

## REACH

# A Vision for Our Savior Lutheran Church

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## INTRODUCTION

We reach for what's important to us. We reach out to hold the hand of our spouse or a loved one. We reach down to pick up our children, grandchildren, or a niece or nephew. We may reach ahead in our work, straining to attain a degree, a promotion, or a raise. Sometimes, we simply reach for a cup of coffee in the morning. Either way, we reach for what's important to us.

**What do we reach for as a church community?** Churches reach for plenty of things. Some of these things are God-centered. Others are centered more on individual interests or the preservation of an institution.

**As a church community, what would God have us reach for together in the coming days?**

## **A Biblical Reach**

If we're going to locate what God would have us reach for, the Bible is the best place to begin our search. In the book of Acts, we see the early church reaching out in three key directions.

Immediately after God sent his gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the early church

**reached UP in worship,**

**reached OVER in community,**

**and reached OUT to the world.**

We read in Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

## Three Key Relationships

Three key relationships defined the early church:

They grew in faith by **reaching UP in worship** —“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer.”

They **reached OVER in love to others** in their church community —“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”

They **reached OUT with hope to the world** —“And the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.”



## **Responding to God's Reach**

Why did the early church reach for these three key relationships? Only because God first reached out to them in love. The same is true for us. We reach out to God because he first reached out to us. Our reach is always the echo of his reach into our lives. In Christ, God reached out to humanity with sacrificial love. Like we say in the catechism, “He redeemed me, a lost and condemned person.” Through the Spirit, God has woken us to new life. “He called me by the Gospel.”

Our congregation is no different than the early church. Like all churches, we are a community of people whom God has reached out to and brought safely into his embrace. We respond by reaching together for the things that please him.

Sadly, many congregations have no vision for the future. They may be reaching in every direction—very busy, but accomplishing little to nothing of eternal value. As the pastors of OSL, we have prayed, reflected, studied, and wrestled with what we should reach for as a congregation. We believe that God is working great things in our church and community, and we believe that the path forward will mean a renewed commitment to the same three key relationships that defined the early church.

We invite you to prayerfully imagine with us what the future looks like when we reach together as one body of believers for these three relationships. Like many things we reach for, our reach may cost us something—both as a congregation and as individuals—however, we are convinced that the reach is worth the risk. When we reach in the right direction, even our loss is really gain.

# Chapter 1

## REACHING UP IN WORSHIP

Often small children put their hands up and say, “Pick me up!” At my house (PJR), my daughter often says, “Uppies Dad!” That’s an unabashed demand of a daughter to be held by her father. From a biblical perspective, this is the heart of worship. God has reached down to us in Christ. Through his Word and Spirit, God has adopted us into his family as his beloved sons and daughters. The Holy Spirit has sealed our adoptions as final. In fact, the Spirit even moves us to cry out, “Abba, Father!” (Romans 8:14, Galatians 4:6). He has reached down to us, and so now we reach up to him in worship.

As members of God’s family, we call out “Abba, Father!” on a daily basis in prayer. However, the rhythm of our upward reach is experienced regularly as we gather for worship. Worship is like the big family dinner we’re all invited to. It’s a beautiful back and forth exchange in which God reaches out to us, and we reach out to him.

We read in Acts 2:32: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. When we gather for worship, God reaches down to us as his Word is read, sung, and preached. He reaches out to us with visible words like water, bread, and wine. When we experience God’s verbal reach in worship, he creates faith in us. Like children who respond to a trustworthy parent by asking to be held, we also respond to his reach by reaching up. We cry out with prayers, hymns, and praises.

## God at Work, Week by Week

At first glance, an hour-long church service doesn't seem very impressive or life-altering. But when God reaches out to us, amazing things happen. For example, a woman comes to worship at OSL and hears about the love of Christ for the first time. Faith is created. Her faith still reaches up in worship week by week. A man weathering difficult trials tells his pastors that the only thing that has held his life together has been weekly worship. God's word is powerful. When God speaks, he creates. When he creates, we respond by reaching up.

## A Space for Worship

The entire life of a child of God is one of worship. However, like the early church, we set aside specific times to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. We also meet in a specific place, where our worship is enhanced by the gifts and talents of others. Our pastors preach sermons and lead services. Our organist and worship team lead us in making a joyful noise to the Lord with songs of praise.



In the early days of OSL, members came together to literally build a new place of worship. They gave their first fruits to purchase a building. Charter members teamed up to work late hours, using their talents to build and beautify a sanctuary for worship. In later

days they strove together to pay off extra debt.

Now, we are faced with new challenges and opportunities as we reach up in worship. It's hard to bow your head for prayer at the communion rail when there's a leaky roof above your head. Our songs of praise do not ascend as gracefully when the organ is unreliable, and our

antiquated drum set is prone to make a continual "click click" sound. However, as God's people at OSL have been generous in the past, they have also responded now with



surprising acts of generosity. When faced with the seemingly insurmountable cost of replacing our organ, an anonymous donor in our congregation responded by covering the cost! This surprising act of grace (2 Corinthians 8:6) is a clear indication of what we value at OSL—reaching up in worship.

## **Reaching Up in the Future**

Recently we have invested a substantial amount of money into our worship space so that it continues to be a place that is comfortable, inviting, and conducive to reaching up to God. However, due to our current budget and offerings, we have paid for these repairs and upgrades with borrowed money.

Since we value worship at OSL, what would it look like if we reached out in generosity to eliminate this debt? Even more, what would it look like if our generosity did away with the need for borrowed money in the future? God's people came together to fund the building of OSL over 50 years ago. What if we did the same now?

We also have numerous opportunities as we look ahead to the future of worship at OSL. What would it look like if we incorporated media and the arts into our worship? Can you imagine if we added more instruments to our services? Or a choir? In what ways could we creatively experience and declare the excellencies of the one who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light?



# Chapter 2

## REACHING OVER IN COMMUNITY

Community has fallen on hard times lately in America. For many of us, the garage doors of our homes go up early in the morning. We leave in a rush for our jobs and schools, only to return hours later to the same garages, with the doors closing quickly behind us. Even recent studies have confirmed what we all feel: we know our neighbors less than we did decades ago. We are less involved in our communities. Despite countless new ways to “connect” with others, we often feel less connected—perhaps even lonely and isolated.

And yet, we were created for community. After a series of positive affirmations about the goodness of creation in the first chapters of Genesis, God speaks his first negative word in the Bible about a lack of community. “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18).



Not only were we created for community, we were also recreated in Christ for community. We are called “members God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19). We are called “members of the body of Christ” and even “members of one another” (Romans 12:5). This means that community is not an optional benefit for Christians. Rather, community is an integral part of our lives, and therefore one of the three key relationships we reach for.

## Connected in Christ

In Acts 2, we see the early churching reaching for the gift of community in a number of ways.

For one, the early church was not content with a quick visit to church. They took time to share life together on a regular basis.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts... (Acts 2:46).

Second, they not only spent time together, they also reached out to meet each other's needs in tangible ways:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need... (Acts 2:44-45).

Third, they didn't just meet together to be social or share hobbies. They also met to study, pray, share, and grow together in Christ:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).



In comparison to modern-day America, the early church was countercultural! They were not isolated from one another. Instead, they treated their relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ as if those relationships were eternal.

## **Community at OSL**

Our Savior Lutheran Church has been an important support to many from its inception. From long-term members to those who have sojourned among us briefly, our church family has made an impact by the love of Christ experienced in community.

OSL has provided community for those who have been transplanted to New England. For example, the Fischer, Sarvela, Reuss, and Shukei families come to mind. These families migrated to Connecticut from the Midwest and bonded together around church activities and a common worship life. They lived life together outside of Sunday morning and formed relationships that will last into eternity.

Many other new relationships have been fostered among us as well. Heather and Kevin met one another through the OSL Youth Group, fell in love, and are now raising their own children in our midst. They have been important contributors and builders of our life together as God's people.

## **Together as a Community**

We often build these relationships as we serve together side by side: From OSL On the Move events to Short Term Mission Trips, to manning the refreshment table at Live Nativity, to leading worship together on the Worship Team, to cleaning and maintaining the church facilities, to caring for clients at The Bridge, we develop shared experiences demonstrating God's love in Christ, and we find ourselves experiencing that very same love in the process.



There are many examples and expressions of that love of Christ active among us:

- Like the early church in Acts (see 4:32-37) many have experienced financial support in times of need. The OSL Benevolence fund has helped with car payments, medical bills, mortgage payments, utility bills and more(!) providing a stop-gap for families experiencing hardship in times of job loss, illness or other strife.
- Prayer support has also been an important expression of the love of Jesus experienced in our community of faith. From our elders praying with individuals after worship, to our prayer chain, to a women's Facebook prayer support group, to small group gatherings—friends in Christ have learned to pray with and for one another.
- Families have learned to raise their children together. Adoptive families have provided unique support to one another. Couples have mentored other couples in marriage. Meals have been provided to new moms and individuals recovering from surgery. Chores have been done for those who are recovering from hospitalization.
- Sometimes, we simply have fun together: From hiking, to kayaking, to campfires and camp-outs, to meeting for a meal or a cup of coffee, to bowling outings, to Ragnar Relay events, OSL members and



friends get together and enjoy one another's company on a regular basis.

So much good happens when we reach over to one another in love!

## **The Love of Christ Visible in Community**

We love these concrete expressions of the love of Christ experienced in community. We love stories like Jim's. One day, Jim signed up to visit homebound members as part of an OSL On the Move event. He enjoyed it so much, that he has made such visits a regular part of his life. He consistently visits a variety of people in their homes and in institutional places of care. Jim regularly goes walking with Bob, who suffers with dementia. He has played recorded sermons, read the bible, and prayed with many. He listens. He smiles. He shares. He loves.



As you can see, there are a wide variety of opportunities for love to be experienced in community through OSL. Many of these are formal expressions of care (e.g., the ministry of Elders, Stephen Ministers, Marriage and Family Therapists, Pastors, or a Parish Nurse.) At other times, community is built and love is experienced through established ministries and events of the church. But sometimes, love is experienced casually, spontaneously, and informally as we simply live and enjoy life together.

Is this love always experienced by everyone in such beautiful and consistent ways? Sadly, no! We are a community of people who still fight against our sinful nature. Because of that we will, at times, let one another down. We may feel lonely even in the midst of community. We may misunderstand and be misunderstood by one another. People may, at times, slip through the cracks of care.

Because of this, it is essential that we would be intentional about building community and strengthening existing vehicles for care.

How can we do this? What might this look like?

## **Reaching Over in the Future**

It takes a great deal to organize our life together. We have so many events and opportunities for worship, community, and reaching out. Sometimes this is overwhelming. We are all so busy with work, family, and church. Many are actively “plugged into” meaningful opportunities for service and growth. Many others have yet to experience that joy and are missing out on the relationships that are developed as we work side by side together.

What if we had someone (call it a “Ministry Coordinator”) who helped us focus and organize to increase volunteer engagement in our key events and ministries and helped us to facilitate the launch of new ministries? A clear result of this would be stronger community, and more opportunity to demonstrate and experience the love of Jesus in relationships with one another.

The voters of OSL recently approved such a position. While there are provisions for funding this currently, we will need increased generosity to sustain this in the future.

What about the ways we care for one another? What would happen if we were to invest in and revitalize some of our formal vehicles of care, such as Stephen Ministry, Parish Nursing, and Marriage and Family Therapy?

Stephen Ministers receive 50 hours (!) of specialized training to support others in various times of need. But they need trained leaders to support, train, encourage, and deploy them. What if we invested in training three more leaders and got this ministry on solid ground again? We can imagine many people receiving more consistent care.

Our brief experiment with Parish Nursing was also a blessing to many. What if we reinvested in Parish Nursing and the reestablishment of a Health Team? Can you imagine the expanded care we could demonstrate?

Many have been blessed through the helping ministry of a Marriage and Family Therapist. Christian MFTs could provide more beyond individual therapy. They could offer seminars and support and skills groups to address a wide variety of life's challenges and opportunities. This seems to be a wise and fruitful place to invest as well.

Even with these formal opportunities to care for one another, the best expression of care is what happens when we simply love one another. In other words, the most important aspect of our caring ministry at Our Savior Lutheran Church is YOU!

So, doesn't it make sense to invest in building relationships with others? Look for ways we will facilitate these opportunities in the next year. From bible studies, to small group opportunities, to social events, we want to provide many opportunities for the people

of OSL to meet one another, grow in personal relationship with one another, and truly experience the love of Christ in this community.

Are you ready to invest your time? Your energy? Your financial resources to make it happen?

# **Chapter 3:**

## **REACHING OUT TO THE WORLD**

When you have good news, you want to share it. We post pictures of special occasions on social media. We send out “save the date” postcards for weddings or graduation ceremonies, and announcements for the birth of a new baby. Isn’t it the same with the hope we have in Christ? As a community that reaches up to God in worship and over to one another in community, we also reach out with the hope we have in Christ. We want the world to reach up with us in worship. We desire that others would find a home within the safety of God’s family.

### **Reaching Out Then**

The entire book of Acts is a story about the church reaching out to the world with hope. Shortly before Jesus ascends and the Spirit is poured out on the church, he tells his disciples:

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

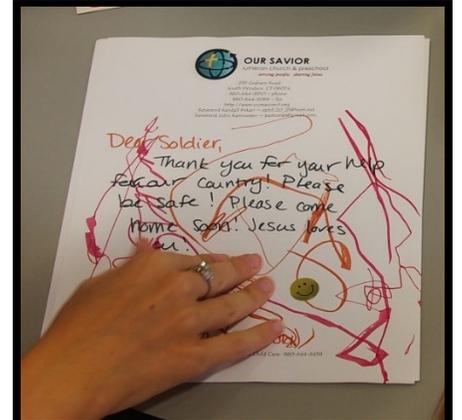
When we get a snapshot of the early church in Acts 2, they are reaching out with hope to their neighbors in Jerusalem.

The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:46).

The rest of the book of Acts tells the story of the Holy Spirit leading the church to reach out to the ends of the earth. In the final chapter,

the Spirit has pushed the hope of the Gospel far from Jerusalem—all the way to Rome—the center of the ancient world!

## Reaching Out Now



The call to bring the hope of the gospel to the ends of the earth has now come to us. Together, the people of OSL have been “serving people and sharing Jesus” for decades, and God has used us to connect people to Jesus and to share the hope of the Gospel with many both close to home and abroad. This has happened in many ways:

- OSL has sent teams of short-term missionaries to Kenya, Mexico, The Dominican Republic, Latvia, Nicaragua, and Haiti—conducting eyeglass and health clinics, assisting with clean water projects, and more.
- Friends have invited other friends and family to worship and other events where the Gospel has been shared. Faith has been kindled through the preaching of God’s Word. Some have become believers. Others have returned to the faith of their youth.
- Children without families and homes have been adopted into OSL families, brought to Baptism, and taught the love of Jesus in

word and action. These kids now demonstrate the love of Jesus to us all.

- Together we raised \$25,000 to fund the recording of a portion of God's Word and the distribution of that



Word in the language of a people that previously did not have access to the Bible in their heart language.

- Through the Bridge, we have begun to share tangible expressions of hope through blessings of food and clothes, and have pointed many to the hope we have in Christ, bringing needs before the throne of God in prayer offered in Jesus' Name.
- OSL has supported Capstone Ministry in Kisumu in western Kenya and their important work of reconciling street boys with their families and with God. Over 400 boys have been reconciled with their families and shown the love of our Heavenly Father.
- Individuals and families daily bear witness to God's love in Christ in their workplaces, schools, and homes.

We praise God that he uses even us to share the Hope of Jesus!

# OSPCC

Among the many ways God is actively calling people to himself is through Our Savior Preschool and Childcare. (OSPCC) Here are three quick stories that give a glimpse of what God is up to:



- While recently talking with an OSPCC family at the Live Nativity, they shared with me (PRP) that they have worshipped with us a few times. The mom was asking about Sunday school opportunities for her daughter. I was able to talk with her about Faith Quest and VBS. She also shared with me how

her daughter loves Bible time with Pastor John, and talks about Jesus all the time.

- A former student of OSPCC sought out an MFT at OSL because this student had positive experiences here in the past and felt safe coming here to share and work through the hard stuff of life.
- Dennis and Angela had their kids in OSPCC years ago. They recently began worshipping with us. Angela told us that in just a few months here, she learned more about God than in many years before. Wow! Praise God!

## Looking to the Future: What if?

Here we are, in South Windsor, CT at this time in human history. God has placed us right here for the good of our neighbors, that they might encounter God's love in Christ. That's where our hope rests. It does not ultimately rest in scientific progress or

government policy overhaul. Hope does not rest in us trying to be better people. Our hope rests in Christ, who alone forgives our sins, gives us life, and will make all things (even us!) new.



Who else needs this hope? Who else needs Jesus? How can we best share that hope where it is needed?

We have existing ministries like OSPCC and the Bridge that are poised to make a real difference in the lives of many for here and for eternity.

Even now we are positioned to share the hope of Jesus with many through OSPCC, where, at the start of 2018 we have 100 families entrusting us with the care of their children, and 38 staff members to care for them. What an

opportunity! These families come to us from all sorts of backgrounds, and carry with them a host of needs. How can we continue to build on the relationship we already have with them? How can we clearly demonstrate and SPEAK the good news of Jesus to them?

What if we created family nights so that OSPCC families can gather with us around a meal to learn from, share with, and support one another? What if we each committed to praying for these families and our staff by name on a regular basis? What if we extended our own care ministries (Stephen Ministry, Parish Nursing, MFTs, etc.) to the preschool families as well, and gave tangible expression of the love of Jesus? What else could we do?

The Bridge continues to grow to be a viable ministry through which the hope of Jesus is shared with our neighbors. But we can do more! What if we worked hard to connect people with even more than material resources, but also with coaching, training, and the same care and support ministries of our congregation?

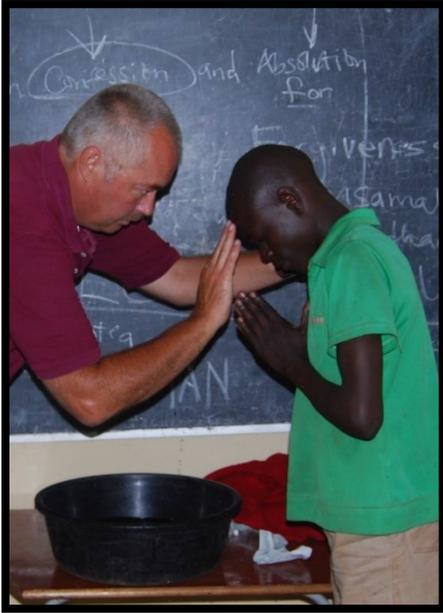


(Stephen Ministry, Parish Nursing, MFT, etc.) They did not end up in situations of need through one cause alone. Clients often have a whole host of needs—and also opportunities. What can we learn from them? How can we become partners with them in ministry and life?

The Bridge is also at the point where it would benefit from part time staff and even more space to keep this as a sustainable outreach of our Church. The ongoing and expanding impact of the Bridge will take a commitment of prayer, time, energy, and financial generosity from our whole church.

## To the Ends of the Earth

We have fantastic opportunities on the local level to make an impact on people's lives here and for eternity. But Jesus sends his church "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) with the Gospel, commanding that we make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). This is a big world with over 5.5 BILLION people who do not yet know Jesus—many who have never even heard of him. It might be tempting to simply shrug our shoulders and think, "Well, someone else will reach them." But we don't have that luxury. Jesus sends his entire church. That's US! And isn't it an honor to share the Gospel of Jesus? Absolutely.



So where do we take this message? How? Do we send and fund missionaries? Do we work with children in need? Do we work with people who are enslaved? Do we fund the translation and recording of the Bible? There are so many opportunities available. This will call for study and lots and lots of prayer. It will then call for a financial commitment. But it's exciting to think what could be accomplished for God's glory and his Kingdom if we work together in his strength!

## **Chapter 4:**

### **THE CALL TO REACH FOR THE RIGHT THINGS**

Some of the things we reach for in life require little to no effort. Some of the things we reach for will cost us only pocket change. But when we reach for the things that really matter in life—the things that God would have us reach for as a church—these things will often cost us something.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul talks about what he reaches for in life.

Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14).

He also talks about what he lost because of that reach.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things (3:8).

But Paul is also content with so much loss, because what he had reached for was eternally worth it.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus my Lord (3:8).

### **Three Free, Yet Costly Relationships**

At this point we're met with a paradox. The three relationships God calls us to reach for are free. And yet... they are also costly for us as individuals and as a community.

God's reach to us in worship is a gift. It was costly for him—we can only reach up in worship at the cost of his Son's life—and yet, he reaches down to us when we're broke and have nothing to offer him. But when we respond by reaching up to God in worship, it will always cost us something.

It will cost us time—time that is so often used for other things on the weekend.

It will cost us energy—we make a joyful noise to the Lord with all of our gifts, talents, and vigor.

It will cost us money—we only worship indoors with heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer because of our offerings.

Nevertheless, what we receive in worship is eternally worth it, and therefore worth the reach.

The gift of Christian community, like worship, is free. By grace alone God has made us members of his family and members of one another. But when we respond by reaching over in love to our brothers and sisters, it will cost us something.

It will cost us time, since relationships take time.

It will cost us patience, because people and relationships are messy.

It will cost us material resources, because we love one another with deeds rather than just words.

Still, the love we experience in community is eternally worth it, because the relationships we form in Christ are eternal.

Reaching out to the world with the hope of the Gospel is also free. In and of ourselves, we are not qualified to embark on such a mission, and yet, God still calls us. And while the call is free, it will always cost us something.

It will cost us our time, because people take time.

It will cost us money, because the mission requires resources.

It may cost us our reputation, because the gospel is not welcomed by all.

It may even cost us our lives, because the kingdom only comes with suffering.

And yet, whatever we lose is only pocket change in comparison to the reward—people who will share in reaching up in worship and over in community with us eternally.

## **Taking the Risk to Reach**

Some older members find it hard to get up and get moving in the morning. Even moderately bad weather makes a simple drive and walk into church potentially hazardous. And yet, they come! There is a risk. There is a cost. But they come, because, in worship, they encounter the Living God, and receive from Him exactly what they need. The reach is worth the cost.

There are some who experience social anxiety. They do not enjoy mingling with others—even people they know. It is difficult and uncomfortable. And yet, they make an effort to come to a Lenten dinner and worship. They serve at a block party or an Easter Eggstravaganza, because they know that they are part of something

bigger than themselves. They are committed to the Body of Christ. The reach is worth the cost.

One woman at OSL found it terribly awkward to pray out loud with others. But she tried. She practiced. She learned. She can put that hard-learned skill to practice praying with clients at the Bridge. It still may be awkward, but she has the honor of bringing the needs of another person to our Father in heaven. The reach is worth the cost.

Relationships are filled with risk. Relationships are costly. You can't be in a relationship without an investment of some sort. We've discussed three key relationships: our relationship with God, one another, and those who do not yet know Christ. We are called to pursue these relationships both as individuals and as members of our congregation.

Together, we aim to strengthen and facilitate the growth of these three relationships. Together, we will strive to reach up in faith, over in love and out with hope. To do this, it will cost us something. It will take time, energy, money and more. But the reach is worth the cost.

How will you get involved? How will you help improve our "reach" together as a congregation? Are there ministries with which you can connect? Places and people you can serve? What gifts and talents and passions has God given to you that could be used for the good of your neighbor?

And then there is the financial cost. Over the next two years we are praying for a \$500,000 expansion in the generous gifts of God's people to help fund the opportunities in front of us. That may sound ambitious. But to God this is a small thing—and essential for our reach.

**How has God blessed you?**

**How is God leading you to contribute?**

Please pray about all of this. Please pray for the opportunities in front of us. Please pray for our church leadership and pastors. Please pray for the Body of Christ in this place. Please pray for those with whom we interact and serve on a daily basis at the Bridge, OSPCC, our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. Please pray for a generous response to the amazing grace of God.

God is so good! In the midst of our desperation, God reached down to us in the person of Jesus. He rescued us! He restored us into a right relationship with himself. He is now our Father through faith in Jesus.

Our prayer is that this great work of God will inspire us to give ourselves wholly and joyfully into these relationships with God, one another, and a world who doesn't know Jesus.

**May God grant this for Jesus' sake!**