



The Allegan Congregationalist

April 2024

Our church exists to introduce people to Jesus Christ and train those who already know Him.

The Value of Strategic Planning

by Greg Carlson

Calendar Events:

- April 13
4:30 to 6:30 pm
Spaghetti Dinner
Fundraiser for
Kitchen Remodel
- May 11 Plant
Sale 9am-2pm
- May 21 Ladies'
Banquet 6pm

The leadership of this church has wisely decided to prayerfully discern the Lord's leading for the near future. We will survey a cross-section of thirty people from the congregation with perceptive questions. The analysis of these surveys will be reported to the church by Pastor Dave Balicki of the Conservative Congregational Church Conference. The survey analysis will help the church know how to be more effective in carrying out its mission. The ensuing strategic planning will also give a good idea as to a profile for this church's next prospective pastor.



Making plans for the future is good. We recognize, however, that even the best laid plans can be subject to change. James says we should leave space for God's changes, saying, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:15). James' words are a reminder that planning with God means continually reassessing, adapting, and adjusting your plans. The church leadership realizes this is the best spiritual practice – being sensitive to God's unfolding leadership. Yet it is good to ask for the Lord's leading now.

"What are You leading us to now and in the near future as near as we can tell?"

I appreciate the leadership insights in regard to vision and change that John Maxwell has shared in his Maxwell Leadership Bible in pages 1644-45. I have brief thoughts based on Maxwell's, first of all having to do with *Releasing the Power of Strategic Thinking* from the book of Genesis in the life of Joseph. Not only did Joseph see things from a strategic perspective in regard to how God put him in charge of food supply management of Egypt, but he planned carefully for meeting the needs of Egypt. He was led of God in leading the people for whom he was responsible.

There are numerous other examples of strategic planning in the Bible. Moses sent twelve spies into the Promised Land to help form a plan for taking the land. Our Lord sent disciples ahead of his larger group to make plans for staying over in Samaria. The first century missionaries made plans for the spread of the gospel.

Maxwell also talks about *Discovering the Joy of Creative Thinking*. He uses the example of Nehemiah leading the rebuilding of the wall with shrewd, creative thinking (Nehemiah chapters 2-4). No doubt this church and its leadership will have the challenge and joy of addressing opportunities with creative thinking.

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The Value of Strategic Planning (cont.)

by Greg Carlson

A third matter Maxwell shares regarding vision and change is *Feeling the Energy of Possibility Thinking*. The example for this is Peter who was praying on a rooftop in Acts 10 when God gave him an unusual vision. The vision expanded Peter's thinking so he would be open to sharing the gospel with Gentile people. Peter was so entrenched in his current thinking that he pushed back. This new thought was foreign to him. God finally convinced Peter that his goal was to reach the nations. Peter agreed and God gave him the spiritual energy to enter a new world of ministry.

It is a good exercise for individuals and for a church to diligently seek the will of God, thinking creatively with the energy of anticipation about what God has next.

As announced from the pulpit, we are in need of 30 volunteers to complete the National Church Development Survey. This is an ask of 30 minutes of your time in order to share your evaluation of the spiritual development within our church family. If you are willing to participate, please let us know by putting your name in the box on the round table in the fellowship lounge. The tentative schedule is to have volunteers complete the surveys following service on Sunday, April 14. If needed, a secondary make-up date will be scheduled.

Kitchen Fundraiser: Saturday, April 13



Take the night off on Saturday, April 13.

The Trustees are hosting a spaghetti dinner fundraiser. Grab a few friends and join us for your evening meal served from 4:30 to 6:30. All proceeds will be used toward continuing updates needed in our kitchen. Last year, your generous donations made possible the installation of a new kitchen ceiling and lights. We would like to continue to update the kitchen including counters, cupboards, and new paint.

**Dinner Served
from 4:30-6:30 pm.**

To Believe or Not to Believe...That is the Question.

By Todd Wagner

Earlier last week I was reading an article published in the Associated Press out of London on March 14, 2024, written by Ali Swenson and Kevin Chan. The headline was, “Election disinformation takes a big leap with AI being used to deceive worldwide.” While lies, disinformation, and deception tricks are nothing new in the world of politics, the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is something that piqued my interest. Some statements made in this article provoked my thoughts. For example, the writers say, “Artificial intelligence is supercharging the threat of election disinformation worldwide, making it easy for anyone with a smartphone and a devious imagination to create fake – but **convincing** – content aimed at **fooling** voters.” Later, the writers say, “You don’t need to look far to see some people ... being clearly **confused** as to whether something is real or not.” And then there was this statement, “The question is no longer whether AI ‘deepfakes’ could **affect** elections, but how **influential** they will be. AI ‘deepfakes’ could erode the public’s trust in what they see and hear”.

Now you may be wondering, what do “AI”, politics, and deception have to do with ministry and the church? On one hand, nothing. On the other, everything! As I mentioned, this article provoked a lot of thought – theological thought. While “AI” is not inherently evil in and of itself, it is no better than the hearts of those who program and develop it. It is also subject to use by the adversary as another tool he can use to attack the Church. It may begin with politics and elections, but where it could go next can be concerning. We know that the Church has been under attack for centuries by Satan and his demons, even infiltrating and attacking the Church from within. This is why Jude wrote his letter to the Church, to warn against false teaching and deception, rather than about the gift of salvation we all share in Christ. Today, Satan still causes believers and potential believers alike to doubt their trust in God and the Christian faith. Whether displaying scandals, fraud in the Church, or perverting Scripture to conform with societal and cultural beliefs, people are beginning to distrust the goodness of God and the gift of grace He offers all people through Christ (**Eph 2:8**).

The more I think about how AI can be used to deceive and confuse people from knowing the truth in politics, the more I wonder when the day will come when it is used exclusively to deceive and persecute the Church and believers. The journalist in the AP article made an insightful statement writing, “... we live in a world in which everything is suspect — and so everyone gets to choose what they believe ...” If this is true now, how much more will it be when those with evil intent uses AI against believers?



So, what does the Bible say about deception in these last days? In the New Testament, the Greek word used for “deceive” is *planaō*, and it’s found 39 times in 37 different verses. Jesus first warns us about deception in **Matthew 24** & **Mark 13**, and Paul tells us in **2 Thess 2:7** that the “secret power of lawlessness is already at work.” The apostle also warns believers about deception in Romans 3 & 16; 1 Cor 3:18; Eph 5:6, and 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Similarly, the apostle John warns about deception in his epistle (1 John) and the book of Revelation. The biblical writers and our Lord Jesus felt it necessary to warn us about deception in the last days. Now, if the occasion comes when AI is used to persecute the Church during our lifetime, let us remember we are fully equipped to deal with anything the world throws our way.

Let's Get It Right (cont.)

First, we have the promise of **Romans 8:31** which says, *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* Second, *“God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows”* (**Gal 6:7**). Our Sovereign God will exact justice on those who deceive. Third, the apostle Paul reminds us in 2 Thessalonians 2, *“... not to become easily unsettled or alarmed...”*. He goes on in v. 9 to warn that Satan will use *“all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie.”* Could “AI” be part of these signs and wonders that are convincing, influential, fooling, causing confusion, and affecting what we know? Maybe, I don’t know. But we do know that Jesus will overthrow lawlessness with the breath of His mouth (v. 8). So how do we deal with deception today? How do we know what’s true and what’s not? How can we lead other people to the truth in a world full of trickery and delusion? First, we MUST remain rooted in God’s word. Pick up your Bible and read it! Meditate on His word day and night (**Joshua 1:8**). Next, John tells us to “test the spirits.” In his epistle He writes, *“... do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (**1 Jn 4:1**). If you question something, compare what you know to God’s word so you can confirm if what you see and hear lines up with biblical doctrine, or with the world. Third, pray for wisdom and present your requests to God. Jesus promises that whatever we ask according to God’s will, it will be done for us. So, seek wisdom. Ask God for wisdom to discern the truth. Unless you ask for it (*with the right motives*), you will not receive it (**James 4**). The deception in today’s world is why we need to be in God’s word and boldly proclaim the Gospel to all creation. (**Matt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15**).

Because of Jesus’ resurrection and the salvation He offers through His atoning sacrifice, we can be assured we have the tools available to combat any sort of disinformation. So friends, *“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love”* (**1 Cor 16: 13-14**). This is how we’ll know whether to believe or not to believe.



Save the Date: Ladies’ Banquet - Tuesday, May 21



**Ladies—Mark your calendars:
Our annual Ladies’ Banquet hosted at
the church on Tuesday, May 21 at 6 pm.**

Our evening entertainment will be provided by Barbara Jean, former Miss Michigan and professional entertainer, who uses her ventriloquism, comedy and music to help people laugh and enjoy life.



Come, Follow, Abide With Me



by Julie DeHaan

Abide. To remain, to stay. It's a word I love, feeling warm and safe. The same sentiments I have for the passage of John 15:1-5, **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."**

I've always approached the passage with my gardener's heart, knowing the benefits of pruning: the flowers will be more plentiful, the shape more attractive, the plant stronger. In reading Chuck Swindoll's *The Greatest Life of All: Jesus*, I saw the passage in a new light, one more in tune with a first century Jew. Did you know, that no metaphor touched the Hebrew soul like the picture of the vinedresser and his vineyard? This image so poignantly illustrated God's special care for the nation of Israel. From Isaiah 5:1: **"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill."** Isaiah continues to build the metaphor of how God set Israel apart, His Holy people. He cared for them, protected them, looked for them to bear fruit. This passage concludes that only wild grapes were forthcoming and so was judgement to be delivered by the Babylonians.

Following His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus told another story about a vineyard (See Matthew 21: 33-40.) This parable describes a protected vineyard where tenants killed not only the master's servants, but his very son. Jesus was teaching in the temple knowing he would soon be falsely judged and willingly hung on a cross. Like the passage from Isaiah, those high priests and Pharisees who were plotting to kill Jesus felt the sting of rebuke.

However, Jesus delivered the message denoted by John in the Upper Room, during the Last Supper. No longer is the vineyard a metaphor for the nation of Israel. Jesus took the place of Israel, He truly was the healthy vine that the nation had failed to become. As Swindoll puts it, "His true disciples are called to live as citizens of the new kingdom by applying the concept Jesus termed as *abiding*. We are not just to trust Jesus for pardon and for help and to some extent to obey Him. We are invited to a close union with him, an intimacy of fellowship. When we fail to abide it is an unspeakable loss to ourselves, the church, and the world."

Abide. Friends, don't miss what Jesus has called us to do. Yes, God planted the vine in the Promised Land to produce



Photo credit: Theresa Prolo



Come, Follow, Abide With Me (cont.)

fruit. Jesus expected those abiding in Him to produce fruit. Fruit is the ***purpose*** of the branch, but it is not the ***responsibility*** of the branch. The branch cannot produce anything on its own. However, when it remains attached to the vine, it will receive life-sustaining sap, nourishment, strength, everything it needs. If it remains connected to the vine, it will inevitably hang heavy with grapes. The focus of a Christian's activity is not to work hard enough to make fruit, but to abide, keeping connection to Jesus Christ clean and strong.



It's tradition. Rick Hansen has collected hats over the years. Modeling a cap of choice are Amy Hansen, Marcia Stein, Elaine Cochran, Theresa Prolo, Julie DeHaan, Terri Misner, Susan Lucas & Sue Belden.

Will's Prayer Requests

Will Dickerson, our missionary in Hungary, wrote that his friend and fellow missionary from Korea, Kee Jae Shin, lost his short battle with pancreatic cancer in January. Please pray for his widow, Kyung, and their two sons. Pray, too, that God would strengthen and guide the congregation during this time of transition. Another missionary couple arrived from Korea not long ago. The long term plan is for them to assume leadership of the congregation once significant progress with the Hungarian language happens. Will continues to preach in Hungarian once each month. At school, Will is leading discussions with his students on their future plans and whether or not life has meaning and purpose. Prayers are desired over these conversations and hearts to be opened to know the agape love of God.

On March 21, several ladies had the opportunity to step out of life's normal routines and getaway for an overnight Ladies' Retreat. Hosted at the Hansen's beautiful cabin nestled amongst the Pine River, we enjoyed delightful food and fellowship sharing God's word and our hearts. We are so grateful for those who arranged this special time, those who were able to attend, those who prayed for us over the weekend, and for the One who calls us to abide.

First Congregational Church SPRING PLANT & GARDEN SALE

Do you have perennials or house plants that need to be divided?
Do you have whimsical garden pieces that need a new home?
Please help the Women's Fellowship with their annual plant sale fundraiser.
Non-living donations can be dropped off now in the basement furnace room.
We'll collect plants as May comes closer! Thinking Spring!





Stone Soup and African Travelogue

Engaging Families to Grow Kids in the Gospel

Have you ever heard the story of the Stone Soup? Once upon a time, a traveler passed through a tiny village. He was mighty hungry, but no one would answer his knock on the door, let alone offer him a spare bread crumb. He set about gathering some stones and headed to the village center. After gathering some wood, he started a fire. Curious, one of the villagers inquired just what he was up to. The traveler replied, "I'd like to make some stone soup, but I haven't any pot to collect and boil water." Hungry and wondering just what stone soup would taste like, the villager offered to bring his pot filled with water. A little girl grew bold enough to come to the fire. The traveler told her of the stone soup preparation. It would be very delicious if he had just a pinch of salt and pepper. She ran home and brought back her parents, along with their spice shakers. That water came to a slow boil as the afternoon progressed. Gradually, all the villagers had gathered round, bringing a bit of spare vegetable top or smidgen of leftover beef. Together, the village feasted on that pot of stone soup. Years ago, the acolyte group brought together various veggies and served up a vat of stone soup with the motto, "If we all do a little, it can help a lot."

With great delight, the Christian Board of Education hosted the return of our Stone Soup luncheon on Sunday, March 17. Following the luncheon, Elsie Jones shared her beautiful photos and experiences while on African safari. What a delight to gather and share with one another.



The stone has been
rolled back. The tomb
is empty. The Savior
is not there. He is
alive. He is risen.
He has risen, indeed.



What a joy to celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus and His glorious resurrection together as a church family. Thank you to the many hands who labored together to bring the Good News to us throughout this past Holy Week.

Until Jesus returns again, **Go! Preach His Good News.**

Stone Soup and African Travelogue (cont.)

Photo credit: Theresa Prolo
Julie DeHaan

TRAVEL AFRICA

The Maasai women can bear heavy baskets on their head. We experimented, some with better posture than others. The Maasai men can jump straight into the air. Just for fun, some brave men gave that a try, too!





26 Wayne Kooy
 30 Mary Scurio
 Jennifer Miller



04 Barry & Denise Lucas

05 Jeff Polonowski
 10 Dennis Wells
 16 Ella Hiscock
 20 Carrie Lovett



2024

Please call the office if there is an anniversary or birthday you would like to add to the list.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4 9:45 & 12:30 Food Warehouse 3-5:30 CK Dinner	5 8 Food Warehouse	6
7 9 Sunday School 10:30 Worship CE Mtg	8 5:30 Women's Fellowship	9 7 Diaconate Mtg	10 10 Senior Support Group Meeting 5:45 Prayer Mtg	11 9:45 & 12:30 Food Warehouse 3-5:30 CK Take-out Dinner	12 8 Food Warehouse	13 8:30 Men's Breakfast  Spaghetti 4:30-6:30 Fundraiser
14 9 Sunday School 10:30 Worship Trustee Mtg	15	16	17 5:45 Prayer Mtg	18 9:45 & 12:30 Food Warehouse 3-5:30 CK Take-out Dinner	19 8 Food Warehouse	20
Communion 21 9 Sunday School 10:30 Worship	22	23	24 10 Senior Support Group Meeting 5:45 Prayer Mtg	25 9:45 & 12:30 Food Warehouse 3-5:30 CK Take-out Dinner	26 8 Food Warehouse	27
28 9 Sunday School 10:30 Worship	29	30				

The First Congregational Church of Allegan



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Worship with us on Sundays at 10:30 AM!

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

The Hole In our Holiness

Excerpted from Kevin DeYoung

In his book *The Hole In Our Holiness*, Kevin DeYoung explores how good deeds spring up from good news.

1. The gospel encourages godliness out of a sense of gratitude.
2. The gospel aids our pursuit of holiness by telling us the truth about who we are.
 - If we are heirs to the whole world, why should we envy?
 - If we are God's treasured possession, why be jealous?
 - If God is our Father, why be afraid?
 - If we are dead to sin, why live in it?
 - If we've been raised with Christ, why continue in our old sinful ways?
 - If we are loved with an everlasting love, why are we trying to prove our worth to the world?

3. The gospel points us to Jesus.

All the blessings of salvation, whether in eternity past (election), in history (redemption), in the present (effectual calling, justification, and sanctification), or in the future (glorification) are received in Jesus Christ. Union with Christ really matters for the way you live your life. It matters for your spiritual health and your holiness. Union with Christ guides our growth in godliness: it reminds us that the pursuit of holiness is also the pursuit of Christ. We aren't interested in being virtuous just to be good people. Our first love is Jesus. Holiness is not ultimately about living up to a moral standard. It's about living in Christ and living out our real, vital union with him.

