially started schools to serve children at risk in the community. I saw a witness of the way of the church in Entoronto, where Nazarene Compassionate Ministries is turning a dry and arid land into a green land so families there can learn farming and agriculture. I later returned to Nairobi as part of a team whose assignment was to build a classroom at the Church of the Nazarene in Kawangware so they could expand their school. Friends of ours in Vancouver who are not Christians and do not attend our church heard about our project in Kenya and wanted to be part of it, and many of them donated to the cause. Our involvement in this project was a witness to our unchurched neighbors in Vancouver. Our good works are witness to outsiders. Our good works bring glory to God among unbelievers.

In 1 Peter 2:12, Peter encourages Christians to “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” Churches all around the world humbly seek to live their common life together in a way that is witness to the beloved children of the church, forgetters, and outsiders. This is our witness of way!

5

Evangelism: The Heart of Our Witness

Acts 2:36: Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

What comes to mind when you hear the word evangelism? Do you have a positive reaction? Negative? Indifferent? Is it is a hopeful and helpful word for you, or a word that raises fear and anxiety? When I asked a group of people in my congregation what the word evangelism brought to their minds, I received responses like these:

∙ Evangelism looks like preaching, Billy Graham, tents and arenas, masses of people.

∙ Evangelism is someone standing on a street corner handing out tracts.

∙ Evangelism is intrusive.

∙ Evangelism is meeting people one on one or buttonholing people in the mall.

∙ Evangelism is trying to rescue people, like the claw machine at the arcade.

∙ Finally, someone admitted that, “Growing up, I felt a very strong sense of obligation to personally evangelize from the time I was very young. As a result, evangelism has been fraught with anxiety.”

As I interviewed people in the church, I began to realize that the word evangelism carries some baggage. Someone recently came to me and said, “When I first heard that you were going to preach a series on witness and evangelism, my first reaction was fear. He’s going to ask us to go door to door, knocking on the doors of strangers to tell them about Jesus.” She was relieved I hadn’t asked her to do this—and she loves Jesus!

The negativity surrounding the word “evangelism” is even greater outside the church. A good friend of mine in my neighborhood asked me what my doctoral research was about. I said “evangelism” just to see what kind of reaction I would get. I did get a reaction. It wasn’t positive. It is sad that evangelism has become a dirty word, a word that provokes anxiety and embarrassment in the church, and is an affront to the world. This realization inspired my research into the problem and my desire to regenerate evangelism as a missional practice of our church. I want to reclaim evangelism as a hope-filled and meaningful practice of the church. In the Bible, to evangelize means literally to announce good news or a welcome message. This is the word often translated as “gospel” in the English Bibles. In the New Testament, the gospel is the good news about the victory of Jesus Christ over the powers of evil, sin, and death. It is the saving implications of his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming return for the whole world. In Peter’s sermon on Pentecost, this good news is centered on the exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of God and the gracious outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all who recognize Jesus as both Lord and Christ. The good news that Peter announces is that Jesus is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah and the world’s true Lord, the one who brings God’s salvation for all who will turn and receive.

The New Testament use of the word “evangelize” is actually rooted in its Old Testament use. Isaiah 52:7 celebrates the bringer of such good news:

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,

who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,

who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

May 8, 1945, known as V-E Day, was the day celebrated worldwide in honor of the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allies. When news of Germany’s surrender was announced, the relief and celebrations occurred throughout the Western world. In the United Kingdom, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth made public appearances on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, along with Prime Minister Churchill. In the United States, it was President Truman’s birthday, and he claimed that it was the best birthday he’d ever had. The news of the Allied victory, the news of the enemy’s defeat, and the coming peace was good news.

Evangelism is rooted in the announcement of the good news that the cosmic victory won by Jesus at the cross has been confirmed through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the consequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit, assure us that the reign of God has begun in Christ Jesus and the reign of evil, sin, and death is ending. This is good news for a world held in the grip of evil, sin, abuse, corruption, and death.

Scott Jones helpfully reminds us that this good news is news that reveals and confirms the love of God for the whole human race and the whole creation.

Why does God announce the coming of [God’s] reign in the person of Jesus? Why does Christ die for the redemption of the world? Why does God guarantee the fulfillment of all these promises in a new heaven and new earth? The answer to all these and other fundamental questions lies in God’s essence, which is love. God creates, redeems, and saves the world because God is love. God loves the world.[[44]](#endnote-44)

The most well-known expression of this love is found in John 3:16, which beautifully encapsulates this loving good news: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

In order to regenerate evangelism as a meaningful practice of our church, we need to rediscover and embrace the gospel for what it truly is: the good news of God’s redeeming, reconciling, and rescuing love for the whole creation. The Christian church is called, empowered, and gifted to bear witness to the loving reign of God in many and multiform ways. We bear witness to the reign of God in Christ through our witness of worship, our witness of wonder, and our witness of way.

What is the goal or purpose of our witness in the world? What is the goal or purpose of evangelism? Are they the same? Different? Similar?

We often use the word *evangelism* to refer to this wider mission of announcing and embodying this good news in the world. But in order to regenerate evangelism as a missional practice of the church, I want to suggest we use it in a more foused way. *Evangelism* stands at the heart of our mission of witness in which the whole congregation engages. This more focused mission of evangelism is located scripturally in Matthew 28:18-20, where the risen Jesus says to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.

This passage is often referred to as the Great Commission. As we—a community of disciples—are in the process of going together, bearing witness to the reality of the reign of God in the world through our worship, wonder, and way, we are commissioned to do this by the authority of King Jesus. He sends us on his behalf to make disciples, inviting others to enter the wondrous life of the kingdom of God, to join us in worship of our risen King, and participate with us on the way with Jesus. If we think about our mission this way, we come to see that evangelism stands at the front end of the disciple-making mission of the church. Evangelism encompasses the work of the whole church in initiating the beloved children of the church, forgetters, and outsiders into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God in Christ. Our larger mission of witness is therefore intimately connected to our more focused mission of evangelism. Through our worship, wonder, and way we announce and embody the very same good news of God’s reign in Christ that we seek to initiate persons into through our practices of evangelism.

I am not actually suggesting anything particularly new or innovative here. Initiating people into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God has always been at the heart of the mission of the church, even if it was not explicitly described this way.[[45]](#endnote-45) But in order to regenerate evangelism as a missional practice of the church, we need to make a more explicit connection between our wider mission of witness and the narrower mission of evangelism in particular as we consider the three constituents of our witness: outsiders, forgetters, and beloved children.

Let me tell a story of how one forgetter and her beloved child were initiated into Christian discipleship through the witness of the whole church to illustrate the connection I want us to make. It is the story of my mother-in-law, Sandy, and her daughter, my wife, Aisling.

As a young girl growing up in the 1950s, Sandy’s parents took her to the local Baptist church, where she remembers sitting in the worship service and staring in awe at the big, bright columns that flowed through the sanctuary. Sandy’s grandmother was a strong Christian who read her Bible daily and showed Sandy love, affection, and acceptance. Sandy’s parents moved a lot, so they did not always attend church consistently. But when they settled down in a large city, a pastor named Cephas Centers invited her parents to a new church he was starting. Sandy’s mom got involved in the church, directing choir, and Sandy went to Sunday school, where she learned the stories of the Bible. She went to the church’s summer camp and remembers learning to sing the Doxology. The loving, accepting, and wise ways of a camp counselor had a significant influence on Sandy, and that counselor nurtured in her a sense of wonder at being in God’s good creation.

As a preteen, Sandy remembers going to the altar at that church and giving her life to God as the congregation sang a gospel song called, “Just as I Am.” The moment she got up from the altar she felt as though a burden had lifted. Soon after, Sandy’s grandmother died, and her dad was transferred to another, far away city. After the move, the family did not find a church home, and Sandy stopped being a part of a community of witness. Over time the family that had once been part of the church became a family of forgetters. However, Sandy retained a sense of God’s presence and remained interested in spiritual things. After graduating from college, she moved to Ireland, where she met and married Martin, with whom she had twin daughters, Aisling and Caoilfhionn. Soon after the girls were born, Sandy and Martin divorced.

Sandy and the girls moved back to the States. She remarried and, in 1980, moved into an apartment complex near Nazarene Theological Seminary. She met Daryll and Verna Stanton, who were students at the seminary. Sandy remembers the Stantons as neighbors who were friendly and unassuming. They invited Sandy and her family to their home for dinner. They shared life with them. She doesn’t remember them as aggressive or pushy, just real people. The Stantons invited Sandy many times to their church and received many refusals from her. Sandy was friendly toward the idea of God but not interested in church. She was put off by organized religion and afraid of cults. By this time in her life, Sandy would be considered a forgetter insofar as she was no longer nurturing her walk with Jesus or participating in the life and mission of God in the world with a Spirit-constituted community of faith.

One day Verna Stanton invited Sandy to a Saturday luncheon drama for women. Sandy went, and was impressed by how much love and acceptance there was from the cast, even when someone messed up a line. Having been involved in drama herself, Sandy expected criticism when the cast made mistakes. But instead she experienced laughter, ease, and joy. The cast members’ way of relating to one another was a witness to her. She remembers that day as the reason she finally accepted an invitation to attend an Easter sunrise service. Sandy felt a spiritual connection through the congregation’s witness of worship. She felt that what was happening there was real to the Stantons, to their pastor, and to the congregation, even if not yet completely for her. Soon after, Sandy began attending Sunday worship services.

A Canadian named Gordon Wetmore was the pastor. He had a limp arm as a result of polio. It was a witness to Sandy to see him preach with a disability. The warmth and welcome of the congregation was also a witness and created a safe space for Sandy to observe their way of being church together. After a few visits, she was relieved to determine that the Church of the Nazarene was not a cult. Sandy began to attend a Sunday school class and met one of the pastors on staff, Chic Shaver. One Sunday, after Sandy had been attending for a while, Chic offered to visit her and talk with her about spiritual things. Sandy took it as an expression of care that he would want to come to her home and talk with her. Her marriage was not going well, her home had become a dark place, and her husband showed violent and dangerous tendencies toward her and her two daughters.

Chic and two others from the church came for a visit. Following the *Evangelism Explosion* script, they shared a plan of salvation with Sandy. When Chic asked Sandy if she would like to accept Jesus as her Savior, Sandy heard it as an opportunity to renew the commitment to Christ she had made as a child. A forgetter was welcomed home. Because her husband was not receptive, Sandy prayed privately but remembers that, as she prayed, she had what she describes as “a vision of Jesus” over Pastor Shaver. It was a witness of wonder that Sandy took as a sign that she could trust what Chic was asking her to do. From that time forward, Sandy became a regular part of the worshiping community at the Church of the Nazarene. Her marriage ended soon after, and the church became an important part of the healing that she and her daughters needed. She involved herself in the ministries of the church and, as an adult, reengaged the journey with Jesus that she had left off so many years ago.

Sandy’s daughter Aisling immediately became a beloved child of the church. Though she didn’t have a father, she gained many loving spiritual fathers who made sure she and her mom and sister were cared for. Aisling doesn’t remember having a moment like her mom did, when someone came to her home to invite her to accept Jesus. But she does remember her home being changed through the power of the gospel. Her mother found courage to leave the abusive relationship, and the light of Christ began to shine in their home. Aisling was initiated into Christian discipleship through Sunday school classes, worship services, youth group, summer camps, and the mentorship of spiritually sensitive and mature adults in the church. Over the course of her childhood, youth, and young adult years, she made trips to the altar, asked for and received forgiveness, and consecrated herself to the Lord. She can’t name a specific date and time when she accepted Christ; she always remembers being accepted by Christ. She was publicly initiated into the Christian church through baptism and profession of faith. The church did not treat Aisling like an outsider or a forgetter; instead, they enfolded her into their loving arms as a beloved child. Through the intentional nurture of the church and its witness of worship, wonder, and way, Aisling now lives as a faithful follower of Jesus.

I share this story of Sandy and Aisling to illustrate how practices of evangelism that are at the heart of our mission of witness do not have to be intrusive, negative, coercive, or pushy, but rather flow from our shared witness of worship, wonder, and way of living in the world. The Stantons were simply being loving neighbors to Sandy. They did not push an agenda but openly shared their way of life. “People need to see how you live your life before they will be receptive. The Stantons were that for me,” Sandy remembers. The way the people at the church loved one another and enfolded Sandy and her daughters into that love was witness to her. The regular, weekly worship services at Kansas City First Church also witnessed to Sandy. On Sunday mornings, she observed people who authentically and genuinely worshiped the risen, ascended Jesus, and their witness of worship had an impact on her. As she listened to the sermons and sang the songs, the faith of her childhood was rekindled. The Holy Spirit was wondrously at work in Sandy’s life. The awe she experienced in the church of her childhood and the wonder of God’s good creation that was cultivated in youth summer camp helped her be attentive to the Spirit when Chic visited her. Because she was a forgetter who had positive memories of church, she welcomed Chic’s interest in her spiritual condition when he offered to come to her home.

How important was the particular personal evangelism method used in this story (*Evangelism Explosion*) in helping Sandy and Aisling become disciples of Jesus? What other factors were significant?

Aisling’s journey into discipleship is different from her mom’s. Because of the way the church enfolded her family, Aisling has always known the life and love of Christ through the church. Her Sunday school teachers, pastors, friends, and spiritual mentors all helped initiate her into Christian discipleship. Through baptism, the church signified and celebrated the regenerating work of the Spirit in Aisling’s life and her inclusion as a full participant in the life and mission of the church. She has remained a beloved child of the church her whole life.

For the beloved children of the church, evangelism is a ministry of the whole congregation. We are all of us, together, all the time, helping our beloved children, young and old, discover and enter the way of Christian discipleship. At an evangelism workshop, I made the point that evangelism is a ministry of the whole congregation and that part of this ministry includes helping the beloved children of the church mature as disciples of Jesus. After the workshop, an older woman came to me and said something like, “Thank you! This is so helpful. I’ve spent my whole life ministering to children and youth in the church, but because I’ve never led anyone in a sinner’s prayer, I’ve never felt like I was doing evangelism. But I have been! I’ve taught many children and youth about Jesus, prayed with and for them, and encouraged them to follow Jesus. Many of these children are faithful followers of Jesus today.” We need to encourage our Sunday school teachers, youth workers, and everyone who works with our children and youth to see how vital their ministry is. They are evangelizing our children through their faithful and often thankless ministries as nursery workers, children’s church leaders, Sunday school teachers, summer camp counselors, youth workers (both paid and volunteer), godparents, mentors, and spiritual friends.

Outsiders will likely travel a different path into Christian discipleship than either forgetters or our beloved children. In order to regenerate evangelism as a missional practice of the local church, congregations must be attentive to their unique context. Vancouver is not Kansas City. Forgetters like my mother-in-law, who grew up in a churched culture and carry warm, positive memories of their earlier church experiences are rare in Vancouver and many other global cities today. Many of the evangelism methods developed in the past, such as *Evangelism Explosion*, *The Four Spiritual Laws,* and the *Roman Road* were designed for forgetters who had some previous, positive experience with the church. These methods of evangelism, in effect, said, “Come home” to these forgetters and offered assurance of salvation to those who saw this as their spiritual need.

In my experience with outsiders today such methods of evangelism (prepared scripts, knocking on doors, and other “come home” methods) fall flat. When we think about evangelizing outsiders, we need to consider practices of evangelism that have the long view in mind. Evangelizing outsiders would include welcoming them to belong to our community of faith and be involved in our family and community life long before they believe, and certainly before they behave in ways that we might expect Christian disciples to behave. By making space for outsiders to belong before they believe, we graciously offer them an opportunity to glimpse the life of Christian discipleship to which we are calling them, and allowing space for the work of the Spirit to open eyes and unstop ears. This calls us to be faithful in our witness of worship, wonder, and way over the long haul.

In conversation with my fellow pastors in Vancouver, we estimate that it may take around seven years for outsiders who make positive connections with a church to be initiated into Christian discipleship. But in a city like Vancouver with a high rate of mobility, many of the outsiders who come into contact with the church through ministries such as English classes or refugee services are not around for seven years. In this context, evangelizing outsiders includes the work of sowing the gospel, trusting that the seed that is planted will grow to maturity even after people move away.

Are people who believe or behave differently from you welcomed and encouraged to come to your church?

Fiona was a visiting Chinese scholar at the University of British Columbia who, with her family, became part of our community for the months they lived near our church. Fiona befriended the host of our English Conversation Club, a woman named Brenda. Brenda invited Fiona to attend the ladies’ Bible study meeting in her home. Over the course of the study, Fiona expressed admiration for the teachings of Jesus and told the ladies in the Bible study that she was trying to put Jesus’s teachings into practice in her home and work life. In addition to this, she read the Bible with her family, and her preteen daughter had begun to pray. One evening during the Bible study, Fiona began to speak openly and positively about Jesus. One of the ladies appropriately took the opportunity to ask Fiona if she wanted to accept Jesus into her heart. Fiona refused.

Fiona was either unable or unwilling to respond to the direct invitation to ask Jesus into her heart. She was not interested in joining the Christian religion, which was how she understood the invitation. Yet at the same time, because she had been invited to be part of the ladies’ Bible study, she was learning to put Jesus’s teachings into practice in her everyday life, and as a result, her life and her whole family were being transformed. Even though she didn’t pray to accept Jesus, the ladies in the Bible study were evangelizing Fiona insofar as they were initiating her into Christian discipleship. Through her engagement with our church in a number of different ways, she was discovering what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and put the teachings of Jesus into practice. We do hope that in time, Fiona will come to personal faith in Jesus Christ as a full participant in the life and mission of God in the world. But I am grateful we had the opportunity to help her begin the journey. For Fiona, and many outsiders like her, the journey to Jesus will take time. Our ministries of evangelism to outsiders need to be flexible, creative, patient, and attentive to the work of the Spirit.

Of course, repentance and faith are necessary for full initiation into Christian discipleship. The good news of God’s reign calls for a response. In Acts 2, following the wonder of the Pentecost event and Peter’s words of wonder, the people are “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37) and ask Peter what they should do.

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” … Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. Acts 2:38-39, 41

It is this call to repentance and faith in Jesus that often causes conflict between the church and the world. We cannot ignore or be naïve to the challenge that the witness and evangelism of the church bring to the world. People may appreciate our witness of our worship, wonder, and way and still not want to be initiated into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God. Regenerating evangelism as a missional practice of the church means we take seriously the biblical truth that evangelism includes a summons to a new allegiance and incorporation into the new community of the Holy Spirit that seeks to live as witness to the reign of God through its worship, wonder, and way. Beloved children, forgetters, and outsiders need to be invited to receive Jesus and become his disciples. They may need guidance on how to repent, and what to believe. Evangelism is intended to initiate persons into Christian discipleship, and without intention on the part of the Christian community, evangelism will not happen.

Have you ever helped a beloved child, forgetter, or outsider receive Jesus? What did you do to help the person understand what it means to repent and believe? How did the person’s situation shape your guidance?

We use the word *conversion* to describe the change of heart, mind, will, and attitude that is a central part of what it means to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. Conversion is a biblical word used to describe what happens when persons are initiated into discipleship in response to the reign of God in Christ. Whether a person’s conversion takes place in a moment of crisis or as a longer process, the twofold response required by Peter in his sermon in Acts 2 remains at the heart of the conversion experience that signifies a person’s turning away from the kingdoms of this world and turning toward the kingdom of God.

This twofold response is repentance and baptism: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39). In the book of Acts, repentance and baptism are inseparable from participation in the life and mission of the Christian church.

Through baptism we are commissioned into the mission of God for the life of the world. To be baptized is to become a member of the Spirit-empowered witnessing community. All who are baptized into fellowship with Christ and his church are now witnesses and, together, have the great joy and privilege of helping initiate beloved children, forgetters, and outsiders into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God. We bear witness to this reign through our worship, wonder, and way. And we lovingly seek to initiate everyone who calls on the name of the Lord into discipleship, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded. Jesus promised to be with us always as we carry out this commission, to the very end of the age.

Evangelism is the heart of our mission of witness. As you engage this mission with your congregation in the places you live and move and work and pray and play in these days, I pray you will do so with Spirit-empowered confidence and Spirit-filled joy, in love, for the life of the world.

1. Propositions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 are taken from Chilcote and Warner, *The Study of Evangelism.* However, I present them in a different order. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas G. Long*, The Witness of Preaching,* Second Edition, 2nd ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2011), 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Goheen, 39 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Randy L Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn: Kingswood Books, 1994), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Maddox, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Maddox, 112-113. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Abingdon Press, 1993), 71. The following terms are taken from this book: constituents of our witness; beloved children; forgetters; and outsiders. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bob McDonald, “The Science of Religion,” Quirks & Quarks with Bob McDonald, accessed May 4, 2013, http://www.cbc.ca/quirks/episode/2013/03/30/march-30-2013/#3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This paragraph, and the use of Psalm 96, were inspired by Christopher Wright’s book *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Zondervan, 2010), 244-262. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* (Zondervan, 2010), 170–171. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Dickson, 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dickson, 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. “Two Thirds of Adults Formerly in Church Would Consider Returning | LifeWay Research,” accessed May 6, 2013, http://www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=LifeWay-

Research-surveys-formerly-churched-part-2-of-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Haldor Lillenas, “Wonderful Grace of Jesus,” *Sing to the Lord* (Lillenas Publishing Co., 1993), hymn #360. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan, “Mighty to Save,” *Mighty to Save* (Hillsong Publishing, 2006), track #14. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Dawn, 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Paul W. Chilcote, “The Integral Nature of Worship and Evangelism,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church,* ed. Paul W. Chilcote and Laceye C. Warner (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing

Company, 2008), 262. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Chilcote, 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 5-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Benji Rodes, *The Fire Reply,* 2013, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Rodes, 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Rodes, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Rodes, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Rodes, 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew,* 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Cited by James M. Houston, *The Transforming Friendship: A Guide to Prayer* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1991), 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Houston, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Zondervan, 2010), 122 & 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Brazos Press, 2007), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), xv. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion,* Reprint (HarperOne, 2012), 106–112. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Stark, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Dickson, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Dickson, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Dickson, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Green, xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Stan Ingersol, *Nazarene Roots: Pastors, Prophets, Revivalists & Reformers* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009), 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ingersol, 89-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Harold Ivan Smith, *The Quotable Bresee* (Beacon Hill, 1983), 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Wright, 94-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Scott J Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Abingdon Press, 2003), 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. In *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor,* Jones, who builds on the work of William Abraham, provides the following definition of evangelism: “Evangelism is that set of loving, intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God” (18). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)