



2014 BISHOP'S SERIES:
THE MISSION TABLE



Bishop Lawrence Wohlrabe
NORTHWESTERN MINNESOTA SYNOD

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January: Introduction

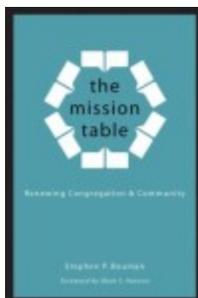
When our family gathered for supper on Christmas Eve, the youngest table-mate was only 6 months old with a first tooth just poking through her gums. Though she wasn't yet eating adult food, granddaughter Olivia was still seated in the family circle, her pudgy little hands folded gently by her dad, as we prayed our table prayer. She didn't know all that was happening, but still she grinned from ear to ear because she was part of it all—indeed with all the grownups gazing at her, Olivia was the center of our celebration.

We all know what it means to sit at table with one another. For most of us, “sitting at table” began long before we were completely in touch with reality. Every home, no matter how impoverished, has some sort of table where those who live under the same roof draw together for nourishment. Unlike our friends in the animal kingdom, we human beings don't graze in pastures or kill-and-eat our prey on the spot. We prepare food. We savor food, often in the company of others. We are sustained by nourishment and conversation around the table.

Kitchen Tables

For most of us the kitchen table is the first one we remember. Close your eyes for a moment and try to conjure up a memory of the first kitchen table you remember from your childhood. What did it look like, sound like, smell like? Who sat at table with you? What was your favorite meal? What sorts of conversations took place around that kitchen table?

Author Stephen P. Bouman, recalling the earliest kitchen table in his life, writes:



“At the table, I learned my values, my identity, my culture. At the kitchen table in my home, each of us five children had a seat....We told stories around the kitchen table....Life around the kitchen table, the songs of our grandparents, the heartbeat of received story, and resurrection faith anchor us. They stay with us all our lives and come alive when we need them most.” (The Mission Table: Renewing Congregation and Community, excerpted from pp. 17-19)

Altar Tables

Now imagine all the homes in your congregation and community. Visualize all the kitchen tables where God’s children regularly come together. And ask yourself: Where do all these tables *intersect*?

For Christians, all the kitchen tables of their lives intersect at the altar table of the church. Every meal we take at home anticipates the next time we’ll gather together at the Lord’s Supper—even as every time we eat the Lord’s Meal, we look forward to the Heavenly Feast that will never end.

What a ragtag collection of folks assemble regularly around the altar table! In our daily lives we might scarcely ever see one another (not unlike many families nowadays). If we were honest, we probably don’t see eye to eye with all the folks we eat with at the Lord’s Supper. But the altar table isn’t about how similar or dissimilar we all are. The altar table is about what God is doing in our midst: forgiving sins, restoring relationships, kindling hope, giving life, sending forth. The altar table—with the gifts of our Lord’s true Body and Blood—is at the center of our life as Christian people.

Again, Bouman writes:

“The altar in the church is the table that unites the kitchen tables of the congregation. Here we mark life passages as a faith community; here we bring our gifts to be shared with a wider circle. We seek to be fed and filled with spiritual food, to encounter Christ’s presence and peace, to praise God, to experience loving community across the generations. All roads meet at the altar table when the church gathers for Holy Communion.” (p. 23)



The first altar I remember was shoved up against the wall of the chancel in our little congregation. I remember this altar not so much as a table as a symbol of God’s holy presence in our midst. When the pastor faced the altar—his back to the congregation—we knew that he was coming before God, and inviting us all to do the same. I remember being a little scared of this table, which was tucked inside altar rails that only the pastor could regularly enter.

Thank God, most of our congregations have moved our altars out away from the wall, so that they might become again what **altars were always meant to be: tables around which God’s people can**

gather—tables that reflect a God who is not aloof or fear-inducing, but close by and constantly present with us and for us.

Mission Tables

But it doesn't end here, in the coziness of a comfortable sanctuary. The God who meets us at the altar table is a missionary God, who is always saving us in order to send us back out into God's world. We regularly visit the altar table, but we do not live in the sanctuary that houses it. **Altar tables point us back out, beyond the doors of our church buildings,** to all the tables where we will now continue to encounter one another along with our neighbors. Altar tables produce *mission tables* in God's world.

Pastor Bouman draws our attention to the “sending stories” in [Luke, chapters 6 through 10](#), in which Jesus sends his followers out into the countryside to bear witness to God's reign. For example,

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money.... Whatever house you enter, stay there and leave from there....” They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere. (Luke 9:1-6)

Commenting on these verses, Bouman observes:

“[The disciples] travel light. They leave behind the props of their daily existence—staff, bag, money, bread.... Mission is the seeking of hospitality at the tables of our neighbors in the world, seeking a welcome. We don't approach our neighbors primarily to catalog and meet their needs. God is already there. Great competence and giftedness are already present. We go to listen to the stories of our new hosts at the table, to receive their welcome, and if invited, to tell our own story.” (pp. 31-32)

Jesus didn't send out his followers in order to form tight-knit enclaves of the like-minded. Jesus' instruction to “eat what is set before you” (Luke 9:8) absolved his missionaries from needing to “keep kosher” in their eating habits! Mission tables are not cookie-cutter havens for the holy. Rather they are evangelical ventures into the messiness of the world, where all manner of human beings gather—including, especially, unbelievers (better yet: “not-yet-believers”) in our midst. That's how the gospel gets out into the world, when we dare to sit together with people who are decidedly NOT

like us. Jesus sends us to construct messy mission tables where the good gossip of the Gospel can get over-heard by neighbors and strangers.

During this new year of 2014, my monthly bishop's columns will invite us to consider this powerful image of The Mission Table. As I write these monthly columns, I'll draw heavily upon Stephen Bouman's new book, *The Mission Table: Renewing Congregation and Community* (copyright 2013, Augsburg Fortress). But I'll also share some of my own reflections along with stories of mission tables that are popping up all around our Northwestern Minnesota Synod. I invite you to join me on this wondrous journey from the kitchen table to the altar table to all the mission tables God creates in our midst.

For reflection or discussion

Ponder (or share with your group) your most powerful memories associated with

- A kitchen table in a home where you have lived.
- An altar table in a church building.
- A mission table somewhere 'in the world.'

February: The Table of Creation

“God blessed [humankind], and God said to them, ... See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ... And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

Genesis 1:28-31

“... ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ ”

Genesis 3:17-19

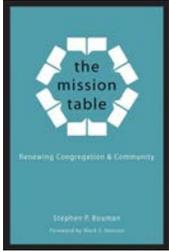
“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. ... [God] will swallow up death forever.”

Isaiah 25:6-8

The story goes that Martin Luther was once asked what God was doing the day before he created the world. Luther replied: “Cutting hickory switches, to spank persons who ask such foolish questions!” Although we Lutherans normally steer clear of speculative questions, they still pop up in our minds from time to time. For instance: **Why did God create this particular world?** What other kind of world might God have made?

At the risk of earning one of Luther’s hickory switches, I will hazard a guess. It appears to me that God created *this* world *this* particular way was to foster a life rich in relationships—with God, with one another, and with the earth itself. Nestled inside this reality are some basic facts of life: we all need to eat, and God has provided a world rich with delectable things.

Also, God apparently intends for us humans to do most of our eating together—at tables. **There is something foundational, even primal, about “sitting at table” with one another.** Gathering around tables is hard-wired into the very fabric of creation.



In the beginning, God set a table: all creation is a table of nurturing relationships created by the perfect community of the Trinity, God the Creator, Savior and Sustainer. God's dream is oneness, mutuality and the goodness of all creation. Human beings were created to serve at the table of creation, to participate in its unfolding in partnership with the triune Creator.

Such talk can pop up where we least expect it. The other day I heard a chef exclaim on National Public Radio: "When you eat something delicious you feel connected to the creation."¹

We who reside in or near farm country still experience the intimate connection between our need for daily bread and all the ways the earth yields its bounty. I still treasure fond childhood memories of my dad and other farmers in our township helping each other out during harvest, plopped down on the ground as they picnicked together at midday, seated royally on God's good earth.

A Broken Table

The good table of creation, however, has been broken by sin—our propensity to live for ourselves, to shun the life-giving relationships God created for us to enjoy. As the biblical story unfolds, "Adam and Eve left this perfection and went out into the world as mortal beings but bearing signs of the promised reconciliation of all creation and a memory of the first table." In his book, *The Mission Table*, Stephen Bouman describes compellingly the many ways the table of creation has been broken:

- In our substitution of "virtual" reality for the on-the-ground reality of created life;
- In the breakdown of our political structures and our inability to act for the common good;
- In clashes over issues of race, gender, class and economic life; and
- In our tendency to withdraw from shared, civil discourse into cocoons of like-mindedness.

Even—perhaps especially—we witness the broken table of creation right in our congregations:

Too often the sacramental life of the church replicates the broken table. A single-minded focus to set the table for those who are poor and the stranger among us and those without the gospel becomes

¹ Overheard on [The Splendid Table](#) on National Public Radio, January 25, 2014.

diffused in issues of congregational survival. Prayer life becomes rote, communal study of scripture happens infrequently, evangelism is a committee not the commitment of every disciple. We go through the motions not expecting much. We tolerate losing our children and grandchildren and their generations from the table a chair at a time. The old, old story just becomes old and infrequently told. We lose our curiosity and our embrace of our communities. The table is ours, not the world's.

God does not tolerate such brokenness, however. Neither must we. Therein lies our hope. *“The most radical and holy thing anyone can do is to repair a table, set a table, reconnect table to table.”*

A Broken Table—Repaired and Reconnected

Here is a potent image of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the table-restorer par excellence! It is no coincidence that “in the night he was betrayed” our Lord Jesus sat at table with his closest friends. It is not happenstance that the way the Body of Christ comes together to rekindle the story of Jesus most vividly and savingly in our lives is also at a table—the altar table, around the Supper of our Lord.

In the Eucharist, our faith becomes concrete, carnal, when in the eating and drinking we participate in the death and resurrection of the firstborn of all creation, Jesus the Christ, who at the cross promised, ‘I, when I am lifted up...will draw all people to myself’ (John 12:32)....

The world is present at the Eucharist in the gifts of bread and wine.

- *In the history of the lives of those who gather.*
- *As fruits of our labors, symbolized by our offering of money....*
- *In the intercession of God's people, their yearning for peace, their anguish at the pain of life.*
- *As time as God's people get out of bed, leave their kitchen tables, and come to the altar, they offer their ‘time,’ a slice of their history.*
- *In the diversity of the people.*

We may grow queasy when we hear of the Lord's Supper spoken of in such a “worldly” fashion. Often the Supper is celebrated as an intimate, family meal. Many Christians, in fact, practice some form of “close” (or closed) Communion—limiting participation only to those who are deemed exactly like us in faith and conviction.

God's work of repairing, setting and reconnecting the table of Creation isn't happening in some dark corner, though. The altar table is a public table—it is fundamentally available to all persons who are being drawn to Christ who on the Cross suffered and died for everyone.

A Public Table

When I was a youth minister in Massachusetts in the mid-1970s I took part in a week-long leadership school for church youth. Our chaplain—one of the most creative pastors I have known—crafted celebrations of the Lord's Supper for every day of the week. We ate the Body and Blood of our Lord wherever we happened to be each day—in the woods, on a beach, even in a picnic area next to an amusement park. Just taking the Supper out "into the world" altered my whole perception of what the Table is about. *"Imagining the table in the center of town or out on the highway is a reminder that this table exists to open us up to God's mission for the life of the world."*

Regardless of the architecture of your church building, picture its four walls collapsing every time you celebrate the Lord's Supper. Imagine every Eucharist taking place "in public." Doing so will forever transform how you partake of Christ's Body and Blood.

To place the Eucharist in the midst of the world is not to baptize life with extraneous doses of God. It rather recognizes the presence of the incarnate Lord in everything. The earthly vessels of water, bread, and wine root the grace of God in the things of this world.

More importantly, conceiving of the Supper as happening "in public" will open your eyes in fresh ways as you *leave* the altar table.

Leaving the altar table filled with Christ's graceful presence, we hit the street and begin to notice the graceful presence of God in the world around us. We have been fed to point to that presence and join it. The church in the world understands that the restoring, reconciling, recreating reign of God is breaking into all the dark, anonymous corners of creation.

For reflection or discussion

- How does your congregation's life and ministry engage with the foundational realities that (a) we all must eat and (b) God intends us to eat together, at tables?

- In your community or neighborhood, how do you see or experience the brokenness of the table of creation?
- How do you or your congregation “go public” with the Good News of Jesus Christ?

March: From the Kitchen Table to the Altar Table

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb....'

Luke 1:39-42

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [the infant Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah...

Luke 2:22, 25-26

There are some absolute essentials in life, bare necessities without which we die. It's been said that we can live three weeks without food, three days without water, but only three minutes without air. But not all these essentials come to us in the same way. We breathe every minute without even thinking about it. We drink water whenever we're thirsty and a faucet or fountain is handy. But most of the time we take our food in the company of others—pointing us to some other essentials of life.

Air, water and food only take us so far toward the wholeness of life our Creator intends for us. What *surrounds* those bare necessities, though, is just as important. And that is especially true of our daily bread. Food is best accompanied by conversation, stories, and human warmth. Those too are "necessities of life" if life is to be anything more than sheer subsistence.

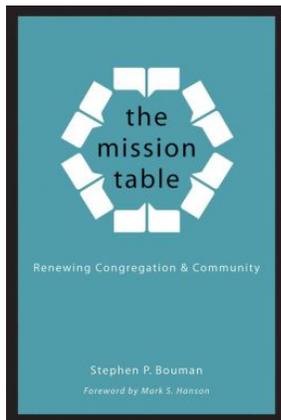
Kitchen Tables

So we gather around tables from the moment we know how to sit up—and, indeed, even before that. There's a place at the table even for infants in arms! The first table most of us sit at is the kitchen table, or wherever we eat most of our meals in the company of others who love us. Do you remember your first kitchen table? What was on it? Who sat there? What did you smell? What did you talk about?

The first kitchen table I recall was in a farmhouse near Amboy, Minnesota. By the time I was able to take my place at that table my two much-older sisters had gone off to nursing school in Minneapolis. So most of the time I had the kitchen table and my mom and my dad all to myself. I don't remember ever leaving that table hungry or being expelled from that table as punishment for bad behavior. The kitchen table was where we gathered together, where we caught up with one another's lives, where I got to listen in on (most of) the adults' conversations, where I was formed and fed in a host of small but significant ways.

Sometimes the kitchen table was relocated—during planting and harvest—to the front seat of my father's pickup. Mom would haul the meal out to the fields, with little Larry in tow, and we ate our hamburger hash and vegetables-out-of-a-can (ughhh!) on plastic plates in the pickup. Because a table isn't so much a specific piece of furniture as it is a gathering of kindred souls.

Kitchen tables are those places where your values, identity, and culture were formed....



...Life around the kitchen table, the songs of our grandparents, heartbeat of received story, and resurrection faith anchor us. They stay with us all our lives and come alive when we need them most. It is no accident that as we seek revival in mission as a church that is shrinking, steeped in scarcity thinking, and afraid of the future, we turn to the table to renew us. When we talk about 'tables,' we do not speak of bureaucratic systems or techniques or programs. We again take our seat at the kitchen table, bathed in stories and values and rhythms of faith that have anchored us in a gracious God from generation to generation.

The Bible is replete with stories about identity and purpose being shaped around kitchen tables. For example, in the first chapter of Luke's gospel a teenager named Mary, having heard the jaw-dropping news that she is to become the mother of the Messiah, hustles her way to the home of her cousin Elizabeth who, though at an advanced age, is also unexpectedly pregnant. Mary needs to regain her bearings—and where better to do that than at the kitchen table of another expectant mother?

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth"....From an audience with an angel, Mary went to the kitchen table of her cousin Elizabeth....Like a child who does not fully know the meaning

of the words yet is moved to join the melody, Mary sang along with the holy all around her....Elizabeth blessed her for the child she carried in her womb and for her faith: "Blessed is the fruit of your womb....Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord"...

It is not accidental that Mary's visit to Elizabeth was an inter-generational encounter. Mary, probably a teenager at the time, seeks out older kin—the priest Zechariah and his aged wife Elizabeth—both of whom had walked long in the faith of Israel. Both of these elders in Mary's life bless her, confirm the words of the angel Gabriel, and give Mary courage and hope for the future. The path forward in mission will depend on a renewal of the songs of our ancestors in faith.

Altar Tables

As the gospel-writer Luke continues to weave Mary's story, he illustrates the **move from the kitchen tables of our homes to the altar tables of our holy places**. Having birthed the Christchild, having cuddled the Holy Infant in their small family circle, Mary and her husband Joseph trek to Jerusalem's Temple to "present" Jesus in the Temple in accordance with Jewish law (read the whole story in Luke 2:22-39).

And here, once again, as they approach the altar table of the Temple with their sacrifices, the parents of Jesus have more transforming inter-generational encounters—with the long-waiting elders Simeon and Anna who testify to the miracle of the Incarnation in the flesh and blood of the Baby.

In a moment of spiritual clarity, Simeon embraced the promised Christ and was moved to sing, "Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace," the Nunc Dimittis. The words of a sermon, the testimony of a lay leader, the presence of family sitting around you as you sing a beloved hymn, a visit when you are in the hospital, an insight in a Bible study— there are moments when Jesus is real and present and brings peace beyond words. The Holy Spirit's presence animates life around the tables. We glimpse that first table in the midst of creation. As for Simeon, the spiritual clarity moves us to witness and testimony and song.

Mary's journey in Luke 1 and 2 from Gabriel's announcement to Elizabeth's kitchen table to the manger in Bethlehem to the Temple altar table is echoed in our own movement from the kitchen tables of our homes to the altar tables of our holy places.

*The altar in the church is the table that unites the kitchen tables of the congregation. Here we mark life passages as a faith community; here we bring our gifts to be shared with a wider circle. We seek to be fed and filled with spiritual food, to encounter Christ's presence and peace, to praise God, to experience loving community across the generations. **All roads meet at the altar table when the church gathers for Holy Communion** (emphasis added).*

Not all of these passages of life are easy or buoyant, though. The altar table is also where God gathers up our woes and our worries, our doubts and our sorrows.

In the midst of fulfillment, [Simeon] saw Mary's impending grief. He acknowledges a place at the table for sadness, grief, incomprehension. His spiritual expression embraced solidarity with a mother who would suffer: "A sword will pierce your own soul" (Luke 2:35). Think of that piercing sword in your soul and in the soul of the alcoholic who can't make it another day, the wife whose husband is leaving her, the father who cannot speak to his teenage child anymore, the person with the shocking diagnosis, the provider who lost a job, the sister whose dark night of the soul seem to go on forever, the grieving widow so lonely she says she would speak to the devil if she could.

Both the joy and the longing that God gathers up from us at the Altar Table remind us that our journey is not finished there in the holy place. From the kitchen table, we are sent to the altar table, and from there into the world as story and sign bearers of the Creator's vision for reconciliation, forgiveness, restoration, and grace.

For reflection or discussion

- Ponder the questions in italics at the top of page 2 of this column. If you are in a group setting, discuss these questions with one or two other persons. (If your childhood home lacked a kitchen table, or if you only remember your first kitchen table as a sad or scary place, where else in your early life did you receive your faith and values?)
- How might your congregation help to enrich kitchen table conversations in households?
- Ponder (or discuss with one or two others) one way your church's altar table is the "crossroads" of all the kitchen tables in your congregation??

April: Seeking Hospitality at New Tables

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

Luke 10:1-9

Last summer Joy and I left the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Pittsburgh for a week of vacation on the East Coast. First we headed east across Pennsylvania, spending two days in Gettysburg. After visiting the famous Civil War battlefield, we stopped at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg—and in the wonderful, New England meeting-style chapel we made a curious discovery. In the lower corner of one of the stained glass windows we noticed a pictorial tribute to the Rev. John Christian Frederick Heyer (1793-1873) who earned a medical degree, served congregations in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, and later made three missionary journeys to India where he helped found our companion synod, the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church. Heyer was an indomitable spirit who made his final missionary voyage to India at the ripe old age of 77.



Heyer has become something of a hero to me, especially since I have had the chance to travel twice to our companion synod in India—where his legacy is still remembered fondly and gratefully. Heyer left the comfort of his kitchen table in the United States in order to find hospitality among the tables of Telegu-speaking persons in India, many of whom were brought into the Christian family because "Father Heyer" crossed borders to come to them with the story of Jesus Christ.

Such is the nature of mission in the name of Jesus. *Imagine Jesus teaching about the reign of God as a stone thrown in the water, causing waves to ripple out in concentric circles. His message was “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).*

Jesus himself modeled this aspect of mission by preaching, teaching and **enacting** the kingdom of God in an itinerant (“walking around”) ministry, moving from table to table in Galilee. Then he apprenticed his followers to join with him in this work—eventually sending them out in waves of mission that we read about in Luke’s gospel, chapters 8-10.

What was essential in Jesus’ way of doing God’s mission was that his followers risk themselves to those they came to serve.

Do you notice the stance of this communal band of missionary leaders? They travel light. They leave behind the props of their daily existence—staff, bag, money, bread. They leave their own table and go forth into the community as vulnerable guests finding themselves at the kitchen tables of their neighbors, eating what is put in front of them.

What is particularly important here is that Jesus’ followers travel in a way that shows they intend to **eat** in the homes of those they come to serve. This is about more than gaining nourishment; it is about entering into the lives of others so deeply that you are willing to sit at their tables, engage one another in table-talk, and eat whatever they place before you. In such intimate table-conversation sharing the stories of our lives leads naturally to sharing the story of Jesus.



Joy and I (and the nineteen folks who went from our synod to India in 2012) have discovered firsthand how vital this is during our times among Telegu-speaking Lutherans in India. Indian people love to eat, and they cherish every chance to share food with guests. Two memories stand out. One, our Indian hosts always wanted us to eat more food than our stomachs could handle (sort of like going to grandma’s house and being repeatedly commanded to eat!) Two, our Indian

friends noticed when Joy and I ate in the manner they eat—setting aside silverware and just using our hands. “Look, Bishop Larry and Joy are eating Telegu-style!”

This might seem like homely stuff, but it is much more than “folksiness.” Stephen Bouman writes:

*I find it striking that in Jesus’ instructions in Luke 9 (and also in Luke 10) he explicitly commands the visitors not to bring bread with them. Why is that? Well, what did you learn at your kitchen table about what you do when you eat someone else’s house as a guest? “Eat what they put in front of you.” We do not bring bread because we will eat the bread of our hosts. We are guests. We become companions with those with whom we share bread. In Spanish, Latin, and French, the root words for companion are **con** (“with”) and **pan** (“bread”). And in the bread sharing, we all become companions with Jesus, the ultimate host at every table. Mission is eucharist.*

Moving from our altar tables, inside our church buildings, out into the world is so crucial—especially today in this 21st century time of mission. When we turn in on ourselves, we grow stagnant; when we risk ourselves to God’s world, we are renewed as followers of Jesus. We regain our capacity to “reproduce” in the church.

The shrinking church has been stuck at its own tables, losing its connection to the tables of its community. Renewal in mission involves leaving our table and seeking companionship at new tables, our neighbors’ tables, living and sharing the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus for the life of the world.

Where do we see this happening in our corner of the world? Every week I hear new stories about how congregations across our region are pushing out beyond the walls of their church buildings, into the wider community, bearing the light of Christ. Some examples:

- When some disciples at Shalom, Alexandria, discovered that often families in grief at next-door Anderson Funeral Home didn’t always have a good way to offer a funeral luncheon—they have opened the doors of Shalom to host such gatherings. The Shalom folks see this as welcoming outreach—not a heavy burden!
- In the last few years members at Immanuel, Osage and Aardahl, Bemidji have reached out to their neighbors in friendly, every-home contacts. Both congregations discovered they had more neighbors than welcome-packets, so extra materials were produced to blanket the neighborhood.

- More and more congregations are co-sponsoring or hosting food shelves or community meals.

For the last few winters, members at South Immanuel, Rothsay have been holding their Sunday morning worship services in the high-rise apartment building for senior adults in Pelican Rapids. This arrangement wonderfully serves both the members of South

- Immanuel and the residents of the high-rise (while reducing winter fuel costs in South Immanuel's church building).
- Members of St Mark's of Fargo have been holding their midweek Lenten worship services in the Churches United for the Homeless shelter in Moorhead.
- Every Thursday a different cadre of congregations in the Headwaters Conference (Conference 4) host "Supper for a Buck" at the Lutheran Campus Ministry at Bemidji State University—a great time to engage with young adults who hunger for home-cooked food and friendly conversation in a Christ-centered setting.

In the words of Stephen Bouman, *from our kitchen tables, God calls us to meet Christ at the altar table. From the altar table, we are sent to gather at the tables of neighbors and set new tables with new friends. Mission is moving from table to table, seeking to join God already in the world making new space for reconciling, renewing grace.*

For reflection or discussion

- How might we need to rethink hospitality on the basis of Jesus' words in Luke 10? Is hospitality just something we offer to others—or do we also need to relearn how to receive the hospitality of others?
- Why are persons more willing to open up with one another when they're sharing the same table? How does sharing the stories of our lives provide opportunities to share Jesus' story as well?
- In what ways might your congregation push out beyond the walls of your church building?

May: The Congregation: A Table for Mission (Part 1)

Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Luke 10:38-42



This "mission table" stuff has legs (pun intended!) Not only does it resonate with the biblical witness, but it also connects with how life is playing out in our 21st century missionary context. Deep as we are in the digital revolution (with all our portable digital devices), we still long for skin-to-skin, real-time encounters with one another.

A friend² recently sent me this picture from one of his favorite coffee shops. Granted, the shop has a vested commercial interest in urging folks to take a breath, pull a chair up to a table, and drink their great coffee. But the fact that a business transaction is in sight here doesn't undo the message.

Surely for Christians and others LIFE IS lived around tables. Is it any wonder that we can borrow this table-language to speak appropriately of the **congregation itself**? The congregation is a mission table, "*which connects the kitchen tables of its members at the altar table and sends its people out to new tables of God's restoring and reconciling mission.*"

² David Holtz, executive director of Luther Crest bible Camp, Alexandria

What that looks like will occupy our attention in this column and next two columns (Chapter 4 of The Mission Table). These columns will explore Bouman’s Ten Biblical Marks of a Missional Congregation.

A Congregation in Mission is Always Listening

Before a congregation focused on God’s mission in the world “does something” it takes time to listen. In fact, such congregations find that listening is one of their habitual rhythms!

When he walked among us, Jesus listened to others, and sometimes people listened to him, too. But too often folks couldn’t or wouldn’t listen to Jesus. They had their questions, their agendas, their notions. They often asked barbed questions designed not to open up space for listening, but to attack Jesus and God’s mission.

That’s why the little story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10 is so precious. It speaks of serving (Martha) and listening (Mary). It clarifies Jesus’ way of prioritizing things, in which listening is “the better part” (v. 42). Without listening even our best efforts can be distracted from what matters most. The story seems to be about the very act of listening itself—listening to Jesus, whatever he might be telling us.

Oh, but that’s hard to do! Listening goes against the grain. It asks us to stop what we’re doing (silence our cell phones!) Calm ourselves. Take some time. Be quiet. Listen. Ponder. Remain quiet. Listen some more.

When we do that what do we hear? To whom do we pay attention? Martha Grace Reece speaks of the “**Three Great Listenings:**”³

- listening to God through scripture and prayer;
- listening to the community outside our doors;
- listening within the household of faith.

One of the congregations I served entered into a mission planning process. We hosted a summit meeting over breakfast with our neighbors—representatives of the community outside our doors. We invited “outsiders” to take a seat at our table to teach us about “our” congregation.

It was amazing. We heard how much people already knew about our church. We were gently invited

³ [Guiding Principles for Congregational Mission Planning](#)

to realize we might not be as friendly as we thought we were. Our mayor spoke of the unraveling of the social fabric of our community. This mission table/listening post influenced our congregation's understanding of how we participate in God's mission. It helped turn us inside out.

Stephen Bouman has done this sort of thing. He writes that

the most effective mission strategies I have encountered have not been the ones with all the demographic bells and whistles and the embodiment of the latest process and strategic theories. They have been about congregations really caring and creating space and hospitality for the stories of their members and neighbors to be told. As it was for Jesus, to be in mission is to listen.

A Congregation in Mission Mentors and Trains its Leaders

Matthew 14:22-33 tells the familiar story of Jesus walking on the water—and Peter trying to do likewise. We usually consider this a “miracle story” or a “doubt and faith story.” But what if it's really a *leadership mentoring story*?

“The biblical account tells us that Peter wanted to leave the boat and move toward the Jesus future....Jesus was never more a teacher and coach than when he invited Peter out of the safety of the boat. With one word Jesus committed to a future leader: ‘Come.’”

In this scary, uncertain time for Christ's church—with winds blowing and waves crashing—let's be on the lookout for folks who seem brave enough to follow Jesus, even when that feels like “walking on water.” Let's especially keep our eyes peeled for emergent leaders who might be more drawn to the future than they are fascinated by the past. When we encounter such emergent leaders—many of them younger and less experienced than us “old hands”—will we elders be ready to give up our seat (and maybe our life preserver!) to give them a chance?

Writes Bouman: *“A missional congregation invests in leaders and has a plan for leadership development. The congregation sees everything it does as opportunity for leadership development. A time of mission strategy and discernment can be an opportunity to develop the gifts and passions of people”*

A Congregation in Mission Nurtures Communal Leadership

As vital as it is for congregations to be on the lookout for **individual** leaders, we also recognize the **communal** nature of this task. We aren't, like the U.S. Marines, looking for "a few good men (and women!)" We're seeking out a *critical mass* of leaders with imagination, courage and a spirit of adventure.

One of the best biblical stories about this is in Exodus 18:18-23, during the forty years the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness of Sinai. A concerned father-in-law (Jethro) advises his overworked son-in-law (Moses) to develop a pattern of communal, shared leadership lest he burn out under the heavy burden of responsibility that had fallen on his shoulders.

"Are you nuts, Moses, trying to discern the issues of everyone all at once all by yourself? Why don't you organize with a team of leaders, each one to judge over one hundred' Verse 24 says that 'Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said,' and over the course of their forty-year wilderness trek, the Israelites were formed into a community with a team of leaders."

While I have no crystal ball for predicting the most faithful and fruitful path ahead for us, at least three things seem to be clear:

1. The day is long past when a congregation can count on having one, omni-competent pastor who does nearly all of the congregation's ministry. That tired old model never worked that well, and it cannot get us where Christ is calling us to go here and now.
2. Nor can congregations keep leaning heavily on a tight circle of veteran, but exhausted, lay leaders who just keep getting "recycled" from one leadership position to another. What if we re-imagined congregations as teams of player-coaches who **all** regularly "get in the game?" "Would that **all** the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29)
3. The leadership we're seeking may be right under our noses. As Bouman says: *"Whether in rural North Dakota or in urban situations like the South Bronx, the trend for lay and pastoral leadership will continue to be toward homegrown leaders....Where mission flourishes, leadership multiplies."*

For reflection or discussion

- How might your congregation listen better to God, its members and its neighbors?
- How is your congregation calling forth and mentoring new leaders?
- How does your congregation do in developing patterns of shared leadership?

June: The Congregation: A Table for Mission (Part 2)

“After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.”

John 5:1-9

On the dirt farm in southern Minnesota where I grew up there was one almost unforgiveable sin. Each spring, as the snow melted, leaving the soil saturated, my father warned me repeatedly about not getting a tractor stuck in the mud. Getting stuck in a field was bad news for a host of reasons.

- First, you couldn’t work if your tractor was stuck—and spring was a time of urgency, preparing the soil and planting the seeds.
- Second, getting stuck often meant getting REALLY stuck, because someone who’s stuck tends to spin his wheels, digging your tractor deeper and deeper into the mud.
- Third, someone else (usually my dad) had to stop working in another field in order to bring his tractor to my stuck tractor and try to get me unstuck. But this was dangerous, because the rescuer had to get close enough to the stuck tractor that he himself might get stuck too—oh my!

That paralyzed feeling that accompanies being stuck doesn’t come only to farmers and farmhands. It’s common among church folks, as well. Congregations get stuck in old ruts, worn-out patterns, ways of “doing church” that used to work—but not today.

In this portion of chapter 4 in *The Mission Table*, Stephen Bouman discusses three more biblical marks of missional congregations:

- A congregation in mission faces paralysis with courage;

- A congregation in mission reroots in its community; and
- A congregation in mission risks new things.

From Paralysis to Motion

The poignant story in John 5 draws our attention to a paralyzed man who, for 38 years, had been stuck alongside a pool had healing qualities. So close, but yet so far—with useless legs and no one to help him, until Jesus came along one day and noticed this man in his stuckness. He asked the paralyzed man a rather surprising question: “Do you want to be made well?” The man could have refused to dignify Jesus’ question with an answer, but instead (as Stephen Bouman observes) he offered

a spirited response. He was just lying there, but now he was animated, ticked. He spit out his anger: ‘Sir I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’

Although Jesus’ question might have seemed cruel (really now, what person paralyzed for 38 years **wouldn’t** want to be healed?) it was the only question that mattered.

If the man doesn’t want to be made well, he will continue to make a life for himself sitting by the side of the pool. Our pathologies can domesticate us. All of us, sisters and brothers, are on our mats. All of us are at the many tables of the church together. Do we want to be made well? It’s the only question for congregations stalled in their ministry, timid in their stewardship, lax in their discipleship, stifled in their imagination about the future, afraid of the changing communities outside their doors.

The first step to moving from “stuck” to “unstuck” is to **recognize our stuckness**⁴ — to become aware enough, angry enough, unsettled enough, restless enough with whatever’s paralyzing us that we’re willing to become unstuck. Jesus involved the paralyzed man in his own healing—there was no magic wand, no potion, no spell involved. “Stand up, take your mat, and walk.”

Jesus doesn’t sprinkle pixie dust over “stuck” congregations. Jesus works in, with, and through us to move us from paralysis to motion. The first step is to recognize our stuckness; the next step is to believe that becoming unstuck matters enough that we’re willing to let God change us.

⁴ Isn’t this what we’re regularly saying when we confess that “we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves?” (ELW, p. 95)

Several years ago two neighboring congregations in our synod found themselves paralyzed. One church had gone a number of years without a full-time pastor; the other church had lost a significant portion of their members following a disaffiliation vote. Both congregations recognized their stuckness and were ready for something new—reaching out to one another to share a pastor. God provided the right circumstances, the right set of lay leaders, and the right pastor—and soon the Heartland Parish of Nevis and Akeley was born, with Pastor Darrell Morton serving them. This journey from “paralysis to motion” has injected new life into these congregations.

Just last month the Heartland Parish was one of the stops along [the synod's pre-assembly Hunger Ride](#). As reported by Pr. Steve Peterson, assistant to the bishop, these two small congregations are doing extraordinary work, in addressing hunger and poverty. [The Avis Nevis Food Shelf](#), which served 642 households in 2013, is an auxiliary of the parish's Ministry of Outreach, offering food support to those in the communities of Akeley and Nevis. The parish is a driving force behind UCAN (assisting neighbors in crises) and *Yes, You Can!* (helping unemployed and underemployed folks find jobs, retain jobs, receive mentoring/training and rebuild dignity and confidence.

From Rootless to Rerooted

Pat Keifert⁵ tells the story of a man seeking directions while visiting Ireland. When his map failed him, he turned to a local villager for directions. Hearing the name of the traveler's destination, the villager told the man: “Well, I don't know how to get where you want to go, but I know that you don't want to start from here....”

As congregations face the challenges of the 21st century, it's easy to feel “rootless.” Everything that used to work in ministry no longer works—what do we do now? Maybe we should just pack our bags and move to someplace more promising than our current location!

In *The Mission Table* Stephen Bouman reflects upon the “paired” healing stories in Matthew 9:18-26, the story of Jairus and his sick-unto-death daughter, intertwined with the story of the hemorrhaging woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe. Both stories involve persons whose faith in Jesus refuses to let them give up on claiming Jesus' power in their lives. Both Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman “*took a gamble on the resurrection.*”

⁵ *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Allelon Publishing, 2007)

God is calling congregations that feel rootless to “take a gamble on the resurrection.” Doing so doesn’t involve packing up and moving somewhere else—seeking out a more favorable location for serving God’s mission. It involves rerooting in our communities, looking for buried treasure in our own back yards.

Folks in rural Minnesota too often have bought into a woeful “narrative of decline.” “We’re old, we’re dying, we have no future” are words I hear fairly regularly—even though the facts tell another story. Consider these countervailing statistics about our mission territory:

- A Minneapolis Star Tribune article from last autumn reported that population is actually increasing in 50 of Minnesota’s 87 counties.
- As I reported a couple years ago, in all but four of the 21 counties of our synod there are more children and youth (age 18 and younger) than there are senior adults (age 65 and older).

Rather than packing our bags and moving elsewhere, God invites us to be rerooted where we’re already planted—**rerooted in God’s mission**. [Pr. Keith Zeh](#), Director for Evangelical Mission, leads cadres of congregations in NW MN and EaND who are “gambling on the resurrection” by intentionally rerooting themselves where they already are.

Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church of Sebeka is one such congregation. Our Saviour’s *Re-Rooting in God’s Mission* team, including Pr. Rachel Stout and several lay leaders, has helped the congregation grow in listening to God, listening to each other and listening to their neighbors around Sebeka. Out of these “Three Great Listeners” emerged a Community Thanksgiving Meal. “I sat down with Heidi, who coordinated the dinner and asked her to tell me how it went,” notes Pr. Stout. “Right away she started to cry, saying: ‘You know, I’ve been coming to this church my whole life. I didn’t realize till recently how very closed off we were to the rest of the community....It wasn’t until the split [an unsuccessful attempt to disaffiliate from the ELCA, after which some Our Saviour’s members departed] and the time after that our eyes were opened. Our doors are open, literally and figuratively’....”

From Safe-and-Secure to Risk-Taking

The Book of Acts tells numerous stories about the Holy Spirit pushing the early church to take bolder risks for the sake of God’s mission in the world. Acts 10 focuses on perhaps the boldest risk that was

taken by Jewish-background disciples like Peter: reaching out to Gentiles (non-Jews) with the good news about Jesus.

At the heart of this story is a trance (literally, an *ecstasy*) Peter has, while resting on the rooftop of a house in Joppa.

Peter...saw all kinds of animals descend on a tablecloth. He was hungry, but the food was not kosher. He would dishonor God by killing and eating what was ritually unclean. But then he heard God say, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." When Peter protested, God said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:13-15). This happened three times, and then the tablecloth was lifted and Peter came out of his trance.

Peter's vision on the rooftop coincides with a visit to the house by a Gentile, a Roman centurion named Cornelius. After a few days with this Gentile "outsider," Peter was singing a new song: "God shows no partiality, but...anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10:32-35).

Bouman writes:

*"Mission begins with the hunger for ecstasy, for the kind of experience that is open to the urgent interior word of the living Christ who dwells in each of us. Life in Christ asks us to **step out** [the meaning of the Greek word ecstasy] continually into wider worlds, deeper spiritual insights, passionate engagement with the calling we have from God."*

A good example of such risk-taking is playing out in East Moe and West Moe Lutheran Churches of rural Brandon. According to Pr. Laurie Natwick, assistant to the bishop, after their previous pastor retired the congregations were really unsure about their future. Some of their members didn't see much hope for the parish—but then a nearby seminary student, Sarah Evenson (who's also a spouse, mother, day-care provider and occasionally a church custodian) saw potential galore in this two-point parish. She began serving the parish as a Synodically Authorized Minister (SAM) and is now also doing her seminary internship with them. Together, Sarah and the parish are taking risks for the sake of the gospel. God's Word is preached and lived out, from the sanctuary to the church kitchen and out the door into the world!

For reflection or discussion

- How does your congregation experience “stuckness?”
- How might God be calling your church to be re-rooted in your community?
- When did you or your church take a risk? What difference did that risk-taking make?

July: The Congregation: A Table for Mission (Part 3)

'If God gave them [Gentiles] the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God , saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

Acts 11:16-18

The phrase, "But we've always done it that way," has (for good reason!) been nicknamed the Seven Last Words of the Church. The power of nostalgic inertia can be deadly!

The Book of Acts reveals God the Holy Spirit constantly pushing the followers of Jesus out into the world, beyond their familiar comfort zones. One of the benchmarks in this "move on out, move forward" narrative is the story of Peter's encounter with the Roman soldier Cornelius. [Read the whole compelling story in Acts 10.](#)

To understand this strange story we need to remember that Jews simply did not associate with non-Jews (Gentiles). Jews shunned the non-kosher foods that Gentiles ate. They understood themselves to be a distinct, holy people—set apart for God's purposes.

In Acts 10 God pushes the apostle Peter (born and reared in Judaism) to **venture out beyond his old comfort zone**. Peter has an amazing vision that's repeated three times—a vision that challenges all his Jewish assumptions about who's in and who's out, "clean" and "unclean." The vision occurs just before he is invited to visit the home of Cornelius, a non-kosher, unclean Gentile.

God changes the terms on which Peter and other followers of the Risen Jesus will serve his mission in the world! In Acts 11:1-18, Peter explains this new turn of events to the Jewish-background leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem. They are taken aback by what Peter has done (baptizing Cornelius and his whole Gentile household!)—but they are captured by the divine logic of it all:

Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

Acts 11:18

A Congregation in Mission Makes All Decision Based On its Mission

The decision to bring the Good News of Jesus to Gentiles as well as to Jews was a startling turning point in the early church's life. The Christian movement extended out beyond the enclave mentality they inherited from Judaism. God's mission prevailed over the way things had always been.

Peter gave his testimony to the inclusion of Cornelius and the Gentles at the table. That decision trumped every other decision that could be made....In the future, every important decision was mission-driven. When apostolic mission sets the table, other priorities fall into place or fall away.

Some congregations seem to think that their mission is simply to keep on doing things the way we've always done them. Other congregations are experiencing the joy of allowing their sense of purpose, serving God's mission in Jesus Christ, to guide them. When choosing among a wide array of good things they might do, these congregations ask themselves: **“What is most important for us as we serve God's mission? What is God calling us to do?”**

Calvary of Alexandria and Trinity of Crookston have been turning their imaginations loose in fresh, mission-driven ways. **Calvary is partnering with Luther Crest Bible Camp** to offer a summer-time outdoor worship opportunity on the shores of beautiful Lake Carlos; now they're exploring ways for this seasonal ministry to reach unchurched folks year-round. **Trinity is pondering ways to do some of its ministries off-site**, to open themselves up to those without a faith community (especially young adults). Both of these “mission probes” will be considered for ELCA funding around mid-July (the synod has already released some dollars from our mission outreach budget for 2014). Pray for them!

A Congregation In Mission is Clear About Money and Relationships

Whenever you read the New Testament expect to be surprised. God doesn't operate the way we do. Consider the astounding story of the poor Macedonian believers whose generous bowled over St Paul and other leaders of the early Church. [Read their story in II Corinthians 8:1-15.](#)

Paul lifts up the example of the Macedonians as he encourages Christians in another part of the world (Corinth) to contribute to an offering for the poor, persecuted believers in Jerusalem. The Macedonians were themselves hardly people of means, but that didn't stop them: “During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part....” (II Cor. 8:2)

This is so often the case. The poor among us tend to be more generous than the wealthy. Perhaps it's because, being poor themselves, they understand what it means to be in need. The poor can more easily picture and thus relate to those they seek to help.

Steve Bouman, in *The Mission Table*, reminds us that *the poorer the people, the more generous they are. Or maybe the most reconciled, the most generous....Mission beings with each disciple, every day, transformed by gratitude for the gift of new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It begins with a gracious God and our response.*

The spiritual gift of generosity thrives best in a hothouse environment where relationships are prized. At our 2014 synod assembly two of our small-membership congregations, **Little Norway Lutheran Church** of rural Fertile and **Gloria Dei Lutheran Church** of Felton, [received the Holy Cow and Holy Mackerel awards](#) for their generosity and creativity in addressing hunger issues. Having visited both of these congregations, I can attest that such generosity reflects the rich relationships that members have with one another and their neighbors.

A Congregation in Mission is Propelled by the Resurrection of Jesus

One of the most compelling stories in the Book of Acts is [the Call of Paul in Acts 9](#). It's such a crucial narrative that Paul re-tells it twice in [Acts 22](#) and [Acts 26](#) and refers to it in his epistles.

What transformed Paul from being a persecutor of Christians to becoming an apostle? Was it a gnawing sense of guilt over his murderous hatred of the church, earlier in his life? Was it the high drama of his shattering experience on the road to Damascus? Was it the sudden blindness that fell upon him?

What's clear in all the narratives of the Call of Paul is that it involved a personal encounter between Paul and the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was stunned by the Resurrection—and because of his experience (although he never walked with Jesus in Galilee as did the other apostles) he forever after counted himself among the many witnesses to the Resurrection: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.**” (1 Cor. 15:3-8)

The Resurrection of Jesus, pure and simple, is why we invest our lives serving God's mission:

We in the church will not truly give ourselves to God's mission in the world until we are stunned once again by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead....The resurrection of Jesus transforms congregations at risk to congregations risking mission. Every ministry is a ministry "at risk" if it does not share the kinetic ecstasy that leads it to step out into wider worlds.

People who've been stunned by the Resurrection of Jesus are accused of doing crazy things like "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Instead of settling for reasonable, attainable responses to God's love, Easter people "shoot the moon" with regularity. So, for example,

It's a Resurrection faith that is...

- leading our brothers and sisters in Christ in the SE MN Synod to tackle the goal of **eliminating food insecurity** in their corner of our state. Learn more at semnsynod.org
- "rebuking the fever" of **malaria** through a global effort to dramatically reduce this scourge that is so deadly to children across Africa. Find out more at elca.org
- leading us in the NW MN Synod to believe that even shy Lutherans can pass on the faith to the next generation in our midst—which is the aim of **our multi-year Fostering Vibrant Faith project**, approved at our recent synod assembly. Check it out at nwmnsynod.org/resources/fostering-vibrant-faith/

A Congregation in Mission is Shaped by Word and Sacraments

Stephen Bouman concludes Chapter 4 of *The Mission Table* with a recollection of Aidan Kavanaugh (1929-2005) a professor of worship who taught at the Yale Divinity School: *the integrity of evangelism—that is, sharing the good news of God's grace—is directly related to the integrity of the liturgy.*

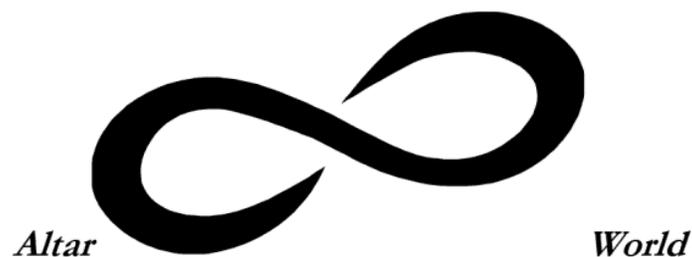
In other words, a congregation in mission is always **moving from** its latest worship experience and always **moving toward** its next time of worship. Worship is in the center of its whole life, because in worship God shows up to forgive us, revive us, reclaim us and send us.

However we serve God's mission in the world is an outflowing of our liturgical life as a people gathered around (and scattered from) God's gracious encounters with us in Word and Sacrament. Writes Bouman:

Consider the mission heartbeat of baptism. *We do not baptize our babies (of any age) and leave them at the font. Baptismal ministry follows them into the world: to care and struggle for the schools in which they learn, to guard the communal values that shape them, to nurture their relationships, and to provide them with mentors....*

Consider [also] the mission heartbeat of the Eucharist. *If we eat at the altar table of our congregations and others outside do not eat, or eat alone, Eucharistic ministry is to follow the real presence of Jesus into the world to connect with the community.*

Many of us who studied at Luther Seminary remember the figure-eight diagram that the late Professor Loren Halvorson frequently drew on the chalkboard.



Professor Halvorson (who taught courses in social ministry) insisted that caring for our neighbors in the world is faithful and makes sense only if it's grounded in our experience of God's amazing care for us through the Word and Sacraments. We Christ-followers are always making our way—"figure eight style"—from the altar to the world and back again. No wonder the figure-eight symbol is also the symbol of infinity!

For discussion or reflection

- How are your congregation's priorities in mission shaping the ways you witness and serve in the world?
- Recall a time when God's grace toward you and your gratitude to God moved you to act generously toward others.

- When have you encountered the Risen Christ in ways that moved you deeply and changed the direction of your life?
- What are some ways your congregation's Word and Sacrament worship spills over into the lives of your neighbors?

September: Mission Table Leadership

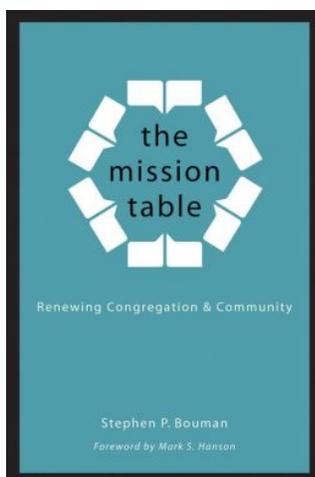
As [Jesus] walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.’

Matthew 4:18-22

“The only constant is change.” This statement, which sounds oxymoronic,⁶ sums up so much about how life “feels” nowadays—perhaps especially life in the church.

Almost nothing that used to work still works. The culture, rather than supporting faith and communities of faith, seems indifferent if not hostile to the things of God. Patterns of “doing church” that sustained us for decades, if not centuries, seem outdated, ineffective. We grow weary from trying to rethink just about everything.

Stephen Bouman captures the dynamic at work well when he writes:



The decline of institutional religion is calling us into ministry in a new context here in North America. Yet the United States remains unique in the world when it comes to spirituality. Eighty percent of the US population is still convinced that God is real. So here is our context: institutional forms of religion are collapsing while most people still believe in God. We are awash in spiritual hunger. In this in-between place, we do not yet know what forms will emerge. All things are possible. In such a time as this, what kind of leadership can come alongside congregations, communities, and spiritual seekers, helping them to imagine new mission tables, revised old ones, and learn from what they see emerging?

⁶ An “oxymoron” is a figure of speech in which two words with opposing meanings are used together intentionally for effect.

Not for Sissies

I'm struck, as I work within our synod, how difficult it can be to surface leaders for mission tables. Folks are willing to sit around the circle and participate—but don't ask anyone to serve as chair or convener (thankfully this doesn't happen all the time!) It is as if people sense that leadership, too, has changed in the church. And leadership nowadays is definitely "not for sissies."

Yet there has never been a time in the whole long life of God's people when leaders have not been called forth—when leadership has not emerged. And even today, the need for leadership has not diminished. Despite the ways that church leaders in the 21st century may need to learn how to lead differently from the way leadership has functioned in the past, some bedrock realities about leadership have not changed:

Leadership in a missional church is spiritually-grounded.

Leadership at its best emerges from men and women of God who pray, worship, dwell in the Word, serve, give and struggle for justice. Writes Bouman:

"Mission leaders build tables that are spiritual oases of service and solidarity with the lives of communities in this secular yet believing context."

Such spiritual leadership doesn't produce Supermen or Wonder Women leaders, though. Bouman draws attention to the biblical picture of humility in leadership that characterized Moses and Jesus himself. Such humility "wears well" in our 21st century context, in which the church is often on the margins, no longer at the center of things. "

The church's mission needs leaders infused with the presence of God, confident in the promises of God, and filled with the hope that comes with being humble before God. In that humility is strength, integrity, resolve and a singleminded embrace of the possibilities the risen Christ makes present."

Leadership in a missional church is baptismally-endowed.

When I preach at ordinations or installations of pastors, I often remind them, "You didn't get yourself into this mess! God has called you!"

The same goes for the whole people of God, not just pastors. When God **saves** us through our baptism into Christ, the Lord simultaneously sends us to serve Christ's mission of reclaiming the

whole creation and making all things new. Therefore, *“we cannot talk about leadership in the church without talking about the call every Christian receives at baptism to be part of God’s mission in the world, to be part of the priesthood of all believers. The church today needs leaders who are committed to agitating and winsomely engaging its members and neighbors around that call.”*

So, what does such spiritually-grounded, baptismally-endowed leadership look like **today**?

A Mission Leader is Relational

Every year, on Pentecost Sunday, we read from the second chapter of the Book of Acts. I wonder, though, if we always notice both the **public** and the relational sides of this amazing story. The public side is what we’re most familiar with: the Holy Spirit descends in a fiery public demonstration of evangelical power, leading Peter to preach a sermon that immediately draws 3,000 persons to be baptized into Christ. Wow!

But the relational side of the Pentecost Story is just as amazing (see [Acts 2:42-47](#)). Immediately those who are baptized enter into relationship with one another! The impulse to gather together seems to be intrinsic to being joined to the Risen Christ. Community—the first church—is formed and takes shape. The public event of Pentecost produces the relational reality of the church-in-mission.

We live in a time when the relational side of the church’s life needs to come to the fore. This might come as a surprise to us as we’ve watched life in the 21st century unfold. Doesn’t it seem as though life has become more “atomized” as persons seem mesmerized by their precious digital devices? We watch people walking down a sidewalk, each one focused on his or her iPhone or Droid—it’s amazing that they don’t run into one another more often!

But look more closely. Our hi-tech world carries with it a hunger for hi-touch encounters. The implication for a church in mission is that leaders will *“put in the time and energy needed to build relationships within the congregation and in the community ... Relationships are the synapses⁷ of mission.”*

A Mission Leader Pays Attention to Institutional Relationships

⁷ In the nervous system, a synapse is a structure that permits a neuron (or nerve cell) to pass an electrical or chemical signal to another cell (neural or otherwise).

In other words, a mission leader cannot afford—ever!—to be a lone ranger. Writes Bouman:

“Studies of new mission starts have shown that where local networks and relationships are strong, and connected to the wider church, so is the fledgling ministry. It takes a village of tables to nourish and raise a new one.”

For this reason our synod continues to provide a means whereby we cultivate connections with new ministries. I invite you to [ponder and pray for the ministry partners](#) we support together through our life as the Northwestern Minnesota Synod.

A Mission Leader Has an Entrepreneurial Spirit

Phyllis Tickle, in her book, *The Great Emergence*, observes that “about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale....about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace⁸ that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”⁹

If we are living through one of these 500-year-rummage-sales, and if new forms of “doing church” are emerging, chances are the leaders God is calling forth will seem similar to entrepreneurs in the business world. Entrepreneurs aren’t shopkeepers or minders-of-the-store. They have no knack for conducting “business as usual.” They are the visionaries who dare to try new things—and to risk failure in the process.

But entrepreneurs in the church can make us nervous. They color outside the lines. They try things that don’t always succeed. Their imaginations sometimes lead to flights of fancy. We worry they might “throw the baby out with the bath.”

In truth, though, the church of Jesus Christ has always been blessed with such reckless risk-takers. Many of us sense that we need them now more than ever. If entrepreneurial leaders make us nervous, perhaps we need to all get in our cars and visit a mission start church. Starting new ministries is just as much a part of our DNA as “preserving sacred traditions.” As Bouman reminds us:

⁸ A carapace is a hard shell on the back of some animals (such as turtles or crabs)

⁹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker, 2008), p. 16.

“In the past, planting churches has generated a restless excitement. Our communal memory of excitement and bold risks for mission will be a path to the renewal of our beloved tables for the life of the world.”

A Mission Leader is Clear about the Power of Money

Because we are creatures of time and space, seeking to serve God’s mission in the real, tangible world all around us—nothing we set out to do in service to God’s mission will happen without financial resources. Even though our patterns for how Christians live out the spiritual gift of generosity are changing—along with everything else!—we will continue to need mission leaders who

- Cultivate in themselves and others a sense of stewardship that is wide and deep;
- Built strong, sustainable financial models for ministry; and
- Courageously ask for sacrificial support.

In next month’s column we’ll continue to look at characteristics of mission leaders. Feel free to read the rest of Chapter 5 in *The Mission Table*, as you ponder your own gifts and passions as a missional leader in a changing church.

God bless you for being the mission leader God, in your Baptism, has called you to be!

For discussion or reflection

- As you ponder your own calling to be a mission leader, how have faith practices and your baptism into Christ shaped you?
- What’s noticeably healthy about the relational life of your congregation? What could enhance your relational life together?
- What connections does your congregation cultivate with any of our synod’s partners in ministry?
- What sometimes holds back mission leaders from boldly asking for sacrificial support?

October: Setting Mission Tables

Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.' Elisha said to her, 'What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?' She answered, 'Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil.' He said, 'Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few. Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside.' So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' But he said to her, 'There are no more.' Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God, and he said, 'Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest.'

II Kings 4:1-7

The power to convene people around tables may not seem like much. It smacks of being the antithesis to traditional, command-and-control leadership styles. "Hey, why don't we get together, have a cup of coffee and talk this over?" seems like a weak, ineffectual response to a sharp problem or simmering crisis.

But more often than not, those words ("Why don't we get together?") are the starting point for diminishing despair and instilling fresh hope in the difficult situations in we get into in the church. Now more than ever, as we all deal with the astonishing pace of change in church and culture, we're being called to develop the art of "setting mission tables" in the midst of what might feel like only chaos.

A Framework to Guide Us

As I write this month's column, I'm getting ready for an "area conversation" involving several neighboring ELCA churches in one corner of our synod. Time and circumstances have put several of these local churches at risk—so much so that in order to move ahead they will need to consider new possibilities for working together. (This sort of thing, by the way, is happening all over our synod, the ELCA and in most other church bodies as well.)

When leaders of these congregations sit at table together this month, we'll begin by dwelling in the Word of God from II Kings 4, quoted above. As Stephen Bouman suggests, *this passage gives us a framework for the possibilities of throwing our lot in with one another in setting tables for re-rooting in the community.* If Pastor Bouman is correct, what is the shape of this framework?

First, there is **honesty** about what's happening and **willingness to "name our pain."** In II Kings, a widow is in debt over her head—and the man to whom she owes money wants to take her two children in payment (illegal in our day, but not during the Old Testament period!) So how about us? What are the threats we face? What fears keep us awake at night?

Second, there is Elisha's intriguing question: **"What shall I do for you?"** (v. 2). Elisha doesn't barrel in with a ready-made solution. He refuses to treat the widow like a poor, powerless victim. His question implies respect for her and recognition that she still has the power to ask, choose and act. Bouman observes that *we need leaders who can come alongside widowed congregations, seemingly bereft of a future, and **agitate their agency.*** The widow would be part of her own solution!

Third, Elisha asks the woman about the **resources** she still has: "Tell me, what do you have in the house?" (v. 2). The widow thinks she has nothing. *Life's cupboard is bare. That is how we sometimes act in our churches—afraid of the future, as if we have nothing, as if God is holding out on us.*

But the woman does still have one thing: "a jar of oil." This revelation leads Elisha to offer a plan—but first the widow would need to **reach out to her neighbors.** The woman has her little jar of oil—but she lacks other containers to receive the oil that will soon flow forth from her little jar. So Elisha points her toward her neighbors, inviting the widow to ask them to loan her some jars and other containers.

Elisha is telling us through the widow to reconnect with God's community....When we leave the kitchen and altar tables and move to the tables of our communities and wider world, God has empty vessels waiting for our oil, company for our grief, mutual signs of hope, the ransom of our children, the collective pouring out of our future.

Having discerned these steps together, Elisha empowers the woman to **expect God to act**—to work a miracle that God is happy to give, as the woman's little jar of oil becomes like a flowing well, filling

all those borrowed vessels. God doesn't just cover her debt; God opens up a new future: "you and your children can live on the rest."

The Three Great Listenings

So if this is the *framework* for setting a mission table, what is the *agenda* for a mission table—what can we expect to happen? The key thing, Bouman writes, is that when we set a mission table we engage deeply in the "three great listenings."

1. We listen to God explicitly in prayer, study of scripture, and liturgy... *The narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus for the life the world shapes us and the tables we set.*

Congregation councils and other mission tables function best when they always begin with a significant time of dwelling in the Word and prayer. Mission tables see this as their first, chief "business"—and they realize that taking time for listening to God sets the tone for their gatherings, increasing their confidence that they're doing what matters, and thus enhancing their effectiveness. Taking time to listen to God ultimately saves time in arguing over values, goals and commitments.

2. We listen to the church... *for the gifts and assets God has given us in our congregation. We also listen to our denominational partners and our ecumenical allies; we pay attention to the wider church beyond our doors.*

Such listening to the church moves us, though, beyond tending our own comfort or security as a community of faith. Those who sit at mission tables aren't trying to "keep everyone happy" in "our" church. Their angle of vision is wider and deeper.

3. We listen to the world around us. *Are continually doing one-on-ones with our neighbors, listening to their hopes, aspirations, insights, and giftedness....we re-root church tables in the tables of our communities.*

Lately I've been reflecting on a phrase that church folks often use: "Bishop, we need to figure out a way to keep our doors open." This phrase often sounds like the voice of a survival mentality, the implication being that "we need to keep *our* doors open for *our* people." What if we turned this language inside-out, though? What if the way to "keeping our doors open" is literally to **open our church doors ever-wider to people who aren't currently in our congregations?** This actually is

the only way, not just to survive but to thrive in serving God's mission of blessing and redeeming the whole world.

If your congregation feels the time is ripe to engage more intentionally in the "three great listenings," I encourage you to explore the "Model for Congregation Listening Tables" on pp. 100-101 in Stephen Bouman's book, *The Mission Table*. Our synod's Director for Evangelical Mission, [Pastor Keith Zeh](#), has also been leading congregations through a ["Re-rooting in God's Mission" process](#) over the last few years. For more information on how your congregation could be part of that contact him at keith.zeh@elca.org.

The Wider Community

This month we will exercise our citizenship by voting on November 4, and later we will observe the national holiday known as Thanksgiving Day. November is a good time for us to remember how our churches are embedded in a wider community and culture. Our congregations never exist in sterile bubbles. The challenges and opportunities faced by our churches are always (at least in part) shaped by the surrounding society—workplaces, businesses, governments, schools, community organizations and churches of our faith traditions.

As we set mission tables in our congregations, let us do so with eyes peeled for what's happening in our wider community. May we, in Jesus' words, be salt and light for the world (Matthew 5:13-14). May we think and speak and act in ways that serve the common good!

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; united us in bonds of love; and, through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; so that, in your good time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ELW, p. 79

For discussion or reflection

- How is your congregation already engaging in the “three great listenings?” How might you enhance your ability to listen to God, to the congregation and to the community?
- What critical “common good” issues are on the minds of your neighbors nowadays?

November: Restoring the Broken Table

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58:9b-12

O come, O King of nations, come,
O Cornerstone that binds in one:
Refresh the hearts that long for you;
Restore the broken, make us new.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

ELW 257

Jesus' arrival on earth (a.k.a. Advent) signals God's firm resolve to restore the whole fallen creation, to make all things new.

We need this sort of bold, broad proclamation right about now every year. It challenges all the forces in our culture that would reduce the message of Advent to syrupy sentimentality that sells short God's great rescue plan which begins in Bethlehem's manger. Jesus was born among us not simply

to soothe us. Jesus was sent to this poor old earth to “repair the breach” and restore all that is broken.

The Broken Table

Stephen Bouman catalogs the brokenness the Christ-Child came to restore. *Those who struggle to get through each day, he reminds us, are people. They are our brothers and sisters:*

- *Disaster victims living in crummy hotels across the country.*
- *Old people who die because they cannot afford medicine.*
- *Millions of people without health care in the US.*
- *Economic migrants despised and sometimes beat up as they toil in this country for just enough for another day.*
- *Children who show up in schools that don't show up for them....*
- *Children who are abused to death in homes where no one checks to see how they are doing.*

This laundry list of human misery is an affront to God's vision in creating tables of abundance, community and mission. The table is broken: around the corner, across our country, throughout the world. In what way can our kitchen, altar and mission tables have any impact at all in living out this promise from Isaiah 58:12: “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in”?

This is not happening somewhere else in our world: it's happening right under our noses, right in our backyards, right in our communities. “One-third of Minnesota kids live in low-income homes” reads a headline in this morning's *Fargo Forum* newspaper.¹⁰

Ringling the Bell

The magnitude of the problems that create so many broken tables can be mind-numbing. Where to begin? And, is this even something “church folks” should concern themselves with, anyway?

¹⁰ “One-third of Minn. Kids live in low-income homes,” *Fargo Forum*, Monday, November 24, 2014 (page C4). For more information about this story go to <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>

The God of the Bible is unequivocal about the poor, the stranger, the last, the least, the most vulnerable, declares Stephen Bouman. Does God's mission have a church in those places?

Like the Salvation Army volunteers who stand beside those familiar red kettles in our shopping centers these December days, Bouman is sounding God's call, "ringing the bell" to remind us that God's mission, grounded in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, encompasses the whole creation. *The church has public tables, rich ways of encountering the most vulnerable in the world, but those tables are often not connected to each other...*

A church that refuses to hide its light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:15) doesn't shrink back from arenas of public engagement as avenues for expressing—not detracting from!—the good news of God's coming among us in the Infant born in Bethlehem.

Public Church Engagement

There is actually a **continuum of ways** *the church engages the public, accompanying society with the gospel*. Bouman highlights five of them:

Individual acts of love and mercy, like the various food ministries carried out by over 90% of ELCA congregations. Such expressions of charity are foundational for all the other ways the church engages in public ministry.

Direct services provided to people in need, such as the plethora of ministries offered by member-organizations in [Lutheran Services in America \(LSA\)](#)—one of the country's largest networks of social service providers, through which we Lutherans touch the lives of 6 million Americans annually. [Lutheran Social Service of MN](#), a member of LSA, blankets our whole state (including senior nutrition sites in 28 mid-sized and small towns of our synod!) with a wide array of services to those in need, expressing God's commitment to "rebuilding the breach."

Economic development is yet another way some congregations practice public engagement on behalf of the poor. For example, ELCA congregations are among the 57 member churches that operate [Churches United for the Homeless](#)—an agency that is actively seeking ways to address the Fargo-Moorhead area's desperate need for more affordable housing.

Advocacy, which is speaking truth to power by state, national, and global leaders guided by the public commitments of the church. One way we do that is through our shared ministry, [Lutheran](#)

[Advocacy Minnesota](#) (formerly known as the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota) and its new executive director Tammy Walhof. On behalf of the six ELCA synods of Minnesota Tammy makes complex public policy issues understandable to local church, campus, or community groups—and then empowers them to take action on the issues.

Grassroots mobilization, a.k.a. community organizing brings the church's public engagement full circle as people at the local level are empowered to recognize their capacity, find their voice and speak for themselves and their neighbors. We are blessed to have a growing partnership with [ISAIAH-Minnesota](#), a vehicle for congregations, clergy, and people of faith to act collectively and powerfully towards racial and economic equity in the state of Minnesota.

Scratching an Itch

Our Lord Jesus did not come among us begrudgingly or reluctantly—acting solely from some grim sense of duty. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews invites us, rather, to look to Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who **for the joy that was set before him** endured the cross, disregarding its shame...” (Hebrews 12:2)

It is God's good pleasure to take on human flesh and pitch a tent among us (John 1:14). In similar fashion it becomes our good pleasure to incarnate God's overflowing love in all the ways we serve God's rescue-and-recovery mission in the world.

People want to show up and make a difference in the lives of people and communities, especially those most vulnerable and suffering, writes Stephen Bouman. How can the church accompany civil society with the gospel?

Public church engagement “scratches an itch” that followers of Jesus (especially younger disciples) feel deeply. As we celebrate this holy season—and as we anticipate another year of living in God's grace—may God open our eyes to fresh pathways for living as “repairers of the breach.”

For discussion or reflection

- Where do you observe “broken tables” (pockets of human misery and need) in your own neighborhood or community?

- Where is your congregation along the continuum of ways the church is publicly engaged in the world?
- During this Advent season for whom are you praying? To whom is God calling you to offer Christ-like compassion?