

SERVING GOD WITH OUR WHOLE LIVES: A STUDY OF STEWARDSHIP

by

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This work is dedicated to my husband Simon, our sons, Mason and Atticus,
as well as our amazing family (blood, chosen, and church).

Preface

The hope of this project is to help the congregation find ways to work alongside the community, deepen our lives, and strengthen our interconnectedness through stewardship practices. Stewardship is service to God which encompasses our actions in missions, futuring, and our embodiment as children of God. The purpose of this project is for our actions to become more intentional as we discern and follow in the direction of God. Other desires of this project include developing awareness of our gifts, our power, and our ability to create equity as a foundation of the community for future generations.

Abstract

Over the course of seven weeks, the worshipping congregation of The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls studied the meaning of the stewardship. We focused on the question of how can a congregation embody stewardship as a foundation of mission, participating in the local community in service of God? We reflected upon stewardship as embodied worship and faith in action. *Beyond the Offering Plate* served as an outline for a sermon series, to help broaden our definition of stewardship and discover a deeper understanding of the meaning of “steward”. Church coffee hours helped us to learn more about our missional history, our spiritual gifts and how God is calling us to use them in the world in partnership with the communities’ gifts and needs.

Chapter 1

In this project, I will argue that we tell the story of who we are as God's people in every action or inaction as embodied persons, created in the image of God. Our church is to think about its life cycles in relationship with the current membership and community; remembering that the call in the past may not be the call in the present. I will argue that the goal of this work isn't about saving souls, for that is God's work, but rather to be the future, the Kingdom of God, in the present community of Seneca Falls, NY, planning for the future as we live as people prepared to die. Specifically, I will focus on the question, how can a congregation embody stewardship as a foundation of mission, participating in the local community in service of God?

This project is about empowering the congregation to understand they have everything they need to do the work of God. This is the theology of enough, knowing we have enough to take care of ourselves and our neighbors. Those actions are our stewardship practices, or the *Missio Dei*, God's love in action. God calls us to action and sends us out to serve God's creation. It is my hope that we feel more connected to one another, more fully understanding that we are part of one another, even if some of us never sit in the church pews, and that level of care or stewardship as mission is another form of worship. Stewardship as mission is an embodied practice because it requires our whole selves in service to God. Intentional engagement with stewardship and its variety of meanings will result in a deeper connection with God and a stronger relationship with the community.

This work is important to me for several reasons. I grew up economically poor. Money and finances were never where the conversations in our house began, because there was a strict budget. We began from the place where we were being called to serve,

or in response to the crisis we were facing. In our home, you did with what you had to, and money was never a barrier to doing. In other words, money wasn't the primary motivating factor. We had to be creative. For instance, we didn't have the budget to call the plumber, especially before we troubleshooted the issue. We instead were sent to the library to get a book to guide us through potential issues and solutions. We learned to recover furniture, make curtains out of sheets, and find quality clothes at the thrift store. This model of service shaped my mindset and action. I learned from an early age that money wasn't needed to serve one's community.

Growing up in Appalachia, southeastern Ohio, I saw this repeatedly in my neighborhood. I witnessed people helping their community, serving in any way they were able, and being creative in their problem solving. When money was needed to solve the problem, it was found. It was much later that I discovered the blessing of this environment and how it benefits me as a leader in the community. This model helps us to discern priorities, stretch our imaginations, and embrace a theology of enough.

Another reason this question is important is because it focuses on being intentional in planning. I am a firm believer in preventative measures and steps. Planning is important, so that we can respond to situations that arise, and not all of them are emergencies; by planning we can distinguish between real emergencies and our anxiety. If our congregation is dealing with declining membership, we don't have the luxury of time to adapt and readjust. We need to think about taking purposeful steps so that we can continue to hear God's call and not have it drowned out by the fear of death. In the case of this church this would mean dissolving the church. This has been the prominent model presented in the PCUSA.

I work in the Presbytery of Geneva which has many closing churches. There is a practice of closing buildings, selling them off for \$1 to another church, and ending the church ministry. I have often been the only no vote on these issues, because I think it is a narrow vision and fails to think outside the box. I think it is a poor model of stewardship and leaves no legacy, has no impact. Such actions encourage the idea that a church is a building, and such actions live into scarcity, rather than abundance or enoughness. This understanding of the framework of stewardship and the development of this theology took shape over time.

The first shift happened when I served as Peace Corps Volunteer in Kenya. Time worked differently in Kenya. A jammed packed to-do list was not feasible in this culture. People took time to build relationships and trust. In learning to wait, watch, and follow, I saw that this was not a place with an abundance of financial wealth, formal education, or stuff. People there had an abundance of relationships, skills, and spiritual gifts. They used them to better their communities, and they used them to serve God. I learned quickly to bring gifts of flour and sugar when I visited people's home, because they would serve me with what they had, knowing they had enough, and knowing that the practice of hospitality was important. Coming from a culture of never enough, this drastically shifted my mindset. It reminded me a great deal of the place I grew up.

The second shift occurred when I was in my chaplain residency program. I served for a full year on the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit floor and had rotations in the Emergency Room, Psychiatric floor, and several other Intensive Care Units. Being with children and their families as they passed away helped me to face my own mortality. We are not promised longevity, and death is something that will happen to all of us. The

purpose of life shifted from length to depth. Some of my patients were hours old when they left this earth, but their impact was deep. Their lives mattered. In facing my own mortality, I made the decision that I wanted to live a life that mattered.

The third shift was learning to love myself so that I could better love others. This meant prioritizing my values and then my practices, so that they mirrored one another. As a pastor this means helping the congregation understand who they are, what their mission is, and helping them align their actions with their mission. If we desire to leave a legacy of generosity, then our life choices need to model generosity. I did not grow up with grandparents. The only grandparent I knew died when I was 4 and she was 55. I did not know a generation in my family beyond my parents and their sibling. My parents died young. They didn't leave a financial legacy, but rather a legacy of memories, some trinkets, and a lot of life lessons. I again learned that we live as people prepared to die.

In the process of discerning this project and research question, I have discovered that God has been shaping my actions, my hopes, and my person into this moment in time. In the chapters to follow, God will continue to help me answer this question of how we embody stewardship as a foundation of mission, to participate in the local community in service of God.

The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, NY has been a congregation since 1807. It has been on its current site since 1815 and in this building since 1870. The First Presbyterian Church owns three pieces of property: the church, the annex which is called Eastman Hall, and the manse. Our first church building remains standing on State Street and is the oldest building in Seneca Falls. Seneca Falls was once home to many manufacturing companies, and when they left in the late 1980's and early 1990's the

population of the congregation went from over 500 to just over 100, almost overnight. We now have forty-five members and worship around thirty-five to forty on a Sunday, and around twenty online. I have served as the pastor of this congregation since January 2, 2011.

The church is situated in the Finger Lakes region and is part of the Presbytery of Geneva. This region is part of what is called the Burned-Over District.

“During the Second Great Awakening, evangelical religious fervor swept the country, especially the Northeast and Midwest, and new ideas and beliefs spread via the Erie Canal. New religious and utopian movements such as the Oneida Community, the Spiritualists, the Shakers and the Mormons, moved westward along the canal route, rapidly descending on port towns and then moving on. This fast-moving wave of spirituality and religious zeal, which converted so many so quickly, prompted observers to refer to the Genesee Valley as the “Burned-Over District.”¹

Many of the founding members of the town of Seneca Falls were members of this congregation.

One gift we have as a worshipping community is a large endowment. We have had many conversations about living out of our abundance and not our scarcity. In this project I will introduce the Theology of Enough. We have focused the mission of the church and have made many changes to our buildings to lower the cost of maintaining them to ensure that we can invest our time, talents, and treasures in the larger community context rather than in keeping our lights on. In talking about and discerning theologically the places that God is calling us, and in planning while not in crisis, we hope to better serve God and God’s people. The endowments of The First Presbyterian Church total over four million. Some of the funds are restricted, but these generous gifts ensure the

¹ <https://nyheritage.org/exhibits/two-hundred-years-erie-canal/burned-over-district>. Walter Gable. Accessed on May 16, 2022

church's three buildings are maintained and energies can be spent on missions, not capital campaigns. The congregation is attempting to make changes, using the endowments, to lower overhead costs in the church. Six years ago, the church went solar, and we are working on switching to heat pumps, mini splits, and improvements to insulation to cut down on gas energy. The congregation feels these choices help us to live into the desire to be good stewards of the gifts we have been given and of creation. It is our hope that these changes will keep the operating budget lower in the years to come; to date, these changes have saved over \$30,000, with \$6000 last year alone.

The drawback of having endowments and not needing to do many fundraisers, is that the church became insular. The congregation maintained their charitable giving in the community but did so quietly. They gave generously to the partner non-profit agencies that aligned with their values, but those ministries were not in the neighborhood. They were not connecting to the people, hearing the stories, and knowing that the people in the margins needed to feel like they were standing on solid ground. The church developed a donor and recipient relationship rather than an organic moving of the Spirit of God.

One mission of the church, which bridged the gaps between donor and recipient, was the start of a new worshipping community on Wednesday evenings. This service began with a 30-minute worship service and ended with a communal dinner. Everyone ate with one another at the tables. Everyone prayed with one another, served one another, and learned from one another. The service numbers grew as we deepened our faith. This all ended when the church was broken into the day after Christmas, and the offering stolen by a worshipping member of this Wednesday church community. The congregation

did not handle this well and never properly grieved nor reconciled the relationships. Conversations continue in the present to restart this ministry.

Decisions of The First Presbyterian Church are made by the Session. It is composed of nine Ruling Elders, elected by the congregation every November in three classes of three for three years each, renewable for a total of six years, as well as the Clerk of Session, elected by Session every January, and the Moderator, who is the pastor. They function under *Robert's Rules of Order*, *The Book of Order*, *The Book of Confessions*, the church by-laws, and the Manual of Operations.

The Session, together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of their particular church as well as the church at large, including ecumenical relationships.² The full congregation meets for a meeting in November to elect officers and in January for the Annual Meeting, in which they approve pastor's Terms of Call, pass the budget, and hear committee updates and changes.

The church works in committees, which meet the first Sunday of every month after church or as needed. There are nine committees including the Session. All members of the committees have equal voice and vote. Their work is reported back to the Session, as each committee has at least one Session member. The pastor is an ex-officio member of every committee.

There is one group of the church that works entirely out of this structure, and that is our Coffee Hour. When we have coffee hour on Sunday following worship it is an education hour. A member of the community or a church member shares a program. As

² Manual of Operations of The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, NY.

people get coffee and snacks (there is a signup sheet for hosts) they place a dollar or two in an offering plate. This money is used to support local programs but never runs through the Session of the church.

Early on in my pastoral ministry with the congregation, the Session made the decision to design an action plan; they have done this three times in our ministry together. We know that life is constantly changing, and we discussed that making plans allows us to better respond to crisis. This entailed the environmental changes to the church, including solar, mini splits, and insulation. It also meant security changes: switching to a fob system and security cameras. We also looked at our furnaces, roofs, basic building maintenance, etc., so that we could better plan our budget in response to routine replacements. This also allows us space to apply for grant funding and for spacing out the replacements of appliances. Making plans also helped us to feel empowered because we better understood the gifts we had and how we wanted to use them. Some of the changes were small, such as moving the lectern to the floor level to ensure accessibility to anyone who wanted to read, because steps were potentially an obstacle. Other steps were larger, such as replacing all the lights in the annex building with LED. Ensuring our bills are less helps us to focus outward. It also helps us to see how these endowments can be used to serve the wider community. We have shifted our framework, but this took years of internal work.

Five years ago, the Session made the decision to highlight four action verbs in our mission statement and make them the focus of our work. They didn't want their Mission Statement to only have life on paper--they wanted the community to know they were

loved. Leslie Newbiggin observes, “Mission is faith in action.”³ This work was not for the governing body alone, but for the whole congregation, so we brought this mission into the worship service. This allows us to remember why we do what we do. We want to live our life in Christ with intention and purpose. We remind ourselves of this every Sunday, and these intentions shape our worship service and our week. Our mission is to serve this community guided by the example of Jesus Christ and led by the Spirit of God. We encourage one another to “*Be Welcoming *Be Compassionate *Be You (bravely) *Be Community.”

As we continued to discern our work together and live into this mission, we felt a strong need as a congregation to create a non-discrimination policy. We wish to make our practices and intentions clear to those who might never walk in the doors. If our sign says all are welcome, we need to be hospitable. It reads, “The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls.” In keeping with our baptismal covenant vow to respect the dignity of every human being, we have adopted the following policy of non-discrimination: “Employment, membership, and participation in any church activity is open to all without regard to ethnicity, race, skin color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, or disability.” Our policy and mission are printed on the brochures for the events I am sharing in the life of this church. I thought it important to frame for them the work we have already done, knowing that the process of learning and increasing our faith is never finished.

In the fifteen years I have been here, three Presbyterian Churches within ten to twenty minutes of this congregation and members in the Presbytery have closed their

³ Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 39.

doors. These changes around us have sparked many conversations about our ministry and the life of this congregation. Of the population of Seneca Country, 84.34% of the population of Seneca County, to which Seneca Falls belongs, do not affiliate with a religion. This information was presented to the Town Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee, of which I am a member. In the report, the MRB Group, who is leading the study and formation of the plan, highlighted,

Affiliation with a religious organization or civic organization can be used as a proxy measure for social connectedness, and how much a community may be able to rely on the goodwill of other local citizens, leading to reciprocity and mutually beneficial cooperation. Religious adherents can access additional support beyond their family and neighbors. Religious organizations are often organized to actively provide physical and social support to their congregations and communities during times of individual and community crisis.

These statistics indicate that our ministry is not at the center of the community but at the margins, as we represent 16% of the population in our county. Another way to say this is that Seneca Falls is a post-Christendom setting, as Christians are the minority population. One may argue it is a post-Christian reality.

We also must deal with our own church reality. First Presbyterian Church is representative of the population changes in our county, which has been identified by New York State as an aging community. Our congregation's decrease in size reflects these trends. The highest number of memberships was over 500 people, and our current membership is forty-five people. When I arrived in 2011 the church had seventy-three members. While we have added members every year, we have lost members due to death and to moving in retirement. The current population of Seneca Falls, New York is 6,055

based on our projections of the latest US Census estimates.⁴ It, like the church, is decreasing. In 2019, the median age of all people in Seneca Falls, New York was 41,⁵ but the majority of our membership is over sixty-five years of age, well above the community average. The last official US Census in 2010 recorded the population at 6,681. The church has thought about how to shift this demographic, but no real changes have been made. In general, most of the churches in our community have the same age demographic as our church, and, also like us, declining membership.

Knowing we serve a community in which a significant portion of the community does not have a religious affiliation, and that our church community is also declining in membership, we have shifted the focus more on mission. What will make the church mission different in a post-Christian reality? Bryan Stone's work may help us because he thinks we are all in a post-Christian reality, and writes, "The church that was once at the center of Western civilization and presumed for itself a privileged voice, has increasingly found that center unraveling for itself in a sort of diaspora at the margins...."⁶ The church is no longer the center of power, but Stone argues that where the church is now is where power will be found, as the church never should have been at the center, but always working from the margins. What does working from the margins look like? Is it using the endowments we have been given, as well as leaning into the church history of service, to gain an understanding of this post-Christian reality? To discover a possible answer to this question, the Session made the decision to work with a mission management group to

⁴ US Census 2019 ACS 5-Year Survey. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/seneca-falls-ny?fbclid=IwAR2-_zOcCSFTiR-aUTBirLBU4vjZUIQf7JEuOTEIXMJEYaRD6gbejc2pZzc Accessed on May 16, 2022

⁵ Data from the Census Bureau ACS 5-year Estimate. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/seneca-falls-ny?fbclid=IwAR2-_zOcCSFTiR-aUTBirLBU4vjZUIQf7JEuOTEIXMJEYaRD6gbejc2pZzc Accessed on May 16, 2022.

⁶ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. pg.10

determine our missional readiness and to see if our resources, property, and values had been communally discerned. They informed us that in all their time doing this work they had never worked with a church who so clearly knew, understood, and could state its mission. With this knowledge, they said it showed us were ready to act on our values to serve the community in long-term ways, particularly around the needs of affordable housing and food security. It made us feel strong and ready to proceed forward with the next steps.

Another mission program of the congregation is the PCUSA campaign called Matthew 25.

“Matthew 25:31–46 calls all of us to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities. Convicted by this passage, both the 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted the PC(USA) to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor. By accepting the Matthew 25 invitation, you can help our denomination become a more relevant presence in the world. We recognize Christ’s urgent call to be a church of action, where God’s love, justice and mercy shine forth and are contagious. And we rejoice how our re-energized faith can unite all Presbyterians for a common and holy purpose: our common identity to do mission.”⁷

Our church is attempting to live out this biblical call by addressing areas of poverty as well as the vitality of our congregation. We do see that our ministry involves engaging in the setting of the church and not only within the walls of the church.

The Session is still trying to figure out what it means to be a Matthew 25 congregation. We recognize Christ’s urgent call to be a church of action, where God’s love, justice, and mercy shine forth and are contagious. And we rejoice over how our re-

⁷ Presbyterian Mission. “Matthew 25 in the PC(USA): A bold vision and invitation”.
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/> Accessed on May 16, 2022.

energized faith can unite all Presbyterians for a common and holy purpose: our common identity to do mission. According to the language of the original Matthew 25 proposal,

“This is done in 3 ways:

- Building congregational vitality by challenging people and congregations to deepen their faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world.
- Dismantling structural racism by advocating and acting to break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color.
- Eradicating systemic poverty by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor. As disciples of Jesus Christ, Presbyterians engage in multiple components of a holistic effort to eradicate systemic poverty, address its root causes, and build communities of well-being.’⁸

This is the language of the church, and it doesn’t often translate well into the community.

The community doesn’t know what it means for us to say we are a Matthew 25

Congregation, so we will have to show them what it means through our actions and steps.

The congregation recently discerned the desire to be more actively engaged in the community. The struggle was age, ability, and time. We know that physically building a house with Habitat for Humanity is not something we can do as a congregation. So, what can we do? Leaning into our mission and bravely being children of God, we invite the community. It is my hope that deepening these roots of understanding and knowing why we are doing this work at this time in our history as a church, will help us as people of God in our service to God's creation. I wish to discover if framing this missional event with a clear theological foundation will strengthen the outcomes. This exercise is not about bringing more people into a worship service on a Sunday morning, but rather about

⁸ Presbyterian Mission. “Matthew 25 in the PC(USA):A bold vision and invitation”.
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/> Accessed on May 16, 2022.

sharing the gifts that we already have with our community, building relationships, and deepening our faith.

Recently, the local Episcopal priest called the Ministerial Association to gather and form a joint outreach ministry. Most of us are dealing with similar declining church populations. We have fewer people to do more work. It is our hope as a ministerium that our churches will be able to do some of this work together. Already our congregation and the Methodist congregation have joined our youth groups, as well as a few joint worship services. The Ministerial Association has already worked together on food collections for the local food pantry, the school feeding programs, and the community Thanksgiving dinner. We understand that as church membership declines, we will have to be more intentional with our partnerships.

Our membership is made up of the people in our neighborhood. Members' travel is less than twenty minutes to church, and for most less than ten, which is also aligned with the commute-to-work numbers in Seneca Falls. The next nearest Presbyterian Church is in Waterloo, New York, a seven-minute drive from our church. While there were conversations in the earlier 2000's about merging the churches, it was determined that they each would rather remain independent and in their own communities. We have never revisited this conversation.

Education level is a demographic area where our church differs from the mean of our community. Most of our members have a college degree or higher. Historically this has always been the case, and in 2011 when asking people who did not attend our church what our reputation was in the community, the most popular answer was snobbish and elite. We were the place where the "white collars" worshiped. Our reputation has changed

over the last decade, as we have pointed a great deal of work into knowing the community, in addition to donations. However, the level of our education as well as our white collars have not changed. One of the reasons for a decline in membership is that the children of the current members also went on to get advanced degrees and moved out of the community. Seneca Falls has an 88.7% high school grad or higher, and 24.4% bachelor's degree or higher.⁹ There are not enough jobs in their fields of study for them to return to Seneca Falls upon the completion of their degrees. Thus, we don't have the natural 'fillers' in our church pews. This shift to unchurched has occurred throughout the United States. We are forced to ask ourselves again, in this post-Christian reality, what is the role of the church? Are we understood in society to be like every other nonprofit agency?

Since many of our members have lived in Seneca Falls for decades, they have seen a shift in the poverty rates. They respond by giving generously of their time and money to our area food pantry and through running a community summer backpack program. This provides 60-100 children meals throughout the whole summer when they do not benefit from the school feeding programs. The overall poverty rate is 14.65%. The race most likely to be in poverty in Seneca Falls is "Other," with 88.24% below the poverty level.¹⁰ Learning these statistics and understanding the systemic issues underneath the statistics has helped the church community to brainstorm a variety of ways to address these communal issues. We know there is strength in living in a small community where there is one school district, one recreation center, and one town

⁹ US Census 2019 ACS 5-Year Survey. <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3666322-seneca-falls-ny/> Accessed on May 16, 2022.

¹⁰ Data from the Census Bureau ACS 5-year Estimate. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/seneca-falls-ny?fbclid=IwAR2-_zOcCSFTiR-aUTBirLBU4vjZUJQf7JEuOTEIXMJEyaRD6gbejc2pZzc Accessed on May 16, 2022.

council. We can see how our decisions to move a grocery store creates a food desert. The choice not to invest in the infrastructure impacts everyone, both those on the margins and those in the center of power. We are still trying to discern from which place the congregation is working. Are we still a center of power? If so, how are we serving the people in the margins and other centers of power in understanding they are one community?

Seneca County has some of the worst health ratings in the state of New York. We do have many members with health issues and issues of addiction, which mirror the rates in our community. Per capita personal health care spending in New York was \$9,778 in 2014. This is a 4.57% increase from the previous year (\$9,351).¹¹ Our church has donated to RIP Medical Debt to alleviate health care costs. We received a \$10,000 Mental Health Grant from the PCUSA to address this rising health crisis in our community. The grant trains the coaches of sixth-twelfth graders in Seneca County in Youth Mental Health First Aid and Trauma Informed Care.

Recently, the church also received a \$7,500 synod grant for the Ecumenical Youth Group. We partner with United Methodist Church for our bi-monthly Youth Group. One week we do a service project and the next week we do a fun fellowship activity. The youth were told of a grant opportunity and came up with an idea for community-wide youth nights. They recognized that middle school and high school students have no place to hang out for fun. They wanted to use the church social hall to host monthly Youth Community Nights, so that on the second Friday of the month, middle school students would meet from 6:00 pm-8:00 pm and high school students would gather from 8:00 pm-

¹¹ 2022 County Health Rankings. Data from the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps County Health Rankings. Seneca County. Accessed on May 16, 2022.

10:00 pm. The social hall would have a video game room with Meta Quest 2, PlayStation 5, board games, yard games, a concession stand, and a room for dance and karaoke. This program will be led by the youth and for the youth. The adults will open the space and provide supervision for safety. We hope this improves the mental health of the youth in the community as connection is one of the best ways to improve mental health. We also hope to offer the space for birthday parties, anniversaries, and Sober Nights.

The church continues to try to respond to the needs of the community. The congregation is very supportive of the pastor in pursuing this work in the community and partnering with United Way, our local food pantry, Habitat, Suicide Prevention, Substance Coalition, and Mental Health Services, as well as the pastor's work on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for the school district. The congregation partners with several community groups including House of Concern, Community Action Program, Meals on Wheels, Backpack Pantry, Boy Scouts, Tops, Creative Choices Day Care, First Amendment First Vote, Women's Rights Park, Seneca Singers, Relay for Life, the It's a Wonderful Life Festival, the Seneca Falls Central School District, and We Exist FLX. We do a great deal of service in the community, but I don't know if we are framing it as stewardship as mission. I don't know if we are using all the gifts we have in service of God and one another. I don't know if we have band-aided issues or are thinking of solving systemic issues that the future will not know. I hope this project will help us to find ways to work alongside the community and to deepen our lives through strengthening our interconnectedness. I hope it makes our actions intentional, in that they are following in the direction of God. I hope that this project develops our awareness of

our gifts, our power, and our ability to create equity as a foundation of the community for future generations.

In Chapter Two, I will discuss the theological framework of this project. I will do this by using a seven-week sermon series based on Adam Copeland's book *Beyond the Offering Plate*. I wish to deepen the definition of stewardship and to expand the practices beyond financial giving. Additionally, I will provide educational coffee hours that explore our story as a congregation and our gifts, as well as our current practices. I deeply desire for all of us as a church to understand that the gifts we have been given need to be shared, and God has given us what we need--enough--to do God's work. God gave us these gifts in order that all can benefit from them. Jesus said that "if the people are silent, then the stones would cry out."¹² This means God will always find the way to share God's love, even if the people of God failed to discern or failed to act on how to serve God's creation.

In Chapter Three, I will conduct qualitative interventions to gather data. This will be done primarily through conversations and a handful of activities with the congregation. Members of the congregation will be asked to keep a journal based on the sermon series. The journal will ask a question for deeper reflection and provide an activity to practice stewardship. The activities involve drawing a communal River of Life, learning about asset gathering, conducting a spiritual gifts inventory, and answering a final series of questions in order to learn if this intentional focus on stewardship changed our definition and deepened our relationship with God.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss the main threads or themes the data has uncovered. Does this level in intentional focus with a congregation enable us to embody stewardship

¹² Luke 19:40. CEV.

as a foundation of mission. As a worshipping community will we discover the definition of what it means to be a steward of God? Will we be able to look at what God has given us and serve the community of Seneca Falls with what we have? Will we see that God has given us enough so that we can use all that we have in service to God? Let us find out.

Chapter 2

I believe that we have come to a place in history where we desire everything to be separated into neat and nice boxes, like secular and sacred. The problem is that they are not separate boxes; because we are all interconnected. Otherwise, being Christian becomes something we do on Sunday, and we do not integrate this activity into our lives and stories. Jesus can easily become a product that is bought and sold. Churches can become places where people are given a list of things they must do to be saved and where they can move from the secular box to the sacred box. This, I believe, usurps God's sovereignty, placing the church in the seat of the judge instead of the seat of the servant. The desire to categorize and commodify makes me curious about what practices of the church are being placed in neat and nice boxes, instead of being integrated into one's daily life. The practice I want to take a deeper look into in this project is stewardship.

As people, we are stewards of God. We are not in charge. Our lives are lived in service of God and God's creation. Stewardship is often viewed as charitable giving to the church, which the church uses to conduct its operations and mission. I would like to break stewardship free of this limited box, in the hopes that stewardship will be understood as part of one's daily life or whole self.

To accomplish this, I will be thinking of stewardship from three theological lenses in my research: stewardship as mission, stewardship as future visioning, and stewardship as an embodied practice. The stewardship lenses will be grounded in the biblical passages of Matthew 10: 7-8 (stewardship as mission), Matthew 24: 32-44 (stewardship as future visioning), and 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (stewardship as an embodied practice). I will define these terms individually, as well as what they mean used together, through

conversations with other theological resources. I believe stewardship is an on-going conversation with God that began at creation and continues today.

Stewardship as Mission

The first theological lens is stewardship as mission, the people being encouraged to serve God. According to Matthew 10:7-8: “As you go, announce that the kingdom of heaven will soon be here. Heal the sick, raise the dead to life, heal people who have leprosy, and force out demons. You received without paying; now give without being paid.”¹³ While stewardship is often seen in the church setting as a financial donation, this passage invites us to see service not as a financial transaction, but as an announcement of God’s kingdom. The announcement of God’s kingdom is done through acts of service such as healing, and not by an exchange of goods.

Service in this setting means taking the gifts God has freely given to us and using these gifts to benefit others. This call to give is not limited to a structure, like the church building, but is a call to announce where we go. I see this passage as a divine invitation from God, where God assures the people that they will have what they need to do the works God is calling them to do. This passage reminds readers that God has given us this day our daily bread, not to be stored up, but to be shared with whomever we encounter in God’s creation that day. This is my understanding of stewardship as mission, knowing we serve God wherever we go. This understanding frees stewardship from the sacred box only practiced on Sunday, and places the practice of stewardship as mission, into one’s everyday life.

As with the passage from Matthew 10:7-8, Peter Block and Rolf Jacobson’s

¹³ Matthew 10:7-8, (Contemporary English Version)

work helps to create an understanding of stewardship as mission as the daily practice of serving God. Jacobson gives a wonderful definition of steward, writing,

“A Christian congregation belongs to God. God is the owner. We are merely stewards, the servants or slaves who have responsibility for the master's household, for the master's mission, for the master's ministry.”¹⁴

Stewardship, then, is service to God, through our actions and our missions, which are to be God's desire and not our own. Knowing that we are loved and knitted into Christ allows the work to become cooperative and not competitive. The work of stewardship as mission is being with one another and seeing the image of God in all people. It is not a competition to see who has more people in the pews. Rather, it is a collaboration between the people in the pews and the people outside the church, working together to heal the community.

Again, I see these actions as blurring the lines of the secular and the sacred. I find Edwin Van Driel's work helpful in expanding Jacobson's definition of steward and connecting it more deeply to mission. One could think of the secular as the community and the sacred as in the pews, but this would limit both these communities and God. Van Driel attests, “the work of missions is never separated between believing and following, faith and obedience, and the preaching of the gospel from the action of God's justice.”¹⁵ Van Driel does a great job of showing the interconnection of the sacred and secular and seeing God as the space between. God is not bound by space and time, and as people who accept God's invitation to follow wherever God is leading, we are also not bound. Faith calls us to obey, even when we don't know where all the resources are coming from,

¹⁴ Jacobson, Rolf. *Stewards of God's Mysteries: Stewarding as a Model for Congregational Ministry*. pg. 252

¹⁵ Van Driel, Edwin. “Christ Gathering all Things into Himself: On the Christological impetus of Lesslie Newbigin's missional-ecumenical project”. Pg. 91

because we know that God always provides the daily bread. We are called to share this good news, freely, in our practices, which are the stewardship of mission. We can announce God's justice through the service of loving others as God loves us.

Another author who strengthens stewardship as mission in driving it away from consumerism and towards generous living and daily practice is Bethany Ringdal, who writes,

“Being free to live generously is part of the good news. But generous living is also a skill to be taught. If Christian living means living generously, it must also mean living responsibly with money in order to have enough to give. Release from the cultural drive to consume, freedom from crippling debt, and promoting prompting toward free and generous giving are miracles of the Spirit, but we in the church can help them along by providing teaching, supports, and accountability as our people are transformed in their relationship with money.”¹⁶

Ringdal is talking about the theology of enough and against the commodification of Christ. As people of God, we are called to live generously. Being responsible with money doesn't always mean saving it; sometimes it means giving in ways that further the mission of God.

In this project, I ask the congregation if they are living generously as they further the mission of God, or if they are living out of scarcity, afraid these financial gifts will run out. Will they move on the call of the Holy Spirit and trust that God will provide what is needed, or will they insist that all of God's provisions need to be stored up before they move? Alys Robinson provides a view on stewardship as mission that is helpful because again, it pushes stewardship from the realm of capital to the mission field, stating,

¹⁶ Ringdal, Bethany. *Money and Mission Starts: Funding New Churches for God's Mission*. Word and World, vol. 42, Number 1, Winter 2022. Pg. 64

“There is often an insistence on raising money first and then advancing the mission of the organization....Mission must always come first, new possibilities recognized, and opportunities considered, particularly if one desires to be worthy of generosity.”¹⁷

God calls us to place the emphasis of being good stewards on the mission, the actions God has called us to do, not on the money made in the process. This is the Theology of Enough, discerning how God is calling us to serve and putting that service into action. We trust that God will always provide.

In the case of a church, like The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, stewardship becomes a question of trusting God enough to use the money we have in service to God in the community. Mark Elsdon creates a bridge between money and mission as stewardship when he writes, “by providing tangible ways for the church to engage with the community in this work, by looking at impact investing, as a practice of stewardship as mission.”¹⁸ Impact investing would be one way for churches to use their finances to create a larger impact in the broader community, standing in the gap of abundance and scarcity with the knowledge that they have enough. The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls chose to stand in this gap and make an impact investment when it used its endowments to purchase solar panels, providing enough energy to run the properties. The church heard a clear call to be a good steward of the earth. Standing in the gap to use money from the endowments, or between scarcity and abundance, in the space of enough, is easier said than done. Each community will need to look at mission within their own context because God’s call to serve is not the same for all people and churches.

¹⁷ Alys Robinson, Kerry. *Imagining Abundance: Fundraising, Philanthropy, and a Spiritual Call to Service*, pg. 40

¹⁸ Elsdon, Mark. *We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry*

Churches can't know their full context if they do not branch out of the building and into the neighborhood. Bryan Stone's work frames what this gap looks like in this reality: it looks like evangelism. I know evangelism can be a frightening word for mainline Protestants, but God tells us not to be afraid. Stone wants Christian communities to reclaim evangelism as a practice saying,

“For some, the word [evangelism] calls to mind a shameful history of forced conversions, inquisitions, fraudulent television preachers, religious wars, crusades, genocide, colonization, and the ruthless expansion of Western power throughout the world. The E-word has become a dirty word—an embarrassment to the Christian and an affront to the non-Christian.”¹⁹

This is exactly the mindset of the congregation where I serve. Every time we discuss evangelism, I see people's faces scrunch up. Stone's work reframes evangelism as a practice of stewardship, and Stone poses the question in this way:

“Might evangelism be a practice that calls forth the highest creative energies, intellect, and imagination of Christians rather than a crass exercise in marketing the church to consumers within a world of abundant and competing options?”²⁰

Stone again helps us to see the interconnection. He takes stewardship out of a nice, neat box and mixes it up with everything: stewardship as mission is fusion, connecting to time, talent, treasures, our lives, our bodies, and our privilege.

Stone's main claim is that “the most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.”²¹ For Stone, these practices ground

¹⁹ Stone, Bryan. *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. pg. 10.

²⁰ Stone, Bryan. *Evangelism after Christendom*. Pg. 10

²¹ Stone, Bryan. *Evangelism after Christendom*. pg.15

and connect us in understanding of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. He makes this argument in reframing evangelism, calling the readers to this work:

“Rethinking and reconstructing evangelism is a task that must be taken up in every era and in every part of the world where the church takes seriously its calling to ‘announce peace’ and to bear faithful, public, and embodied witness to God’s reign in its own context.”²²

In other words, our faith stories are told in the actions of our everyday life and with our whole selves. What is the story we wish to tell, and what is the story we want to be remembered?

Stewardship as Future Visioning

I think it is very important for churches to consider their story. Our stories are connected to the larger story of God’s kingdom, which was, and is, and shall be. Who we are and how we wish to be remembered will shape our missions, because it will require future visioning. We don’t need to bookend our stories between our birthdate and death date. The theological lens of stewardship as future visioning, as something beyond our death, is described in Matthew 24: 32-51:

“Learn a lesson from a fig tree. When its branches sprout and start putting out leaves, you know summer is near. So when you see all these things happening, you will know the time has almost come. I can promise you that some of the people of this generation will still be alive when all this happens. The sky and the earth won't last forever, but my words will. No one knows the day or hour. The angels in heaven don't know, and the Son himself doesn't know. Only the Father knows.”²³

The planting of a tree is an act of future visioning, not limited to the seed planter’s birth and death dates. One plants a tree without knowing if one will live long enough to see the fruits. One plants a tree from the seeds of another. One plants a

²² Stone, Bryan. *Evangelism after Christendom*. Pg.10

²³ Matthew 24: 32-44. (Contemporary English Version)

tree without knowing if it will take root and grow, or how the branches will form, or which will be the strongest. I think of stewardship in the same way. One is called to give, or to plant a fig tree, without knowing the outcome of the gift. The hope in the giving is that it will bear fruit. One might have an action plan, or a list of intentions, to ensure that the place the tree is planted is in the proper soil, water, and sunlight.

Churches might see an action plan like this as a response to the call to the stewardship of future visioning, a call to think about the trees a church is planting and to be intentional that we aren't scattering seed everywhere and begging for God to do the rest. Part of our work is readying the soil, or discerning our past, our present, and our future. Only God knows what the future will bring, but God isn't asking us to hoard the seeds. Church ancestors didn't give us the gift of seeds so that no one in the church would plant them. The result of not planting will be no more fig trees. Stewardship of future visioning requires the church to discern its call in the current place and what it will leave to the generations to come.

The church lives on after we die, which makes me wonder about what happens when we see our legacy, not as the gifts, the skills, and the genes that we pass on naturally within our family systems, but as passing ourselves on in real life from generation to generation an unending life in which we never die. Does this desire--not to see the end of our life and our struggle with the limitations of life--make room for a way of being that is completely outside of the church? I think churches avoid conversations about future because they don't want to face a possible death as an institution any more than people want to imagine life not continuing after they take their final breath. I think

facing our deaths helps us to live deeper lives, so the potential conflict is worth engaging in the conversation. Samuel Wells helps connect planting of seeds to the building of legacy. Wells encourages us to engage in the conflict, to envision the future we might not see, and to embrace conflict and failure. He writes, “God's way of salvation is not to obliterate controversy and replace it with simple accord; it is to take failure and turn it into the opportunity for discovery, transformation, intimacy, and hope.”²⁴

God is with us in the failure too. Michael Welker insists God is with us in the form of the Holy Spirit in those moments of failure, calling us to try again. To do the work of God, to live in the conflict and the failure, we will need the help of the Spirit: “The action of the Spirit does not flee from the world, but overcomes the world, delivering and renewing life.”²⁵ As God’s people we also do not flee. The Spirit calls us to serve--in any way we can--the interconnecting God, who makes the miracles happen. We might not be able to solve all the problems, but we can’t flee from them either.

Our actions and our inactions tell the story of our legacy. We are to use whatever skills we have in service of the people in our neighborhoods. If you have a voice, you use it on the phone to make calls. If you have legs, you use them to walk door to door. If you have hands, you use them to pass out meals, clean tables, and pick up trash. If you have a mind, you use it to brainstorm and make plans of action. The reward of serving is that your life is deep. You might not be saving the world. It's not going to solve world hunger or win you an award like the Nobel Peace Prize, but your service will leave the world better than you found it. Life is short and it changes on a dime, and God calls us to be intentional with our one precious life. So often it is the final gift, an endowment we leave

²⁴ Wells, Samuel. *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God*, pg. 59

²⁵ Welker, Michael. *God the Spirit*. pg. 263

to a church, that remembers us in the history books. I will argue that it is the day-to-day use of one's gifts that create a bigger impact: even if a name is not remembered in history, the impact is felt--this is the stewardship of future visioning. I have no idea who planted the trees in our yard. However, the impact of these trees is felt in the shade they offer and in the quality of the soil.

Engagement in future thinking also means being aware of our present leadership, gifts, and adaptability. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky write about leadership and the adaptations leaders must make to bring about future change, adaptations which will help provide structure for this work. The practice of leadership involves two core processes: diagnosis first, and then action. You first diagnose what is happening in your organization or community and then take actions to address the problems you have identified.

Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. Leadership must wrestle with the normative questions of value, purpose, and process. This wrestling helps us to adapt. Organizational adaptation occurs through experimentation and relies on diversity. Adopting changes will take time. Thus, adaptive leadership must be persistent. The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. Technical problems have known solutions, but "Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, belief, habits, and loyalties."²⁶ The hope is that in thinking of stewardship more broadly, we as a church can see the differences between the technical and adaptive challenges, we face in order to best serve God. Knowing the

²⁶ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. pg. 19.

difference can help all to serve God. We must not step haphazardly into the future, but with intentionality and purpose, knowing we have enough.

Part of leading stewardship as future visioning will be teaching about the theology of enough. This work decentralizes individuals and the collective and recenters God as the giver of gifts. Alexia Salvaterra and Peter Goodwin Heltzel say that one does this when “We take seriously the best in people, the reality of the image of God in each of us and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.”²⁷ This decentering will require the church to do the hard work of recognizing individual gifts and how these gifts are connected in the body of Christ, in order to do work that brings glory and honor to God. Salvaterra and Heltzel’s book is a toolbox for how one might begin this life and work. This is the work of Matthew 24: 32-51 as it recognizes the fig tree. They make their case by reminding readers of what it means to be a beloved community. Faith-rooted organizing is the building of beloved communities: “The place where everyone is recognized as being equally and infinitely precious, where everyone is welcome, valued and respected.”²⁸ Recognizing that everyone is equal and infinitely precious helps us to keep God at the center of the work.

It also helps us to work beyond our present and be guided toward God’s future. Elizabeth Liebert calls this work the Social Discernment Cycle, which is a conversation with God which provides many practices to draw on to ensure that the future visioning is done with God. Liebert says that this work

“merits the term discernment because it is a process for seeking God’s call in a particular situation. It is called social because it deals primarily with human communities and their social structural, rather than interpersonal, aspects. It is a cycle because one completed round of discernment prepares for the

²⁷ Salvaterra and Heltzel Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World, pg. 74

²⁸ Salvaterra and Heltzel Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World, pg. 17-18.

next.”²⁹

The Social Discernment Cycle is not about new programs and busy work. It is also not about looking at the work of the church from fiscal year to fiscal year. To do this work, without this discernment, would mean we are alive but not living.

One question our church often asks is what if the church were to close tomorrow-- would it matter to the community? Does our impact matter to the community or are we a building people enter only on a Sunday for a few hours. One way the church could make an impact and engage in future visions would be to stand in solidarity with the larger community, particularly those on the margins. Walter Brueggemann says Jesus displayed his solidarity in the form of compassion, which lays the foundation of a biblical understanding of this seed planting in the work of Jesus’ future visioning. Brueggemann says,

“One thing the dominant culture cannot tolerate or co-opt is compassion, the ability to stand in solidarity with the victims of the present order. It can manage charity and good intentions, but it has no way to resist solidarity with pain or grief. . . . This then becomes the mission of the church, for it is the mission of God best exemplified in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Jesus replaces numbness with compassion.”³⁰

We cannot become numb to the world. As part of the mission of The First Presbyterian church we say that we are to be compassionate. Zscheile, Binder, and Pinkstaff call for “new ways to embody Christian identity and purpose in a changing context,” and they see this work as “an opportunity to become less busy, less distracted, and more open to God's leading.”³¹ This work is not one-size-fits-

²⁹ Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*, pg. 1

³⁰ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*, pg. 88.

³¹ Zscheile, Binder, Pinkstaff, *Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future*. Pg 4

all, because the communities and the people at the margins are different. This work will require the church to be different. These authors say,

“It means cultivating a countercultural way of life. Because the radical call of Jesus, and Christian people are supposed to live differently, and the church is supposed to help them do that....This involves cultivating practices by which people can experience the power and presence of God for themselves and, in turn, reflect on their own experience in the community.”³²

Again, they call on the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit isn’t the primary leader only inside the walls of a church sanctuary, but everywhere in God’s creation. To lead faithful intervention, they say,

“This means cultivating a community of listening on multiple levels inside and outside of the church, of prayer and spiritual practices, and of action learning, whereby people behave their way forward into a new future rather than plan everything out ahead of time. It means lovingly holding space in a community for people's yearnings, fears, anxieties, and hopes, recognizing that your role as a leader is not to fix people, rescue them from ambiguities they're facing, or tell them where to go. Rather it, it means introducing the practices by which people can discover a hopeful future and do the learning themselves while you walk alongside them, helping them interpret faithfully what they are experiencing.”³³

How can we be different and keep everything the same? We can’t. However, to follow the call to the Spirit into that future will require us to know who we are in the present.

Stewardship as Embodied Practice

As we think about missions and the future, we must know who we are as a child of God, and I think this knowing is part of stewardship as embodiment. This practice can be seen at work in the text from 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.

Remember this saying, “A few seeds make a small harvest, but a lot of seeds make a big harvest.” Each of you must make up your own mind about how

³² Zscheile, Binder, Pinkstaff, *Leading Faithful Innovation*. Pg 12

³³ Zscheile, Binder, Pinkstaff, *Leading Faithful Innovation*. Pg 17

much to give. But don't feel sorry that you must give and don't feel you are forced to give. God loves people who love to give. God can bless you with everything you need, and you will always have more than enough to do all kinds of good things for others. The Scriptures say, "God freely gives his gifts to the poor, and always does right." God gives seed to farmers and provides everyone with food. He will increase what you have, so you can give even more to those in need. You will be blessed in every way, and you will be able to keep on being generous. Then many people will thank God when we deliver your gift. What you are doing is much more than a service that supplies God's people with what they need. It is something that will make many others thank God. The way in which you have proved yourselves by this service will bring honor and praise to God. You believed the message about Christ, and you obeyed it by sharing generously with God's people and with everyone else. Now they are praying for you and want to see you, because God used you to bless them so very much. Thank God for his gift that is too wonderful for words!³⁴

We are each human, beautifully and wonderfully made by God. Even those humans that cause of grief and suffering have within them the ruah, the breath of God. This passage reminds us that we are embodied people, which means we are empowered to make choices. *"Each of you must make up your own mind about how much to give."* We are each empowered to give as much or as a little as we want from the lives God has given to us. God doesn't coerce or force us to use the gifts we have. We choose to live in abundance, scarcity, or enoughness. As a parent I have learned that I can encourage my kids to practice but forcing them always has the opposite effect. So, it is with God.

God created us in God's image and invited us to a life of service, not servitude. We each decide how and how much to give. This passage tells us about the depth of our lives when we choose to give it our all and serve one another. God assures us we will receive in proportion to what we give, that we will have enough. What we do is much more than a service that supplies God's people with what they need; it is gratitude for God. When we serve, we will bring honor and praise to God. We believe the message

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. (Contemporary English Version)

about Christ, and we obey it by sharing generously with God's people and with everyone else.

If our gifts are seeds, planted in our soul, then service helps these seeds to grow. This service is stewardship as mission. This service is planning for a future we might never see, or stewardship as future visioning. This service is embodied, because it requires us to use our gifts to serve, our whole selves. The more we use our gifts (seeds) the more they grow. The Spirit helps us to discern that our seeds are not isolated from one another; they are working together in God's ecosystem, which we call earth. God works in us and through us to ensure that these gifts work together so that we all are supplied with what we need. God isn't calling us to save God's creation, but to serve God's creation. God has already saved us, and in serving one another we deepen our learning and understanding of God's saving grace, and we receive the blessings, or the desire to do more to bring honor and praise to God.

As highlighted in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, "Each of you must make up your own mind about how much to give." The incarnate Christ is in the background as the model of what it means to be an embodied steward of God. James Smith shows stewardship as an embodied practice by connecting it to discipleship, saying,

"First, it recognizes that human beings are made by and for the creator who is known in Jesus Christ. Second, the implicit picture of being human is dynamic. To be human is to be for something, directed towards something, oriented towards something; to be human is to move is to be on the move, pursuing something, after something. We are like existential sharks: we have to move to live. We are not just static containers for ideas; we are dynamic creatures directed towards some end."³⁵

³⁵ Smith, James K. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, pg. 8

The church has a body that must move. We are individuals together, each with spiritual gifts that are part of the body of Christ; there is no church of one. The corporate church is a huge potluck of spiritual gifts and resources gathered at God's table. Smith further stretches the stewardship of embodiment to worship, saying, "Recognizing worship as the heart of discipleship doesn't mean sequestering discipleship to Sunday; it means expanding worship to become a way of life."³⁶ We are the body of Christ in all we do, but this work is a "we" and not an "I."

Embodiment is a way to talk about one's personhood, but we must be careful not to spiral into individualism, by remembering it is God who we serve, and not self that is important. Carter Snead's definition of personhood is helpful because it steps away from expressive individualism and moves toward interconnectedness, remembering that interconnectedness is God's self, or the breath of God in each living things. This book provides a great outline for the meaning of embodiment.

If we remembered that we are embodied, we will better understand ourselves as whole, living organisms rather than mere wills inhabiting instrumental bodies ('re-membering' as re-integration of mind and body). If we remember that our embodiment renders us vulnerable and dependent upon the benefits of others for our very lives and self-understanding, we will more clearly grasp our obligations of just generosity and reciprocal indebtedness to those others who are likewise vulnerable ('re-membering' as rebinding ourselves to one another in the body of community). If we remember that as living human bodies, we all pass through stages of life when our will, judgment, strength, and beauty are inchoate, obscured, compromised, or annihilated, we will be able to more readily recognize others as fellow members of the human community with claims on us, despite the sometimes distressing disguises of age, illness, and disability ('re-membering' as an essential tool of recognition.)³⁷

The works of Snead and Smith connect the self to something greater than self. We

³⁶ Smith, James K. *You Are What You Love*. Pg.113

³⁷ Snead, Carter O. *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*. Pg. 8

are a part of the body of Christ gathering at God's table. It can be so easy to forget that we gather at the God's table and are only a piece of the body of Christ, because the work we do as God's people can become siloed and inside the church building.

This is where Douglas Hall will be valuable as he writes, "The symbol of steward challenges human beings to assume the posture of those who serve. And contrary to the retreat from the world in which we have been seduced by our failure at mastering it, stewardship challenges us to serve responsibly and as those committed to creation."³⁸ Hall reminds us about the thin edge we walk between embodiment and individualism and between serving and being served. Assuming the posture of those we serve helps us to remain balanced on this edge. We can serve responsibly because we remember whom we serve. We remember that God is the center, not our separate self and not even our church. Luke Timothy Johnson also helps to remind me of this when he says, "The way we use, own, acquire, and disperse material things symbolizes and expresses our attitudes and responses to ourselves, the world around us, other people, and, most of all, God."³⁹ The stewardship of embodiment is the knowledge of our whole self and how we connect to the world around us in God's larger story. It isn't only about our gifts, but how we develop these gifts, use these gifts, and how we share these gifts with others.

Mary Sue Drier encourages us along this line of thinking, saying, "As long as enough money was coming in for our congregation to survive and even thrive, we were able to ignore some of the contradictions, complexities, and challenges of stewardship in our unabashedly consumer-oriented culture."⁴⁰ She calls on us to fight against this urge to

³⁸ Hall, Douglas. *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. pg. 95

³⁹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing. 2011. Pg. 37

⁴⁰ Drier, Mary Sue. "That's Just Rude!" *New Perspectives on Old Practices*. Pg 100

default to a consumer-oriented culture and to rethink stewardship. Drier states, “Rethinking stewardship is not for the sake of bringing money into the church, but for the sake of the very mission of the church to participate faithfully in God's mission in the world.”⁴¹ At the same time Drier says, “Reframing stewardship in this way integrates it into our Christian vocation of bearing the life, hope, and freedom of Christ in the world and to our neighbor.”⁴² Her work really helps me to understand the stewardship of money, or treasure, and the stewardship of embodiment, or time and talents. Drier’s call to reframe stewardship is what helped to lead me to the work of Adam Copeland.

Adam Copeland’s book, *Beyond the Offering Plate*, is critical to my research design and project. He created an essay book on stewardship as a holistic practice and defines stewardship as, “a lived theology founded on the claim that all resources begin and belong to God.” He argues that “Practicing stewardship reshapes how Christians manage all resources including our money, materials, and relationships. Stewardship is a lived concept, most often resulting in sharing that surprises, compassion that complicates, and love that inspires.”⁴³ His work was used as the basis of the sermon series. I used his structure, authors, and practices of stewardship to broaden our understanding of this work. His holistic viewpoint of stewardship was easy to see through the theological lenses of my project.

Summary

In this chapter I have provided biblical definitions of stewardship as mission, stewardship as future visioning, and stewardship as an embodied practice, and engaged

⁴¹ Drier, Mary Sue. “*That’s Just Rude!*” . Pg. 101

⁴² Drier, Mary Sue. “*That’s Just Rude!*” . Pg. 105

⁴³ Copeland, Adam. *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*. Pg. xv

those definitions in conversation with theological partners. These conversations are not over, but will continue through the sermon series, as well as the coffee hours. As stated in chapter one, it is difficult to know when this conversation with God began. I know this project started years before I read these books, understood these passages, or developed my research methodology. It is a struggle to put this conversation with God into words, but I also couldn't capture it in a painting or a dance. Like the pages of lineage in the bible, each passage and each author "begat" something else.

Below is a table showing the topics, scripture, and hymn choices for the sermon series. The topics and scriptures come from the essays in the book *Beyond the Offering Plate*. The hymns all come from the Glory to God and Sing the Faith hymnals from the PCUSA.

Table 1

Time: Clocks, Calendars, and Cathedrals	Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 90	2150 Lord, Be Glorified; 708 We Give Thee But Thine Own; 715 The Earth Belongs to God Alone
Life at Its End and the Body	Psalm 139 and Romans 14: 1-8	2049 God is Here Today; 691 Lord, When I Came into This Life; 697 Take My Life
Money, Finances, and Technology	Deut. 15:7-11 and Romans 8:1-17	2025 As the Deer; 695 Change My Heart, O God; 690 God's Glory Fills the Heavens
Privilege: Toward the Stewardship of Incarnation	Acts 6:1-7 and Rev. 13	2036 Give Thanks; 702 Christ Be Beside Me; 693 Though I May Speak
Spirit: Stewarding Spiritual Gifts	Isaiah 11:2-3 and Romans 5:1-15	2026 Halle, Halle, Hallelujah; 699 Fill My Cup; 692 Spirit, Open My Heart
Community and Work: Called to Service	Lev. 19:13, Proverbs 22:22, and 1Peter 4:1-11	2012 What a Might God We Serve; 503 Lord, We Have Come at Your Own Invitation; 700 I'm Gonna Live so God Can Use Me

Mind: The Ascension of our Life Together	Deut. 6:5 and Philippians 2:5-11	2068 I Love You, Lord; 698 Take, O Take Me as I Am; 711 Lord of All Good
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Throughout the sermon series I will interweave the theological lens of mission, future visioning, and embodiment. I will find ways to bring each lens into the topics throughout the series, in conversation with these aspects of stewardship. My hope is that people will begin to see how these lenses build on one another to create a fuller definition of the meaning of stewardship. I did not preach on the scripture passages I used to define my theological lenses, but I will use the lenses throughout the series. I have decided to refer directly to the passages behind my lenses during the coffee hours instead. The coffee hours, following the worship, will engage these theological lenses from a different angle and in more hands-on ways. I hope this will allow for a more creative engagement with these biblical passages than would occur in a worship service.

Additionally, each church member will be given a journal to use throughout the sermon series. The journal will have the essay title and author from the book, a quote of theirs, and an action step. The action step is an invitation to integrate the knowledge from their heads into their bodies. I will not be collecting these journals, which I hope allows for people to be real, transparent, and vulnerable with God. I pray this tool will help to deepen our understanding of God.

My hope is that people will continue to engage with Sunday's worship service throughout their week. They will think more about their mission practices, including the ones they never thought of as missional prior to this sermon series. Do they see their habits and practices throughout the week as ways of serving God? Are they looking at the community differently? Do they see the people they are encountering in the neighborhood as children of God, who like them, have inherited and innate gifts from

God? Do they see how God may be collectively using their gifts to build a future? How are we telling each other this news when we gather again on Sunday? Will it change our framework at all?

Coffee hours will integrate the topics and will require the congregation's full participation. They will have to work in small groups, think creatively, and work silently. While there are seven sermon topics, I made the decision to present four coffee hours. The first involves thinking more about our institutional time frame by using an activity called River of Life. The second coffee will look at stewardship as asset gathering. How do our gifts work together collectively? How do our gifts work with the gifts to the community and some of our community partners? This will help us engage the stewardship of mission and futuring. The third coffee hour will focus on the stewardship of embodiment, as we think about our gifts and our inner Care Bear. How do we shine the light of God using the gifts God has given us to serve the community? The final coffee hour is a recap to bring everything together. Everyone will be asked to fill out a survey so that they can fully express how God has changed them or if God has changed them over the seven-week sermon series.

This was intentional in design, because I think there needs to be space to process both as individuals and as a community. My design was chosen to move us forward and to think about what comes next. What does the next year, three years, five years, and ten years look like for our congregation? Doing more coffee hours would provide less time for the congregation to process their thoughts and feelings and to discern. I am a person who has struggles to balance between too much and too little, and I wanted to honor the

work I was asking the congregation to do, by giving them space to do it, without being rushed.

In chapter three, I will discuss the details of the sermon series and coffee hours conducted at The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, New York. I will share places of learning, of vulnerability, of failure, and of success. I am both excited and frightened about what comes next.

Chapter 3

Part I: Project Overview

In this project, I will argue that we tell the story of who we are as God's people in every action or inaction as embodied persons, created in the image of God. Specifically, I will focus on this question: how can a congregation embody stewardship as a foundation of mission to participate in the local community in service of God? This project is about empowering the congregation to understand that they have everything they need to do the work of God--understanding this as the theology of enough, knowing we have enough to take care of ourselves and our neighbors.

To put this work into practice I must do research. I chose to do qualitative research, because this project is relational and it is very difficult to place a numerical value on relationship. One question in my final evaluation is quantitative. The research requires the help of the congregation. I will ask all congregants 18 and older to participate in this research. I have 45 church members, and I expect about 20 people to fill out the informed consents and participate in the coffee hours. I will gather the data during the coffee hours by listening and I will keep the data in a password-protected folder on my laptop. The participants will each be assigned a number so their identities will be kept anonymous.

We will intentionally speak about the stewardship process through a study of scriptural stories and the stories of other churches. If we have a deeper understanding of stewardship as mission, stewardship as future visioning, and stewardship as embodiment, we might have a different understanding of what God is calling us to do in our present context. I want to do it this way because I desire lots of participation, conversation, and

communal discernment. I will do a seven-week sermon series based on the stewardship practices highlighted in *Beyond the Offering Plate*.

I will talk about the traditional understanding of stewardship and invite the congregants to make their pledges, stick them in a sealed envelope, and place them in the offering plate.⁴⁴ We will place them on the offering table throughout the seven weeks. The stewardship letter offers an explanation of stewardship, our hopes for the next year, and highlights of the previous year, which they will keep. The pledge sheet, as always, lists a financial contribution as well as a gifts contribution. They will be asked if they desire to serve on a committee, lead a class or program, or participate in one of our current mission activities. At the end of the sermon series, congregants will retrieve their sealed envelopes, open them, and see if anything has changed based on their deeper understanding of stewardship. These will be collected on November 24, 2024, and given to the Stewardship and Finance Committee. They will summarize the results for me so that church members will feel no pressure to give of their money or time than they desire or feel called by God to give. I do not anticipate any harm being done in this research project. There could be some challenges in my role as researcher and pastor. While I am primarily talking about stewardship, participants are going to think about their relationship with God. This is personal and I will have to carefully discern what role I am in. There will be tension between wanting to do research and pastoral and ethical obligations.

The information I collect for the project will not have people's names attached to any of their answer sheets. I will only know their identity if they have shared with the

⁴⁴ Appendix A

larger group. Additionally, our stewardship pledge forms have always asked for volunteer time, financial contributions, and using their talents. The pledge forms will be collected by the Treasurer and Stewardship Committee. I am only told the number of overall contributions that have gone down, remained the same, or increased. I am given the volunteer information in a separate document and do not see who pledges with participants' names, indicating their financial contributions. Forms are collected this way to ensure participants do not feel pressured to give more than they are able or have discerned.

Additionally, as described above, congregants will be given a journal containing the sermon series topics, a quote from each author, a question from each author, and an action item to implement that week.⁴⁵ Unlike the pledge letter, participants will not hand in their journals. The journal is designed to help them have a way to engage the sermon theme and an action item for the week based on the sermon topic.

Part II: Project Implementation

I began the sermon series with the “Stewardship of Time: Clocks, Calendars, and Cathedrals,” using the scripture passages from Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 90. World Communion Sunday had taken place prior to the start of this series. The members of the Worship Committee and I had discussed using as decoration the images of Jesus from around the world that hang in my church office.⁴⁶ We looked at the images of Jesus and placed him in different time zones around the world, including our communion table at 10am Eastern Standard Time. Next to the image of Jesus is the place and time along with a bread and juice that is common to this region. For communion the various breads and

⁴⁵ Appendix B

⁴⁶ Appendix G

juices were served and following worship people were invited to come to the communion table to sample other breads and juices. It was joyful and energizing. While the rice bread from China was not everyone's favorite, the other breads and juices were well received and enjoyed. We decided since the sermon series would begin with stewardship of time, the Worship Committee left the time zones and images of Jesus in front of the communion table for reference and a deeper conversation on Stewardship. A highlight of the sermon for me was connecting the stewardship of time to stewardship as futuring. The Psalmist is pointing out that God's time is infinite, but our lives are not--they are finite. Maryann McKibben Dana, who writes the essay on time in Adam Copeland's book, *Beyond the Offering Plate*, says. "The tricky aspect of stewardship of time, as opposed to other aspects of our lives, is this: we never really know how much time we have."⁴⁷ In other words, "God is eternal; we are beautifully and painfully not."⁴⁸ The Psalmist says, "We can expect seventy years, or maybe eighty, if we are healthy, but even our best years bring trouble and sorrow. Suddenly our time is up, and we disappear." The members appreciated the invitation to look at our calendars and do a time audit to see how our calendars show us are spending their time versus what we say we prioritize.

The second sermon was on the "Stewardship of Life at Its End: Signs of the Cross and Body: On Flesh," using the passages from Psalm 139 and Romans 14: 1-8. The congregation and I tried something very new for this Sunday and it went very well. I serve as a member on the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission for the PCUSA. We meet in Louisville, Kentucky three or four times a year for hearings,

⁴⁷ Copeland, Adam J. (Editor). *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. Pg. 4

⁴⁸ Copeland, Adam J. (Editor). *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*. pg 4

gathering on Thursday until Sunday afternoon. This means I am away from the pulpit those Sundays to do work for the larger church. Usually, a Ruling Elder fills the pulpit, but I did not want to interrupt the sermon series. Working with the Worship Committee again, I decided to pre-record the sermon on the Stewardship of Life and Body. We set up the 100-foot screen in the choir loft, which is the central point in the front of the sanctuary and the projector. A Ruling Elder led the other parts of the service and played the pre-recorded sermon during this point of the service. The sound and video quality were good and the people in the service and streaming from home were able to fully participate. I did still receive feedback from church members on the sermon and one even shared the sermon with her niece who had been struggling with this topic in her own life.

The third sermon was on the “Stewardship of Money and Finances: Practicing Generosity and Technology: Digital Gifts,” and the scripture passages used were Deut. 15:7-11 and Romans 8:1-17. This was personally a harder sermon to structure because money is the primary way people discuss stewardship in the church, so I found it tricky to reframe. I decided to frame money and technology as tools we use or as tools we serve. King’s essay in *Beyond the Offering Plate* reminds us that, “Our stewardship of finances is a spiritual issue. Jesus knew the power that money can have in and over our lives.”⁴⁹ And Copeland reminds us, “Like all in God’s world, we can use the gift of technology for God’s glory, for justice, for care of one another, and for nourishing of all creation. God, after all, is all about making things.”⁵⁰ We are asking ourselves: are we using the gifts of money and technology in service to God, as stewards of God’s creation? Or are we serving money and technology as idols we worship? Members were asked to assess how

⁴⁹ Copeland. *Beyond the Offering Plate*. Pg 34

⁵⁰ Copeland. *Beyond the Offering Plate*.pg. 51

they used these tools throughout their week and to pay attention to this dynamic. I don't know how it was for others, but I was very aware that week about how much television I watch in the evening after my brain begins to decompress from the day.

The sermon on "Privilege: Toward the Stewardship of Incarnation," using the passages of the books of Acts 6:1-7 and Revelation 13 fell on the Sunday prior to the United States presidential elections. The topic of privilege and its meaning was very much being debated in the news and was present in the worship service, although we never discussed the elections directly. Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer Oget's essay on this lens of stewardship states,

"If we understand stewardship as carefully tending to the 'manifold grace of God' (1 Peter), we cannot then propose a stewardship of privilege. We must, instead, consider a stewardship of incarnation. This kind of stewardship must carefully tend our incarnations: bodies, families, languages, and cultures."⁵¹

This sermon topic allowed me to expand on both the stewardship of futuring and the stewardship of embodiment because Rev. Dr Oget talks about this as Incarnation, which forces us to be aware of the bodies we live in and how we use them to address systemic issues, as well as the privilege some are given and the impact of these systems on the future that God intends for us as a people.

The fifth week focused on the Spirit: "Stewarding Spiritual Gifts," based on the scripture passages of Isaiah 11:2-3 and Romans 5:1-15. My primary focus was on connecting our spiritual gifts to the community, and in particular to the worship service. The Session had recently taken part in a Mission Audit. They learned that they saw their primary form of mission as the worship service and that their second form of mission was

⁵¹ Copeland, ed., *Beyond the Offering Plate*, pg. 65

in the service to the community. This discovery allowed me to easily connect our learnings to David Gambrell's essay. Gambrell states, "Worship itself is a gracious gift of God--the gift of being able to gather in God's presence, to hear again the gospel of Jesus Christ, to share in the communion of the Holy Spirit, and to be sent out to love and serve the Lord in daily life."⁵² We gather to be sent. One of the powerful reminders in worship is that we are not alone.

Worship reminds us we are enough. Collectively we have enough to do the work of God. Gambrell says it this way, "Worship is also the primary and central occasion in which we respond and lay claim to God's grace--singing thanksgiving and praise, confessing our sin and receiving Christ's mercy, crying out in supplication and lament, interceding for the church and the world, calling on the transforming power of the Spirit."⁵³ This is the order of worship and bulletin layout. The Spirit of God transforms us. God's grace makes us new, not once in our baptism, but every day. This is the daily bread God has given to us; God gives us manna every day, in the form of grace. It provides us with the fuel we need to do the work of God, to have the courage to use the gifts God has given us to serve God faithfully. This sermon allowed me to frame stewardship as communal work and discernment and to talk about how God provides us with enough to serve.

The sermon of the "Stewardship of Community: Investing Social Capital as an Act of Faith and Work: Called to Service" using Lev. 19:13, Proverbs 22: 22, and 1Peter 4:1-11, was the hardest sermon for me to write. I still have no idea why this was so difficult to write and to preach. A part of me feels like it was because I was aware of my

⁵² Copeland, ed. *Beyond the Offering Plate*, pg. 89

⁵³ Copeland, ed. *Beyond the Offering Plate*, pg. 89

personal bias against corporations and my participation in their harmful practices. In the sermon, the closest I was to articulating this bias was when I said, “So that no matter what meaning of work we are doing--the work that is necessary for materials things, the work that enhances our life, or the work that is service--in all of it we are developing the image of God.”⁵⁴ I think as we develop the image of God in ourselves, or work on shining the light of our soul, we have an easier time seeing that image of God in others. The stewardship of embodiment is shining the light of one’s soul.

I am curious if we don’t focus on seeing the image of God in ourselves, and fail to see it in others, are those moments we allow poor choices to step in and take the lead? Poor choices are what is being lifted in the texts from Leviticus and Proverbs, when they say, “Do not steal anything or cheat anyone” and “Don’t take advantage of the poor.” We often don’t ask one another these questions in relationship to our work. We don’t ask people if, in their work as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, they steal or cheat anyone. We don’t ask if they take advantage of the poor. We also don’t often ask these questions of the workplaces that provide the necessary materials that we need to live that we earn through our work. I love coffee, but I don’t know that I ask about the farming practices used to harvest the beans. Are these fair-trade? Maybe what I purchase from a market, but not when I drink coffee from McDonalds. Did I ask where the copper was dug from the ground to make my phone and computer? No, I did not. In fact, I know this answer AND I purchased it anyway. I absolutely ignored the message of Leviticus and Proverbs and did what I wanted. This is to ignore the stewardship of futuring, to not think about how these decisions are building a future and asking if this is the future we want. I

⁵⁴ Copeland, ed. *Beyond the Offering Plate*, pg. 89.

don't know that I did my best work in this sermon and I didn't receive much feedback after the sermon, which affirms my feeling that I failed to fully make this connection for the congregation.

The final sermon was on the "Stewardship of the Mind: The Ascension of our Life Together" using the passages from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Philippians 2:5-1. In this sermon I stepped on a landmine of my own creation when I made a personal confession. As I was reviewing and practicing the sermon on Sunday morning, I felt God pushing me to add this statement to my sermon. It was not a part of my original sermon written for that day. "Ok, so to get REALLY uncomfortable, I have a confession. Slowly in my time here, I have moved things around from time to time. I have mostly always left the worship the same--except I force us all to try out new hymns. We have decorated the Sanctuary during a few other seasons, but roughly the same. However, slowly I moved the flags that always sat up by the organ. You are looking now and they are gone. Yes, I moved them further back a little at a time for years. This passage and others like it are why. About two months ago I removed them completely. I heard nothing, until a few days ago. While they are not here next to the organ, they are standing tall at the entrance on the southside. My reasoning is I think it gets into what is being talked about in this passage: if Christ is King, than Caesar is not. Patriotism: feeling of attachment and commitment to a country, nation, or political community (Britannica). Nationalism: ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests (Britannica). Having the flags in the Sanctuary feels like Nationalism, not patriotism. Nationalism hits a little too close to idolatry for my theological comfort. I do recognize that this is a bigger conversation. But

on the Lord's Day, I want to make sure we are all remembering that Christ is King, and on Christ the King Sunday it feels even more essential that we think about this. Thinking critically is stewardship of the mind."

The result is that one of my members walked out after the sermon. They are more conservative politically and grew up in a variety of more conservative religious traditions. I noted they had left and reached out to them via text message several hours later. I wrote, "I noticed you left after the sermon this morning, is everything ok?" They replied that they were still processing the sermon and weren't sure about how they felt. I said, "Thank you for letting me know. I will be in my office on Monday all day, if you want to talk about it and process it together." On Monday morning they met me in my office. This was a moment in the research when I was clearly a pastor and not a researcher. They weren't speaking to an ethnographer, but to their pastor who had done something that upset them. We spoke for an hour about these feelings, my decision and confession, and what happens next. It was a healthy conversation. The following day they met with me again because they had a dream at 1:30 a.m. that morning. They said they woke up with these words on their heart and wrote them down. They heard God telling them that they cannot be an obstacle in other people's relationship with God. When they place an obstacle in the way God is connecting differently with someone else, it weakens God's connection to them. They then apologized for placing their feelings on this topic in the way of what God was calling me to do. Tears formed in my eyes, but did not fall. They sat in their normal pew on the following Sunday. I was so grateful for the depth of our relationship that allowed us to have this conversation. It very much felt like the stewardship of the mind in action.

To supplement and expand on the sermon series, I taught Coffee Hours, which are education hours, with snacks, tea, and coffee. It is the space the church has cultivated for faith development outside the worship service for all members and visitors. I used this time throughout the seven-weeks to conduct deeper learning opportunities. I lead four in-depth learning activities. They each ran approximately one hour long and required everyone who attended to participate. I developed a variety of ways for people to be involved in the hopes that all personalities feel like they can express themselves. Some of the topics required small group work, others were individual assessments or surveys, and some required crayons and creativity. There were seven sermons, but only four coffee hours. This was done to honor church committee meetings and church traditions, like Pumpkin Sunday.

The first Coffee Hour was the River of Life exercise.⁵⁵ This exercise was introduced to the cohort by Dr. Capps. It will be a helpful exercise for looking to the past, present, and future. We established a church timeline, context, barriers, and hopes, from another angle. We worked in small groups and collectively as we share the story we are telling about the church, combining the story into a single narrative. This enabled us to talk about stewardship as futuring. This congregation maintains a very detailed church history timeline, so I hoped this exercise expands on that project, primarily done when the church celebrated its 200th Year in Ministry. This activity names where we began, where we went, where we are now, and where we are going.

The second focused on Asset Gathering.⁵⁶ This is done in three ways: “Focus on the gifts of its members, nurture associational life, and offer hospitality, the welcoming of

⁵⁵ Appendix C

⁵⁶ Appendix D

strangers.”⁵⁷ I instructed the congregation on what this entails in terms of the giving of gifts, the presences of associations, and the compassion of hospitality. At the end of the coffee hour, I asked: What are your gifts of the head? What are the gifts of your hands? What are the gifts of your heart? What clubs, groups, and associations do you and your family belong to or participate in? People will be given a chance to do this work alone, knowing that all their work will be collected by me. Then participants who wished to share their thoughts publicly will be invited to do so. My hope was that this created space for silence and creativity, a space where they can write their ideas down and know they will not be judged. I hope that they were able to trust what we have built in our fifteen years of ministry together enabled them to be vulnerable and honest. Many of the members have been in ministry together for decades. While they may bring some of their community connections to the church to lead a coffee hour, we have never connected their work and our work in doing something together. Often it is a presentation, a small donation to that organizations project, and a round of applause.

The third focus was an opportunity to do a Spiritual Gifts Assessment to learn about our inner “Care Bear.”⁵⁸ It was important for us to begin to identify our individual gifts and the ways they work collectively. This intervention, I hoped, strengthened our understanding of stewardship as embodiment. I argued that the Care Bear is a perfect symbol of stewardship as an embodied practice. In a continued desire to blur the lines of the secular and the sacred, I embraced a retro image from my childhood that is experiencing a comeback. The Care Bear is the embodiment of intelligence, imagination,

⁵⁷ McKnight, John and Peter Block. *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010. pg. 67

⁵⁸ Appendix E

energy, and love, which demonstrate love in action and the possibilities present when one's individual gifts work with the collective, as they work together to heal a community to bring about the kin-dom of God. They were able to design on paper their own Care Bear and shared their paper with others. This allowed us to talk about our spiritual gifts. Each Care Bear is a different color, and each has a symbol on their belly, representing their primary characteristic. The Care Bears worked together to solve problems with the Care Bear stare. This glittery beam filled with hearts and stars can blast an enemy to subdue their heartless attempts to harm others. However, the stare does not hurt any enemies and to the contrary can even be used to heal.⁵⁹ The Care Bear stare, comedian Dave Chappelle reminds us, is just pure love beaming from the belly. It is amazing!! Pure love beaming from your belly. I think the church could also beam pure lights of love that heal and serve God's creation.

The fourth and final coffee hour was a Stewardship Recap.⁶⁰ This coffee hour focused on my three biblical lenses for the project. Participants were asked to answer five questions, and the answers were collected. We had a conversation where people were invited to share anything they wanted the group to know about their answers. This way I was able to gather information and allow space for both the introverts and the extroverts. Some are able to openly share, and others are only to share in the written questionnaire. Either way I was able to collect the data and learn something more about this community.

1. My definition of stewardship has (please circle one number):
 - 5-changed dramatically over the last seven weeks
 - 4-changed quite a bit

⁵⁹ https://carebears.fandom.com/wiki/Care_Bear_Stare Accessed Oct 18, 2024

⁶⁰ Appendix F

3-changed somewhat

2-changed a little

1-didn't change.

2. What is your current definition of stewardship?
3. How has your relationship with God deepened?
4. What gifts from God have you identified and how is God calling you to use your gifts in the community?
5. What kind of legacy do you want to leave?

These are the questions I most wanted to ask the congregants. Some congregants do this work as individuals, but rarely do we do this work collectively. The church has dedication plaques showing people's values and gifts. Our endowments are financial "plaques" of one's legacy. Some of these gifts are unrestricted and others can only be used for certain practices of the church. I want to know if focusing in on a practice such as stewardship, results in changes to the way we see and use these gifts.

Part III: Project Results and Interpretation

The sermon series went well, and we were able to have many rich conversations as a result. Not a single person spoke about the journal supplement, so I imagine either it wasn't used, or people didn't find it meaningful. As I made the choice not to collect the journals, I also have made the choice not to ask follow-up questions. The journal was never mentioned by a congregant throughout the sermon series or coffee hours.

When I was writing the project proposal, I gathered four of my colleagues in ministry to ask for their input. We gathered at my home for coffee, tea, and cardamon cake. They each received a draft of my proposal, and we had a conversation. They shared their thoughts on the project, and I asked them if they understood the questions and the

research methodologies. They helped to process the theological themes, which I have struggled with throughout this project. My colleagues also thought it would be helpful if I shared this material with them to use in their contexts. They expressed that these are conversations they desire to have in their churches as well, but they find it difficult to lead the discussions. They suggested that I share the sermons and the journal. They could then use this material like a Bible study in their own congregations and begin to have these discussions in a non-threatening and biblically grounded way. A result of this conversation and suggestion, I made the decision to record all the sermons and load them as a YouTube playlist called Stewardship.⁶¹ I recorded them on the laptop while sitting at my office desk. I felt this would help to create a more conversational environment for viewers, verses a pulpit, as it is a place of power and authority. I also connected the playlist to a google drive folder.⁶² This folder contains a printable form of the journal, as well as the prayers and readings used for the worship service for that stewardship topic. Many of the churches in the Presbytery of Geneva do not have a minister or pulpit supply. In creating this playlist and google drive folder, I hope to provide a resource for Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders to use in the way that will best serve their context and congregation. I did not provide the PowerPoint presentations and coffee hour materials. I would be happy to lead these for other congregations but felt they would not be helpful on their own.

The first coffee hour was the River of Life. I wanted us to think differently about our church's story. In the past we had done a church genogram, a church timeline, and a written history. The result was a lot of laughter and people critiquing their artwork. Many

⁶¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjzvqkwpi4s&list=PLoIPQFQsKywd-T3LWo-amyB-9V7akrn1P>

⁶² <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1fV3QyyxiiSD0FUWfTHJVsPCmR0tq45F4>

of the people made the decision to enter the river at the point they joined the congregation. Only one table tried to capture the church history and important moments prior to their joining the congregation. I found this fascinating and in chapter four I will attempt to join their rivers into one River of Life.

However, to honor their stories I will share with you the results of the activity, as it occurred. There were four tables of people. Tables one, two, and three had four to five people each, but table four worked alone. They were the host for the coffee hour that day and found it easier to draw their own river rather than working with a group because they were sometimes sitting down and other times refilling the coffee creamer.

Table One was comprised of two groups of people. One group grew up in this congregation as youth, left the community, and have now returned in their retirement. The other group grew up in the neighboring and rival community and did not join until they were adults. This table was focused on the context of the larger community of Seneca Falls of their youth. They spoke about the hospitals and schools being tributaries, which are alliances that fortify our work. The mountains in their drawing were people's individual journeys of faith; mountains are outside forces that may threaten the work. They described a variety of people and personalities at the church, combined with the history of the country at this time, mainly the 1960's. They named the Presbytery was a big influence of the river with lexicons and rules, this shapes and forms the river.

They spoke at length about Mynderse Academy, which in 1960's was a great place for math and science. Mynderse Academy is our public high school. It is named for Col. Mynderse who was a founder of Seneca Falls and a member of our congregation. Table One highlighted Cayuga Street, which is the road the church sits on and is a NY

State Highway, as being filled with doctors (Bove, Towers, Skinner, Foote, Koch). The town was 16,000 people; it is around 6,000 now. These were the waterfalls and dams, the successes and the obstacles of the community which greatly influenced the church. They were the only group to talk about Eisenhower College, which became an offshoot of the church as founding members of the college. They shared that the community numbers changed because Gould and Sylvania, two major employers with factories, downsized or moved from the community. They took many people with them. Our church membership records went from 500 to 150 nearly overnight with the transfer of membership to churches in Pennsylvania where Sylvania had moved their work. Gould's remains in Seneca Falls but is no longer the number one employer, and a year ago they closed their foundry.

Table Two was comprised of all newer members who had grown up in other churches. This table did not work well collectively, but rather more like individuals. Table Two all told the story of how they joined the church. One group shared that it was their family members brought them to the church. Over their lifetime they had attended many weddings and funerals at the church. Their River of Life contained many obstacles and dams, described as deaths of loved ones and the sale of the family farm. One person said, "Many obstacles, put us all here in this wonderful church."

Table Three was made of church members who began worshipping in this congregation after their church closed some years ago. Their River of Life began with the history of this church. Romulus Presbyterian Church was the first church in Seneca County beginning in the late 1700's. The bricks of the church were made by two families who were members of the congregation. One of their former ministers, Rev. Barton, is

buried in Fort Greene Cemetery in Romulus, at the place where the church pulpit used to be before the church moved to another location. Table Three joined the Romulus church in 1962 and remained members until its closure in 2018. For a brief while the Romulus Church was yoked with the West Fayette for a moment due to diminishing congregations. Both Romulus and West Fayette have since closed, and members of these churches have joined the congregation of Seneca Falls. The Commissioned Ruling Elder, who was a pastor of the Romulus Church, and their spouse were members here, so when Romulus closed on April 1st, they started coming here at CRE's invitation. One of their identified swamps, activities that undermine the organization, was their relationship with the Presbytery of Geneva. The church closed due to the Presbytery and money. The congregation had a \$150,000 endowment that became a \$20,000 endowment in the 2008 stock market crash. They remain upset that the Presbytery did not help them assess their endowment or connect them to the Presbyterian Foundation which does this work for the larger church. They only learned of the Foundation and its work because of their coffee hour presentation a year ago in our church. There is clearly still some processing of the harms that occurred with the church closure that needs to happen for Table Three.

Table Four was the person who worked alone because they were serving as the coffee hour host. They spoke about joining on Christmas Eve 1990 with their daughter, who was two at the time. Peter Crego was the minister and is now the Pastor Emeritus. They spoke of the trees of the church. The trees foster sustainability and provide structural support for sustainability. They named the trees as the twenty-one choir members, and the vibrant Sunday School that took place in the Social Hall. The Social Hall is the place we have our Coffee Hours and other church receptions, which at one

time were all classrooms for the church youth. They named the waterfalls, activities that create a stronger organization, as the middle school kids. These “kids” are now all in their mid-40’s and while they are not active in the church of Seneca Falls, they are active members at the churches in the communities where they live. Table Four said, “This shows you how strong and important this church was for them.” Table Four spoke about joining the Session in 2008 and serving on and off for the last fifteen years as a sea, a dream of for your organization. They spoke about the loss of church members over the last five years due to death and moving, as dams, permanent structures such as activities, challenges, or persistent problems. Finally, they shared the sun, source of light and health for the organization that nurture the trees and vegetation around the river, saying they were “glad to have a family I can worship with and be together with every Sunday.”

Table Five did not draw much of a river; instead, they did a timeline. They started in 1807 when the church began and highlighted places in the church history that were reasons they are members at this congregation, like the women’s rights events and other social justice work of the church. They see becoming a Matthew 25 congregation as a sea. This is where a hope for the organization in the future, a dream of for your organization. They did more talking and less drawing as a group. One member said, “Leah, you know I hate drawing things, I am a terrible drawer.” I encouraged them to do their best. Based on this comment I decided to share the example of my River of Life that I did as part of Dr. Tanner’s course. I used it to highlight that drawing well isn’t a prerequisite for this activity and so they could see how one might use trees, stones, waterfalls, and dams to create a story.

The topic on Asset Gathering was a great conversation. People were participating and liked the idea of thinking about others as neighbors versus consumers. So often we speak of worship as a product that we need to sell to increase membership. The coffee hour presentation gave them the background of the book by McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. McKnight and Block make an argument about a move from consumer to citizen in an abundant community.

“This book gives voice to the ideal of an abundant--or some call a beloved--community. It reminds us of our power to create a full and complete life. It assures us that when we join with our neighbors, we are the architects of the future that we want to live within. Such a future is made possible through the untapped abundance of every community, especially our own.”⁶³

The authors encourage the readers to engage in a new way forward, one that lives out of its abundance and not its scarcity. The next step I added was the Theology of Enough, having their daily bread. For the authors moving forward is done in three ways. They say, “Focus on the gifts of its members, nurture associational life, and offer hospitality, the welcoming of strangers.”⁶⁴ We will need to see how God is blessing us to use the gifts to bless others. The coffee hour was an attempt to move forward.

I spoke about having all the skills and gifts we need to do the work God is calling us to do. This will require us to not only be able to identify our gifts, but the gifts of others, and the places our gifts connect with the gifts of the community. They all were invited to fill out a questionnaire asking them to think about four things: the gifts of their heads, hands, hearts, and the clubs and organizations they are a part of the community.

⁶³ McKnight, John and Peter Block. *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. pg. xiv

⁶⁴ McKnight, John and Peter Block. *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. pg. 67

They expressed their desire to have a list of ideas about gifts to choose from, in lieu of thinking on their own. I told them that there are too many gifts to be contained in a single list. I found in this conversation that many of the people struggled to think of their gifts but had no problem identifying the gifts of others. There were also many people who had never thought of being hospitable as a gift because it is just who they are as person. I realized in their response that we are going to need to return to this topic if we really want to move forward.

The members listed the gifts of the head, knowledge of a particular area: crosswords; pet loss grief group; enjoy working with numbers; organization, a degree of tolerance; curiosity; searching out truths; curiosity; being able to figure things out; caring; ability to talk with people in need and listen to their thoughts; science; philosophy; communication; leadership; being the best person I can be; problem solver; ideas; organize; families; being close and involved; compassion; empathy.

The gifts of hands or talents and abilities that were identified were: pet care; drawing; painting; becoming more difficult to use my hands; pet grooming; breadmaking; use of small hand tools; harp; sewing; knitting; crocheting; using my hands to do the things I have figured out; helping others if I can; helping people in need in whatever way I can; music; gardening; cooking; sports; cooking; baking; creative craftsman; cooker; baker; fixer of broken things; cook; clean; baking; cooking; gardening; traders of all things that use my hands.

Gift of heart, or places of passion, were: looking at people the way Jesus did; loving people; mail greeting cards to people; thoughtful; praying for others; giving to organizations meaningful to me; relation to others; feeding people; listening to people

when they have concerns and problems; caring for sick people and animals; understanding when people are stressed; loving others; empathy; welcoming; poetry; empathy; charity; passion for knowledge; treat people with dignity; love one another; forgiver; listener; sympathy; listening, cash; music; nature; family; music; friendships.

Finally they listed the places of their connections or clubs and groups they participate, where were: church; none outside of church; AKC; Harp Academy Group; fire dept; church; leader of group; volunteer fire dept (50 plus years); original member of South Seneca Ambulance Corps and EMT; Elks; friends of the library; historical society; house of concern; church; heritage preservation; waste management; democratic committee; church; wilderness society; natural disaster response; anti-war; health; fire dept; friendship house; church; knitting group; bridge; music; town business/government; church; music; theatre; chiropractic college athletic center.

The coffee hour I was most excited about seemed to make everyone the most nervous. This was another attempt to help members of the congregation identify their core gift and value. I relied on James K. Smith's book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* for this coffee hour presentation. James Smith allows for a bridge between the concepts of stewardship and discipleship. He says, "discipleship needs to be centered in and fueled by our immersion in the body of Christ."⁶⁵ This coffee hour also expanded on my theological lens of stewardship as embodiment. Smith writes that,

"If you are passionate about seeking justice, renewing culture, and taking up your vocation to unfurl all creations potential, you need to invest in the formation of your imagination. You need to curate your heart. You need to worship well. Because you are what you love. And you worship what you

⁶⁵ Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love*. pg. xi

love.”⁶⁶

Worship is the primary way this congregation has identified as their stewardship of mission. This coffee hour helped me to connect mission and embodiment in the work of Smith and with the help of the Care Bears. Smith helps to ground these ideas when he says,

“First, it (worship) recognizes that human beings are made by and for the creator who is known in Jesus Christ. Second, the implicit picture of being human is dynamic. To be human is to be for something, directed towards something, oriented towards something period to be human is to move is to be on the move, pursuing something, after something.”⁶⁷

Smith helped me to connect this identification of worship and mission when he writes, “Recognizing worship as the heart of discipleship doesn't mean sequestering discipleship to Sunday; It means expanding worship to become a way of life.”⁶⁸

People were very engaged by the work of Smith. They even clearly saw this connection to the Care Bear. However, again I learned that many people do not know their spiritual gifts, nor do they think much of them. I used my Care Bear, which sits in my office, as an example of the activity I was asking them to do. My Care Bear is purple, because it is my favorite color, and the belly symbol is an anvil. I explained how when I was sixteen years old my camp director, where I was working that summer as a dishwasher, identified my spiritual gifts as wisdom and mercy. I told the director that I wasn't so sure I liked these gifts, particularly the gift of mercy. They asked me why and I told them because this spiritual gift of mercy causes me pain. They thought about this for some time and then replied. They said all spiritual gifts are tools. The reason that mercy

⁶⁶ Smith, James K A. *You Are What You Love*. pg. xii

⁶⁷ Smith, James K A. *You Are What You Love*. pg. 8

⁶⁸ Smith, James K A. *You Are What You Love*. pg. 113

is painful is because while other spiritual gifts may be seen as a tool in the toolbox, mercy is the anvil. The gift is mercy is what God uses for the other people to allow their gifts to take shape. The anvil the tool the blacksmith strikes against to sharpen the knife or create the hammer. So yes, it may hurt, but it is valuable. I still don't know that I adore the gift of mercy, but it did become my belly symbol.

I then gave them each a blank image of a Care Bear with no symbol on their belly. I asked them to think about their own belly symbol; their spiritual gifts, that they shine into God's world in service of God. Some people were able to begin right away with the color of their bear. Some people could even quickly identify the gift they wished to draw on their belly. However, most were afraid to share their gifts, one person even said, "NOOOOOOOO, thank you." And "I just don't think I have any." While they did make a connection to stewardship as missional, or so it appeared, they overall aren't ready to join in a Care Bear Stare, though they seem to be grasping the loss of unused gifts, particularly when we spoke about gifts that were missing, like the church members who have passed away. People begrudgingly colored their care bears. I had hoped it would help us connect a few of our gifts together, but it has shown me that I need to help more people discern their gifts as gifts from God.

The fourth and final coffee hour was a Stewardship Recap. This was the place I expanded upon my biblical lens and the places in scripture I used to help me discern this lens and its definitions. Those lenses are stewardship as mission (Matthew 10:7-8), stewardship as future visioning (Matthew 24: 32-51), and stewardship as embodiment (2 Corinthians 9:6-15). I made the decision to preach the sermon series not on these passages, but the ones used by the essayist in "Beyond the Offering Plate." I spoke

throughout the sermon series on these lenses and what I meant when I was using them. Our gifts are different, but God has put them on this earth at the same time. If our gifts are seeds, planted in our soul, service helps these seeds to grow. This service is stewardship. This service is mission. This service is planning for a future we might never see. This service is embodied, because it requires us to use our gifts to serve. The more we use our gifts (seeds) the more they grow. These seeds are not isolated from one another; they are working together in God's ecosystem, which we call earth. God works in us and through us to ensure that these gifts work together so that we all are supplied with what we need. God isn't calling us to save God's creation, but to serve God's creation. God has already saved us and in serving one another we deepen our learning and understanding of God's saving grace, and we receive the blessings, or the desire to do more to bring honor and praise to God. This coffee hour allowed me in the recap to ground them in the Bible.

I read the passages and described how I was interpreting the passage for this project. I also spent time connecting this work to work we have done together in the past and work people have spoken of wanting to do in the future. It was a good conversation with a high level of participation. People asked questions about how this project came about and why I felt the need to do a doctoral program at all. I realized in this question-and-answer period that while I have always been open with them in this process, there was still an underlying fear that this decision to work toward a doctorate would result in my decision to leave this congregation.

I gave the congregation the final survey and reminded them that this is research and not a test to be graded. I encouraged them to be honest in the way they answered. I

used as an example the first question the survey asked: My definition of stewardship has (please circle one number): 5-changed dramatically over the last seven weeks; 4-changed quite a bit; 3-changed somewhat; 2-changed a little; 1-didn't change. I told them that circling the number five isn't going to help me get a doctoral degree, but being honest in their answers will be helpful to the research. I also reminded them that these surveys were anonymous, and I wouldn't know how people answered individually. This data would be collected and analyzed collectively. They understood the assignment and proceeded to answer honestly. I will reveal the results and analysis of the data in chapter 4.

Finally, I thanked them for their support over these years. I thanked them for the time given to attend the courses. I thanked them for allowing me the opportunity to share what I was learning with them in sermons, newsletters, coffee hours, and random exercises. I even reminded the people on Session at the time of how much they hated some of the discernment exercises we did together and how I had to promise not to make them do those exercises ever again. Oddly, it was my favorite discernment activity in Dr. Oden's course, but maybe she must be the one to lead it. I thanked them for the prayers, the support of my family, and the time they spent doing this research with me over the course of seven weeks. They then proceeded to fill out the survey.

I enjoyed reading the results of this questionnaire. I was fascinated by their definitions of stewardship. A few of the answers given were nice Sunday School answers, but it was clear that they had been paying attention in the worship service and in the coffee hours. In particular, I was moved by their answers to the final question on the legacy they wish to leave. In reading their responses I was reminded of one of the reasons I wanted to do a project like this to begin with. I strongly feel that knowing the legacy we

desire to leave as a person, family, institution, or community, helps the lives we live to be deeper, fuller, and more intentional. This in turn helps us to be present to the world around us and more responsive to God's call. The thread of their answers was a desire to be remembered as a loving and kind child of God. I feel the same way and in reading their answers I still very much feel called by God to serve as a minister of this congregation.

As requested, the Treasurer and Office Manager provided me with the results of the pledge sheets. These results will be discussed in chapter 4.

Part IV: Summary

I am not sure if this project design worked in the way I had envisioned. I will expand on this thought in the fourth chapter. I do know that the work is not complete. A future potential of this work will be small group work with stakeholders--CARE, create hospitable spaces, ask self-awakening questions/reflect theologically together/enact the next most faithful steps, as mentioned above.⁶⁹ Doing this step as part of this project would have been too difficult. The CARE work will not take place during a coffee hour but is the next logical step in this process.

We will engage our identified community partners and create a network of mutuality. Several community partners were already identified in the coffee hour on Asset Gathering. The partners named will help us to know where to begin this work. It will be on-going work to create community change, but we can begin the process. I hope that having spent seven weeks studying stewardship and learning how is it foundational

⁶⁹ Lewis, Stephen, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker. *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2020.

to mission, the congregation will see that everything we do in the local community is in service of God.

I have already seen some evidence of this seed planting in the work of the congregation. One member took on an active role in the Community Church Outreach Committee. This is a group of members and the pastors of the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian Church. It has begun meeting to discover ways we might be able to address community needs collectively. These meetings have already resulted in a driver list for the local food pantry to use when they have a client in need of food and no transport to visit the pantry. People have been connecting these ideas to people outside the church. For instance, one Ruling Elder set up a meeting with a town council member to discuss our affordable housing crisis and potential ways to partner. Another Ruling Elder spoke with the town manager and received a list of properties the town owns to see how these can also be used to address housing concerns. I will expand on these conversations in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 will be a discussion the main threads or themes the data has uncovered. I will analyze the data to see if an intentional focus on stewardship with a congregation enables us to embody stewardship as a foundation of mission. I will discuss the definition of what it means to be a steward of God: what the congregation learned as well as what I learned in the process of this research. I will look at the gifts the congregation has identified to see how we can use these gifts God has given us to serve the community of Seneca Falls. Chapter 4 will also look at what worked in this research, what didn't work, and where we go next. Did we discover that God has given us enough so that we can use all we have in service to God, or has nothing changed? We shall see.

Chapter 4

Project Evaluation

Over seven weeks the congregation looked at their gifts and began to identify how God is calling them to use these gifts in service of the community of Seneca Falls. In this final chapter, I will discuss what worked in this research, what didn't work, and where we go next. Did we discover that God has given us enough so that we can serve God with our whole selves or has nothing changed?

In the first question of the final questionnaire, I discovered that an intentional focus on stewardship and its various means does change one's definition of stewardship. This question is the only quantitative question in my research methodology. The question asks the participants to circle one number on the scale of five to one. My definition of stewardship has:

- 5-changed dramatically over the last seven weeks
- 4-changed quite a bit
- 3-changed somewhat
- 2-changed a little
- 1-didn't change.

While I had hoped to have twenty participants, I ended up with sixteen surveys the average answer to question one was 2.94. The result told me that my project was just the beginning of what I needed to do.

Knowing that the sermon series and coffee hour had an impact is beneficial, I learned that an intentional study of this nature and design is helpful for providing a foundation and basic understanding of a topic. I also learned that it is the beginning of the work. The process of discernment and collaboration will take far more time and will change based on one's congregational context. This project cannot be a one-size-fits-all

church program. However, the rest of what I learned gave me a strong foundation for future work. I will explore this further with the other four questions.

The second question asked the participants for this definition of stewardship. One participant gave the classic church answer, “Time, talent, and monies as valuable in each their own way.” Other participants talked of the shift in their definition and thinking, writing, “I say my idea of stewardship has changed over the last seven weeks. It seemed to me that stewardship was talked about this time of year as mainly a time of pledging period now I have a deeper understanding that is much more involved as an example caring for people, family, and using my skills to honor God.” This definition encompasses the learnings from the sermons, as well as the coffee hour practices. Still others defined stewardship as “Seeing God by serving his people, showing his love through me, my actions and my words” and others, “Having the responsibility as a Christian to see and whatever in our walk though this life, to better the situation that is before us, through the power that the Lord gave each and every one of us.” While their meaning of stewardship was changing somewhat, the shifts were small.

There is a range and depth present in their answers. As I analyze the results, I can see God’s work in us all during this intentional focus on the meaning of stewardship. Our definitions are similar but more expansive. I know that I will have work as a pastor to continue to build on these definitions. I can see how one would write up the meaning of the word stewardship, but also what might it look like in practice, in action.

The answers to the third question, on how has your relationship with God deepened, was left blank on four surveys. This was disappointing because I struggle to analyze empty answers. I don’t know if this was an error and unintentional, or if they

were left blanks because the participants didn't have an answer, or because they didn't want to be honest about their answer, so they said nothing. Whatever the reason, it was the only survey question that was left blank more than once by participants.

What I was able to learn from the participants who answered the question is that their relationships were deepened. One participant wrote, "We've both opened doors and are communicating again." I was happy to read that the participant felt like they were talking with God again. For another participant it deepened their relationship with God and a new understanding of their father: "Better understanding of how my father was always full of joy and waking up every day saying, 'how can I keep from singing.'" Still others were hopeful that it had changed but unclear about how it changed. One participant said, "I would like to say it has, but today I'm not sure it has!" And another writing, "I don't know that it has." It is unclear to me that participants used the journal to engage with that they were learning throughout the week, as I did not collect them. However, not one person referenced the journals directly in helping to deepen their relationship with God. I would still provide the journals for participants if I were to lead this project again, but I will ensure that I was directly encouraging the people to use the journal for this purpose.

The fourth question asks: What gifts from God have you identified and how is God calling you to use your gifts in the community? Again, their answers were varied, but this is also the place they wrote the longest answers. As their pastor, I see that I will need to have deeper conversations on how all these gifts connect and where God is collectively leading us. While I know the participants better understood their gifts, I still see them struggling with how to implement using these gifts in the community. One

participant makes this connection in their own writing, “One of my gifts is liking to work with numbers, and my love of mission. So, it’s perfect for me to see the monies put to work outside the church building.” Another participant made this similar connection from God, to self, and to others writing, “Love of science--to use in the service of health, music--to use everywhere, cooking--to help my family and community, gardening, curiosity, empathy.” Another participant made it clear that using one’s gifts doesn’t mean one always leads from the front, saying, “Ability to lead--leading does not have to be ‘out front’ it can be ‘within’ that group and just as valued.”

Finally, participants were asked What kind of legacy do you want to leave? I had a desire to ask this question to look through the lens of stewardship as futuring. I see in the wording of this question, as well as their answers, that people desire to leave a positive legacy. I found the participants answers to be genuine and beautiful. One wrote, “When all is said and done, I want to be remembered that I truly loved the Lord and baked a fair loaf of bread to feed others.” Another said, “The world is better or at least my corner is”; and still another, “An example of a life of service and productive in using gifts maximally.” My question asks for the individual legacy they long to leave, but the work we continue to do together would build on a collective or institutionally legacy. I wonder if the desire to leave a positive legacy extends beyond the self. Only one participant answer makes this connection, “I want to be a part of leaving this church fiscally sound. And to use the church resources to support this community and neighbors.” I have seen a similar desire in multiple members, I will have to work harder on providing people an opportunity to share their thoughts on the best ways to use these

resources and who we may want to partner with in this work, as there are multiple ways to serve the community and our neighbors.

Main Themes

My main research question, which no one answered directly, was how can a congregation embody stewardship as a foundation of mission to participate in the local community in service of God? I argued that we tell the story of who we are as God's people in every action or inaction as embodied persons, created in the image of God. The answer I heard from my congregation was that they tell their story with hesitation. They never hesitate to help, but they do hesitate to lead. This was one of the main themes in my research. They are quick to jump in and help with money, to partner with people who are already doing good work, but they hesitate to lead the people in a new project.

This was revealed in my ministry and context throughout the research process by their written answers. For instance, their pledge sheets were not much different from the year prior. While there were small increases in the pledge's monies, four increased pledges, seven pledges remained the same and one decreased, due to their move to another state. However, in terms of volunteerism and desire to volunteer there were no changes noted on the pledge forms. It will be interesting to know if volunteering increases and meetings with community partners continues to happen. I also realize, because of their hesitancy, that my ask needs to be more specific.

In the Gifts Assessment Coffee Hour their questionnaire allowed me to clearly see the level of talent of the church members, but also their hesitation in putting their talent into mission. They have a variety of interests and knowledge. We had attempted some

years ago to put together a Mission Brochure to join the interests of the church members with the interests of community members.

The Mission brochure⁷⁰ said, “We are an Intergenerational Learning Center where all people are welcome to learn, grow, and teach. The First Presbyterian Church is blessed with a beautiful space to build community. We do this by sharing skills and building relationships. In our desire to welcome and build community, we want this space to be used throughout the week for classes and services taught by members of the congregation and community partners.”

Building the ideas in this brochure into a sustainable idea will take lots of time and clarity. The research project has clarified this for me. It will take more intentional conversations and planning before another mission brochure could be available. It is my hope in providing this kind of foundation the congregants will be less hesitant about joining in, because they will see they are doing the work together. It will take time to show the congregations that this is living out the theology of enough—that we don’t need to hire experts because we are experts.

For instance, we have musicians, who could offer a class on handbells, so a course may be an option. One of the elementary schools is always trying to find community people to lead interesting club as part of their after-school programing. There may be an opportunity for the bell choir director to teach a whole new generation about handbells and chimes. We have many church members who are avid bird watchers, so inviting people to meet a certain time and place to look at birds and discuss what they have seen, may be a gathering of the congregation and the community. It may be a way to

⁷⁰ Appendix I

build more organic relationships. I also think there is something powerful about people teaching what they are passionate about.

The research has also shown me that there will be work in learning how to connect individual gifts to collaborative and collective gifts. While there are many bakers, they do not all specialize in the same kind of baking. So, these classes may be offered at the same time but taught by a variety of people in the church. One may be excellent at making pie crusts, another bread, and still another cake decorating. This also doesn't leave out the person who doesn't bake. They can attend the classes and they can also make sure to invite others to attend. I discovered in doing this research, that I have more work to do before project of this size is ready to be unveiled. A project like this supports the community, but it also helps us to use the gift of this beautiful building in more varied ways.

I also feel part of the hesitation seems to be that people are still confusing gifts with talents and interest. Thus, instead of a single image on their Care Bear belly, as was shown throughout the PowerPoint in the images of the Care Bears, they had several smaller illustrations of the activities they are good at doing. There were a few who understood the assignment, which was to think about their one core value. They were to search for the single gift they feel God has given them to serve God's world. I noticed only one participant grasped this concept in their drawing of a large green thumb. I realized in looking at the coloring pages, that I failed to explain what I meant by gift from God. It is one's authentic self, the being, created by God, before the world was involved. God breathed life into our being, this is embodiment. If you were to draw that gift, the

most authentic version of yourself as an image on your Care Bear belly, in order to shine the light of God into the world, what would it look like?

Equally, I noticed hesitation in coloring the bears non-bear colors. They participants gravitated toward browns to color the bodies of their bears. Again, despite being showed only bears with the coloring of the rainbow. I might say there is a literal hesitation to color outside the lines. This project has helped me to see that this may not be limited to a coloring page, but something deeper. Is it possible they have forgotten we are all our ages at once and the work of children is play? Or do they not know their most authentic self? Or am I judging their color choice too harshly?

During the River of Life Coffee Hour, I saw hesitation in telling an intuitional story. I learned that while the church's historic timeline may be the main river, members see themselves as tributaries, entering and exiting a larger story. It was almost as though members saw themselves like people in a riverboat. Even in working collectively the stories were told individually. The people were far more comfortable starting the river at their point of entry and were only thinking as far in the future as winding their way down the river until their exit. They are like tiny spiritual essays that an editor, in this case me, would have to join as one image.⁷¹ This activity, combined with the final question on the questionnaire about legacy, needs to be processed further and I understand I will have to spend more time encouraging congregants to shape the river or at least paddle in the boat. This is another reason why I sense collective hesitation. The members seem to be looking to the pastor, not God, to be the river guide. It feels like following the pastor's call by the

⁷¹ Appendix J

Holy Spirit verses a collective call of the church. We will need to do more work together to reach clarity.

One other significant observation was that two separate tables listed the move of one family as significant. I was only able to see this because I joined the drawings together into one drawing. It was a great loss to our church family, but it was the right move for them as a family. Though they do not worship with us in-person on Sunday mornings, but only when they visit Seneca Falls, they have written about their desire to remain members of this congregation. Though they worship at other places where they have moved, their church home is at First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls. They continue to pledge and pay their per capita, which is a PCUSA suggestion. They also continue to send ideas, articles, and contact information for projects and people we are working on, but it is still a great loss in leadership and fellowship.

The project also confirmed for me that there is a desire to avoid in-depth conversations about issues that impact daily lives. Even I can avoid these conversations, as revealed in the seventh sermon where I was able to have a conversation about the flags that I had been avoiding for fifteen years. Perhaps it is not only the congregation that struggles with hesitation. While I can always talk about new ways to decorate the sanctuary, ideas for our monthly random acts of kindness, and even changes at the denominational level, this project revealed some conversations we have been avoiding. The River of Life activity also showed me that only one table named their hope for the future. I don't know if this is because they forgot or because they can't imagine the life of the church continuing beyond their own passing.

I believe another theme of this project is the aging of the congregation. They love the ideas of these projects and partnerships but too are tired to do the work. I have heard this referred to in church circles as “the dones”. They are people who have attended and participated in church their whole lives and now they would like to miss it occasionally and step away from the leadership roles. The problem is that there is not a younger generation ready to take to the lead. I have seen this in the choir and handbell choirs. Prior to Covid these groups met weekly to practice. The choir performed every Sunday, and the bells performed once a month. Now they meet for Christmas and Easter. The session recently made the decision to downsize from three classes of three, nine in total, to three classes of two or six in total. I see these as positive steps because they are being realistic about their future planning and trajectory, despite their hesitation. However, I think a real conversation on the future of this congregation and the age of the members will need to occur soon, particularly before plans are made and partnerships are formed.

I am not sure if this project design worked in the way I had envisioned, but it was hugely beneficial. I have been here for fifteen years and in some ways this project reminded me that we are just getting started. In doing this work I discovered places I need to grow, like slowly narrowing down ideas until everyone is on the same page. I am still learning to ask for help, as doing things by myself or pulling others along is not leadership. I also learned that while hesitancy exists, so does trust. People were honest with their answers. They were honest about activities they enjoyed and the ones they did not. They were helpful and encouraging with their feedback. I am grateful for how they showed up.

Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Rationale

So often I as a pastor preach the same messages, lessons, and dogmas I learned as a child growing up in the church. Even when I have discovered something new about the text, it is hard as pastor to preach a familiar story in a different way. It is difficult to reframe something that is so familiar, like the stories of Christmas and Easter. However, this project taught me that we are all are more than capable of learning new things, but it will take a great deal of focus and years of hard work.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, this project is on stewardship with God, which I have attempted to view through three lenses: stewardship as mission, stewardship as future vision, and stewardship as embodiment. Despite the structure of the research methodology in the coffee hours and the layout of the sermon series, what I discovered is that this conversation is messy, and the lenses are sometimes blurred. Just as the secular and the sacred are blurred, so are these lenses of stewardship. Because they are not separate, they are also interconnected and integrated into our whole lives and stories. It was an impossible task to take everything learned from these biblical stories, theological books, the history of the congregation, and the community and tie it up with a nice little bow. The story goes on.

I often workout to a YouTube channel called *Team Body Project*. One of the instructors, Daniel, reminds those of us working out at home to make sure we are leaving it all on the dance floor. The energy we are feeling in our bodies is for this workout that is front of us, so we do not need to hold back. Doing this workout will give us the energy we need throughout the day. We don't need to hoard the energy or let it out slowly. We

can leave it all on the dance floor. This to me is how to live the Theology of Enough. This is a life spent with the daily bread God provides.

One story this project has shown me that I want to continue to explore biblically and pastorally is the Theology of Enough. The theology of enough decentralizes individuals and recenters God as the giver of gifts. It is a life which recognizes that all we have is from God. Thus, we are each empowered to give as much or as a little as we want from the lives God has given. We make these decisions when we choose to live from a place of abundance, scarcity, or enoughness. God doesn't coerce or force us to use these gifts. Are we living generously and furthering the mission of God or are we living in fear of these gifts running out?

Our life story is told in the actions or inactions of our everyday life. Do we tell this story with our whole selves, leaving it all on the dance floor and consuming the daily bread? Or do we fail to act because we are terrified of getting the dance moves wrong, so we become wallflowers, eating all the snacks from the table? I feel that the day-to-day use of one's gifts create a bigger impact. We don't spend our lives waiting for someone or something to come along and fix all these obstacles we are facing. We are the heroes we are waiting for. God has given us what we need in this present moment. The theology of enough allows us to see it. It is knowing who we are, as children of God. Even if the name is not remembered in history, the impact of our actions and inactions are felt.

The concept of the theology of enough comes from "Enough is Enough," published by John Taylor⁷², the newly appointed Bishop of Winchester, in 1975. In his book Taylor describes the Hebrews' dream of shalom being much broader than peace. He

⁷² Taylor, John Vernon. *Enough Is Enough*. S.C.M. Press. 1975.

referred to the harmony implicit in an awareness of God. It meant a dancing kind of inter-relationship between various elements, “seeking something more free than equality, more generous than equity, the ever-shifting equipoise of a life-system. Economically and socially this dream of shalom found its expression in what I call the theology of enough.” Taylor mentions that the Old Testament has many references to covetousness and greed, but that another quality, *betsa* (Hebrew) - the desire of overriding ambition, and using unjust or fraudulent means - is also roundly condemned. He points out that the New Testament has a stern veto against grasping excess, or covetousness, wanting more and more, and so forth. He emphasizes that one should fit one’s own needs to the needs of others and shun an inherent lust for possession and domination. Taylor concludes by saying: “The prodigal son remembered his father’s home as the place where even the lowest paid servant has enough and to spare, and this is the emphasis that the New Testament gives to the theology of enough. Excess is not simply prohibited; it is replaced by a lavish generosity of both give and take.”⁷³

However, I prefer the explanation of enoughness that former First Lady Michelle Obama used in an interview with Drew Barrymore. Obama said,

“The beauty of Fraser Robinson, my father, was that I saw in him a feeling of ‘enoughness’ in himself.... If you had something on your plate that was good, and you hadn’t finished it, and you were looking for more before you even enjoyed what was on your plate, you’d get in trouble, ...the thing that’ll get you ... never being satisfied with what you have right here. Because it’s enough. What you have is enough. We live in a time where it feels like folks never think it’s enough. We’re always looking at the next thing on YouTube. And we’re never satisfied, ever. I’ve met billionaires who are not satisfied. They don’t feel like it’s enough.... So that’s the long way of saying: will you be, ok? [Yes,] as long as you’re ok with you.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Taylor, John Vernon. *Enough Is Enough*.

⁷⁴<https://www.thedrewbarrymoreshow.com/videos/michelle-obama-gives-drew-advice-on-how-to-find-herself-after-her-kids-leave-the-nest> .April 24, 2024. Website accessed, December 23, 2024.

Enoughness is that inner knowledge that we are who we are, and we have what we have, and this is enough. God did not create us deficient. We are because God is. This is embodiment.

Jesus lived his life as an example of enoughness. He wasn't afraid to use these gifts in service of God, the stewardship of mission. He wasn't afraid to talk about the new heaven and the new earth, the stewardship of futuring. Jesus knew he was enough, the stewardship of embodiment. These are some of the reasons I love Jesus. He reminded others that they were also enough. This is another reason I love Jesus. He did this reminding in healing, in rebuking, and in providing feedback. He used the gifts God had given to him every day to bring the good news. Jesus didn't save it for later, for tomorrow--he left it all on the dance floor. He lived in the present and danced like no one was watching. Tomorrow has its own worries; today is enough for enough.

If we want to be more like Jesus, we must remember that we are enough. We are enough. So, ask the hard questions. We are enough, so dream your dream without hesitation. We are enough, so let us be brave. We are enough, no matter our age and ableness. We are here, in this world, right now with whatever we have on our plate, no more, no less, and it is enough. What is there to fear? Nothing, for each of us is a beloved child of God.

Conclusion

This project has helped me realize the importance of facing one's future knowing who you are and showing who you are through your missions. I believe this project provides a good basis for a broader understanding of the meaning of stewardship. I have over the years felt the call of the Spirit focusing in on the local

community. I feel this is where we can make the most influence and have the greatest impact. There must be a reason God placed us together in the space. I don't think it is so that we do nothing with our collective gifts. I think the church I serve is a great model for community service. They have always been involved in the community building schools, libraries, industry, banks, and hospitals. During this project we have discerned that the Spirit is still moving and calling us to action.

Recently, I watched the TED talk: *Why heroes don't change the world?* by David LaMotte.⁷⁵ The description says:

Heroism is overrated. It is always movements that lead to large-scale change, though our dominant cultural narrative of change focuses on individuals. It is not naive to think you can change the world, it is naive to think you could be in the world and not change it, but that change happens in community.

Movements are not a one-person show. They are a community of people with their varied gifts and resources working toward common goals. This project research reminded me the Holy Spirit began working in this church and in this community long before any of us who are here now were born. The Spirit continues to call us into movements of change.

During this project the congregation was reminded that they have a great deal of community capital and of the importance of this capital. In the past these relationships resulted in the building of schools, libraries, industry, banks, and hospitals. Today members are still involved throughout the community with local groups, the school, and the town government. The community band stores its instruments in one of our many closets. The Seneca Singers, a local community choir, hold their annual holiday concert in the sanctuary at the end of the It's a

⁷⁵ https://youtu.be/UDHrgQ5NmI4?si=YB42APMQafEl_QpV. Website accessed on December 19, 2024.

Wonderful Life Festival. Seneca Falls Community Players holds performances of *The George Bailey Radio Show* throughout the festival weekend. These partnerships have resulted in positive outcomes and a willingness to lend help and support to one another when needed.

A future potential of this work will be small group work with stakeholders using the practices in the book by Lewis, Williams, and Baker to help to set up the future work of connecting the church to community partners. They make the case for this new way of leading with the acronym CARE. It stands for “C=Create hospitable space, A=Ask self-awakening questions, R=Reflect theologically together, and E=Enact the next most faithful step.”⁷⁶ This will be the next step after to ensure all this work will not be another failed exercise, but a bright future for the community. It also helps us all to understand that this project is on-going. This project is the starting, not ending point of the work of stewardship.

We will need to further engage our identified community partners and create a network of mutuality. Several community partners were already identified in the coffee hour on Asset Gathering. The partners named will help us to know where to begin this work. It will be on-going work to create community change, a movement, but we can begin the process. I hope that having spent seven weeks studying stewardship and learning how it is foundational to mission, the congregation will see that everything we do in the local community is in service of God. I am hopeful that stronger connections can be made so that we have greater impact and less volunteer burnout.

⁷⁶ Lewis, Williams, and Baker. *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose*, pg. 3

I have already seen some evidence of this seed planting in the work of the congregation. One member took on an active role in the Community Church Outreach Committee. This is a group of members and the pastors of the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. It has begun meeting to discover ways we might be able to address community needs collectively. We have met on four different occasions. There were presentations with the United Way director, the director of the local food pantry, The House of Concern, and the housing coordinator for the new low-income apartments.

We also discovered places we can work together. One issue highlighted by the director of the House of Concern was the transit issue. While people can take the bus to the pantry to pick up food, they can't return on the bus. The bus limits each person to one bag, which means they have no way to transport the food they receive to their home. The result of this meeting was the creation of a driver list for the local food pantry to use when they have a client in need of food and no transport to visit the pantry. One volunteer, who doesn't drive, will be the contact person for the director. The director will phone this volunteer when a need arises, and the volunteer will use the list to call around and see who is available at that time to help.

Another concern raised was laundry. People can't bring all their laundry to the laundromats to be washed, due to the limitations of public transit. When people arrive at the laundromat, they do not always know how to do laundry. Sometimes they lack the money to pay for the machines. We are looking into setting up a voucher system with the laundromats and will provide flyers that teach people how to wash clothes and get out tough stains. Additionally, we will continue to think about how people will be able to

transport their laundry. This may require more conversations with the Regional Transit Authority.

The final area of discussion of the outreach ministry was housing insecurity. As this is a much larger issue; it was agreed to form a subgroup to tackle this project. I have been asked to lead this group, due to my involvement at the community level. More community involvement from people outside of the Outreach Ministry meeting will be necessary. My plan is to provide a housing presentation⁷⁷ to church and our community partners of interest. Particularly, this presentation addresses housing affordability in Seneca Falls. I had the pleasure of serving on the Town's Comprehensive Planning Board in 2022-2023. A plan was created and adopted by the Town, as a way forward. This plan addresses many issues our community is facing. The work also gave me access to data on these issues. The data I found most telling was on housing affordability.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Appendix H

⁷⁸ MRB presentation to the Seneca Falls Comprehensive Board, SF - Economic Base Report New_4.27.23

Affordability

The following table calculates the minimum household income required to affordably purchase a median-priced home in each respective geography. We use a rule of thumb of 30% of income can go to housing costs before a household is considered burdened by high housing costs:

- Median Home Value and Median Contract Rent in the Town is lower than that of the County, but significantly lower than the Region.
- At least 57.5% of households earn above the calculated threshold for owner-occupied housing, indicating a generally affordable housing stock.
- At least 65.8% of town households earn a sufficient annual income to rent a dwelling at the median contract rent price.

Housing Affordability - Owner-Occupied Housing, 2022			
	Town of Seneca Falls	Seneca County	G / FL Region
Median Home Value - 2022	\$131,317	\$138,316	\$181,378
10% Down Payment	\$13,132	\$13,832	\$18,138
Remaining Balance	\$118,185	\$124,484	\$163,240
Average Mortgage @7% for 30 Years	\$786	\$828	\$1,086
Estimated Additional Costs*	\$280	\$289	\$347
Estimated Monthly Mortgage Costs	\$1,066	\$1,118	\$1,433
Household Income Threshold	\$42,640	\$44,720	\$57,320

*Include zillow estimated insurance, PMI, and taxes
Source: Esri; Zillow Mortgage Calculator; MRB Group

Housing Affordability - Renter-Occupied Housing, 2022			
	Town of Seneca Falls	Seneca County	G / FL Region
Median Contract Rent	\$663	\$662	\$785
Household Income Threshold	\$26,520	\$26,480	\$31,400

Source: Esri; MRB Group

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(S. -E. MRB presentation to the Seneca Falls Comprehensive Board 4.27.2023)

What I found most intriguing is the average mortgage and the median rent. The cost difference is minimal, but compared to the household income threshold the gap is wide. I feel this is worth exploring because what it says to me is that people can afford the payment, but they lack access to the means of entry into home ownership. I think collectively as a church and a community we will find ways to bridge this gap.

Members of the congregation have also been connecting these ideas to people outside the church. For instance, one ruling elder set up a meeting with a town council member to discuss our affordable housing crisis and potential ways to partner. They set up a meeting to discuss town codes and the potential of a partnership between the town and church. It was the first time a member of the church had arranged such a meeting on behalf of the church and not another organization where they serve.

Another ruling elder spoke with the Town Manager and received a list of properties the town owns to see how these can also be used to address housing concerns. As is evident, housing is a major concern in the community of Seneca Falls. Again, the hope is to find ways for us to partner that are beneficial for the town, as well as the least of these in the community of Seneca Falls. One beauty of a small town is that people know one another. Another beauty is we all go to the same schools, shop in the same stores, drink the same water, and drive the same roads. There is not a part of town which is exempt from the infrastructure, and this is a strength of our community. The strength is that we can see how connected we are and how our decisions impact one another.

Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter Three, part of my preparation for this project was speaking with my colleagues in ministry, who serve in the Presbytery of Geneva. They had mentioned that this intense stewardship study would be beneficial to their congregations as well. They suggested that having the journal and the sermons available would allow them to play my sermon and have discussions about it in their own settings, having the journals as a guide and a practice. My congregation also has a YouTube channel, so I have recorded each sermon as a video and placed into a playlist on our church channel. I have connected a link to a google drive, which contains the journals for people to download and use as they engage in this sermon series. My hope is that others will be able to have these discussions in their own settings and contexts. They will be able to communal concern the ways God is calling them to serve, with their unique gifts, and with their community's future in mind.

The movement of the Holy Spirit has never ceased. I pray we can discern and follow the Spirit. I pray our hesitation doesn't slam on the brakes. I pray we can see the

future hope as we continue to wind along the River of Life. I pray we can join our gifts together for a Care Bear stare that will heal the least of these among us and that shines brightly beyond any man-made margin. I pray that we can deepen our lives with God and serve God with our whole selves.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

First Presbyterian Church & Society of Seneca Falls

23 Cayuga Street, Seneca Falls, New York 13148
315-568-6636
www.fpressf.com



1st Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls

Reverend Leah Ntuala, Pastor
Reverend Dr Peter J Crego, Pastor Emeritus

*Be Welcoming*Be Compassionate*Be You (bravely)*Be Community

October 2025

Dear Child of God,

First, thank you for your incredibly generosity! This year thanks to your gifts, we were able to do the work of God in the community. We were able to pay the staff, paint a town mural, allow the community to use our space, help community agencies, and much more.

In 2025, we are being invited to explore a deeper meaning of stewardship. The Session has begun this work by engaging with Mission Management Corps in a mission audit. Their goal is to help us as a congregation figure out our calling. Frederick Buechner says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." We are excited to discern!

Additionally, as part of Pastor Leah's doctoral project, our congregation will develop a deeper understanding of stewardship. We will think of stewardship from three theological lenses: stewardship as mission, stewardship as future visioning, and stewardship as an embodied practice. This is the theology of enough; knowing God provides us our daily bread, we have enough to take care of ourselves and our neighbors. We then give from our abundance instead of living out of our scarcity. This empowers us to understand that we have everything we need to do the work of God. God is calling us to action and sending us out to serve God's creation. Intentional engagement with stewardship and the variety of meanings will result in a deeper connection with God and a stronger relationship with the community, living out the call in Matthew 25, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Now it is time to look ahead to next years' plans and visions where God is leading us in 2025, and thinking ahead -two, three, five years, and 10 years. The pledge form asks us to discern not only your financial stewardship, but how you wish to use your time and talents.

Please join in this celebration by filling out the enclosed Estimate of Giving form and return it by November 17, 2024.

In God's Mercy,

Kae Hoyle
Treasurer

Jay Hoyle
Stewardship Chair and Session Member

ESTIMATE of GIVING

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Email _____

____ I would like to make a pledge to First Presbyterian Church ministries:

\$ _____ Ministries and Operations: per ____ Week ____ Month ____ Quarter ____ Year

\$ _____ Mission Benevolence: per ____ Week ____ Month ____ Quarter ____ Year

\$ _____ Planned Giving (Legacy)

TIME and TALENT GIVING**Worship:**

____ Liturgy (read scripture) ____ Choir ____ Bell Choir ____ Ushers ____ Special Music ____ Nursery

Prayer:

____ Prayer Chain ____ Sending Cards ____ Random Acts of Kindness ____ Healing Services

Education and Study:

____ Coffee Hour Presentation ____ Women's Circle ____ Christian Education

____ Youth Group Volunteer ____ Teach a Skill (ex. knitting, baking, gardening)

Serve:

____ Coffee Hour Snacks ____ Special Events ____ Session ____ Personnel

____ Monthly Youth Gathering Chaperone ____ Tool Lending Library ____ Fix It Café

____ Serve on a Community Coalition (ex. housing, mental health, substance abuse)

Care for Congregation:

____ Transportation ____ Property ____ Stewardship/Finance ____ Membership & Parish Life

____ Outreach ____ Mentor ____ Worship & Music Committee

____ I am unable to give of my time and talents at this time.

Please return this form to:

First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, Stewardship

PO Box 383

Seneca Falls, NY 13148

firstpres13148@gmail.com

Remember – we accept automatic payments via PayPal, Vanco and Venmo

THANK YOU!

Appendix B

Sermon Series Scripture

Time: Clocks, Calendars, and Cathedrals- Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 90

Life at Its End: Signs of the Cross and Body: On Flesh- Psalm 13,
Luke 24: 13-25, Romans 14: 1-8 Psalm 139, Matt. 1:18-25, and John
9:1-12

Money and Finances: Practicing Generosity and Technology: Digital
Gifts - Deut. 15:7-11, Matt. 19:16-30, and 1John 3:11-24, Psalm 24,
John 13:31-35, and Romans 8:1-17

Privilege: Toward the Stewardship of Incarnation- Acts 2, Acts 6:1-7,
1Cor. 12, and Rev. 13

Spirit: Stewarding Spiritual Gifts- Isaiah 11:2-3, Mark 12:28-34, and
Romans 5:1-15

Community: Investing Social Capital
as an Act of Faith and Work: Called to Service-
Matt 28:16-20 and Romans 12, Lev. 19:13, Proverbs 22:22,
and 1Peter 4:1-11

Mind: The Ascension of our Life Together- Deut. 6:5, Mark 14:22-25,
and Philipians 2:5-11



Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship

Adam J. Copeland, editor



A 7-Week Sermon Series Journal

Name: _____

The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, NY
23 Cayuga Street

A member of the



A Matthew 25 Church



Toward a church as generous and just as God's Grace
www.fpcsf.com



Time: Clocks, Calendars, and Cathedrals
MaryAnn McKibben Dana

"The tricky aspect of stewardship of time, as
opposed to other aspects of our lives, is
this: we never really know how much time
we have period."

Question: Examine your personal calendar as if it were a theological
document. Where do you spend most of your time? What do you
prioritize? Does your calendar align with your faith and values?

Mind: The Ascension of our Life Together
Neal D. Presa

"To exercise stewardship of mind, then, is to be a
faithful, trusted, and trustworthy custodian of your
whole self."

Question: In what ways might you explore opportunities to
stewardship your mind in ways that might reconnect, or realign mind
with heart, soul, and strength?



Life at Its End: Signs of the Cross
Mary Hinkle Shore

"So then, since we are all terminal, what does it
mean to be stewards of our own lives or another's
as it nears its end?"

Question: In what ways do you explore themes of lament as a
community?



Action: Write a letter to or have a conversation with a loved one about
death and dying.

Body: On Flesh
Elise Roscher

"Bodies are the gifts from God. How we talk about
our bodies, treat them, and care for them is how we
respond to that gift. It's a form of prayer. Our bodies
are powerful if we pay attention to them."

Question: In what ways are human bodies engaged
in the life of the community of your congregation?



Action: Create a chronological timeline of your life. Create a second
timeline that depicts kairos time, of life events. Consider the places of
overlap and lack thereof. What do you make of the differences and
similarities?

Action: Embrace the Lord's supper as a time of being united being
united with Christ body as well as one another period find a way this
week to break bread and drink from a cup with others in the body of
Christ.

Action: Go on a prayer walk or sit and do a body scan.



Money and Finances: Practicing Generosity
David P. King

"Reframing stewardship holistically moves us beyond
the maintenance of the church building we're
balancing individual budgets. It leads us to consider
reimagining our relationship with money as a central aspect of
discipleship."

Question: To what people and places do you feel a sense of
gratitude?

Community: Investing Social Capital
as an Act of Faith
John W. West

"Relationships, it seems, our foundational for all
creation. We are relational beings living in a relational world"

Question: In what ways do you see people less inclined to come to
church or see church as an attractive community? Given these
emerging realities, how can you follow Jesus outside the walls, and be
church elsewhere?



Action: Consider stewarding existing small group relationships or
finding common interests and gathering around shared passions. How
might our congregation embrace small group ministry and strengthen
network ties?



Work: Called to Service
Kathleen A. Cahalan

"God creates us with a capacity for vocation, and we are called to be
good stewards of this crucial gift- our ability to respond."

Question: In what ways are different vocations and gifts celebrated
and shared in our faith community?



Privilege: Toward the Stewardship
of Incarnation
Margaret P. Aymer

"I believe that Christian faith calls us to the
stewardship of incarnation. Such stewardship
serves as an ethical critique of (un)earned
societal privilege."

Question: How does our congregation understand its relationship to
the broader community in terms of systems of privilege and
oppression?

Spirit: Stewarding Spiritual Gifts
David Gambrell

"We are called to make good use
of the gifts God has given us in
baptism in other words, to be good
stewards of these spiritual gifts."

Question: Where is the Spirit already at work in your congregation?
What gifts have been poured out among the entire community?



Technology: Digital Gifts
Adam J. Copeland

"Like all in God's world, we can use the gift of
technology for God's glory, for justice, for the care
of one another, and for the nourishing of all creation."

Question: Are your daily practices with digital tools supporting your
relationships with others and building up God's beloved community?

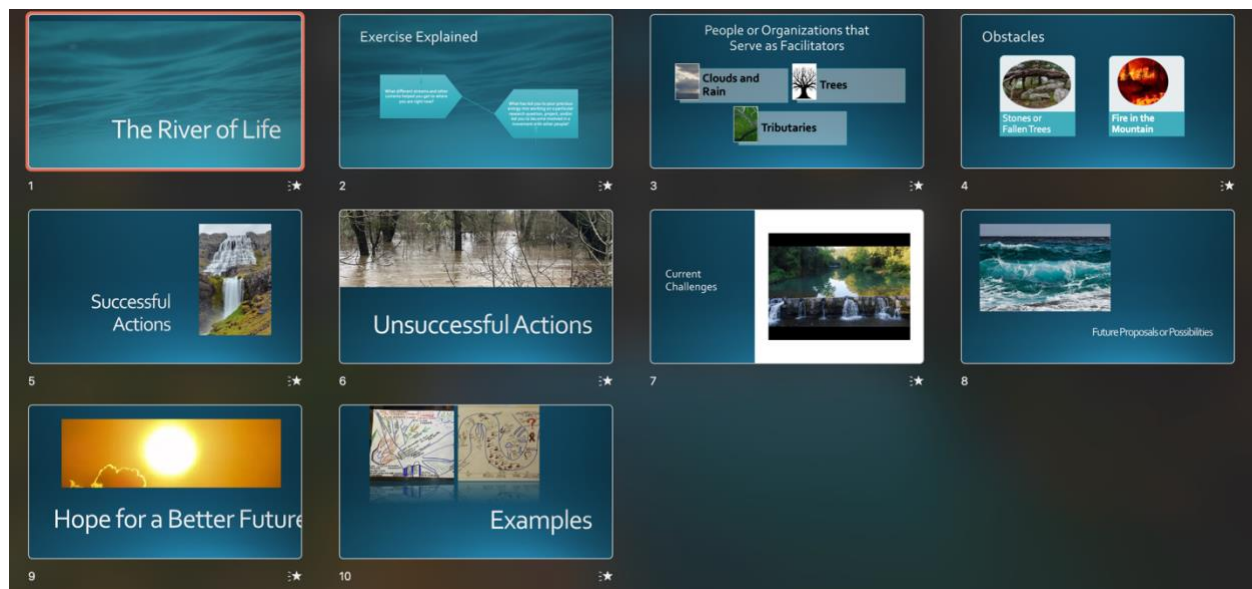
Action: Embark on a technology fast or Sabbath. What did you notice?
In what ways do you feel refreshed and or disconnected?

Action: Make a list of your gifts and how these gifts may be used to
serve others

Action: Listen to the story of someone who has experienced hunger,
homelessness, poverty, or racism.

Action: Practice affirming the gifts you see in others.

Appendix C



The River of Life

This is a popular education activity drawn from some organizing circles that is designed to help an organization, campaign, or group recover its history and orient it toward new goals — connecting the two and naming the challenges and successes in its historical path.

Either as individuals or in groups, consider the following question then draw a River of Life:

What different streams and other currents helped you get to where you are right now?

What has led you to pour precious energy into working on a particular research question, project, and/or led you to become involved in a movement with other people?

Think about the fast-moving times in your life and the challenges or rocks (these can be people, external pressures, unexpected institutional changes, etc.) that you were able to move through. Draw these as a river.

Use the metaphor to its fullest — maybe there are offshoots, rapids, waterfalls, or still times in slower moving oxbows, etc. in the river of your life.

Elements that you may include:

1. People or Organizations that Serve as Facilitators:

Clouds and Rain — These improve emergence and growth of the work or movement.

Tributaries — Alliances and partnerships that fortify your work.

Trees — [These foster sustainability](#) and provide structural support for sustainability.

2. Obstacles:

Stones or Fallen Trees — Context conditions that limit or prevent progress to some extent.

Fire in the Mountain — Context threats, something on the outside that threatens the entire existence of the organization. (These are often social threats that are beyond your organization's control.)

3. Successful Actions:

Waterfalls — Activities that create a stronger organization and facilitate actions that accomplish your goals or the goals of your department.

4. Unsuccessful Actions:

Swamps and eddies — Activities or "doldrums" that undermine the organization; these can be failed projects that are allowed to continue or bad policies that undermine institutional trust.

5. Current Challenges:

Dams — Permanent structures such as activities, challenges, or persistent problems (e.g., "zombie narratives," interpersonal conflicts, unresolved disagreements) that stop progress or impede the flourishing of your organization.

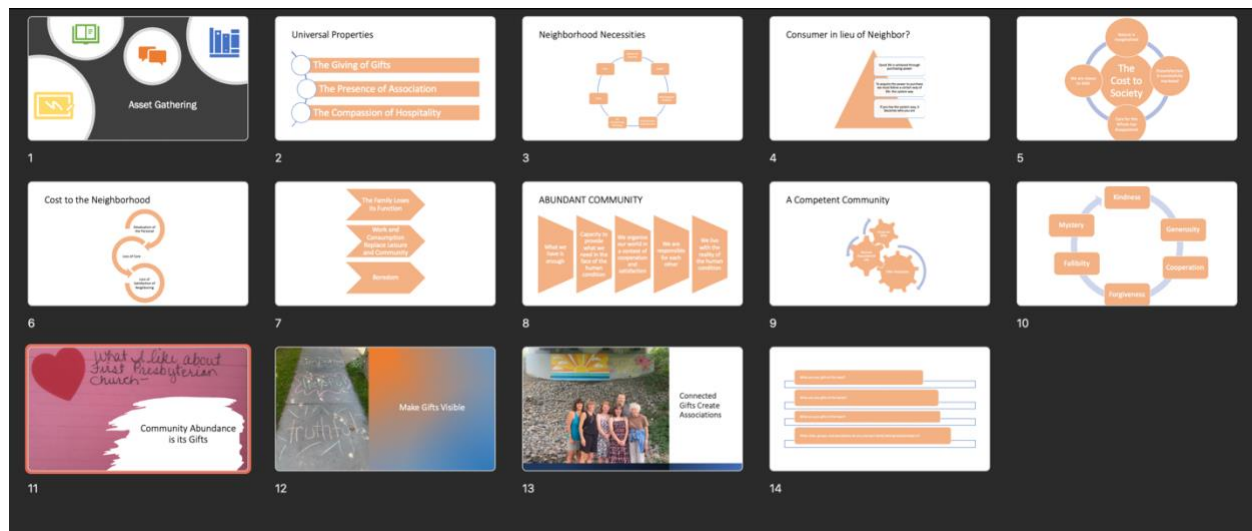
6. Future Proposals or Possibilities:

Sea (name the sea) — This is where you hope your organization (or you personally) will be in 5-7 years. The sea is what you dream of for your organization.

7. Hopes for a Better Future:

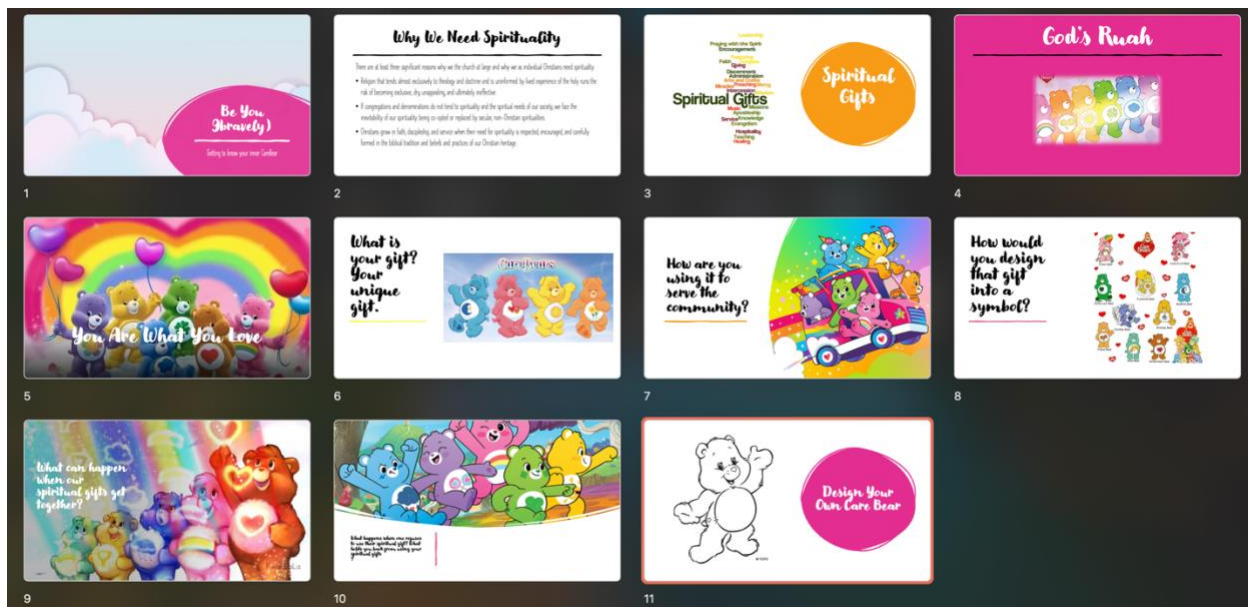
Sun (name the rays) — This is the source of light and health for your organization that is nurturing the trees and vegetation around your river.

Appendix D

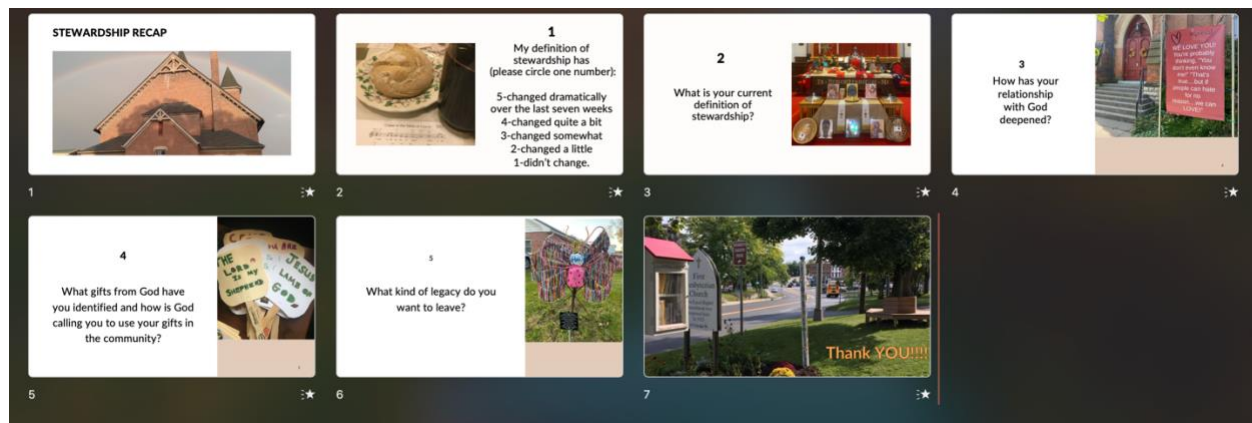


- What are your gifts of the head?
- What are the gifts of your hands?
- What are the gifts of your heart?
- What clubs, groups, and associations do you and your family belong to or participate in?

Appendix E



Appendix F

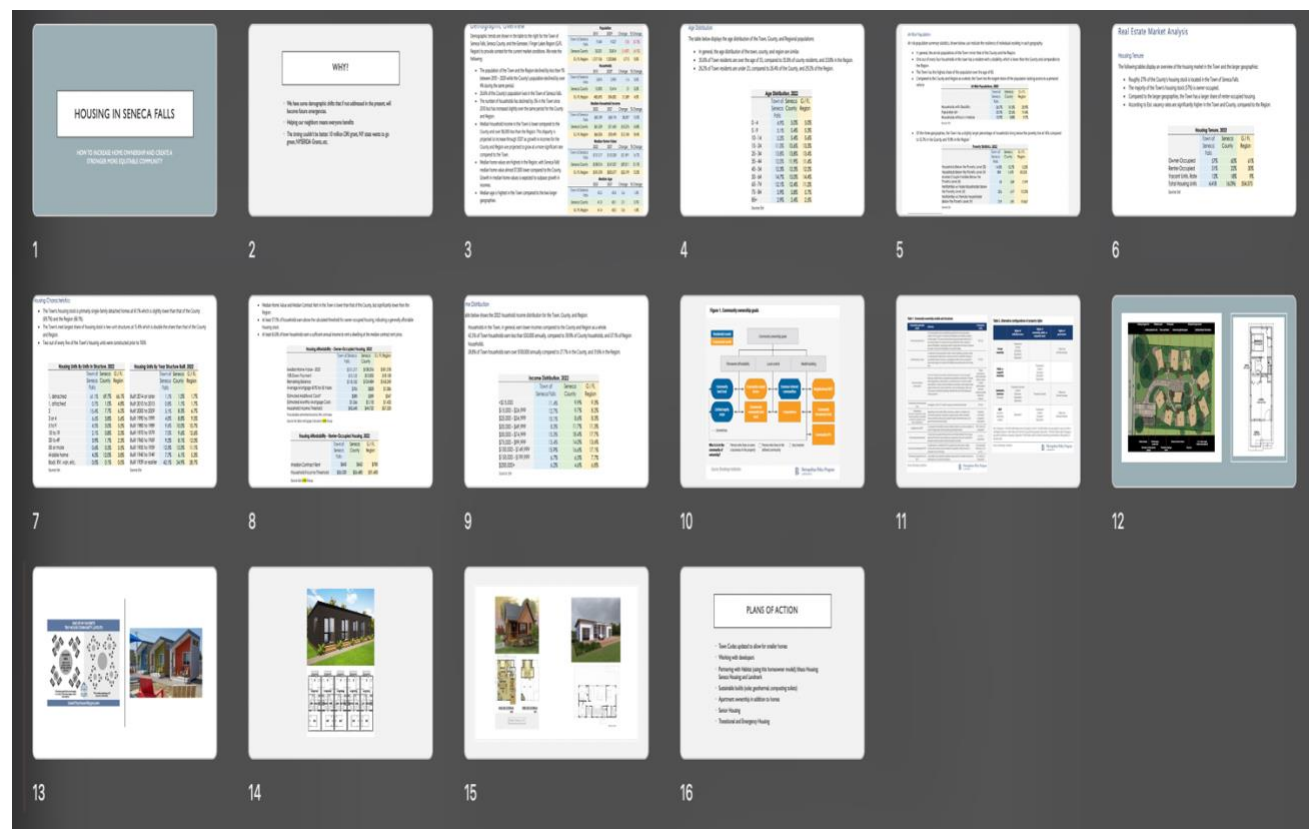


1. My definition of stewardship has (please circle one number):
 - 5-changed dramatically over the last seven weeks
 - 4-changed quite a bit
 - 3-changed somewhat
 - 2-changed a little
 - 1-didn't change
2. What is your current definition of stewardship?
3. How has your relationship with God deepened?
4. What gifts from God have you identified and how is God calling you to use your gifts in the community?
5. What kind of legacy do you want to leave?

Appendix G



Appendix H



Appendix I

Cooking Classes

Breadmaking
Pie Baking
Canning
Cooking on a Budget



Nature

Walking Groups
Bird Watching
Gardening
Compost



Mission Services

We are an Intergenerational Learning Center where all people are welcome to learn, grow, and teach.

The First Presbyterian Church is blessed with a beautiful space to build community. We do this by sharing skills and building relationships.

In our desire to welcome and build community, we want this space to be used throughout the week for classes and services taught by members of the congregation and community partners.

On the second Saturday of the month, we will have a Fix-It-Café. Come into the church from 10am-1pm, grab a cup of coffee as we gather and work on repairing objects of everyday life, such as electronics, mechanical devices, computers, bicycles, and clothing.

*Please check our website for the times and dates of the classes.

About Us

Our mission is to serve this community guided by the example of Jesus Christ and led by the Spirit of God.

We encourage one another to:

- *Be Welcoming
- *Be Compassionate
- *Be You (bravely)
- *Be Community

Contact Us

Phone: 315.568.6636
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The First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, in keeping with our baptismal covenant vow to respect the dignity of every human being, have adopted the following policy of non-discrimination: Employment, membership, and participation in any church activity is open to all without regard to ethnicity, race, skin color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, or disability.



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BE WELCOMING
BE COMPASSIONATE
BE YOU (BRAVELY)
BE COMMUNITY



Wellness

Grief Support
Trauma Informed Care
Parenting
Legacy Planning
NA
AA



Fun

Music Lessons (piano/handbells)
Arts (drawing/painting)
Book Club
Movie Club
Games
(Bridge, Euchre, Scrabble, Chess)

*We offer a first Friday of the month potluck dinner and game night, 5:30pm-8pm



What I like about The First Presbyterian Church:
The community is warm and welcoming.

Housing

Finance
Basic Maintenance
Pet Care/Training
Cleaning 101
Tool Use

Trades

Electrical
Carpentry
Sewing
Knitting
Crocheting

*We also developing a lending tool library. Please see the website for details.

Appendix J

