

Footsteps

Making spiritual growth the priority

Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio

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RenewalWorks is a ministry of Forward Movement, committed to supporting congregations, their leaders, and members in a process of spiritual growth.

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Introduction

RenewalWorks is a ministry of Forward Movement; both are committed to reinvigorating the church and strengthening disciples. Thank you for taking the time to read about the reasoning and research behind RenewalWorks. It is all part of an exploration of spiritual growth, offered with love and hope for The Episcopal Church.

A good place to start this exploration is with some key questions: Is your congregation healthy? What factors play a role in a vital and strong congregation? What about you personally? How would you rate your spiritual vitality? What can help you—and your congregation—deepen a relationship with God and with neighbors?

We can imagine a variety of answers to these questions. And certainly many answers would have merit. But we feel fairly confident that we can offer important insight into how congregations and individuals might take the first steps toward a deeper, richer faith.

This insight is based on the experience of 2,000 congregations and 500,000 individuals from across the country. With data collected and analyzed, a theme emerged: congregations and individuals with a vibrant, deepening faith place spiritual growth as a top priority.

The *Footsteps* workbook puts flesh onto this data, explaining the meaning and implications of the survey results. The workbook explores the meaning of spiritual growth as well as presents a plan for growth that can guide both congregations and individuals. The workbook outlines a broader process called RenewalWorks that encourages congregations to have spiritual growth as a common goal and aspiration. Once spiritual growth is a top priority and a common call for the congregation, other elements of health and vitality will fall into place.

As a way to begin, we invite you to join us in prayer for the renewal and mission of our congregations. Please offer this prayer, adding thanks for the grace that brings us together as a church. Take a moment of silence before you continue reading this material.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things that had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)

- Jay Sidebotham and the RenewalWorks team

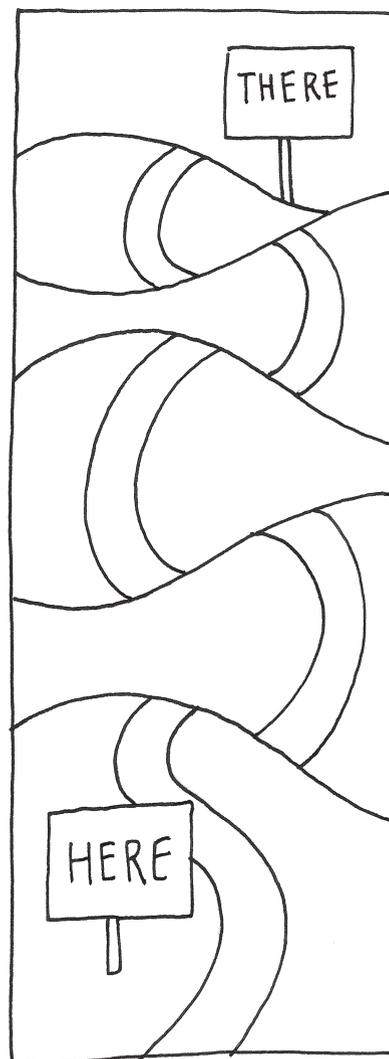
Chapter I

Getting from Here to There

*Where is my congregation right now?
Where would I like it to go?
How am I going to get there?*

Before they were called Christians, members of the early church were described as people of The Way. They were on the move. Because their life in community was so dynamic, because it was so clearly marked by love of God and neighbor, these first Christians transformed the world around them. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the church grew as outsiders witnessed the ways that Christians lived in community. People said: “See how they love one another. I want to be part of something like that.” As Christians grew and changed, their world was transformed in remarkable ways as well.

These changes were all about movement and growth. As Saint Paul guided the first Christian communities, he spoke of those who grow in maturity in Christ—some only able to digest the basics, others able to chew on meatier stuff. He had in mind the vision of a spiritual continuum. The letter to the Ephesians describes the Christian community as the body of Christ: growing, dynamic, changing, evolving, building itself up in love.



GET GROWING

Growth, change, and movement are part of the Christian story from day one, which is why the pointed question asked by Brian McLaren is so critical. McLaren, a well-known preacher, evangelist, and astute commentator on contemporary Christendom, asked: Is the church a club for those who have arrived, or a community of disciples who are on the way?

Episcopalians (sometimes jokingly described as the frozen chosen) have a call to spiritual growth, which is reflected in *The Book of Common Prayer*. It is captured in the baptismal service, as sponsors for young candidates pledge to help a child grow into the full stature of Christ. That's not a bad aspiration for all of us.



We welcome you to share in a process (an online survey followed by a series of workshops followed by a few specific next steps embraced by the congregation) by which we seek to help members of congregations focus on growth in their life with God, and in that way contribute to the vitality of their congregations.

The following pages tell a story of research done with thousands of Christians and hundreds of churches—research and resources being brought into The Episcopal Church through RenewalWorks, a ministry of Forward Movement. We are excited about this beginning. We are grateful for your interest and the prospect of your participation. We will learn together, and in the conversation and planning that unfolds, we envision a renewed commitment to spiritual growth in the church we love.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

We believe that spiritual growth is fundamentally relational. The Hebrew scriptures capture that relational dimension. The Ten Commandments may sound to some like a list of rules, but actually, they are all about relationship. The first commandments describe a healthy and vital relationship with God, followed by commandments that ask how we live in healthy and vital relationship with each other.

In the New Testament, a lawyer puts Jesus to a test, asking about the requirements to inherit eternal life. Jesus makes reference to the scriptures he has learned and frames his answer relationally, in terms of love of God and love of neighbor.

Add to that love of the world God has made, and love of self, and we begin to see a way to understand spiritual growth. Spiritual growth becomes a matter of taking the steps needed to deepen relationship with God, with neighbor, with the world, and with ourselves.

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Love of God and Neighbor

As you begin to read, mark, and inwardly digest this material, spend a few moments attending to these passages in which Jesus calls his disciples to love of God and neighbor.

One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:35-40).

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:9-12).

TO CONSIDER

Before reading any further, pause and reflect on these two passages. Write your answers to the following questions:

1. What do these passages say to me about who Jesus is?
2. What do they say to me about what it means to be a disciple?

NOTES