

Refreshing the Vision for Prayer and Healing

The Vision for Prayer and Healing at Cedar Ridge

Prayer and healing are foundational to the Cedar Ridge community of hope and transformation. Through a growing relationship with Jesus, we experience transformational healing that both centers us in the love and peace of God and empowers us to work for justice and reconciliation.

CRCC has always emphasized the importance of prayer, and in particular we have encouraged contemplative practices such as silence and solitude which allow us to become “a community of peace and safety where it’s possible to shelter from the frenzied pace of life, in order to slow down and explore the mystery and meaning of our existence; where we can take time to address the roots of our anxieties and pain; a place of hope where we can find help and healing and the power to change, no matter how desperate our situation.”

In March of 2015, the Prayer and Healing ministry team (P&H) crafted a mission statement to further this vision:

The Prayer & Healing team seeks to build a sustainable spiritual support system for our congregation, especially those in need of help and healing. Our priority is help in troubled times. Part of the foundation of such a spiritual support system is a prayerful and compassionate congregation, so we also seek to help our entire congregation grow in prayer to promote health for our whole community.

Our challenge is to move beyond prayer and healing as separate “activities” or “programs” and to foster an enduring culture of prayerfulness and compassionate healing that permeates all we do as individuals and as a church. We seek to embody a congregational and personal rhythm of life that mirrors the way of Jesus: withdrawing for solitary prayer but also viewing all of our actions and relationships as guided and empowered by a prayerful, continual connection with God.

The following four objectives are designed to normalize prayer and healing as a part of discipleship, making them a way of life, rather than something that we “do.”

1. *Create space* for people of all ages to practice conscious contact with God, learning to rest in God’s love, discern God’s guidance, and recognize the divine in the activity of daily life.
2. Lay out diverse prayer pathways that create a *healthy integrated balance* between our inner and outer lives and guide us into “active contemplation” where we view everything and everyone through the lens of love. Inner prayer practices generate the love and compassion that empowers us to work for justice and reconciliation in the world.
3. Model this healthy balance through our ministries: Establish a *foundation of prayer* for all of our ministries by weaving prayer and healing practices into our growth, community and servanthood activities so that prayer is not a separate element.

4. Enhance and expand our *culture of compassionate healing* so that everyone in our community views offering and receiving healing as a way of life. As a community, we will create safe spaces for people to process their brokenness and experience the healing power of Jesus, resulting in a family of humble “wounded healers” who serve and support each other on their healing journeys.

Current Reality

There is a sense that while we are a prayerful congregation as a whole, our personal prayer lives are not all they could be. There are as many reasons for this as there are people at Cedar Ridge, but the regional culture of busyness is a main culprit. We must find ways of living prayerfully within this culture.

1. Create contemplative space

We attempt to create space for intentional, conscious contact with God through corporate worship services and discipleship group prayer practices. Extended communion times and Lenten services are particularly meant to promote contemplation and help people become more comfortable with silence as a practice. We offer Lenten and Advent Quiet Days and various prayer circles after Sunday services where attendance ranges from five to thirty, such as psalm-writing, spiritual direction and contemplation, and monthly racial reconciliation circles. There is anecdotal evidence that these efforts translate into increased individual prayer, but discipleship group leaders report that group prayer times are inconsistent and many people do not feel that their prayer lives are “enough.”

2. Encourage a healthy, integrated balance of our inner and outer lives

We can tend to compartmentalize prayer and feel that we are either praying or serving, or that we are called to do one or the other. This can result in “contemplatives” who forget that they are “blessed to be a blessing” or “social activists” who may be motivated by anger or fear rather than by a Spirit of love and compassion. Jesus is our example of a balanced and integrated life of prayer and action, and we seek to follow his way of engaging in “inner” prayer practices that empower and infuse “outer” action in the world.

At CRCC, we emphasize silence and solitude. These practices take many forms in our congregation, and can be carried out while engaging in everyday activities such as cooking, coloring, exercising or walking the dog. Some meditate on the metro; some withdraw for weekend retreats. We have consistently promoted “inner work” in community through contemplative retreats, Quiet Days, discipleship group practices, evening prayer groups, classes, and reflection during services. Ten to twenty percent of our congregation are regular participants at the smaller events, and that number is growing slowly.

3. Build a foundation of prayer for all ministries

The church can model an inward/outward balance through the way we do ministry. We should work to incorporate prayer into all that we do, rather than have it tacked on or even competing with “other” ministries. Prayer is naturally associated with spiritual growth, but should also underpin our community and service elements.

As a first step, most of our main ministry teams include someone from the P&H team who can promote prayer on the team and help brainstorm ways to involve the congregation in praying for the ministry.

4. Enhance our culture of compassionate healing

Ten years ago, we envisioned a ministry area “specifically focused on helping people with emotional, psychological and developmental struggles.” We wanted to create a safe place for healing and recovery and “offer rest, support and hope to even the most despairing.” We had hoped that hurting people would be drawn to our congregation and also expected that as people began to “explore the roots of their anxiety and pain,” they would seek help with healing.

The demand has not been as great as we expected, and Matthew handles most of it, occasionally referring people to Roger and Melanie. Some Prayer and Healing team members have been trained in healing, counseling, and spiritual direction practices, but the team currently focuses on creating congregational prayer opportunities rather than prioritizing healing. We offer emotional healing through Transformational Prayer Ministry (TPM) and grief and crisis counseling when needed.

CRCC promotes an atmosphere of compassion and patience for self and others through our messages and discipleship group materials, and most discipleship groups provide safe space for individuals to examine their anxiety and pain. Now we want to expand the call to communal healing beyond leadership, and nurture a community of healers and helpers. This may entail increasing our comfort with physical healing, which was an essential part of Christ’s public ministry.

Possible Ways Forward

Each of these sections contains practices, approaches or tools for moving forward as a community. It is important to remember that such tools and practices are secondary and should never become our focus. Our focus is on creating safe spaces and ways for individuals to find balance and peace through a deeper connection with God. This will look different for different people at different times.

1. Create contemplative space

- Offering many approaches and practices may add to the sense of busyness. We should consider offering from one to three practices for a month, quarter, or series to be used in the Sunday service, children and youth rooms, and discipleship groups. We might hold workshops, regular practice groups, reading groups, share stories, and feature the practices in The Loop.
- Ash Wednesday and Good Friday services are generally well received. We should consider holding primarily contemplative services on several Sundays a year, just as we hold Service Days. We could include youth and offer a variation for children. Like Quiet Days, these services would involve fewer words, quiet music, silence, and some contemplative practices. We need to design and present these so they do not alienate newcomers.
- Proceed with existing plans (with the youth) to upgrade and promote the prayer walk and labyrinth, and incorporate them into ministries and services. Our serene property is underused as sacred space.
- Retreats can make life-long converts to silence and contemplation. We might promote a small contemplative retreat, and if it is a success, regularize it so that it is looked forward to each year. Alternatively, we could coordinate a group to attend an outside retreat with Contemplative Outreach, Shalem, Bon Secours, National Cathedral, or Seeker’s Church.

2. Encourage a healthy, integrated balance of our inner and outer lives

As our “outer” social and economic justice work grows and we recapture our vision for being a community that treasures the earth and shares our resources with more people, we want to emphasize prayer practices that will help our congregation lead well-balanced lives inspired by prayer that leads to action.

Because everyone experiences God differently, one defined “pathway” to a prayerful, balanced lifestyle is not appropriate. Our challenge is to offer multiple prayer pathways leading to a life of “active contemplation” and constant connection to God, so that everyone can find their own healthy balance.

- We will continue to emphasize contemplative prayer and silence, solitude, and reflection as central to our spiritual growth, but we seek to expand the way we think about prayer so that prayer infuses our whole lives.
- We will create diverse pathways that support personal prayer growth through individual, group and corporate vehicles. Everyone who wants to should have personal support for developing individualized pathways of prayer. Some elements might include a course on prayer for Enneagram types, individual spiritual partnerships (with one or two others) with a focus on prayer and healing practices, and more promotion of a Rule of Life approach.
- Ideally, we would like to train and equip our whole congregation to be spiritual companions for one another. Some may be gifted or experienced in spiritual support, and they could be available, but we do not want to create a hierarchy of “experts.” Individual pathways would include small group and corporate elements as well.
- At the corporate level, we might include a more intentional inward/outward rhythm in our church calendar, mirroring on a larger scale a daily lifestyle of reflection and action. We can learn to carry inner peace into our busy times. Cedar Ridge has some naturally busier seasons and we could purposefully intersperse more reflective times such as: incorporating a slow-down for introspection and some form of Rule of Life planning at the New Year; a slow-down at Lent (as we do); and another slow-down for gratitude at Thanksgiving. We could also emphasize a weekly or monthly Sabbath for enjoying community.
- Regular teaching in Sunday messages, workshops and small groups should focus on inner practices that “normalize” prayer and integrate day-to-day life with spiritual life, such as discernment, spiritual direction, and Life Lectio. By incorporating action oriented contemplative practices (writing, art, walking outside) and emphasizing personal inner disciplines that are “active” and in-the-world (fasting, mindfulness, secrecy, simplicity), we can expand people’s conception of prayer and better engage children and youth.

3. Build a foundation of prayer for all ministries

- Continue our teaching focus on what prayer is and why it is important. This emphasis could include more Sunday messages on prayer from different angles, integrating prayer with other subject matters and using stories from different ministry areas.
- Examine each main ministry area and develop a plan to incorporate more prayer by and for the participants. Ideas include church-wide fasting around our Guatemala trip, contemplative farming retreats, visiting prayer practice leaders in children and youth groups, and collecting prayer requests from Greencastle and Ipalteco families and people we serve on Days of Service.

4. Enhance our culture of compassionate healing

- Train discipleship group leaders and other ministry leaders in compassionate listening, group spiritual direction, confession, and speaking the truth in love, and encourage them to model it for others so that this becomes a natural outgrowth of following Jesus and an expectation in our community. These practices build trust in community and in God's mercy, and can free us from paralyzing guilt and shame. They also lead to forgiveness and compassion for others.
- Begin normalizing the idea of healing prayer, including physical healing. Leaders should become comfortable with it and model it for others. While some people are specifically gifted as healing channels, anyone can practice it, and we should feel empowered as disciples to embrace God's will and power for wholeness and healing.
- Reinvigorate the emotional/spiritual healing Transformational Prayer Ministry. Once learned, individuals can use the method to facilitate the healing of past hurts and recovery from unhealthy emotional patterns and beliefs. The technique is highly effective for many, and we have several trained facilitators who are willing to lead a renewed effort.
- Compassion leads people to want to serve others in practical ways, and being cared for during hard times can be healing and transformational. We have set up a Congregational Care system, which needs to be advertised more broadly to recruit more helpers and to let people know how to ask for help.