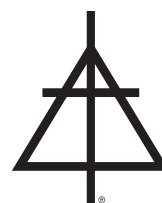


COUNCIL DEVOTIONS

Church Health

crcna.org/PCR



Christian Reformed Church
**Pastor Church
Resources**

Introduction

The twelve devotionals presented here are offered to you and your church council in the hope that they will help you think biblically and talk deeply about your congregation's health. We envision them primarily as a resource for opening devotions at your council meetings. If your council meets monthly then there are enough devotionals here to cover a full year.

After an introductory devotional each subsequent devotional presents an area of church health. There are eleven of them, based on a study of scripture's teaching about the church by denominational staff. In each case the devotional begins with a relevant scripture text and then goes on to help you think about that area of church health and your particular congregation.

The eleven church health indicators are:

1. Centrality of the Word of God
2. Kingdom Extension
3. Loving Relationships
4. Authentic Spirituality
5. Transforming Worship
6. Servant Leadership
7. Generous Stewardship
8. Intentional Disciple Making
9. Mission/Vision
10. Justice and Righteousness Advocacy
11. Children and Youth Ministry

These indicators became the foundation of a church renewal program called the Healthy Church Discernment Process (HCDP), administered through the office of Pastor Church Resources. For more information on HCDP please go to the Healthy Church website (crcna.org/HealthyChurch) or call Rev. David Den Haan at Pastor Church Resources (toll free 877-279-9994 ext. 2712).

We are grateful to the Rev. Dr. Stanley Mast for writing these devotionals. We hope that they help you chart a course towards deeper congregational flourishing and vitality.

A HEALTHY CHURCH

Acts 2:42-47

An old friend of mine was as blessed with wealth as the biblical Job, but he always claimed that the greatest blessing of all, apart from salvation in Christ, was health. “If you have your health, you have everything,” he would say after every round of golf. “You may have everything money can buy, but without your health, it doesn’t mean anything.” He ended up being a perfect example of that, as he suffered like Job before dying, still a wealthy man.

I know, that’s a gloomy way to begin a devotional on church health. But to paraphrase Mark Twain, the prospect of dying tends to focus the mind in a marvelous way. That’s what we want to do with these devotionals—focus your mind on church health, in a day when so many churches are dying. Over the next year, we invite you to think together about the health of the church, especially your local church.

Who’s to say whether your church is healthy? Well, how about God in his Word? Here in Acts 2 we have our first picture of the early church. It was probably as healthy as any church could be. But it wasn’t perfect. The germs of sin sickness were already there, as evidenced by the financial scandal involving Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and the ethnic squabbling over the care of widows (Acts 6). And there was trouble from the outside right away (Acts 4).

As with our individual health, the health of every church is always a bit precarious. We need to eat well, exercise faithfully, get the proper amount of sleep, see the doctor, and take our meds. Most of all, we must pray, because, apart from salvation in Christ, health is God’s most precious gift. What does that mean for the church?

In the Christian Reformed Church, there are a number of programs to help churches monitor and regain their health. One of them is The Healthy Church Discernment Process, which focuses on eleven characteristics of the healthy church. Over the next 11 months, we invite you to use this little devotional booklet at your Council meetings to ask yourselves these questions. Is our church healthy? How can we as a Council help our church get healthier? Do we need to consult anyone else in order to become healthier?

Prayer: —Great Physician, we praise you for the gift of health. Help us now to let you diagnose us, so that we can seek your healing and health more fervently and faithfully. Amen.

Discussion Starters: What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “healthy church?” How do we know when a church is healthy or unhealthy?

Something to Try: Over the next month, find a high school student and ask her/him what they think a healthy church looks like.

CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

II Timothy 3:14-4:2

In I and II Timothy, we hear an old preacher on his death bed (II Timothy 4:6) giving instructions to his young protégé (I Timothy 4:12), who is serving an influential church at Ephesus. Paul has advice for Timothy about how to be a good pastor and how to organize the church so that it is properly governed and it takes care of its most vulnerable members. He warns about false teachers, gives guidelines about worship, and counsels about the blessings and dangers of money. Not surprisingly, Paul touches on many of the characteristics of a healthy church in his advice to Timothy.

In the words we've read today, Paul focuses on what is arguably the foundational mark of a healthy church, the centrality of the Word of God. The Scriptures are God-breathed and, thus, are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. All of those uses of the Bible are designed to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Timothy's life has been guided by Scripture "from infancy." And now Paul, with all the passion an old preacher can muster, exhorts his young charge to "preach the word... in season and out of season... with great patience and careful instruction."

In a healthy church, the Word is central to the life of the church. If our church is healthy, the Word will be the foundation of all our teaching and preaching. That will be demonstrated in the pulpit and the pew. The Bible will be preached with power and integrity in a clear, theologically sound and practical way that reflects the Reformed confessions. And our people will apply God's Word to every area of life, so that the people of God "may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Prayer: Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Help us to hold it high in worship and in everyday life, so that our feet will not slip off your path. In the name of the Light of the World, Amen.

Discussion Starters: What evidence do we have that the Word is central to the life of our church? Who is most responsible for making the Bible central to our life—the preacher, the council, or the congregation?

Something to Try: Schedule a special meeting with your preacher to ask him/her what you can do to help him/her in the work of preaching the Word.

MISSION AND VISION

Acts 1:1-8

Early in my ministry I was deeply influenced by the KJV of Proverbs 28:19. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” If a group of people don’t know what they are doing and why they are doing it, they will lose focus, fall apart, sink into mediocrity or, worse, cease to exist.

When General Electric stopped focusing on its main business of electricity and diversified into all sorts of unrelated businesses, it eventually sank into a malaise that nearly killed that huge company. If a platoon of soldiers in Afghanistan doesn’t know what cave to attack and doesn’t understand how their mission fits into their government’s overall vision for that war-torn country, they will not be focused and will be vulnerable. When a local church doesn’t have a clear mission and vision of God’s desired future for them, it can lose its missional focus.

That’s why Jesus’ last words to the infant church before his ascension were words about mission and vision. His disciples knew that he had come to bring the Kingdom of God to this world (Mark 1:14-15). Now that he had completed his work by conquering death, they wanted to know when and how that kingdom would come.

While admonishing them not to think about times and dates, Jesus gave them their mission; “you will be my witnesses.” By doing that, you “will make disciples” and, thus, promote the kingdom of God on this earth. Here’s the vision that will drive all your work. Though you will start right where you are in Jerusalem, you will finally carry my name “to the ends of the earth.” By the power of the Spirit that mission and vision have driven the church for over 2000 years.

As the Spirit leads, Jesus clarifies that mission for particular people with specific visions. For example, he gave Peter a vision to go to the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10). In a healthy church, people have a clear sense of their church’s specific mission and a compelling vision for its future. Healthy churches periodically assess all areas of ministry based on their mission, vision and goals. And they feel so strongly about their mission and vision that they are willing to change and even suffer for the gospel.

Prayer: Spirit of God, fall fresh on us. “We ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies, no sudden rending of the veil of clay, no angel visitant, no opening skies; but take the dimness of our souls away.” Amen.

Discussion Starters: How does the life of your church reflect a clear mission and vision? How many of our people (or us) can state that mission and vision?

Something to Try: Ask the Holy Spirit for leading on how to more effectively live out your mission and vision. Or ask if your church needs a new mission and vision.

KINGDOM EXTENSION

Acts 8:1b-8, 11:19-26

Last month in Acts 1 we heard Jesus give his fledgling church its mission and vision. We noted the connection between being witnesses and promoting the Kingdom of God on earth. Today, we'll reflect a bit more on how Jesus extends his kingdom through the church.

The book of Acts traces how the Kingdom of God expanded from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and, then, to the ends of the earth. We already know the key role played in that expansion by the Apostles, most notably Peter and Paul. But our readings for today give us tantalizing hints about the crucial part played by ordinary Christians in the spread of the Gospel and the expansion of the Kingdom.

After the martyrdom of Stephen, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and people scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. I italicized those words from Acts 8:1 because verse 4 says: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Initially, it was not the apostles who spread the Gospel outside of Jerusalem, thus carrying out Jesus' mission and vision. It was ordinary people.

Acts 11:19 continues that emphasis. "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews." The vision of Jesus was being pursued to the ends of the earth. But now listen. "Some of them, however..., began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus... and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." Again, these were ordinary people witnessing about Jesus, and the church grew by leaps and bounds.

A healthy church is passionate about reaching its community, its nation and its world for Christ. Both pastors and people bear verbal witness to his saving power. Such a church expects to see its members mature in their own faith and to see a growing number of neighbors and strangers begin to follow Christ. Thus, a healthy church is actively engaged in its community, extending the kingdom by deeds of love and mercy as well as by words of testimony about Christ. Such a church rejoices to see the church multiply in church plants around the city and the world.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us a passion to be your witnesses here and around the world. And by your Spirit, give us the boldness to act on our passion. Amen.

Discussion Starters: Does our church need a program to encourage personal witnessing? How are we involved in our community?

Something to Try: Pray that God will give you one opportunity in the next month to share the Gospel with someone who doesn't believe.

LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

John 13:34-35, I Corinthians 13:4-7

As Jesus prepared to leave his disciples for the cross and beyond, he laid down the law for their life together. “Love one another.” He called that a new command, but how was that new? We hear versions of that command throughout the Old Testament. The “new” was this qualifier—“as I have loved you.” That was radically new, because the world had never seen an act of love like the Son of God giving his life for sinners.

If you love that way, said Jesus, the world will take notice. In fact, that is the mark that sets the church apart from the world and attracts the world to Jesus. “By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

But what does that mean, practically? I Corinthians 13 gives us a clear picture of Christ-like love. Loving as he did doesn’t mean that we always like each other or that we always agree with each other. Christ love is a set of attitudes and actions that characterized our Lord. He was patient and kind. He was not easily angered and he did not boast. He was not proud or rude. He always trusted and protected. His love persevered through it all, even betrayal and denial.

In a healthy church, relationships are characterized by that kind of love, not only between family members and old friends, but also between “those others” of a different race, social class, or political party. A healthy church won’t settle for polite greetings in the hall. Instead it intentionally creates opportunities for fellowship, aiming for mutual accountability in small groups. When conflict divides the body or when sin stains the fellowship, a healthy church deals with such matters using Biblical principles, like Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:15-17.

Prayer: Oh, Master, grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love with all my soul, as Jesus did. In his name, Amen.

Discussion Starters: How many opportunities for meaningful fellowship does your church provide in a month? What is the biggest obstacle to loving relationships in your church today? What is being done about it?

Something to Try: In the next month, find one of “those others” after church and spend 5 minutes talking about who you are and who he/she is. As a Council develop an outline you can use in such conversations.

AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY

Philippians 3:4b-21

In this deeply autobiographical text, Paul exposes his heart for God in Christ. In a culture where an increasing number of people are “spiritual but not religious,” Paul’s testimony helps us distinguish authentic spirituality from other sincere, but misguided spiritual efforts.

In fact, he begins by decisively turning his back on all the ways he used to seek God’s favor: reliance on his religious pedigree, strenuous efforts to live by God’s law, fierce opposition to “the enemy,” and a spotless resume of his righteousness. Paul was a very good man, but in all of his spiritual efforts, he was relying on himself.

Now Paul knows that such “confidence in the flesh” was a waste of time and energy; indeed, it was literally “rubbish, garbage.” Instead, Paul is relying on the righteousness of Christ received through faith in Christ. We call that justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It is the heart of authentic spirituality.

But there’s more. Paul’s deepest desire as a justified sinner is to know Christ more deeply, to experience the power of his resurrection, and even to share in his suffering. His life is focused on being so united with Christ that he will share in Christ’s resurrection. That passion for Christ is the soul of authentic spirituality.

Paul knows he hasn’t arrived at his goal yet, and that is essential to authentic spirituality. Honest self-appraisal and forthright confession are the beginning of growth. And we grow more when we exercise discipline in our lives, pressing on by means of spiritual exercises to reach our goal of knowing Christ the way he knows us. In all our efforts, we must “eagerly wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who... will transform” us. Authentic spirituality is Christ centered from beginning to end.

A healthy church is committed to helping its members grow into union with Christ. Honest confession of failure, deep prayers for a closer walk, sermons that focus on Christ alone as our only hope for life and death, and an intentional program of spiritual disciplines—these things will characterize our worship and life together. A healthy church is always asking, is this activity drawing us closer to God in Christ?

Prayer: O God, I want to know Jesus more deeply. Or at least I want to want that. Amen.

Discussion Starters: On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being weak and 10 being strong, how passionate is our church about knowing Christ more deeply? What is your favorite spiritual discipline?

Something to Try: Make a list of all the spiritual disciplines Christians have used over the centuries, using Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. Which disciplines should we add to our spiritual practices?

TRANSFORMING WORSHIP

Psalm 95

When Reformed folks think about worship, we think about preaching. So did the early church. As Acts 2 describes that church, the first thing we hear is that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (verse 42).” Presumably that happened “in the temple courts (Acts 2:46).”

What was that temple worship like? Psalm 95 gives us a powerful summary. Worship that transforms our lives is, as one worship expert put it, “relaxed joyful reverence.”

Worship is first of all an act of reverence. “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.” We must bow down before our God, not first of all because he is great, but because he is good; “for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the flock under his care.” In our worship, we don’t cringe in fear; we crawl into our Father’s lap.

According to verses 7-10, our main act of reverent worship is to listen to God: to close our mouths, open our ears, soften our hearts, and do what God tells us to do. When we “do not harden our hearts,” but listen to God’s Word, we will be transformed by worship.

But reverence must also rise up rejoicing. “Come, let us sing for joy before the Lord, let us shout aloud... with thanksgiving....” Yes, there is a place for lament and confession, but the overriding emotion of worship must be joy. Because God is so great, far above all the gods of the nations, holding the universe in his hand, we can sing with joyful reverence.

But we must relax. I don’t mean, be sloppy or casual. I’m thinking of that last word in verse 11. If we don’t listen to God with joyful reverence, we will never enter his “rest.” Conversely, in order to worship properly, we must rest in Christ. We come into God’s presence, pray and sing, hear the Gospel, and enter God’s rest, because of Jesus. Worship is not about us and our effort, but about Jesus and his work for us. So, relax and rest in Jesus.

A healthy church has that kind of transforming worship, shaped so that young and old, seekers and saints will be moved to relaxed joyful reverence. The Word is preached, the sacraments are celebrated, and the liturgy is followed so that all will come to Jesus and rest in him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to worship you in Spirit and in truth. Amen.

Discussion Starters: What do you think of this definition of transforming worship? Does our worship engage all generations and all levels of spiritual maturity?

Something to Try: Ask a young person and a senior citizen where they think our worship falls on the “relaxed joyful reverence” spectrum. Where does the emphasis lie for us?

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Matthew 20:20-28

It isn't just Jewish mothers who want their children to be great. It's also Gentile fathers, and every son and daughter in the world. From politicians to pastors, we would all love to be in positions of leadership, the "right hand woman," or at least the "left hand man."

That desire to be great is not bad in itself; after all, God made us great, in his own image so that we could rule his creation. But when that God-given gift becomes cancerous, it causes us to use other image bearers for our own good and to abuse the creation.

Jesus says that it shouldn't be that way in his church. He came "not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." Accordingly, those who follow Jesus must lead as he did. "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant...."

Most of us won't ever be called to give our lives for our friends. So, what can servant leadership mean for us in our day and place? Jesus gave us a humble and humbling example in John 13, when he knelt down before his disciples and washed their feet. "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Servant leadership puts others first, taking care of the needs of others before self, doing the little things that will make others greater, even to the point of humbling ourselves to exalt others. That doesn't mean we don't lead. Jesus clearly and strongly told his disciples what to do, but he did it not for his own sake, but for their salvation and their service to the world.

A healthy church has leaders who are intentionally developing others to become leaders. Thus, they are more concerned about the spiritual growth of the members than about their own status. Because these leaders are striving to become like Jesus and demonstrate a united commitment to the church, the members of a healthy church trust their leaders and engage in free and open dialogue with them.

Prayer: O Master, let me walk with thee, in lowly paths of service free; tell me thy secret, help me bear the strain of toil, the fret of care. Amen.

Discussion Starters: Which is the greater danger in the church today: people wanting to be great leaders or people not wanting to be leaders at all? How can we encourage people to exercise their gifts in service to God and others? What is a modern-day equivalent to washing feet?

Something to Try: Catch someone doing a simple work of servant leadership and thank them, in Jesus name.

GENEROUS STEWARDSHIP

II Corinthians 8:1-15

As we've done before, our talk about generous stewardship begins with the healthy church in Acts. Acts 2:44 and 45 shows us a church so passionate about taking care of others that the "have's" sold their possessions in order to give to those in need. In fact, they had "everything in common." That may sound like communism, but it wasn't. It was community, a community so strong that they treated their private property as though it belonged to the community.

Wow! That's challenging. Could the church survive with such generosity? Wouldn't everyone be poor eventually? We're not told how long that communal approach to church life lasted, but our reading from II Corinthians tells us that Christians, even poor ones, are called to sacrificial generosity. Paul holds up the poor Macedonians as a model of stewardship. "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

Paul calls on the far-more-wealthy Corinthians to "excel in this grace of giving." That's important wording. Stewardship is not a grim duty; it a grace, a gift from the Christ, "who though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor..." Christ is both our example in giving and the source of the grace it takes to part with our hard-earned stuff.

Our reading ends with a theme that connects to that early church in Acts—"that there may be equality (verse 13)." Paul reminds us that our stuff is a gift from God, not just for us, but also for others. We must share, so that all may have enough. That's how it goes in a family.

Of course, generous stewardship is not just about giving money. It is also the sacrificial use of our talents in the service of others and the wise care of the creation over which God gave us dominion. Last month we focused on Jesus's servant leadership; he sacrificed not just his talents for us, but his very life. And judging by how often Jesus referred to nature in his teaching (birds and lilies, wheat and weeds), it is clear that he loved God's world, too.

In a healthy church, there is a generous stewardship of treasure, talent, and trees. (Sorry, I had to go for alliteration). Talk about stewardship is frequent and unabashed, so people understand that stewardship is part of discipleship. People are encouraged to use their talents to bless the church and community. And creation care is seen as part of being in the image of the God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for becoming poor so that we might become rich. Fill us with your generous Spirit. Amen.

Discussion Starters: How does frank talk about stewardship make you feel? How often is stewardship preached in your church? Enough, too much, not enough? How about creation care?

Something to Try: Spend an hour on line investigating stewardship development programs.

INTENTIONAL DISCIPLE-MAKING

II Corinthians 3:17-18, Luke 14:25-33

According to Matthew 28:19, Jesus' last words to his disciples were, "Go and make disciples..." By the power of the Spirit, they did. Oh my, how they did, to the ends of the earth, even to where you live. In II Corinthians 3:17-18 Paul says that the Spirit continues to transform ordinary believers into the very likeness of Jesus with ever-increasing glory. Thank God!

That work isn't done. With the guidance and power of the Spirit, every Christian is still called to make disciples. Every church must be committed to helping its members fulfill their calling to do that. Indeed, a healthy church has an intentional disciple making ministry.

What does intentional disciple-making look like? How do we make disciples? There are an abundance of good books out there that outline a process. The best of them follow the disciple-making ministry of our Lord himself. A careful study of the Gospels reveals Jesus' "program."

First, he called people to come to him in faith; "follow me." After they followed him around for a while, he gave them on-the-job training; "he sent them out to preach and heal and cast out demons." Then they reported back, giving testimony about their experience of God's grace. Interspersed with going and doing were teaching sessions, where Jesus revealed God's will for their lives. In Luke 14:25-33, he spelled out the demands of discipleship. And then after giving them last minute instructions about what would happen after his death, he laid down his life for their sins and ours, thus showing them that discipleship calls for sacrifice.

All of that was bathed in prayer. Before he called them, he prayed for 40 days in the wilderness. His miracles were often attended by prayer. He slipped away to pray so often with such obvious positive effect that they begged him to "teach us to pray." And when he was about to die, he prayed for them in the upper room and then prayed for himself in the Garden of Gethsemane.

A healthy church has a clear picture of the disciple-making process and has built that process into the very fabric of the church. Accordingly, the church is focused on how people are growing into the likeness of Jesus and how they are using their gifts in ministry. The effectiveness of the church's ministry is measured by how well it contributes to making disciples. Prayer undergirds everything.

Prayer: O Lord, by your Spirit, transform us into your likeness. And give us a passion to help others become your disciples, too. Amen.

Discussion Starters: How committed to making disciples is our church? Can you outline our church's disciple making process?

Something to Try: Consult the CRC webpage to find information about "Faith Formation." Get one of the books they recommend and share its contents with Council.

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 25:31-40, Isaiah 59:9-15

If you want to start an argument in your church, start talking about whether and how the government should be involved with caring for the poor and marginalized in our world. Party lines will instantly rise like walls and verbal guns will begin blasting. We cannot agree about the government's role in promoting justice and righteousness.

But there shouldn't be any disagreement about whether the church should be involved in issues of justice and righteousness. In Matthew 25, Jesus was shockingly clear about how we should treat the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the poor, the sick and the prisoner. In caring for them, said Jesus, we care for him. Such care is a demonstration of the reality of our faith, and thus determines our eternal destiny: "come you who are blessed by my father; take the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

Jesus was simply building on a long Old Testament prophetic tradition, spelled out in texts like Amos 5:21-24 ("let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream") and Isaiah 59:9-15 ("the Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice").

Of course, we must be sure that we understand exactly what justice and righteousness are in the Biblical world. And we may well debate how to pursue justice and righteousness in a complex world; indeed, we should pray fervently, study the Scripture faithfully, and research the issues carefully, relying on the Spirit to guide us into the ways of Jesus (cf. Luke 4:18-19). Further, we must be sure that our commitment to seek justice and righteousness doesn't weaken our commitment to make disciples. Some may see those two commitments as competitors, but biblically they complement each other.

A healthy church is committed to a full gospel proclamation, calling people to follow Jesus and do his work of caring for the needy around us. Because people are caught up in a sinful culture, a healthy church calls for equity in society and justice in the world. That includes caring for those with disabilities and those of other ethnic and social backgrounds. A church that follows the Suffering Servant cares for those who suffer, no matter who they are.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us a heart, your heart, for all who are lost in "a far country." Help us to seek and save them in every way possible, even as you did. Amen.

Discussion Starters: How does our church demonstrate Christ's passion for the people mentioned in Matthew 25? Offer one suggestion about how our church can pursue justice and righteousness in a culture deeply divided by politics?

Something to Try: In your devotions this month, use a good concordance (or go on line) to find all the texts in the Psalms and in Proverbs about "the poor, the widow, and the stranger or alien."

CHILDREN AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Mark 10:13-16

If last month's devotional stirred up a hornet's nest, this month's mark of a healthy church should soothe sting. I mean, what church doesn't love its children and youth? After all, they are our kids and they are the future of the church. If they leave, we die.

But caring for our young ones isn't just a matter of self-preservation. It's a matter of being obedient to God. In the famous Shema of Israel, the command to love the Lord completely is followed immediately by the command to teach the love commandments to our children.

Use every means and opportunity. "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road; when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." Teaching kids to love God is one of our highest priorities.

But children can get in the way of other more adult pursuits, as the disciples discovered as they followed Jesus. So when people brought their little ones to Jesus to be blessed, the disciples rebuked them. "He's too busy for babies. He's got more important things to do than play with kids." And Jesus got furious. "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom God belongs to such as these." In fact, "anyone who will not receive the Kingdom (embodied in Jesus) like a little child will never enter it." "Then he took the children in his arms, put his hand on them, and blessed them."

We must do the same, at home and in church. But do we? Of course, we want to bless our children, but we also want to be blessed ourselves. So, whose needs shape our worship? How much money is devoted to children's ministry? Whose ministry is prioritized in the hiring of ministry help? Now we might be stirring up another hornets' nest.

No, it is not easy to bless our children, even as we seek a blessing for ourselves. But a healthy church makes ministry to children and youth a high priority and has a comprehensive strategy for their faith formation. To facilitate their growth, a healthy church offers training and support for parents as they nurture their children. A healthy church involves the young in all aspects of ministry and has a careful policy about abuse. As a result, the youth stay in church.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, take us all in your arms and bless us, so that we may all enter the Kingdom of heaven, no matter what our age. Amen.

Discussion Starters: What evidence do we have that our church highly values our children and youth? What is our strategy for their faith formation and for supporting parents?

Something to Try: Find out whether our kids stay here after graduation from school. If they don't, why do they leave?