



**Spring 2017 Discipleship Group Materials**



Community Church

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# Introduction

We are caught up in an amazing story! We are part of the big story of God's incredible love for a broken world, and our own call to partner with God in reconciling all things. And we are part of the smaller but no less incredible story of living and working all that out where we live, in our moment in time and space.

We are an amazing community! We are a truly diverse group of people who have found a spiritual home here. We embrace one another, agree, argue, grow, falter and, more than anything, we are learning to love God, love ourselves, and love one another. And we have a powerful vision—one that binds us together, and one that God has used to challenge us to change, inspire us to action, and sustain us through difficult times along the way. It is a vision that is much bigger than any or all of us, opening us to our need for God's presence, and sending us into a broken world that needs God.

We have come a long way in the ten years since we first articulated our vision as a community; with God's help we have made great progress in our goals of spiritual growth, community and servanthood. As our journey continues, we are inspired by God's great hope in us, in humanity and in the future. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and the best is yet to come!

## Overview

In this series we will explore our future together as a church community. The series coincides with a strategic planning process that our Board and Pastoral Team have been working in collaboration with other teams and leaders across our church. This has resulted in the development of 4 overarching themes related to our vision that we believe God is calling us to make our intentional focus over the next 5-10 years.

Each week we will engage with one of these themes alongside a story about Jesus that illustrates it, helps explain it, and inspires us to action. The discussion questions each week are designed to help us all wrestle with the challenges, give feedback into the planning process, and determine how we can each respond personally to this exciting call to co-create our future with God.

The 4 weeks of the series will cover the following themes:

- *April 30: Sharing Our Vision With Others*  
Inviting others to join us in our journey, and learning with and from likeminded partners and congregations.

- *May 7: Advancing Social Justice*  
Increasing our understanding of and prayerful commitment to addressing social justice issues.
- *May 14: Prioritizing Relationships*  
Growing in loving, life-giving relationships as an end in itself, and as the approach to everything we do as a community.
- *May 21: Cultivating Openness to God's Presence*  
Developing a culture of intentional connection to the presence of God through corporate and individual prayer and worship.

During the series, we will be reflecting on the implications of these 4 themes for how we live out our vision. Take some time before the start of this series to reflect on our vision:

*Imagine a community that dares to dream of heaven on earth; a community where everyone is accepted and respected and their journey cherished, regardless of their background, beliefs or place in society; where everyone looks out for the concerns of others and no one is alone.*

*Imagine 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.*

*Imagine a community of people devoted to following Jesus together, learning to live like him and helping one another grow in their relationship with God; where we are gradually transformed to become better people: better friends, better family members, better workers, better neighbors; becoming people who enjoy life to the full and who can also deal with adversity well, learning to grow through failure and suffering.*

*Imagine that community scattered throughout the region around Washington, Baltimore and beyond working as agents of love, peace and hope wherever they are; serving our neighbors, caring for the poor, helping the oppressed.*

*Imagine a community of people who live simply and ethically, who share their land and resources with their neighbors; a community that treasures the Earth and reaches out beyond global, cultural and political barriers to offer friendship and practical support.*

*Imagine a community of people who make the world a better place.*

## Our Approach to Strategic Planning

### Prayerful

In Scripture we read, “We plan the way we want to live, but only God makes us able to live it” (Proverbs 16:9, The Message). Recognizing our total dependence on God, our desire is for this to be a prayerful process where we open ourselves up to God and listen to the Spirit’s prompting. We long to be co-creators with God as we plan for the future—rather than simply seeking divine blessing for plans we have made.

Leaders from across the church who have contributed to the work so far have done so prayerfully and with humility. As we bring all of this work together and distill it into a strategic plan, we want to remain prayerful and humble: seeking to hear God and one another. As we discuss different aspects of our plan, let us be open to one another’s opinion—and especially to opinions that differ from our own—as a way of discerning divine intent.

### Intergenerational

We are an intergenerational community, and the plans we make impact everyone, regardless of age. We want to hear the perspectives of all our members. Children and youth leaders will leverage the 4 Sunday mornings of this series to engage younger members in these topics in age-relevant ways.

During this short series please make extra effort to use the Reflection With Children exercises, and to ensure the feedback of children and youth is captured and shared with the whole community.

### Personal

In planning processes such as these, it is very easy to think of what other people, or the church as a whole, should do. Let us resist that temptation and instead focus on what we can do as individuals and in our small groups to contribute to the increasing realization of our dream of heaven on earth.

### Practicalities

- In this packet you will find the discussion questions for each week. Each of them assumes you have heard the message for that week, so if you were not able to be at Cedar Ridge that Sunday, **please listen or watch the message online** ([www.crcc.org/messages/](http://www.crcc.org/messages/)).
- The questions for this series are intended to stimulate thinking about how we want to pursue our vision in the next 5-10 years. And we want to hear your thoughts! There are a number of ways you can share your perspective on the way forward:

- Take notes in the pages in this book labeled “Feedback.” Cut out these pages and drop them in the Strategic Planning Feedback box on the Welcome table in the Commons, or post them on the walls at the Strategic Planning Forum on May 21.
- Come to the Strategic Planning Forum on Sunday May 21, following the service. We will have a light lunch then gather around tables to discuss key ministry areas:
  - Children and Youth
  - Farm
  - Finance
  - Guatemala
  - Outreach
  - Prayer and Healing
  - Property
  - Small Groups
  - Social Justice
  - Worship

Then we will share potluck desserts together and celebrate community!

- If you can’t make it to the Strategic Planning Forum, you can email your feedback to [questions@crcc.org](mailto:questions@crcc.org).
- **Since the Forum is immediately after the service on week 4, the material for week 4 needs to be reviewed by group members during the third week (as “homework”!). There are no group discussion questions for week 4.**
- The strategic planning papers written for each of the 10 key ministry areas listed above can be found here: [www.crcc.org/strategic-planning-papers](http://www.crcc.org/strategic-planning-papers). These papers give much more detail concerning the current challenges, priority issues, and next steps in each of these areas.



**Spring Discipleship Series 2017**  
**The Best Is Yet To Come**

## **Week 1: Sharing Our Vision With Others**

### **Luke 7:1-10**

Jesus reached out to those around him not just with an offer of help, but with an invitation to partnership. Jesus' vision was much bigger than starting a new religion. He invited people to follow him and to seek the Kingdom of God, which transcends religious dogma, ethnicity and culture. He invited people to partner with him in becoming transformed people and in bringing healing, life and wholeness to the world. In this story, as is often the case, Jesus reaches out and breaks cultural and religious taboos, dramatically illustrating the nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus heals a Roman centurion's servant, but we hardly hear about the healing: all the focus is on the centurion. He is a pagan (religiously different to Jesus) and a Gentile (culturally different to Jesus)—which meant he was "unclean" under Jewish religious law. He is also an official in a brutal occupying military force to which Jesus and his followers are subject. But Jesus sees past all the religious, cultural and power dynamics to identify his faith and reveal that he is a partner, and one who belongs. This challenges the very nature of power, such that even the centurion sees Jesus as the one with real authority. The Kingdom of God is about love and partnership, breaking down the barriers of power and division.

### **This week's discussion questions**

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What was difficult for you?
2. As we look to partner with other groups and communities in our local area, what are some potential prejudices and judgments we might need to let go of?
3. Read the text beginning on page 7 entitled *Sharing Our Vision With Others*. Discuss the questions below. If you have answers to these questions that you think it would be useful to share with the church as a whole, write them (clearly!) on page 9 of this book. You can cut out this page and post it on the wall at the Strategic Planning Forum (on May 21) or drop it in the box on the Welcome table in the Commons.
  - Do you agree that sharing our vision with others is important? Why does it matter to you?
  - Is there anything in the text you disagree with? Why do you disagree?
  - Is there anything you think is missing from the text? What is it – and why is it important?

4. How confident do you feel about articulating your own story of what God means to you and how Cedar Ridge helps you in your journey? What would help you to feel more confident?
5. Are there people you know with whom our vision might resonate? How could you invite them to engage with our community?
6. How can we—corporately and as individuals—become more of a “safe space” where people can share honestly and vulnerably without fear of judgment?
7. Think through all the ways you interact with Cedar Ridge. In what other ways will you personally help us share our vision with others?
8. What could you do as a group to reach out to others?
9. Spend some time praying for each other and for our community as we reach out to others with the good news of Jesus.

### **Reflection during the week**

During the week, prayerfully reflect on the challenge and privilege of sharing our vision with others. Note any additional thoughts that come to mind. Pray for your own role in helping us share our vision with others.

### **Reflection with children**

Talk to your child(ren) about our vision and why we want to share it with other people. Pray about this together, and let us know what they think—we want feedback from all age groups in our community! (Don't forget: you can send feedback to [questions@crcc.org](mailto:questions@crcc.org))

# Sharing Our Vision With Others

## What is this theme, and why does it matter?

The vision of Cedar Ridge is to be a community that is dedicated to seeking the kingdom of God; that dreams of—and works towards—heaven on earth; and that partners with Christ, and with others who are likeminded, to make the world a better place. Our vision portrays a community that is a place of safety and healing, of hope and transformation for people of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds. Through our vision we declare our intention to accept, respect and lovingly journey alongside everyone who enters our community.

We want others to experience the liberating good news that underlies Cedar Ridge’s vision and values. We do not want to “compete” with neighboring churches, but we do want to offer an alternative way of following Jesus to non-churched people, and to those who no longer feel aligned with the vision of their current faith tradition. If we are making progress towards our vision, and living out the call to follow Jesus, we should be growing numerically.

As a small but distinctive part of the body of Christ in the world, we can play a valuable role in sharing ideas and participating in the conversation with other churches working towards visions similar to our own. We can also learn from such churches, and can leverage their experience and networks to become more effective agents of love, peace and hope.

## What are the implications of this theme?

We are confident in God’s love for the whole world, and in God’s call to us to join in the work of reconciliation. We have a compelling and much needed vision to share with the world. We therefore want to do several things to invite others to join us in our journey, and to learn with and from likeminded partners and congregations:

1. ***Intentionally attract people to join our community***—We want to invest more in marketing and outreach so that people who would like to join a community like us are able to find us. We want to ensure newcomers of all ages and backgrounds feel welcome and can easily integrate into the life of the community. We want to make our events easy for non-churched people to engage with. And we want to share our property with our neighbors in welcoming and responsible ways.
2. ***Proactively engage people where they are***—Many people need a community like Cedar Ridge, even if they do not yet recognize that need. Therefore, we want to deliberately and thoughtfully engage people in local venues outside of the church, and through less “religious” and therefore more accessible events.
3. ***Mobilize members as “ambassadors” and partners in Christ’s work of reconciling all things***—We want to strengthen our own capacity and willingness to share and embody Cedar Ridge’s understanding of the gospel with others. We will seek to strengthen our

listening skills, find ways to authentically articulate our own story, and develop appropriate resources to support us in sharing our vision with neighbors and friends.

4. ***Join with likeminded local partners in making the world a better place***—We want to create synergy with others as we work to make the world a better place, increasing the breadth of our outreach through joint services, events and projects with likeminded people outside our own community. Furthermore, in reaching out to partner with our neighbors from other religions, denomination and perspectives, we seek to embody Jesus' barrier-breaking love that knows no bounds.
5. ***Seek to make a positive contribution to and learn from the church at large***—We want to share models, practices, learning and ideas with other churches, leaders and networks to serve the body of Christ, and to learn from others in order to better pursue our vision.

### **What might this look like in practice?**

- We could develop a discipleship series that encourages us to reach out to our neighbors through some kind of an activity.
- We could invite schools and other faith communities to come and volunteer on the farm with us.
- For youth, this might mean more social events and non-Sunday activities that make it easier to invite friends.
- We could build stronger partnerships with other groups working with Guatemalans in our neighborhood.
- We could take Cedar Ridge "on the road" by organizing discussion gatherings in local coffee shops.
- During our Sunday services, we could ensure that most songs are simple and easy for newcomers to join in with.
- We could host social justice-themed documentary screenings to which we could invite our friends.

# Feedback: Sharing Our Vision With Others

*This matters to me*

*Not sure about this*

**Hey, what about this?**



Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_



**Spring Discipleship Series 2017**  
**The Best Is Yet To Come**

## **Week 2: Advancing Social Justice**

### **Matthew 5:1-20**

The Sermon on the Mount is considered by some to be Jesus's inaugural address: laying out his vision for the Kingdom of Heaven at the outset of his earthly ministry. The message that Jesus delivers is replete with references to righteousness—*dikaïosuné*, in the Greek, which literally means "God's judicial approval" and is often translated "justice." Coming in the tradition of a Jewish prophet, Jesus reaffirms the need to fulfill the law, and to demonstrate justice rather than religious piety in order to enter the Kingdom. He declares blessed (or happy) those who long for justice, and who suffer for the sake of justice. Such people, approved by God, are not only ready for the coming Kingdom; they also know the fulfillment and joy of being one with God and with other people. As we grow in our love for Jesus, and our gratitude for all we have been given, we long to give back; to somehow demonstrate our love. In the famous parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25), Jesus says, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." In serving others—the poor, the vulnerable, the neglected—we serve our King.

### **This week's discussion questions**

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What was difficult for you?
2. In what ways do you "hunger and thirst for righteousness (or justice)"?
3. Read the text beginning on page 13 entitled *Advancing Social Justice*. Write your answers to the questions below on page 15 of this book. You can cut out this page and post it on the wall at the Strategic Planning Forum (on May 21) or drop it in the box on the Welcome table in the Commons.
  - Do you agree with what is in the text?
  - Is there anything you disagree with? Why do you disagree?
  - Is there anything you think is missing from this paper? What is it – and why is it important?
4. As followers of Jesus, we recognize we are one with God and therefore one with each other. How might this impact how we think about social justice?

5. What social justice issues are important to you personally? How does being a member of Cedar Ridge impact how you engage with these issues?
6. What inspires you to get involved in social justice issues at Cedar Ridge? What holds you back from getting further involved?
7. How might you engage with the topic of social justice as a group? What will you do together to promote justice and reconciliation?
8. Spend some time praying for one another and for our community as we engage in issues of social justice.

### **Reflection during the week**

During the week, prayerfully reflect on our community's role in addressing issues of social justice. Note any additional thoughts that come to mind. Pray about your own involvement in this area.

### **Reflection with children**

Talk to your child(ren) about some of the social justice issues you care about. Pray with them about these issues, and let us know what they think about social justice—we want feedback from all age groups in our community! (Don't forget: you can send feedback to [questions@crcc.org](mailto:questions@crcc.org))



# Advancing Social Justice

## What is this theme, and why does it matter?

Concern for social justice—locally, nationally and internationally—has always been part of Cedar Ridge’s identity. Our vision calls us to work as agents of love, peace and hope; to serve our neighbors, care for the poor, and help the oppressed; to live simply and ethically, and treasure the earth; and to reach out beyond global, cultural and political barriers to offer friendship and practical support. Aspects of this vision provided the impetus to hold regular, churchwide Days of Service, establish the farm, and develop partnerships in Ipala, Guatemala. More recently, we have formed the Racial Reconciliation and the Economic Justice teams to strengthen our own understanding of these issues, and identify ways we can engage locally to promote racial and economic justice and reconciliation. We have also reaffirmed our commitment to developing relationships with other faith communities, and have begun to engage more in multi-faith events.

To date, two topical areas have emerged as priorities: **food security** (linked to the farm, Greencastle Elementary School backpack program, and support to nutrition-related initiatives in Guatemala); and **education** (scholarships and support to schools in Guatemala, and our work with Greencastle). A third area may be forming around racial and economic bias in the **justice system**, which has implications for our Latino neighbors as well as for other faith communities with which we are developing relationships. These areas of focus may shift as we grow in our understanding of social justice issues, deepen our partnerships with other organizations, draw more of our members into this work, and seek to be responsive to changes in the socio-political environment.

## What are the implications of this theme?

This core aspect of our vision has gathered momentum and become more clearly defined in the last couple of years. Based on our conviction that the Kingdom of God looks like a just and fair world where all of society experiences peace and healing, we have identified the following as priorities for the coming years:

1. **Motivate our community to pursue justice and mercy**—A commitment to social justice can easily become a source of anger and bitterness, or a way to feel superior and self-righteous. To guard against this, we want to promote an understanding of our oneness with all of humanity, as well as God’s own heart for justice, mercy and reconciliation.
2. **Increase congregational understanding of social justice issues**—Injustice thrives on ignorance and false narratives. We will continue to invest in educating ourselves and others, and will intentionally make safe space for sharing personal stories, and discussing what we are learning in an atmosphere of love and empathy.
3. **Increase CRCC’s commitment to pray for social justice**—However much our hearts are moved by unjust situations, we can be certain that God’s own heart is moved to an

infinitely greater degree. Through prayer, we acknowledge our total dependency on God, surrender our burden of grief and frustration, and seek wisdom, strength and courage. We want to model the need for prayer in our events and activities, and continually exhort one another to pray for our hurting world.

4. ***Equip our community with facts, tools and approaches to productively engage in discussions related to social justice issues***—Challenging others in a loving way is difficult, particularly in the context of emotionally charged issues such as racism, religious intolerance, and economic disparity. As a community, we value being accepting and non-judgmental, while also standing with the poor and oppressed. We want to equip people to manage this tension.
5. ***Identify ways for CRCC to strategically act, including through partnerships with other groups***—Through research, and consultation with other groups engaged in locally relevant social justice issues, we want to prayerfully identify ways we can engage in priority issues in focused and meaningful ways.
6. ***Increase the number and depth of relationships between CRCC members and people of different faiths, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds***—Recognizing the immense value of being directly exposed to other views and life experiences—and reflecting the desire for a relational basis for all our social justice work—we will encourage people to develop diverse relationships, and create venues to facilitate this.

### **What might this look like in practice?**

- Within our discipleship groups, we might sometimes shift the focus from discussion to engaging in a social justice-oriented activity.
- We could develop brochures and include signage on the farm about food insecurity in our area and ways to advocate for change.
- We could conduct research to ensure our support to Ipala, Guatemala is empowering residents to move out of poverty.
- We could promote environmental justice and stewardship among Cedar Ridge members, and invest in solar panels, bird and bat boxes, and other environmentally friendly improvements on our property.
- We could increase our giving to support social justice initiatives.
- We could reflect God's heart for justice more in the worship songs we sing.
- We might partner with local organizations to advocate for changes in the legal systems and education policies and procedures.

# Feedback: Advancing Social Justice

*This matters to me*

*Not sure about this*

**Hey, what about this?**



Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_



## Spring Discipleship Series 2017 The Best Is Yet To Come

### Week 3: Prioritizing Relationships

#### Matthew 9:9-13

Jesus did everything through relationships. He only seems to be alone when he is praying, and we feel some of his anguish at being alone (even deserted) in the last hours before his death. The last thing he does before his arrest is to have a meal with his friends. His vision for the Kingdom of God is all about relationships: it is about people coming together to share life, to help one another, challenge one another, and be one. Throughout the gospels this focus on inclusive relationships is epitomized by Jesus eating and drinking with all who will join him. In this story we see Jesus invite Matthew into his community. Matthew is a tax collector: a traitor and an archenemy of the Jewish people. It is not only the Pharisees who would have had a problem with Matthew: many of his disciples seem to have been sympathetic to the Zealot Party that was trying to overthrow Rome and had no time for tax collectors. Yet Jesus' community embraces him and they eat together. The Kingdom of God is not about us all agreeing or seeing eye-to-eye, but is evidenced by a love that transcends our differences and makes us one.

**Please note:** Since the Strategic Planning Forum will take place immediately after the service next Sunday, it is important to complete the *Exercise for the week* (next page).

#### This week's discussion questions

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What was difficult for you?
2. Who are people you could invite into your circle of friends? What keeps you from inviting them in?
3. Read the text beginning on page 19 entitled *Prioritizing Relationships*. Write your answers to the questions below on page 21 of this book. You can cut out this page and post it on the wall at the Strategic Planning Forum or drop it in the box on the Welcome table in the Commons.
  - Do you agree with what is in the text?
  - Is there anything you disagree with? Why do you disagree?
  - Is there anything you think is missing from this paper? What is it – and why is it important?

4. Do you find it easy to form deep, mutually accountable relationships with others? Why or why not?
5. How would you describe your relationships within Cedar Ridge? How meaningful are they to you? How diverse are they?
6. How would you like your relationships at Cedar Ridge to be different? What could you do to bring about that change?
7. Think about the dynamics within your group. Discuss how you can help one another to be more...
  - Honest and vulnerable
  - Open to being challenged
  - Empathetic and supportive
  - Inclusive of others
8. Spend some time praying for one another, your group, and our church community as we seek to strengthen life-giving relationships.

### **Exercise during the week**

Immediately after the service next week, we will hold our Strategic Planning Forum. This is an opportunity to learn more about how these strategic themes will impact our various ministry areas, to provide input into the strategic planning process, and to identify ways in which you can further engage in helping to make our vision a reality. During the week take time to read through Week 4 and answer the questions, so you are ready for the Forum!

### **Reflection with children**

Talk to your child(ren) about the need to love and include people we might think are different to us. Pray with them about this, and let us know how they think we could be a more welcoming church—we want feedback from all age groups in our community! (Don't forget: you can send feedback to [questions@crcc.org](mailto:questions@crcc.org)).

# Prioritizing Relationships

## What is this theme, and why does it matter?

The Cedar Ridge vision is highly relational: an inclusive and diverse community where “everyone looks out for the concerns of others and no one is alone.” We seek to reach out beyond all barriers to experience the oneness that Jesus calls us to. In dreaming of heaven on earth, we long for and work towards a world where artificial and destructive divisions—based on gender, race, age, sexual orientation, social standing, etc.—are no more. Loving, life-giving relationships are the end we seek: love, peace and acceptance among humanity.

But relationships are also the means to other aspects of our vision. Through relationships we receive support, encouragement and constructive feedback that helps us grow spiritually. We identify and develop leaders, and build teams in a relational context. Interpersonal relationships are the means by which we take care of one another, rather than through institutional church systems. By serving alongside others, and by partnering with those we serve (rather than seeing them as projects), we are more effective at making the world a better place.

We swim in a cultural tide that seems to work against relationships. Technology, busyness, geographic separation and stress can push us all further apart. So we recognize the need to be proactive and intentional about prioritizing relationships, and realistic about how we make this feasible.

## What are the implications of this theme?

Relationships are not just the way we want to “get things done” but the intentional outcome we are looking for as we experience more of God’s life together. As we seek ways to more fully embody our vision, we have identified the following priorities:

1. **Promote inclusion leading to diversity**—We want to intentionally strengthen an atmosphere of inclusion in all areas of church life: in our Sunday services, discipleship groups, communications, and events. This will include proactive steps to ensure that planning and programming reflect and promote diversity regarding race, gender, age and sexuality.
2. **Develop a relational basis for all our activities**—As busyness sets in, the temptation grows to be efficient in getting the job done, at the expense of investing time and energy in the relationships we want to underpin everything we do. We will therefore regularly publicly explain and champion the importance of relationships in all our activities, and will deliberately consider the relational potentialities for all planned activities.
3. **Encourage relational depth and scope**—We live in a culture where many of us have extensive social networks, but no deep and committed relationships in which we can

challenge one another to grow, and hold one another mutually accountable. We want to encourage one another to be more vulnerable in loving, life-giving relationships. At the same time, we want to guard against exclusion or cliquishness, and continue to step out of our comfort zones to include others.

4. ***Promote relationships as the medium of leadership***—We are united as a community by our vision for following Jesus, which is highly relational. Those tasked with leading our community therefore need to embody this relational aspect of our vision. We want to ensure all leaders are connected to others in leadership, cared for, and developed; and as much as possible, we want activities to be led by teams rather than individuals.

### **What might this look like in practice?**

- This might mean an inclusive style of music on Sunday mornings that draws on the multiple roots of our community and is intergenerational.
- We could build deeper relationships with farm food recipients, Greencastle Elementary School and service day partners.
- We could strengthen our relationships with local churches in Ipala, Guatemala, and increase our personal interaction with our partners there through events, Skype calls, etc.
- In addition to discipleship groups, we might encourage a range of small groups to form to allow people to create community around a common purpose, interest, or other affinity.
- We could create a clearer path for young people to express commitment and a greater sense of belonging through baptism, a family-oriented Journey class, or other means.
- We could develop our empathic listening skills and confidence in sharing the story of our spiritual journey so as to “be the gospel” to others.



# Feedback: Prioritizing Relationships

*This matters to me*

*Not sure about this*

**Hey, what about this?**



Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_



**Spring Discipleship Series 2017**  
**The Best Is Yet To Come**

## **Week 4: Cultivating Openness to God's Presence**

1. Read the text beginning on page 24 entitled *Cultivating Openness to God's Presence*. Write your answers to the questions below on page 27 of this book. You can cut out this page and post it on the wall at the Strategic Planning Forum or drop it in the box on the Welcome table in the Commons.
  - Do you agree with what is in the text?
  - Is there anything you disagree with? Why do you disagree?
  - Is there anything you think is missing from this paper? What is it – and why is it important?
2. Do you generally feel “connected” to God through the day? What helps you to sense God's presence? What hinders you?
3. What specific practices or activities help you become more aware of God's presence? How could you integrate more of these practices or activities into your daily life?
4. When do you feel most connected to God and others through your interactions with Cedar Ridge? What could we do as a community to strengthen our sense of intimacy with God?
5. Spend some time praying for yourself and our community to cultivate openness to God's presence.

# Cultivating Openness to God's Presence

## What is this theme, and why does it matter?

Our vision is based on dreaming of heaven on earth: we long to partner with God in bringing in the Kingdom, and living in the reality revealed through Jesus of oneness with God and each other. Our vision expresses the inextricable connection between sheltering from the frenzied pace of life to explore mystery and meaning, and our call to work as agents of love, peace and hope in the world. We long to live an integrated life—experiencing intimacy with God in the midst of everyday activity. Just as Jesus did, we want to find God everywhere: in people, in nature, in the scriptures, in solitude. This awareness of intimate connection is the fuel for our vision and its highest goal. Without it we will burn out under the effort of trying to accomplish our vision; and we will miss the love, joy and peace of a deeply fulfilling life here and now.

Despite the pervasive presence of God, we struggle to experience it. Our lives are so full; there are so many demands on us; and we are weighed down with worries and messages from our surroundings that we are not enough and not doing enough. So we need to be proactive about making room for awareness through the practice of worship and prayer. Both are an expression of our deep desire for an authentic experience of God in all aspects of life: an intentional engagement with the eternal life that Jesus lived and offered.

By coming together in worship and/or prayer, we experience God as a community. At other times we need to be alone and seek God within. Individually and corporately, we want to grow in the art of seeing God all around us, and finding ways to be more aware of God within and without as we go about our everyday lives.

## What are the implications of this theme?

We cannot manufacture intimacy with God. It seems to grow through a combination of surrendering to God and pursuing God. But we can take action to cultivate openness to God's presence, intentionally inviting God into every aspect of our lives. We have identified the following priorities to help us to cultivate this openness:

1. ***Developing a culture of intentional connection to the presence of God***—We want to become a people identified by our mindful approach to everyday life by engaging in practices that help us to “see” God in everything. As we grow in our awareness of our oneness with God and each other, we want to apply this understanding in such a way as to increase our capacity to handle stress, conflict and pain with love.
2. ***Embracing worship that celebrates our connection to God***—We want to grow as a creative and expressive worshipping community when we gather together. We want our worship to be simple, inclusive and authentic—to tell our story and to connect us with one another as we draw close to the God who is love. We also want to grow in our understanding of worship as discipleship, leveraging everyday “moments of awe” as

opportunities for worship, and integrating worshipful spiritual practices into our daily routines.

3. ***Becoming a more prayerful community***—We want to grow in intentional prayer practices that help us center on God, rest in God’s love, and discern God’s guidance. We also want 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.

### **What might this look like in practice?**

- We could hold contemplative all-prayer or all-worship Sunday services or retreats.
- We could more fully use our property as an aid to prayer and worship by promoting the prayer walk and labyrinth, and encouraging appreciation for God’s creation.
- We could encourage youth to increasingly make the connection to God for themselves by giving them more input into and control over their Sunday gatherings.
- We might support and help group leaders to be able to lead creative and vulnerable prayer and worship.
- We could have a message series to strengthen community understanding of giving as an act of worship.
- More public story-telling about how we have found certain practices helpful in opening ourselves to God’s presence could encourage us to find and use practices that work for us.
- We could establish a prayer station on the farm and be more intentional about celebrating harvest during Sunday services.



# Feedback: Cultivating Openness to God's Presence

*This matters to me*

*Not sure about this*

**Hey, what about this?**



Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_