

MERCYhouse &membership



**A guide for members
and those seeking to be**

**“And they devoted themselves to the
apostles' teaching and the fellowship,
to the breaking of bread
and the prayers.”**

Acts 2:42 (ESV)

A HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH BEING BUILT BY THE MERCY OF GOD

MERCYhouse

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All Scriptures quoted in this publication are from
the English Standard Version unless otherwise
specified.

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Ready, Shoot, Aim . . .

How do you start a church?

We asked ourselves that same question. How do you start a church, and more specifically, how do you start a church in Amherst, MA? Melanie Krumrey and I (Robert) and Joe and Wendi Greene came to the Pioneer Valley in 1999 to attempt such a feat. Joe and Wendi were actually already here at the time. Wendi was from a little town outside of Amherst called New Salem and had just married Joe who was also a native of Western, MA. The Krumreys are originally from Texas and had been doing college ministry in a local church just on the doorstep of Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, OK.

The Baptist Convention of New England had been attempting to find a planting team to start a church in Amherst for quite some time. Joe was attending a seminary that was actually housed in the building of the BCNE and had been talking to some of the staff about being a part of a planting team that would reach out to the campuses and community of the Pioneer Valley. Melanie and I had been praying about an opportunity to go to an unchurched region of the U.S. and start a new church. Through a friendship with BCNE staff member John Ramirez, we were approached with the opportunity to plant a church in Amherst.

Amherst is a place known for chewing up church plants and spitting them out. The spiritual history of this place is littered with failed attempts at planting churches and those that are planted struggle to survive. With this in mind, you would think that the crack

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team that was sent to plant MERCYhouse would be extremely well qualified and trained. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Joe and Wendi were newly married and brand new to ministry and Robert and Melanie were new to New England. Neither family had ever planted a church nor did they have any coaches around them who knew how to plant churches either.

Truth be told, this effort should have been doomed from the start and we were too naïve to even know it. This brings us to the question with which we started this chapter – how do you plant a church? If we knew anything, we knew we needed to pray. So we did. Joe and I prayer walked¹ literally for hours. We walked each of the five campuses and the streets of Amherst, South Hadley, and Northampton. We used a prayer uttered by the Apostle Paul when he was planting churches in the first century:

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

Colossians 4:3,4 (NIV)

After prayer walking, Joe and I would then return to my house and pray some more; praying that God would do a supernatural work in this valley in opening a door for the message of the gospel and helping us to proclaim it clearly whenever that door got opened. We also engaged people any way we could. This also was something that we picked up from the Apostle Paul in the next few verses in Colossians 4:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Colossians 4:5,6 (NIV)

We walked into the Chamber of Commerce in Amherst and asked if MERCYhouse could become a member of the chamber. The executive director of the chamber looked

¹ Prayer Walking – A method of praying that involves actually praying at the locations where one desires God to

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at us with a mixture of warm acceptance and dread. He then quickly informed me that he was agnostic and that he would have to bring our request up to the board of directors. He did that. They said yes, and we were off to the races. Within two weeks, the exec was calling us and asking for help with volunteer labor for various events. Then Leisure Services (our town rec. dept.) found out about us through the chamber and we started helping out there too. This was the genesis of our yearly involvement in the “Taste of Amherst” and “The Fourth of July Celebration” and other community events.

As summer was coming to a close, we knew that things were going to drastically change. Students were coming back to the five colleges and we knew we wanted to reach out to them. We hired a graphics person to create a professional looking brochure and we purchased a banner. We then showed up at Umass and set up a table in the Campus Center. We stayed there from morning until evening talking to anyone who would listen and inviting them to an informational meeting at The Lord Jeffrey Inn in downtown Amherst.

By this time, some extra hands had arrived. Far, far away in a land called Kentucky, a Baptist student ministries director named Keith Inman had recruited three students from Murray State to come and help us. Keith had been on a “vision tour” where ministers from the south tour a region of the U.S. that has significantly fewer Christians than places like Kentucky. The purpose of these tours is to encourage ministries who have 100’s of college students and resources to get excited about partnering with ministries who are just getting off the ground. Keith walked each of the five campuses with John Ramirez and Joe Green hearing about the needs and praying that God would raise up a church in Amherst, MA before the Krumreys even knew such an opportunity existed.

When Keith got back to KY, he pitched the idea at an enormous student conference that they should all transfer from their current campus to Umass for the purpose of helping plant MERCYhouse. Three students (John, Danette, and Jocelyn) approached Keith that day and said they wanted to do it. Even more amazing is that they actually did.

John could play the guitar and lead worship. He was also willing to talk to anyone who would listen about a new church called MERCYhouse. Danette and Jocelyn were also great evangelists and had a heart to not only reach people but help them grow as disciples of Jesus. They all three lived in residence halls and were inviting people like crazy to come and check out our new church plant.

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The Core Group

As we walked into the Lord Jeff to set-up for our first gathering on Sunday, September 12, 1999, I was really hoping and praying for 10 people - meaning the Krumreys, Greens, John, Danette, and Jocelyn and three new ones. I knew how hard the soil was and in spite of all the conversations we'd had and the news ads in the town paper and the Collegian, I just didn't expect very many to show up in some hotel conference room almost a mile away from campus.

As we stood there waiting with our overpriced coffee and cookies that the hotel made us buy if we wanted to have refreshments, students started to walk in. Jessica Sachs, Jill Browning, Amy Bouldin, Noah Farnham, Mike Hundley, Wang Lee, Rachel Abbot, Abe Sandel, Sarah Hakanson (Cartel), Elise Strachan, Victoria D'Cruz, Laura Holle and of course John Daily, Jocelyn Turner, and Danette. The strange thing was that many of these students were part of the student exchange program at Umass. Jill was from Seattle, Amy from Nashville, Victoria from Great Britain, Laura from Oklahoma and the three from Murray, KY.

All total, there were about 25 people in the room and I was blown away. We had rented a room that seated 20 so it felt packed out and everyone seemed excited about the prospect of a new church plant. John led some songs and I preached and described as best I could the vision of our church plant. I really had no plan for what to do next so we just told them to come back next week. Thankfully the conference room was available.

We continued to table at Umass until the University came to us and let us know that we weren't officially supposed to be in the campus center and that a Umass employee had made a mistake in letting us in. Again, in the providence of God, he had given us a start and that start was students. Next Sunday finally arrived and many of the same students returned and brought others. By then, we had a little more of a plan for next steps and at the end of the service, I invited people who were interested in being a part of the core team to meet at my house on Tuesday night. Again, this seemed to be doomed to fail seeing as how these students had only been around us for two hours over two weeks and were now going to show up in some guy's living room.

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About a dozen of them showed up and we talked further about what being a part of a church planting core meant. As they left our home that night, all of them seemed to indicate that they were all in. Jill Browning made a point to come over to me and shake my hand and let me know that she would do anything she could to help get the church off the ground. The intensity of those days and of those students was electric. The Holy Spirit was in the process of birthing a church!

College Students

As you hear about our start, you may be wondering how we started a church with college students. On paper this sounds like something that yet again was doomed to fail. In fact, at this stage we asked the students if they would help us do things to reach out to community members. We needed to be able to pay the bills and students just weren't going to be able to do that. Our core team was happy to help out. We did movies for kids, door to door giveaways, staffed community events, prayer walked, handed out water on the bike trail, anything to engage new people.

The result was that every time that we did an event using students as our volunteers, they brought their friends. Families and other community members were engaged at the events but when Sunday rolled around, the student friends showed up and no one from the community. Over the course of the next six months, it became obvious that at least for this season in the life of our church, we were going to be made up by students.

This has made a significant impact on our church even today. We continue to be a church that is about half college students. This is part of the DNA of our church body and we want it to continue. We also desire that families and other community folks will continue to join our church as well. We need them to link arms with us in the mission of reaching and building and sending students. Even the purchase of our facilities and where they are located feed into the vision of reaching students.

A Home for MERCYhouse

That brings us to another part of our history; the purchase of our facility. Unbeknownst to us, this story started back in 1999 when Jessica Sachs showed up at our church. Jessica was the only New England Baptist student that we had and she had actually been praying that a church would be planted before she graduated from Umass. She was one of the students that Joe Green had met a year before the start of the church and she showed up at our info. table at Umass giddy with excitement.

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Jessica was an extremely committed member of our core team in those early days. She showed up, she helped with worship, she went door to door, she did it all; and she loved it. She then graduated and got a job in Boston with the accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers. On September 11, 2001 she boarded a plane in Boston that was outbound to L.A. It made a sharp detour toward NYC and was used by terrorists that day to blow up the World Trade Center. We were devastated. We mourned her loss and remembered her in a Umass memorial service full of School of Management professors and school friends. We then did another service at her home church in Billerica, MA. The service at Billerica was so full that they had to set up speakers in the parking lot for overflow. PWC chartered a bus for their employees to be transported to and from the service. Members of the media were there interviewing all those who were participating in the service.

So much came out of this. Jessica's life was a beautiful testimony of the reality of Jesus in her life. Students, professors, work colleagues, complete strangers heard about the hope that was found in Jessica's Jesus in spite of such calamity. Jessica's family also asked that donations given in her memory be given to MERCYhouse. We made sure these were saved in a separate account for something significant which we hoped would be a facility.

In the fall of 2004, MERCYhouse had reached over 200 in attendance and was meeting in a lecture hall at Umass. We were still mostly students but now had students from all five colleges. In 2000, Lois Grandmaison had come from Texas to join our church staff and immediately began pouring her life into students especially Smith College students. It was an exciting time of growth for our church. The only problem was that we were having a harder and harder time finding places to meet.

With each season of growth we would move to a different location for Sunday worship. First it was the Lord Jeffrey Inn, then the Jones Library, then Stirn Auditorium at Amherst College and then Morrill Science Center at Umass. Because of constant scheduling issues, we ended up meeting in 7 different places in the course of the first 7 weeks of fall semester 2004. This was extremely frustrating and yet somehow students kept finding us and attending our worship services. We knew this problem of a meeting space had to be remedied.

While all of this Sunday morning shifting was happening, a church building came up for sale on 365 North Pleasant Street just off of campus near most of the Umass frat houses. We made an appointment with a realtor one day and took a look at the facility. In spite of the pink walls, red carpet, and white church pews, we knew the space would be perfect.

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We asked the realtor what we had to do to get things rolling on the 1.2 million dollar purchase and they said we needed to make an offer and then put down non refundable earnest money to the tune of \$40,000. The amount that had been given in memory of Jessica from 100's of people (friends, family, strangers, American Airlines . . .) was \$40,000. In faith, we wrote the check.

Then we started raising the other \$160,000 needed to complete the down payment. Again, something that seemed destined to fail. A church made up of mostly college students trying to raise a huge sum of money and convince some bank that we could pay a mortgage once we close the deal. We closed the deal in September of 2005 and by God's grace we haven't missed a payment.

Church Planting

Another story that is important for understanding our church is a story about church planting. From early on, we knew our one little church plant was not the hope of The Pioneer Valley. The hope of The Valley was Jesus raising up lots of disciples who would be gathered in lots of churches. Seeing God plant MERCYhouse gave us hope that he could do that again and again if we were willing to believe in his willingness to do so. We talked and prayed about the possibilities of God birthing a church planting movement in our lifetime and even started to pray that he would bring about the planting of 50 churches by 2020 (our 2020 vision). While we don't think all of these churches will come from MERCYhouse, we do want to plant as many as we can and assist any Christ centered denomination or group who wants to plant a church in our area.

Our first church was planted in 2008 by Nate and Sarah Cartel. Nate and Sarah had both been students at Umass and Sarah had been a part of that very first group of students that had planted MERCYhouse. Nate spent a few years on our staff as an associate pastor and then started an outreach service at night on the campus of Umass (MERCYhouse Nights). Within weeks, the core that was working at starting this service began to get excited about getting a completely new church started. So yet again, a rag tag group of students started a second church in Amherst, MA. This church, Vita Nova, is now a thriving church filled with both students and community members from our region.

We have seen two more churches planted since this one (Valley Church in South Hadley and City Church in Springfield). In 2012, Valley Church has had to close its doors after a three year effort to get things off the ground. Our most recent church planting focus is in Greenfield, MA being led by Nate Cartel and at the writing of this is in the core building

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stage. Like we said, we believe that God desires to reach people throughout our valley and gather them into churches and we want to be a part of that.

There are obviously 1000's more stories we could tell. Many students who have come to know Christ here, been baptized, made disciples and sent all over the world. Many who have met their spouses here and are now having children and raising them to love Jesus and participate in his kingdom. Countless hours of volunteer work at town events and at Craig's Doors homeless shelter. Prayers prayed, tears shed, joy on top of joy from new life found in Christ. We hope that you'll join us in the next chapter of our story. Whether you are a child, a college student, or a community member, God is working in our church and has a part of the plot line that he is perhaps calling you to be a part of. We would love to have you as part of our household so if you are the least bit intrigued, keep reading and find out more about what it means to be a part of MERCYhouse.

Chapter
2

The Good News

What is the core of the Christian Faith?

What is the core of the Christian Faith and of MERCYhouse? In a word - the gospel. The Apostle Paul writes in the New Testament book of Romans:

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

Romans 1:16 (ESV)

The word "gospel" in English is translated from a Greek word, *euangelion*, which means "good news." It was used by Roman emperors to announce the coming of their reign, which in their estimation, was a tremendous gift to humanity. Ruler after ruler came through Rome proclaiming their "gospel", their "good news," yet each ruler died and left things more or less like they found them, or worse.

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The Christian gospel is the proclamation of the reign of a Ruler that is unlike anything the world has ever seen. It is a message that is profound and life changing, and it is not only for Romans and Jews but for all the nations of the world. It is an invitation to join a country that is above and beyond any political regime; a country that is even above and beyond this world and the existence that we experience here.

Look back at the text from Romans. Notice the kind of confidence that the Apostle Paul (writer of Romans) has in this gospel; it is the “power of God!” How can the gospel of Jesus equal the power of God? Shouldn’t the power of God simply be the power of God?

The simple answer is that the gospel message (we’ll define it in a moment) is the means that God has chosen for His power to be released in the world. The gospel certainly has no power apart from God, but God has so exclusively limited Himself to working through the gospel that the gospel itself is the power. We cannot forget this as disciples and disciple-makers (also known as church members). If we don’t have the gospel, we don’t have any God-given power. If we proclaim the gospel and set it center stage in our church, it will allow for a powerful intervention by God in our lives and the lives of those whom we seek to influence.

Since the gospel is so powerful and essential, we really need to define what it is. One of the most succinct places to go to in the Bible to answer the question of what the gospel is, is in 1 Corinthians, in it Paul writes:

"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."

1 Corinthian 15:3-5

Paul grew up in Jewish culture where passing on tradition was of utmost importance. One of the reasons we know the Bible has been accurately transmitted is how the Jews

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painstakingly copied their biblical manuscripts. For example, the scribes of Jesus' day knew exactly how many letters there were in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). They knew what the middle letter and the middle word of the Torah were. The scribes would count the number of letters from the first one to the middle, and from the back one to the middle. If their count was off by one, they would burn the manuscript and start over. Paul here is using that same Jewish technical language to describe the "passing on" that Christians are to do with the gospel. They are to be as diligent and accurate as the Jewish scribes, perhaps more so, when passing on this most precious of biblical truth.

Paul then tells his disciples what they are to pass on. He sums it up in the phrase "Christ died for sins." It is essential that we understand that central to the gospel message is the truth that Jesus, our King, died a sacrificial death in our place for sins that we committed. This is not your ordinary king. Before Jesus is our Lord, He is first our Savior. Jesus Himself proclaimed this in Matthew 20:28. In this verse He says that He came to serve humanity by dying as a "ransom for many." We, who had been kidnapped by Satan, sin, and death were rescued and ransomed, by our Savior through His death on the cross.

Paul continues to tell us Jesus wasn't faking his death. He really suffered and really died. His heart, which was fully human, really stopped. His lungs, which were just like yours and mine, really ceased to take in air. He was laid in a cold dark tomb. As far as Jesus' followers knew this was the end of their leader. And then on the third day, he rose again.

Many a great leader has died for their cause. From William Wallace to Martin Luther King Jr., leaders have died brutal deaths that spurred their followers on to participate in their movement with even greater zeal than before. This leader is different. This leader died, was buried, and rose again as a victor, defeating our captives of death, sin and Satan himself!

As might be expected, some people are skeptical of this claim. Many today think that perhaps this is metaphor, perhaps Christ resurrected spiritually in the hearts of His followers, but a dead man rising, that seems impossible. Paul is prepared for this and lets us know that the events that make up the gospel happened in history in front of eyewitnesses. In fact, more than five hundred people at one time were eyewitnesses to the risen Christ.

A few of these eyewitnesses, and one man who had access to eyewitnesses, Luke, wrote about their experiences with Jesus. We call these written records "the Gospels." They are

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Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These narratives make up the first four books of the New Testament. They have often been described as having very long introductions leading up to the body of their work- the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is the core of the Christian message. In the only two religious rituals instituted by Christ, the church role-plays this story. Through communion and baptism we again and again point to the center of our faith - the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. In the words of Christ we do these rituals “in remembrance of him.”² We are not remembering that we should be nice to everybody and never tell lies; we are remembering the gospel, the foundation of our faith.

You may have noticed the phrase “according to the Scriptures” being repeated twice in Paul’s account of the gospel story in 1Corinthians 15. Paul sees the need for repeating himself like this in such a short verse because he is letting us know that the gospel is part of a much larger story. It’s not something that dropped out of thin air in first century Palestine. This gospel is the pinnacle of God’s work among humans that has been going on since the beginning of time. The church throughout history has often summarized that

larger story into the following four acts: **Created, Fallen, Redeemed and Restored.**

Created

In order to be a Christian, one must believe that there is a God and that this God has created us. In Genesis 1 and 2 we find God created the world, and His creation culminated in the creation of human beings. Those human beings are created to be in relationship with God, themselves, each other, and the rest of creation. This is how Act 1 of God’s story begins.

If you take a look at Genesis 2, you will find those four relationships represented. Adam’s relationship with God is like that of a child with God as his Father. God is providing for Adam, protecting him and instructing him. God then tells Adam that “it is not good for man to be alone.” God introduces the need of every human to be in relationship with other humans. God solves the problem of man’s aloneness by creating Eve and giving her to Adam to be a companion and helper to him. Adam responds by professing his thanksgiving to God and admiration of Eve.

² Luke 22:19

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We next find out that Adam and Eve are in perfect relationship with themselves. They are “naked and unashamed.” They are not self-conscious in any way. They are not wondering what the other might be thinking of them. They are content to just be, and be the way God created them to be.

Finally they are in perfect relationship with the earth. Adam and Eve are cultivating the garden that God planted for them, and it is responding by producing good fruit for food. They are the garden’s overseers, and the garden is their good home. Yet, if you know the story, something earth shattering is about to happen.

Fallen

In Genesis 2:16-17 we find out that there is a ground rule for living in the garden. The ground rule is this: to never eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this prohibition, God is giving Adam and Eve an opportunity to choose to continue to be in relationship with Him, or choose to separate themselves from Him. The consequence for disobeying this command, and thus forsaking their relationship with God, is death.

In a startling twist, there is another voice besides God in the garden with Adam and Eve. A serpent (we know to be Satan) adds to the laboratory of choice. He offers an alternative view of Adam and Eve’s existence. He proposes that God isn’t as good and trustworthy as He says and as they first thought. Satan says that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will not bring about death, but instead bring about an illumination and an empowerment that God is trying to hold back from them. Adam and Eve choose to believe this satanic alternative explanation of their existence and the rule God has set up, and the result is horrific. Theologians call what happened the Fall.

Just as God had promised, the consequence of their choice was death. While this death certainly included physical death, it also encompassed much more. This “death” spoken of by God in Genesis 2 included a severing of all those relationships that were mentioned earlier. The first consequence that becomes obvious is the death of their relationship with themselves. As soon as they eat the fruit, Adam and Eve try their hand at sewing to cover up their naked bodies because now they are feeling shame and are self-consciousness for the first time.

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There is also a death in their relationship with God. God shows up for His daily afternoon walk with His son and daughter and instead of jumping into His arms as they normally did, Man and Woman are hiding in the bushes. This is the first time humans have known separation from God. God in his mercy pursues Adam and asks him if he has eaten of the fruit. Adam reveals the death of his relationship with God and Eve by letting God know that it was “the woman” whom “God gave him” that caused him to eat the fruit.

We soon find out about the death in their relationship with the earth when we read the section in Genesis 3 sometimes called the curse.³ It’s a listing off of the consequences that resulted from Adam and Eve’s decision to choose Satan and themselves over God. In the section of the curse spoken to Adam, we find out that work will now be “toil” and that the earth will produce “thorns and thistles” instead of responding with fruitfulness to human cultivation.

It is a sad moment for humans. Like opening the exit door of a plane at thirty thousand feet, deathly chaos has replaced what was once a paradise. Paul describes this in Romans, he writes:

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”

Romans 5:12

Even in these tragic events of Genesis 3, we see two glimmers of hope. The first glimmer is that God, in his infinite mercy is not done with humans. He sees the pathetically sewn fig leaves that Adam and Eve made for themselves and are wearing, and He responds by killing a few animals and giving their skins to Adam and Eve as clothing. It is tragic that God would have to kill His own creation to take care of these two rebellious children, but it is a foreshadowing of things to come in this larger story of the gospel. Many animals will die for the good of humans before this story ends. Each sacrifice points to the death of something much more precious than animals. They point to a final Sacrifice that will have to die to benefit humanity by giving life once again.

³ Genesis 3:14–19

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Redeemed

The other glimmer of hope in Genesis 3 is contained in the curse God gives to Satan. In this curse it is explained that Satan and human beings will be at war with one another for a good part of the larger story. The way this is stated is that God will put “enmity” between humans and Satan. Not only is a war predicted, but so is the outcome. Genesis 3 states that Satan will strike the heel of the offspring of Eve but that this same offspring will crush Satan’s head. While heel striking does not sound fun, it isn’t nearly as devastating as head striking. The hope in these verses is that somehow a human being will one day reverse the mess. The Bible begins the third Act of God’s unfolding story, Redemption, immediately after the Fall.

The Apostle Paul follows up the problem of death in Romans 5:12 with the solution:

“For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

Romans 5:17

Jesus eventually comes through the travail of many a birthing mother for the purpose of dying a death that would take on the consequences that were experienced by all humanity starting in the garden with Adam and Eve’s disobedience. The Apostle Paul writes it this way:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 6:23

The wages for sin had to be paid by us or by someone else. That someone else is Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death allows for a “great exchange,” whereby through faith we receive the free gift of eternal life because Jesus was willing to receive an undeserved death for sin. Jesus dies to finally Redeem God’s people, a redemption that is prophesied about and foreshadowed throughout the Old Testament.

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Restoration

God's story does not stop at Jesus' death and resurrection. Although Redemption has been finished, we are still in a broken and sinful world, surrounded by death, sin, disease and heartbreak. The gospel message has a future hope much like Genesis 3 contained a future hope for Adam and Eve. God has written a final Act to his story, Restoration.

The gospel tells us that someday Jesus is coming back, and this time he will stay. We see glimmers of what restoration looks like in Jesus' resurrection body, the fellowship of the church, and the constant reassurance of the Bible that we will have glorious bodies, ample rewards, and a new heaven and new earth. The gospel tells us that someday all will be good again as it was in the Garden.

The Apostle John writes in the final book of the Bible:

" Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Revelation 21:1-5

These four Acts are a good framework for understanding the gospel. Central to each one is the cross of Christ. It is through Jesus that all of Creation was created.⁴ It is through Jesus that the curse would be taken away. It is through Jesus' life, death, burial and resurrection that we were able to be redeemed. Finally, it is through Christ's glorious return and final victory over Satan, sin and death that we will be able to enjoy the new

⁴ Colossians 1:15-20

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heaven and new earth, receiving glorious resurrection bodies and returned fellowship with God and each other for eternity.

This gospel story needs to be on the forefront of our minds as we begin the journey to becoming a disciple and a disciple-maker (aka church member). It is the fuel and the goal. It is the beginning and the end of everything that we do as a church. It's the reason that we ask new converts to be baptized. It's the reason we take communion each and every week. It's the reason Jesus is the hero of every sermon and small group Bible study. It's the reason we plant churches. It's the reason, we are compelling you to join our church. Not because we want to build up an organization and point to our success, but because Jesus “. . . died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

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Chapter
3

Baptized Into the Name

What is the meaning and method of Baptism?

Baptism is an important part of any conversation about church membership. The scripture is very clear that Jesus wanted his disciples to baptize new converts and that it was an important part of the church's mission of "making disciples". We find this in places like Matthew 28:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:19,20

These are some of the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples while on earth and they are sometimes called the "great commission" and include several truths regarding how the church should go about making disciples or followers of Jesus. One of the things commanded here is to baptize those who choose to become followers of Jesus. This

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word “baptism” is being translated from a Greek word “*baptizo*” which means to immerse or submerge.

It seems that the first followers of Jesus take this instruction regarding baptism pretty seriously. Peter delivers the first gospel preaching sermon to a crowd of thousands in downtown Jerusalem and many in the crowd are “cut to the heart”. They ask him what they should do next and this is what he says:

“ . . . Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 2:38

So why is the baptism thing so important for the church to carry out? This goes back to the gospel. In Matthew 28, Jesus instructs his disciples to baptize into the Name (singular) of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. A Christian baptism is one that represents the person’s new identity; one that has been given to them now that they are a Christian. Because of their faith in what God the Son (Jesus) did for them by dying on the cross, they are now beloved children of God the Father. This was God the Father’s plan all along. He actually sent Jesus⁵ to rescue humans from their sin and Jesus willingly⁶ went to the cross to fulfill this plan. As the Father’s beloved children, we also receive the gift of God the Holy Spirit⁷ who dwells inside of us and gives us life both now and throughout eternity. This is why Christian baptism is in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It’s literally in the Name of the triune God.⁸

What about the method of baptism? Why would God ask the church to give all of their new recruits a bath? It’s one of the ways that the church preaches the gospel. When the church gathers together for worship, it preaches the gospel in three ways. It sings the

⁵ John 3:16

⁶ John 10:17

⁷ Romans 8:9

⁸ This is what Christians mean when they say that God is Triune or a Trinity. He is one God and three Persons and each of these Persons is fully God. It is essential to believe this in order to be a Christian. Also see the account of Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 4.

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gospel⁹, it says the gospel¹⁰, and it sees the gospel. The way that the church sees the gospel is through something known as ordinances or sacraments. These ordinances are visible rituals that Jesus has commanded the church to participate in and they have everything to do with the heart of the church, the gospel.

One that we observe every Sunday is communion or what is sometimes called the Lord's Supper. Jesus instituted this on the night before his death on the cross.¹¹ It involves the eating of bread and the drinking of wine or grape juice. This is an opportunity for the church to remember the source of salvation and the central reason there even is a church – the death of Jesus. He instructs the church to do this meal of remembrance until he returns at his second coming which helps the church keep the main thing the main thing which is the gospel.

Baptism is another way that the church “sees” the gospel. As we submerge people into a pool or pond of water and bring them back up again, we remember the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. **The person being baptized is communicating in a very overt way that they believe the gospel of the dying/rising/returning Savior that the church is preaching.** We try to enhance this profession aspect of baptism by encouraging each baptismal candidate to treat their baptism like a wedding and send out invites to friends and family. We also ask each person being baptized to write out their testimony. A testimony is the story of who you were before you found out about Jesus, how it is you came to believe in Jesus, and how Jesus has begun to change you now that you are in a relationship with him.

Baptism is also a visible means for telling the church and the world what has happened to you personally as a result of your having put faith in the crucified Christ. Spiritually speaking, you have been relocated from being outside of Christ to being “in Christ”. Baptism gives us a seen symbol that expresses this unseen truth. The Apostle Paul writes about this in Romans chapter six where he writes;

⁹ Colossians 3:16

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 4:1,2

¹¹ Luke 22:14-20

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Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3-4

Baptism is also the way that you join the church. The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:4-6

Paul is seeking to unify the church at Ephesus and one of his ways of doing that is saying that his readers not only share “one faith” but “one baptism”. Every believer is commanded by Jesus to show their faith in him and join a local church by getting baptized. This was true 2000 years ago and is still true today.

One question that sometimes arises is why different kinds of churches handle baptism in different kinds of ways. For instance, why do churches like ours baptize adult converts and do so by completely submerging people in water while others baptize infants and do so by sprinkling? The reason is theology.

Theologically, churches fall into three different categories. This is certainly oversimplification, but for the purpose of getting a handle on this sometimes controversial subject, we’ve got to start somewhere. These three categories are Sacramental, Covenantal, and Conversional. The first group (**Sacramental**), include churches like Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Methodists. While they would have differing views on the meaning of baptism and communion, they would share the common understanding that somehow the real presence of Jesus and his forgiveness is being delivered to the Christian via the elements of wine and wafer and water. For instance, Lutherans hold to a belief called “consubstantiation” which means that they believe that the real presence of Christ travels parallel to the bread and the wine.

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Catholics, on the other hand, believe in “transubstantiation” which is the belief that the bread and drink actually becomes the body and blood of Christ.

Read below 3 excerpts from the Roman Catholic Catechism:

1210 Christ instituted the sacraments of the new law. There are seven: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony. The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life:[1] they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life

1115 Jesus' words and actions during his hidden life and public ministry were already salvific, for they anticipated the power of his Paschal mystery. They announced and prepared what he was going to give the Church when all was accomplished. **The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church,** for "what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries." [32]

1213 Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (vitae spiritualis ianua),[4] and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. **Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God;** we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: "Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word." [5]

These churches believe that their priests and pastors have been given the power and authority to “sanctify” bread, wine, and water and disseminate grace to the partaker. This theology drives the belief that babies should be baptized even though a baby cannot yet understand the gospel and respond in faith. The thinking of these churches, is that baptism essentially saves the baby until the baby can grow old enough to confirm his or her faith around age 12.

The second category of churches is **Covenantal**. This group includes Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Here's an excerpt from the Westminster Catechism used by Presbyterians:

Q: Which are the sacraments of the New Testament? **A:** The sacraments of the New Testament are baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

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Q: What is baptism? **A:** Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's.

Q: To whom is baptism to be administered?

A: Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; **but the infants of such as are members of the visible church, are to be baptized.**

They see the church as God's New Covenant Community and baptism as a sign of that New Covenant (i.e. the covenant of grace). The sign of God's Old Covenant with Israel was the circumcision of every male child. In covenant churches, baptism is seen in much the same way as circumcision. If a child is born into one of the families in the church, it is assumed that this child is ordained by God to be a Christian and should therefore be given the sign of the covenant which is baptism. Later in the child's life, he or she is then given an opportunity to confirm their faith.

What are we to make of these beliefs and practices? At MERCYhouse, we do our best to look to the Bible and also learn from our sacramental and covenantal brothers and sisters. We are probably a bit more sacramental than most Baptist/evangelical types. Communion was a weekly part of the worship of the early church¹² and so it is at MH. Something special and spiritual does happen when we gather around the communion table as a church. Some in our church have had spiritual experiences during communion. Some have even experienced a moment during communion that they believe to be their conversion to Christianity.

We also believe a lot of what is contained in covenantal beliefs. The church is the new covenant community of God. Israel was a type that ultimately pointed toward a community that is ransomed by Jesus and is called out of every tribe and nation. Baptism is the sign of entering that covenant community. We are grateful for much that is taught by these churches.

Most importantly we want to turn to the Bible to understand the meaning and method of baptism. As was mentioned earlier, the word baptism means to submerge something. Why would John the Baptist need the Jordan River for baptisms by sprinkling?¹³ If one is

¹² The "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42

¹³ Matthew 3:6

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being symbolically baptized into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, it seems to make sense that one must be plunged under water and then brought back up again.

We also see a pattern in the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts, where people hear the gospel, respond in faith and are baptized.¹⁴ These people are old enough to hear and understand and make a profession that they are trusting in Jesus for salvation. This kind of understanding of baptism is found in churches that would be considered **Conversional**. MERCYhouse is in this category as are Baptists, Evangelicals, and most Non-denominational churches. This means that joining Jesus and the church first happens when a person places faith in Jesus and is converted. Baptism then becomes a way for that person to profess their faith and join the family of God that is the church.

Here is an excerpt from the Baptist Faith and Message which is put out by the denomination with which we are affiliated:

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

So what if you don't want to be baptized? As lovingly as we can, we want to ask you to reconsider. This is technically the first command that Jesus gives to a new convert – "be baptized". If you hold to differing views on baptism but believe in the gospel that we are preaching, there is another option. MERCYhouse is a melting pot of people from many different backgrounds so it is very common for people who are from different church traditions to join in with us during their college years and then return to their earlier roots.

If that is you, we welcome you as an affiliate member. This means that you are letting us know that you believe in the gospel and are on board with the vision of our church. The restriction that will be placed on you is that you will only have a voice in our church summit meetings (twice a year) but you will not be able to vote. These meetings include votes by the congregation on our yearly spending plan and any decisions regarding our church staff and other leadership appointments. There will also be certain positions of leadership that will not be available to you (for instance our leadership team) because you do not completely agree with the essential teachings of the church.

¹⁴ Acts 2:37,38; Acts 16:30-33

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Our hope is that if you are a Christian who has never been baptized by immersion, that you will profess your faith through baptism. We typically baptize people at the end of each semester – in a portable pool that we bring into the church in December and in Puffer’s Pond at the beginning of May. In order to do this, you will need to attend our New Members Class, write out your testimony, and ask someone to read your testimony on the day of the baptism. You’ll also want to wear something modest that you can get wet in, and bring a towel to dry off, and some dry clothes to change into. These baptismal celebrations have been some of the highpoints of the history of our church. We would love to see you there!

Chapter

4

The Vision

What is a church supposed to be?

Church. This word conjures up a whole host of thoughts and ideas in people's minds: white steeples, little Sunday school chairs, old men in robes and funny hats. Chances are what comes to mind probably doesn't have much to do with what the word actually means.

The etymology of the word "church" can be traced to the German word "kirche" which means fortress. Honestly, this really doesn't capture what Jesus and the New Testament writers were thinking when they used the word "ecclesia" to refer to God's people, which is the Greek word that is translated "church" in our English Bibles. The word ecclesia in Greco-Roman culture was used to describe a legislative body in a particular region that would gather periodically and then scatter throughout the region the rest of the time. The members of each ecclesia were the eyes and ears and influencers for that particular region. Jesus used this word to talk about God's people because he envisioned this kind of "gathered" and "scattered" community.

So what is it that brings the church together? The gospel. One of the greatest chapters in the Bible on what the church is to be . . . and do is Romans chapter 12. The Apostle Paul opens the chapter like this:

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“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”
Romans 12:1 (NIV 1984)

We usually think about this verse in terms of the individual Christian, but Paul is launching into a teaching about the church. He first points to the epicenter of the church which is the gospel. He does this by using the phrase “in view of God’s mercy”. Words like grace and mercy are always shorthand for the gospel that we talked about in an earlier chapter in this book. God showed mercy at the cross by having compassion for sinners and out of that compassion withholding the punishment that the sinners deserved. This is what is meant by the word “mercy”. It involves withholding deserved punishment out of a heart of compassion.

This is the mercy of MERCYhouse. There is a reason that the word “mercy” is first in our logo and that it is in all caps. This is referring to the mercy of the gospel and is the most important requirement for any group of people to call themselves a church. This means that buildings and steeples and church programs and and and . . . have life in them first and foremost because of the powerful gospel that was first preached by Peter in the temple courts in Jerusalem 2000 years ago.

Notice what happens when a group of people get a “view” of this mercy? They respond to this good news by “offering their bodies as a living sacrifice”. This is described in the plural. It is a group of people who are offering their lives as living sacrifices and doing so together. This “living sacrifice” language is a harkening back to a particular kind of Old Testament animal sacrifice. While some sacrifices were specifically for the atonement of sin, there was one called a “whole burnt offering” that worshippers could offer as a way of showing God their absolute unconditional devotion. The way that this sacrifice was offered showed the surrender of the worshipper by being completely consumed by the altar fire. This was unique to other sacrifices which usually involved the sprinkling of the blood on the altar fire and then keeping the meat to be eaten by the priests, the worshipper, or both.

In Romans 12:1, Paul reveals that the church is made up of people who are “living sacrifices”. In the same spirit of those in the Old Testament who desired to surrender all to God in faith, New Testament people of God offer themselves as daily living sacrifices in response to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This is the New Testament definition of worship – responding to the mercy and grace of the gospel by unconditionally surrendering to God in faith.

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Once 2 or more people respond to the gospel in this way, they are well on their way of being a church.¹⁵ The Bible says that once one is a child of God, they are also part of the family of God. Later in Romans 12, Paul exhorts the church at Rome to “be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”¹⁶ If we are a Christian, we have joined Jesus and we have joined his family. This is the “house” part of the MERCYhouse. Community is not the origin of the church, but it is extremely important for being formed as a disciple of Jesus and participating in the mission of God in the world.

This is implied in the way that Jesus carried out his mission on earth from day one of his teaching ministry. He called disciples to “follow him”¹⁷ but at the same time he called them to join his small band of disciples and be formed in their love and worship of HIM while living in a community of people that they would have never chosen for themselves. This hasn’t changed. Jesus wants every Christian to join a gospel focused, Spirit empowered family that is on the mission of inviting others to respond to the gospel in faith and join the family of God – the church.

This mission of inviting others to the gospel and into the family of God is a bit different than a normal earthly family. Earthly families typically grow from biological growth and sometimes through adoption. The church family grows through supernatural growth that comes from people hearing the gospel, converting to Christ and being baptized into the local expression of the people of God, the church! This is what Jesus is saying to his disciples when he invites them to be “fishers of men”¹⁸. The family is constantly expanding with new disciples who are making new disciples and on and on it goes.

¹⁵ Matthew 18:20

¹⁶ Romans 12:10

¹⁷ Matthew 4:19

¹⁸ Matthew 4:19

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We summarize this vision of the church in the following vision statement:

“We are a household of faith being built by the mercy of God”

We are a community of people who have “viewed” the mercy in the gospel and have responded by unconditionally surrendering to God as a living sacrifice. This doesn’t mean that we are perfect, far from it. It instead means that we have given everything that we know of ourselves to everything that we know of God and as quickly as we can confess and repent when we don’t. We who have responded in this way have become gospel-anchored and Spirit empowered worshippers of Jesus who now do life together as a spiritual family and are on the mission of inviting others to respond to the gospel in faith and join our family. This means MERCYhouse is always “being built” both by the addition of new people and the ongoing growth of people that are already part of our family.

Some who are reading this may be thinking, “I’m not ready to be that all in with Jesus and his church. Does that mean that I can’t be here anymore?” Nothing could be farther from the truth. One of the things that we’ve seen time and time again is that many people in our area are completely new to Christianity. They usually come in thinking they know what it is about and end up being confronted with the truths that we’ve tried to communicate in this book. We know that usually it takes time to digest these truths. Questions come up about any number of things and we take these questions seriously.

If that is where you are in your search for God and who he is, welcome! We are glad you are here. In fact, a major reason for planting this church was so people like you could come in and listen to sermons, participate in small group discussions, ask questions of individuals, and take the time needed to process all of this. We’ll never make apologies for our beliefs about God and we’ll be lovingly forthright about those beliefs, but we will also give you permission to ask the tough questions and work through what it means to respond to the gospel and join Jesus’ family.

So that’s what the Vision of MERCYhouse is. What a church is. In the next chapter, we’ll talk about what a church does. How we as a church press forward toward this vision of being a household of faith being built by the mercy of God.

Chapter
5

The Five Devotions

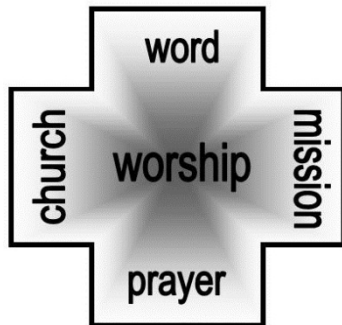
What is a church supposed to do?

In the last four chapters, we've been talking a lot about "being". What goes on at the core of the Christian and at the core of the Church. This is essential for any kind of human endeavor. Doing things merely for the sake of doing them is lifeless and doomed for failure. That said, if "being" never leads to "doing", something is amiss as well. In this chapter we will explore what the church is supposed to do.

We begin with the official church handbook given to us by God which is the New Testament of our Bible. When the first church of all time was instituted in Acts chapter 2, we see the preaching of the gospel by Peter and the conversion of over 3000 people upon hearing that gospel. Then it was time to "do" whatever it is that churches are supposed to do. We see what they did in this short verse from Acts:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42 (NIV 1984)

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We first see that they “devoted” themselves to something. This is a word that connotes discipline. A discipline is something you do no matter what even if you don’t feel like it. Brushing your teeth, changing the oil in your car, putting money aside in a savings account, and the list goes on. We all have things that we do whether we feel like it or not. We see that the early church had some disciplines that they embraced as well. We call these the **“five devotions”**.

The Apostles’ Teaching

The first one in the list is a devotion to the Apostles’ teaching. Jesus’ original disciples knew all about the life and teachings of Jesus and the significance of his death, burial and resurrection and impending return. They essentially had the New Testament living inside of them. Those earliest Christians had to show up in the Jerusalem temple courts each day to hear the Apostles teach about these very important truths regarding Christian doctrine and practice.

Today we no longer have eyewitness Apostles walking around, but thankfully they and those who had contact with them wrote down what these very important teachings were. They make up our New Testament. The way we as a church devote ourselves to the “Apostles’ Teaching” is by first believing that these scriptures are inspired by God and therefore authoritative and devoting ourselves to the study and application of these Scriptures.

Divine inspiration of the Bible is an essential presupposition for anyone who is seeking to devote themselves to God’s truth, the Bible. The Apostle Paul expresses this in a letter he wrote to a young pastor which eventually ended up in our New Testament. He says this to his mentee:

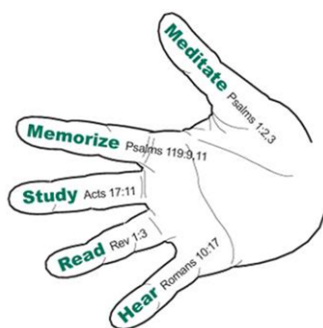
“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,”

2Timothy 3:16

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Paul makes it clear that in order for the Bible to be used by God to teach, correct, and train us, we must first believe that the Bible has been given to us by God. This understanding of Holy Scripture is a prerequisite for everything else that we are teaching in this book. The way we know the gospel, the vision of our church, even these five devotions that we are about to discuss all come from the Bible. It is looked to as the authoritative source for both our beliefs (who we are) and practices (what we do). Because of this, the belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible is a prerequisite for being a member of MERCYhouse. If you don't hold to this belief, please talk to someone in leadership about why one would hold such a belief and we'll be happy to answer any questions that you have.

Once divine inspiration is established, we can then consider how one would regularly expose oneself to the Scripture. The campus ministry Navigators has a great illustration of how Christians are to regularly take in God's Word.



The first way that a Christian takes in the Bible is to “hear”¹⁹ it. This means you are experiencing the word in community with other Christians (not just podcasts). You hear the word when you hear preaching on Sunday, discuss a weekly Bible study in a small group, and have conversations about truth during the week with other Christians. You also “read”²⁰ the Bible. It’s important for any Christian to actually take time in every week to sit down and read on their own. This is an opportunity for God to speak to you on a daily basis and not just in the times when you are in a church context.

The next finger is “study.”²¹ Reading the Bible is extremely helpful and necessary for the Christian, but in order to really take seriously knowing Jesus and growing as a disciple of his, we need to focus our mind on his truth in an intentional way. This can be done in a myriad of ways, most of which you already know through your study of other subjects. This could be anything from reading and re-reading a particular section of scripture,

¹⁹ “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Romans 10:17

²⁰ “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.” Revelation 1:3

²¹ “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” Acts 17:11

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making outlines, using flow charts. It's really up to you what strategies you come up with to do this. It's just important that you do it.

The next finger is "memorize".²² Diligent study tends to lead to memorizing the scriptures on which you are focusing. It's also helpful to write scriptures on cards, on a sticky note, on your mirror; again any way that helps you commit bits and pieces of God's truth to memory. The reason for all this hearing, reading, studying and memorizing is for the purpose of getting to the thumb – "meditation".²³ This is where the Holy Spirit begins to speak to you through God's word the Bible. As you hold His truth in your mind and ask God how that truth applies to your life, He will meet you in a two-way conversation about who He is and what it is He desire to do in and through you on a daily basis.

When you become a member of MERCYhouse, you are devoting yourself to this kind of regular exposure to God's word. Your growth depends on it and so does the church which is you and all these other disciples of Jesus who are growing in the grace of God through their study and application of the Bible. Here's a quick summary of the kinds of ways a church member is pursuing a relationship with God through is word.

DEVOTION TO THE WORD

Hearing and Singing God's Word in weekly Sunday Worship

Participating in Bible study discussions in a weekly Small Group

Attending special classes and events at MH that are designed to help
one grow in their understanding of the Bible

Setting time aside for reading, studying,
memorizing, and meditating on God's Word

The Fellowship

The next devotion mentioned in Acts 2:42 is the devotion to the "fellowship". This word translated fellowship is the Greek word "Koinonia". It is a unique word that was made up by the New Testament writers to communicate the very unique community that is the

²² "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." Psalm 119:11

²³ "but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." Psalm 1:2

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church. We've already discussed the understanding of the church as a group of gospel-anchored; Spirit empowered Jesus followers who commit to each other like family. Now let's go back to Romans 12 and take a look at a few of the gifts that make up the family that is the church.

"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. 4Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

Romans 12:3-8

The Apostle Paul begins this section writing about humility. Humility is simply an accurate view of oneself. Thinking too highly or too lowly of yourself are both examples of thinking too much of yourself. Humility is the ability to see our strengths and weaknesses. It gives us the confidence to step up and make ourselves available to serve others according to our strengths, and to rely on others according to our needs and weaknesses. This attitude of humility is nonnegotiable if we want to obtain the vision that God has for His church. His vision is that the church would work much like the human body.

There are two things that Paul wants to draw attention to by equating the church with a human body. First, the human body is unified, working together to accomplish a single purpose, like hitting a tennis ball with a racket for example. Second, the human body is made up of many specialized parts that are working together as individuals to fulfill their purpose. It takes legs, arms, fingers, shoulders,

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heart, blood, etc. to hit the tennis ball. All these parts have different functions and forms, but all are needed to hit the ball.

Spiritual Gifts

The church functions in much the same way. The church is a group of people who all have specialties, called spiritual gifts, who are working together to accomplish the same goal with the same purpose. That purpose is to be the physical presence of Christ on the earth. There are four places in the Bible that speak of spiritual gifts- 1 Corinthians 12:8-28, Ephesians 4:11, Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:11. Romans 12 is the best place to start. The gifts listed here are very simple and straight forward. Below is a starting definition and brief explanation for each of the gifts listed in Romans 12.

Prophecy – Foretelling and Forth telling.

Think of an Old Testament prophet - they always have good news and bad news. The bad news the Old Testament prophet conveyed was always a convicting message from God to His people about how they have wandered away, sinned, and forsaken him. The bad news cuts to people's hearts. It is painful. The good news was usually a vision of the future that God has for His people once they repent. It was a message of both correction and hope.

While someone with the gift of prophecy is not delivering the very words of God that will one day become Scripture like the Old Testament prophets did, they are performing a very similar function. They have the ability to confront people with the truth in such a way that it pierces to their heart. This can be done in a sermon or in a one on one conversation over coffee. The prophet's good news, much like the Old Testament prophet, is a vision of a good future filled with hope and grace. The vision casters of the church are typically prophets. These people can really energize the church to move forward even when the road ahead seems very murky. In a one on one setting, the prophet can cast vision for someone's life and be a powerful source of confrontation and encouragement to that person.

The prophet is one of the three gifts in Romans 12 that contain a footnote in the Scriptures. The footnote says the church should let the prophet exercise their faith according to the measure of faith that they possess. Prophets are by nature very vocal, and they always have an opinion about everything. If they are not careful, they

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will get way ahead of what they have earned the right to say and put people off instead of having an influence in the lives of others.

Serving – Seeing needs and meeting them.

The servant is on the opposite end of the spectrum from the prophet. If the prophet is the mouth of the church, a servant is the hands. These folks can see the needs of the church and are typically task oriented. They do things like clean the foyer or move a new married couple into their first apartment. They are extremely energized in personally meeting concrete needs. These are the people that get things done, even when they are not asked. They don't ask, "Is there anything I can do to help?" they see what needs to be done and hop right to it. Servants have to watch out that they don't get frustrated with others who don't see the needs and don't naturally gravitate toward getting them done.

Teaching – Making the truth understandable.

Teachers in the church know how to build a bridge, using explanation and illustration, from the truth of the Bible to the learner. Things in the Bible that once seemed unclear and inaccessible to others become clear and applicable through the ministry of the teacher. Teachers have to watch out for focusing just on the transference of truth and forgetting that they actually have to relate to the people that they are teaching.

Encouragement – Moving people forward.

A person with the gift of encouragement can't stand to see anyone standing still. They are the people who come alongside others in the church and cheer them forward. The encourager can do that by pointing out the strengths that they see in another person or confronting the other person about things in their lives that are holding them back. People with this gift have to watch out that they don't burn themselves out encouraging everyone else while they themselves are wondering if they are of any value in the church.

Giving – Being a conduit for God's resources.

Givers hold the resources that they have been given in an open hand. They joyfully release those resources into God's kingdom's work which can benefit both

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organizations and individuals. They don't attach strings to their giving because the reason they give is to worship God, not to get some sort of glory from, or control over, others. Givers have to be careful that they don't use their giving as an excuse not to also invest themselves relationally in the lives of others.

Leadership (or Administration) – Organizing and Mobilizing

Unlike prophecy, this gift is less about vision casting, and more about creating infrastructure. People with this gift are the organizers of the church. They create systems that make opportunities for others to use their gifts, and help place the right people in those opportunities. Romans 12 has a caveat for this gift, that those with it should exercise it diligently. This is an exhortation for the administrator to not only make plans but actually execute those plans with real people which always requires the augmentation of the perfect plan which is not always easy for the administrator.

Mercy – Feeling the emotion of others, empathizing.

People with the gift of mercy are the feelers of the church. If someone is hurting, the person with the gift of mercy hurts with them. If someone is joyful, the person with the gift of mercy rejoices with them. They are a tremendous source of comfort and encouragement for people in the church. Just like prophets and leaders, they, too, have a footnote. Their footnote is to exercise their gift cheerfully. The person with the gift of mercy has a tendency to take on too much of people's pain and end up depressed. The remedy to this is to see themselves as a temporary carrier of another's pain that they quickly dump onto Jesus.

So which gifts do you have? Every Christian has been given a mix of a few Spiritual gifts that fit a particular calling they have in the body of Christ. This gift does not belong to you, but instead belongs to the church. A big part of what it means to devote yourself to the fellowship is to discover and then employ your gifts in the body of Christ. The easiest way to do this is to jump in to some kind of service opportunity at MERCYhouse. Try your hand at greeting or helping with MH kids or assisting your small group leader with administrative details. As you try on different roles in the church, you will discover what you are good at and what you enjoy. These are most likely things that you have been gifted by God to do as a way of worshipping and serving in his church.

Generosity

Another important way that you devote yourself to the fellowship is by giving financially on a regular basis. There are many laws about giving in the Old Testament. Everything from what you are to give, when, and how much, is discussed in the code of laws that is found in books of the Bible like Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The reason for all the laws about giving in the Old Testament was to let the Israelites know they had the option of living independently from God or relying on Him for their livelihood. The result of relying on God was abundance, and the result of relying on themselves was scarcity. By not giving obediently, they were declaring that they would rather take care of themselves than have God do it for them. Israel often stepped out of this child role God had designed for them, with all its responsibilities and privileges. This rebellion led to the consequence of God periodically stepping out of his parental roll which included His provision and blessing.

The closest thing to a New Testament endorsement of tithing is Matthew 23:23. In this verse, Jesus chastises the Pharisees for tithing everything (down to counting the seeds from their herb garden) while “forgetting” to practice things like justice and mercy toward the people around them. He then ends the rebuke by saying, “You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former.” This phrase is often pointed to as proof that Jesus mandates that Christians tithe.

The problem with this interpretation is that tithing is not mentioned anywhere else in Jesus’ teaching, or the rest of the New Testament for that matter. If this was such a clear cut Christian discipline, you would expect to see it taught in a more direct way than as an aside of a rebuke against hard-hearted tithers. Like all spiritual disciplines, giving is taught by Jesus to be something experienced within the framework of a loving response to a loving God. When Jesus does teach more directly on giving, He says this:

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what

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your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:1-4

The first principle for New Testament giving is that we give because we love God. Jesus communicates that a relationship with God is the lens through which we look at giving and every other spiritual discipline. The heart of why we reach for our wallets is because we love God and love to participate in His kingdom’s work through giving away resources.

The Bible doesn’t stop there. Human beings are stingy. Our default mode is to go into survival mode, just like the Israelites, and hoard our resources until the day comes when we are “comfortable” and feel the freedom to be generous. That day of financial security never comes. For this reason there are Scriptures that encourage generous giving. In his second letter to the church at Corinth Paul writes:

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

2 Corinthians 9:6-7

The second principle of New Testament giving is to give generously. Christians have been given a gift of infinite value, namely salvation through Christ, so there is no place for being a cheapskate. If we understand the gospel and its implications, we will be generous; more than this, we will actually be cheerful as we freely give our resources in response to being in relationship with a generous God.

Just like it’s helpful to set aside a regular time to pray, even though the primary motivation for praying is a love of God, it is helpful to be intentional regarding our giving. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthians in this way:

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“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.”

1 Corinthians 16:2

The third principle of New Testament giving is to give intentionally. While the New Testament framework for giving is a grace initiated response to God’s love, demonstrated in the second and fourth chapter of the book of Acts, it is always helpful for human beings to have some sort of plan. In the above verses, we don’t see Paul uttering the “11th Commandment.” What we see him sanctioning is some sort of regular, planned out giving that is proportional to one’s income.

For many Christians the tithe provides a good way to plan one’s giving. It seems that if those under the Law in the Old Testament gave ten percent of their income to God, then those under grace should at least do the same. The reality is that because of the generosity displayed in the gospel, we should desire to go above and beyond the ten percent mandated in the Old Testament and if we don’t, to confess that to God and ask for forgiveness and healing.

We encourage people to adopt the ten percent mark as the minimum standard for their giving, although an even greater percentage should be sought after. God is serious about us trusting Him financially by giving a significant portion of our income away. If we don’t practice this spiritual discipline, we end up missing out both spiritually and materially in ways that we cannot possibly even imagine. It is an abundant spiritual blessing to really live the relationship that we have with God in this most concrete of spiritual disciplines.

Common Questions about Generosity

1. What if I’m in debt?

Even if you are in debt, you should still give in some sort of intentional way. I (Robert) have chosen to tithe no matter what – even if I get myself into debt. It’s an act of faith, and it drives home the point that God is your provider and will have to

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come through in order for you to make it. In the end, the important thing is that you pray through it, do whatever God convicts you to do, and then follow through on it. While it's important to be faithful with the ten percent we are giving away, we also want to be faithful with the ninety percent that we remain stewards of. The ninety percent is God's money, too, and we are managing it for Him. We need to have a plan for how we intend to get out of debt and stay out of debt once we're there.

A helpful tool to use for cultivating generosity in your life is a spending plan. Sit down and write down all of your expenses. Then look at your income and begin divvying up the amounts needed in each category. You start off with the categories of tithe and taxes and then housing and food, etc. If you wind up with more bills than money, then it's time to pray about increasing income or decreasing spending. If there is a surplus, then it's time to pray about how to best steward the extra (investing or saving for instance). Mint.com is an excellent resource for creating budgets and tracking spending on a regular basis.

2. What if I'm a student and don't have a job?

It may be a bit of a stretch to expect that students tithe their student loans or the money sent to them by their parents. We do think that students should still participate in the offering in a regular way that is somehow proportional to their income. If you are a student and can come up with cash for lattes and music on iTunes, surely you can come up with \$5, \$10, or \$20 a week for the offering basket. This kind of giving will begin a discipline that will carry over into your lives after graduation. Students often times have summer jobs or part time jobs. We encourage them to tithe and give generously from those earnings.

3. What if tithing will cause me to not be able to pay my bills – at least on paper?

For the last twenty years of my life, tithing has seemingly kept me from paying all of my bills– at least on paper. Somehow, though, we continue to pay the bills after 25 years of tithing. I'd say that God has opened up the storehouses in heaven just like He promised. You will rarely find a more concrete laboratory for faith than money. It is a really exciting, and sometimes scary, journey of learning to trust in God and see Him come through in miraculous ways.

One of the ways that I've seen God do this is in opportunities to travel. While on paper, we could never conceive of having a travel budget, we've found ourselves

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visiting the coast of Maine (use of a free cabin), Santa Monica, CA (gift from family), Honduras (mission trip), and Switzerland (officiated a wedding of an alumni who paid for our trip). These were “extras” that God in his grace was willing to give us as we sought to serve him in the work of the Kingdom. They were also better than any trip I could have saved for had I simply held back my tithe for the travel budget.

That being said, giving doesn’t mean that God won’t ask you to make sacrifices. If people are looking at their budget and not able to tithe or give generously, they should take intentional steps toward bringing in more income or reducing their spending so that they can do so. Giving is an essential part of the responsibility of being a member of MERCYhouse.

So giving of your spiritual gifts and your material gifts are two ways in which members of MERCYhouse devote themselves to the fellowship. Another way of saying this is that when becoming a member of this church, you are making available to the ministry of the church your time, your talent, and your treasure.

Church Discipline

Becoming a church member also means that you are placing yourself under the authority of the church. Authority is not a very popular word in our culture. For many it brings to mind evil dictators and corrupt politicians. The Bible doesn’t see authority in this way especially God’s authority and the authority that is exercised in the home and in the church.

While the Bible does acknowledge that earthly authority is fallen and broken just like everything else in this world in its current state, it also casts vision for redeemed authority as exercised by parents over children, husbands over wives²⁴, and elders over the church.

These elders are recognized by the church as men who know and love Jesus and who are mature examples of what a disciple should be. We read about the qualifications of these leaders in places like 1 Timothy chapter 3. These leaders are given the responsibility to oversee, shepherd, and teach the church. They are accountable to the church and if their lives go off the path of being a committed disciple, the church

²⁴ See Ephesians chapters 5 and 6 for example

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is responsible for removing them from leadership.²⁵ The church is also required to submit to those who have been appointed by the congregation to lead them. We see this in places like Hebrews 13:17

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

In the event that a member of the church begins exhibiting attitudes and/or actions that are not consistent with being a disciple of Jesus, the elders of the church are responsible to approach that person in love and speak truth to them about their sin. If that person refuses to repent from that sin, it is the responsibility of the elders to then bring this to the attention of the church and get the whole church involved in encouraging this person to repent. We see this process described by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

We have only had to take a handful of people through this entire process because of their unwillingness to repent. This is not something we enjoy doing, but it is part of what you are signing up for when you join a church. You are submitting to the leadership of MERCYhouse and giving them permission to approach you in the event that they see you in unrepentant sin. It is a safety net that every Christian, including the elders themselves, need to have. Here is a summary of the kinds of things a member of our church does in order to devote themselves to the fellowship.

²⁵ 1 Timothy 5:17-20

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DEVOTION TO THE FELLOWSHIP

Commit to a few like family – join a small group

Discover and employ your spiritual gifts – join a servant team

Give financially in a way that is generous, proportional and consistent

Attend biyearly church gatherings for the purpose of confirming
our yearly budget and to appoint leaders

Submit to church discipline

The Breaking of Bread

The next devotion is the “breaking of bread”. This literally refers to the taking of communion or the Lord’s Supper. This simple ritual was given to the church as a means of remembering Jesus’ death, burial,

resurrection and impending return.²⁶ It was something that the early church practiced every time they got together for corporate worship and serves as a way of reorienting the church toward the main thing – the gospel. We at MERCYhouse continue to do the same.

This phrase “breaking of bread” was also a euphemism for corporate worship itself. It would be like saying we are going to a “barbeque”. Much more will be happening at this barbeque like talking and playing games but we are referring to it as a barbeque because that is the focal point of the afternoon. By devoting ourselves to the “breaking of bread” we are saying we are devoting ourselves to gospel centered worship.

We’ve already talked about what worship is in an earlier chapter so you know that when we say “worship” we mean an unconditional submission to Jesus in response to the gospel. This is really the fuel for all the other devotions. The reason we fellowship is because we’ve been given this special community (Koinonia) through what Christ did for us on the cross. The reason we read the Bible is because the Bible has been handed down to us as a means of understanding the gospel better so we can be stirred in our hearts to worship Jesus more. The reason we pray (we’re about to talk about this devotion) is because we know and love Jesus through the gospel and we want to relate with him. The reason we participate in the mission of the church (about to talk about this devotion too) is because we’ve been so impacted by the gospel that we want to share it with others.

²⁶ Luke 22:18-20

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We devote ourselves to worship by first cultivating the habit of thinking on the goodness of the gospel as we study and pray and fellowship and impact the world around us. We do this when we set time aside to think on this through scripture

study, participate in small groups, and attend Sunday worship services. This is the most important devotion to cultivate because it gives life to all the others.

DEVOTION TO WORSHIP

Seek to make the gospel the central motivation of my life

Set time aside in my daily life to dwell on

the gospel through prayer and scripture study

Attend a weekly Small Group

Attend Sunday Worship on a weekly basis

Prayer

The fourth devotion is prayer. This one may be the simplest to understand. The early church prayed a lot. This is affirmed throughout the New Testament in verses like the following:

“And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”

Acts 1:13,14

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

Colossians 4:2

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“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

Ephesians 6:18

We pray at MERCYhouse. We pray on Sunday mornings. We pray at small groups. The church staff and other leaders pray together for each other and for the church. We hold periodic prayer gatherings for the whole church. As we do life together, we pray with each other and we pray as individuals. Part of being a member of our church is devoting yourself to prayer, both individual and corporate.

DEVOTION TO PRAYER

Set time aside weekly for private prayer

Pray for the needs of the church, its leaders, and its mission

Pray for and with your small group

Participate in periodic prayer gatherings

That covers the four devotions which are mentioned in Acts 2:42. Becoming a member of MERCYhouse means that you are devoting yourself along with your fellow members to Worship, The Word, Prayer, and The Fellowship. In the next chapter, we'll discuss the fifth devotion – The Mission.

M E M B E R S H I P

Chapter
6

The Fifth Devotion

What is the mission of MERCYhouse?

Every church should be doing the things we've mentioned so far - holding to the gospel as the core, responding to the gospel in worship, cultivating devotion to the word and prayer and the fellowship. The church should also be devoted to the same mission.

Jesus was clear with his early disciples that they were on a mission to make more and ever-growing disciples. They were to do this by compelling others to believe in the crucified/resurrected/returning Jesus and by teaching them to obey everything he commanded them. We see these clear instructions in places like the closing words from the gospel of Matthew:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

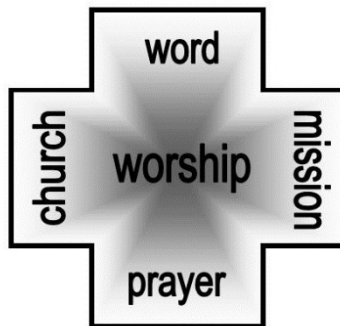
Matthew 28:19,20

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We find Jesus saying similar things in places like Acts 1:8 just one chapter before Acts 2:42:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8

While Jesus was very clear about this missionary component of church life, the early church took some convincing of this fact. At first, they kept the gospel in Jerusalem and didn’t seem to have any plans for moving out to the “ends of the earth.” God allowed persecution to break out²⁷ and unbeknownst to them at the time they began the process of making disciples of all nations and not just the nation of which they were a part. This really revved up when the gospel got to a place called Antioch²⁸ and the Holy Spirit sent out the first two missionaries (Paul and Barnabus) in the middle of a prayer meeting instead of in the middle of an outbreak of persecution.



We are fairly certain if we were to ask the early church about the devotions listed in Acts 2:42, they would add one more – the Mission. If any church is not intentional about this, it quickly suffers from a case of “mission creep” and instead of making more and better disciples, it starts to be a country club for Christians. This is the kiss of death for any church community.

In one sense, every church has the same mission, that of making disciples. In another sense, each church has a unique context in which it carries out its mission and needs to define what their mission looks like. For MERCYhouse there are three overarching things that make up our mission. The first is reaching, building, and sending college students and other young adults. The second is connecting, training, and commissioning families. The third is planting churches.

²⁷ Acts chapter 8

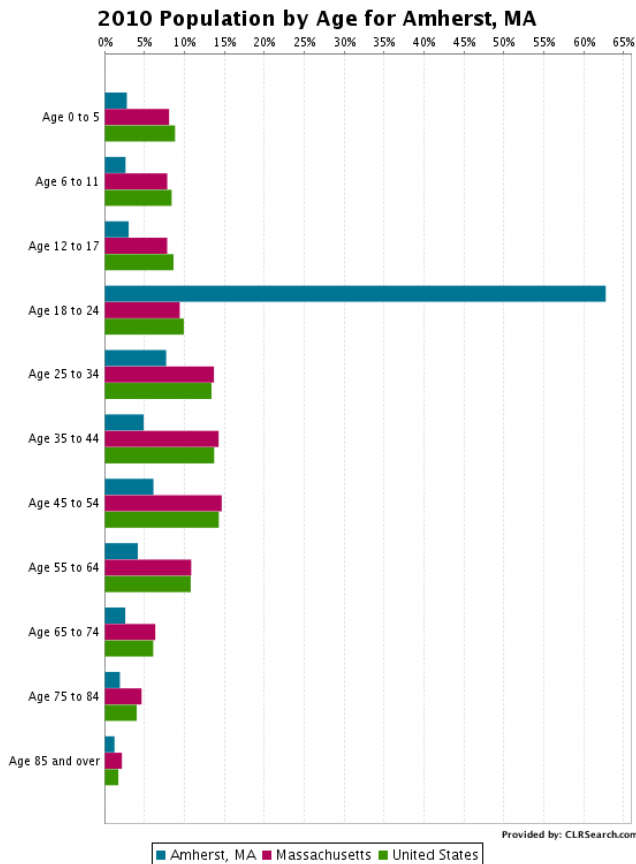
²⁸ Acts chapter 13

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Reach, Build, Send Students

If you've been around MERCYhouse for any length of time, you've noticed that there are a lot of younger people that make up our church. Not just that, but younger people who make up the leadership of the church. As you read in the first chapter, this has been a part of the DNA of our church from day one. We are grateful for this and believe that

God has given us a unique calling to reach and disciple students from the five colleges.



It makes perfect sense that God would want to plant churches that are on the mission of reaching and investing in students and other twenty something's. Almost 70% of the population in Amherst is under the age of 30.²⁹ If you are reading this and are older than 30 you may be wondering if there is a place for you. We want to unequivocally say YES! We are always excited to see people walk through our doors who have a bit more life experience than the average MHer.

Our mission requires that there be a tight-knit team of "permanent residents" who love the mission of reaching,

building, and sending students. We need couples and single working people to mentor students, provide hospitality, give generously, help build infrastructure, and more. If this is sounding like a very vested kind of church experience, you're right. We think this should be every person's experience in any church where you become a member and it is especially true at MERCYhouse.

²⁹ 2010 US Census

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If you are a college student and are reading this, we are glad you are here too. We count it an extreme privilege to have been a church home for literally 100's of students over the years. We are going to do everything we can to help you sink your roots deep into Christ and grow as His disciple. Part of that disciple making process will be giving you opportunities to serve that you may not have had in a more traditional church. We are consistently qualifying the unqualified because God has given us a fellowship that is extremely young and we've seen a tremendous amount of growth come out of that.

We are also going to draft you into our core of missionaries. The way people typically come to MERCYhouse is through relationships. Other than a website and a few ads now and then, we spread the word about our church through word of mouth. The "every member is a missionary" approach is at the heart of the mission of this church. By becoming a member at MERCYhouse, you are devoting yourself to being a part of the missionary efforts of our church.

Connecting, Training, and Commissioning Families

Since 1999, the demographic of MERCYhouse has been slowly changing. A major indicator of this was a baby dedication service in June of 2013. In that service, eight families dedicated their newborn sons and daughters to the Lord. These families were an answer to the prayers of many over the previous 14 years of the church's existence.

As a church that is now made up of not only young singles but also families, we are excited to be growing in the mission of making disciples of entire families. We approach this first of all by helping these families to **connect** with one another. Because of the strong emphasis on reaching and building up students, it can feel a bit like a collegiate church. In actuality, our church is half students and half everyone else. Families are able to find each other and build deep friendships in married couple small groups, men's fellowships, and mommy groups. There are also various fellowship events that are targeted toward the building up of relationships among the families in our church.

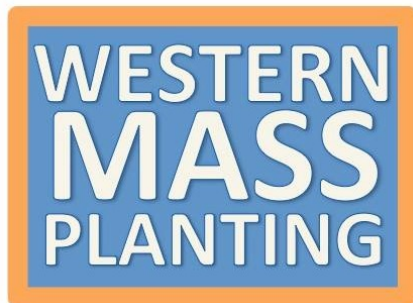
We also seek to **train** our families. Every Sunday, children receive training in "MH kids" regarding what it means to be a Christ follower. This ministry to children is continuing to deepen in its impact on the smallest of MHers and we are excited to see how this will augment what parents are already doing to make disciples of their children. More important than the kid's ministry itself, we prioritize the training of moms and dads in the areas of marriage and parenting. We see parents as the primary disciplinarians of their children so instead of a multilayered children's ministry we seek to equip mom and dad to thrive in their marriage and raise their children to be disciples of Christ. This is

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accomplished through small group experiences as well as periodic conferences and seminars.

Finally, we **commission** our families. We know that God has placed us in the heart of the Five College Area for a reason – to reach, build, and send students. This mission can only be accomplished by a whole host of vested permanent resident adults who are willing to pour out their time, talent, and treasure to see it through. We believe this to be an incredibly rewarding though sometimes taxing ministry. One of the rewards is a front row seat to seeing the gospel sown into people's lives that then go around the world and make a global difference. If you are a family, we invite you to be a part of a legacy of the sending out of these precious souls who will know and live the gospel because you were willing to invest in a church that was willing to reach into these campuses. This experience will shape you and your children for a lifetime of giving oneself away for the gospel.

Church Planting



The third emphasis that makes up the mission of our church is planting other churches. From day one of our existence, we looked forward to being a mother to future church plants. So far, we've tried 4 times and have 2 churches to show for it. The first is Vita Nova (vitanovachurch.com) located in Amherst, MA and City Church (thecitywithin.org) in Springfield, MA. We are always looking for new opportunities to participate in church planting. This includes giving of funds, praying of prayers for church plants, and sending out of people to

participate in church planting long and short term.

This third prong of our mission is to be a catalyst for church planting all around Western Mass and beyond. We don't expect to be planting all these churches by ourselves, but we do want to plant some of them and encourage other groups and denominations to do the same. This slowly growing group of churches is known as the Western Mass Church Planting Network (wmasschurchplanting.org) and is steadily becoming a resource for anyone who is interested in church planting in and around Western Mass.

What that means in regard to membership in our church is that every member must commit to accomplishing this vision. For some that will mean joining with a core of

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people who will plant one or more of these churches. For others it will mean praying for this mission, giving generously toward this mission, and working hard at the mother church to make it possible for mature leaders to be sent out as part of church planting cores. It is a sacrifice, but again we believe that the gospel is that good and our response to it should include a missionary effort that fits our context.

Our context is one of very few gospel preaching churches. The population of our valley contains less than 2% of people who would say that they believe the Bible to be truth and that belief in Jesus is essential for salvation.³⁰ If God, in his grace, sees fit to plant 50 churches, this % could change from 2 to 10 percent assuming these churches average around the size of MERCYhouse. We believe that God is more than capable of this and want to posture our church and its mission to create a launching pad for God to do just that.

This Mission is the fifth and final devotion. Each of the five (worship, fellowship, word, prayer, mission) represent what individuals in the church and the church as a whole is supposed to “do”. These are the things that you are devoting yourself to if you become a member at MERCYhouse.

DEVOTION TO MISSION

Pray for the mission of the church

Be a missionary in your spheres of influence

Seek to serve in a way that accomplishes the endeavors of
reaching/building/sending students and church planting

Participate in outreach events like free rides

³⁰ Netsinstitute.org

M E M B E R S H I P

Chapter 7

Distinctives

A few things that make us unique

Every church is unique. We've tried to give you the basics of our beliefs and practices in this book. Here is a list of some of the distinctives that you should be aware of as you consider joining our fellowship. Some of these have been discussed in earlier pages and others are beyond the scope of this publication.

- We hold to a biblical gospel which includes the bad news that humans are helpless sinners who are separated from God and the good news that God has provided reconciliation for those sinners through Christ's death on the cross. (see chapter 2 and Romans 1-3)
- We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God AND Christ is the interpretive key to understanding the Bible (see chapter 5 and Luke 24)
- We hold to a complimentary view of gender. This means that we believe that it is God's design for men to lovingly lead in both the family and the church. This is expressed in part by having only males on our leadership team who fulfill the function of biblical elders. (See Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 3). One does not

MEMBERSHIP

have to agree with this in order to become a member of this church but they do need to agree not to undermine this teaching and be willing to submit to this leadership structure while serving at MERCYhouse.

- Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion) are signs and symbols of invisible spiritual reality (i.e. the gospel). Baptism is for people who profess that they are converted Christians and is by immersion. You must be baptized in this way at MERCYhouse or in a church of like faith and practice to be a member of MERCYhouse.
- God has designed sex to be experienced only in the context of marriage and marriage is to be defined as one man, one woman for one lifetime.
- Our framework for disciple making is the Five Devotions: Worship, Word, Prayer, Fellowship, Mission (Acts 2:42 and Acts 1:8)
- The mission of our church is to make disciples of all nations and in particular to reach, build, and send students from the five colleges and participate in and encourage the planting of churches in the Pioneer Valley.
- We are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC.net); the Baptist Convention of New England (BCNE.net); the Massachusetts Baptist Association (massbaptist.org); and the 2020 Network (2020network.org).

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, we would be happy to talk more about any and all of these distinctives. We are excited about the ministry that God has planted here and we would love for more and more people to come and be a part of it. We believe that the story that God is writing in our Valley and around the world includes you and begins with the receiving of the grace and forgiveness that was given through Jesus' death on the cross. After that, the possibilities are endless. You are the son or daughter of a King who has "all authority in heaven and on earth" who is giving you the power to "go and make disciples"³¹. We look forward to joining with you as a member of a spiritual family and a partner in the mission of changing the world for the glory of Jesus.

³¹ See Matthew 28:16-19

Chapter

8

Membership Covenant

Making the Covenant and Renewing the Covenant

Joining a church is joining a covenant community. What that means is that you are making a commitment to God and the local community (or household) of faith that this MERCYhouse. It's similar to getting married which is another one of God's covenant relationships. When you enter into a relationship like this, you are ceasing to be a consumer who will go elsewhere if your needs aren't met. As a member of this local body, you will now seek to unconditionally love and serve others in this fellowship in response to the grace that Jesus has showed you in the gospel.

You may be asking, "What if I start to not like the preaching or the music style or people are getting on my nerves?" Just like in a marriage, you typically fall in love, out of love, and back in love again if you are willing to stick it out. It's this kind of devotion to an imperfect community that Jesus uses to shape us as His disciples more so than going to the hippest church in town that meets our every felt need. Moving forward in faith with other imperfect sinners who are saved by grace and are being made holy is God's plan for being made a disciple.

One of the ways that we clarify what it means to be a member here is by having you sign a membership covenant (see below). This covenant is merely a short summary of what

has been covered in this book and in our membership class. We also ask members of our church to sign this every year in February as a way to refresh our memories regarding what it means to be a member of our church. Please carefully read this covenant and then sign below if you are willing to commit yourself to both the belief and practice of our fellowship. We look forward to joining together on the mission that God has for us as we seek to make disciples of all nations.

I, the undersigned, reaffirm my belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins and through His death, burial and resurrection have entered into a relationship with God - who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As one who is restored to God, I now desire to live in community with other redeemed people in the local church known as MERCYhouse in Amherst, MA.

In response to the grace of this salvation, I devote myself to the following five devotions of our church:

1. I devote myself to **WORSHIP** by seeking to continually surrender my entire life to God in response to God's initiation with me in the gospel and by worshipping God regularly with other members of MERCYhouse. (Acts 2:42-47; Romans 12:1; Hebrews 10:24,25)
2. I devote myself to the **WORD** by regularly studying the Bible both as an individual and with other members of MERCYhouse and by obeying those things that I am learning. (Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 3:16,17; Psalm 119:11)
3. I devote myself to **PRAYER** by praying. I will regularly pray for the leadership and mission of MERCYhouse. I will also pray with and for fellow members of the church. (Acts 2:42; Acts 1:13,14; Colossians 4:2)

4. I devote myself to the **FELLOWSHIP** by living in biblical community. I understand this to mean that I am regularly sharing my life with at least a few other church members and will seek ways to encourage others in their growth as disciples of Jesus. I will continue to grow in my understanding of my spiritual gifts and will use them in ways that build up the church. I will also commit myself to give generously in order to support the mission of the church and agree to support and submit to church leadership. (Acts 2:42; Romans 12:3-8; 2Corinthians 9:6-7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 13:17)
5. I devote myself to the **MISSION** by seeking to demonstrate and proclaim the gospel to those with whom I have influence. I will also make available my own time, talent and resources to help accomplish the mission to reach, build, and send students of the Five Colleges; accomplish the planting of new churches in the Pioneer Valley; and connect, train, and commission the families and singles of our church. (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8)

Signature _____

Date _____