

“A Disciple-Making Congregation”

Good morning! Welcome (again) to worship. It's good to be together (here today) for this special service which serves not only as a kickoff to our fall schedule, but also as a way for us to begin laying out what we've been doing and will (continue to do) in response to Jesus' call and commission to go into the world and make disciples.

Over the next six weeks, we're going to be laying out some of the basic understandings (and truths) that have become foundational for us as we move toward becoming a disciple-making congregation. We're going to be presenting materials (all biblically-based) that will challenge some of the assumptions that, perhaps, many of us have had about discipleship, and that will cause us to think and (perhaps even re-think) what being a disciple of Jesus is all about.

In so doing, it is my prayer, and I know also the prayer of the others on our staff and in our leadership, that when all is said and done, we'll be in a much better place (as a congregation) to move forward with a unified understanding of what discipleship is, and in a much better place (individually) to be working at what God desires for each of us to become.

I want you to know (and I wouldn't just say this) that in my (almost 21 years) here at St. Timothy's, I have never been more excited and energized about what I believe is in our future and where I believe God is leading us than I am today. I have also never been more aware of the change that needs to happen and the challenge of what it will take (from all of us) if we are to realize and get onboard with what God has in store.

What I want to do in the next (40 minutes or so) is to share a number of things that will help set the stage for what we'll be doing in the weeks ahead, and where we believe God is leading. We're going to be covering a lot of ground here this morning, so there's an outline (in your bulletins) if you want to follow along and take notes.

Now, I'll say this up front, and I know (for some of you) this will be the hardest thing you do all morning; but I'm going to ask you not to look ahead (on the outline) and try to figure out what's coming next, but to stick with me, so we can follow this through together.

Before looking at where we're going, (what's in front of us), it's important that we recognize and (be honest) about what's been happening in the church, across the country, (some of the trends), as well as what's happening here in this valley as we seek to be the church. Turn your attention to the front walls for a few moments and watch this clip.

Video Clip: “When God Left the Building”

view video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiwhjsguUC8>

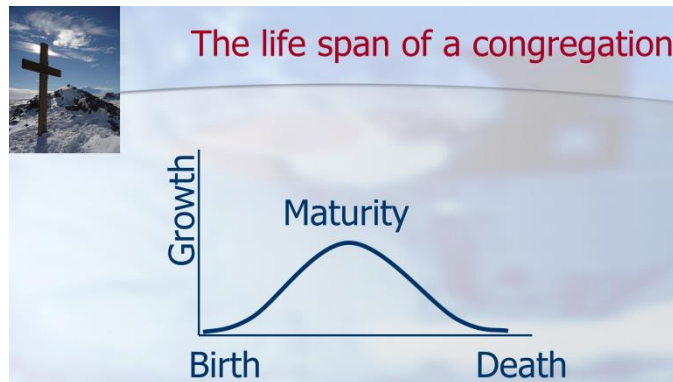
Why are we here? What brought us to this point? (This is nothing new.) Even that little clip (we just saw); we all know the numbers. Nationwide, since the 1970's, there has been a more than **45%** decline in church attendance among Roman Catholics and the major Protestant denominations. The trends in the Santa Clara Valley, (since 1990), the number of Lutheran churches has dropped from 38 to 26, and the overall attendance has declined almost **50%**.

Here at St. Timothy's, beginning in the 1990's and through about 2004/2005, we were growing in numbers; every year it was getting better. Since then, we've held our own in terms of membership (about 1200), but our worship attendance has dropped almost **20%**.

Five years ago, our leaders began to ask the tough questions. I still remember some of the conversation. We were a strong congregation, still relatively young (compared to many), but starting to see a decline. We weren't overly concerned (at the time), but we were openly honest. Nothing had outwardly changed. We were still doing what we'd always been doing. But what we were doing was no longer bearing the same fruit. We realized we were not alone. Even then, we knew what was happening. We also realized it was time for a change.

Look at the front walls again. We might have shared this before. It's a graph depicting the normal "Life Cycle" of a congregation. Every congregation goes through this. This life-cycle is something every congregation experiences.

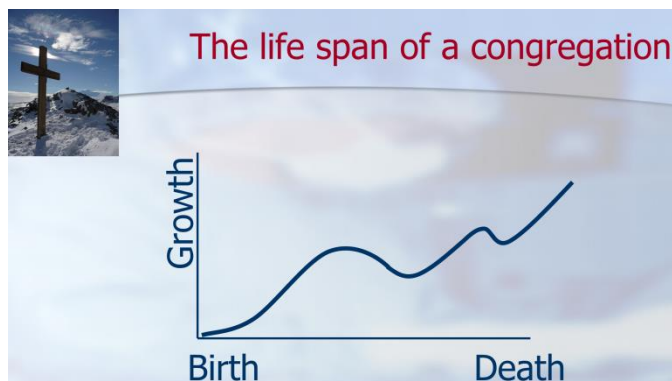
There's a time when it starts (its birth) on the bottom left. There's a time when it grows (works its way up) and eventually peaks (at the top). And then it goes into decline and, if nothing happens to change it, it eventually leads to its death (on the bottom right).



Every congregation goes through this. It's the natural life-cycle of every congregation. (We're no exception.) We face the same (life/death) challenge as everyone else.

What needs to happen (and here's the key) when that decline begins to happen, is to go back and re-start what was first started. If a congregation goes back and re-thinks what it's all about and re-commits itself to why it first started, then the decline can be turned around and growth can continue. (Show the re-started portion of the graph.)

Several times in our congregation's 53 years of history, we have had to re-think and **re-commit** ourselves to our basic tasks. It happened in 1966, after only four years as a congregation (uncertain if it would continue). It happened in 1988 (when things were no longer working as they once had). It was time for a re-start. It happened in 1997, (not long after I was called here to serve). We needed to take a step back. It also happened in 2009-10, as we took a hard look at where we were at and what needed to change.



Long story short, our leadership (at the time) began exploring ways to jump-start what we were doing. As a result, (we've shared this before) four years ago, your pastors attended an introductory session to a discipling ministry called 3DM: Three-Dimensional Ministries. The gathering was held at St. Matthew Lutheran in Walnut Creek.

As a follow-up, we committed to sending four of us (Maria Bones, Joe Hill, Pastor Judy and I) to four 3-day training sessions spread out over the next eighteen months. At that time, we made a conscious decision to transition from being a program-driven ministry to becoming a disciple-producing ministry. We'll say more about that a bit later.

Early on in those three-day sessions, we were introduced to the concept of huddles. A huddle is a group of 5-8 people, gathering regularly for the purpose of supporting and challenging each other in their own faith walk as disciples, as well as providing them with biblically-based tools for making more disciples.

Quick history: Three years ago we began our first huddle. There were nine of us in that first group: the four who had attended the training sessions, plus Johanne Roberts, Mary Selbo, Cliff Gray, Michael Stamos, and Pastor Jim. After finishing that first generation huddle, we held seven second generation huddles, and have since started seven more that are currently meeting. Altogether, a total of 50 people have been huddled and another 36 are involved in one right now.

Now, when we first started, it was a very intentional invitation-only approach, recommended by 3DM. If it has felt a bit “closed” (up until now), we’ve been aware of that, and it’s going to change. Moving forward, our goal is to provide opportunity for (all of us) to be supported and challenged in the same way. We’ll be saying more about that in these next weeks.

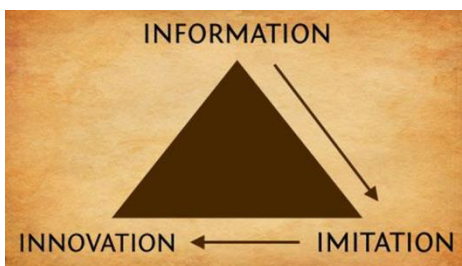
We also began this year, (as somewhat of a side note) our first “pilot” (experimental) effort at what we are calling Missional Communities. We have more groundwork to lay before that becomes our focus. For now, just know that it’s happening.

Now, let’s go back to where we started. Do you know why I believe the church is in decline, why things need to change? Do you know what I think has happened, what we’re good at and what we have failed to do? I think we’ve been good at passing on information, getting the right information into people’s heads (Bible knowledge), but (not so good at) providing examples and opportunities for what we have learned to be lived out.

We all know we’re called to teach, and we do it well. We have Bible classes, Sunday school classes, confirmation classes (we give tests). And so, why is it, (when it’s all finished) and our young people confirm their faith, that such a high percentage of those students (and their families) stop coming? I think it’s because we haven’t done a good job of communicating and showing and living what it’s all about.

Look at these Bible verses

- 1 Corinthians 11:1 – “Follow my **example**, as I follow the example of Christ.”
- 1 Timothy 4:11-12 – “Command and **teach** these things...set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”
- James 1:22 – “Do not merely **listen** to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”
- Matthew 7:24 – “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into **practice** is like a wise man who built his house on a rock.”
- Matthew 12:50 – “Whoever **does** the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”



Now, take a look on the front walls again.

This is what we refer to as the “Learning Triangle.” It’s how Jesus taught his disciples. He taught them what they needed to know (Information). He gave them an example of how to do it (Imitation). And then he turned them loose and said go out and do it (Innovation). And they did.

What the church has done and why it has so often failed is that we’ve been good at passing on information and telling people to go do it, without providing them an example, (something to imitate), as well as ways to make it their own, to innovate. That’s one of the reasons Jesus taught in parables. It was a challenge not only to learn, but to live, and to find ways (for themselves) to put biblical truth into practice.

In other words, it’s not enough to learn what Jesus **taught**, if we are not **living** what we have learned. Disciple-making is all about encouraging and supporting and **challenging** ourselves (and others) to live out what they have been taught.

Take a look at this next clip. It’s the beginning of a message on discipleship by Francis Chan. Let’s watch.

Video Clip: Francis Chan: “How Not to Make a Disciple”

view video clip here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIA-DGx_3Y

Isn't that great? It makes you laugh. We've got it all memorized; can say it in Greek. Even more so, if it wasn't true. What does it look like? If the commission is to make disciples, what does that mean for us? Where do we start? How did Jesus do it?

If you look at the discipling techniques of Jesus, he was a master at making disciples. He was always working to help people grow. He'd invite them in, call them to follow, and then he'd challenge them with what that meant for their lives. And he'd never back down. He was a master at balancing the invitation to follow, with the challenge of what following actually meant.

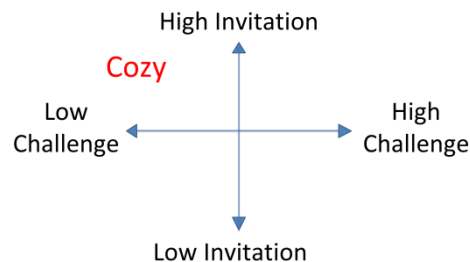
Go through the gospels and you find many examples. I'll refer to just a few.

- Mark 1: (The **calling** of the first disciples.) Jesus found them fishing, invited them to follow him and become fishers of men. They began following and their lives changed.
- John 4: (The story of the **Samaritan** woman). Jesus met her at the well and invited her to put her trust in him. Her life was a mess. What she needed was someone who cared. Jesus cared. He invited her in.
- Contrast that with the story in Matthew 19: the rich young **ruler** who claimed to have kept all of the commandments of God. His life was secure (and confident). Jesus told him to sell all he had and give it away, and then follow. The man couldn't do it, so he walked away, and Jesus let him.

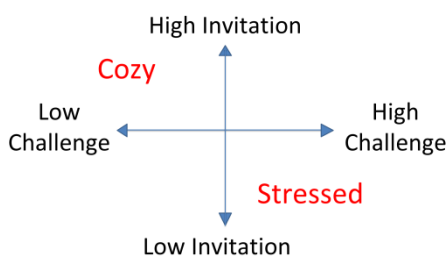
There was always a healthy balance between Jesus inviting people to follow and challenging them with what that actually meant for their lives.

Take a look at this next illustration. This matrix illustrates what happens in congregations when they err on one side (or the other) of the invitation and challenge.

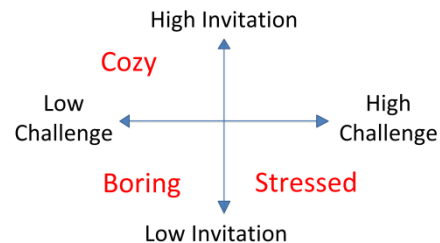
Start with the upper left-hand quadrant. When congregations have a high invitation and low challenge approach; when they are good at inviting people in, giving them what they want, providing for their needs, but never challenging them, what happens? It creates a very "cozy culture." People love it. The pastors and staff do the work. Things just happen. It's all easy; nothing needs to change. It's cozy.



What happens when it's the opposite? (Look at the bottom right hand quadrant). When congregations are low on the invitation and high on the challenge; they get you in, but they never let up. How about teaching Sunday School? How about singing in the choir? We have a work day this Saturday. We need some help with our stewardship campaign. Do you want to usher, serve on this committee, and it keeps on going. What happens? It creates a very "stressed culture." People get stressed out, and who can blame them?



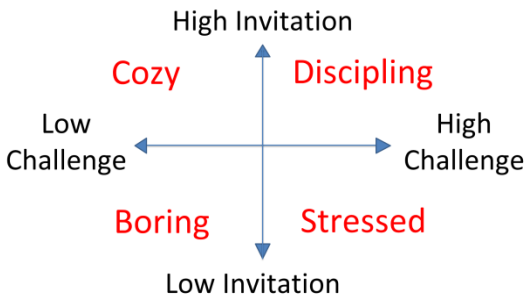
On the bottom left; what happens there? It's low on invitation, low on challenge. There's nothing going on to which people can be invited, and no one's being challenged to do anything. What happens? It creates a "bored culture." It's boring. No one cares. Eventually, no one comes.



Now, what does Jesus want? What he wants are churches where there is a healthy balance between the invitation and the challenge. What he wants are churches where people are continually invited in, but never allowed to simply take it in. There's always a challenge to grow; always a challenge to follow.

What happens (when this happens) is that we end up with disciples. We end up with people not just coming to church, but who are actually following Jesus. They gather together on Sunday, for encouragement and support and challenge. And then they go out during the week and live it out. There's this gathering and scattering rhythm being developed. There's this inviting and challenging culture that results.

The result is that it becomes not a cozy culture or a stressed culture or a bored culture, but a discipling culture. That's what we're going after: a community of believers where people are open to the Lord's leading, willing to be supported and challenged in their faith, and ready to respond and to reach out to a world in need.



Now, maybe you're thinking, "Isn't that what we've always been doing? Isn't that what we've always been about?" My answer is, "Yes" and "No."

Yes, that's what we've always been doing, always been about. The question is: "Was it working? Were we actually making disciples?" Yes, that's always what we've been about.

But "No", it was working (for many years), but it has not been working for a number of years. This goes back to the "Life Cycle" graph we talked about where congregations need to take a step back and re-focus and re-commit to what they're all about.

I don't want to get into too much here today. (I'll let you be the judge.) But on that Invitation/Challenge matrix, do you know where I think we were five and six (and maybe 7 or 8) years ago? I think we were in two quadrants.

With the program-driven approach we had, we had developed, on the one hand, a very **cozy** culture. People could come and go as they liked, take in what they liked, and then leave. (And it was happening.) We had many people who would come and go, take in what they liked (as long as they liked it), and then they were gone. There were a lot of people who were very cozy.

On the other hand, we had developed a **staff** and a **leadership** that had become rather stressed out. They weren't ready to give up, but they were tired and they were stressed and (at times) a bit discouraged. How come? Because (with a program-driven model), not only are people coming and going, taking in what they like; it also takes others to put together all of the programs. That's what was happening, and we realized it needed to change.

Now, cozy or stressed, that finally was not the question. The question was (and still is) are we **making** disciples? Is what we're doing creating followers of Jesus, or is what we're doing simply enabling people to pick and choose what they want, providing whatever people think they (need and want), whether or not the result is a disciple of Christ?

In committing ourselves to a more intentional disciple-making approach, we knew it would mean that some of what we had been doing (in our programming) would need to change. The direction we are going is not simply a repackaging of the same old stuff, with a new ribbon. It's a fundamentally different **approach** with a fundamentally different **goal** in mind. Don't miss how significant the shift we are making really is.

Now, before going any further, let me share a few definitions. There are some basic definitions we want to make sure we all understand. It's easy to use this language and not be fully together on what we mean. When we talk about a disciple or discipleship, or a huddle, here's what we mean:

- Disciple: A person who accepts both the **invitation AND challenge** to follow Jesus, strives to live a life consistent with his, and teaches **others** to do the same.
- Discipleship: The process by which a person commits to **learning** from Jesus and others how to grow into his likeness, **lives** what they learned, and becomes **equipped** to help others to do the same.
- Huddle (a vehicle for support, challenge, training, and accountability): Small groups (5-8 people) who meet regularly to **learn** from and **challenge** each other to become disciples who are better equipped to **reproduce** disciples.

Now, I realize this is a lot to take in in one sitting. (We'll be sorting through it in the weeks ahead.) But we need to be aware of and (on board with) where we are going, if we're ever going to get there. So hang in.

Let's shift gears (for a few moments) and talk about what matters to us. What things do we value as a congregation? What is our vision as we think about where we are going, how are we going to get there, and how will we know if what we've done (and are doing) is a success?

There are a number of things we could point to that help to shape who and what we are. I want to lift up three. The first is from Matthew 22: the Great **Commandment**; a call to "love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself."

The second is the Great **Commission**: Matthew 28. Jesus commissioned us to "go into the world and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them to obey" all that Jesus has taught us.

The third is Jesus' call to go after the lost. I'm not going to read it for you, but I want you to go home and read it. Luke 15 has three stories that illustrate what matters to Jesus: the lost **sheep**, the lost **coin**, and the lost **son**. All three say the same thing. It's the one that is lost that's the one that matters. It's the one who's not where (he or she) should be that's the one about whom Jesus cares the most.

The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes after the one that's lost. The woman searches the house until she finds that one lost coin. The father stares out his window, waiting and longing and hoping that his one lost son will come back. That's the picture Jesus has for his Church. That's the picture Jesus holds out for us.

Let's talk about the one. (The "one" was important to our Lord. It needs to be important to us.) Who are the "ones" in our community that don't know Jesus? Who is the one in your life that (for whatever reason) has chosen to stay away from the church? Is it your next door neighbor? Is it your colleague at work? Is it your friend, your classmate? Is it your daughter, or your son, your granddaughter or grandson?

Think about it (for a moment). Who comes to mind? Who is it (in your life) that falls into the category of the "one" about whom you deeply care? We all have "ones" in our lives. Who is the one in your life? Who are the "ones" in your life that might only be reached (for Christ) by you?

There's a place on your outline to write down a name. (Write it down.) We all have ones. Mine is written down right here. Who is your one? Write it down.

Now, let me ask you a question. Regardless of who it is, what would you be willing the change (in your life), in our life, in what we offer (or the way it is offered) here at the church, that the one (in your life) might be reached for (and come to know) Christ? What would you be willing to change?

Do you know what I would be willing to change for the one? I'd change anything (for the one), except for Jesus. I'd change everything (for the one), except for Christ. If that one (who is not reached) could be reached? If what we offered (and decided to offer) might help? I'd change anything and everything, if that one who is not here would come to faith.

Now, we don't have time to go into all of it. We're still trying (in many ways) to figure it out. We've made changes in Sunday school, changes in confirmation. We've added a number of things, taken a few things away.

One of the changes we're planning (beginning next Sunday) is in our worship. In the past (as you know), we've had two fairly traditional services at 8:15 and 9:45, and one more contemporary service at 11:15. Beginning next week, we'll be offering one traditional service at 8:15 and two more contemporary services at 9:45 and 11:15.

The reason we're doing it (and this is where the real change is happening) is not because it is necessarily what you and I might want or choose for ourselves. I don't know how that would play out if we were to take a vote. (How many want traditional and how many want contemporary?) It might end up with a rather even split. (It doesn't matter.) What matters is not so much what works best for us (as the ninety-nine who are already here), but what might work best for us (who are here) to reach and welcome those who are not.

The world (out there) is not waiting at our doors to come (in here). Each one of us needs to do whatever we can to go out after the "ones" we know and invite them to come. That's the only way they'll come. It's the only way it'll happen. The burden (for inviting) the "ones" we know is not on us as a community (on what happens in this place), but on each of us as individual **followers** of Jesus and what happens (out in that place).

What is on us (here in this place), at the church, is to provide opportunities that are more accessible to the outsiders than what us insiders have come to know. (It's back to that "cozy culture" quadrant.) If you grew up in the church and are used to (coming to church), then what we're doing in the church works for you. If you didn't or you haven't, then it probably won't. We're going to be changing a few things up, because we need to be more serious about going after the lost.

Now, it's not going to be radical. (Don't get the wrong impression.) We're going to be including most of the same pieces in our worship that are there now. They'll just be packaged a bit differently. As we move a few things around, don't lose sight of why we're doing it. We're not changing things for us. We're changing them for Christ. We're not doing things differently for the ninety-nine who are here. We're doing things differently to reach the ones, for whom our Lord Jesus died, who are not.

I have a few quotes I want to share with you, and then I want to close out our time in prayer. Before I do, do you want know who I believe is doing the best job of discipling our culture today, (including many Christians)? Let me tell you who I think is doing the best job of discipling our culture. Our world is doing an incredible job of discipling our culture. It's doing an incredible job of forming people who are either followers of Jesus (or who might be) followers of Jesus into its image.

It's moving people (number one) from **faith** into **doubt**. Nobody seems to know (any more) if you can believe anything at all. Is there truth? Is anything certain? Are there any absolutes in the world? Or is it all up for grabs, nothing we can know for sure? Our world is filled with doubt.

Our world is moving people (number two) from **love** to **insecurity**. The message of the Christian faith is that we are all loved. God loves us. He loves you. And it doesn't depend upon anything you've done; only upon Jesus. (That's the message.) But you look at the world today, people don't know if they're accepted (if they're loved), so they're continually faking it, putting on a front. They're pretending to have it all together, but hurting deeply inside; from love to insecurity.

Number three, our culture is moving people from **community** to **individualism**. (Am I wrong?) The old "It's all about me" mindset is everywhere. The family unit (in our culture) is falling apart. And we're convinced we're making progress. We've been brainwashed into thinking it's all good, but it's not. It's not all about me, but we're becoming convinced (subtly, if not directly) that it is.

Number four, our world is moving people from **contributing** to **consuming**. All of life (or so we're told) is a blank canvas for (you and me) to write our own story. And so we write it (for ourselves), not asking the question, "What can I contribute?" but, "What's in it for me?" It's all turned around. We're not contributing, we're becoming consumers.

And (number five), our world is moving people from a place of **rest** to a place of **exhaustion**. The #1 challenge we face, the most common concern we continue to hear? People are too busy. They're worn out. They have little (if no) energy left for the things that really matter. They want to contribute, but they can't. There's nothing left.

Our world is doing an incredible job of discipling Christians (and many would-be Christians) into doubt, insecurity, individualism, consuming, and exhaustion...and it's killing the Church. The most heartbreaking aspect (to what the world is telling us) is that it doesn't work. It doesn't work.

Look at this quote from Herman Bavink (a theologian) from some time ago. He says, “The more abundantly the benefits of civilization come streaming our way, the emptier our lives become. With all its wealth and power, it only shows that the human heart, in which God has put eternity, is so huge that all the world is too small to satisfy it.”

In the midst of a culture that is feasting on abundance, with leans souls, Jesus steps into to invite us into counter-formation, instead of being discipled by the world, to being discipled by him.

Two final quotes, and then we’ll close. The first from Neil Cole, a Christian writer and church planter. He says, “Ultimately, each church will be evaluated by only one thing, its disciples. Your church is only as good as its disciples. It does not matter how good your praise, preaching, programs, and property are. If your disciples are passive, needy, consumerist, and not moving in the direction of radical obedience, your church is not good.” That’s a powerful statement. I believe he’s right.

And now, one last one, from Dallas Willard, a man who spent much of his life helping people with their own Christian spiritual formation; he died two years ago. Look at what he says. (He says), “Since making disciples is the main task of the church, every church ought to be able to answer two questions:

- 1) What is our plan for making disciples?
- 2) Is our plan working?

What is our plan for making disciples? And is our plan working?

Go back to where this all started this morning. Five years ago, our leaders began asking the tough questions. We were a strong congregation then, still relatively young, and we still are. Lutheran churches around us, for many of them, the writing is on the wall. (It’s only a matter of time and they’ll be closing shop.)

But for us, if our goal is to outlast them all (to be the last-standing Lutheran church in the valley), then I believe we’re on the right track. We’ve got enough going for us, that we could continue to do (if we chose) what we’ve been doing, and we’d still be here for quite some time; if that’s our goal.

But if our goal is not to outlast everyone else, but to be faithful to and give honor to Christ, then we need to change. And not for the sake of change, because change only means that things have changed. But for the lost, for the one, for the “ones” in each of our lives – in your life and mine; and for a world in desperate need of what only Jesus can offer, and what we (as the church) have to give.

My friends, I’ve never been more excited about where I believe God is leading us than I am today, and never more aware of the change that needs to happen, and the challenge of what it will take (from all of us) if we are to realize and get onboard with what God has in store.

We’re in this together. It’s time to go after it and get onboard. The next six weeks are important. Make it a priority. Change what (needs to change) to be here. It’s why we’re here. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your invitation to us to be among your followers. We thank you that you have done all that is needed for our salvation and that in you (and you alone) are we secure. We thank you (also) for your challenge to not just be secure in what you have given, but to be formed into what you have created us to become.

We pray for the lost, for the “ones” we know who have yet to come to know you. Help us to change what needs to change, to be willing and ready to let go of anything and everything (except for Jesus), that the unreached in this world might be reached for him.

Lord, guide these weeks ahead. Fill us with your Spirit. Work in us (and among us) that we would not be formed and molded by the world (and our culture), but formed and re-formed into the image of Christ...in whose name we pray. Amen.