

The community of the Los Altos United Methodist Church is:

Touching heaven, changing earth with head, heart, and hands

We accomplish this purpose by *faithfully committing to and intentionally growing in* our five congregational and personal practices: passionate worship, deepening faith, radical hospitality, bold service & social justice, and extravagant generosity.

In fact, our leadership (Church Council) includes five committees based on these very practices. The members of each committee are committed to helping the church and its community find ways to engage in these spiritual practices. To learn more: <http://laumc.org/about/leadership.html>

These practices were developed by United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase. Check out his website www.fivepractices.org to learn more.

The fruitful, God-related life develops with intentional and repeated attention to five essential practices that are critical for our growth in Christ. We invite God into our lives and make room for God in our hearts, we love God in return, we purposefully cooperate with the Holy Spirit in our spiritual growth, we serve and love others, and we allow God to shape our giving. Through these practices, God changes us from the inside out and works through us to transform the world. – Bishop Schnase

These 5 practices also mirror the membership vows taken when joining the United Methodist Church (prayers, presence, gifts, service, witness), and combine well with the elements of our December emphasis on Advent Conspiracy (worship fully, spend less, give more, love all). We will consider all of these elements during Viral Faith.

Blessings on your journey of going deeper into these practices and applying them to your everyday lives!

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Welcome to GroupLife at Los Altos United Methodist Church. It's about fostering community with real people, real lives, and real faith. Groups of 6 – 12 people meet regularly in homes to share fellowship, mutual caring and support, and spiritual growth. The goal is that each member of a group feels genuine trust, love, and encouragement and is accountable in community. As we embark on this journey together, we realize that it is not just a program, it is not just an event, it is not just a class. It is a new way to do church and to be church: a new culture. A way for a big church to become small. Going through life's ups and downs with a group is how Jesus did it. It's how the early church did it. It's how John Wesley started the Methodist tradition. And now it's our turn: It's how we do life!

GroupLife Commitment

Small groups at Los Altos United Methodist Church hold the following values:

- R** Take responsibility for what you say and feel without blaming others
- E** Use empathetic listening
- S** Be sensitive to differences in communication styles
- P** Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak
- E** Examine your own assumptions and perceptions
- C** Keep confidentiality
- T** Tolerate ambiguity and do not assume right and wrong

GroupLife is a safe place to express feelings and ideas without judgment, a place to receive encouragement and support. Out of respect for each other's time, meetings will start and end at the specified times. Please be prompt. If unable to attend, notify the HOST.

Note that the HOST has agreed to open his or her home for the duration of this group. Others in the group are welcome to take on other group responsibilities during this time, such as helping facilitate discussion, bringing refreshments, assisting with communication among the group, and planning any social or service events the group wishes to pursue.

How to Use This Workbook

During our Viral Faith series, we recommend that groups meet for three sessions of discussion and also participate in two activities together. Each group has freedom and flexibility to schedule as they are able during November and December. We encourage you to plan your schedule early! All of the content is contained in this workbook; there is no separate text. We encourage all to attend church worship on Sunday to hear messages from our Pastors on the topics. (Sunday worship times at Los Altos United Methodist Church are 8:00am, 9:30am, 11:15am, and 5:00pm. You may also view live streaming online or archived sermons at our website www.laumc.org). Here is the general suggestion for Viral Faith:

Discussion 1: Gifts/Extravagant Generosity/Spend Less/Give More

Discussion 2: Presence/Passionate Worship/Worship Fully

Discussion 3: Prayers/Deepening Faith/Love All

First activity: Witness/Radical Hospitality – have a social event together

Second activity: Service/Bold Service & Social Justice – do a service project together

An easy-to-follow format for each session is provided in this workbook, along with HOST guides and prompts. Below are suggested time allotments for a 90-minute meeting. Feel free to adjust the time segments if your group is meeting for a shorter or longer period.

Welcome & Ice Breaker	15 min	This activity is designed to help the group get better acquainted with each other as people arrive. Good time to serve a snack as well!
Opening prayer	5 min	A scripture, poem, or prayer is provided. Try different ways to pray: one person read aloud, everyone take turns reading a portion, do it silently, or any other method you wish.
Video Introduction	5 min	Watch the appropriate video to stimulate your discussion time together.
Discussion Points	45 min	Some suggestions for group discussion are provided. Feel free to do all of them, some of them, or none of them if you have other thoughts and ideas to discuss. You may break up into smaller groups for discussion as well.
Prayer requests & Closing prayer	15 min	Spend some time allowing everyone to share praises or concerns. Close the group meeting by reading the included prayer and adding your own.

LOS ALTOS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Touching Heaven, Changing Earth with Head, Heart, and Hands.

Membership vows	5 practices	Key phrase	Advent Conspiracy
Prayers	Deepening Faith	We grow	
Presence	Passionate Worship	We love	Worship Fully
Gifts	Extravagant Generosity	We give	Spend Less
Service	Bold Service & Social Justice	We serve	Give More
Witness	Radical Hospitality	We share	Love All



The GroupLife medallion incorporates the five practices of fruitful congregations and fruitful living.

www.laumc.org

SESSION ONE: VIRAL FAITH

Gifts/Extravagant Generosity [AC: spend less/give more]

“We buy things we don’t even need with money we don’t even have to impress people we don’t even know.” – Dave Ramsey

Welcome & Ice-breaker

What is the most meaningful gift anyone has ever given you, and why?

Check-in about prayer concerns from previous week (if group met)

Prayer (Host says, “We will say this prayer together, line by line, going around a circle, each person saying a line aloud, followed by the next person reading the next line”.)

Loving God, It is so easy to see what lacks in my life and
 let that become the focus of my thoughts and my attitude.
 Today I choose to look through the lens of abundance.
 I choose to see the benefits and blessings today
 no matter how small they may seem.
 Thank you for reminding me
 that my life does not consist of an abundance of things
 but rather in an abundance of moments
 that I can choose to find the blessings in.
 Help me today, by the power of Your Holy Spirit.
 I pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

(Host reads the above quote by Dave Ramsey and then introduces the DVD from *Advent Conspiracy* with these words...)

Advent Conspiracy was started in 2006 by five pastors who decided to make Christmas a revolutionary event by encouraging their communities to *Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, and Love All*. The response was overwhelming and the *Conspiracy* was born. [AC] is a resource for

churches to engage in authentic worship and giving at Christmas. This video shows how through the practice of Extravagant Generosity, we offer our material resources in a manner that supports the causes that transform life and relieve suffering, that enlarges the soul and sustains the spirit. Check it out.

(Play DVD: *Be Alive*. Duration 2 minutes and 14 seconds)

Discussion

(Host asks someone to read this paragraph aloud to the group.)

When a person officially joins a congregation, he or she makes a commitment to participate in the ministries, financial support, and decision-making of the church. Therefore, the church not only counts members, it counts **on** them to be a formal part of the body of Christ and to accept and exercise their responsibilities in that role. People who join a United Methodist Church commit to "uphold the church by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service and their witness." Honoring this membership commitment through a lifetime builds a strong community of believers who are disciples of Jesus Christ.

(Host says, "These vows, and the five corresponding practices, help us live out a balanced life. Today's focus is on "gifts" and the practice of extravagant generosity". Host may guide discussion with some or all of the following).

1. We have spiritual gifts, our natural abilities, our material assets and our training and experience to uphold God's church. We have opportunities each day to discover and develop gifts, then a responsibility through this vow to full stewardship of our time, abilities, and finances. What is your definition of stewardship?
2. How do you practice good stewardship? (environment, material assets, time)
3. Do you agree with this statement: "We are part of a culture that has, in many ways, lost our vision of the difference between wants and needs. We have tasted the sweetness of immediate gratification and it has become the staple that we want on our table all the time. We haven't wanted to save for something when we could charge it and enjoy it immediately." Discuss.

4. What was the one gift you remember getting for Christmas last year? What about the fourth gift? Do you remember that one?
5. "Spending Less isn't a call to stop giving gifts; it's a call to stop spending money on gifts we won't remember in less than a year. America spends around \$450 billion dollars during the Christmas season, and much of that goes right onto a credit card. By spending wisely on gifts we free ourselves from the anxiety associated with debt so we can take in the season with a full heart." Share your thoughts/feelings about these statements.
6. How can you spend less and still practice extravagant generosity? The most powerful, memorable gift you can give to someone else is yourself. And nobody modeled this more than Jesus. So what does this look like for you? Tickets to a ball game or the theater? A movie night? The main point is simple: When it comes to spending time with those you love, it's all about quality, not quantity. Agree? Why or why not?
7. Open time for sharing thoughts about sermon, this topic and our group discussion.

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer (Host asks someone to read this prayer).

God, we are grateful for this time to be together. Please receive the prayer requests that we have shared. We know that all that we have comes from you. We seek to honor you with all that we are and with all that we do. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

SESSION TWO: VIRAL FAITH

Presence/Passionate Worship [AC: worship fully]

You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you. – Psalm 118:28

Welcome & Ice-breaker

Describe your favorite vacation destination.

Check-in about prayer concerns from last session.

Prayer (Host asks someone to read this prayer).

O God who is greater than the most powerful forces in this world, enable us to be still & know that you are God.

O Lord who answers out of the whirlwind of everyday life, breathe in us your Holy Spirit to strengthen, comfort, & guide us in the midst of the storm.

O still, small voice, speak to us this hour, that we might become makers of your peace in our homes, in our communities, in our world.

We pray all this in the name of the One who calmed the raging sea. Amen.

– Pastor Pete Haynes, Long Green Valley Church of the Brethren

(Host reads the above quote from the Psalms and then introduces the DVD from *Advent Conspiracy* with these words...)

We all want our Christmas to be a lot of things. Full of joy. Memories. Happiness. Above all, we want it to be about Jesus. What we don't want is stress. Or debt. Or feeling like we "missed the moment". Advent Conspiracy is a movement designed to help us all slow down and experience a Christmas worth remembering. But doing this means doing things a little differently. A little creatively.

(Play DVD: *Worship Fully*. Duration 3 minutes, 15 seconds)

Discussion

(Host may guide discussion with some or all of the following):

1. What did you feel while watching that video? What did you notice in it? Was it "passionate worship"?

(Host invites someone to read the following quote from Advent Conspiracy).

Christmas marks the moment where God's promise was fulfilled and love took form, tiny fingers and all. It is a moment that deserves our full attention and praise. We believe the level of our involvement at Christmas is based entirely on how much we are celebrating Christ's birth. He deserves celebration; one that is creative, loud and directs every heart His way. - [AC: Worship Fully]

2. How will you "prepare Him room"?

(Host invites someone to read the following quote aloud).

Donna R. Patrick is a musician, conference speaker & writer. She writes:

In my book I devote several chapters to the reasons some people sit in church and miss worship .There are people who come to church on Sunday simply because it seems to be the right thing to do; surrendering to God in true worship never enters their minds. This is the group that comes to have their weekly "religious experience," but they never experience God's presence. Worship and coming to church are not the same thing.

3. We all go to church, but what is your motive for being there?

(Host invites someone to read the following quote aloud).

We can worship God anytime, anywhere, for any reason. The best reason is just because God is God. We don't have to wait for some miraculous event to occur before we worship God. As a matter of fact, we are free to worship God before the miraculous occurs! We can bump our "worship schedule" and get on God's worship schedule. David said in Psalm 34:1, "I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth." He doesn't qualify the where, but he does let us know when and how often. He says "at all times" and "continually." That's it. – Donna R. Patrick

4. A commitment to presence means we pay attention to the time and to the place we are at the present moment. Our Christian commitment is to pay attention to the present moment, looking and listening for God's guidance. When we promise "presence" to the congregation, we commit to be engaged to the place and people who compose both the congregation and the community the congregation serves. How often do you attend worship? Do you worship online when you're out-of-town?

5. Donna R. Patrick writes, "I challenge you this week to turn your heart to seek God's face in worship. When you do you will no longer sit in church for a religious fix, but rather standing or bowing to meet God and encounter God's presence". Is that something that speaks to you? Have you had an experience where being "intentionally present" transformed your worship experience?
6. Open time for sharing thoughts about sermon, this topic and our group discussion.

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer(to be read aloud by Host)

We thank you for this new day, God.

Confession time: ... we're not very good at giving thanks.

We tend to be takers more than givers.

You give us so much, only we get so turned around that we can't see what you provide for us, each and every day. We get so lost in the struggle to make ends meet, that "meat", and what it takes to buy it, becomes our end. Forgive us, Lord, and free us. Open us to your simple gifts, that we might be able to turn right side around; that we might, in fact, find delight in turning; that we might enjoy simply giving. Today is a day for turning, O God, a new day, your day of rest and renewal. Bow us, bend us, turn us, so that these words become the song of our heart, mind, & soul: "May Jesus Christ be praised!" Amen.

– Pastor Pete Haynes, Long Green Valley Church of the Brethren

SESSION THREE: VIRAL FAITH

Prayers/Deepening Faith [AC: Love all]

Prayer is conversation with God. Your relationship with God grows the same way that significant human relationships grow. You have to give time and attention to special relationships. As your faith develops and grows, you spend more and more time with God.

Welcome & Ice-breaker

What is the best book you have read recently?

Check-in about prayer concerns from last session.

Prayer(Host invites someone to pray this prayer aloud).

O God, whose Word is not just a one-way conversation, talk with us, today, and hear us as we pray. Free us, that we might listen for your voice, and empower us to speak to you. For in Christ Jesus, you have called us into a friendship which influences all other relationships. Help us to see beauty where we might be tempted to see ugliness, in ourselves, as well as in others. May your "joy" be found there as well. As you have washed our feet in Christ, kneel us to washing your feet in others. As you have lifted us off our knees, help us to lift others up. For we all were created in your image. Re-create in us, just now, a new heart, O God, one that beats in tune with your own. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

(Host reads the quote at the top of the page about prayer and then introduces the DVD from *Advent Conspiracy* with these words...)

It all boils down to love. Love from a savior. Love to a neighbor in need. By spending just a little less on gifts we free up our resources to love as Jesus loves by giving to those who really need help. This is the conspiracy three churches began a few years ago, and has since grown to an international movement where thousands of churches have raised millions of dollars to love others in life-changing ways.

(Play DVD: *Love all*. Duration 5 minutes, 10 seconds)

Discussion

(Host may guide discussion with some or all of the following. Host asks someone to read

the opening quote aloud).

In August 2010, political comedian/TV Host Jon Stewart commented on the fact that Chelsea Clinton's wedding was co-officiated by a rabbi and a United Methodist pastor. "Being a Methodist is easy," Stewart said on his show. "It's like the University of Phoenix of religions: you just send them 50 bucks and click 'I agree' and you are saved. In response to the Stewart joke, United Methodist Reporter Managing Editor Robin Russell made these observations: "Persons who take membership vows promise to "uphold this congregation of The United Methodist Church by [their] prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness." All too often, however, there are few expectations beyond serving on a committee, showing up on Sunday and making a financial pledge—and certainly no follow-through or consequences.

1. What do you think about the above quote? Reactions/feedback.

(Host reads the following)

Robin Russell continues: Yet churches that ask something of their members tend to have a more engaged and active laity who feel empowered for the work of the ministry. Young people, in particular, are eager to invest their lives in something bigger than themselves.

2. Do you think of your church as being shy in asking much of its members? Do you get asked to do more by your job, your children's school, your social clubs? Is there a greater expectation there? What does that indicate or mean?

(Host reads the following)

More from Robin Russell: I find it interesting that John Wesley, the father of small-group ministry, is a hero of the faith even to many outside the Wesleyan traditions. Whatever they're called today—lifegroups, cell groups, home churches—these gatherings for study, fellowship and accountability are a hallmark of most growing nondenominational churches. But glance at a typical United Methodist church bulletin and you'll see more announcements for Zumba classes and senior citizen outings than for Bible studies or accountability groups.

3. So what's a spiritually minded person to do?

(Host reads the following)

"The key leverage point for congregational development is adult spiritual

formation. It's a spiritual issue, a matter of the heart. It's not programmatic or organizational. It's about growing spiritual giants".

4. The hymn, *God of Grace & God of Glory* includes these lyrics: "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom's goal...serving thee whom we adore." How can we pray for wisdom and courage to be people who are intentionally deepening their faith? Do you pray for the mission and ministry of the church along with praying for your needs and the needs of loved ones?
5. Open time for sharing thoughts about sermon, this topic and our group discussion.

Prayer Requests

Closing Prayer

(Host invites the group to say this prayer aloud together, in unison).

Lord, help us to be well-rounded followers of yours, going deep spiritually, sharing our faith with people and also being concerned about their physical needs. Amen.

Look ahead at the suggested activities for your group to do, as representing the other 2 practice areas. Discuss ideas and plan a time to do a social event and a service project.

ACTIVITY ONE: Witness/Radical Hospitality

We encourage your group to have a social event together, in celebration of the practice of radical hospitality. Hospitality is inviting, welcoming, receiving, and caring for others. Radical means drastically different from normal practices. We must be open to God's grace and then share that with others.

“God intends for people to live their lives interlaced by the grace of God with others, to know the gift and task of community from birth to death.”

- *Cultivating Fruitfulness*, Schnase.

Consider these possibilities for your celebration time together. The goal is to share some time together – make it simple!

Potluck meal

Meal out at a restaurant

Ornament exchange party

White elephant exchange party

Dessert potluck party

Cookie exchange

Go caroling

Make advent wreaths together

Attend worship together and share a meal afterwards

Go on a hike together

Go bowling together

Share an evening of board games or card games

Attend Festival of Carols & Lights together with refreshments before/after

Attend a local Christmas event: Christmas in the Park, Bethlehem

Enjoy the Los Altos Festival of Lights Parade together

As you look forward to your hospitality together, consider ways that hospitality could be enhanced or extended to others.

“We love because he first loved us.” – I John 4:19

Have you ever invited someone who is not a part of a congregation to a service, ministry, activity, or small group of your church? Why or why not?

Think of some folks who do not have a church home, or a group. Pray for them and for an opportunity to invite them to share in community in some way.

ACTIVITY TWO: Service/Bold Service & Social Justice

Doing something together to help others is a powerful experience. Bold Service & Social Justice allows us to make a positive difference in the lives of others. We offer ourselves, gifts, abilities, and passions to God so God can use us to transform the world by relieving suffering.

“Serve one another in love.” – Galatians 5:13

As a group, pray about an opportunity to serve. Pray for something bold, that perhaps takes you out of your comfort zone. Pray for those you will serve.

The next page compiled by our practice area of Bold Service & Social Justice contains several opportunities to serve, both at LAUMC, in the broader community, and in the world. You may also refer to the church website for additional ideas and community partners.

After your service event is complete, take some time as a group to talk about the experience. What surprised you? What did you learn? How can you continue to be in prayer & service for the folks or organization you served?

Make sure your group has decided on a date to meet in January, 2013!