

VITAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

12 CHARACTERISTICS OF
HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS

PHIL BROCHARD AND ALISSA NEWTON

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to every person willing to spend time, faith,
and love for the sake of Christian community.

CONTENTS

Foreword by the Most Rev. Melissa Skelton	ix
Introduction	xi
1. Sense of Purpose: Gather, Transform, Send	1
2. Reliably Transformational	17
3. Practitionership	37
4. Able to Trust	49
5. Curiosity	61
6. Responsive	73
7. Reflective	91
8. Open to Change	103
9. Collaborative	117
10. Productive in Conflict	131
11. Emotionally Grounded	145
12. Self-Differentiated Leadership	159
Afterword: A Conversation with Bishop Greg Rickel, Episcopal Diocese of Olympia	169
Appendix A. Retreat and Intentional Design	175
Appendix B. Gather, Transform, Send: The Core Purpose of a Christian Community; A Retreat for Leadership Bodies	183
Appendix C. Sources of Transformation: The Ways That God Changes Lives; A Retreat for Leadership Bodies	193
Appendix D. Faith Development in Community: An Invitation to Go Deeper; A Retreat for Leadership Bodies	199
Appendix E. The Benedictine Life: God Is Not Elsewhere; A Retreat for Leadership Bodies	205
Appendix F. Gather, Transform, Send: The Core Purpose of a Christian Community; An Online Retreat for Leadership Bodies	211
Acknowledgments	215

CHAPTER 1

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Gather, Transform, Send

THE VERY FIRST SESSION of the College for Congregational Development in the Diocese of Olympia, Washington, was held in January of 2009, at the behest of our new bishop who had arrived with a vision to concentrate on equipping congregations for development. At that first meeting, the 1960s-era conference center was packed. Some of the chairs were filled with representatives from congregations eager to see how the bishop's new initiative for congregational development would begin. Other folks were there as part of a new requirement: all churches receiving diocesan grants must participate. Some were hopeful and excited, while others came grudgingly and sat stiffly in their chairs, resenting being "forced" to attend to continue receiving financial help.

Among the hopeful and excited were two men from St. Germain's, located in Hoodport, Washington. St. Germain's was a classic "hospice" case, meaning that none of the granting bodies within the diocese really believed this congregation could revive; the financial assistance was largely expected to keep the lights on and ease their pain until they decided on their own to dissolve. Located in a small town at the very end of the Hood Canal, St. Germain's had never been large. By 2009 their membership had dwindled to around eleven with an average Sunday attendance of, well, about eleven. They sent Pete, the retired priest who provided them with regular supply, and Matt, one of their younger members, a man in his late sixties who was transitioning into retirement in Hoodport.

Over 2009 and 2010 Alissa got to know Pete and Matt, and through them the heart of St. Germain's. Matt, the layperson, had a background in finance and instantly saw the usefulness of the material we taught at the College. Pete, the priest, found himself invigorated especially by one particular

model called Gather-Transform-Send, which sought to help congregations articulate their purpose. But could a small, elderly, remote congregation like St. Germain's even *have* a purpose?

Alissa is fond of telling people that in her decade of consulting with congregations in all states of health, she has never met a vestry, bishop's committee, or board of leaders that does not truly and deeply love their church. She has, however, worked with plenty of congregations whose members could not tell her *why* they love their church or even what their church is for. This is a common affliction in mainline churches, where many congregations were founded during a time when the most effective mode of evangelism was simply opening their doors and waiting for people to show up. These days, as dwindling numbers and other factors show, especially in churches like St. Germain's, simply having a building with services on Sunday isn't enough purpose to build or sustain a faith community. We have found that a community's willingness and ability to articulate their sense of purpose is a compelling and necessary first step to increasing their health, faithfulness, and effectiveness as a local expression of God's love and a site of transformation for those seeking to go deeper in relationship with God.

This characteristic of a healthy and vital congregation, the ability to articulate and live into their purpose, is the beating heart of our approach to congregational development and the driving force that animates many of the other characteristics of health we will explore in later chapters. Like an individual's sense of vocation, unique to each human being and emerging from some combination of who they are and who God is calling them to be, we believe that healthy faith communities not only know their reason for being but have the capacity to articulate their identity and purpose in ways that draw people into the community, with the purpose of connecting the congregation to their context in mutually beneficial relationship. We begin with articulating purpose and the model that helps us visualize and assess it, because this is very often where the churches we work with need to begin: Why do you love your faith community? Why does it exist? We believe there are good answers to these questions, answers worth the time and risk of discernment and discovery.

Let's move into our first example, the first core congregational development model that Pete and Matt from St. Germain's learned to use: a model designed to teach and assess the core purpose of a congregation.

Gather-Transform-Send

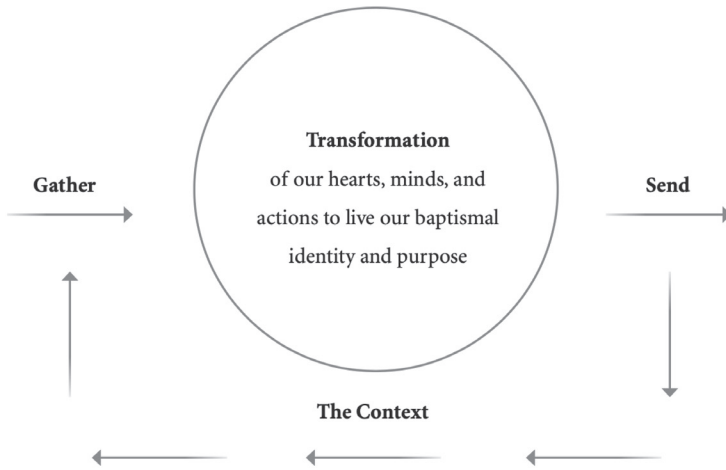


Figure 1-1

Gather-Transform-Send (GTS) is a model that can be used as a lens for understanding, analyzing, and helping your congregation articulate and live into its core purpose. Developed by Melissa Skelton for the College for Congregational Development, this model helps congregational leaders figure out how to articulate purpose in a way that refines identity and moves communities deeper into their call to be local expressions of the body of Christ.

GTS consists of two components in four parts. The first component includes the elements of the model's name—Gather, Transform, Send. This is an articulation of the core purpose of every congregation: to gather God's people in community, to be a site of transformation and renewal through worship and congregational life together, and then to send God's people out into a world that needs them as salt, light, and leaven. This is the heartbeat of GTS, the place where you will spend much of your time as you use this model to teach, analyze, diagnose, and intervene with your congregation. Every faith community that worships or gathers in any way is engaged in this purpose, and every congregation can improve, adapt, and engage this core purpose more deeply than they currently do. And yet it is the second component that animates the first: the unique context of the individual congregation.

Every congregation enacts its core purpose in some way through the Gather, Transform, Send rubric, but each one does this work in its own

particular context. Some churches are located in urban centers with opportunities for significant foot traffic passing by their doors. Others are in suburban contexts, embedded among housing subdivisions, and still others are more like St. Germain's, struggling along in small towns growing smaller as industries like logging and tourism flag. Churches have lineages, just as people do, histories of gathering people who are white, Black, Latino, or Asian, or histories of somehow being or becoming more or less diverse. Some churches live in neighborhoods that match their demographics, others in neighborhoods that once matched their demographics, but no longer do. There are as many unique examples as there are congregations. For the GTS model, the core purpose and unique context depend upon and inform each other, meaning that no two churches share the same reason for being, because each community of faith is called to be a unique, local expression of Christ in a way that fits its context. Let's now delve more deeply into each element of this model.

Gather



Figure 1-2

“Do you know what I saw on your website that made me cry?” a newcomer said to Alissa during a congregational newcomer’s Zoom event in early 2021. “You included couples who do not have children in your descriptions of what families look like at St. Columba’s.” The woman went on to reveal that she and her husband love children but are child free by choice. They don’t feel called as a couple to parenting. “We feel invisible to churches sometimes,” she said softly. “It meant so much to see us in that list.”

Here is what this newcomer read, when she clicked on “Children and Families” on the St. Columba’s website:

St. Columba’s strives to be a safe and loving community for all kinds of families—we welcome families formed through adoption, foster care, birth, choice, or circumstance. We welcome families who are doing the sacred work of raising children, families who are hoping and preparing to do that work, and families whose work and life together does not include children. We believe that a full community includes people and families of many ages, stages, and ways of being together.

This St. Columba's newcomer is in the process of experiencing being "gathered" into our community of faith. She has experienced an invitation to worship, both through being told about the congregation and through exploring its website. She has begun to worship online with the community and accepted an invitation to attend a newcomer's gathering. Still ahead of her are opportunities to learn about the history and particular congregational culture of St. Columba's, to find ministry opportunities that work for her, and to pledge financially, or to be (if appropriate) baptized, received, or confirmed.

Based on the work of Alice Mann,¹ the Gather function in GTS splits into four parts. It is sometimes easiest to understand each subsection when viewed through the lens of someone new to your congregation, although every congregant experiences being gathered and regathered. The four parts of Gather are:

- **Invite:** Everything that happens before someone shows up for worship is an invitation. It includes how people talk about your congregation, what is (or isn't) on your website, the appearance of the building and grounds, exterior signage, how easy or difficult it is to find your community's physical or online location, and how people who either already attend or know about your church extend direct invitations.
- **Greet:** The Greet function is all about what meets people when they come in, log on, or otherwise choose to intentionally interact with your community of faith. For in-person worship, this function is incarnated most deeply by the other people who are there. This includes trained greeters who welcome folks at the door, an essential part of in-person worship, but it also includes the welcome of those who are not specifically assigned to greet. How do those present greet each other? How are newcomers spoken to and included? How are newcomers recognized?
- **Orient:** Orientation is the process of learning how "we" do things in "our" church. Every church has unique ways of being together, be it Sunday worship and children's ministries, or getting involved in volunteering, making sure the restrooms are clean, or figuring out how to sing along. Bulletins and printed material are, for some congregations, key orientation pieces that let folks know how to connect to worship: Do we use a hymnal, watch a screen, or is the bulletin a one-stop destination for

1. Alice Mann, *Incorporation of New Members in the Episcopal Church: A Manual for Clergy and Lay Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Ascension Press, 1983).

all the words and music for service? Does the bulletin also orient folks to what else is happening in the congregation? Education and formation opportunities serve as orientation opportunities as well, whether they are as explicit as a newcomer's or confirmation class, or something less obvious like a Bible or book study. Signage (e.g., where is the bathroom?) and written cues in the bulletin (or announcements) are other places where folks are oriented to finding their place and participate in the life of a particular community of faith.

- **Incorporate:** Incorporation happens when someone accepts the invitation to make a particular community of faith their spiritual home. Often this is tied up in the acceptance of an invitation to deeper life, belonging, or ownership in the community. Choosing to be baptized, received, or confirmed can be moments of incorporation. So can something as simple as transferring membership or going through a simple new member ceremony. Sometimes incorporation can look like saying "yes" to running for an elected lay leadership position, or to participation in a ministry that is core to the congregation's identity. Small groups, Bible studies, ministry and leadership teams are all sites of incorporation into community. And, of course, the invitation to pledge or give financially to the life of a church is an explicit invitation to acknowledge and belong through participation in the fiscal support of the community.

Using the lens of Gather is the starting point for analyzing the newcomer experience in your community. Most churches are aware of newcomers in some way or another, even if it is just the realization that they don't tend to return, or that there aren't very many of them. However, it would be a mistake to think that Gather is only helpful for improving and understanding how your community gathers new people. In reality, every person who participates in the life of a congregation is being continually gathered. Even clergy experience inviting, greeting, orienting, and incorporating. Gather is also helpful when looking at longtime members who are adjusting to changes in technology, leadership, ministry opportunity, or an influx of new people. Gather can be used when planning changes that might be difficult for established community members, with questions like "How will longtime members be reoriented to this new way of doing _____?" or "How will we invite established members to this new service/ministry/communication method?"

When you are using Gather to analyze experiences of your congregation, here are two exercises to try, either alone or with a team:

- Do a “practice walkthrough” of your Sunday morning with an eye toward what the experience is like for the group you are preparing to gather. Why might they be coming? What is it like for them to park and walk in, or log on? Who greets them? What signage do they see? Are they able to learn more about the community through bulletins, announcements, talking to folks, coffee hour, etc.? Think about what might be working well, and what might need examination to gather more effectively.
- Interview community members about how they first came to your church, and why they stuck around. Look for elements of Invite, Greet, Orient, and Incorporate in their stories.

Transform

Alissa’s first experiences in the Episcopal church were at St. Mark’s Cathedral in Seattle. She was a university student at the time, attending a local Free Methodist university and figuring out her faith as she slowly differentiated herself from the conservative evangelicalism that she grew up in. St. Mark’s has a Sunday night compline service that is well known throughout the city and beyond, drawing hundreds of people each week, a large percentage of whom are young adults from the various colleges and universities in town. The first time Alissa attended she was struck by the spacious, stark cathedral sanctuary, the beautiful, solemn compline chant of the choir, and the freedom with which St. Mark’s opened their sacred space to so many young people who were obviously new to this type of liturgical experience. Not only did people fill all the pews for Sunday compline, but they overflowed onto the floors and other spaces. Many sat on the ground or even lay down near or under the altar to listen to the chanted service, making the experience feel something akin to having a slumber party in a monastery—kids draped everywhere, solemn darkness, and sacred chant. Coming to compline was a transformative experience for Alissa, ultimately drawing her toward both a deeper, more intentional faith practice and eventually a vocation within the Episcopal church.

Transformation is the heart of both the purpose of congregations, as we propose it here, and the heart of the G-T-S model. It’s why any of us show up: the hope that the practice of belonging to a faith community will both renew and change us, turning our hearts more toward Christ and transforming our lives more and more into extensions of God’s love in a broken world. As William Temple once wrote, “The Church is the only society that exists

for the benefit of those who are not its members.”² But how does transformation happen? How can we understand, replicate, quantify, and produce it? The short answer is we can’t. A better question might be how can we steward the transformational gifts God is giving to our community?

Instead of answers, the Transform aspect of G-T-S offers us questions, lifting up the reality that transformation is more than the sum of its parts and not entirely under any one human being’s control. Instead, just as it is God who calls people to your community to be gathered, it is God who moves through the gathered community, transforming it in ways that are both expected and surprising. The big question in Transform is how does your community open the way for this transformation to take place and where are such opportunities being stymied?

In the example of Alissa at St. Mark’s Seattle, transformation came from expected, reliable sources: the liturgy and the worship space. For Episcopal churches, the aesthetics of worship spaces are often transformational for those who come and stay. Alissa felt the compelling presence of God in the towering ceilings and concrete floor, the hushed room, the gorgeous chanted prayers. But she also was transformed by the less expected experience of young people lying in aisles and around the altar. The possibility that a community could make room for these guests each week during formal, sacred worship was what attracted her and invited her deeper into both faith and practice within the Episcopal tradition.

When you begin to articulate the ways in which your community is a site of God’s transformation and renewal for your people, it’s normal and natural to begin with more obvious options such as prayer, worship, Bible study, spirituality classes, worship space, small groups, and friendships. But Transform asks us to also look at the less visible things, the parts of congregational culture that are the very air we breathe and so are sometimes difficult to see, such as: How are children treated here? What happens when there is conflict? How is money discussed? Who is invited into leadership, and how? Who preaches? Is there silence? These questions and many others help identify both the unique character and challenges in your community as you seek to deepen the opportunities for God’s Spirit to transform the people God has called to be a part of your congregation.

To begin to look at your congregation’s relationship to Transformation, try this exercise: with the word “Transform.”

2. Recalled as a personal dictum in “Letter from the Archbishop of the West Indies,” in *Theology* (1956), vol. 59, retrieved from oxfordreference.com.



Figure 1-3

- Look at the word cloud above. Which words draw you in and relate to transformational moments for you in your faith community? What happened exactly? How did God move through those elements of community or congregational life?
- Now, which words in the cloud do you want to avoid, or feel less positive to explore? What experiences or patterns of experience do you connect to those words?
- What might both these explorations tell you about your community's strengths and challenges in the area of Transform?

Send

Several years ago Phil's congregation, All Souls, began participating in inter-faith vigils at a local county jail that was also serving as a detention center for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). As he tells it, the parish learned that some asylum seekers had a dire need for temporary housing after being released from detention on bond because they often had no immediate family or other network of support with whom they could stay. All Souls saw an opportunity to provide Christian hospitality and to care for the sojourner in their midst.

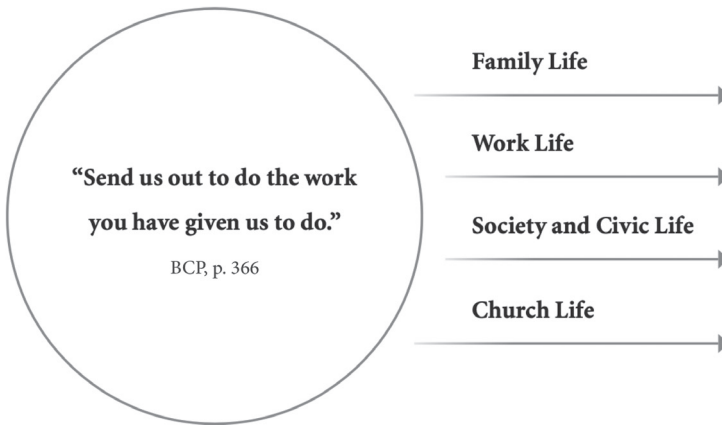


Figure 1-4

So, after significant prayer and conversation, All Souls decided to open one and then later two rooms in their Parish House for respite for asylum seekers making their way to a longer term solution. Sometimes folks stayed for a couple of days, sometimes for several weeks. Several teams of parishioners accompanied the guests by bringing meals, washing linens, offering trips to doctor appointments and hearings. But a few days after Easter of 2018, the accompaniment of someone seeking refuge in the United States took a different turn.

On a Wednesday in April, Eric, one of the guests, had what appeared to be a routine hearing in immigration court, a regularly scheduled consideration of his asylum application. As had been the case in the past, several members of the accompaniment team from All Souls were there with him. Already out on bond in his hope to receive political asylum, at the hearing the immigration judge gave Eric until October to find an attorney and make his case. But as soon as he left the courtroom, everything went sideways.

Several plainclothes ICE detention officers immediately grabbed Eric as he exited the courtroom. As his accompaniment team watched in horror, Eric was taken away to a separate detention area, to be detained indefinitely. It turned out that following a recent decision by the Supreme Court, the Department of Homeland Security had just authorized an increase in bond for asylum seekers. That was true for Eric, though it reflected no change in his asylum case, no increased risk on his part.

On the spot the accompaniment team sprang into action. One member found an ICE official and explained who they were and why they were

looking for Eric. The ICE official, impressed that Eric had such support from a church, let them know where he was being taken, and that his bail had been raised from \$1,500 to \$3,000. The team then rallied and reached out to other parishioners involved with the accompaniment program to raise the increased bail amount. Within hours they had raised the funds, were able to post his bail, find out where Eric was being detained, get him released from detention, and return him to Berkeley before the sun had set. Miraculously, he spent the night once more in the Parish House.

There are several reasons why this response was possible. To paraphrase one of Bryan Stevenson's 4 steps for changing the world,³ the people on Eric's accompaniment team got proximate. They were present with Eric in his suffering, and as a result were willing to walk alongside him. They also had learned about the system that they were working in and were ready to engage the levers within it. And they knew there was a whole body of people working with them, and they trusted that others would respond in the moment. Ultimately, Phil believes that these All Souls members felt sent by the Spirit to witness and care for sojourners, in this particular case, for Eric.

All of this happened three days after Easter Sunday, when the clergy and staff of All Souls were away, recovering from the intensity of Lent and Holy Week. Having been supported and sent for this work, these courageous and compassionate souls on the accompaniment team responded on their own with faith and perseverance. They didn't need permission or guidance from the ordained or professional leadership of the church. They'd already been transformed by God, sent by the Spirit into the fullness of their lives, and so off they went. Here's an excerpt from an e-mail Phil received written by one of the saints of this effort, and it reminds him of the Easter reality that is present, if we can recognize it.

Eric returned to the Parish House around 5:15 p.m. this afternoon. It feels like Easter all over again! Sharon had cleaned and prepared his room, with new sheets and new supplies in the refrigerator. Dani had left for him beautiful flowers, cookies, dinner, and cards from her children, which brought him to tears. We said a prayer of gratitude to God and to the members of our community, and also prayed for strength and courage in the days ahead, both for *Eric* and for all refugees and immigrants who are incarcerated, criminalized, and subjected to unjust treatment by our government.

3. Martin Saunders, "Bryan Stevenson: Four Steps to Really Change the World," *Christian Today*, July 16, 2015, www.christiantoday.com/article/bryan-stevenson-four-steps-to-really-change-the-world/59211.htm.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you, and I know *Eric* feels the same. Thank you for bearing witness to the injustice *Eric* suffered, for not leaving him in the hands of ICE, for demanding that he be released on bond, for praying, raising, and delivering his bond, and accompanying him over these past thirty-six hours. It made all the difference!

The transformation that we experience in Christian community is not meant for that moment alone. The union we come to with God, the feeling of wholeness, is not meant simply for us. A changed heart is not meant for that person alone. The forgiveness that we receive during worship on Sunday should be extended to our classmates and our coworkers on Wednesday. The witness to justice that we see in our sacred texts can guide the vision of the beloved community we seek to live in as a town or state or nation or world.

An essential truth of the Christian life that this model recognizes is that we are changed as individuals and as communities so that through us the world can be changed as well.

A story is told about a farmer who was bringing wheat to town with his donkey and cart. Alongside him came an itinerant Christian preacher. "Brother, are you saved?" the preacher earnestly asked. The farmer thought about it for a while and said, "Well, that's a good question. But I don't know that I'm the best person to answer. To really know the answer, you should probably ask the miller, and the shopkeeper, and my wife, and our children, those who come to labor in my farm, and that man who was just passing through last month. They would probably have a truer answer than I would." The preacher, unsure of what to make of this answer, walked on.

After we have gathered together and have been transformed through being accepted by the community, or learning a new way to pray, or being held in a deep silence, then we are sent into the rest of our lives to share that transformation with those whose lives are linked with ours.

The example of All Souls's accompaniment of *Eric* through the immigration system is a dramatic example of sending. But in addition to civic life, we are sent into all of life, into our most intimate relationships, into our work, and into the life of the wider church. The healing we experience in prayer and in worship around the table is also the necessary nourishment for the healing of relationships. When we teach about ethics, we are helping people negotiate challenging situations in their offices. When we draw the circle bigger to welcome a newcomer, we are giving a child the practice to do this on the playground at school.

A question for us as lay and ordained leaders of Christian communities should always be, “Where do the people of this congregation go after being transformed? How are we equipping them to go there?” This equipping can take many forms—gathering small groups to talk about Christian partnerships, helping parents understand how to talk about forgiveness with their children, teaching centering prayer to stressed-out teenagers.

One way to use the Send part of GTS for analysis is to do the following exercise:

- List groups in your congregation by their various affinities: for example, health care workers, stay-at-home mothers, university professors, tech workers, teachers, etc. Think about profession but also other factors such as age and familial status (retired grandparents whose adult children live far away, gay couples, adoptive families, etc.), economic status, and whatever else makes sense. With this information in front of you, ask:
 - Where do our people go when they are not here?
 - What types of work, family, and civic lives are your folks being sent into?
 - How does (or how can) our community work to equip our people for the lives they are sent into? Where is there room to do better?
 - What information do we lack about the lives our people lead when they are not at church or actively participating in this faith community? How might we uncover this data?

Context

Whenever Alissa or Phil teach the GTS model, whether in a large training session or working with a smaller group like a vestry or a church leadership team, we have learned we also need the expertise of the people we are teaching. Only members of the particular community of faith using GTS can explicate or understand their context. Context animates and provides the deep usefulness to this model, because while every local congregation is called to Gather, Transform, and Send, each one is different in how these elements work, why they work, and what unique characteristics and reasons for being are revealed in their setting.

Let’s return to St. Germain’s, Hoodspoor, where this chapter began. St. Germain’s had never been a large church, and as tourism and logging both declined in their area, their context began to work against some

of the assumptions made by St. Germain's founders. As Pete and Matt began to use Gather, Transform, Send to analyze their congregation, they realized some key things. First, they learned that the changing demographics of Hoodsport meant that many of the middle class and working class families who lived there didn't know about the Episcopal Church. Most of the children of longtime members moved away to find jobs and raise their families in more promising economic areas. To add to the complexity, the main road into Hoodsport had changed, and while folks could see the sign for St. Germain's on the way into town, the building was not visible.

St. Germain's decided to get to know their community better and started asking questions in their little town—questions about what families needed and whether people knew anything about St. Germain's. What they discovered was that school children in Hoodsport lacked opportunities to socialize together in safe environments. They also learned that almost no one in town knew who they were.

Three years after first attending the College for Congregational Development and learning about GTS, Pete and Matt stood before the congregational development grant committee of the Diocese of Olympia. Instead of asking for money for operating expenses, as they usually did, they asked for start-up money to begin hosting an after-school movie night for kids in town once a week, providing them with a safe and supervised place to hang out. Pete mentioned that, due to their efforts to connect with the community, a couple of low-income families had begun attending regularly, nearly doubling St. Germain's average Sunday attendance. His eyes teared up a bit as he talked about the five baptisms they had planned for later that fall. "We haven't had a baptism here in years," he said.

Thinking about context while using G-T-S was a game changer for St. Germain's. They did not become a megachurch or suddenly resolve all their problems, but they were able to find a unique purpose that reinvigorated their faith community as a place for God to gather, transform, and send.

Your community, too, is situated within a unique and changing context. As part of Gather-Transform-Send, you are encouraged to ask what is unique about the context in which you are gathering together God's people. What do these people in particular need for the sake of transformation? And how are these particular people being equipped by their experiences within the life of the community to be salt, light, and leaven in their worlds outside the church?

Conclusion

Once a faith community begins to coalesce around a clearly articulated sense of purpose, things start to happen. Common language develops and positive “we are” statements begin to emerge. You might overhear a longtime parishioner describe the community to a newcomer in reliable, true, and particular ways, moving from generalities like “we are a friendly church” to particularities like “we work hard to make space for all kinds of families,” or “we really believe that social justice is a key part of our communal faith practice.” This shared language and sense of purpose helps leaders make choices that are true to its unique identity, and to the deep, common call shared by every community of faith to gather God’s people, become a site of God’s transformation and renewal for those people, and then to send them out into the world as beacons of God’s love.

A sense of purpose is a wonderful, vital place to begin. Gather-Transform-Send is a helpful tool for any congregational development practitioner’s toolbox. We begin here because this is the catalyst for many types of change and for more healthy characteristics. This is the center, but there is so much more ahead.