

Today

Sept/Oct 2025

refresh, refocus, renew



Basic Bible Truths

ALSO: AMONG ALL PEOPLE

Dear Friends:

Fall is a season of change, and it's the perfect time to reflect on where God is calling us and what anchors our faith.

In September, Kevin DeRaaf leads us through a devotional series that helps us focus on God's mission to the world. Through Scripture and ministry stories, Kevin reminds us that God's mission is for everyone and reaches into all parts of life. Each of us is called to participate in God's work of love, healing, and renewal.



At the same time, we are reminded to rest. Each week includes a Sabbath reflection, reminding us to pause and remember that God's mission moves forward not because of us but because of him.

In October, George Koopmans reflects with us on basic Bible truths that make up the core of Christian teaching. With a chaplain's heart, George leads us through themes like sin, salvation, faith, prayer, and God's justice. These devotions offer lasting comfort and assurance, reminding us what it means to belong to Jesus in both life and death.

Together, these series of devotions offer a rich invitation: to join in God's work in the world while staying grounded in his promises.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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"Among All People"
Kevin DeRaaf



"Basic Bible Truths"
George Koopmans

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september

Among All People

Kevin DeRaaf

As Christ-followers, we are part of a story that is bigger than our own lives—and even the lives of our families and church communities. We are a part of a global church of believers called to recognize God's work in the world and to live out God's mission of sharing the good news of Jesus everywhere.

This month let's explore what it means to be part of this bigger story so that we can declare with our lives the greatness of God and the wonder of his amazing salvation to the people around us. And as we reflect on these things, may God form us into people who honor him in all we think, do, and say—that everyone we meet may experience the love, hope, and peace that only God can give.

Rev. Kevin DeRaaf is the director of Resonate Global Mission, the mission agency of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, which works in more than 40 countries around the world. With a focus on global mission as well as local mission and church planting, Kevin is passionate about seeing others join in God's mission as God calls them. He and his wife, Jacquie, have three children and five grandchildren and live in Burlington, Ontario.

A BIG GOD. A BIG MISSION.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
—Psalm 96:3

Recently our young grandson was lying quietly in his bed. Suddenly he piped up with a question: “Mommy, if God made everything, then who made God?”

What a good question! And just how big is God?

Psalm 96 reminds us that we serve the God of the universe. As followers of Christ, we are brought into a life-giving relationship with our big and marvelous God who not only rules the heavens and the earth but also knows every detail of our lives. This makes us part of a story that is much bigger than we are.

We are part of a global church living out God’s mission in every corner of the world. That big mission is beautifully captured in Psalm 96:3: “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.”

This month we are going to explore what it means to be part of this bigger story. And we will use four key words to get at what it means to declare with our lives the greatness of God’s marvelous deeds: *gospel*, *witness*, *holistic*, and *intercultural*. These words capture the biblically shaped passion that is at the heart of the global mission agency I am privileged to serve.

As we reflect on these key words together this month, may God form us into people who increasingly declare his glory through our lives.

God, we praise you as Lord over all, and we thank you for your amazing, worldwide mission. May our hearts be open as we learn what it means to reflect you in every part of our lives. Amen.

GOSPEL: A DEFINITION

Jesus went through all the towns and villages . . . proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.
—Matthew 9:35

The first word we want to focus on as we think about God's big mission is *gospel*. Here is a definition of the gospel that I think captures just how big and amazing this good news is: "The gospel is the good news of God's reign, grace, and love in and through Christ for the redemption and renewal of all things." This definition shapes everything we do in the mission agency that I serve. Take a moment and read it again if that helps.

We see this definition at work here in Matthew 9. Jesus announces and proclaims the good news that God's kingdom has arrived—our God reigns! This good news is not just an announcement; it comes with a powerful demonstration of this life-changing message. Filled with compassion and love, Jesus heals people of "every disease and sick-

ness." What's more, Jesus longs to see his team multiply and bring this good news to a world that is desperate for hope and love.

How is God inviting you to respond to this message of good news in a fresh way and to join in his mission? There is no better news than the good news of Jesus. There is no better calling than to share this good news with others. "The harvest is plentiful" (Matthew 9:37).

Lord, I pray that my life will ring out with your good news. Continue to raise up people around the world to bring your message of life to the ends of the earth. Amen.

GOSPEL: YOU ARE LOVED!

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

—1 John 4:10

My wife, Jacquie, is a teacher in a Christian elementary school. One day she asked her students to complete this sentence: “Jesus loves me because . . .” Almost every student answered with phrases like “Because I am sometimes kind to my sister” or “Because I try to do my best in school.”

It was interesting to hear that almost all of the students connected Jesus’ love with their efforts to earn it. Where did that idea come from? It is not the message of the Bible, and it is not the gospel. The true heart of the gospel is captured in the powerful words of 1 John 4:10: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

The gospel message is that there is nothing we can do to make Jesus love us. Our

salvation is offered as a completely free, undeserved gift: we simply receive it. Our passage sums it all up in one word: *love*.

Receive the good news for you today: This is love: not that you loved God (or did anything else to earn God’s favor), but that he loves you and sent his Son as a saving sacrifice for your sins. You are loved—just because you are you and God is love.

Dear God, as I am reminded that your love is the starting point of everything, help me to embrace Jesus as your greatest gift of love to me. Help me to love you in return. Amen.

GOSPEL: A HUMBLE WITNESS

God exalted him to the highest place . . . that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. . . —Philippians 2:9-11

When I was a pastor, one of the churches I served celebrated Ascension Day with a midweek worship service. That meant extra preparation work for me, and I admit that sometimes I resented having to do that extra work.

One year, in front of a small crowd on a Thursday evening, I delivered a hastily produced sermon. And after the worship service, a young man who had been visiting our church asked if he could meet with me. So we did. He told me that in that service, he had encountered God like never before. In an instant, the Christian story had made sense to him. He was now a believer in Christ!

Through that simple, unassuming worship service and my unimpressive words, the Holy Spirit brought him to a deep awareness of what it means to

be in relationship with Jesus, the Servant-King. I was deeply humbled, knowing that my attitude had not been the best going into that service.

This experience gave me new insight into the message of Philippians 2. I am often humbled because of my failures and shortcomings. But Jesus, who intentionally humbled himself for the sake of the world, continues to work among us despite ourselves. He will keep changing lives until that day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

Jesus, thank you for always working through us, despite our failures and weaknesses. We worship you as our Savior and exalt you as our ascended Lord. Amen.

GOSPEL: RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.
—Romans 6:8

As we think about the Lord's good news, the gospel, it is important to be aware of the radical change it brings to our lives.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of baptizing Ava, a recent immigrant from Iran. Her journey began when she found out that her neighbor, a woman from our church, was a Christian. Ava had lots of questions, and that led to many months of one-on-one Bible study, in which Ava felt safe to ask whatever was on her mind. Later she joined a women's Bible study, and eventually Ava received Jesus as her Savior and committed her life to following him.

To mark this moment, Ava wanted to be baptized. She wanted to be immersed in the waters of baptism as described in Romans 6, and she requested that it be a small affair

because of her fear of crowds. So on a beautiful Wednesday morning, with about 15 women gathered at a neighboring Baptist church, we celebrated Ava's baptism—her participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What a day!

Whatever your faith journey, this is the heart of the gospel: by putting our faith and trust in Jesus, we die to our old self and we are raised to new life in him—starting now and going into all eternity. May you count yourself alive to Jesus Christ today!

Lord Jesus, thank you that because of your death and resurrection, we too can be raised to new life. Help me to put my trust in you today for every situation in my life. Amen.

GOSPEL: YOU'VE BEEN INVITED!

Jesus replied, "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests."
—Luke 14:16

Thinking about the gospel reminds us that at the heart of the Christian faith is a life-changing message of joy. That's why I like this parable so much. Jesus uses a powerful metaphor to describe life with him in the kingdom of God: a great banquet.

In Jesus' day, banquets often celebrated important events in the community. In fact, Jesus' first miracle took place at a wedding banquet. To spare the family from social embarrassment when their wine had run out early, Jesus turned several jugs of water into wine (John 2:1-11).

In Luke 14, Jesus tells a story about a wealthy man who hosts a banquet for his friends. They all accept the initial invitation, but when the day of the banquet comes and they are told that the food is ready, they make ridiculous excuses and

reject the host's generosity. So the angry and frustrated host opens his table to whoever wants to come.

This becomes a picture of the kingdom we are invited to enjoy. Sometimes this parable is summed up in a way like this: "God is throwing a party. Are you coming?" I love that! This sounds like good news to me!

Am I willing to see that life in Jesus is better and more delightful than anything this world offers? Am I ready to drop everything and run to the feast?

Jesus, help me to see that life in your kingdom is a great celebration that we can enjoy forever. May I not be distracted by other things in my life and say yes to your invitation today. Amen.

SABBATH: REST

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”
—Matthew 11:28

Today is Sunday, so let's pause our focus on mission themes and take some time out for worship and rest. This is important, because missions can easily focus on all the things we are called to do. And, at times, talking about God's mission can leave us feeling guilty about things we are not doing. So today we remember that we do not carry the world on our shoulders. We take a day to worship, meditate on Scripture, play, and rest.

This past week we have been thinking about the gospel as good news. In our passage today we hear the most beautiful good news from Jesus: “Come to me and rest.” Notice that he is talking not only about physical rest but also about rest for our souls. Jesus promises eternal rest for us all.

The other day I was reading some bedtime stories to my

grandsons—and as we did that together, I could feel them relax into my arms. Secure in a trusted relationship, they were able to let go and fall into a state of peaceful rest.

Jesus invites us to see himself that way. Secure in Jesus, we can release our cares, our burdens, and our problems to him. On this day of rest, may you be reminded and find that the Lord holds you and the whole world in his hands.

Dear Jesus, I surrender all the places in my life where I feel tired and worn out. May I find true and eternal rest in you today on this day of Sabbath. Amen.

WITNESS: I CAN'T HELP IT!

“As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”
—Acts 4:20

When we see or experience something extraordinary, usually we can't help telling people about it. Whether it is an encounter with a celebrity or a wonderful vacation or a life-changing event, we want to share it. As a young teen, I witnessed the launch of one of the first space shuttles. You can be sure I told all my friends about it when I got back home!

This week, as we think about God's big mission, let's focus on our second word, *witness*. We give witness, or testimony, about God's work of salvation because God calls us to do so, and the Holy Spirit has come to help us (Acts 1:8).

But we are also motivated internally. If we have experienced the saving love and power of God, and it has completely changed who we are and how we live, how can we *not* talk about it?

In our passage today, we read that the apostles Peter and John caused a stir among the religious leaders in Jerusalem by healing a lame man. Those leaders wanted to know by what power or authority they had done this work. Peter, bold as ever, declared that they served Jesus and Jesus alone. And as for their work of speaking about Jesus and ministering in his name, how could they keep from sharing about all they had learned from the Savior? Likewise, may our lives spill over with the joy of our salvation!

Dear Jesus, as this passage reminds us, “salvation is found in no one else” but you. May my life overflow with excitement and joy that because of your great love, I belong to you. Amen.

WITNESS: ME? AN EVANGELIST?

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"
—John 4:7

Many Christians are uneasy about sharing the gospel message. We don't want to say the wrong thing or offend people or push them away. I remember how scared I was the one time I did door-to-door evangelism. As a teenager I volunteered in the summer with a group of young people in a neighborhood church. We led vacation Bible school for kids living nearby, and when we followed up to visit with the kids' families, we were so nervous that sometimes we forgot the name of the church we were serving—let alone how to share our faith!

That model of evangelism tends not to be effective today. Many people have found that building relationships with people and witnessing as friends is more fruitful.

John 4 shows us how Jesus struck up a conversation with

a woman at a well. It was culturally unusual for him to speak with a woman he did not know, but she sensed his care for her and her life. He was bold but also highly relational and kind. As she talked with him, she showed that she was a thoughtful but wounded person with broken relationships in her past.

Most situations of sharing the good news do not bring about such a quick turnaround. But we can follow Jesus' compassionate approach, listening to people's stories, entering their pain, and speaking with gentleness and respect about the God who loves them.

Jesus, equip me with your Holy Spirit to become increasingly attentive to my connections with others. Help me respond with your compassion. Amen.

WITNESS: REFLECTING THE LIGHT

[John] himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.
—John 1:8

When we think about sharing our faith, we are often nervous about having the right words to say. What if I say something wrong? What if someone asks me a question I don't know how to answer? What kind of witness would that be?

I love how the gospel of John describes the work of John the Baptist. It is a reassuring description of what it means to be an evangelist (a messenger) for Jesus. We are told that John came as a witness, to testify concerning the light of Christ. We get this important clarification: "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

Wherever you may be right now, take a look at the closest light near you. Doing so might not be very comfortable for your eyes, though. In general, lights are not designed to be looked at. The purpose of a

light is to reveal the things around it. For example, you can read a book and see other things around you because some kind of light is helping you to see those things.

The role of John the Baptist, "who came as a witness to testify" about Jesus, was to help people understand about the light. John was not the light. But he helped people to understand that the One who is the light makes it possible to see what life is all about. In the same way, our witness about Jesus is not about ourselves—it points people to the One who is the light of the world.

Jesus, light of the world, shine in our hearts today. Help us to witness faithfully about you in a world that longs for your light of love and hope. Amen.

WITNESS: COMPEL EVERYONE TO JOIN!

"The master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.'"

—Luke 14:23

Let's return to a parable we looked at last week (Sept. 6). We can reflect on this story through the lens of our call to witness. We are reminded in Jesus' parable that one of the most compelling pictures of the kingdom of God is that of a great feast.

In fact, the Bible closes with a picture of a wedding feast. Jesus will return one day, and everything that is wrong will be made right. In Revelation 19:9 we read, "The angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" The Lamb is Jesus. And the guests are all who have said yes to his invitation.

Here in Luke, Jesus tells us that as we wait for that great feast, our call is to invite everyone who will come. This is the heart of Jesus' parable. He

deeply longs for every seat to be filled. "Go," he tells his servants, in effect, "and bring in everyone you can find." And when the servants do that and there is still room, he sends them out again.

Think of the people you know who need to be encouraged by the beautiful news that God has a place for them at his table. The Lord has invited everyone—won't you pass the word along? And how can you share the generosity that flows from all the goodness God has given you?

Lord Jesus, fill me with so much gratitude and joy for being invited to your feast that I cannot help inviting others to come as well. Amen.

WITNESS: GOD SPEAKING THROUGH YOU

“At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”
—Matthew 10:19-20

Someone told me recently about an illustration that I used in a sermon several years ago. They said it made a helpful point that they have often shared with their kids through the years. It had to do with the consequences of our actions—if you pick up one end of a stick, you also pick up the other. They said I also used an actual stick to help make the point.

But I don't remember using that illustration. I don't even remember using the stick. But I expressed my gratitude that the illustration was helpful, even though I didn't remember it.

Our passage today talks about the Lord's promise that the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say when we need them the most. I believe this is true, even in situations when

we are not being persecuted. If we lean on the Holy Spirit, God can use our words to breathe life, encouragement, and conviction into the hearts of others. God can use our words to bring exactly what someone needs in that moment—even if we don't remember everything we have said.

Let's pray that God will give us his words if we are ever being persecuted. And in our everyday conversations, let's practice witnessing about his goodness so that we are ready.

Jesus, we pray for believers who are being persecuted for their faith in you. Give them strength and your words to say. Please also guide us all as we witness about your goodness. Amen.

WITNESS: NOTICING GOD

My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long.
—Psalm 71:15

This week we have reflected on what it means to be a witness to God's saving work. To be a witness is to simply tell about what you have seen and heard. As Christians, we believe that God is always at work around us, so our role is to bear witness to his presence and goodness.

I have an older soccer friend who grew up with a negative view of religion and has often sparred with me about my faith. Several years ago his wife developed dementia, and he spent years caring for her at their home until she recently passed away. In her final months he barely left the house; he was a constant presence at her side. He told me once that as hard as that was, he wouldn't have wanted to do anything differently. As I thought about his deep faithfulness to his wife, it prompted me to say, "Rick, I know you

may not agree with this, but your care for your wife makes me think about how much God cares for us." He brushed me away. But he didn't argue.

That interaction reminds me of how we can see God at work—if we pay attention. In addition, if we ask God to help us pay more attention to his work all around us, I wonder how much easier it might become to witness about God's righteous deeds in our lives and in the lives of others.

God, you call me to declare your power and glory to others. May I see your hand at work in my daily life and in the lives of the people around me. Help me to notice and to bear witness to your greatness. Amen.

SABBATH: CONTENTMENT

Like a weaned child I am content.

—Psalm 131:2

The actor Jim Carrey once introduced himself at a Golden Globe awards show as a two-time winner of the award. Half-joking, he made a big deal of winning the award twice. Then he said, with a big smile, “When I go to sleep at night . . . I don’t just dream any old dream. No, sir. I dream about being *three-time* Golden Globe-winning actor Jim Carrey.” Then he paused, looking at the audience of famous actors and celebrities, and declared, “Because then I would be enough. . . . And I could stop this terrible search.” The audience laughed uncomfortably.

The video clip of that speech went viral because it touches on a vulnerability within many of us. In a society built around consumerism and prestige, our discontentment is easily stirred up. We are told again and again through all kinds of media that we are just one pur-

chase or one achievement away from having complete satisfaction and happiness. Then we will have enough. And we will be enough.

Today, however, we celebrate God’s gift that reminds us that we already have everything we need in Christ. In Christ I am secure. In Christ my hope is found. In Christ I find my deepest contentment, like a weaned child with its loving mother.

May we seek and find that contentment in Christ today.

Lord Jesus, I confess my own issues of discontentment. Forgive me for not trusting that I already have everything I need from you to enjoy the fullness of life. Amen.

HOLISTIC: A DEFINITION IN ACTION

Jesus went throughout Galilee . . . healing every disease and sickness among the people. —Matthew 4:23

This week let's reflect on a word we might not hear very often: *holistic*. In mission work we generally define *holistic* in terms of people's whole lives. We minister with our whole lives, and we care about the whole lives of the people we minister with.

It's one thing to think about a definition. It's a whole other thing to see it in action. That's what we read about as Matthew 4 describes the ministry of Jesus. Imagine what it would have been like to experience Jesus' work for yourself. No wonder the good news of Jesus spread everywhere!

All of the mission concepts we have been reflecting on this month show up in this passage: gospel (good news), witness, and holistic. Jesus proclaims the good news of the kingdom of God. People who experience Jesus witness to his

goodness and bring others to meet him. And we see the holistic ministry of Jesus "healing every disease and sickness." People are set free in every part of their lives.

Our theme verse for this month says: "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Psalm 96:3). This is what holistic mission is all about.

What does it look like to introduce hurting people to Jesus and his marvelous deeds? We live in a world that desperately needs to experience the loving and healing touch of Jesus.

Jesus, thank you for caring about every part of our lives. Please bring healing to the broken areas of my life, and help me to be a channel of your healing presence to others. Amen.

HOLISTIC: OUR SERVANT-GOD

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. . . .”
—Mark 10:45

Last year I took a course with mission leaders from around the world. On the first day, we were asked this question: How would you describe the central, gospel message of the Bible? I spoke up with an answer that reflects my church tradition. A few others chimed in with their answers.

After several people had spoken, a classmate from Ethiopia gave an answer that many of us did not expect. She said, “I think the story of the Bible centers on the story of God as a servant.”

That got our attention. She went on to explain, “The Bible opens with God creating the world and caring for Adam and Eve. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God put into place a plan to serve the world through his Son, Jesus.” And then she pointed out this beautiful detail: “The Bible

ends with a picture of the new Jerusalem, which we are told will not need the sun or moon because God provides the light” (Revelation 21:23). From the beginning into eternity, God serves the world and all who are in it. I had never heard the good news framed in that way, reflecting a different perspective and cultural context.

If Jesus came not to be served but to serve, how does that affect the way we live each day? How should it affect the way we live?

Servant God, I am humbled by your willingness to do whatever was necessary to rescue me. Help me in my life to be a reflection of your self-giving heart. Amen.

HOLISTIC: CARING FOR THE WHOLE PERSON

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.
—Hebrews 13:2

Krystal entered our lives many years ago when her life was at rock bottom. With nowhere else to turn, she came to our church, hoping to reconnect with Jesus, who had been a big part of her life when she was younger. As I and a few others began to learn her story, we discovered many layers of brokenness.

I was amazed as members of our church embraced Krystal and provided for her needs. She was supported with a steady supply of healthy food. Someone gave her their older car, and a mechanic fixed it up free of charge. One night, when my daughter and I stopped by Krystal's place to drop off some groceries, she burst into tears at yet another expression of care.

Then a few months later, when her life stabilized, Krystal

moved on, and none of us heard from her again.

Despite that disappointment, I do not regret the experience of connecting with Krystal. We aimed to be faithful in caring for her needs, and we do not know everything she was dealing with. She is in God's care.

I also can't help wondering if, through Krystal, we served an angel without knowing it. As we live out the good news of Jesus in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and other communities, we never know how the story will twist and turn, but we do know that God calls us to show his love.

God, help us to let go of our expectations and to serve whoever you may bring into our lives. Thank you for always loving us fully. Amen.

HOLISTIC: RECONCILED AND RECONCILING

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

—2 Corinthians 5:18

My wife and I stood silently together, staring up at a small window in the top corner of a large and ominous residential school building. For 140 years this building housed about 150 Indigenous children from a nearby reserve. We had just heard some of the heart-wrenching stories of the children who were forced to live in that school. When they arrived, their hair was cut, and their clothes were taken away and replaced with uniforms. Names were replaced with numbers. Many children suffered abuse and neglect. One man told us that this small window was where he would regularly escape from when he was a boy living at the school.

Sadly, for most of its history this was a church-run school. As you can imagine, many of the children who lived at the school have a very complicat-

ed and hostile view of the Christian faith today. Thankfully, some churches and Christians in Canada are beginning to reckon with this shameful past and have taken steps toward reconciliation.

This work is a part of our holistic mission. As Christians, we have been reconciled to God through Christ. And we are called to the ongoing ministry of reconciliation, bringing the hope and healing of Christ into the deeply broken places of our world. It begins by listening and, where necessary, repenting.

Dear God, we confess that your church has at times been a poor reflection of your heart. Forgive us and help us to live as agents of reconciliation in this broken world. Amen.

HOLISTIC: SERVICE WORSHIP

“Love the Lord your God with all your . . . strength.”

—Mark 12:30

In many Christian traditions like my own, the Sunday worship service is the high point of the week. We gather to bring God our praise, offer our prayers, engage with God's Word, be nourished by the sacraments, and find renewal in our walk with Jesus.

A few years ago a diaconal leader challenged our congregation to think about our Sunday gathering from a different point of view. What if, instead of thinking about our Sunday experience as a worship service, we flipped that around and thought about it as “service worship”? What if we considered that acts of service can be just as worshipful as the other activities of traditional worship?

That started a beautiful new tradition in our church. Several times a year on a Sunday morning, we now gather for a

short time of singing, prayer, and reflection, and then we disperse in teams throughout our city. Our teams volunteer at local schools, women's shelters, food banks, and more.

What we have discovered in this simple change is that worship is so much more than what happens in a typical worship service. To love God not just with our heart, soul, and mind but also to love God *and our neighbor* with all our strength is a beautiful expression of worship. This is also a powerful expression of holistic mission.

God, may my life be an offering of worship to you, not just through my words but also through my acts of kindness and generosity. I commit my whole self to you today. Amen.

HOLISTIC: A BEAUTIFUL NEIGHBORHOOD

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.
—John 1:14 (*The Message*)

On a cool but beautiful fall day, several colleagues and I gathered with Mark, one of our missionaries, in a small house in a struggling neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan. This neighborhood has a history of being overlooked, and signs of decay are all around. Every third property is a vacant lot, and many of the remaining houses are in poor condition.

For all of the external signs of stress, though, the atmosphere inside this small home overflowed with joy and gratitude. Mark introduced us to some of his neighborhood friends who were now involved in the ministry work there. These friends told us how Mark had bought this house to serve as a ministry center in the neighborhood—but that it took seven years before the neighbors actually trusted that this mission effort was genuine. Now the ministry runs a number of

support centers in the community. One offers a ministry for men living on the streets, providing showers, food, and other basic needs. Another provides similar services for women. The centers also offer Bible studies and practical support ministries.

What a beautiful picture of holistic mission, when Jesus moves into a neighborhood and the values of his kingdom begin to transform hearts, lives, and communities. May our lives and churches reflect the same missional heart.

Jesus, help us to see the many ways you are at work in the neighborhoods and communities where we live. May we live faithfully as your hands and feet in the places we call home. Amen.

SABBATH: LISTEN

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God. . . .
—Deuteronomy 6:4-5

I worked in a grocery store when I was in high school. Back then, the prices of products were on stickers, and a cashier had to key the numbers in. Sometimes the sticker would be missing, and the cashier would call for a price check. It was part of my job to run to the shelf where the product came from and find the price.

On busy Saturdays with lots of customers and cashiers, it often happened that a cashier would call my name several times before I would hear it. I thought something was wrong with my hearing. So I went to an ear doctor and discovered that my hearing was fine. The problem was not with my ears; it was me. That experience showed me how easily I could tune out important messages.

Today is the day for Sabbath rest and worship. It is a day to

pause, quiet ourselves, and listen for God's gentle, life-giving voice.

Today's passage from Deuteronomy 6, called the "Shema" in Hebrew, was often recited by God's people several times a day. Notice how it begins: "Hear, O Israel. . . ." This can be a helpful reminder to pay attention to what we may have tuned out.

Let's open our ears today to the message that God is our God, the one true God, who loves us. And may we hear the invitation again to love God with our whole being.

Lord, God, it's easy for me to grow inattentive to your voice. Tune my entire life to your voice of love and speak to me today, I pray. Amen.

INTERCULTURAL: TO THE WHOLE WORLD

All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.
—Acts 8:1

This week let's focus on another important mission word: *intercultural*. To be intercultural followers of Jesus means that we engage with people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to join in God's mission to the whole world.

If we look closely at the early church in the book of Acts, we can see this principle in action. Jesus spent most of his teaching ministry among his own (Jewish) people, but he gave many hints that the good news of the kingdom is intended for all nations. The focus of missions started in Jerusalem. And when believers in Christ were scattered because of persecution, they "preached the word wherever they went."

Jesus had promised that his followers would witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). And in our passage today

we see an example of how the preaching of the gospel spread from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria.

As the good news of Jesus spread, it crossed ethnic boundaries. And within a few years missionaries like the apostle Paul and others spread the word of God's salvation in Christ throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Today the fastest growing parts of the church are in places like Africa, Asia, and Central America. Jesus' promise is still unfolding today!

Jesus, thank you that your good news is for everyone from every culture and nation. We pray for your worldwide church and for missionaries serving in cross-cultural contexts. Amen.

INTERCULTURAL: I AM WITH YOU

“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
—Matthew 28:20

Many years ago on a mission trip to Central America, I experienced for the first time a culture that was very different from my own. Our team landed at the airport, went through customs, and discovered that our host had not yet arrived to pick us up. In the unfamiliar surroundings we felt alone and anxious. None of us spoke Spanish or knew where we were supposed to go. I remember pacing back and forth in the airport with one of our team members, praying and talking out what we should do if no one came to meet us. Eventually Steve, our missionary host, showed up—to our great relief!

That experience reminds me that there is always a measure of anxiety and uncertainty when we step across cultural and ethnic boundaries, whether it's in our neighborhood or in a neighboring coun-

try or overseas. We become vulnerable—and for many of us that can feel uncomfortable. Yet, as I also learned on that first mission trip, when we take that step, we open ourselves to new relationships, learning opportunities, and experiences that can change our lives for good in many ways.

Most of all, we discover that when we embrace Jesus' Great Commission to us in Matthew 28, his words also become more real to us than we might imagine: “Surely I am with you always. . . .”

Lord, Jesus, help me to discern how I can support your mission to all nations. What next step are you inviting me into? Thank you for your promise to be with me always. Amen.

INTERCULTURAL: FOLLOWING GOD'S DIRECTION

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia. . . .
—Acts 16:10

Looking back on my life's journey, I see a series of doors that God opened and closed to bring me where I am today. Along the way, I experienced not only disappointments but also some great surprises. Though I didn't always see it at the time, I can see more clearly now how God was guiding me. As you reflect on your life, I wonder if you can see God's direction in similar ways?

We can see God's direction at work in the episode that Paul and his companions experienced in our reading for today. Paul and his team were on a significant intercultural missionary journey, bringing the gospel to strategic countries and regions in the Roman Empire. He and his companions had tried to go to the province of Asia (part of present-day Turkey), but the Holy Spirit stopped them, and they changed course. Then, at the

border leading into Bithynia, the same thing happened.

That night, Paul had a vision in which he saw a man begging him to come to Macedonia. So the missionaries went there, and God opened a remarkable door for them in Philippi.

I find myself challenged by this passage to pay close attention to God's leading. What neighbor or coworker or friend is God calling me to love more intentionally? Can I sense that the Spirit is beckoning me to cross the street or a cultural boundary or an ocean to follow and trust his leading?

Dear God, I long to have the clarity that you gave to Paul in this episode. Help me to trust that you are urging me to follow you into places and relationships where I can bring your love. Amen.

INTERCULTURAL: REACHING REMOTE PLACES

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. —2 Corinthians 9:12

The countries of Sudan and South Sudan are among the world's most difficult places to live in today. Millions of people in these countries have been displaced by civil war, political unrest, and disasters.

Yet Jesus continues to be at work. The mission agency I serve provides a training program for pastors and church leaders called Timothy Leadership Training (TLT). Reverend Patrick, a church leader in South Sudan, recently reported that 43 pastors and ministry leaders completed the TLT program and are making a difference in their communities. Though non-Sudanese people cannot generally enter these countries right now, we can still bless and encourage churches and believers there through programs like TLT.

This reflects the joy that flows

through 2 Corinthians 9. Here Paul celebrates the generosity of the church in Corinth as it gives to bless churches in other lands. And their investment in God's kingdom will result in blessings multiplied for both the giver and the receivers. Most significantly, this work honors Jesus.

As we consider our place in God's worldwide mission, we cannot underestimate how our partnership with other ministries can benefit people in places we cannot go. Wherever we are, our generosity can bless Christian brothers and sisters around the world in extraordinary ways.

God, help us to grow in the grace of giving. May our generosity minister to others around the world and honor you. Amen.

INTERCULTURAL: LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.
—1 Corinthians 10:33

About 15 years ago my wife and I spent time with a small team in a West African country. One day we enjoyed a meal of rice and chicken served on a large platter. We gathered around the food, and each person took a portion with their hand. I did the same, but then I heard a shout and saw fingers pointing at me! I jumped back in shock, wondering what I had done wrong. Then my hosts burst out laughing. I am left-handed, and, without thinking, I had used my left hand to scoop food from the communal platter—and that was a no-no in that culture. We had a good laugh together over my mistake.

To engage with people of other cultures means that sometimes we are going to make mistakes. That's a part of learning in contexts that we are not familiar with. But when we take on a posture of vulner-

ability and humility, we also find our lives deeply enriched through our friendship with people whose background is different from ours.

In our passage from 1 Corinthians today, we see the example of Paul adjusting his behavior to the culture of others wherever possible, in order to honor them and to glorify God. We represent God faithfully when we respect other cultures and are willing to learn.

Jesus, help me to grow in curiosity and openness to coworkers and neighbors whose cultural backgrounds may be different from mine. May your love shine through me as I seek to bring your goodness to others. Amen.

INTERCULTURAL: ALL NATIONS

Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. —Revelation 7:9

This passage is one of the most powerful pictures of heaven in the Bible. John sees a vast crowd of people from every nation and language, and all are celebrating and worshipping Jesus with all their heart. Everyone is dressed in white robes, waving palm branches, and praising God. What a vision! It seems that John himself is so astonished that one of the elders by the throne comes to him and asks, in effect, “Who do you think these people are?” John is unsure, so he replies: “Sir, you know.”

It turns out that every person in the crowd has experienced the forgiveness of Jesus and received new life. The white robes, ironically, are white because they have been washed in Jesus’ blood (v. 14).

This week we have been focusing on the intercultural

mission of God, and Revelation 7 is a clear picture of the impact of that work.

A few months ago I met with about 50 church planters and their spouses who represented 15 different countries. We learned together and enjoyed beautiful moments of worship in several languages. I looked around the room at these gifted and faithful leaders, and it seemed like a taste of what John describes here.

May it be so in every one of our churches!

Lord, we long for the day when we will join in with the vast multitude around your throne. May your church increasingly reflect the intercultural beauty of the world you have created and re-deemed. Amen.

SABBATH: PEACE

“... the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”
—Numbers 6:26

Last year, my wife and I completed a 900-kilometer (560-mile) hiking trail that stretches from Niagara Falls to Lake Huron in Canada. It took us about 60 hikes over five summers to finish it. One of the things we noticed whenever we would start a new hike was the immediate sense of peace and calm we felt as we followed a path into the woods. We were soon immersed in the beauty of nature. It was our happy place.

Some of the greatest gifts of God are moments when we can catch a glimpse of God's peace. Where and when have you experienced that gift?

Sabbath is designed to be a day of peace for us—a day when we interrupt our regular routines to focus on God through worship, play, and rest. Thankfully we do not have to be in our “happy place” to receive that peace. The blessing of

Aaron in Numbers 6 is God's promise to turn his face toward us wherever we are and to bring us peace.

We see the same in the ministry of Jesus. After his resurrection, Jesus greeted his grieving disciples with a beautiful message: “Peace be with you!” (John 20:21, 26).

On this Sabbath day, may you experience the gift of God's eternal peace in Jesus for whatever burden you may be carrying.

Jesus, my life longs for the peace that transcends all understanding. Grant me your blessing of peace today as I give up my worries and anxieties to rest in you. Amen.

GOD'S MISSION HAS DISCIPLES

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." —Luke 10:17

Wally was a church member who had a big heart for mission. He and I led a course for several years about the basics of Christian faith, and we saw a lot of good change in people's lives during that time. I remember thinking sometimes as I drove home, "It doesn't get any better than this!"

It seems that Jesus' disciples sensed something like that in their own context when he sent them out in pairs. Jesus celebrated their success by declaring that through their work, Satan himself was being defeated. What a statement! It truly doesn't get better than that!

This month we have focused on some big mission words: *gospel*, *witness*, *holistic*, and *inter-cultural*. These are important words and concepts. But they don't mean a thing if they remain just ideas. They come

alive and truly mean something when they describe how we join Jesus in the work of changing lives and renewing communities.

As Wally interacted with the people he met, whether it was in his greenhouse operation, talking to a visitor at church, striking up a conversation at the coffee shop, or hosting our course, he wasn't thinking about those big words. He just wanted to make sure that every person knew they were loved with an everlasting love and that they would meet Jesus. Jesus commissions us, his disciples, with the same call.

Jesus, help me to be available to you. In my interactions with others, may I bring your message of life, healing, and hope. Equip me with your Spirit, Lord. Amen.

GOD'S MISSION HAS A CHURCH

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
—Psalm 96:3

As we wrap up our month together, let's return to our theme passage, Psalm 96. As I read this psalm, I notice something remarkable. It assumes that God is at work at all times in creation and among all the peoples and nations of the world. Sometimes it can be tempting for us to believe that we are responsible to bring God into places where he is not. But the truth is that God is already present wherever we may go. Our call is to bear witness to him and to his work in our midst.

I recently spent a couple of days with a small group of church leaders and members from across my denomination. I heard story after story about God at work in their church communities. It didn't matter if their church was urban, suburban, thriving, or struggling—every person had stories to tell about God changing lives and

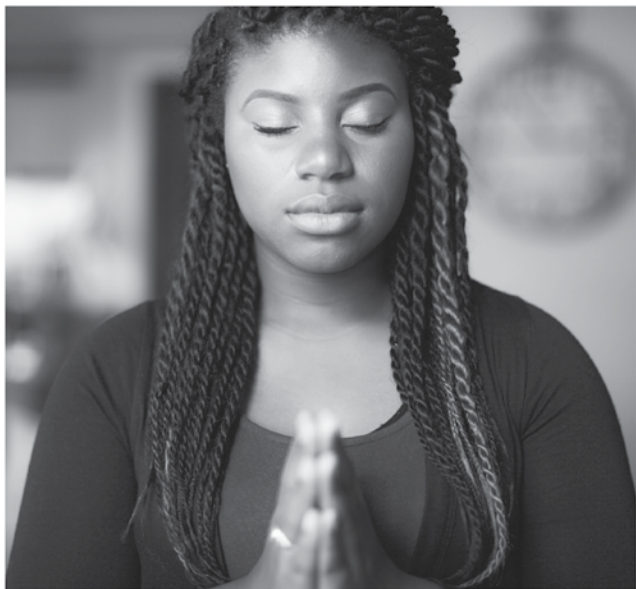
communities. There were stories of discipleship, mission, service, worship, and sacrifice.

We began as strangers around the table, and soon we embraced each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We clearly saw the presence of Jesus in one another. We were all different, but we each had similar stories of the faithful God working through the small and loving actions of his people.

May God use you and me to “declare his glory . . . among all peoples.”

God, guide us to declare your glory and to point out your amazing work that is all around us in every part of the world. May your kingdom come and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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