



Journey

Our Journey as a Community

The History of Cedar Ridge

Cedar Ridge Community Church was started in 1982 by a small group of friends from a variety of Christian backgrounds, including Brian McLaren who became our first full-time pastor. The church grew over the next 14 years, moving from place to place to accommodate its increasing size, until in 1996, after an outpouring of sacrificial giving, Cedar Ridge became owners of a beautiful 63-acre historic property in Spencerville, Maryland.

After Brian left pastoral ministry to respond to his call as a writer and speaker in the public arena, Matthew Dyer took over leadership in 2006. Seeking greater clarity and purpose for the future, the people of Cedar Ridge engaged together in a year of “re-envisioning the church.” Through this extensive process that included church-wide discussion and collaboration, a vision was formed based on the desire to become a people simply devoted to following Jesus and sharing God’s love.

Since then, we’ve worked to define more clearly what this vision looks like as an expression of our life together as a community. In 2009, we established a community farm, where we annually grow and give away thousands of pounds of produce for those in need. That same year, we also initiated a relational partnership with a community in Guatemala, where we have been able to love and serve, and where many of our own people have been able to visit, learn and grow.

Over the years, we have become a much more diverse community. We are now open and affirming of our LGBTQ family. Even though we have a long way to go, we are more racially diverse and are proactively engaged in racial justice and reconciliation. And we have made great strides in becoming a more integrated community for all ages, including children and youth. (You can read more about the history of Cedar Ridge, our property, and our various initiatives on our website: www.crcc.org.)

Your Turn!

Take some time to reflect on how you became part of Cedar Ridge, and when. This is part of our community’s story, so take some time to describe it. Record your reflections in the box below.

Our Vision

Our vision is expressed in the statement below, but it is important to realize that a vision only becomes real if it inspires us to embrace it and live it out. Words on a page are powerless in and of themselves, but if they inspire us to live differently, they can change the world. Our vision statement is more poetic than corporate with the hope it will capture our imaginations with a beautiful dream of the future.

Cedar Ridge is a community of hope and transformation dedicated to following Jesus.

Imagine a community that dares to dream of heaven on Earth; a diverse community where everyone is welcomed and respected and their journey cherished; a community where everyone belongs and looks out for the concerns of others, so no one feels alone.

Imagine a community of peace and safety where it's possible to shelter from the frenzied pace of life in order to slow down and explore the mystery and meaning of our existence; where we can take time to address the roots of our anxieties and pain; a place of hope where we can find help and healing and the power to change, no matter how desperate our situation.

Imagine a community of people devoted to following Jesus together, learning to live like him and helping one another grow in their relationship with God; where we are gradually transformed to become better people who enjoy life to the full and who can also deal with adversity well, learning to grow through failure and suffering.

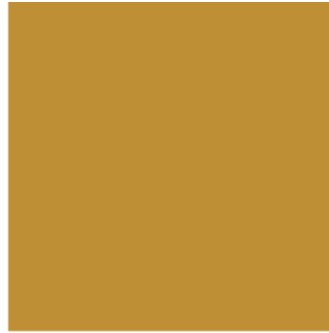
Imagine that community scattered throughout the region working as agents of love, peace, and hope wherever they are; serving our neighbors and pursuing justice with the oppressed and underserved.

Imagine a community of people who live simply and ethically, who share their land and resources with their neighbors; a community that treasures the Earth and reaches out beyond national, cultural, and political barriers to offer friendship and practical support.

Imagine a community of people who make the world a better place.

At the heart of our vision is discipleship—following Jesus and his way with our whole beings. Discipleship happens in three inseparable ways:

- **Growth:** growing in our understanding and experience of God
- **Community:** developing enriching relationships with one another
- **Servanthood:** serving and caring for the world around us



Reflection

Take some time to reflect on the following questions and record your answers in the box below.

1. How does the vision make you feel?
2. What do you like and not like about the vision?
3. What is most challenging for you about this vision?
4. How have you experienced personal growth, community, and servanthood at Cedar Ridge?
5. How would you like to experience more of these things?

Our Values

Unlike many churches, we don't have a denomination or a statement of beliefs to define who we are. We are an independent community church, composed of people from diverse faith backgrounds and none, held together by our shared desire to follow Jesus.

Following Jesus is a lifelong process—a journey—and we each set out from different places and walk unique paths. We do not all believe the same things, or agree on what is right behavior, but we share a common vision to follow Jesus through growth, community and servanthood. And we seek to pursue our vision through a commitment to the core values given below.

We accept everyone (no exceptions!), and seek to support one another as we continue on our journey of faith. You can read more about what holds us together as a community in Annex 1, "Unity In A Diverse Community."

Love: This is our highest value and the one that undergirds all our others. Love is what we see in Jesus, the way we define God, and the way we seek to relate to others. As followers of Jesus our journey is ultimately a progressive experience of oneness with God and oneness with one another. For us, love is our final authority and more important than being right. We will disagree on all manner of things, but we will always love.

Hope: We celebrate the reality embodied in Jesus that God never gives up on the world or any single one of us. This hope drives our commitment to transformation. As followers of Jesus, we believe we can all become healthier and more loving people, and the world can become a more just and loving place. We choose to believe the best about others, ourselves, and the future, and we work creatively and imaginatively to bring about new realities and possibilities.

Diversity: We welcome and treasure our differences embodied in race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, age and abilities and intentionally pursue a community culture where everyone has a sense of inclusion and belonging. We honor the different spiritual paths we have each walked and see our differences as a gift because we each have the most to learn from those who are least like us.

Humility: We adopt the servant-hearted posture of Jesus in putting others first. We are honest about our weaknesses and mistakes and authentically strive to

change. We pursue vulnerability in relationships, and are committed to working through conflict, rather than walking away. While striving to act and speak with integrity, we seek new understandings of ourselves and others rather than proving ourselves right.

Justice: We seek to live justly and work for justice in our relationships, our communities, and in society as whole. We express this personally (being the change we want to see in world) through our behaviors, what we buy, what we consume, and how we treat both people and nature. We express this corporately through the struggle against systems that perpetuate racial, economic, social and environmental injustice.

Journey: We see life as a journey and all of us are in process. That means none of us are the finished article so we can have patience with ourselves and others. Transformation takes time, so we are committed to faithful practice and not giving up. We embrace mystery and acknowledge the role of both faith and doubt in our journey, recognizing that it takes us into both new understandings as well as new uncertainties. So we remain openhearted and openminded: to God and to one another.

Reflection

Take some time to reflect on the following questions and record your answers in the box below.

1. How does the absence of a defined statement of beliefs at Cedar Ridge make you feel?
2. Which of these values resonates with you the most, which feels the most challenging?
3. Are there additional values you would have liked to see in this list?



Finding Our Way Together

Our Activities

We often think about following Jesus in terms of growth, community, and servanthood—and our activities, programs, and events are planned with these three elements in mind.

We view worship as an integral part of discipleship in our daily lives. In addition, as a community, we gather to worship through music and song, as well as through other art forms and media. On the first Sunday of every month we intentionally make this an intergenerational event.

Children and youth are a priority for us at Cedar Ridge, and we try to equip families to help their kids grow in following Jesus. Believing discipleship is based in relationships, we encourage all adults to interact with children and youth, and take responsibility for their growth.

Small groups provide a setting in which we can get to know one another better. By gathering in smaller groups (especially closer to where we live), we can better care for each other, help one another grow spiritually, and reach out to serve others together.

In addition to the care provided through small groups, pastors and congregational care team members provide prayer, encouragement, and practical support to community members in need, so that no one feels alone.

We want to deepen our awareness and understanding of historic and current racial issues that cause pain and inequities in our community and in society as a whole. Through events and ongoing activities, we seek to equip our community to live out God's vision of peace and justice.

We partner with the people of Ipala, Guatemala to address education and health issues—helping, in a small way, to make the world a better, more just place.

Through the Cedar Ridge farm, we provide fresh produce to neighbors in need, take a stand on the issue of food justice, and welcome neighbors onto our property to serve and celebrate the harvest with us.

We also address local economic justice issues—particularly focused on education and food—through a variety of ways, including advocacy support for low-income schools, monthly deliveries of toiletries, and seasonal collections.

Twice a year, our community gathers for a potluck breakfast before departing in groups to serve our community. There are projects for all ages and abilities, and we invite other faith communities, neighbors and friends to join us in this practical way of being the change we want to see in the world.

Throughout the year we host a variety of intergenerational events, all of which can be found on the calendar on our website.

Our Property

Cedar Ridge is located on 63 acres of woods and meadows, populated by a wide variety of wildlife. Bird boxes encourage nesting on the property, and beehives facilitate pollination and produce honey. Our land provides an opportunity for people to connect to nature, serve neighbors in need, and experience community.

The 8-acre community solar farm on our property reflects our commitment to treasuring the Earth. It provides renewable energy for up to 350 families in our area, including those who live on low to moderate income.

The prayer walk around our property includes 17 stations for reflection and takes about 45 minutes to complete. It includes a labyrinth—a sacred place of beauty and peace. Walking the winding path of a labyrinth is an ancient spiritual practice dating back thousands of years. The playground is open to all children, and there are even geocaches hidden around the property. Take some time to explore!

Reflection

Consider the following: What aspects of the life and work of our community excite you? Are any of these areas new to you? What would you like to learn more about? Are there things you would like to get more involved with? Write down your reflections in the box below.



Commitment to the Journey

Leadership at Cedar Ridge

We currently have three pastoral staff—Matthew, Ruth, and Wesley. As Lead Pastor, Matthew is responsible for the spiritual direction of the church and works closely with the other pastors to establish our course, run the day-to-day activities of the church, and monitor progress. Our leadership philosophy is about teamwork and collaboration rather than authoritarian.

As a nonprofit, we have an elected Board of Trustees that makes sure we comply with all legal and financial requirements, holds the Lead Pastor accountable, and ensures we remain true to our vision. Each year, pastoral staff works with leaders from across our community to develop an annual plan and budget, which are reviewed and approved by the Board, and then shared with the community as a whole. (Check out our website for more information: www.crcc.org.)

Belonging at Cedar Ridge

We welcome everyone (no exceptions!) to be part of our diverse community, and we seek to provide the space and time for each person to develop spiritually at their own pace. At the same time, we recognize our vision of hope and transformation invites us into commitment to help make the dream a reality.

We experience more of heaven on earth as we commit to caring for one another, as we take responsibility for growing spiritually, and as we seek to serve rather than be served. This requires a conscious, purposeful, sustained commitment to Jesus, to one another, and to ourselves.

Such commitment is not a cause for guilt, pressure or anxiety: Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. Rather, it is an exciting opportunity to partner with God in the work of reconciliation and healing—an invitation to help make the world a better place.

At Cedar Ridge, there are a number of ways of expressing commitment to following Jesus—both through personal discipleship, as well as through community engagement:

- **Membership**—If you feel aligned with our vision and values, and are not yet a member, we encourage you to prayerfully consider becoming one— regardless of how long you have been attending. (More information on our vision and values can be found in the Annexes.)
- **Baptism**—Our practice is baptism for adults and younger people who can give their own consent and are making a conscious decision to follow Jesus.
- **Child dedication**—As parents dedicate their children to God, we also dedicate ourselves to helping them teach and model the way of Jesus.

Your Turn!

Reflect on your own thoughts about commitment, and record your responses in the box below:

1. How does the word commitment make you feel, and why?
2. Do you feel more or less committed to following Jesus now than in the past? What has led to the difference?
3. Are there ways you (and your family) want to express commitment to following Jesus?





A Family Commitment

We recognize the decision of parents and other caregivers to be actively involved at Cedar Ridge typically has profound impacts on their children. We want to support families as they think through these issues, and consider the consequences for each family member. If you have questions or concerns about this, please feel free to contact Ruth Campbell (ruthc@crcc.org) for children, or Trish Audi (trisha@crcc.org) for youth.

Owning the Vision

Our dream of heaven on earth will only become a reality as we each “own” the vision, make it ours, and begin to live it out. Following Jesus together in community therefore means a number of things for each of us:

- It means being committed to engaging in the life of the church. Showing up to the service on Sundays, to small group meetings, and other events brings encouragement to us and to others. By participating—rather than spectating or being consumers—we demonstrate that we are the church.
- It means investing in relationships, making time for people, and putting our own concerns and needs aside to be present to others, listening with empathy, accepting one another in all our brokenness, and extending practical support. It means opening up our homes to one another, going deeper in some of our relationships, and widening our circles to include others in need of friendship.
- It means focusing on our own spiritual growth to increasingly become agents of love, peace and hope. To become more like Jesus, we take on the practices that Jesus engaged in himself. Through prayer and spiritual disciplines, we offer God space in us to help us change.
- It means giving financially to fund the programs and activities that support our vision. We also give as a way of responding to our vision’s call to live simply and ethically, sharing our resources with others. We give regularly and sacrificially, recognizing that everything we have comes from God and belongs to God.
- It means serving our community and our neighbors. This includes volunteering for specific tasks that need doing, as well as spontaneously responding when we see a need. We see serving as so much more than an obligation or a task: It is a spiritual discipline through which God shapes us. Serving is an opportunity for growth, and an expression of God’s love in us.

Reflection

Prayerfully consider your commitment to following Jesus at Cedar Ridge:

1. What does this look like for you?
2. How might you deepen or reaffirm your commitment?
3. What are the implications for your participation, relationships, spiritual growth, giving and serving?

Annex 1: Unity in a Diverse Community

*What binds us together as a community,
and do we need to all agree on matters of belief, behavior or practice?*

Our journey is what we have in common. We are all travelers. This is very important to us as a community because often in religious communities, belonging is determined by other things: believing a certain set of principles or theological beliefs, refraining from a certain set of behaviors, or acting a certain way. At Cedar Ridge, we recognize that everyone is different, with unique experiences and perspectives. That means we all set out on our journey from different places and walk unique paths, but we are all moving towards a common place: Christ. This is what makes us a community: not that we are all the same, not that we all believe the same things, not that we all agree about what is the right behavior. Rather, we are united by the fact that we are all in a process of following Jesus.

One way of describing this unifying element is to consider a metaphor from set theory (used in mathematics, sociology and other disciplines). For the sake of this illustration we will look at two types of sets: bounded sets and centered sets.

Bounded Set

In a bounded set, membership (belonging to the set) is determined by a very clearly defined boundary (figure 1). This strong boundary acts as a filter admitting certain people and excluding others (figure 2). This is not necessarily done in an unkind way; it's just how some communities define and determine identity. Boundary criteria in religious communities often require people to believe (or at least publicly profess belief) in certain specific things about God, the world, right and wrong, life, people, etc.

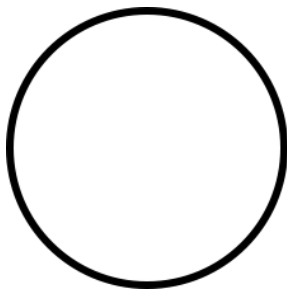


Figure 1: Strong boundary

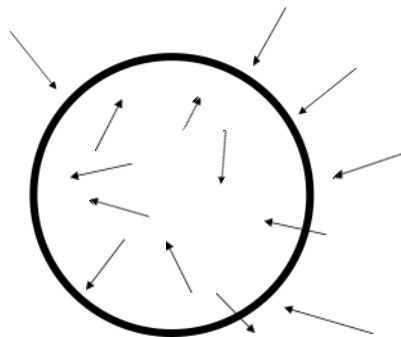


Figure 2: Strong boundary acts as a filter defining who's in and who's out

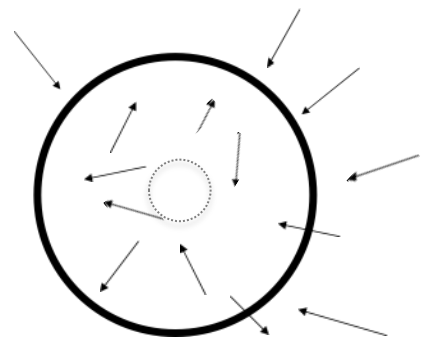


Figure 3: Soft center does not define movement within the set

In communities defined by strong boundaries, less attention is often paid to the "center," i.e., where people are heading once they qualify to get in. Such communities are said to have a hard boundary and a soft center (figure 3). The defining issues are around the boundary criteria, which are about "getting in", rather than on what happens within the community. Action can often be primarily around trying to conform beliefs and behaviors to the commonly understood boundary.

Some characteristics of bounded set communities are the following:

1. It is very clear who is in and who is out.
2. Belonging is usually determined by obvious, externally recognizable criteria.
3. Members form a homogenous group since entry and ongoing inclusion require conformity.
4. These groups tend to be static. The emphasis is on what people are like now (and whether they meet the required criteria) rather than on what they are becoming. The driving force is the boundary, not the center.

Perceived strengths of these communities are a sense of safety, as there is usually little ambiguity or confusion about what is acceptable, and people usually know what to expect. A sense of comfort can be felt in being with like-minded and like-living people. There may be not much complexity to wrestle with, and this can contribute to a sense of confidence and certainty.

Perceived weaknesses of a bounded set are the requirement to meet the standard before joining, and the need to maintain certain standards throughout. Doubt and struggles must be concealed, or when expressed, may be cause for non-inclusion. Certain people are often excluded from or belittled within bounded communities because of their views and practices. There may be very little diversity, or expressed diversity.

Centered Set

In a centered set, membership is determined by a very clearly defined center (figure 4). This strong center acts as a kind of “magnetic north” defining the activity, process and journey of the community. What defines the community is that everyone is moving towards a common center (figure 5).



Figure 4: Clearly defined firm center

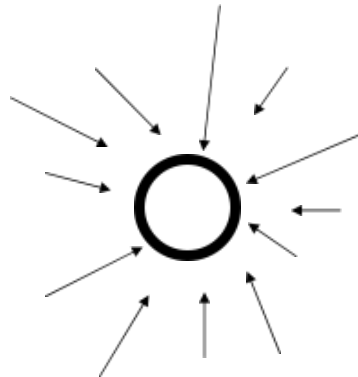


Figure 5: Clear firm center defines movement within the set

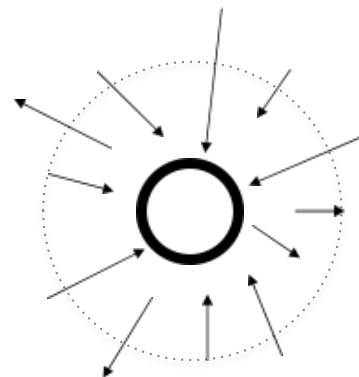


Figure 6: Soft porous boundary keeps set open

There is only a very porous boundary (if at all), so it is open to all (figure 6). What determines whether one is part of the community is not the boundary, but whether one is choosing to move towards the center. People approach the center from very different directions (the boundary is open) and move at very different paces.

In figure 6 above, some of the arrows are moving away from the center: membership is based on movement towards the center rather than on being inside a defining boundary and so people further away from the center but moving towards it might experience a deeper sense of belonging than those closer to the center but moving away. These kinds of groups are also not only easy to join but inherently easy to voluntarily leave.

Some characteristics of centered set communities are the following:

1. It is often less easy to determine who is part of the group.
2. Since belonging is determined by movement and a process (a journey) that is only evident over time, these groups tend not to evaluate people on external criteria (beliefs and behaviors) but create space for inward transformation to work itself out.
3. Members of the group are usually very diverse since there are no standard entry requirements.
4. These groups tend to be dynamic. The emphasis is on what people are becoming, rather than on what they are like now. The driving force is the clear firm center to which the group is moving.

Perceived strengths of these communities are that everyone is accepted and respected and anyone can belong. There is also a built-in dynamic of growth, as belonging is defined by movement towards the center, rather than a static adherence to boundary criteria.

Perceived weaknesses are that the community will be very diverse with lots of different opinions and beliefs, which can lead to conflict. There may also be ambiguity about what the community stands for without clear communication of vision and values. With a porous boundary, there might be a lot of turnover as it is low risk for inquisitive people to enter and spend time checking out the community, with some staying at the edges and others eventually leaving. These types of communities need to work hard at good communication and dealing honestly with conflict.

What kind of set is Cedar Ridge?

You might have guessed already that Cedar Ridge strives to be a centered set. Our community is defined by the following:

- a) **Firm center:** Our center is Jesus. We are a community devoted to following Jesus. Clearly we have a particular way in which we see and follow Jesus, which we call our vision. So in practical terms our center is our vision; this is what unifies us. But we must always keep in mind that our center is not some corporate vision that we have come up with for our own purpose, and that we try to enforce on others. Jesus Himself is the center, drawing us to Him. We are not the guardians of that process; we believe that God is in charge of that.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

John 12:32 (New Revised Standard Version)

- b) **Porous boundary:** We accept everyone, no exceptions. That does not mean we all have to agree with each other or accept all behavior as good. But we give everyone space and time to follow their journey towards the center.
- c) **Membership:** We value commitment; commitment to Jesus, to the journey, and to one another. This commitment is expressed in movement towards the center; taking steps on this journey. Commitment is not defined as being at any particular point on the journey at any given time.

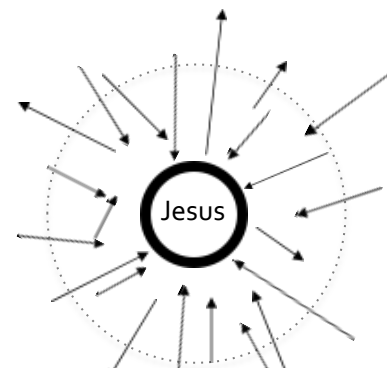


Figure 7: Cedar Ridge is an open community with Jesus at the center

- d) ***Journey to the center:*** There is no time limit. Change is not forced, and we recognize that true change and real movement take time.
- e) ***Diversity:*** We accept people. We don't try to change anyone, but point them towards the center. We don't assume we are always right about everything, and we seek to accept and learn from those who are different from us. This diversity creates a culture of transformation where we are all challenged.
- f) ***Openness and honesty:*** Bounded sets could result in people trying to conceal their real thoughts, doubts, beliefs and behaviors in order to gain entry and acceptance. This often results in a fake church culture where people "pretend to be good." In a centered set we encourage honesty and openness, and accept one another with all our faults and failings. This creates the opportunity for growth and change to happen.
- g) ***Reliance on the Holy Spirit:*** Only God really knows people's innermost beings. We put the pressure on God for change, and trust God for the journey that we are all on. We don't police change, but we do expect an atmosphere where we lovingly challenge one another to grow.

We are intentionally a centered set

Sometimes groups that are very open and accepting might appear to be just vague, woolly and spineless, as though they are just not prepared to be challenging, defined or strong. At Cedar Ridge we are a centered set on purpose. This is not a case of "anything goes;" we intentionally want to create this kind of environment because in it we see the greatest hope for people to follow Jesus. We recognize that many churches and religious establishments choose a different way, and we respect that, but we are passionate and purposeful about creating an atmosphere in which everyone has space to work out their journey.

In many ways being a centered set is much more risky. We have to trust each person is truly following Jesus and making Jesus-centered decisions, rather than demanding a certain set of behaviors or beliefs. It is messier. Maybe the most uncomfortable aspect is that it requires trusting in the mysterious, unseen and often imperceptible presence of God with us and with others, rather than the recognizable neatness and simple order that can come through placing confidence in standard behaviors, a moral code, etc. We won't have the "comfort in conformity" that a bounded set can sometimes bring, but rather, we are certain to be with others who believe and behave very differently. As a result, we will have disagreement and conflict, but we embrace these as healthy things and agents of potential transformation. This means we must be humble and diligent about conflict and not avoid it. This way of community has the potential for incredible transformation and beauty. It is a strong call to commitment, belonging and membership.

Our centeredness is rooted in history

Describing ourselves as a "centered set" is simply a metaphor to help explain what kind of community we are. There is no "centered set" movement or denomination that we belong to; no handbook on "how to be a centered set church." We are just trying to be true to the way of Jesus as we see it, and just trying to use language like this to help describe it. But we are not alone in pursuing Jesus in this way. Many other churches throughout history could be described in similar ways. In fact if we go back to the very early years of the church in the first few centuries, we can see a very similar approach to following Jesus.

Back then, as the early Christian movement grew throughout Europe, two approaches evolved. One, influenced from the church and culture in Rome, emphasized catechism. This meant that before someone could become a “Christian” and a member of the local church community, they would have to go through a series of often rigorous teaching and training in the faith (catechism) at the end of which they would be baptized “into” the community. This approach saw faith as good understanding of and adherence to the precepts of the church before being admitted to the community.

A different approach evolved among the Celtic tribes of Europe, led by people such as St. Patrick. The Celtic movement espoused “belonging before believing.” Rather than putting new members through catechism, they were welcomed into the community with all their pagan beliefs, attitudes and culture, and were able to witness first-hand the reality of what following Jesus meant. Through relationships and experiences, they grew in their own understanding, and had space and time in this diverse community to develop spiritually at their own pace. Ultimately, the Roman approach predominated in Christendom. Although we have great respect for and have gained so much from the Roman tradition, our understanding of community is more like the less common Celtic tradition, in many ways.

Annex 2: What Does It Mean To Be “Saved”?

What does it mean to be “saved” or “born again” as some people say within the Christian faith? This kind of language is usually used to define whether someone is “in” (a Christian) or “out” (a non-Christian). How do we understand that in light of our desire to be inclusive?

To address this we will briefly study some of Jesus’ words about it in the gospel of John:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

⁴“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

John 3:1-19 (New International Version)

Let’s look at some of the important issues related to this passage.

John's Gospel

John's account of Jesus' life is full of rich imagery, poetry and metaphor. It has a deep serious tone as he addresses profound cosmic issues. He embraces mystery and talks about heavenly, cosmic issues becoming earthly and coming into our reality. He starts his account off in such a way to describe Jesus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-5 & 14 (New International Version)

John loved to use the metaphors of light and darkness to describe spiritual reality, and in particular a theme of his is that Jesus is the Light, come to free humanity from darkness, but that humans struggled to understand this Light. Through this misunderstanding, further investigation results in humans being more illumined by the Light and gaining deeper understanding. John recognized spirituality as a journey.

Nicodemus

This account of Nicodemus exhibits these themes. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night (v2), perhaps because he is afraid of being seen with Jesus but John also seems to be inferring that Nicodemus is "in the dark" and he is coming to Jesus the Light. He is a very important religious person (v1): a Jew, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin (the highest legal, legislative and judicial body of the Jews). Jesus even refers to him as "Israel's teacher" (v10); a high accolade indeed. He seems to have a certain amount of respect and admiration for Jesus (v2) and Jesus meets him on his level and shares some challenging concepts. As the narrative moves on it seems that Nicodemus fades from the story (perhaps retreating back into the night). It's not clear whether Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus in the latter verses or whether John is narrating. Either way what Jesus shares is very important for us.

Born again

Jesus rocks Nicodemus back on his heels by saying that one has to be "born again" to see the Kingdom of God (v3). Nicodemus misunderstands, thinking Jesus is referring to physical birth (v4). But Jesus is speaking in heavenly terms rather than earthly. The term "born again" literally means "born from above" (*anōthen* in the original Greek). Jesus is talking about becoming a child of God and defining that as having nothing to do with physical birth but rather on a more mystical birth from above, from the heavenly realm, related to the Kingdom of God. This is an incredibly surprising and inclusive statement because at that point the prevailing view (and certainly the view of the religious establishment of which Nicodemus was a part) was that being a child of God was dependent on one's ethnicity: Jewish people were the children of God. Jesus is throwing the door wide open by saying that anyone can be a child of God, no matter their birth, pedigree or place of privilege. This would likely have been most troubling to Nicodemus because he is of the exact kind of pedigree that was supposed to qualify one as a child of God. It's important to see that the term "born again" has often been used in exclusive ways (to

determine who is in and who is out) but the context and overarching message of the passage from which the term comes is distinctly inclusive.

Salvation

Jesus seems to be defining salvation as being “born of the Spirit” (v5). Jesus comes into the world to bring God’s very life to us and this is explained in verses 16 and 17:

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Greek word used for “save” here is *sozo*. It means “healing” and “wholeness” and is also used when Jesus heals people of sickness. It is related to the Hebrew concept of *Shalom* meaning “holistic peace” or “life the way it should be” which in many ways correlates to the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced. The term “eternal life” in verse 17 might perhaps be better translated “life eternal” or “life without beginning or end”, another connection to *Shalom* or the Kingdom of God. So the term “saved” seems to have more to do with being healed and made whole, rather than fulfilling some judicial requirement that lets us off the hook for all the bad things we do. The emphasis is on what we are *being saved to* (healing, wholeness, shalom, the Kingdom of God, living meaningfully and well) rather than on what we are *being saved from*, because

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (v17).

It’s not hard to see that without the Light of God, we are perishing in the dark. Left to our own devices we do not seem to move towards health and wholeness. If that were the case, we would all be wonderful people and the world would be heaven. The fact is we are in a desperate state of perishing! But the message from Jesus is that God wants to save us from our perishing so that we can have real life. Salvation is about God not wanting us to perish in our own darkness. This message of unconditional love and great hope has been distorted—it’s not “come to Jesus or he will cause you to perish!”

Belief

The word for “believe” in verse 16 is the Greek *pisteuo*. The fuller meaning of this word is much more than assent to a proposition or intellectual acknowledgment of a fact. It means willingness to commit to, trust in, or follow someone. It’s associated with obedience (which implies followership). John uses the word around 100 times and always as a verb. It’s a dynamic, active, relational word set in the present, not the past. When Jesus (or John) says “whoever believes in Him” it does not imply a static acceptance of certain facts about Jesus that then qualify you for salvation. Rather it implies a process of trust, followership and commitment in the present moment through which we are being saved (healed and made whole).

Mystery

John’s theme of mystery is present in this passage. In all these matters of new birth, salvation and belief, John emphasizes mystery. In verses 6, 7 and 8 Jesus cautions us about evaluating who is in and who is out. If spirituality was a matter of physical birth (i.e. externally obvious issues) then it would be

easy to determine who is in and who is out. But since spirituality is of another world - of the Spirit - we cannot make such easy determinations, just as we cannot predict which way the wind will blow (v8). It's not for us to judge someone's salvation. That is God's business.

So what can we conclude from this passage?

- 1) We are not called to be gatekeepers of who is saved and who is not. This passage is about breaking down barriers, about letting people in, not keeping people out. The Pharisees saw themselves as gatekeepers and Jesus is resolutely challenging that role. It would be tragically ironic if we were to take these concepts of being "born again" and "saved" and use them as barriers to exclude people.
- 2) We do not know the real spiritual state of anyone for sure. Only God knows.
- 3) What we can do is address our own need for salvation every day.
 - Are we living in the light?
 - In what sense are we perishing? Being saved?
 - Are we following Jesus?
- 4) We can always encourage people to come to the light and point them towards Jesus.
- 5) Belief is not a statement; it's an active response to Jesus and a process of commitment and followership.
- 6) Likewise, salvation is not instant; it's a process of transformation (a journey) from darkness to light, from death to life, from perishing to life everlasting.

Different Christian traditions have varying views about the meaning of salvation. For some sacramental traditions (e.g., Roman Catholic) it happens through and at the time of baptism. For some Protestant traditions it happens through having the right beliefs about Jesus. For some traditions such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals it happens at a specific moment of divine revelation often pinpointed as a moment of conversion.

At Cedar Ridge, we believe salvation is what is happening to us when we follow Jesus, let the Light in and allow healing to take place. We see it as an ongoing journey, a process over time with many ups and downs. There are often many noticeable and important milestones on that journey such as when we submit to baptism as a symbol of our followership or times of deepening understanding about Jesus or even overwhelming moments of divine revelation, but we see all of them as part of a long journey of conversion to the Way of Jesus. We don't have altar calls at Cedar Ridge, we don't try to pressure or guilt people into "getting saved" but we do call everyone, all the time to follow Jesus, no matter where they are on their spiritual journey; not just to admire or even agree with Jesus, but to follow. In that sense, every moment of every day we call ourselves and the whole world to be saved.

Annex 3: New Member Affirmation

What Cedar Ridge Community Church invites you to join us in our journey of hope and transformation - being and making disciples of Jesus, in authentic community, for the good of the world.

With God's help...

Will you commit to follow Jesus? Will you be open and honest about your life? Will you earnestly engage in practices that help you grow to become a more loving and generous human being, and help others do the same?

"We will"

Will you commit to other people? Will you pursue life-giving, sacrificial relationships? Will you strive to believe the best about others, and work through differences; to be humble and forgiving, and to listen well and speak the truth in love?

"We will"

Will you commit to a life of servanthood? Will you generously help those in need? Will you practice hospitality and share your gifts, time, and money with others? Will you live a life that honors God by working for peace, justice, and healing in our world?

"We will"



CEDAR RIDGE
Community Church
a community of hope

2410 Spencerville Rd
MD 20868
www.cccc.org