THE FUTURE OF GRACE FOR YAKIMA – EXPANDED EDITION

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THE STATE OF THE CHURCH INSTITUTION

The statistics are clear. American Christianity is still within a state of deep decline. Over 90% of churches in America are declining. Four thousand churches are closing per year. The natural tendency is to find someone to blame before considering whether we Christians bear some responsibility for this state of affairs. The prophets of the Bible had a different way of thinking. As they document the building of the temple, a civil war that created different centers of gathered worship (Jerusalem or the "high places" of Jeroboam II), the fall of Israel to the Assyrians, and the fall of Judah to Babylon with the destruction of the temple, the prophets wondered if God had some cause to remove his presence from them.

Jesus came with the same prophetic spirit as he announced that God was leaving the Second Temple and would destroy it utterly. What is the accusation? "So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."[1]

The fruit of American Christianity mostly now seen as:

- Increasing alignment of churches with political parties
- Fracturing of institutions and communities through rivalry and conflict
- Decreasing attendance, averaging about 1.2 Sundays/month
- Declining giving
- Mistrust of institutions

This differs from the fruit of the Holy Spirit:

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control

Now, there are millions of faithful Christians who do bear this fruit in themselves. But our institutions don't seem to be known in America for these traits.

So, rather than blame, it is important to ask why things are the way they are? What are the contributing factors? What nuance can we bring to the situation to avoid simplistic responses?

It is helpful to understand Grace of Christ from a broad view of social change in order to see how the lived stories, the joys, the sorrows, the united missions, the conflicts and broken relationships have not only been shaped by individual choices, but by historical forces outside of individual control. This assessment of the state of current reality is not a judgment on individual or group success or failure. It is a tool to help understand why things are the way they are, and how Grace would have to have been exceptionally different

[1] Matthew 7:17-19.

to avoid the larger historical trends it experienced and embodied. Changing the future often requires understanding why the past is shaped the way it is.

Church strategies of the past can be broadly summarized by the kind of architecture they have used. At first, Christianity was a **household faith**, meeting in homes, sometimes converting houses into gathering spaces. This practice continues where Christianity is persecuted and among some groups who intentionally chose this method today.

With state affirmation and empowerment, Christianity moved into civil architecture—Roman basilicas, courthouses, and **temples**. This long period of "temple church" architecture spanned the majority of Christian history, and brought with it expectations of an institution that supported and often monopolized the civic life of Europeans. Grace of Christ's building enshrined this history in our architecture. As civic life has fragmented, as America has polarized, "mainline" downtown, architectural churches have suffered the highest rates of decline as they could not maintain the center-of-community purpose for which they were built.

Contemporary churches have moved to a "theater" model in which their architecture, like theaters, is oriented around efficiency and the production of high-quality events focused on performance. Whether cause or effect, the result is that Christianity is largely oriented around finding the church with the right music and right preacher who provide what is needed or desired for spiritual nourishment. Unfortunately, the very business model focuses on reaching largely homogenous people, entrenching division. Financial pressure means even old "temple churches" try to adapt and transform into "theater" models.

Grace of Christ is like many historic mainline Protestant churches in North America, older, largely not representative of the demographics of its neighborhood, focused on worship events that appeal to mostly homogenous demographic units. Grace is a "Temple Church". Its building is purpose-built for traditional worship events. Its architecture imitates the basilicas of late antiquity. Its organizational structure is focused on governance. Its assumed summary of the gospel has been related to language of sacrifice and the petition of God for benefits. It was founded as a civic institution and has had ties to the upper echelons of social and political life. It has functioned as a community chest, redistributing wealth through tithing and institutionally chosen giving to missions partners. Grace is a Temple Church in the midst of a world long focused on the newer Theater Church model. Temple churches belong to a bygone era in Christian history. Theater churches are modern, relevant, often short-lived, and enshrine a consumer, echo-chamber mentality evident also in civil life and on social media. Temple churches acted like the government. Theater churches act like businesses.

Grace cannot become a Theater Church. Its sanctuary is unsuited. Its ongoing maintenance costs are too high. The numbers don't work. And what's the use of imitating the success of other businesses when you have the possibility of seizing a Jesus-shaped alternative!?

Grace has everything it needs to leapfrog the Theater church trend and become an Embassy of the Kingdom of God that equips ambassadors of reconciliation. An Embassy model of church focuses on developing something like an expat community, becoming a community hub for equipping citizens of the Kingdom of God to live, thrive, and represent their homeland well. This, as the next section will show, happens to be the gospel that the Bible presents when read as a coherent whole.

But hope can dim by the seeming decay around us. For generations now, the narrative of secularization and decline has held the church of North America captive in cycles of trying to find quick fixes. Some of you may have lived through the Jesus People and coffeehouse Christianity, through megachurches, seeker sensitivity, evangelism explosion, elevator gospel pitches, gospel tracts, the emerging church, fresh expressions, the religious right, the moral majority, missional communities, small groups, prayer partners, and more. There's always the next 12 steps to transform your church. But for as good as many of these have been, they have demonstrated that the decline has not been for want of trying *methods*. **Perhaps the decline has a more basic root cause—changing beliefs that fit changing people living in changing times.**

The words and symbols of Christianity (or any other tradition) don't remain static. They are stewarded by people who pass meaning on through life and story. The Christians of early medieval England, for example, had wildly different priorities, clung to different ideas, lived and died for different causes, dressed and behaved Christianly in ways moderns find strange. They fought deeply about the right date for Easter and experienced division because of this question. Christianity and its words, symbols, and institutions are always in need of returning to the sources (*ad fontes*), to the Word of God, lest we use the words, symbols, and institutions to express ourselves in God-shaped words, rather than revealing God in human ways. Reformers of the past expressed this by saying "The Reformed church is always reforming!" What better evidence for the need of reform is there than a movement that declines in spite of all efforts at trying the latest thing?

PLIGHT OF THE MAINLINE

Local churches, particularly of the historic downtown mainline variety, like First Presbyterian/Grace of Christ, have been the hardest hit by late 20th century and early 21st century trends. These are churches that were often founded before cities were incorporated, built as centerpieces around which the town and then city would grow, and were therefore focused on uniting architectural and civic ambition. The grand church buildings portrayed hope for a growing future. After WWII, suburban development drew working professionals out of the city center, leading to many cities in the United States experiencing urban decay, compounded by the development of the shopping mall, and then suburban strip mall. Without wealthy financial or tech-centric redevelopment of downtown areas, many rural or semi-rural places in America have faced continued city-center vacancy and dereliction. Churches in those spaces have likewise struggled to compete with suburban churches, built for efficiency, built in the same shopping-centric strip malls, focused on the new and trendy, and on brand development more than community development. The attendance and revenue decline of Grace of Christ is matched by similar churches across North America, a process that has been ongoing for decades now.

AN INNOVATIVE AND CIVIC SPIRIT

John Roddick Thompson, a Presbyterian leader from Olympia, led the first Protestant worship service in what was then North Yakima on March 8, 1885 at Mr. Shull's boarding tent located by the newly built railroad line on Front and Yakima Streets.[2] First Presbyterian Church was first, pioneering the way in a new era of history in the Yakima Valley. Thompson had already been advocating for two years to develop a church in the Yakima Valley. Other Presbyterians were similar pioneers of the era. Sheldon Jackson planted Presbyterian churches throughout the American West up into Alaska. Our church began as a first mover, a leader, not waiting for others to follow, but looking for opportunities and seizing them quickly.

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[2] Helland, Maurice. *Tent to Tower,* 9-12. There were two (non-Presbyterian) churches already built in Yakima City (now Union Gap) that chose not to move when the railroad determined its new station would be four miles north in the new North Yakima, now the City of Yakima.

First Presbyterian Church, like most churches that share that historical name, was founded as a "Temple Church" during a growth and development phase of American westward expansion. It functioned to support a community of Christians who had theological and ethnic ties to the tradition, which is largely Scottish (and Ulster Scot/Northern Irish) in origin. This is evident in the heritage of its charter members. "Most of the members were in their 30s or 40s and a majority, not surprisingly, were of Scottish birth or descent."[3] As *Tent to Tower* outlines well, First Presbyterian grew rapidly along with the growth of the city of Yakima. During the tenure of Dr. Ferry (a Scot himself) between 1920 and 1940, the city of Yakima doubled in size and church membership went from 690 to 2295.[4] In 1940 with a population of 27,221 residents, that made approximately 8% of Yakima members of First Presbyterian. First Presbyterian Church was a civic-minded institution from its inception as the first Protestant church in what was then North Yakima. And its fortunes have unsurprisingly been connected to those of the city itself. Prominent named parks, schools, businesses, and streets are found also in the membership and leadership rolls of First Pres.

A DIFFERENT POPULATION

Yet, Yakima has changed significantly over the decades. In the 100 years since Dr. Ferry led this congregation, the population has grown to over 100,000, and the number of churches has expanded to 83.[5] What was once an English and Scottish church that had to close a sister church in Moxee due to French and Dutch immigrants outnumbering the English speakers,[6] Yakima itself is now a city where 44% of households don't speak English at home.[7] Our neighborhood A.C. Davis High School is about 88% Hispanic, and 75% from low-income families.[8] Migration is the story of Yakima from its beginning through today.

FROM CIVIL RELIGION TO POLARIZATION

First Presbyterian Church was founded in a time of social division based on country and culture of origin. While ethnic and religious difference led to different towns having different church traditions, the great homogenizing ("melting pot") of economic development created generations who were willing to work together for a common civic goal. Ethnic division is no less apparent today, even if the lines are different.

Scholars of religion describe Christianity in America in the 20th century as "civil religion." This was most notable in Dwight Eisenhower's additions of "In God We Trust" to money, and "One nation under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance (1954), in part to combat atheistic communism then on the rise in the global east, and in part in response to a Presbyterian sermon he heard sitting in the same pew that Abraham Lincoln had rented and whose words from the Gettysburg Address inspired the phrase.

Attempts to reassert this Christian-dominated civil religion remain to this day, of course. But the differences between 1954 and 2027 are significant. Rather than united under God against communism, Christianity is similarly polarized and churches have become largely aligned with specific party platforms. Christianity is not a symbol of national unity, but the battleground of culture war. "White Evangelical" is a large category political strategists engage as most predictably Republican. Progressive churches proudly display flag symbols

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[3] *Tent to Tower*, 12.
[4] *Tent to Tower*, 53.
[5] This number varies somewhat by source and where boundaries are drawn.
[6] *Tent to Tower,* 22.
[7] Yakimavalleytrends.org. Accessed 10/13/26.
[8] Greatschools.org. Accessed 10/13/26.

of progressive movements, be it the LGBTQ flag, a Palestinian flag, Black Lives Matter flags, or various others. There is an expectation that churches publish their stances on specific issues, so church-shoppers can find the places that align best. Churches are expected to be echo-chambers for positions established outside of churches themselves. They are subordinate organizations.

First/Grace and its parent denomination ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians has aimed to avoid this polarization. But this is a hard path to walk when the cultural norm demands churches declare their social platforms and allegiances.

While there is hope that the trends may be shifting with reports of renewed interest in Christianity from Gen-Z; Christianity in America, at least in terms of regular church attendance, has broadly been in decline for many decades and recent stories of revival has not made a significant impact on the larger trends. In any case, it is not the historic mainline denominations that are typically noticing growth. Hope for the future can't be placed in trends and statistics, not in returning to the old ways, not in adapting to society, but in developing a first-principles approach to institutional redesign. The question we have to ask for ourselves as Christians in the 21st century is *not*, "How do we maintain, grow, or save our beloved institutions and get younger generations to love them" but "What gifts do we have to give to the Church of the future?" Relationships and community are built through gift-giving and it is through giving of ourselves and our best gifts that our community will grow and our institution will be prized by those who aren't currently part of us.

Christianity must cope with the fact of broad cultural critique and rejection and look itself in the mirror of Scripture. There is hope for the future. But that hope is found in rediscovering the good news of the Kingdom of God and God's commissioning of coworkers to represent that kingdom to a world enslaved to the "domain of darkness." If we begin with the truth of Scripture and redevelop a vision of church for our time and place, we find a profoundly hopeful situation! The world has never needed the gospel of Jesus Christ expressed in local communities of Christians more than it does today.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

The gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change the world in totality by changing individuals and communities.

More than politics, more than technology, more than economics, *it is the power of what people believe and the stories they tell that drive the world.* The question that drives people to thrive in life, or to despair of it, is "why?" and that question can only be answered by telling a story.

Christians tell just such a story. We call it a "gospel."
But somehow, the major point of conflict in Christianity today is around the gospel. The fundamental problem is, we're not telling the same story, but we all claim that we are telling the one true story. So we divide.

What if Christians have lost the plot? That is, instead of the *story* of the Bible, Christians have distilled it into specific formulas, doctrines, and codes that function as *boundary markers* or *fences* to show loyalty and integration with other human groups. Because of this, Christians often talk past each other. We often don't tell the plot of the Bible and the story of God and his creation, we instead focus on a specific small aspect of the story and make it the whole. For some this is liberation and social justice. For others this is good human wisdom. For still others it's all about justification and the death of Jesus. For others it's about being empowered with supernatural ability. And for yet others, it's about a spiritual connection with a higher power.

The Bible has all of these elements. Yet the Bible manages to hold them all together with a story summed up (*recapitulated*) in Jesus Christ. And it holds this together by *embodying the story in a diverse people.* In that story, God has an ongoing desire to develop people who can bear great responsibility by being formed into the character of Jesus *as a community*, the "body of Christ."

The local expression of God's people represents the best and greatest hope for all creation, for these are the communities where God's story is lived out on display. A people who seek to humble themselves in the presence of the Creator, who seek the Creator's will in all things, who are called to be ambassadors of the God who is reconciling all things to himself, have the power to *change the hearts and minds* of people who have been formed in a world of injustice. And that change will impact all fields of human endeavor. This doesn't happen through the application of debated moral principles, but through the transformation of *structures of meaning.* In other words, the gospel rewrites the operating system of the human mind. And it does this by *the creation of a Christ-shaped community*, or "the church".

When we turn to Scripture to rediscover what God's relationship with his people is in the Old Testament, what Jesus is doing in the New Testament, and what the other authors make of all this, we can rightly combine this into a simple formula: The church is the people of God, on the mission of God, becoming the image of God in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, participating in God's glory.

THE CHURCH IS THE PEOPLE OF GOD

In the beginning, God chose people to serve as his representatives, his "image."[9] His people are those who acknowledge his authority and desire to learn his character from him.[10] The people of God are not related to one ethnic or national group, but are all those who do the will of God and are faithful to God.[11] Church is a people, a community, a body-politic. It is not a building,[12] institution, world-order, governance structure, or worship event. The church is a whole new birthright,[13] a whole new genealogy, a new people into which the orphans of the domain of darkness[14] can be born from above into the kingdom of Jesus.[15]

THE CHURCH IS ON THE MISSION OF GOD WHO IS RECONCILING ALL THINGS TO HIMSELF IN CHRIST

In Genesis, God chose Adam and Eve and "brought them to rest"[16] in his palace garden.[17] There God commissioned them to be his representatives, giving Adam the task of naming the animals, a symbol of authority. They were to "serve and protect" the garden, as a trial run of elevating them to God's "divine council" where they would serve as delegated rulers over larger territory beyond the walled garden.[18] Genesis 2-4 does not present the world outside of the garden as sinless and pristine, but as desolate and threatening.[19] The picture is clear and continues throughout the Bible—God chose his people expand his garden, not through conquest, violence, or cultivation,[20] but through forming right relationships with the people and creatures of the land.[21] God's covenant with Abraham is for his family to be a blessing to all.[22] He is trained to mediate conflict[23] and intercede for the innocent.[24] Even in captivity, in exile, and in diaspora, God's people are a blessing when they reveal the character of God.[25]

God has established his people, called from every nation, to bear his mission of reconciling all things to himself. God is patient. His greater desire than achieving justice now is forming worthy heirs. God does not will that any should perish, but that all should repent.[26] For this reason God forms a people, so that judgment does not lead to destruction, but to forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing.

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[9] Genesis 1:26-27.
[10] Matthew 11:29; Philippians 2:5-11.
[11] Matthew 12:50.
[12] 1 Kings 8:27; Acts 7:48.
[13] John 3:5.
[14] Colossians 1:13.
[15] 1 Peter 1:3; 1:23.
[16] Genesis 2:15. The word "put" here is better translated "caused to come to rest".
[17] "Paradise" comes from a Persian word meaning palace garden.
[18] Note how Jesus operates with this understanding in the Parable of the Talents. God delegates property and expects a return on the investment in order to grant that those who are faithful in small things would be given increased authority.
[19] Of whom is Cain afraid? Why is there a land of wandering? Why does Cain need God's protection? (Gen 4:13-16).
[20] Genesis has a very apparent critique of settled agriculture from Cain's rejected sacrifice of grain to the punishment of Adam having to scratch out a living in infertile ground.
[21] The line of Cain conquers the land and builds. The line of Seth ends with Noah whose name means rest. "This one shall bring relief from our work" (Gen 5:28).
[22] Gen 12:2.
[23] Gen 14:21-24, in which Abram shows shrewd skill in refusing a gift that might bring a debt that binds him to further military obligations.
[24] Gen 18:22-33.
[25] E.g. Daniel.
[26] 2 Peter 3:9.

For this reason, God sent his Son Jesus as the fulfilment of Torah and Prophets, to make a new covenant, one that is open to any and all people who want to be children of God. Christ's death accomplished many things. It was for the forgiveness of sins. It was for freedom from the power of evil. And it was for the renewal of human minds so that the character of God could be formed anew in his people, who are commissioned to once again spread the garden of God, his reign of abundant life in the manner of his character. Making disciples of Jesus Christ is another way to phrase the call of Abraham, to be a blessing to all peoples, and to make a great new people who show what God looks like to the world.

"Through Christ, God reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors of Christ, God making his appeal through us." 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.

THE CHURCH IS BECOMING THE IMAGE OF GOD IN CHRIST

*For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the **image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:29)*

God is a Father not because he provides only, but because God adopts children whom he desires would all come "to maturity to the measure of the full stature of Christ."[27] God does not seek worshippers but inheritors who can bear responsibility for the creation. This only comes through formation. Formation is not simply a "spiritual" activity activated through prayer, fasting, or other disciplines; it is a whole-life formation in a whole-life community, as Jesus himself demonstrated by feeding people and giving them water. Formation comes not only by retreats, but by integrating all parts of our lives into the kingdom of God. This is what it means to "present your bodies as living sacrifices… which is your act of logical worship". Paul links this "living sacrifice" to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds."[28]

The image of God promised to Adam and Eve is not about "what it means to be human" but "what it means to represent God." Humans do not represent God by being human. That's how we make gods out of ourselves, how we make heaven a cosmic mirror. The image of God is Jesus Christ, and him alone.[29] We image God as we show the world Jesus' character formed in us.

The gospel demands an "embassy" approach to the world. Why? Simply being human, finding our identity in human categories, is to be "conformed to the patterns of the world" and to "walk by the flesh." No matter how much good those categories have—nation, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, language, profession, age—they are to be brought to be a sacrifice in order to become a child of God.

The gospel isn't about the "conversion" of the mind through faith statements, or the inner life through spiritual practices or experiences (though it involves those), it's about the bringing of our whole selves to be transformed into the image of God by becoming like Jesus and thus showing Jesus to the world.

The church is the family of God's people, growing each other up until we all attain maturity and can bear burdens for others.[30]

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[27] Ephesians 4:13, NRSV.
[28] Romans 12:1-2.
[29] Colossians 1:15.
[30] Galatians 6:2.

THE CHURCH WORKS THROUGH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

The Holy Spirit is one of the most talked-about, but least-understood aspects of the Bible. The Spirit has been utilized by various traditions in different ways. And most of the misunderstandings between traditions revolves around methods of access to and demonstration of the reality of the Holy Spirit. The focus is often on miracles or special powers. But the New Testament is clear on this more basic point—the Spirit is the authority of God. That is, those who are born of God live by a different authority to those born of the flesh. Those who are filled with the Spirit walk according to the Spirit.[31] They behave differently because they are filled with a different authority. As with the magicians of Pharaoh vs. Moses,[32] or the magicians of Jesus' day,[33] the Bible doesn't see that spiritual power is restricted to the Holy Spirit. *It's the character of the Holy Spirit that matters.*

So, the Bible also links spirituality with whole-life kingdom-orientation, not with only activating a specific inward part of human experience. The Bible's story is one of authority, of mastery, of enslavement. The language of flesh vs. Spirit is about which one of these is our master. Paul likes the word "flesh" but John prefers the "world". And the Bible's understanding of authority uses language of "love."[34]

We live in a pragmatic world. It forms itself and people according to what works. It is self-referential. It acknowledges no higher authority than what works, what has power, and what activates that power for our success. This spirit of the age presents its own kind of mastery in adapting to the market, to technology, to political pressures. This is a form of spiritual formation and mastery too.

Christian formation is about "keeping in step with the Spirit," living by the Spirit, which bears fruit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.[35] And this list should look similar to Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, "Love is patient, love is kind…"[36]

The Holy Spirit empowers the church to be the church as he forms us into the image of God in Christ. Division, dissentions, rivalry, jealousy, envy, are all fruit of walking by the flesh.[37] Church institutions and communities walk by the flesh when they use their traditions, their favorite teachers, preachers, or theologians, when they cling so tightly to human doctrines that they cannot associate with others in love pursuing peace.

The Holy Spirit enables church institutions to take kingdom risks. This isn't because the Spirit is opposed to planning, research, and critical thinking, but because the Spirit is the power of God to reveal his kingdom. The Spirit gives us the confidence that, as we do our responsible part, as we "seek first the kingdom of God," that God will add to us what we need to thrive.[38] The Holy Spirit is the bond of love that draws us toward one another,[39] not an esoteric power that leads us to isolation or division.

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[31] Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16.
[32] Exodus 7-8.
[33] Acts 8.
[34] Matthew 6:24. Note that Jesus here is invoking the same contrast. It's not the love of "money" as in currency/cash, but in terms of material possessions, the things that gratify the flesh but that kill our character, our soul, as in Matthew 16:26.
[35] Galatians 5:22-23.
[36] 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.
[37] Galatians 5:20-21.
[38] Matthew 6:33.
[39] Romans 5:5.

The Holy Spirit is an ambassadorial power. It transforms our authority structure away from human, fleshly, worldly identities and loyalties, and conforms them to the will of God and the formation of people into his image through community-developing relational fruit.

THE CHURCH PARTICIPATES IN GOD'S GLORY

The gospel is not only about humans giving God glory, as though God is a demanding king who requires all praise. Praise is not a duty owed to a divine dictator, but the joy of those who have been saved and transformed. God's glory is his weightiness, his importance, his brilliance in the Bible.[40] But God does not want to keep this to himself. God desires that his glory would fill the earth,[41] not in an overwhelming way, but by his people reflecting his glory throughout all creation.

Paul describes this distributed glory thus, "and we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."[42]

The church doesn't exist to simply worship God with songs and sermons and special events. In fact, God "hates" worship that isn't backed up with deeds that demonstrate his character.[43] "Faith without works is dead."[44] God is most glorified when that glory is distributed and displayed through good works,[45] not when it is centralized in ritual.

Thus, the idea of an embassy church is that the light we shine to the world is manifest in authentically integrated faith, words, and works, and that people are attracted to the light of God that shines in darkness.

A THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY: AMBASSADORS OF RECONCILIATION

All the theology of the church is summarized in the simple phrase Paul gives in 2 Corinthians 5:20. We are ambassadors (elder statesmen and women sent on a delegation) of reconciliation. This is an identity for Christians that summarizes the greatest commandments: Love God, love your neighbor.[46] The enactment of this is worth more than all sacrifices and worship in the world.

As ambassadors, "our citizenship is in heaven"[47] and "no one can serve two masters."[48] Our first loyalty is to the kingdom of God and it is our task to live out this identity authentically by refusing to make human identities primary and dividing against Christians. This does not mean we ignore truth. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that *God is true* and human speech, no matter how well considered, can only reach toward truth as we are true to God. God *condescends* to us in human words through human messengers and God is known not by words, not by knowledge, but by love.[49]

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[40] "Shining" lights in a pre-electricity world were almost always personified as sources of great power.
[41] Isaiah 6:3; Ezekiel 43:2
[42] 2 Corinthians 3:18.
[43] Isaiah 1:11-17.
[44] James 2:17.
[45] Matthew 5:17; Ephesians 2:10.
[46] Mark 12:29-31.
[47] Galatians 3:20.
[48] Matthew 6:24.
[49] 1 John 4:12.

Revealing the character of God as his ambassadors also means that we do not judge.[50] God has not judged us, we do not pronounce closure on others. We do not condemn the world, but neither do we affirm it. Instead, we invite, "come let us reason together."[51]

A THEOLOGICAL PURPOSE: GRACE OF CHRIST IS AN EMBASSY OF THE KINGDOM

Grace of Christ exists to be an embassy of the kingdom of God in Yakima, leading the way in equipping ambassadors of Christ, fostering reconciliation, cultivating the community of Christians who gather here, sparking collaboration across institutional boundaries, and so revealing in small ways samples of what God is working to do in all creation—to reconcile all things to himself.

[50] Matthew 7:1-2; Romans 2:1-5.
[51] Isaiah 1:18.

THE BUSINESS OF GRACE OF CHRIST

FINANCIAL CHANGE

The business of running a church has significantly changed in the past century. "Temple churches" like First/Grace historically have relied on a culturally assumed Christianity that included theologies of tithing and stewardship. That is no longer part of the broad cultural narrative. It was historically believed that wealth and success were indicators of divine favor. This is not a Christian belief in particular, but one that finds expression throughout pre-Christian and later religions as well. Success in worldly affairs almost inevitably leads people to believe that the successful are closer to sources of power and wealth, blessed by God or the gods. We still talk about these people as "stars," "celebrities," "idols," and even "divas." Calvinism, the theological strand that historically inspired Presbyterianism, has been noted for its work ethic. Max Weber, the sociologist who identified and analyzed the "Protestant Ethic" points to predestination and the need to demonstrate God's favor by worldly success as instrumental in the founding of modern capitalism. Adam Smith, whose 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations* is regularly seen as the birth of capitalism, was a Scot, the product of Presbyterian culture.

The idea that God blesses the righteous with worldly success and who must then steward the wealth God has supplied to them through tithing and philanthropy is, again, not unique to Christianity. It is evident in much earlier religions. Tithing, even, is widely evident in Greco-Roman pagan religion, and ancient Greek and Roman temples were the banks of their own time, as seemingly the Temple of Jerusalem had become in Jesus' time when he clears it of moneychangers.

Theater churches sometimes double-down on this logic. Prosperity gospel churches and televangelists make direct investment claims, that giving money to a ministry is giving money to God, and that God rewards acts of faith with a 10x ROI or health benefits. But more responsible theater churches understand that their funding model is based on the value-add they provide to their attendees and treat fundraising in line with most other non-profits and do not feel the need to theologize it. But whether irresponsible or responsible, theater churches do not claim to be the community chests or proto-banks that temples and Temple Churches once represented in civilization. The job of the church has long ceased to be the pooling and redistribution of wealth, even though this is an essential role at its founding in Acts 2.

Giving is no longer centralized in a temple, but goes directly to transparent organizations with missions that donors value. Churches uniquely do not have to file IRS form 990, which means they are typically far less transparent financially than other non-profits. And during the 20th century, numerous Christian non-profits or parachurch organizations were established with specialized missions, and which typically directly fundraise rather than relying on community-chest churches. Christianity is no longer vertically integrated. It outsourced, specialized, and has ended up with churches focusing almost solely on gathered worship events. This specialization on worship contributes to the consumerization of worship, as church institutions focus the majority of their differentiation on the worship event rather than the shape of a wider community life. This also makes narratives of tithing and stewardship that focus philanthropy through a single institution hard to maintain when donors are being asked to give to a variety of Christian organizations.

Simply put, churches as worship centers no longer own the stewardship narrative. So, they must focus on developing a competitive product/service.

TEMPLE VS. THEATER? EMBASSY.

One of the greatest challenges churches like First/Grace face is that they were built in an entirely different season of Christendom, replete with different theologies, governing structures, congregational expectations, worship practices, and civic relationships. First/Grace was part of the civic fabric of Yakima. Modern theater churches are more value-add focused. They facilitate personal spirituality, an individual relationship with Jesus, experience-driven worship events in blank-canvas warehouse-style steel buildings. They are highly efficient, maximizing congregation-to-pastor ratios. They are highly attractional, keeping up with trends, working hard to stay relevant. They work to develop a community by branding, advertisement, and other corporate practices. And they are largely suburban institutions.

By contrast, temple churches are inherently economically inefficient. They are not multi-purpose facilities. They are durable, quality buildings, focused on using architecture to give God glory in themselves. Stained glass, organs, choirs are all harder to maintain and have fallen out of favor as modern music has gained ascendancy. Where most churches once had organists, nearly all churches now need paid worship technology workers.

We don't need to evaluate this as good or bad to recognize that Grace of Christ is a historic institution and building that cannot compete financially with modern churches. But with the ~83 churches in Yakima, with new ones starting and satellites coming from other, bigger cities, Grace can lead change by not adapting to the modern modes of theater church business.

A COMMUTER AND LOCAL CHURCH

While Grace does have local membership and attendance, it is also something of a commuter church. There are many here who choose to drive past many other churches to come to Grace. That is a blessing to be valued by our congregation that they make a conscious choice to be here. But it also means growth in the same way requires attracting other commuters who might look to other commuter churches, the larger ones who work hard on their branding, their vision, and their public presence. This demands we ask the question, "Why would someone choose Grace instead of…?" Do we have competitive programs for children, youth, and other activities larger, newer churches are able to provide?

Grace is also a local church. There are many who walk here from Mabel Swan, who make the short drive from the Barge-Chestnut neighborhood, some from downtown, and other locals. Paying attention to our local situation is also important. Grace sits roughly in the middle of ethnic and economic dividing lines of Yakima. If A.C. Davis High shows us we live in a largely low-income and high-majority Hispanic area, remaining and becoming more local requires a critical focus on our identity and demographics. All the literature around multi-ethnic church expressions is clear that "welcoming" is insufficient. Mark DeYmaz says,

> Well-meaning believers will often describe themselves as open to diversity and having anyone who so desires become a part of "their" church… The statement, "We would welcome anyone here," is in most cases more accurately translated, "We would welcome anyone to join us as long as they are willing to conform to our ways but don't expect us to conform to theirs!" And nowhere is this attitude more pronounced than in a congregation's approach to worship.[52]

[52] *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*, 109.

Grace is a majority white church in a Hispanic neighborhood, in majority Hispanic city. "Welcoming" Hispanics to Grace wouldn't make much sense if it's already in the neighborhood. Do we want to be ambassadors of Christ right here, where we are? What will that involve? Ambassadors of Reconciliation and an embassy of the kingdom of God.

A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY OR A COMMUNITY THAT WORSHIPS?

The move away from loyalty to specific denominations and towards finding churches that most fit an individual or family's needs has transformed church institutions into consumer-driven, value-add service organizations. Modern theater churches aim to add value, to attract people with the promise of fitting the needs of specific groups of people well. This has the natural effect of church-realignment around homogeneity. Having a specific target market, preaching sermons that fit that target market, singing songs that group resonates with, all serve to help fracture Christianity into organizations that reinforce existing social divisions. The problem is simple… growth through trying to make worship services attractive is often antithetical to the goal of reconciliation.

The same can be said for preaching style. Modern sermons at theater churches focus on using the Bible to find life applications. And while this might seem normal, consider that in a highly segmented society, life applications vary greatly. The more applicable a sermon to a person's life situation, the more the church must be tailored to a target market. By contrast, Jesus regularly spoke to large groups in parables, in ways that demanded listeners apply the story to their own lives. He directly instructed his disciples with depth.

The challenge of modern church is simple. The more it appeals to specific people, the more it facilitates social segmentation and polarization. Is church part of the civic problem the modern world faces? How can it be a kingdom solution to a human division problem?

The solution to this is simple: ***worship is the goal, not the gateway***. Worship is a good thing. Organs, choirs, bands, English, Spanish, subdued and rational, or vibrant and emotional… the Kingdom of God is full of all tribes and tongues and, one has to imagine, instruments and musical styles. An Embassy church focuses on developing community, creating durable connections of love and mutual help. When we love one another, we are happy to worship with one another in ways that fit.

The same goes for teaching. The solution is simple: ***discipleship requires conversation not dictation***. God became a human being in Jesus Christ to demonstrate that God does not lead by dictation, but by love, encouragement, and equipping. Jesus took the time to talk with Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, Mary and Martha, the woman at the well, his disciples, and more. He didn't neglect public speaking which gathered interest (and turned many away), but he transformed lives as he talked with and touched individual people. Disciples are formed and transformed by love, and love cannot be communicated effectively in public speaking (or online content!). Lectures and sermons are good at broad teaching. The Embassy church focuses first on going deep and forming mature ambassadors who have a hunger to learn general teachings and apply it together.

This means *durable community growth happens first through reconciliation, gathered worship is the resulting celebration.* Forming a community through reconciliation creates durable, mature connections. Forming a community through celebrity pastors and bands creates parasocial relationships that make church institutions almost entirely dependent on the reputation and performance of the talent. Loyalty should be to a community, and pastors exist to facilitate and guide a community, not to be the focal point of it.

A BUSINESS VISION

Leading change means moving beyond a Temple identity, skipping the Theater identity, and developing an Embassy identity that intentionally seeks collaborative rather than competitive modes of being the church in Yakima.

What this looks like financially involves the following goals:

1. Increase the population that feels that Grace is "home" even if that isn't through Sunday attendance, *by making Grace a gift*. Gifts produce gifts, and a sense of ownership creates responsibility. The gift lies at the heart of the gospel of *grace* (gift), and at the heart of human community formation.
2. Diversify revenue streams. Temple churches work by focusing all giving around people who identify with Sunday attendance. This means meeting needs beyond gathered worship services (see Phase Three below).
3. Develop clarity and shared ownership around infrastructure costs. Building users help cover building costs.
4. Facilitate deeper community development among our current congregation through reconciling conversations (Reconciliation Focus Groups).
5. Prepare mature ambassadors to make durable and deep connections in the community.
6. Reorganize staff to facilitate this process and lead the formation of internal community and external connections.

"Ambassadors of Reconciliation" produces a vision for business that aligns with the heritage of First/Grace, and reveals the kingdom of God to the world who, by finding favor by performing Jesus-shaped services, will produce civic investment in a Christian Embassy.

A CIVIC VISION

Summary: First/Grace of Christ was founded as a civic institution and can only thrive among people who seek to pursue the good of their neighbors. In a world that no longer has these as native values and where Christian heritage no longer is assumed in places of power, an embassy church vision must seek first to represent the good of the Kingdom of God as the true civic goods a civil society should seek in Christ as their one and only king.

We saw how the business model of First/Grace has, since its inception, been linked to the civic life of Yakima, and how a theological identity of Ambassadors of Reconciliation leads us to a business model of community redevelopment through reconciliation. Now, we consider how this fits us into the wider Yakima Valley. Many churches claim to be working for the good of the city, but the civic method differs greatly. How does an "embassy" differ from a "temple" church?

DOMINION OR REPRESENTATION

Belief that power comes from the gods, the stars (heavens), high mountains, or from God, and is distributed through human governments is positively ancient… one of the oldest ideas in the written record and likely much older. It undergrids the astrology that still remains in star symbols on state and national flags. Christianity's version of this operated in civil society for about 1500 years when it was believed that the sovereignty of God is distributed through the twin human institutions of church and state, though Medievals fought regularly about which had supremacy. This is the "temple" view of power and it applies to temples nearly everywhere in human culture.[53]

While some or many Christians still hold ambitions to this idea that God's sovereignty is expressed through human institutions, this view has not been normative in Western political science since the revolutions of the 1700s. The American and French Revolutions both overturned the *ancien regime*, the "old order" with "popular sovereignty," or the idea that power comes from below, from the consent of the governed.

Presbyterians, however, were instrumental in combat against the old order, in the development of representational forms of government. Without going into deep history here, Presbyterians in England and Scotland were involved in deposing kings and wars against them. The only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, who helped draft the Articles of Confederation, and who served as president of Princeton University. He thoroughly advocated the separation of church and state, denominational pluralism, and the necessity of the church as forming the moral fabric of a free civil society that was capable of self-governance. Presbyterianism has a heritage of seeing the church's work as engaging in the work of *personal formation rather than direct-access government influence.* God's dominion is expressed, not through institutional order, not through this or that government, or this or that church denomination, but through the hearts, minds, and souls of those who *love* God and *love* their neighbor. The Jesus-shaped vision of dominion looks like consent of the governed to *his Kingdom.*

Some modern Christians attempt to restore the old order by getting Christians in places of power in order to restore a perceived right order to the world under God's lordship expressed through Christians and the

[53] For more see Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred.*

church. The influence of "Dutch Neo-Calvinism" (Sphere Sovereignty) has been highly influential in American Christianity, as have newer Pentecostal forms of Dominion Theology, or the "Seven Mountain Mandate" theology. Both of these perspectives believe that the church's job is to take control of the various spheres or "mountains" of social life and exercise influence through holding positions of power. This view holds that Christians have a special access to the good and it's the duty of Christians to integrate this governance, to implement the good.

The theological problem with this view is simple—Jesus does not delegate positions of authority in his kingdom to humans. The power of the Kingdom remains with the Holy Spirit. It is for Jesus' disciples to *teach and train*,[54] not to exercise authority over others as the Gentiles do.[55]

This means church and state institutions aren't extensions of God's government, they're human social technologies developed to *aid in social ends*. Church institutions aren't God's government. They are *resources and technologies* to support the body of Christ. They are embassies that train and send delegations to represent the kingdom of God. He has delegated his *representation*, his *image*. We are to publicize, or make public, the gospel of the kingdom by showing and telling it. This representation function makes the gospel *plausible* and *tangible*. People get to *taste and see*.[56] This is a vastly different model than authority-based modes of imposition, policing, and dictation.

In short, churches are for God's mission of reconciling all things to himself, not extensions of God's authority to rightly order the world. This transforms dominion into ambassadorship, control into love.

Dominion vs. Ambassador Chart

- Obedience first vs. Love first
- Submission vs. Collaboration
- Hierarchy vs. Equality
- Moral Order vs. Personal Development
- Governance vs. Influence
- Integration vs. Education
- Elders as rulers vs. Elders as worthy of imitation
- Works to get power to make change vs. Makes change through individual love and renewal of the mind
- Performance and show of loyalty vs. Mature demonstration of character
- Believe, Behave, Belong vs. Belong, Believe, Behave

OVERCOMING POLARIZATION

How do we overcome polarization? We begin by refusing to see others through human lenses first, but through Christ's perspective. "From now on we regard no one according to the flesh."[57] By getting to know individuals and hearing their story, we gain understanding about why they are the way they are. We develop

[54] The Great Commission notably states that all power is given to Jesus and that he uses his authority to send a delegation, "Go and make disciples of all peoples teaching them to obey all that I commanded you." Our Christianese word "disciple" hides that the word means "student." See Matthew 28:18-20.
[55] Mt 20:25-25; Mark 10:42-43.
[56] Ps 34:8.
[57] 2 Corinthians 5:16.

compassion. By understanding social trends, belief systems, the influence of forces like economics, migration, cultural differences, we can walk with other people without having to resort to judging them. And if we love others as Christ loved us, we are embodying the gospel of Jesus.

Our church has a history of doing this. First Presbyterian's Dr. David Ferry was good friends with the local Catholic priest, Father Egan, a tradition that was revived by Rick Murray and continued through Curt McFarland with Father Ecker. Helland shows that Dr. Ferry and the tradition of this church were invested in developing friendships and constructive relationships with those who did not share every perspective.[58]

First/Grace has a heritage of crossing boundaries, of being the adults in the room who foster constructive conversations for civic engagement. In an era where churches are polarized, Grace can lead change rooted in its own history.

A CIVIC VISION

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God." Matthew 5:9.

If Grace of Christ authentically becomes ambassadors of reconciliation, our outreach to Yakima will focus on fostering reconciliation across divisions and polarizations. Peace can grow exponentially through efforts to reconcile. As Grace equips ambassadors, so will it embody the change that reveals the kingdom of God. Yakima will be transformed as Christians are reconciled to one another and to others in Yakima. This creates a community who loves and desires the church and generously funds its mission.

Dominion vs. Ambassador

A Contemporary Comparison of Two Leadership & Community Paradigms

	Dominion Model Control • Order • Authority	Ambassador Model Love • Growth • Influence
Priority	Obedience first	Love first
Posture	Submission	Collaboration
Structure	Hierarchy	Equality
Focus	Moral Order	Personal Development
Change Method	Governance	Influence
Formation	Integration	Education
Role of Elders	Elders as rulers	Elders as worthy of imitation
Path to Change	Works to get power to make change	Makes change through individual love and renewal of the mind
Validation	Performance and show of loyalty	Mature demonstration of character
Journey Sequence	**Believe, Behave, Belong**	**Belong, Believe, Behave**

[58] *Tent to Tower*, 39-40.

A THREE-PHASE PROCESS OF RENEWAL

Grace is adopting a three-phase process to embody the change it wants to bring to the landscape of Christian institutions. This represents a multi-year process of inward redevelopment, outward engagement, and upward growth. The paradigm shift from a temple to an embassy will take time, involve intentional conflict resolution and discipleship.

PHASE ONE: INWARD REDEVELOPMENT

In a three-phase redevelopment process, the first phase is always to reexamine our core identity, purpose, and processes. That readies an institution for re-engaging with the community as it is today and prepares for growth. Phase One has been ongoing since Pastor Gregory came, by beginning to re-engage with theological foundations of what a church is, does, and what gospel it brings to the world.

But the first phase is by far the most challenging because it involves change. It involves addressing the places where people have deeply invested, but where the future may not lie. It involves new people, new ideas, new research, even as we try to assess what good things we carry forward into the future.

It involves rethinking the core story Christians have committed themselves to. How people come to Christianity varies by tradition and personal life story. This can create conflict or give rise to misunderstanding as specific formulas are reframed. Understanding the testimony of the whole of Scripture rather than a specific theological formulation can feel disorienting if there have been decades of reinforcing those specific formulas. After all, this is the primary reason why Christianity has denominations. Our formulas differ. Rediscovering the gospel that binds these all together can be difficult.

But, a new future needs a renewed identity and sense of purpose, an asking and answering of "why am I a Christian, why am I at church, and what is church for?"

CHALLENGES

Grace of Christ must first confront its internal challenges that prevent it from growth and sustainability. This requires identifying what is holding Grace back from thriving and addressing those areas with specific strategies. These challenges are both national and Grace-specific. Current aspects that we've been addressing over the past year include:

- Staff size and structure. Grace's facilities require a congregation of a certain size to be sustainable, and that is facilitated by having the right size and structure to staff. A flatter, more collaborative staff structure aims to work toward similar goals.
- Program/ministry siloes. There's a need for coherent movement/direction/unity of purpose across the things Grace does.
- Connection between 9:00 and 11:00 services and those who faithfully attend one or the other.
- Volunteer exhaustion.
- Conflict based in differing expectations.
- Balancing the needs of congregational care with future growth.
- Limited online content and social media engagement prevents visibility to younger generations.
- Large homogeneity of congregation making the development of family, youth, and children's communities a challenge.

ACTIONS:

1. Culture Shift: From Temple to Embassy
    a. From Institutional Governance to Leadership of People
    Rather than seeking to rule, elders and Christians in general need to spiritually lead by example.
    b. From Philanthropy to Family
    c. From Worshipping Community to Community that Worships
    d. From Worshippers to Ambassadors
2. Reorganize the Work of the Church
    a. Staff:
        i. Community Coordinator: A new role that focuses on deepening existing and developing new relationships inside and outside the church. This role will involve volunteer coordination, event planning, and connecting with local ministry partners.
        ii. Director of Congregational Care: A new role that coordinates and facilitates congregational care. This person will train volunteers, coordinate visitation, and facilitate funerals.
        iii. Family and Youth Pastor: Where we've had a separate youth and family/children's position, and Kara and Sarah have developed wonderful programs and relationships, both of our workers are feeling called in different directions, Sarah within the church, Kara out of town. Rather than filling existing positions, we think it is time to recruit an assistant pastor who can coordinate volunteers and develop a coherent vision for growth among younger people and families.
        iv. Director of Media and Communications: To produce and engage with online content.
    b. Ministry Teams and Volunteers
        i. Volunteers consider their gifts and how they might best be used
        ii. Ministry teams restate their purpose as it fits with an Embassy church
3. Develop Community
    a. Events are coordinated, volunteers trained
    b. Events are part of a strategic plan to best develop community
4. Develop Ambassadors
    a. Focus groups
    b. ECO peacemaking training
5. Attract Ambassadors
    a. Advertising to Yakima, especially on social media, communicates a new season
    b. Who wants to be an "ambassador of reconciliation" who doesn't yet know there's a place for that?
    c. Events
    d. Online content
6. Prepare for Others

Timeline:

September 2025-October 2026: Sermon series laying theological foundations for the future focusing on "What is the church?"; "What do ambassadors of reconciliation look like in Jonah and Peter?"; and "Becoming an Embassy".

February 2026: Staff and Session joint meeting to discuss theological foundations

May 2026: Staff and Session joint meeting to discuss the state of affairs at Grace and the city of Yakima

Focus group process begins

June 2026: Session votes on "Ambassadors of Reconciliation" as the identity to drive us forward and commissions a Strategy Team to develop a strategy for the future.

July 2026: Strategy Team begins work
Separation of local from non-local missions for the sake of fostering local collaboration over philanthropy.

September 2026: Hired P/T Director of Strategy (Olivia Hart) to facilitate logistics of institutional renewal.
Staff reorganization process begins

November 2026: Funding for the Future of Grace of Christ. Job openings listed. Development of film/podcast studio for more rapid online-content development.

Q1 2027: Ministry Team and Volunteer Gifts Inventory

Q2 2027: Ambassadors of Reconciliation Training with ECO

Ambassadors of Reconciliation courses launch (invite your friends!)

Q3 2027: Goal for new staffing structure to be in full effect

PHASE TWO: OUTWARD ENGAGEMENT

After internal redevelopment, we turn our eyes toward Yakima. Many churches struggle in outreach efforts due to an assumption that others would want to join the church if just given the opportunity. The barrier to entry is not the doorway of the building, but *trust*. Church attendance is declining, not for want of advertising, or missions or evangelism, but for want of news the world hears as "good news" or gospel. The most rapid growth often comes from "weeds," or organizations that rapidly adapt to the conditions, but may not facilitate a healthy ecosystem. Thus, the first part of the process was theological redevelopment as the church prepares for growth, so that however we grow, we do so sustainably in a way that improves the conditions of the Christian ecosystem in Yakima.

THE MEDIUM OF CHURCH IS ITS MESSAGE

Marshall McLuhan helped found a school of "media ecology" and the whole field of communications as a university discipline. He is famous for the phrase "The medium is the message." Put in other ways, the method of communication brings its own message with it.

Since social media and the smartphone were invented, a collective mental health crisis has been developing apace. And since the development of generative AI, academic test scores have plummeted.[59] The medium of fake-community, of fake-presence, of simulated conversation partners has revealed a truth that some Christians have been speaking out about since the 1950s. Technology transforms the environment in which people's relationships develop and have meaning. The decline of the family is not the result of a progressive cabal, but the natural outcome of moving into a technological environment. The medium of technology is its own message. The rise of consumerist theater churches was also not a conscious theological choice, it was the choice to not lead from Scripture, but to adapt Christianity to the world it found itself in. The medium of the gospel of Jesus Christ is Immanuel, the very embodied presence of God. And the medium of the Holy Spirit is the empowering of a human community as the body of Christ to be God's representatives to the world *as they live life together in Jesus-shaped ways*.

AUTHENTIC, EMBODIED COMMUNITY

Our second phase at Grace of Christ focuses on how to authentically show the kingdom of God to the world. That has to come with the development of real community that has genuine *need* of each other. Consumerism comes from institutions that produce value-add products or services. Community comes by and is shaped by *infrastructure*. Kingdom infrastructure is not in buildings or products, but in developing relationships that desire the meeting of local needs with local resources.

First, we need to decide on what groups we can pursue reconciliation with. There are many choices. Grace is in a majority Hispanic neighborhood, right between the Barge-Chestnut district and East Yakima. Yakima is a fruit town. Our current congregation has many educators and most of our ministry partnerships focus on young people and education. The city, like America as a whole, is polarized politically. How do we be ambassadors of reconciliation to our neighbors? How do we offer the gift of reconciliation in Christ to a divided world? How do we bring Christians and churches and parachurches in Yakima together to be reconciled and begin to collaborate for the kingdom more than pushing voting guides?

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[59] "Generative AI… has a substantial negative impact on learning." https://www.educationnext.org/the-penalty-students-pay-for-using-ai/ Accessed 10/16/2026

EFFECTIVE OUTREACH TAKES STEPS

Many of the places Grace has been working in outreach spaces represent large social gaps. Take students at Adams Elementary School. The school is, in many ways, quite distant from Grace, by age, ethnicity, socioeconomics, and (sometimes) language. Hoping that children from Adams and their families would come to Sunday worship is asking them to cross over many social differences. It's not impossible, but it is highly improbable. There have been notable exceptions of Adams students attending regularly! But more effective outreach to the neediest parts of Yakima will come by collaborating with, and offering what Grace is uniquely able to offer, to those who stand in between. If there was a vision for the church to be filled with the families of Adams Elementary, there are quite a few intermediate gaps to cross before that's likely. Our best gifts are in equipping those who reach the neediest.

Effective outreach takes smaller, incremental steps.

REACHING EDUCATIONAL SPACES

Our strategy team has discerned that reaching out to *educators* is our first and best move. Education already gathers diverse peoples together, not just demographically, but by interest and subcommunity. Music and the arts, disability and special needs, families from every industry all gather around education.

Education is the DNA of Presbyterianism, especially in America. Few other traditions have emphasized the need for quality education among its leadership or believed in the power of wisdom for leadership. Through our deliberative processes, our universities and colleges, our involvement in historical thought-leadership, Presbyterians have believed that education has the ability to change the world by empowering people to think critically in the presence of God.

Education and young people are where many of our current local partnerships have been invested:

- Adams Elementary School
- Davis High School
- Young Life
- Fellowship of Christian Athletes
- Trailseekers
- Outreach Camp
- And more

FROM EDUCATION TO YAKIMA

Education is the gateway through which the people of Yakima can be reached, not by reaching children specifically, but by reaching educators, administrators, and families.

By activating various forms of our Reconciliation Focus Groups, we can intentionally invite individuals to the table, to experience the love of Jesus while growing personally, developing community, and building trust. By beginning with a depth of relationship first, we can put on events that grow this community is more casual ways.

WHAT ABOUT 55+?

Given the dominant demographic of Grace is in this category, why not aim to reach an older segment of the population? This group is included in Phase One. Who are the folks who want to join the mission of being ambassadors of reconciliation in Yakima? Who are the nearest people who come, not to receive services, but who come ready to be equipped as ambassadors and be sent to Yakima as ambassadors? Are you perhaps someone ready to be equipped and sent?

We must be careful to not approach outreach as a question of "how do we grow in our homogeneity?" Simply finding more people who are like us represents the trap that most churches fall into. The more we invest in ourselves and people like us, the more resistant we are to change and to desire reconciliation. A healthy representation of the kingdom of God is going to grow by overcoming divisions. A church must only be an "us" when that "us" looks like the kingdom of God.

WHAT ABOUT RECOVERY?

Grace of Christ is now located in a neighborhood booming with recovery-oriented organizations, and more being built. While we believe that a focus on recovery is vital, our Strategy Team recognizes this growing community around us as best suited as a second-step. Our practice with educators will prepare us better to reach people in recovery in part because issues like drug abuse and addiction are already present in schools and already impact educators and families in educational spaces.

WHAT ABOUT MULTIETHNICITY?

Grace has a long history of working to develop and support a Hispanic congregation, Gracia de Cristo, which was integrated into Grace in 2020. Our Strategy Team and Session have long discussed both the importance of a multiethnic congregation, and the challenges Grace has faced in the past in implementation. We believe that a direct focus on ethnicity will be less effective than a focus on education and educators. Given the demographics of our local schools, investing in individual people will bring a multiethnic transformation as a natural consequence. We will also need to learn cross-cultural skills as ambassadors, and exercising these in educational spaces helps keep the focus on Jesus as the one who brings down the walls of hostility the world builds, rather than a focus on diversity for its own sake. The goal of becoming a multiethnic church is best served by working together with others and learning from one another in partnership.

WHAT ABOUT GANG PREVENTION?

As another excellent example of a vital job that needs to happen in Yakima, Grace is not well-suited to engage with this issue head-on, but through building closer relationships with those who can. This is another area of missional interest that will be best suited by working with those in educational spaces as a first step. Grace has long supported and hosted Trailseekers, who work with at risk children and support their families. Grace also hosts On Fire Ministries who work with at risk youth. Our hope is to continue supporting and working toward integrating with these ministries.

HOW DOES PHASE TWO WORK?

1. Develop an Educator Task Force made up of Grace members who work or have worked in educational spaces to develop a more specific strategy that meets the real needs and opportunities in education.

2. Take the core of trained Ambassadors from Phase One and deepen our connections with educational spaces. Invest in administrators and teachers. The goal is to reach and significantly help the adults who help the young people.
3. Create opportunities to bring the unique educational strengths of Grace, ECO, and our Presbyterian tradition to offer educators ways to grow, in partnership with other organizations.
4. Grow a Jesus-shaped community among educators who see in Grace an embassy of the kingdom and activate those educators as ambassadors of reconciliation.

PHASE TWO TIMELINE OF ACTION

Q4 2026: Begin an Ambassadors of Reconciliation podcast (Kara and Gregory with guests) showing what reconciliation in Christ means and looks like through stories of community members and encouraging but challenging conversations. The goal is to recruit people in Yakima hungry to join our mission.

Q1 2027: Start an Educator Strategy Team with Grace members to develop an effective and feasible plan to engage with educators and grow a community of ambassadors amongst our educators.

PHASE THREE: UPWARD GROWTH AS A TRANSFORMATIVE EMBASSY

The third phase of a redevelopment plan focuses on achieving a long-term vision. Imagine a community of people reconciled to God and to one another who are actively fostering that same reconciliation in Yakima. Imagine a people who are actively transforming worldly resources into kingdom of God relationships. What would be different about Yakima if it was filled with mature ambassadors of Christ who are trained and equipped to reveal the reality of the kingdom of God wherever they go? There is no greater power to overcome the "present evil age" than by transforming the hearts and minds of people and equipping them to represent Jesus in daily life.

GRACE AS A TRANSFORMATIVE EMBASSY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"Engage, Embrace, Educate, Equip, Empower"

Our strategy team began discussing what an institution could look like that serves to bring the reality of the kingdom of God to Yakima. While worship is a crucial part of the life of a Christian community, *worship is the goal, not the gateway to the community*. What would form a community of people who want to worship together across the various divisions of our valley?

We have various words to describe this institution, a "transformation center" or "embassy school" but at the heart are these functions:

ENGAGE:

We take the first step to approach groups with the intent of pursuing reconciliation with God and each other. This engagement means getting to know other groups as they are, on their own terms, understanding what motivates them, what stories they tell about themselves, why they are who and where they are. Understanding others means also understanding ourselves and how we are likely perceived by other groups.

Engaging looks like identifying specific groups and specific representatives of those groups and developing relationships of trust that can open up whole communities to engage.

EMBRACE:

In embassies of the world, nations engage to advance their own agenda. The agenda of God for his people is to love one another. Love is not expressed in ruling over, but in seeking the good and truth for each other. The kingdom of God is open to all who will proclaim loyalty to King Jesus, and our role is to ensure that invitation is not to join "us" but that we all seek the kingdom together.

For example, Grace cannot simply welcome Hispanic people, it must be a community where people of all tribes and tongues find unity in Christ, embracing one another as Jesus has embraced us. Where cultural shifts might happen, where expectations might change, it is not for one privileged group to tell the rest what to change. Grace will look like a cross-section of Yakima with Christ in common.

EDUCATE:

An Embassy educates ambassadors to know God, know themselves, know others, and know how to reconcile all things to God himself.

"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28).

One great strength of the Presbyterian tradition is the belief that God is truth and that the pursuit of the truth is an act of worship. Education is not about curriculum or programs, but about developing relationships of mutuality by developing maturity in one another.

What could such an education look like?

- An integrated kingdom approach for all ages. Activating a community that begins with our Preschool and continues upwards.
- Education focused on the truths and skills not taught in traditional educational spaces, but spaces where the Word of God speaks into and through the church in the world today *as it aims to reconcile all things to God in Christ*:
    - Money, Poverty, Wealth (Beyond budgeting, reconciling rich and poor)
    - Ethnic difference and the Kingdom, with cross-cultural and language skills
    - Gender, sexuality, marriage, divorce, family
    - Creation, agriculture, labor
    - Politics, social division
    - Generational differences
    - Food, food preparation, community development
    - Punishment, justice, criminality, discipline
    - Technology, communication, and community formation
- In all of these areas we could be training Christians to think and act in Jesus-shaped ways in the real world, while developing a community of support and collaboration.

EQUIP

An Embassy equips ambassadors to take action individually and together, applying faith to life *through Christian community (the church).*

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the full measure of Christ." (Ephesians 4:11-13).

The work of ministry requires training in real skills not necessarily gained by teaching or experience in other fields or other institutions. Such skills include:

- Spiritual formation
- Peacemaking and conflict resolution
- Research and informational literacy and hygiene (how to discern truth in a world of lies)
- Jesus-shaped leadership

EMPOWER

An Embassy empowers people to represent Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

The power of God is not manifest in acts of domination, but in service,[60] not in acts of burden-shifting, but in burden lifting.[61] The power of God is given to his people to *give rest to the weary*.[62]

The power of God is for the reconciliation and renewal of all creation. Injustice isn't combatted with retribution, but by empowering ambassadors of reconciliation, we fill the world with strong and mature people who can overcome evil with good.

Empowerment means:

- Giving those who have suffered injustice a new people, a new community in which they can grow into responsibility.
- Creating and growing social capital to "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth" (Luke 16:9).

FROM COMPETITION TO COLLABORATION TO CONSOLIDATION

Christianity in North America is already in the process of institutional contraction. Churches, parachurch organizations, Christian schools, colleges, and seminaries have been closing at rates faster than new ones are produced. Resources are increasingly pressured. This is not an inherently bad situation; it is an opportunity to lead the transformation of the Christian landscape. By developing unique offerings to develop community, Grace ceases to compete with other Sunday morning worshipping institutions and opens the potential to collaborate with other churches. Over time, institutional consolidation will occur, but rather than closure and failure, it will happen joyfully through missional unity.

PHASE THREE VISION STATEMENT

By 2037 Grace of Christ, by living its identity and pursuing its mission, will be known in Yakima as a Christian *community* that actively pursues and facilitates reconciliation with God and with one another. It will be a city on a hill, a lighthouse, an embassy drawing the people of Yakima to it for wisdom, advice, conflict mediation, personal growth, and a desire to follow Jesus through life-together community. By offering unique formational opportunities, Grace of Christ will be a gift to Christians and to the city at large in Yakima. Sustainable growth will happen by developing a broad, embodied social network who take part in funding its mission. Grace of Christ will have helped churches and parachurch organizations to collaborate to the point of facilitating organizational integrations. And Grace of Christ will have formed thought-leaders in various professions in Yakima who are capable of representing the kingdom of God to the world.

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[60] Matthew 20:25-28.
[61] Galatians 6:2.
[62] Matthew 11:28.

CALL TO ACTION

Grace is calling on you to consider the future of the church in Yakima. We believe the future is full of opportunity. But it won't look like the past. We need the innovative spirit that led First Presbyterian Church to be the first Protestant church in Yakima. We can be the church to step over the attractional model to polished Sunday worship events, as we develop a community that thinks deeply about how faith intersects with real life in all the fields in which it is lived. We can develop a community that actively pursues tearing down the walls between groups the world needs to function according to its own broken logic. We can be the body of Christ present in Yakima, forming a real community that is not united around demographic homogeneity, worship and music style preference, or ethnic background, but united in the desire to reconcile *all things* to God in Christ.

I want to personally ask you to consider four ways you can help:

1. Pray for us
2. Support this vision financially
3. Join an Ambassador of Reconciliation Focus Group to experience what this can look like on a small scale.
4. Consider training as a leader, as someone who wants to learn the skills necessary to overcome human division.

If you aren't active at Grace of Christ on Sundays, are part of another worshipping community, I would love for you to consider joining us as well. Our goal is not to take people from other institutions, our goal is to have Grace of Christ be a gift to the broader community providing something others don't. We would love for ambassadors of reconciliation to fill all the churches in Yakima and kickstart the process of reconciling Christians for collaborative kingdom work.

Whatever your response, we'd love to hear from you at the QR code below.