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Introduction

Life is difficult. Growing up is a painful process. Growing old is definitely not for sissies. Of course it is the very young are still most vulnerable. For instance, more than 12 million children under five years of age die in the developing world every year, most from a combination of preventable causes. Meanwhile, here in America, young people face a tidal wave of troubles and temptation. When broken down minute by minute, the statistics are startling. Every 60 seconds 125 young people see their parents get divorced; 77 children are abused or neglected; 107 children are born out of wedlock; 325 teenagers become sexually active; 26 contract a sexually transmitted disease. Worse yet, every 90 seconds a teenager attempts to take his or her own life and every 90 minutes one succeeds. Children everywhere desperately need to be sheltered from the violence, hunger, ignorance and abuse of a world in which they find themselves overwhelmed. Adolescents need a place of shelter from the downpour of peer pressure, the flood of addictive substances, the deluge of seductive images, and the tsunami of stormy feelings caused in part by their own raging hormones. Meanwhile, worried parents are wringing their hands, biting their nails, pulling their hair, and praying non stop for wisdom and strength. Listen to the elderly and you will often hear them say that they are grateful they didn't have to grow up or raise a family in a world such as this. Nevertheless, they also feel battered by life's storms. Live long enough and we all face the fierce squalls of life's winter—the cold winds of loneliness, isolation, and social insecurity. Granted, some folks have it easier than others. But no matter how good you think other folks may have it, trust me, the bottom line is the same for everyone—life is tough.

## I

So here we are, young and old alike, gathered in this place called a sanctuary. Here we are, longing for a place of shelter. Here, at least for this brief hour, we find shelter from life's lightning-fast pace and thunderous demands. We gather here to escape from the world's rush to judgment. Here we are, yearning for forgiveness, acceptance, and the safety to be ourselves. The storms raging through our world are hazardous to our well-being and we know it. They are threatening the very fabric of our family and community life. We need of a place of shelter and God intends His church to be that place. Of all the *Great Ends of the Church*, the most central to the life of our congregation may be "*the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God*".

## II

Of course, it is not enough to simply come here to hide from life's tempests, is it? To be sure, we all need a place of sanctuary but this is only a temporary shelter at best, for the storms of life are not letting up. Therefore, in addition to shelter, we need the support necessary to ride out the storms which life will inevitably blow in upon us. That's why we pray "*Lord prepare me, to be a sanctuary pure and holy, tried and true.*" The purpose of church life is to nurture the spiritual resources that will enable us to live with thanksgiving and be a living sanctuary for God. In her book *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson suggests that "There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts. Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well fed creature, it reveals that something is missing from the diet of our rational, secular, and affluent culture." The truth is, we need to develop healthier spiritual eating habits and that means confronting the D word—DISCIPLINE. The Bible likens Christian practice of spiritual disciplines to an athlete who desires a strong and flexible body for the games.

The word *discipline* and *disciple* have the same root. You won't find one without the other. So ask yourself. What disciplines am I following to help me develop into a strong and flexible disciple? Think about it. Worship is essential, but the soul remains flabby and the spirit grows weak without the disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, study, dialogue, witnessing, fasting, self-examination, material simplicity and service. When we think of the church's nurture program we usually think of Sunday School, and when we think of Sunday School we usually think children. Yet, nurture of the children of God must, must, must include children of all ages. So, be honest with yourself. What are you doing in a disciplined way, to nurture your own spiritual growth? All God's children need of a place of nurture; and God calls the church to be that place.

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## IV

In other words, the purpose of the church is to help me and you grow up. **“No prolonged infancies among us, please.”**, pleads St. Paul. **“Well not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are easy marks for imposters. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. ... His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.”** To the extent that we, as a congregation fulfill our purpose to be a place of shelter and nurture, we will be a healthy Spiritual Fellowship—a people of warm-hearted hospitality. Together, **“we must grow up into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up.”** Spiritual fellowship is all about relationships. Our common relationship with God reveals a fellowship with one another that is otherwise invisible. We are not a political fellowship of the children of democracy. We’re not an economic fellowship of the children of capitalism. We’re not a consumer fellowship of the children of materialism. Rather we are a *Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God*. And that means we are a fellowship purely and simply because each of us is a child for whom Christ died. And when you think about it, who does that leave out? Not a single solitary soul. Jesus died for us all, and absolutely everyone is to be invited into the Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God. Some will reject Christ’s invitation but that’s God’s problem and I’m sure God has it all sorted it out. Our job is to be faithful, not judgmental. We have enough on our hands just trying to grow up— **to know the whole truth and tell it in love.**

## V

Ultimately, the church is a fellowship of eternal life revealed to those who experience communion with the eternal God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The 16<sup>th</sup> century creedal documents of the Presbyterian Church depict the church as an “ark of salvation,” a safe vessel on stormy seas. As one commentator points out, *“The primary functions of this church are to bring people to salvation—a right relationship with God—and to guide them in living the Christian life.”* Of course, when the church is pictured as the ark of salvation, the old joke soon surfaces. “The church is like Noah’s ark. If it weren’t for the storm outside, you wouldn’t be able to stand the smell inside.” True enough—the church is sometimes guilty of all the worst characteristics of any other human group. It is not always a place of safe shelter, the location of nurturing fellowship. But it is also true that we are in need of a place of shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship, and God calls the church to be that place.

## VI

So as we live into the future, what kind of church will we be? I think Hans Kung was right on when he addressed this question: “To what kind of Christian, to what kind of church, does the future belong?”

Not to a church that is lazy, shallow, indifferent, timid and weak in its faith;  
 Not to a church that expects blind obedience and fanatical party loyalty;  
 Not to a church that is a slave of its own history, always putting on the brakes,  
 Not to a church that is anti-critical, suspicious of empirical knowledge;  
 Not to a church that is quarrelsome, impatient and unfair in dialogue;  
 Not to a church that is closed to the real world.

In short, the future does not belong to a church that is dishonest.

No, the future belongs:

To a church that knows what it does not know;

To a church that relies upon God's grace;

To a church that has in its weakness and ignorance a radical confidence in God;

To a church that is strong in faith, joyous and certain, yet self-critical;

To a church filled with intellectual desire, spontaneity, animation and fruitfulness;

To a church that has the courage of initiative, and the courage to take risks;

To a church that is altogether open to the real world;

In short, the future belongs to a thoroughly truthful church.

#### Conclusion

The second great purpose of the church is like a spiritual tripod. One leg provides shelter—a place where we feel welcomed, accepted, forgiven, and safe. But standing on one leg alone is not very stable, is it? So, in addition to the shelter of this sanctuary, we need another leg. We need the church to nurture in us the disciplines of prayer, meditation, Bible study, stewardship, and service. Even then, a two-legged tripod is still quite precarious. That's why our life in Christ remains shaky until we stand with the spiritual fellowship of the people of God. We need fellowship around God's word to keep us honest, humble, and hopeful—to keep our faith from being blown about like a falling leaf. Life is tough. Without God's love, we don't have a leg to stand on. Thank God who gives us the church so we can stand firm—not simply on one leg, not even on two. But on the steady tripod of the shelter of this sanctuary worship, the nurture of spiritual disciplines, and the spiritual fellowship of prayer, praise, study, and service groups.

A few minutes from now, when we are all gathered around tables in fellowship hall, you will be invited to speak the truth in love about your experience of “shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship” in this church. Whether you are a first time visitor or a 50 year member, there is a place at a table waiting just for you.

Let us Pray:

Gracious God, help us to be the church you intended—a place of shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship—welcoming, affirming, and serving to all. Give us wisdom, faith, and commitment to overcome the barriers of apathy, anxiety and mistrust. Prepare us to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true.