

IT STARTS WITH THE SOIL NOT THE SEED

It Starts With the Soil, Not the Seed

Jesus often taught in parables. These parables came from everyday life in a first century, agrarian culture in Palestine. Timeless in character, these parables speak volumes about what the kingdom of God is like.

Some of the parables are organic and deal with soil and seed. In Mark 4:1-8, Jesus tells the parable of the sower, laying great stress on the condition of the soil, *not* the seed.

Later on in the same chapter, Jesus tells the parable of the growing seed and the mustard seed. In these parables, Jesus emphasizes the unstoppable power of the seed (Mark 4:26-32).

In the parable of the sower the seed is the constant and the soil is the variable. Jesus describes four different types of soil and their effect on the seed. It is clear that the condition of the soil determines the outcome of the seed.

The “soil,” not the “seed,” is the determining factor in producing an abundant harvest. While the seed represents the Gospel, the soil represents the condition or capacity of the human heart to receive the message and follow through on the changes that accompany a life surrendered to Christ.

Applying the four types of soil to a church’s health and growth raises some interesting questions, especially in terms of capacity or readiness for meaningful change.

- Is the soil packed down? Is the church strongly resistant to change? (No reflection leads to rejection of the truth.)
- Is the soil full of rocks? Is the change short lived? (No removal of obstacles leads to lack of maturity.)
- Is the soil full of thorns? Is the change eventually choked out? (No repentance from hidden sins leads to lack of long-term change.)
- Is the soil fertile? Is the change producing a fruitful harvest of 30, 60, 100 fold? (No regret leads to reaping and rewards.)

In this application, the soil represents the church’s degree of openness and receptivity to the changes that God wants to bring. Good soil is the precondition of a fruitful harvest. The ground must be prepared for the seed.

In some cases the soil must be broken up with a plow. It is painful for the soil when the plow comes through. But for those churches that are willing to be broken, an abundant harvest is near.

Sometimes pastors and leaders rush into change without preparing the church for change. Sometimes churches want the new hybrid seed mix without first looking at the condition of their soil.

There is a belief that the seed is the answer, when in reality, it is the condition of the soil that determines the outcome of the seed. In the long run, it is better to first deal with the soil and *then* plant the seed.

In other words many churches are looking for the magic beans. It is called the “Jack and the Beanstalk” complex. It is so easy to just throw the magic beans into the soil and believe they will magically grow.

But there are no magic beans. The realistic first thing to do is to check the condition of the soil.

Preparation for change is just as important as the change itself. Jesus talks about preparing the soil in the parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6-9). For three years the tree did not bear any fruit and the owner of the vineyard wanted to cut it down. But the gardener persuaded the owner otherwise:

"Sir, '...leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" Luke 13:8-9

Again, the emphasis is on soil preparation. The gardener does not spend the year dusting the leaves. He focuses on the soil where the roots go deep.

The point is that preparation for change must take place at the deepest level to have lasting impact. The starting point is not tweaking programs but going down to the subterranean level, the level that is oblivious to most but is affecting everyone. Remember, the seed is planted behind the plow not in front of it.

What this study guide is all about

This study guide is about the soil, not the seed. It is about preconditioning the soil and creating an environment in which the marks of a healthy, missional church can take root and flourish.

It is our responsibility as servant leaders to promote healthy, missional churches. By *healthy* we mean pursuing Christ. By *missional* we mean pursuing Christ's priorities in the world. Without good soil, the fruit of a healthy, missional church will not take root.

Vitality is the capacity to live, grow and develop. It is the characteristic that distinguishes living things from non-living things. Cultivating the soil is simply creating the necessary conditions for vital ministry to take place.

The hard truth

Let's face it. Preparing the ground for vitality can be messy. Sometimes it must be broken up with a plow. But for those willing to get their hands and feet dirty, there is hope for an abundant harvest – 30, 60 or even 100 fold.

These questions are no doubt hard. Perhaps you have been asking them already or you wanted to ask them but were too afraid. Yet these are the very questions churches need to ask if they want to begin counting the cost of vitality. The stakes are high and so many churches are falling behind in terms of missional effectiveness.

If you are able and willing to ask the tough questions in a loving, gracious and Christ honoring manner, then indeed you are putting your hand to the plow and breaking up the soil. May you not look back as you confidently move forward into God's future for your church. Working in the soil isn't glamorous, but it is foundational. We plant behind the plow, not in front of it.

The RCA wants to help congregations face their current reality while offering hope for a future of health, growth and reproduction. That's why we provide this study guide as a resource.

How to use it

This is not an assessment. We are simply breaking up the ground. As A.W. Tozier said, "the harvest follows the plow."

(Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you. Hosea 10:12)

Please use this material as a conversation starter with the leaders of your congregation. There are two ways you may want to proceed.

The first way is to read through the entire document, (values, scriptures and questions) in one sitting. Do not discuss. Just listen. Take a break and come back to begin your discussion.

The second way is to turn this into a ten session study. Take one value of vitality at each session.

Whichever way you choose, begin and end in prayer.

Remember, plant behind the plow!

Values of Vitality

1. Vitality begins with God who redeems all things for good. Vitality does not begin with systems, strategies, or structures but with redemptive theology, repentance and prayer. This is evidenced by a sense of desperation and brokenness before God.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. John 12:24

What impresses me most about this value?

How would we describe the church's level of spiritual hunger and brokenness before God? How hungry are our people for more of God?

How do we tinker with the system without addressing the deeper issues of the heart?

What are some of the things we would like to see our church confess and repent of? Are we willing to schedule a special service of recommitment?

2. Vitality is being centered in the mission and message of Jesus. "We need to do something so we don't decline" is vastly different from a renewed sense of mission flowing from the heart of Jesus.

Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. John 4:34-35

What impresses me most about this value?

What is the difference between saving the institution and fulfilling the mission?

Do we see our church as a mission outpost or a Christian enclave?

How has the community around our church changed in the last five years and how have we changed or not changed with it?

What is it about our experience with Jesus that our community can not live without?

If our church building suddenly vanished, would anyone notice? Would any one care?

What is Jesus most proud about your church?

3. Vitality is a movement of the Holy Spirit that often happens in surprising ways - ways in which the church did not plan for or figure out ahead of time. Cultivating a sense of mystery and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit makes us more open to moving forward with God.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. John 3:8

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." Matthew 9:16-17

My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." John 5:17

What impresses you most about this value?

Do you see the church as a safe haven from change or as a change agent in the world?

What is our capacity for adaptability?

In what ways have we played it safe?

How have we shown ourselves to be dependent on the Holy Spirit?

4. Vitality is not just about rebirth; it's about reality - a current reality that requires an accurate and honest assessment.

The letters to the seven churches. Revelation 2 and 3

You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free. John 8:32

What impresses me most about this value?

Many churches suffer from “blind erosion.” In other words, they do not perceive small changes over time.

How would we rate the awareness factor in our church? What do the trends say over the last decade?

Are there elephants in the room that no one wants to take about?

5. Vitality may often come with conflict and opposition. Preparing for this challenge requires courage, hope, perseverance, wisdom, graciousness and training.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1:2-5

What impresses me most about this value?

What are some reasons people resist change?

How is conflict currently handled in our church? How is it viewed? Do we manage it productively?

Are there any unresolved conflicts from the past that are preventing us from moving forward?

6. Vitality is a communal effort that requires teamwork (T), effective leaders (L) and a healthy community (C). In short, vitality requires TLC.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

What impresses me most about this value?

Why does it take a team to bring vitality?

What is the difference between “doing” church and “being” church?

How do we foster trust between the congregation and the leaders and between the leaders and the congregation?

7. Vitality is a journey, not a quick fix. Vitality is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though you do not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain - first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. Mark 4:26-29

What impresses me most about this value?

What is the lure of the quick fix? Why is it so appealing?

What are the advantages of viewing revitalization as a journey?

Why are new programs not always the answer? People say, “If we just did this or that, our church would be better.” Why is this often a band-aid?

Reflect on this statement, “Vitality is a result of doing good biblical ministry over time.”

8. Vitality is the responsibility of each church regardless of its current state of health. Churches need to invest in their own vitality. Vitality is not dependent on age, size, location, style or past performance, but upon healthy habits. The church is in need of constant renewal.

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:18-19

What impresses me most about this value?

What is the danger of thinking that “We have arrived” or “This is as good as it gets?”

How can we build on the past without getting stuck in the past?

What are the radical life-giving stories from our history?

How does vitality transcend the factors of age, size, location or style?

How do we continually challenge ourselves to move forward into God’s future?

9. Vitality takes longer than planned, is messier than expected, costs more than originally figured and requires greater determination than once thought.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and was not able to finish.' Luke 14:28-30

What impresses me most about this value?

Is our heart really ready for this journey?

How is remodeling different than new construction?

Share a story about a remodeling project in your house that took longer than planned, was messier than expected, cost more than you originally figured and required greater determination than once thought?

What are some of the costs that churches incur to move forward into God’s future?

People say they want new life in a church and then when the new life starts to happen some say, “We did not sign up for this.” Like the Israelites who wanted to go back to Egypt, some would rather go back to the way things were – however dysfunctional. Why is the second step of change often more difficult than the first?

10. Vitality is enhanced through a collaborative effort of local, classis, and denominational leadership.

A cord of three strands is not easily broken. Ecclesiastes 4:12

What impresses me most about this value?

Are we aware of Conference and denominational resources that can supplement our efforts to move forward into God’s future?

In what ways could we see our pastor or church partnering with other Covenant pastors or churches in the area?

What questions did we come up with that might enhance this exercise for other churches?