Building on Strengths:
enhancing satisfaction, effectiveness and meaning
in professional work and congregational leadership

Nancy Josephine Cooper Cameron

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Advisors: Rev. Doug Clark, M. Div.
Dr. Bennett Miller

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Doctor of Ministry Project Final Approval

To: The Members of the Doctor of Ministry Faculty

I hereby submit the signatures of approval from my advisors and Dr. Carol Ochs for my completed Doctor of Ministry Project.

The title of the completed Project is:

Building on Strengths:
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in professional work and congregational leadership

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I have submitted velo or spiral bound copies to my mentors and Dr. Carol Ochs.

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Student Name	Student Signature	Date
BENNETT F. MILLER	*signature*	3/11/05
HUC-JIR Mentor's Name	HUC-JIR Mentor's Signature	Date
DOUGLASS B. CLARK	*signature*	3/14/05
PCMH Mentor's Name	PCMH Mentor's Signature	Date
Carol Ochs	*signature*	3/14/05
Dr. Carol Och's Approval		Date

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Preface

If the only prayer you ever give is "thank you", that is enough.
Meister Eckert, 14c.

The only way to begin is with a full, yet inadequate, "Thank you":

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Chapter 1

A statement of the problem or issue addressed by this Project

The search for love, meaning and purpose which gives rise to a glad sense of personal and communal integration is complex, mysterious and multi-dimensional in each individual's experience of life. "An integrated person is someone whose goals, values, thoughts, and actions are in harmony; someone who belongs to a network of relationships; someone who accepts a place within a system of mutual responsibilities and shared meanings" (Gardner, et al, 2001, p. 243).

Freud, in his work that became foundational to the development of psychodynamic theory, taught that the sign of a healthy person was possession of sufficient capacity for "enjoyment and efficiency." (Freud, p. 568). Subsequent interpreters of his work have often understood these criteria in the more contemporary language of love and work. Ego psychology was an expansion of this understanding. Erikson's work (1980) on identity expressed this same objective in positing a theory of "unity of the human life

cycle" (p.7). Subsequent practitioners of psychodynamic theory, with all their individual, complementary, and sometimes contentious variety and diversity, continue to have a common aim in working with individuals or groups: "to look inside someone's heart and mind. Without it (psychodynamic theory) we are almost blind, limited to the surface, the concrete and the manifest." (Berzoff, et. al., 1996, p. 5-6).

Whereas without the historical and continually developing insights given us by psychodynamic theory we are *almost* blind, without the a priori understanding of an eternally loving God originator, creator and pervasive all-embracing prime mover, we are blind. This is the given and the ground on which stand all in a religious community. Theology, the study of God through sacred text and human experience, "is whatever launches, sustains and stabilizes us on the way of love" (Ochs, 2001, p. 4). Therefore, the kinship of theology and psychodynamic theory to address a problem in congregational life offers both the potential for a depth of insight and transformation. Further, this kinship offers the exciting prospect of enhancement of participants' lives (through a felt growth of health/integration).

My project offers congregational leaders an opportunity to identify, understand and reflect upon their (personal) Signature Strengths, a term central to the work of Martin E. P. Seligman (explained below). The congruence, or the absence of congruence, of Signature Strengths in a person's professional and congregational work has a major impact on accomplishment and satisfaction. Conscious awareness of Signature Strengths and their interrelationships enhances personal effectiveness, as well as offering new ways

to address long-standing problems. Further, the intentional utilization of Signature Strengths brings a deepened sense of meaning and satisfaction, increases the incidence and experience of "flow," (as demonstrated in the work of Mihaly Cxizezentmihalvi) and opens a way to growth and transformation.

Finally, this project is of sufficient breadth and relevance to enable and encourage clergy in other traditions/denominations to replicate or adapt it in part or in totality to the specific needs of their congregations (from Demonstration Project Manual, p.1). The objective of this project is to offer to congregational lay leaders an experience that is: 1. theologically and psychologically sound and integrated; 2. a challenging engagement in a process of observation, reflection, discussion and reassessment of their personal strengths; 3. and that results in newly discerned opportunities and understandings of personal satisfactions, effectiveness and impact in professional and congregational work.

Background of this Project: Its need and relevance

(This project will be carried out in a Protestant, Presbyterian congregation. This initial context will influence the choice of scripture texts used. However, in congregations of different faith traditions, these texts could be replaced by choices appropriate and applicable to the participants' theology and experience.)

Lay leadership is a defining and denominational mark of the Presbyterian faith community. Annually, members are nominated and elected by the congregation's entire

membership. Terms of office are three years on two distinct lay leadership boards: (1) the Session (members called "Elders") which is "responsible for the mission and government of a particular church" (Book of Order, G-10.0102); and (2) the Board of Deacons (members called "Deacons") who report to the Elders and whose work involves the ministries of "sympathy, witness and service" (Book of Order, G-6.0401).

Lay leaders, in this urban intentionally progressive left-of-center congregation are diverse in culture, theology, ethnic background, education and professional experience. This unusual diversity is due to the urban nature of New York City and the Riverdale community, the paucity of Protestant choices in the surrounding community, and the decades-old tradition of broad and inclusive theological and social welcome to all who come seeking a spiritual home. In addition to Presbyterians holding the full range of this denomination's theologies (spanning a wide liberal-conservative spectrum), Protestants of other of backgrounds are present---Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Mennonites, Baptists, Congregationalists and other denominations. There is a large group of disaffected former members of the Roman Catholic Church. There are also a few who grew up as practicing or secular Jews and have been baptized into the Christian faith. Some had no religious background or training at all.

This congregation is unified by a Protestant Reformation-based theology. Inherent in this Reformed theology is the understanding that theology is not fixed and set for all time, but under the constant and mysterious guidance of the Holy Spirit. (Presbyterians often refer to their denomination as, "Reformed, ever Reforming".) Thus, Reformed theology by

definition is always subject to the disturbance and blessing of divine intervention and revelation. Tradition and creativity are in continuing, unavoidable, generative tension with one another. Alternatively, said another way in a beloved Protestant hymn, "Time makes ancient good uncouth" (The Hymnal, 1933, p. 373).

A second unifying characteristic of this congregation is its commitment to maintain a wide and expanding welcome to all who seek to join. Another aspect that also unifies this congregation, particularly those elected to leadership positions, is the shared seemingly inescapable reality of living lives marked by stress, anxiety, and commitment overload.

This congregation is of largely middle-class and upper middle class sensibility, orientation, accomplishment and aspiration. The combination of (1) relentlessly fast-paced and inherently competitive urban life, (2) a neighborhood poorly served by public transportation resulting in long (sometimes very long) commutes to work, (3) family relationships that are time starved, (4) micro and macro employment and professional instabilities and uncertainties bringing "doubled-up" jobs and longer hours result in a normative daily existential complexity producing inescapable, unremitting and accumulating stress. This weighty personal inner climate is overlaid by the citywide, nation-wide, worldwide collective fear and anxiety in the shared post-9/11 era.

Thus, by experience, by environment, and by attitude, lay congregational leaders who are employed full time are stretched to near inhuman limits in their unrelieved attempts to

balance responsibilities in work-life/family-life/congregational-life/personal-life. (Although those in recent or long-term retirement often experience many of these same stressors, this project is focused on those who do or must work to maintain self and/or family).

In addition to the weight of these responsibilities, congregational leaders are often loaded with unexpressed personal expectations, low in a sense of spontaneity and joy, and high in feelings of unmet commitments and obligations. Some lay leaders appear to ricochet between one set of inadequately attended responsibilities to another. In their roles of leadership in congregational life, satisfactions are often absent, fleeting or minimal. Further, new leadership opportunities or responsibilities may be seen as burdensome or undertaken with reluctance or resignation. Creativity and initiative are thus often curtailed.

With such an inner and outer climate, congregational leadership often devolves to a functional task, another "to do" to be crossed off the endless list, an experience to be endured until one's term is up. Spiritual vitality and growth are minimal. Further, the spiritual understandings of human capacities as gift and talent and vocation, which are at the theological center of all elected offices, are minimized, if acknowledged at all. The result is a collective lack of energy, enthusiasm, creativity and focus that short-circuits full and committed participation. Both work and congregation, so dominant in an individual's life, receive less than the full vitality, contribution and potential of the

individual. In such circumstances, the person often feels expended and less than fully alive.

The choice is to either throw up our collective hands, sighing, "Well, that's just the way things are in this time and place. What can anyone really do about it?"; or, to seek a fresh approach. I choose the latter: hence this project, Building on Strengths.

Respecting the above realities in lay leaders lives, and cognizant of the their wariness of "taking on one more thing," I propose a carefully planned project that can be easily explained, thoughtfully engaged in, comfortably shared, and offers the possibility of the expansion of goodness, effectiveness, insight and meaning in participants' lives. The objective is to combine theological understanding and psychological learnings to offer participants an increased sense of self-understanding and self-integration while also expanding their desire for adaptation and growth.

The work of Freud is foundational and offers a theory of understanding psychic impediments to personal integration and satisfaction. "Freud wrote that the tasks of adult life are love, work and communal life" (Ochs, 2001, p. 100). Originating theories of drive and structure, his consistent aim was the restoration or strengthening of psychological health. Ego psychology built on this foundation. Erickson expanded the domain further to "the unity of human life cycle, and the specific dynamics of each of its stages, as prescribed by laws of individual development and of social organization. In psychoanalysis this theme had not been carried beyond childhood" (Erikson, p. 7).

Erickson set forth a theory "that personality development is not fixed or contained in childhood, but involves an unfolding of ego psychological development over the life cycle" (Berzoff, p. 104). This life-span orientation was new to the field. For Erickson, health was the way in which a person "(1) masters her environment, (2) has a unified personality, and (3) perceives herself and her world accurately" (p. 104-105). This life-span development approach makes Erickson's work particularly suitable for this project where the participants will be of different ages and stages in life.

The work of Sullivan also contributes to this project. "Sullivan defined health as a person's ability to put the interpersonal situation into words" (p. 206-207). The instrument to be used in this project deals largely with words, and the capacity of participants to give words to their experience and then to reframe their experience in terms of new words. In a (congregational) culture which values education, learning and verbal expression, this approach is likely to be perceived as having a natural unthreatening logic.

The focus of this project will be shaped around the recent work of Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman. Seligman is the Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, the director of the Positive Psychology Network, and the former president of the American Psychological Association. His work is complementary to that of Barbara Frederickson, winner of the Templeton Positive Psychology Prize, in her theory of the function of positive emotions. "Frederickson claims that positive emotions have a grand purpose in evolution. They broaden our abiding intellectual, physical, and social

resources, building up reserves we can draw upon when a threat or opportunity presents itself. When we are in a positive mood, people like us better, and friendship, love and coalitions are more likely to cement. In contrast to constrictions of negative emotion, our mental set is expansive, tolerant, and creative" (Seligman, 2002, p. 32).

Orienting himself to the psychology of positive emotions, Seligman developed an instrument for the identification of an individual's strengths, "Signature Strengths", he calls them. He has demonstrated that the identification of Signature Strengths offers an individual a freshening of self-knowledge that is positive and invites understanding and application in on-going and problematic life situations. The Signature Strengths instrument is in jargon-free language. The insights gained offer a basis for thoughtful reflection on (1) choices made, (2) decisions pending, and (3) changes desired. Further, the conscious integration of Signature Strengths into the tasks of work and congregational leadership may result in the generative and fulfilling experience of "flow" (set forth in the work of Mihaly Cxizezentmihalvi.) Thus, when a lay-leader works from Signature Strengths, whether in a professional career or congregational leadership, not only is effectiveness enhanced, but also so is the potential for greater personal satisfaction, meaning and transformation.

The specific focus of the project will be the common themes in participants' professional work and congregational leadership responsibilities. Initially, each will be asked to identify the specific strengths/attributes needed for the accomplishment of tasks and personal satisfaction in each area. Then, participants will individually and privately take

the Signature Strengths instrument (available on the Internet). Following this, I will plan individual (1 on 1) and group meetings to reflect both on the findings of this Signature Strength process, and the individual and collective experience of the process. My hypothesis in undertaking this project is that there may be an experience of pleasure, affirmation and goodness as consequences of participation, along with the equally desirable benefit of community building among the participants as they compare, contrast and share their insights with one another.

If the shared experience of the participants in the project brings the results as anticipated, this project could be offered as a model to other congregational groups where the aim is to encourage personal growth, give accessible and respected tools for enhanced self-knowledge, encourage deeper and cooperative interrelationships, expand the scope and depth of satisfaction, and foster the climate for personal transformation as a consequence of leadership in a religious community.

In an authentic religious community, twin aspirations for a good life and a meaningful life become mutually reinforcing. "The good life consists in deriving happiness by using your signature strengths every day in the main realms of living. The meaningful life adds one more component: using these same strengths to forward knowledge, power, or goodness (Seligman, 260)."

The defining center of the authentic religious community is a lived faith, trusting in God behind, before, above, beneath, throughout all. The will and way of God is towards

reparation of creation and restoration of human relationships through the healing light of justice and mercy, reconciliation and peace. This ineffably holy God, ever ancient and ever new, tenderly, persistently, creatively, ceaselessly summons all, individually and collectively, into the wonder, blessing, and mystery of life with infinitude of manifestations of divine love.

> (T) therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live...
> (Moses, as recorded in Deuteronomy 30: 19b)

> I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.
> (Jesus, as recorded in John 10:10)

Chapter 2

Principles that guide and inform this Project

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the principles that guide and inform this project. Beginning

with religious principles, I will briefly describe the theology of work from Jewish, early

Christian (Roman Catholic), and Reformed (Protestant) perspectives. The section on

Reformed theology will draw from the teaching of Jesus, the writings of Paul, and record

of the Book of Acts (Luke the presumed author), and the later development of the

Protestant concept of work as vocation. The religious principles underlying this project

show that work is blessing not curse; and, that such human endeavor is divinely intended

to enrich and expand an individual's life as it also enriches and expands the social and

faith community in which the individual lives. When an individual's experience at work

results in constricted vitality and burdensome stress, a rethinking and reordering of understanding is needed.

The psychological principles of this project begin with the work of Freud. These principles are also informed by the subsequent work and theories of ego psychology, Erikson and Sullivan. In the last two decades, Dr. Martin Seligman has questioned the tone and orientation of the entire field of psychology as practiced. In his view, the historical and continuing emphasis on disease, psychological deficits, and needed remediation (by therapy, counseling or medication) have limited the potential impact of psychology on the population as a whole. He had developed a theory, and the instrument by which the theory can be both tested and understood, to delineate an individual's character strengths and intentionally incorporate these strengths to enhance daily living as a natural antidote to stress and anxiety.

Working from these religious and psychological principles with leaders of a Protestant congregation, I will test this hypothesis: that the integration of this theology of vocation and Seligman's positive psychology offer church leaders concrete, integrated understandings and insights that will enhance their capacities for satisfaction, effectiveness and meaning in their professional work and congregational leadership.

Religious Principles

Fear not, little flock, for it is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

As people of faith, what do we do with what we have? A more accurate faith-informed formulation of that question would rephrase it slightly, significantly: as a people of faith, what are we to do with what we *have been given*? For, all is gift.

The traditional theology of creation places all power, imagination, desire and will in God. The origin of creation, as demonstrative of God's divine creative energy and ineffable capacity, is told in two separate accounts, recorded in the first three chapters of Genesis. In the first story, God creates by the power of the divine word: "Let there be..." is successively spoken, giving all creation shape and form and specificity (Genesis 1:1-2:3). In the second account, God is said to "make", the heavens and earth, and to "form" the human, "breathing" into the yet lifeless creature the "breath of life." God further "plants a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed" (Genesis 2: 4-9). In both scriptural accounts, God's power is *sui generis* and God creates *ex nihilo*, with the result that, from a human point of view, all creation, all in creation, and all contained in the nature of creatures created is gift. In both accounts, creation is the sole and exclusive work of God.

Jewish theology understands humans as partners or co-creators with God in the continuing unfolding of creation or, in its repair, where human agency has caused rupture or damage. Work, therefore, is purposeful, dignified and good. (An exception to this understanding of the divinely originated goodness of work is slavery or any kind of work that is degrading to human beings.) "God lies behind all the works of civilization...In

part this leads...to the work ethic of the rabbis, whereby one's earthly avocation is under God's blessing as well as good works, and the manual labor is highly regarded" (Bromiley, 1985, p. 253). This goodness of work is seen repeatedly in scripture: in the building of the ark by Noah, in Moses "work" in leading the Children of Israel from slavery and through the wilderness, in the claiming of the Promised Land, and in the workers who re-built the temple. Each situation both evokes and requires the exercise of human skills, talents, gifts and capabilities. Further each situation shapes and is shaped by these human attributes in the work needed.

A corollary aspect of the Jewish understanding of work lies in the theology of the Garden of Eden. "Adam's punishment was not necessarily *labor* since he had already worked in the Garden. His curse was that he would have to do sweaty, tiring, often frustrating toil to bring forth bread from a sometimes uncooperative earth. Work, which would no longer be easy, would be how humanity could make the world more holy and complete the work that God had started" (Salkin, 1994, p. 39). Another dimension of the understanding of work comes from Wisdom literature which "seems to suggest that hard work is an obligation, since not to work would mean letting life pass and poverty threaten (Proverbs 6.6-11; 12:24)" (Ballard, p.33).

The place of work in human experience was the subject of the Talmudic tale of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son as told by the early sages. The aim is achievement of a balance in life, but a particular kind of balance. (Salkin, p. 42.) "The greatest window into the rabbinic way of understanding is through the rabbis' vocabulary...Maimonides,

the great medieval sage, taught that we should divide our time among 1) studying the Torah; 2) earning a livelihood; and 3) necessary physical activities, such as eating and sleeping. He never questioned that studying Torah took precedence over the other two. The ancient rabbis elevated work to the level of a mitzvah (a holy obligation) since the Torah commands 'six days you shall labor before it demands that we rest on the Sabbath." (Salkin, p. 43-43).

Finally, work or works, that which we leave behind after death, may be a way to leave a legacy or to achieve immortality according to the late philosopher, Hannah Arendt. "'Work and its product, the human artifact,' she wrote, 'bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time'" (Slakin, p. 46).

The earliest of the Christian scriptures, the writings of Paul, speak of work as normative to life in the community of faith. Work guides the disciplines of continuing spiritual formation, evokes patience, and is redemptive through the sharing of the burdens of life in the world. Work therefore is not for individualized good, but for the common good of the community. (Ballard, pp. 35-36).

The Christian understanding of work was radically influenced by the experience and writings of Augustine. His potent and life-transforming conversion to the Christian faith resulted in a categorical condemnation of his libertine former ways, naming them as shamefully lust-driven, guiltily irresponsible, and unredeemedly sinful. Sin, in his new

understanding, was endemic to humans, a result of the heart's perverse and willful habit to desire and love wrongly. The result was human disobedience against God as seen in Augustine's theology of original sin. In this theology, which became the reference point for 1200 years of Christian understanding, work was curse, and a humanly deserved one at that. Work was God-designed and justified punishment to humans for their congenital sinfulness and willful disobedience of divine order. (Genesis 3: 17-19). Further, during these centuries, when work revolved around the essential survival needs of food, shelter and protection, there was little incentive (communal or personal) to reflect on whether personal strengths were being used for the greatest individual or community good. So much of human capacity and capability was wasted, frustrated, unacknowledged, undiscovered, unexplored.

Times have changed. With the eruption of the Reformation, work was redeemed from negativity and curse. Reformers, in their return to scripture, lifted up work as response to blessing, not punishment. Calvin led the successive and extensive development of the theology of vocation. Work as vocation no longer limited to those called into institutionally sanctioned and ordained religious service (such as the celibate ordained male priesthood, or separated monastic communities of celibate men and women), but for all members in the faith community (married or not married). Vocation, derived from the Latin, *vocare*-to call, came to mean any choice of work or profession that both enhanced the individual's God-given capabilities while also contributing to the God-designed vision for all creation: a world of goodness, justice, mercy and peace. In recent decades, this understanding of work has widened and deepened still further into the

concept of humans being co-creators with God. This expansion is central to the theology of Carter Hayward and Matthew Fox. Work understood as co-creation results in a sense of personal integration and satisfaction. The experiences of meaning, goodness and service reinforce each other. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor turned writer, captures this concept vividly when he defines vocation as: "The place where God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, p. 95)

The scriptural theology of vocation is drawn from the teachings of Jesus and the life of the early church, as seen in the Gospels, the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul. Because all people are created in the image of God, all are blessed with God-given gifts, abilities, and talents. Education, maturity and relationships evoke the discovery and recognition of these gifts/abilities/talents and their cultivation results in personal satisfaction as well as contribution to the faith community and world at large. In Jesus' parable of the talents, Matthew 25: 31-46 (parallel in Luke 19: 12-27), the requirement of intentional and responsible use of gifts/abilities/talents is explicitly set forth. The wise, intentional use of what is given is expected, regardless of the size of what has been given. Enhancement of the original size of gift is the result of such intentional use. Non-use of what is given results in its being taken away, an explicit loss to the individual and implicit loss to the community. So it is in human experience: non-use of personal gifts/abilities/talents results in loss, personal and communal.

The writer of the Book of Acts (generally attributed to Luke) is explicit in the expectation, discipline and practice of members of the religious community contributing all they had to the common good. Whereas this takes place largely in the context of monetary contributions, it is a short step to also understand community members are expected to utilize all their abilities---talents, capabilities, strengths---for the health and well-being of all. Such contributions would presume an individual's consciousness of their presence, and the capacity to identify and use them. The same is true in the letters of Paul, most specifically in his writing to the congregation in Corinth. Writing as both critic and guide to this young faith community, he says, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7). The importance of this text to Reform theology cannot be over-emphasized. Significantly, it is used in every Presbyterian ordination service of every elected officer: Minister, Elder, and Deacon.

"The uniqueness of Jesus is in the totality of his humanness" (Rev. Emily Jean Gilbert, Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, group session, July, 1984). When a person is living and working aware of the fullness of capabilities, gifts, strengths, talents and all that their individual being can offer, the experience of generativity and fulfillment result. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5: 48), Jesus exhorted his followers. This directive is not, as has long been misunderstood, a directive to strive for and achieve personal flawlessness. This flawed interpretation of his words dates from the King James translation of the

Christian text in the early 1600's and, is still reflected in more contemporary text translations. The result has been the miss-guided and futile attempt to live in the often depressive and destructive pursuit of personal flawlessness, and to judge others by the same impossible-to-attain goal. The word translated as "perfect" in this Matthew text has an entirely different meaning and connotation: one that is life affirming, not life diminishing. "The use in Matthew carries the LXX sense of 'whole' or 'undivided'" (Bromiley, p. 1164). Thus, Jesus is urging his followers and listeners to live with an undivided sense of self, to live as integrated persons.

Clinical Principles

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreampt of in your philosophy" (from Hamlet, quoted by Berzoff, p. 10).

"In a changing world we are trying out---we must try out---new ways" (Erikson, p. 106).

In the beginning, Freud.

"Freud was always influenced by the belief that insight, self-awareness, and self-knowledge promote psychological development" (Berzoff, p. 18). Freud developed his theories from his findings in clinical data and the inferences he drew from them. In his articulation of the drive theory and the structural theory, Freud set forth a new understanding both of human mental illness and mental health. "A neurotic is incapable

of enjoyment and of efficiency—the former because his libido is not directed onto any real object and the latter because he is obligated to employ a great deal of his available energy on keeping his libido under repression and warding off its assaults. He would become healthier if the conflict between his ego and his libido came to an end and if his ego had his libido again at its disposal" (Freud, p. 564). Freud further emphasizes his focus on the goal of health: "We cannot deny that healthy people as well posses in their mental life what alone makes possible the formation both of dreams and of symptoms, and we must conclude that they too have carried out repressions, that they expend a certain amount of energy in order to maintain them, that their unconscious system conceals repressed impulses which are still cathected with energy, and that *a portion of their libido is withdrawn from their ego's disposal. (Emphasis in text.)* Thus a healthy person, too, is virtually a neurotic (p. 564)." In addition, he continues, "The distinction between nervous health and neurosis is thus reduced to a practical question and is decided by the outcome—*by whether the subject is left with a sufficient amount of capacity for enjoyment and efficiency" (p. 568, emphasis added).* Or, as Freud will say in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts, human mental health is the capacity to love, work and contribute.

Ego psychology has markedly expanded the range of psychodynamic formulations that attempt to explain motivation (Berzoff, p. 98). This theory emphasizes aspects of human dynamic and growth that are positive and more focused on growth. The aim is to strengthen the ego, in its internal and external relationships. This brings the natural result of the possibility and consequence of not only being able to change our own behavior but

also of having agency to be able to change some aspects of the environment in which we live and work.

The intersection of the individual and the social naturally leads to the work of Erik H. Erikson. "Erik Erikson was a particularly important ego psychologist who examined how the ego maintains coherence over the course of an average expectable human life cycle. He theorized that the ego is shaped and transformed not only by biological and psychological forces, but also by social forces. Erickson thus developed a *psychosocial* theory, modeled on Freud's psychosexual theory, which joined the principles of ego psychology with Freud's epigenetic principles from drive theory" (Berzoff, p. 103, emphasis in text).

In his chapter on "The Healthy Personality", Erikson asked, "How does a healthy personality grow or, as it were, accrue from the successive stages of increasing capacity to master life's outer and inner dangers—with some vital enthusiasm to spare?" (Erikson, p. 53) This thinking led him to develop a series of eight stages of development making up the life cycle. At each stage, the developing personality faces a crisis, bringing a change of perspective and the need for new capacities for coping and growth. "Thus, different capacities use different opportunities to become full-grown components of the ever-new configuration that is the growing personality" (Erikson, p. 57). Erikson names the stages of adulthood as: intimacy and distantiation versus self-adsorption, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair and disgust. These adult stages, like the stages of childhood before them, each carry their own perils and uncertainties for

successful passage. (Participants in this Project would, chronologically, be expected to be at the last of the two adult stages). "Ego integrity, therefore, implies an emotional integration which permits participation by followership as well as acceptance of the responsibility of leadership: both must be learned and practiced in religion and politics, in the economic order and in technology, in aristocratic living, and in the arts and sciences" (Erikson, p. 105). It is clarifying to note that by "aristocratic living" Erikson means the understanding "which in its widest possible sense connotes the conviction that the best people rule and that that rule develops the best in people" (Erikson, p. 100).

The work of Henry Stack Sullivan alters the perspective of theory from a "one-person psychology to a two-person psychology" (Berzoff, p. 199) with the development of a relational approach. Like Erikson, he sees personality development taking place over time during the life cycle, and like Erikson, he names the cyclic stages: infancy, childhood, juvenile, preadolescence and late adolescence. Each of these stages is marked by interpersonal relationships and interactions that will shape the level of anxiety the individual feels, and the capacity to endure this anxiety. Whereas, "the key in Freud's view is anxiety about unconscious-disapproved-of, instinctual wishes becoming conscious", according to Sullivan, "the key is anxiety over self-esteem." (Berzoff, p. 208). Consequently, "Sullivan defined health as a person's ability to put the interpersonal situation into words: 'No one has grave difficulties in living if he has a very good grasp of what is happening to him'" (Berzoff, p. 207). By his work, Sullivan "contributed pioneering ideas about the role of needed others in promoting self-esteem"

(Berzoff, p. 218). Self-esteem is an essential and natural component to of the experience of personal integration and satisfaction in work and leadership.

Martin E. P Seligman posits a different approach to integration and satisfaction. Trained in psychology and focusing largely on research, Seligman's earliest work was in the area of learned helplessness. As a therapist and researcher, his approach was "discovering deficits and repairing damage" (Seligman, 2002, p. 22). He began to notice a variety of strengths in some patients which not only helped the patient cope with a presenting problem, but also offered the patient insight and served as buffers against negative impacts. These strengths were transferable to other situations and became the source of the patient's growth and transformation.

This repeated experience with his patients led Seligman himself to gain insight into his work on learned helplessness. He became fascinated by what gave some people the capacity to endure difficulty and grow from the experience, while others gave up or gave in. Long and intense reflection on his years of work with youth and on his personal experience of parenting led him to refocus his professional direction. Initially with children, and later with adults, he developed a theory and practice that was "about identifying and amplifying their strengths and virtues, helping them find the niche where they can live these positive traits to the fullest" (Seligman, 2002, p. 28).

Seligman was influenced by the work of Barbara Fredrickson, especially her theory of the evolution of positive emotions. She posited that positive emotions create expansiveness

for human beings that facilitate relationships, coping with fear and tension, and foster creativity. (Seligman, 2002, p. 36). Building on the work of Lauren Alloy, Lyn Abramson, and Lisa Aspinwall, Seligman began to develop a theory that seemed both obvious and radical: *"A positive mood jolts us into an entirely different way of thinking from a negative mood"* (Seligman, 2002, p. 38.). Thus, he named his theory Positive Psychology. This theory has three pillars: the study of positive emotion, the study of positive traits, and the study of positive institutions. This Project will focus on the second of these pillars: participants' identification and reflection on their positive traits, especially on strengths and virtues, and the impact of such knowledge on work and leadership.

Seligman, working with Dr. Christopher Peterson and Dr. Katherine Dahlsgaard, reviewed 200 sources of human thought over 3000 years to distill as the core virtues, or characteristics of virtually all religious and philosophical traditions. Six were found: wisdom and knowledge, courage, love and humanity, justice, temperance, spirituality and transcendence. He then wanted to understand how humans can possess or achieve these virtues. (Seligman, 2002. p. 133) This led to his theory and development of Signature Strengths.

Seligman sees a distinction between talents and strengths. Strengths, he feels are moral traits; and, talents are non-moral. Talents are automatic whereas strengths usually require volition or choice. A talent can be squandered while a strength cannot. Talents cannot be acquired. Strengths can. Further, he feels strengths can be acquired by almost any

ordinary person. Again, the important factor is choice. The incorporation of personal strengths in daily life is not about learning, training or conditioning but rather about discovery, creation and ownership (Seligman, 2002. p. 135-136).

Working from this approach, there are 24 Personal Strengths grouped in clusters each relating to one of the six virtues mentioned above. In a sense, strengths are routes to virtue, and are characterized by the following: being a trait evident over different times and situations, being valued in its own right, being held in high regard across cultures, resulting in a win-win rather than a win-lose outcome, being supported by culture and respected in recognized role models. In order for a person to identify Personal Strengths, Seligman and Christopher Peterson developed the VIA (Values-In-Action) Strengths Survey instrument. This questionnaire, available on the web, rank orders strengths from top to bottom and compares the participant's answers to the pool of 1000's of people who have also taken the questionnaire. The top five strengths become Signature Strengths, and this knowledge can enable the participant to intentionally and consciously draw on these capacities in work, love, and play. States Seligman, "Herein is my formulation of the good life: Using your signature strengths every day in the main realms of your life to bring abundant gratification and authentic happiness." (Seligman, 2002, p. 161)

According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "The best moments occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (Eby, p. 1). These "best moments" Csikszentmihalyi has named "flow" in his development of the Psychology of Personal Experience. This is not a "spacing out"

so much as it is an exclusive attentiveness to a challenge at hand, which is characterized by clear, high goals and immediate feedback. There is concentration, forgetfulness, involvement and control. Time does not so much stand still as it dilates the focus point to incorporate all awareness. "You can't make flow happen. All you can do is learn to remove obstacles in its way" (Eby, p. 2).

An understanding and experience of Signature Strengths and Flow offer the thoughtful individual new insights into self-awareness with the exciting, inherently risky potential for personal growth and transformation. Thus equipped, he or she may experience a new level of satisfaction in professional and congregational work, as well as a heightened capacity for interrelationship of these two significant areas of living.

O Lord, thou has searched me and known me!

(Psalm 139:1)

"What do you want me to do for you?"

(Jesus' question to a blind man. Mark 10:51)

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Chapter 3

The method of carrying out this Project

Approach and Procedures

The method of carrying out this project will involve an <u>invitation</u> to congregational leaders. In this invitation (both spoken, and later by letter) I will explain the project, its foundation, principles and purpose. I will also discuss what participants may expect: the setting of a mutually workable schedule for meetings; the holding of 4 <u>group meetings</u> over a period of approximately 2 months, with 2 <u>1-on-1 meetings</u>, one at the mid-point and one at the conclusion; the assignment of "At-Home work" in preparation for group meetings 2 and 3.

The Invitation

In a Presbyterian Church, the authority for all aspects of congregational life lies with the Session. The Session is composed of Elders, individuals elected from the congregation to serve 3-year terms (renewable once before a mandatory year "off"). A second leadership group, also elected from the congregation for 3-year terms (also renewable once before a mandatory year "off), is the Board of Deacons. This Deacon Board, working under the

direction and guidance of the Elders of the Session, is responsible for the specific areas of hospitality, pastoral care and community service to, and in the name of, the congregation. Both leadership groups, the Session and Deacons have 15 members, making a total of 30 elected leaders at Riverdale Presbyterian Church.

Because this Project will take place in the context of this congregation and involve its leaders, I felt it necessary to inform the Session of the Project's nature and scope, and to seek the Session's approval for this planned work. This I did in March 2004; and I received both approval and encouragement.

My plan was to send a letter to each Elder and each Deacon asking for his/her participation. In the letter, I would outline the purpose of the project, time requirements, and hoped for results of the project. I anticipated 6-8 positive responses or volunteers from a leadership group of 30.

The Schedule

I planned to execute the project in April-May of 2004. I decided on Sunday evening meetings as all other weeknights were claimed by standing church committee meetings; and, neither Friday nor Saturday (day or evening) would be likely for these hyper-busy individuals. I would have a two week gap between Group Meetings 1 and 2, three weeks between Group Meetings 2 and 3 (when the Character Strengths Survey would be taken by participants), and two weeks between Group Meetings 3 and 4. I planned to meet with

each individual after Group Meeting 2 and again after Group Meeting 4, the conclusion of the project.

All Group Meetings would be 1 ½ hours in the early evening of Sunday (7-8:30). I was unalterably committed to prompt beginning and ending. (Such adherence to stated meeting time would be a surprising and presumably welcome novelty in the practice of church life here.) The individual meetings would be more open-ended, with my expectation they would be from 30-60 minutes.

Plans for the Group and Individual Meetings

All meetings would be held in my residence, the Manse of the church. This is unusual for church-related meetings. I made this decision to set this work "apart" from other church work and to offer a more relaxed, friendly setting. Participants would be invited to come early and to remain after the meeting for coffee and conversation, if they so chose.

Group Meeting 1: The purpose of this meeting was to welcome participants and give a brief over-view of the Project. Each participant would receive a pocket folder containing the printed schedule for Group Meetings of the Project, blank paper, a pen, and the At-Home Assignment # 1.

At this meeting, I planned to open by asking participants why they said "yes" to participating in the project, acknowledging my gratitude for their willingness and interest. I planned to explain the underlying psychological and religious principles. I also would set the context of the significance and relevance of this project to our congregational life, and the individual lives of the participants. At the end of this presentation, I planned to narrow the focus onto character strengths, discussing their importance in our self-understanding and in all the work we do. This would be in preparation for the First Exercise of the meeting.

In the First Exercise, participants would be asked to reflect on their personal strengths, and name them in writing on the paper given them in their Project folder. Because I anticipated that some would find this a difficult or unusual exercise, I planned to give it a sufficient amount of time, 5-10 minutes, and to ask for silence together.

The second part of this Exercise would be for participants to form groups of two or three (depending on numbers present.) While one person remained silent the other(s) would name the strengths they saw and knew in person in focus, and that person would write these named strengths down without comment or interruption. Then, the focus person would shift to another individual in the small group, who would listen and write while other(s) spoke, and so on until each had experienced listening/writing/ speaking with the other(s).

Finally, the entire group would reassemble to discuss together their experience of naming their strengths, and having others name them. What was it like to do that for one's self? What was it like to have others name strengths they saw and knew? This would lead to a discussion of the theology of gifts, strengths, talents, and our responsibility to acknowledge and use them for the common good.

Group Meeting 1 would conclude by reviewing At-Home Work Assignment #1, a copy of which is in the Project Folder. Individuals would be asked to write a 1-page "Critical Incident" report. I explained this by saying, "This is a description of one incident when you were presented with a problem or troublesome situation that you feel you handled effectively. This written description is to have a defined beginning with action-oriented content, and end with a bang of accomplishment. It is not a biography or a resume. It deals with one critical incident that has a beginning, an explanation as to how you handled it, and an ending you feel is good. It can involve home, work, friends, church, or anything else. One page or less."

Group Meeting 2: Participants, with their, Critical Incidents, pair off and read their "Critical Incident" to a partner. The reader then names the personal strengths that facilitated a successful outcome of that incident. The listener first listens, then adds insights as to strengths overlooked or slighted by the reader. The pair then reverses—with the listener becoming the reader, and the reader the listener, as the second Critical Incident is presented and looked at together. This will take around 15 minutes. The group gathers as a whole to reflect on this now shared experience of looking at a

particular experience in terms of personal strengths. What did they see or miss in themselves? What did they see or miss in the other?

I would then make a more lengthy presentation to the group on Positive Psychology, leaving time for questions at the end. This will prepare participants to self-administer the "Character Strengths Survey", which is At-Home assignment # 2 prior to Group Meeting 3. This Survey, like most of the on-going work and teaching of Seligman, is only available on-line. Instructions for the taking of this Survey would be given at the meeting and also included in writing.

First 1-on-1 Meeting: I would plan to meet with each participant after they have completed the Survey to discuss with them their experience of that process, along with their findings, feelings and insights (if any) from it.

Group Meeting 3: The participants would bring to this meeting the results of his/her Character Strengths Survey. The meeting would open with a discussion of the experience of taking the Survey. Participants would then pair off (with a different partner than at other meetings) to talk of what the Survey showed them, their reaction to it, and the reaction of their partner. Questions that could be addressed: did the results feel accurate? Were there any surprises? Were there any disappointments?

The participants would then reconvene as a group. If there is willingness, participants would be asked to name their five strengths, which will be plotted on a large chart that

lists all 24-character strengths (Appendixes 1 and 5). Participants would be given the option to "pass" if they choose not to name their strengths to the group. This would enable the congregational leaders to see where the collective group strengths lie according to this Survey instrument.

Group Meeting 4: This final meeting would be focused on the participants' experience of this Project process. Particular emphasis would be on the theological rootedness of the Character Strengths. References to scriptural texts, stories, and themes would be provided and discussion invited. Depending on the willingness of individuals, a participant could present the entire group with a personal situation and ask for feedback and insight incorporating his/her character strengths. This would be a time of focused reflection and theologizing together. Depending on the make-up of the group, some reflection on the nature of group-revealed strengths may be useful. Finally, for these participants, all of whom are leaders of a faith community, I would emphasize that the nature of blessing always calls us to gratitude and service—no less so in this time of reflection and new understanding of our strengths.

Second 1 on 1 Meeting: This would be the final aspect of the Project for participants. In this time, I would ask participants to reflect on their experience in the Project, guided but not limited to, a set of evaluative questions. This would enable and enhance my assessment of the project.

Methods used to assess outcomes

1. Attendance of participants at all Group Meetings. If absence is necessary, a willingness to make special arrangements to learn of information missed and homework assigned.

2. Completion of all At-Home assignments.

3. The increase and strengthening of ties among participants through shared experiences of At Home assignments and Group Meeting exercises.

4. The increase of self-knowledge and awareness by participants of their own strengths and the impact of conscious employment of these strengths in problematic situations.

5. The presence of a demonstrable willingness to look at problem situations through the lens of new learnings of Character Strengths.

6. The presence of participants' enhanced and deeper ability to experience and articulate a theological understanding of giftedness of personal strengths, and the concomitant ability to acknowledge and use them in professional work and church leadership.

7. A willingness to present problem situations to colleagues in the faith community, and ask for reflection together in light of character strengths of the presenter.

8. Evidence of actual or anticipated enhanced satisfaction, effectiveness and meaning in specific areas of work and church leadership by virtue of being a participant in this Project.

Chapter 4

Results

Description of Outcomes

The response to the invitation to participate in this Project was immediate, significantly larger than I expected. Twelve of 15 Elders volunteered to take part. I had expected four to six from this Board. Because of this high level of response, I did not extend the invitation to the Deacon Board. I did not want to be put in the position of choosing among church leader/volunteers and felt that 12 was the maximum number for effective group interaction that I envisioned for the Project. (I had anticipated a group of around 8).

Once the Project started, the schedule flowed without interruption or flaw. Group meetings were well attended; participants were prepared engaged and enthusiastic; there was an observable "over-flow" of energy and interest as shown by the continuing and sustained conversations among participants after the meeting time had ended. Engagement was further evidenced by the questions asked during presentations of

theological and psychological material that was part of each Group Meeting. These questions reflected that the material presented was being taken seriously and thoughtfully evaluated by the participants. Comments such as:

"I never thought of things this way."

"This gives me a new way of looking at myself. I was always told to work on my weaknesses. That's what my wife says. But they don't go away and I never feel I get anywhere."

"When I face a problem—and I have problems—knowing my strengths, that I really have them, tells me that I should maybe take time. Not rush in. Think about it. Sometimes I just feel I have to react…in a hurry…right now. Maybe I don't."

Outcomes in relation to Assessment Measures of Chapter 3

1. Attendance: Attendance was excellent. Eleven of the twelve participants completed the entire Project. One participant dropped out after missing the first meeting, attending the second, and not attending the last two. Scheduling conflicts were given as the reason. Distance from the church (50 minutes) likely contributed to this. Another participant missed the first meeting due to "forgetfulness." We met separately to catch-up. Two other participants missed one meeting due to pre-planned travel obligations. Each told me of this ahead of time and contacted me in order to "catch-up and be prepared" for the next meeting. Participants were relatively prompt, within 10 minutes of starting time, much better than normal in this community. Meetings ended promptly, and most

participants remained for 20-30 minutes of continued, animated conversation together. Many told me that they often discussed the content and experience of this project with one another during the weeks of its duration.

2. Completion of all At-Home assignments. Every participant came prepared with the requested written work for every meeting. There were no exceptions.

3. Increase of ties among participants. At each Group Meeting, participants were asked to form dyads or triads for meeting exercises. These small groups changed with each meeting. Every exercise included both an experience of self-disclosure and also a requirement for attentive listening to another on personal matters or experiences (not related to congregational business or agendas.) This resulted in an increase of relatedness that was commented on by many, and gave rise to an increase of pleasure, humor and attentiveness at the Group Meetings. "I wouldn't have missed this experience for the world," said one participant. "This *is* church," said another.

4. Increase of self-knowledge. Particularly at the first two Group Meetings, participants spoke to me of the apparent learned/taught Christian aversion to naming one's strengths. "Aren't we supposed to be humble?" one person asked. Another said, "If I talk about my strengths, isn't that pride?" People talked about having to act one way "at work" and another way "at church". The challenge, or invitation, offered by understandings of psychology and theology are to be self-

aware, self-knowledgeable, or, said another way, an integrated self. Understanding one's Signature Strengths, as offered by this Project, is a way in to awareness, knowledge and integration.

5. Use of Signature Strengths in problem/critical situations. An added Assignment (see "Developments not Anticipated" below) for the Group 4 meeting was to look at a current critical situation through the lens of Signature Strengths. Participants were asked to list their strengths at the top of the page, describe the situation in writing, and to reflect on that situation consciously referencing (by underlining or other notation) their Strengths. The experience was illuminating for many. This way of addressing a difficult situation not only was helpful in that one particular circumstance, but it opened new possibilities for fresh understanding and empowerment of other areas of their experience. In Appendix 2 are the reflections of three participants on how they used their Signature Strengths in this way. I have decided to reproduce their texts as written in order to convey a sense of reality and immediacy.

6. Increase in participants' experience and articulation of theological understanding. Members of a faith community are implicitly called to be theologians of their own lives. Congregants, by virtue of profession of faith publicly made and reinforced by the weekly liturgy and content of worship services, have repeatedly self-

committed to see the world and their personal experience in it in the larger context of the unfolding revelation of God. Because the tradition teaches each person is made in the image of God, so each person has divinely given attributes: strengths, gifts, talents, and blessings with which to meet the vicissitudes of life and to share widely, generously and gratefully with the larger community. Few, in this congregation, have been given (or have sought) the needed context for mature, theologically grounded reflection. When, through Projects such as this, or other ways (group study, retreat, personal disciplines), the opportunity is offered, those who participate usually react with curiosity, gratitude, relief and wonder. This was the response I saw as I linked the Character Strengths theologically by distributing "Scripture and Signature Strengths." (See Appendix 3). Here, Strengths were related to specific text verses. Further time and study, beyond the scope of this project, could expand the theological interconnections of Strengths to Scripture stories, parables, themes.

7. Part of the added At-Home assignment for Group Meeting 4 was asking participants to think of a current situation they were facing on which they could use help. Would they consider presenting this to the Group and having others reflect with them on the use of their Strengths in that particular situation? Three individuals volunteered to present situations. (See Appendix 4 for the structure of these individual-to-group presentations.) The response of the Group was thoughtful, creative and sensitive. The response of the individual to this

experience was an expansion of understanding, both of self and of the particular situation. It was a time of grace in the midst of this Project.

8. Positive feelings and outcomes from the Project. Individuals spoke to me of increased understanding of self, and others, in the context of and as a result of their participation. They were beginning to see a new coherence of their own experience, theologically grounded and newly psychologically understood. Many mentioned a strengthened sense of respect and understanding for both self and others. Further, many felt that this Project would enhance work together as a leadership board through increased self-awareness and mutual trust.

Developments not anticipated.

There were many:

1. The enthusiasm of response and the willingness of participants to commit to the requirements of this Project. I had expected it to be much more difficult to recruit volunteers. I did not expect that this initial enthusiasm to build and increase through out the Project, which it did.

2. The difficulty of setting a schedule for the sequence of Group Meetings that avoided conflicts with personal lives or congregational events and seasons.

I had hoped to execute the project in the Spring of 2004. My repeated attempts to block out the needed sequence of weeks were frustrated either by pre-set congregational events or by unavailability of a large percentage of participants. I found this discouraging and this led to my questioning the validity of the Project. A fall schedule (September 19-November 7) seemed highly improbable in our highly programmed church with it's over-busy leaders. I was wrong. This schedule worked flawlessly. It also had the completely unanticipated advantage of complementing and building on Elder's work together at a well-attended and provocative Leadership Retreat earlier that Fall.

3. Because all the participants were drawn from one group, the Elders, this offered the unexpected and unanticipated opportunity to enhance group cohesion and gain group insight. After Group Meeting 3, I took the Signature Strengths named by each individual and arranged them in order of frequency for the whole Group. (See Appendix 5.) The dominant Signature Strengths of this group of Elders were: curiosity (7 participants), gratitude (6), humor (5), spirituality (5), fairness (4), kindness (4), appreciation of beauty and excellence (4). Not one of the Elders reflected strength in: humility/modesty, self-regulation/self-control, persistence, leadership, perspective. This Strength profile of the entire group occasioned surprise, wonder and consternation. One Elder plans to present a reflection on this at the January 2005 Session meeting.

4. An additional At-Home assignment was required. I felt very strongly (perhaps too strongly) that I would not deviate from the initial parameters of the Project. This related to the number and length of meetings, and number of at-home assignments. I had initially said only two assignments would be necessary: the Critical Situation report and the self-administration of the Character Strengths Survey. As the 4th and last meeting approached, I realized that there needed to be ways for participants to pull the newly gained Strengths information into their living, working, theology and leadership. Therefore, with apologies for my lack of anticipation, I gave a three-part additional At-Home assignment for the final Group Meeting: 1. in writing, recount a difficult situation through the lens of their Signature Strengths; 2. also in writing, reflect on church leadership and its interconnections (if any) with Signature Strengths; and, 3. consider offering a situation you are currently experiencing for others to explore with you using the framework of your Signature Strengths. There was no objection to this additional assignment. All came to the final meeting with the assignment prepared; and, all said it was the most time consuming and provocative of all the assignments.

5. After Group Meeting 1, with its brief introduction to the religious and psychological principles of the Project, I realized a more in-depth discussion of Seligman's theory of Positive Psychology was needed. In response to this, I prepared a lengthy oral presentation for Group Meeting 2. This was an

important decision; for, it appeared to be pivotal to individual and shared group understanding of the origin and potential of this project. After my presentation and the resultant questions and discussion, there was, as it were, a collective "Ah-ha!" or "Now I get it!". The curiosity, willingness and enthusiasm of participants, already high, continued to grow significantly. Building on strengths made new sense.

6. The first 1 on 1 Meetings were not held. This was due to the eruption on the congregation of a major crisis (the need to terminate a staff member) and the resultant time and attention this adsorbed from the Elders and myself. In addition, the high level of enthusiasm and group cohesion appeared to make individual discussions less necessary, possibly interruptive, now.

7. The only 1 on 1 Meetings were at the conclusion of the Project. At the end of Group Meeting 4, I gave participants a list of questions concerning their experience of this Project, and asked them to consider these in preparation for our individual meeting. (See Appendix 6.) Participants took this request seriously and many came prepared with notes to reference during our meeting together.

8. Unexpectedly, I enjoyed the group work of this project much more than I imagined. There was an initial and continuing sense of reciprocity between participants and myself that occurs when a group is engaged in an endeavor of purpose, discovery, mutuality and creativity. My careful planning of the

meetings and the attentiveness of participants resulted in a sense of time together well and purposefully spent.

9. There was not sufficient time to reflect on the concept and experience of "flow" by the participants. This theory was presented in Group Meeting 3. There is irony here as I realize, in retrospect, that I was experiencing "flow" in my leadership of this process.

10. The willingness of these leaders to participate in this project with such readiness, with significant expectations of time and home assignments, reflected not only interest on their part, but also a hunger for the very type of insightful, positive experience that can uniquely be offered in the context of a faith community.

11. Three-quarters of the participants expressed eagerness for an opportunity to have occasional meetings for group reflection together. The model for this would be drawn from the exercise in Group Meeting 4: an individual would present a problematic situation to the group and ask for reflection together in terms of the presenters 5 Signature Strengths. I hope to arrange a continuation of Group Meetings for those who care to participate on a monthly basis.

12. Without exception, participants recommended that taking the Character Strength Survey be a practice, or requirement, for every leadership board, annually. This would freshen individual self-understanding as well as give insight to the collective strengths of the group together. This collective view and subsequent analysis could give leaders new understanding as to why

certain problems seem to occur in congregational life, year after year, generation after generation.

13. One participant had a particular difficulty in identifying personal problems for individual or group reflection. "I don't have any problems in my life," this individual said repeatedly. This stumped the rest of us as we had come to know that this individual lives in a strained personal relationship, had recently moved, had been "downsized" from one job, was unemployed for weeks, left the next position after a week, and was just starting a third---all in the process of a few months. "These aren't problems," the person adamantly explained. "They are the situations in my life." I finally realized that I, *I*, had changed my language and caused her a *problem*. Seligman used the word "situation" to invite reflection on participants' experience. I did this initially, then, unconsciously slipped to the word, "problem". In subsequent meetings, I will be more conscious of my use of language, returning to the use of "situation."

Chapter 5

Overall understanding of issues and theories of the Project

1. Congruence between clinical pastoral expectations and outcomes.

The specific focus of this project was to offer participants an opportunity to identify and understand personal strengths in order to enhance the experience of meaning and integration in their professional work and church leadership.

Leaders here, like most of the congregation, live in a climate of stress and competition. Relationships, even the most valued, are often time-starved. Daily life, that is part of the larger pattern of weeks and months and years, is experienced as ricocheting between obligations, deadlines, responsibilities and the unforeseen. There is little time, nor is taking such time valued, to step back and assess the repertoire of personal attributes or strengths with which one can navigate one's own life. Were would such a place of reflection be?

For a person of faith who authenticates that faith by membership in a faith community, the congregation is a natural context for faith reflection, personal development and

growth. This is true if (and this is a big if) the faith tradition and community are seen as central to one's self-understanding, rather than just an activity-add-on. To have a congregational context where one could explore and name, alone and with others, personal strengths, could offer a freshened and affirmed sense of rootedness and capability. The personal vulnerability inherent in such an experience would be shared by similarly motivated others, similarly vulnerable, making vulnerability less frightening and thereby bearable.

The purpose of this project was to provide the setting for this to take place, provide the framework and information to guide it, offer an instrument to illumine it, and give opportunity for participants to distill and carry forward learnings and insights gained from their individual and shared experience. The recent work of Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman on the identification of Character Strengths provided the needed psychological theory and instrument for this approach. Our faith tradition of divine giftedness of all persons, vocation, and service provided the theological foundation.

The congruence of the understanding of Character Strengths and theological strengths as seen in the project was astounding. In retrospect, perhaps this beauty of "fit" should have been more obvious and less surprising. Project participants individually and collectively appeared to carry an unspoken yearning for an experience that allowed free and unfettered reflection of the interrelationships of work life and congregational life. Some felt there was no way to relate the two—that they were destined, doomed, to life a bifurcated living. These people were particularly appreciative that this Project gave them

an unexpected opportunity to look freshly at situations in their work and in the congregation. Others welcomed the opportunity to rediscover personal strengths, or hear others name what may have eluded their conscious awareness. Finally, still others experienced the pleasure and encouragement of affirmation—a reiteration of what is self-known through hearing it spoken by others.

2. Incongruence or unexpected outcomes.

The unexpected outcomes for me were 4: a.) timing and time needed, b.) level of response, c.) commitment of participants, and d.) participants' desire for the continuation of the group reflection process.

a.) Timing and time needed: In retrospect, a vivid indicator of the pastoral dimension of this Project was that the Group found its own timing, in spite of my determined efforts to plan otherwise. I wanted to avoid the fall, feeling that participants would be particularly loaded with personal, professional, congregational responsibilities that all collide in September-October. This may be true. However, what is also true is that there was a ripeness in this over-full time for leaders to want to take time out for a different kind of reflection and experience together. In a sense, the Project provided a fresh and mutually engaging way to begin the new year, newly together. Participants spoke of their appreciation and gratitude for the Fall timing.

The timing needed for preparation by myself—to do the research, to think through and plan the meetings, to prepare the materials—was enormous. One dimension of this Project in particular needs rethinking: the Scriptural interconnections with the Character Strengths require further development. The approach used here smacks of proof-texting. Interconnections of greater depth could be developed through the incorporation of scriptural themes, stories, parables or persons. Further, such parallels may encourage participants to explore Scripture with renewed interest and curiosity than is likely with the single-verse-citation approach.

Further, though I had always felt that this Project fit well into the needs of this congregation, the more I worked on it, the more the nature and timeliness of the "fit" was evident to me. This was either illusionary, and the result of progressive myopia that can overtake a Project director; or it was in fact a lovely revelation of the grace of timeliness bringing expansive, energizing insight to all of us throughout. I hope the latter.

b.) Level of response: Conversations with participants revealed that the initial level of response (12 of 15 Elders) was generated from two motivations: a respect and appreciation for my leadership of the congregation, and a willingness to "participate in something new with you, whatever it is." In terms of the content of the Project, this largely highly educated, diversely experienced, meeting-weary group did not expect a high level of discovery, of self or otherwise. They were gladly surprised, they told me, by the Group Meetings that offered a skillfully planned mix of content, small group experiences, personal reflection, and informal discussion before and after. I am told they

reminded each other of up-coming meetings, checked to see if others had done the "home-work", and offered prods of encouragement. They arrived prepared and curious and left with experiences and information that excited and energized them. So did I.

c.) Commitment of participants: Integration, alignment of self, at-one-ness—there are many ways to describe the need/desire/longing to be at home in self. Freud saw mental health as the capacity to love, work and contribute. (See p. 21, above.) Without becoming overly grandiose, I sense this Project tapped into the inchoate human psychological/spiritual desire for living that has coherence and meaning. Character Strengths that participants discovered, or rediscovered—self-named or named for them— are available in the ubiquity of an individual's life. There is goodness in this knowing. Sensing this, at whatever level of consciousness, was, I now see, a contributing factor that gave strength and energy and zest to almost everyone's experience of this Project. The exception is one individual who, though present with completed assignments throughout, was the most relationally distant and guarded. He lives, teetering, at the high end of New York City's social and political ladder and lives there defended and vigilant. Although he would say in evaluation that, "I knew most of this. There was not much new for me, except I can understand some of the Elders better, even though I still don't feel much in common with them....", he could also say, "Yes, I recommend this process. Yes, even for me. It does make me think, and that doesn't happen very often for me these days."

d.) Desire for continuation of reflection group experience: The repeated desire for a continuation of the group reflection experience using the framework of Signature

Strengths is a natural, though unexpected, result of this level of response and commitment. I had assumed that when the Project was done, it would be *done*. Not so here: in a sense, the completion of the Project is instead the opening of new possibilities for these participants as well as for leaders in the future, or other willing individuals in the congregation at large. One participant said he felt it would be necessary for a group to have a prior self-identity for individuals to draw fully from this project. In other words, a group of participants, unknown to one another, would gain little. Certainly, a group experience offers unique possibilities. However, I can envision, with some redesign of Group Meetings, this project being offered to individuals unknown to one-anther and still having significant individual value.

The link between needs and aims discussed in Chapter 1

Needs:

a.) What can one offer to individual and collective lives, so constantly overcommitted that they feel they have no time, and even less inclination, *for one more thing?*

b.) How can we learn to see ourselves, each divinely created and gifted, with out the distortions of false pride and/or false humility?

c.) How can the separate places of our living---work, congregational leadership, relationships with family, friends, adversaries---have a sense of coherence and interrelatedness?

d.) How can we find a way through complex situations, some newly upon us, others that we have fruitlessly coped with, or ducked, for years?

e.) How can my faith find more of a place in my life? Or, more to the point, how can my life find place in my faith?

f.) Is it possible to find a few people who will listen to me, and give me honest, insightful feedback in ways that are actually useful, relevant and kind?

These needs are all present, articulated and unarticulated, in the lives and experiences of congregational leaders. I know this from conversations, observation, and my own experience of work in this congregation (as well as my experience of being an Elder and congregational leader before being ordained as a minister.)

As addressed in Chapter 1, this Project was responsive to these needs:

a.) The Project was designed tightly, with well-defined time requirements and at-home work. For over-busy people, there is always the capacity to find time for that which is felt to be important. Schedules, even the tightest, do have some elasticity. What makes this possible is if the new event is deemed sufficiently worthy or important to bring elasticity into play. Participants apparently felt initial willingness towards or importance in this Project, and then their own experience provided the necessary impetus for their exceptional diligence and continuation.

b.) The capacity of an individual to name his/her strengths is often distorted by experience and teachings that suggest such naming is either inappropriate or self-preening. Yet, for both psychological health and theological integrity, this self-

knowledge is necessary for maturity, the capacity for relationships, and usefulness and service to the communities in which a person lives. Christian teachings, misunderstood and misapplied, have often given individuals the impression that any claiming of personal capacities is somehow un-Christian. Such age old and contemporary mis-instruction simply insures the collective, complicit development of false modesty or sanctioned hypocrisy. Further, it makes no psychological or theological sense. To be unaware of self, psychologically, crates danger and confusion to self and others. To be unaware of self, theologically, makes it impossible to love self or others, or God.

Seligman's understanding of Character Strengths, and his design of the Character Strength Survey, gives individuals a way to objectify, claim and affirm a personal strength assessment. Knowledge of self (psychological) and knowledge of giftedness (theological) intersect. My design of the Group Meetings prepared participants for this intersection—"warmed them up", as it were. In Group Meeting 1, participants had time to reflect on, and write down, in silence, their own assessment of their personal strengths. Then, in triads, two others named strengths they saw in the (silent) third, with the third also writing down these namings. At Group Meeting 2, participants brought in a Critical Situation, naming the strengths they brought to that particular situation. With a (different) partner, they then listened, and wrote down, the strengths the partner saw. In these exercises, participants were prepared to take the Character Strengths Survey prior to Group Meeting 3. At that third meeting, they arrived prepared with their Signature Strength findings, ready and willing to share their own information with-out self-consciousness, and to listen to others' with genuine interest and shared pleasure. The

twin Christian demons of false-pride and false-humility had been met and, at least for a time, banished.

c.) Finding personal coherence in the different areas of living: "This is who I am" was the response of all but one of the" participants as they viewed their five Signature Strengths. Some felt strong affirmation: "Yup, that's me." or "Nothing new here and that's good." Others felt rediscovery: "I always sort of knew this but it's good to see it so clearly." One participant felt that her five Character Strengths did not represent her. She could not understand why other Strengths did not show up. I encouraged her to take the Survey again and she said she would. She said she had also taken it during a particularly distracted time when a young child was acting out at home. It is also possible, and more than likely, that this participant, chronically late, forgetful, distracted, unreliable and contrary, may have stumbled in front of a new kind of mirror she did not realize was being offered to her.

It was a short step for participants to recognize their Signature Strengths interwoven in the many areas of their living---family, relationships, leisure activities, personal choices. For instance, those with a strength of humor could see that pervasive in their lives. Those with a strength of love of beauty began to understand why the décor of office and home mattered, why they chose the clothes they chose, why they preferred a particular kind of vacation. It was like a "popcorn" kind of awareness that erupted back and forth in the room. One after another, without hesitation or prodding, individuals unselfconsciously made their own connections, as others suggested additional insights for them to consider.

The "Ah-ha"s were both for personal discovery and sharing in the discoveries of others. This group was awash with shared pleasure, delight, laughter and joys in self and one another. I do not exaggerate. It was lovely.

It was important to note, emphasize, and repeat over and over to participants that there is no "hierarchy" of Character Strengths. All are good. None are better. None are lesser. In a list of 24, it is natural to think that being "1" is preferable to being "24." To emphasize this, I did not number the strengths and instead used letters.

d.)Application of Character Strengths to problems: With such a mutual experience of pleasure together, it was a short step to then apply Character Strengths to individual situations. Such an invitation for willing, individual vulnerability would have been unthinkable before this process. Three people quickly volunteered to have the group look with them at the struggle they were having with a particular "live" situation. Two concerned congregational matters (one relating to an individual's leadership of a troubled committee, the other to an individual finding he was suffering and sleepless due to the viciousness of some members). The third situation involved the unbearably pained relationship of an only son with his mother (both from the Dominican Republic and both carrying cultural expectations of that culture), whose physical and mental health is rapidly deteriorating. Group members were intensely respectful, close to reverential, as they listened to these disclosures and requests for insight and help. Their comments were thoughtful and sensitive. Each volunteer was surprised and grateful for this process.

Each felt empowered with new understanding that would enable them to act in a situation that had been experienced as deadening and dead-end.

e.) Finding faith in life, or life in faith: throughout our discussions and my presentations, I referenced that we were a faith community, drawn together by the mysterious, inseparable intertwining of God's leading and our own choice and capacity to respond. Whereas decisions to participate were made individually, there was a felt sense of shared revelation: "Oh! so many others said yes!"... "Oh! You see that strength in me!"... "Oh! Did I show my strengths there?"... "Oh! That may be why you and I approach situations in the same way even though we seem so different" .... "Oh! How clear that is now that you point it out...." and on and on. Presbyterians are often uncomfortable using theological language in conversation with one another. Such "God-talk" (as this is often called) is accompanied by self-consciousness which silences thoughtful and self-revealing theological exploration with others. Yet, the power of the Spirit, blowing away personal hesitations and mental fog, was real in these discussions. Further, participants spoke of the helpfulness of these conversations and methods in all areas of their experience. One said, "Knowing my strengths in this way is like having a tool box with me at all times. When something comes up, I can remember, if I remember, that I have my toolbox. I can take time and open it up and think through the situation consciously using my strengths. It's like living blessed!"

It is this new consciousness of remembering that I referenced frequently to the participants. Not just remembering the Signature Strengths theory, but also remembering

that one is never separated from the holy; and, that this "mere" remembrance may open the unexpected capacity to give time or space or insight to whatever is at hand. And, then…how natural it would be reach for the ever-present "tools" of Character Strengths.

This project grew out of my observing the following: leaders here tend to separate congregational life from other aspects of living. Comments such as, "Well, this is the way we may do things here in the congregation, but the outside world is different." Or, "People at my office just want to get the job done. They don't care much how, or who does it, or if anyone gets hurt in the process. Just get the job done. *Period.*" Or, "The people I work with bring out a different me. I am different at my office. And, sometimes I don't like the me that I am there." For these participants, the Project experience began to raise the question of how, and in what way, religious culture and understandings (experienced in congregational life) can impact non-religious culture (of their professional life).

f.) Finding willing listeners and sensitive feedback: this was an unexpected and unplanned for dimension of the Project. Using Character Strengths for group reflection was suggested to me by a colleague who has significant experience working with and applying Seligman's theories. This time of group reflection provided, in a quiet way, the culmination and evidence of the potential of this project. Participants drawing both from new learning and a new sense of kinship with one another could now ask for and offer mutual help. Customary defenses shrank. The one who asked and the ones who responded took risks, shared uncertainties, asked questions with care, and offered

observations with sensitivity. Were the problem situations "solved" or "fixed"? No. Yet, the presenter discovered space in a formerly tight and unyielding situation, seeing possibilities of new movement in its midst; and, the responders grew in empathy and understanding in the presence of newly seen courage and struggle of another. The participants shared a sense of honest interconnectedness and gratitude, discovering themselves companions and companioned on holy ground.

In Chapter 1, I concluded the section titled "Statement of the problem or issue to addressed by this Project" by saying:

> The objective of this project is to offer congregational lay leaders an experience that is: 1. theologically and psychologically sound and integrated; 2. a challenging engagement in a process of observation, reflection, discussion and reassessment of personal strengths; 3. and that results in newly discerned opportunities and understandings of personal satisfactions, effectiveness and impact in professional and congregational work.

These aims have been carried out by this project.

4. Linkage of this Project to the religious and clinical principles in Chapter 2, including any changes in understanding as a result of execution of the Project.

Religious Principles: In Chapter 2, the theology of work from Jewish, early Christian (Roman Catholic), and Reformed (Protestant) perspectives was presented. The section

on Reformed theology drew from the teaching of Jesus, the writings of Paul, and the Book of Acts. From these contexts, "work is blessing, not curse; and, such human endeavor is divinely intended to enrich and expand an individuals life as it also enriches and expands the social and faith community in which the individual lives." (See page 12 above.)

The members of this congregation are from social/economic classes that value education and inculcate aspiration. All graduated from high school, 10 hold Bachelor's Degrees, 8 have Master's Degrees, and there were 3 PhDs in the group. Education in our culture brings access and gives choice. Thus, they have had the capacity to "choose" their work. No one has to endure the reality of work that was physically/emotionally/psychologically destructive, draining or demeaning. "Work" for participants in this group was chosen mindful of: a utilization of personal talents and acquired skills, an expectation of upward mobility (in income/position/status), a work environment context that would foster learning and satisfaction. Not all participants may ever experience work as vocation, "the place where God calls you...where your deep gladness and the world's hunger meet" (see page 18 above); but, none experience work as curse.

In our Presbyterian tradition, however, there is the understanding that individuals *will* seek and find vocation. This Project directly and indirectly fostered reflection on this. With one exception, all participants came to understand, or understand again, that their choice of work could be seen, and experienced, as vocation. The types of employment represented in this group are: architect, legal secretary, technical sales, information

technology, judicial court systems administrator, building superintendent, therapist, parent-community volunteer, teacher, professor. The one participant who would choose different work than she does now is employed as a back-office administrator in a large real estate firm. She has told me that although she does not feel this work is vocation, she sees "vocation" in her continual choosing to bring an attitude of kindness and forbearance into a hostile and alienating office setting.

Some participants had expected that this Project would make distinctions between "work life" and "congregational life." Said one person, "I thought you were going to show us how different the two worlds are, oppositional. But, instead, I now see how living in oppositional worlds would be a problem for me. I can understand now that even though the situations I face may look very different from one another, I am able to bring to them my same strengths. I feel less divided. My work-self can talk more with my congregational self. And the distance between the two doesn't have to be so big." This individual was speaking of a growing sense of personal integration that she could not only feel, but was beginning to consciously bring to bear in a variety of settings.

One area of collective insight for participants was their connecting their Signature Strengths with facets of church leadership. Most found obvious connections and some discovered new connections. Two found themselves in congregational positions for which they could find no strong personal Signature Strength connection. This will lead to further discussion. It may reflect "a bad fit" between individual and given

responsibility; or a shortcoming in the Strengths Survey for that person. No instrument of measure is flawless.

One surprising result of this Project was revealed when I plotted the Signature Strengths of the leadership group together. Ranking high in frequency for the whole group were: Curiosity, Gratitude, Humor, Spirituality, Fairness, Appreciation of beauty and excellence. Mid range strengths for the group were Integrity, Vitality, Creativity, Forgiveness and Mercy, Citizenship, Open-mindedness, Love of Learning, Love, Hope. Low frequency were Bravery, Social intelligence and Prudence. The Signature Strengths of Humility, Self-regulation, Persistence, *Leadership* and Perspective were not a strength of a single individual in this leadership group!

The meaning of these findings is unclear, and will be a subject of further discussion and reflection. Yet, this much is clear now: this is a congregation where leaders often say: "No one ever volunteers around here!", "It's easier for me to do things myself.", "How do you get people to help?" "The problem in this congregation is people don't tell each other what they are doing." The lack of "Leadership" as an individual *and* collective strength may invite these leaders to talk together as to the accuracy, implications, and opportunities suggested by this finding.

The fact that this Project took place in a congregational setting was of primary importance. Participants came as Elders of a congregation, ordained individually to this elected position to work collectively as congregational leaders. In no other context could

they (or I) imagine such a diverse group drawn together to lead together. There is mystery and grace in this. Participation in the Project revealed that learning about one another enhances understanding, empathy and mutual pleasure. Further, it will continue to lubricate the ways we work together. Listening, discovering, rediscovering, finding graceful ways to question, willingness to correct old attitudes with forgiveness and understanding of self and other ---all these and more were present in each Group Meeting and re-enforced by the Meeting exercises. Christian theology names this as the presence of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 18:20) breathing aliveness, fostering courage, generating creativity in the midst of the seemingly ordinary.

Psychological Principles: Freud's central emphasis on an individual's capacity for "enjoyment and efficiency" holds. Often renamed as "love and work", the capacity for these continue to be the mark of a psychologically healthy person. Many participants experience tension and fragmentation here: work vs. family/personal relationships vs. congregational responsibilities, rather than mutually supportive and reinforcing complementarities of these different areas of adult experience. Ego psychology, with its emphasis on strengthening the ego in its internal and external relationships, offers the possibility of being able to change behavior and some of the aspects of our living. Erikson carried this intersection of the individual and the social further. His understanding of the stages of development frames the experience of aging in ways accessible to those with little background in psychology. Participants were living in the Eriksonian stages of "generativity versus stagnation" and "integrity versus despair and disgust". His objective of "ego integrity permits participation by followership as well as

acceptance of the responsibility of leadership: both must be learned and practiced in religion and politics, in the economic order and in technology, in aristocratic living, and in the arts and sciences." (See page 22 above). Sullivan, too, placed strong emphasis of a relational approach to psychological understanding. Emphasizing self-esteem, he named it key ingredient of personal integration and satisfaction.

The presentation and discussion of these clinical principles gave participants the needed foundation to learn about and understand of the work of Seligman. In a sense, these more traditional principles (known in varying degrees by the participants) plowed the ground that Seligman's approach of Character Strengths proceeded to overturn. Working from the principle of strengths already possessed, identifiable, namable, and useable, Seligman offered participants a new way to self-assess and to frame work and leadership in that assessment. The result was individual insight, energy, thoughtfulness and curiosity.

What I did not anticipate was that insight, energy, reflection and curiosity were also collective. The participant group became more expansive in their mutual understanding and kinship. In the last two Group Meetings there was often an experience of a collective, "Wow!" as they began to feel the impact of Strengths understanding upon self, other and the group as a whole.

There was not sufficient time in the Project as designed to present fully a study of the Csikszentmihalyi concept of "flow". This concept was referenced in Group Meetings. A fuller presentation would have necessitated an additional Group Meeting and related

exercises. Such an addition would, I feel, be beneficial and a logical outgrowth of Signature Strengths work. It would help participants identify flow experiences in their lives. This awareness increases the possibility of increasing flow, a source of satisfaction and meaning. I would recommend this material be incorporated between Group Meetings 3 and 4.

The final sentence of Chapter 2 spoke of this aspiration: An understanding and experience of Signature Strengths and Flow offer the thoughtful individual new insights into self-awareness with the exciting, inherently risky, potential for personal growth and transformation. Thus equipped, he or she may experience a new level of satisfaction in professional and congregational work, as well as a heightened capacity for the interrelationship of these two significant areas of living.

To my delight, pleasure and gratitude, this has been accomplished in this project—for the participants as they have reported to me, and for myself as I led them, step by step, meeting by meeting, in this work. For us all, it has been a time rich in discovery and blessing.

An After word

What a surprise!

This project has been exciting and generative to me in ways beyond my wildest and most outlandish imagining. My first project proposal, approved, backed up by hours of research, was a false start. I could make no headway and eventually discarded the concept, and all preliminary research. My energy and focus evaporated. I learned about the work of Seligman for a year before I slowly could discern its relevance. I began it with hesitation and uncertainty. Then this Project took off.

The fact that the participant group was made up all from the same leadership board, the fact that the Project brought in material (the theories of Seligman) with which participants were unfamiliar and curious (the #1 strength of this group!), the fact that the busiest time of the year was when they all "found" time, the fact that each came prepared with all at-home assignments without exception, the fact that there was a continual unfolding of learning of self and other, the fact that the foundation of this all was our shared participation in a faith community—all this has given this leadership group a dynamic awareness of the hunger for, and sweet taste of, psychologically and theologically integrated learning. Already we are reaping the fruits and benefits of this Project in our work together. I expect this harvest will continue in lives and years to come.

Appendixes

1. Character Strengths

2. Reflections on use of Signature Strengths by three participants.

3. Scripture and Signature Strengths

4. Structure of Individual-to-Group presentations in Group Meeting 4

5. Signature Strengths as a Group

6. Questions for 1 on 1 Meetings to Evaluate the Project

7. Collective description of Participants

8. Reasons given by Elders for participation in Project

9. Letter introducing Project to Elders and asking for their participation

10. Instructions to Participants for taking of Character Strengths Survey

11. Why Positive Psychology? (Oral presentation at Group Meeting 2)

Classification of Character Strengths

These are the 24 strengths that are measured by the VIA Signature Strengths Survey. The names and descriptions of the strengths are taken from **Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification** by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, Oxford University Press, 2004. The earlier versions used in **Authentic Happiness** and on this site are provided in italics.

WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE
Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- **Creativity [originality, ingenuity]**
  Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
  Creativity, ingenuity, and originality - Thinking of new ways to do things is a crucial part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.

- **Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]**
  Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
  Curiosity and interest in the world - You are curious about everything. You are always asking questions, and you find all subjects and topics fascinating. You like exploration and discovery.

- **Open-mindedness [judgment, critical thinking]**
  Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
  Judgment, critical thinking, and open-mindedness - Thinking things through and examining them from all sides are important aspects of who you are. You do not jump to conclusions, and you rely only on solid evidence to make your decisions. You are able to change your mind.

- **Love of Learning**

Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows

Love of learning - You love learning new things, whether in a class or on your own. You have always loved school, reading, and museums-anywhere and everywhere there is an opportunity to learn.

- **Perspective [wisdom]**
  Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

  Perspective (wisdom) - Although you may not think of yourself as wise, your friends hold this view of you. They value your perspective on matters and turn to you for advice. You have a way of looking at the world that makes sense to others and to yourself.

COURAGE
Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- **Bravery [valor]**
  Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it

  Bravery and valor - You are a courageous person who does not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain. You speak up for what is right even if there is opposition. You act on your convictions.

- **Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]**
  Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks

  Industry, diligence, and perseverance - You work hard to finish what you start. No matter the project, you "get it out the door" in timely fashion. You do not get distracted when you work, and you take satisfaction in completing tasks.

- **Integrity [authenticity, honesty]**
  Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

  Honesty, authenticity, and genuineness - You are an honest person, not only by speaking the truth but by living your life in a genuine and authentic way. You are down to earth and

without pretense; you are a "real" person.

- **Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]**
  Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
  Zest, enthusiasm, and energy - Regardless of what you do, you approach it with excitement and energy. You never do anything halfway or halfheartedly. For you, life is an adventure.

HUMANITY
Interpersonal strengths that involve "tending" and "befriending" others

- **Love**
  Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
  Capacity to love and be loved - You value close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated. The people to whom you feel most close are the same people who feel most close to you.

- **Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]**
  Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
  Kindness and generosity - You are kind and generous to others, and you are never too busy to do a favor. You enjoy doing good deeds for others, even if you do not know them well.

- **Social Intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]**
  Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit in to different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
  Social intelligence - You are aware of the motives and feelings of other people. You know what to do to fit in to different social situations, and you know what to do to put others at ease.

JUSTICE
Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- **Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]**
  Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
  Citizenship, teamwork, and loyalty - You excel as a member of a group. You are a loyal and dedicated teammate, you

always do your share, and you work hard for the success of your group.

- **Fairness**
  Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
  Fairness, equity, and justice - Treating all people fairly is one of your abiding principles. You do not let your personal feelings bias your decisions about other people. You give everyone a chance.

- **Leadership**
  Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
  Leadership - You excel at the tasks of leadership: encouraging a group to get things done and preserving harmony within the group by making everyone feel included. You do a good job organizing activities and seeing that they happen.

TEMPERANCE
Strengths that protect against excess

- **Forgiveness and mercy**
  Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful
  Forgiveness and mercy - You forgive those who have done you wrong. You always give people a second chance. Your guiding principle is mercy and not revenge.

- **Humility/Modesty**
  Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding one's self as more special than one is
  Modesty and humility - You do not seek the spotlight, preferring to let your accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not regard yourself as special, and others recognize and value your modesty.

- **Prudence**
  Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted
  Caution, prudence, and discretion - You are a careful person, and your choices are consistently prudent ones. You do not say or do things that you might later regret.

- **Self-regulation [self-control]**
  Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined;

controlling one's appetites and emotions
Self-control and self-regulation - You self-consciously regulate what you feel and what you do. You are a disciplined person. You are in control of your appetites and your emotions, not vice versa.

TRANSCENDENCE
Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

- **Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]**
  Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
  Appreciation of beauty and excellence - You notice and appreciate beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.

- **Gratitude**
  Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
  Gratitude - You are aware of the good things that happen to you, and you never take them for granted. Your friends and family members know that you are a grateful person because you always take the time to express your thanks.

- **Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]**
  Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
  Hope, optimism, and future-mindedness - You expect the best in the future, and you work to achieve it. You believe that the future is something that you can control.

- **Humor [playfulness]**
  Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
  Humor and playfulness - You like to laugh and tease. Bringing smiles to other people is important to you. You try to see the light side of all situations.

- **Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]**
  Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort
  Spirituality, sense of purpose, and faith - You have strong

and coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe. You know where you fit in the larger scheme. Your beliefs shape your actions and are a source of comfort to you.

← Done →

Appendix 2

Reflection on use of Signature Strengths by three participants. (Verbatim written

comments in response to the assignment to look at a "new, deeper problem/situation I

have faced, met or solved" through the lens of identified Signature Strengths.

Assignment 3, prepared for Group Meeting 4.)

Participant A.

Identified Signature Strengths:	Spirituality, sense of purpose
	Humor, playfulness
	Zest, enthusiasm
	Honesty
	Forgiveness

I have had difficulty in a personal relationship. The problems are unresolved, other than

to some extent go our own ways. To get to this point has taken spirituality, honesty,

forgiveness and humor.

Participant B.

Identified Signature Strengths:	Curiosity and interest in the world
	Fairness, equity and justice
	Zest, enthusiasm, energy
	Forgiveness and mercy
	Honesty, authenticity, and genuineness

This year I reinvented myself. Most of my old life left me: my husband due to unresolved depression and personal issues. My professional status as a print production manager and problem solver in book manufacturing left when my boss chose to hire a younger, less costly employee. In my six-month job search, I discovered that I didn't care if I didn't work in the printing industry (my life-long work until then) again.

When I looked back over the many different positions I have held, I recognized that I liked working with people and talking to them about things I loved and knew how to do. I decided to become a teacher, an English teacher, with specialized skills in literacy and publications.

I talked to all the friends and neighbors about teaching---where to go, what to look for, what to avoid, who to see. I volunteered to facilitate a 5th and 6th grade reading group in the spring. I talked to more people. I got admissions materials to (three city-located) colleges and began to plot a course to a master's degree in secondary education. I volunteered in a third grade classroom in summer school. Then I saw a 1"x 2" ad in the Week in Review section of the Sunday newspaper announcing a limited number of scholarships still available for candidates transitioning into public school teaching. I called the number at _____ College and interviewed the same week. I was admitted into the program the same day. Not only would this College give me a scholarship, a mentor to assist with the byways of certification, and an entrée into public school for observation, but also they would facilitate a fast track into a paying job by the second semester of this academic year.

I am halfway through my first semester and one-half way to full certification. Sometimes I am tired and wonder how I am going to get it all done and work and be a mother and a child of aging parents and a sister and a friend and a Session member.

When I look at my signature strengths, I see that curiosity allowed me to find solutions. I didn't stop looking for what might be out there. I see zest and energy---or I used to see it, it is fast disappearing. There is forgiveness and mercy. I have forgiven my husband and my boss for what they did that hurt me. I know that my honesty cost me my job this spring, but I would not have been able to live with myself if I had done anything else.

Participant C

Identified Signature Strengths: Curiosity

Love of learning

Judgment, critical thinking, open-mindedness

Fairness, equity, justice

Humor and playfulness

Recently, I had to propose a series of personnel changes to my boss. I based my recommendations on a combination of factors including what was best for the organization and what was fair for the individuals involved. My boss resisted my recommendations, as I knew she would.

I believe that I used three of my five signature strengths in this extended negotiation. I applied critical thinking in developing my position and marshaling my counter-arguments (which I knew I would need.) I emphasized why I thought the proposed changes were fair and necessary, particularly in terms of equity. Finally, I used humor at various points to lessen the tension involved in the discussion. Additionally, I used humor to gently bring up the negative consequences of not taking the action I recommended.

I must admit I was only partly successful and did not achieve all the changes I wanted. I believe my strategy and presentation, which involved these signature strengths, was effective and will pursue this further using these same strengths.

Appendix 3

(A copy of this was given to all participants at Group Meeting 4, for discussion and

reflection.)

<u>Scripture and Signature Strengths</u>

"Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, 'The first is, Hear, O Israel:
The Lord of God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is
this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mark 12:28-31; also Matthew 22: 34-
40 and Luke 10:25-28)

God is my strength and my shield; in God my heart trusts...(Psalm 28:7)

God will fulfill God's purpose in me. (Psalm 138:a)

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians
6:2b)

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to
God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

You, therefore must be perfect, as God in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)
(Perfect in this context: whole, complete, integrated).

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but
the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires
them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common
good. (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

<u>Wisdom and Knowledge</u>
Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition of knowledge.

Creativity
I create a new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17)

Behold, I make all things new. (Revelation 21:5)

Curiosity

Seek the Lord and God's strength, seek God's presence continually.
(Psalm 105:4)

Seek and you shall find, ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, those who seek find, and to those who knock the door will be opened. (Matthew 7: 7-8)

Open-mindedness
Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.
(Matthew 13:16)

And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at the table in the kingdom of God. (Luke 13:29)

Love of learning
Cling to instruction and never let it go; observe it well, for it is your life.
(Proverbs: 4:13)

Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes, and I will keep it to the end. (Psalm 119:33)

Perspective/wisdom
The first thing to acquire is wisdom, gain understanding though it cost all you have. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you safe; love her, and she will guard you. (Proverbs 4: 7,6)

Wisdom is better than weapons of war...(Ecclesiastes 9:18)

Courage
Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of the will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

Bravery (valor)
Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.
(Esther 5: 16c)

Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.
(1 Corinthians 16:
13)
When they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (Mark 13: 11)

Persistence
With God, nothing will be impossible. (Luke 1:37)

And Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always pray and not lose heart. (Luke 18:1)

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 14:32)

Integrity
Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"....(Matthew5:37a)

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up every way into him who is the head, into Christ...(Ephesians 4:15)

Vitality
I come to bring you life in all its abundance. (John 10:10)

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life ;s/he who believes in me though s/he die, yet shall s/he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. (John 11:25)

Jesus breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:22)

Humanity
Interpersonal strengths that involve "tending" and "befriending" others

Capacity to love and be loved
This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:11)

Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:14)

This I command you, to love one another. (John 15:17)

Kindness, generosity, care, compassion
The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because God has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, God has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;...(Isaiah 61:1, also Luke 4:18)

...and when he saw him, he had compassion on him and bound up his wounds,... and said to the innkeeper, :take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back." (Luke 10:34a)

Jesus had compassion on the multitude...(Matthew 15:32)

Blessed be God, for God has wondrously shown loving kindness to me.
(Psalm 31:21a)

...and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

..."(A)s you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

Social Intelligence
Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (1 Corinthians 12:26)

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)

Justice
Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

Citizenship, social responsibility
...and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. (John 8:31b)

Fairness
Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

Jesus said, "Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7b)

Leadership
To the (shepherd) the gate keeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (John 10:3)

Moreover, choose able persons from all the people, such as fear God, those who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place such people over the people... (Exodus 21: 20a-b)

Consider your call, brothers and sisters...(1 Corinthians 1:26a)

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. (2 Corinthians 5:16)

Jesus said to them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."
(Matthew 4:29)

Temperance
Strengths that protect against excess

Forgiveness and mercy
...(A)s God has forgiven you, so you must forgive one another. (Colossians 3:13)

The Lord is merciful and graci9ous, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Psalm 103:7)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Humility
When you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place...(Luke 14: 10)

Jesus said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. (John 13:14)

"If anyone one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35b)

Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

...and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Prudence
For still the vision awaits its time...If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come. (Habakkuk 2: 3a,4)

...(T)hey who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength...(Isaiah 40:41a)

Self-regulation, self-control
Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...
(Ephesians 4:26)

...(T)est everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

Transcendence
Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

Appreciation of beauty and excellence
God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31a)

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. (Psalm 50: 2)

God has made everything beautiful in its time...(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Honor and majesty are before the Lord; strength and beauty are his sanctuary. (Psalm 96:6)

Gratitude
I give thee thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart...(Psalm 138:1a)

In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to thy name forever. (Psalm 44:8)

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)

...(Give)thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Hope
For in this hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what s/he sees? But, if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:24)

Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

Humor
Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Shall Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?" (Genesis 18:17.) So Sarah laughed to herself...(18:12a)

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy... (Psalm 126:2)

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never

enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

Spirituality, faith, purpose
...(w)e walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.
(2 Corinthians 6:2b)

"Go your way; your faith has made you well." (Mark 10: 52a)

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. (John 14:1)

May you be strengthened with all power, according to God's glorious might, for all
endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to God who has qualified us to share in
the inheritance of the saints in light. (Colossians 1:12)

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,
whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if
there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

Appendix 4

Structure of Individual-to-Group Presentations in Group Meeting 4

The participants were asked if there were volunteers who would like to present a particular personal critical situation to the group, for the group's insight and reflection. There were 3 volunteer Presenters, and this format was used for each. The time allotted for each presentation was 10 minutes, clearly inadequate, yet sufficient to give participants a "taste" of this process. If participants choose to continue this experience of presentation/reflection together at a later time and setting, the time for each presenter would be expanded. I felt constrained by my commitment to end Group Meetings on time.

Format for presentations:

1. Presenter was asked to name his/her Signature Strengths, which I listed on a large flip-chart for all to see and reference easily.

2. Presenter gave a brief summary of the critical situation to the Group.

3. Group members asked questions for information or clarification.

4. Presenter was silent while Group members reflected on the situation with focus on the Presenter's Signature Strengths.

5. Presenter was invited back into the conversation for his/her reaction.

6. Closing comments or insights for anyone to offer.

experience]
Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering

7 of us *Curiosity and interest in the world - You are curious about everything. You are always asking questions, and you find all subjects and topics fascinating. You like exploration and discovery.*

Signature Strengths as a Group

(The frequency of a particular Signature Strength as reported by participants in **Building on Strengths** Thesis Group- 12 members of Session-November, 2004)

- **Gratitude**
  Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks

6 of us *Gratitude - You are aware of the good things that happen to you, and you never take them for granted. Your friends and family members know that you are a grateful person because you always take the time to express your thanks.*

- **Humor [playfulness]**
  Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

5 of us *Humor and playfulness - You like to laugh and tease. Bringing smiles to other people is important to you. You try to see the light side of all situations.*

- **Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]**
  Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort
  Spirituality, sense of purpose, and faith - You have strong and coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe. You know where you fit in the larger scheme. Your beliefs shape your actions and are a source of comfort to you.

- **Fairness**

- **Fairness**
  Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
  Fairness, equity, and justice - Treating all people fairly is one of your abiding principles. You do not let your personal feelings bias your decisions about other people.

- **Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]**
  Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
  Kindness and generosity - You are kind and generous to others, and you are never too busy to do a favor. You enjoy doing good deeds for others, even if you do not know them well.

- **Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]**
  Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
  Appreciation of beauty and excellence - You notice and appreciate beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.

in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
Honesty, authenticity, and genuineness - You are an honest person, not only by speaking the truth but by living your life in a genuine and authentic way. You are down to earth and without pretense; you are a "real" person.

- **Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]**
  Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
  zest, enthusiasm, and energy - Regardless of what you do, you approach it with excitement and energy. You never do anything halfway or halfheartedly. For you, life is an adventure.

Creativity [originality, ingenuity]
Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
Creativity, ingenuity, and originality - Thinking of new ways to do things is a crucial part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.

- **Forgiveness and mercy**
  Forgiving those who have done wrong; giving people a second chance; *not* being vengeful
  Forgiveness and mercy - You forgive those who have done you wrong. You always give people a second chance. Your guiding principle is mercy and not revenge.

- **Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]**
  Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
  Citizenship, teamwork, and loyalty - You excel as a member of a group. You are a loyal and dedicated teammate, you always do your share, and you work hard for the success of your group.

Open-mindedness [judgment, critical thinking]
Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
Judgment, critical thinking, and open-mindedness - Thinking things through and examining them from all sides are important aspects of who you are. You do not jump to conclusions, and you rely only on solid evidence to make your decisions. You are able to change your

- **Love of Learning**
  Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows
  Love of learning - You love learning new things, whether in a class or on your own. You have always loved school, reading, and museums-anywhere and everywhere there is an opportunity to learn.

- **Love**
  Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
  Capacity to love and be loved - You value close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated. The people to whom you feel most close are the same people who feel most close to you.

- **Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]**
  Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
  Hope, optimism, and future-mindedness - You expect the best in the future, and you work to achieve it. You believe that the future is something that you can control.

- **Bravery [valor]**
Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
Bravery and valor - You are a courageous person who does not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain. You speak up for what is right even if there is opposition. You act on your convictions.

- **Social Intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]**
Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit in to different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
Social intelligence - You are aware of the motives and feelings of other people. You know what to do to fit in to different social situations, and you know what to do to put others at ease.

- **Prudence**
Being careful about one's choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted
Caution, prudence, and discretion - You are a careful person, and your choices are consistently prudent ones. You do not say or do things that you might later regret.

- **Humility/Modesty**
Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding one's self as more special than one is
Modesty and humility - You do not seek the spotlight, preferring to let your accomplishments speak for themselves. You do not regard yourself as special, and others recognize and value your modesty.

- **Self-regulation [self-control]**
Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions
Self-control and self-regulation - You self-consciously regulate what you feel and what you do. You are a disciplined person. You are in control of your appetites and your emotions, not vice versa.

- **Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]**
Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks
Industry, diligence, and perseverance - You work hard to finish what you start. No matter the project, you "get it out the door" in timely fashion. You do not get distracted when you work, and you take satisfaction in completing tasks.

- **Leadership**
Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
Leadership - You excel at the tasks of leadership: encouraging a group to get things done and preserving harmony within the group by making everyone feel included. You do a good job organizing activities and seeing that they happen.

- **Perspective [wisdom]**
Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people
Perspective (wisdom) - Although you may not think of yourself as wise, your friends hold this view of you. They value your perspective on matters and turn to you for advice. You have a way of looking at the world that makes sense to others and to yourself.

Appendix 6

Questions for participants to consider when we meet, 1 on 1, to evaluate their

participation in this Project. These were distributed at the end of the last Group

Meeting.

Why did you decide to be part of the Thesis Group?

Did you have any expectations? Were they met?

Did your expectations change? How?

Did your participation give you any new insights, or reinforce any former
understandings?

What impact do you feel your participation will have (if any) on:
     your self-understanding
     your work
     your church leadership
     your relationships with others (home, work, church)

Can you anticipate any expansion of your self-understanding? Any change? Any
transformation?

Do you have suggestions how this project could have been improved and have been more
useful and satisfying for you (scope, presentations, group sessions, materials given)?

Would you recommend this process to others?

Would you be interested in any follow-up gatherings of participants to share in the p
presentations of individual critical/problem situations, looking at these jointly from the
view-point of Signature Strengths?

Appendix 7

Collective description of participants in this Project.

(All participants are Elders of this church, the highest elected office in this denomination. They reflect the diversity of the congregation.)

Ethnic background: 5 Caucasian, 1 mixed-racial, 1 Hispanic, 5 Black (1 African-American, 1 Jamaican-American, 2 Kenyan-American; 1 Cameroonian-American);

Age: 1 in early 30s, 5 in their 40s, 3 in their 50s, 3 in their 60s;

Marital status: 8 married with 2 in second marriages and 1 recently separated, 3 divorced, 1 single (homosexual with partner);

Profession: high-level government administrator, retired automotive/union worker now working as residential building superintendent, architect working as draftsman, public school teacher in training after career in printing, 2 college professors, full-time parent and community volunteer, human resources-benefits administrator, information technology specialist, retired social worker with private and agency related practice, specialized sales in printing industry, legal secretary;

Theological background by upbringing: 5 Presbyterian (2 in Presbyterian mission schools in African countries), 2 Roman Catholic, 2 Lutheran, 1 Jewish, 1 Baptist, 1 Episcopal.

Appendix 8

Reasons given by participants (all Elders) for participation in Project

Answers to the question, "Why did you say 'yes' to participation in this Thesis Project?"

(All responses were spoken at the First Group Meeting.)

"I remember my PhD thesis and how hard it was. I wasn't working with humans, but

with animals and they were difficult. Trying to get people to cooperate must be even

harder. So, I volunteered to help."

"I'm in the midst of a lot of change and anything that I can do now to gain understanding

is worth a try."

"I said yes because of you."

"Me too. I respect what you do here and thought this might be good."

"I want to work on my weaknesses. My wife tells me I should work on them. I know

my strengths, at least I think I do. But my project is to look at my weaknesses and make

them better."

"I was taught to always volunteer. Always take the chance or the risk. I did something like this with a PhD project in college. I don't know what it accomplished but I was given a 6 pack at the end. Not bad."

"I just want to find out more about things."

"I don't have a chance to learn new things much. I'm working on my exams (for certification as an architect) and it takes most of my time. So, I thought, why not?"

"Sure, I'll help. Why not!"

"I always want to help and learn. You work hard here. I want to work with you."

Appendix 9

Letter introducing Project to Elders and asking for their participation:

Josephine C. Cameron   4767 Henry Hudson Parkway   Bronx, New York 10471
(718) 549-4090-home; (718) 796-5560-office; RPCbronx@worldnet.att.net-e-mail; (718) 796-3681-fax

April 27, 2004

To the Elders of the Session:

Friends,

As I mentioned at the April Session meeting, I am writing to offer you an invitation and an opportunity:
> an invitation to discover interesting and satisfying insights about yourself; and,
> an opportunity to do this while participating with others in my doctoral thesis.

As you may know, in these past three years, I have been a student in a Doctor of Ministry program at Hebrew Union College. This interfaith program offers two years of classroom study in theology and pastoral care (which I have completed), followed by a thesis (which this letter is about.) All students in this doctoral are practicing clergy (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish). The required thesis is an application of classroom study to the life of the congregation. I have decided to work with members of the Session on this.

My doctoral Thesis project is titled: **Building on Strengths: enhancing satisfaction, effectiveness and meaning in professional work and congregational leadership.**

Its purpose is to give participants a fresh, positive way to understand personal strengths and capabilities, and reflect on how these personal strengths are used at work and in

church leadership. The result will be, I hope, an increase in your self-understanding, satisfaction and effectiveness. The project offers you the possibility of: personal growth, new approaches to long standing difficult areas, insights to new possibilities, an increased sense integration of church and professional work, and the experience of working with colleagues in a new way.

The study will have 6-9 participants meeting 3-4 times together and 3 times with me individually. The group meetings (of about 1 ½ hour) will be scheduled in advance, and focused and individual meetings of about 45 minutes (planned at our mutual convenience). There will also be two brief "at home" assignments. As soon as I know who will be participating, I will plan a schedule of specific dates.

Would you want to be a participant?

If more people want to participate than I can accommodate, I will work with participants on the basis of "first come" with an eye to a group best reflects the breadth and diversity of our RPC leadership.

Please consider taking part! The only "requirement" is your willingness for which I am, and will continue to be, very grateful.

Either give me a call with your decision or send me an e-mail. Home or office, anytime. Also, feel free to ask any questions

This is a remarkable and unusual opportunity for us both. I hope you can take part. Please let me know within this week. Thanks for giving it your consideration.

Peace,

/s/ Jo Cameron

Appendix 10

Instructions to Participants for taking the Signature Strengths Survey:

Take and complete the Authentic Happiness Signature Strengths Survey at:

http://wwwauthentichappiness.org/

or

"Goggle" to "Authentic Happiness"

At Home Page, go to Signature Strengths Survey.
   Log on with your e-mail address and pass word
                    and....
                                   begin.

The Survey is 200+ quick questions. It goes quickly,
and will take probably +/-   1 ½ hours. *(One Elder
said it took only 20 minutes!)*

At the end, you will receive a print out of your 5 Signature Strengths. Please bring 2
copies to our next meeting:

Appendix 11

Why Positive Psychology?*

(This is the oral presentation made to the Project participants at Group Meeting 2. It is intended to give then an understanding of the new field of Positive Psychology. My assumption was that none of them would be familiar with this information, and that assumption proved true. This presentation is made in the manner of "an apologetic" an approach used by Christians in writing or speaking as a way to present and defend a new understanding or teaching.)

Character: an individual's set of psychological characteristics that affect a person's ability to function morally.

What shapes us and what do we let shape us? Where do theology and psychology mesh? How do we build on who we are, what we have been given so that our life is expansive, brings good to us, to those we love and into the world?

A creative initiative in answering this question is offered by a new field called Positive Psychology.

In 1998, Martin Seligman was elected president of American Psychological Association. In his inaugural address, he pointed out that since World War II, psychology has been focused largely on pathology or illness. By focusing on the identification and treatment of mental illness, psychology has found effective treatments and even cures for a range of psychological diseases.

However, there are three costs to having psychology focus largely on the disease model. One is moral: we look at people, and ourselves, in terms of what has gone wrong, or what is not right. Mentally ill? It becomes a label. When is the last time someone spoke to you easily about his or her *mental* illness as easily as s/he might speak to you of physical illness? Mental illness becomes a place of great silence in many peoples' lives, and this adds to their pain. Secondly, when psychology works only on mental *illness* it forgets about making the lives of relatively untroubled people happier, more productive and more fulfilling. The third consequence is that so much focus and money is spent on diseases, and there is no time and money spent on trying to make people happier. The focus is only on trying to make them less unhappy.

However, healing disease is only part of psychology's mission, a mission which, more broadly understood, is about making the lives of all people better. Seligman was not interested in taking people from a -8 of their experience to a -5. No, he wanted to take people from a +2 of their experience to a + 5. Or said another way, to work primarily on weaknesses automatically puts a person in a one-down position. Another approach

would be to look at psychology's mission from the opposite direction: to approach the same problems individuals' present by working with strengths.

There is an inversion going on here, and the inversion is in thinking and inner orientation. This inversion offers the possibility of a greater sense of satisfaction, flow and happiness. Seligman said, "My great ambition for psychology, and I hope to play a role in it (and you all will play a role in it) is that in the next 10 to 15 years, we will be able to make the parallel claim about happiness; that is, in the same way I can claim unblushingly that psychology and psychiatry have decreased the tonnage of suffering in the world, my aim is that psychology and maybe psychiatry will increase the tonnage of happiness in the world." Therefore, one of his initiatives as President was to launch an empirical or factual study of flourishing individuals and communities in order to learn how to foster these flourishing individuals and these flourishing communities. This on-going worldwide study and has resulted in positive psychology becoming a science of positive individual traits and positive institutions.

The need for the positive is necessary for human health and happiness. Most of us have an explanatory style—or a way we understand the world. To generalize broadly, pessimists see the world this way: when there is a loss or defeat in life, they attribute it to causes that are long lasting or permanent, causes that affect everything, and causes that are their own fault. By contrast, optimists regard defeat and loss as temporary, limited to the present case and defeat becomes the result of circumstances, bad luck, the particular actions of other people or themselves.

People of faith, our Christian faith, can simply not be pessimists. We are called to the understanding, sometimes in spite of the evidence, that the will of God for justice and mercy, healing and goodness in the world can never be thwarted. We have a role to play in the bringing in of justice and healing and mercy and goodness. Jesus often called it love: love of God, love of neighbor, love of self. The great commandment. We each have a part to play in this. No part is too small. No part is insignificant. If I do not play my part, something is missing, lacking. If this is so, it could be said, that my lack of playing my part has, in some unknown and unknowable way, slowed down the coming of the kingdom.

How do we do this, playing our part, living in the fullness of life given to us? This was the question Seligman posed to himself.

One result of addressing this question was to create a classification of human strengths. There is a classification of human mental illnesses called the <u>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</u>, published by the American Psychiatric Association. Now, positive psychology has a companion manual called the <u>Values in Action Classification of Strengths Manual.</u> Some have called this the "manual of the sanities." Its intent is to identify the core human virtues that are consistently valued across cultures and across time. To develop this Manual, Seligman and people working with him reviewed literature and cultures since the beginning of recorded history, going back 1000's of years and coming right up to the present. Researchers were sent up to northern Greenland and

down to Sasai with the objective of including all known cultures in this research and evaluation. What they found were six realms of virtues or strengths. Said Seligman: "We were beginning to have the view that those six virtues are just as much a part of human nature as walking on two feet are."

These six virtues are: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence.

In Positive Psychology, good character is a function of these six virtues. We all have them. They are in you, part of you. The problem is how to define and measure them. Courage, for example can mean different things in different contexts---physical bravery on the battlefield, or moral integrity under pressure. In order to facilitate the definition, cultivation and measure of character, Positive Psychology has arranged a total of 24 strengths under the six virtues. (In the oral presentation, this was printed on a flip chart, easily read by all at this meeting.)

A further dimension of Positive Psychology is the concept of "flow". This comes from the research and writing of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He has conducted a life long quest to discover, as a science, the key to human beings being at their best. When do you find yourself doing exactly what you want to be doing and never wanting it to end? At such a time, you in the flow? He has seen this happens when we concentrate; when we have clear goals; when we get immediate feedback; when we have deep, effortless involvement; when we have a sense of control over what we are doing; when our sense

of self vanishes; when time stops. In this context, Csikszenmihalyi says, we experience meaning in our living.

Positive Psychology makes distinctions in the use of the word "happiness" in our lives. Happiness is one of the legitimate goals of life, and within happiness are three different kinds of life:

1. The pleasant life: having as many positive emotions as you can. That is the happy face, giggly, laugh-track sit-com life, having what you want when you want it kind of life. In the history of philosophy, from Aristotle through Wittgenstein this kind of pleasure was thought of as vulgar. There are two other kinds of happy lives, or we might call it joyful lives.

2. Aristotle and Thomas Jefferson spoke of the happy life, the pursuit of happiness. Seligman uses the term "eudemonia": the good life or the life that is good. This life is not characterized by smiling a lot and giggling. Aristotle talks about the pleasures of contemplation and good conversation. He is not talking about raw feelings, about thrills, about orgasm, or a momentary peak experience. He is talking about a sense of at-homeness, aliveness in self. This is flow. The life that is good consists of the aspects that lead to flow. It consists of first knowing what your signature strengths are and then re-crafting your life to use them more: re-crafting your work, your romantic life, your friendships, your leisure, your parenting to use those things at which you are best. What you get out of that is not the propensity to smile or giggle a lot. What you get is flow. The more you use your highest strengths, the more flow will be in your life.

3. There is a third form of life that is inherent in human experience. That is the pursuit of meaning. This often becomes more evident in our thoughts as we become older, as we raise children or grandchildren, as we look back over our decades and wondering about what we have done with what we have been given. Meaning consists in attachment to something bigger than ones own self. The self, alone and separated, is not a very good site for meaning. In addition, the larger the thing that you can attach yourself to with authenticity and integrity, the more meaning you can get out of life. Seligman feels that serving those things larger than yourself while using your highest strengths is a recipe for meaning.

This is Positive Psychology as conceived of, researched, developed and now practiced by Seligman. His approach, while independent of any particular religion and creed, is not opposed to them. Therefore, this approach can be used in many different contexts. Further, his evaluation of character strengths is factually oriented. It can encourage interventions that can be factually observed. Finally, the resources for testing and evaluation of this approach have been developed, and are taking place. This is the Survey you will take as a participant in this thesis project.

Seligman is aware and respectful of the questions and concerns raised in critique of Positive Psychology. One is that the main instrument for evaluation is based on self-report. That is: how accurately do we ourselves answer questions of the survey, and might our way of doing this mask needed information? The second concern is how accurately can something as complex as character development be assessed and

measured. Finally, and this is a big one, if we define character in terms of psychological strengths, is it possible that character development programs will be developing strong characters instead of good characters. What guarantee do we have that strong character will also be good character?

For us, participants in this Project, these questions invite a natural point of entry for the essential inter-relationship of character strengths and theology. This inter-relationship is at the foundation of this Project.

As people drawn into a faith community, there are many themes of resonance between Positive Psychology and theology. We are created in the image of God. We are gifted. God does not make mistakes. We have a responsibility to know, and use our gifts for the common good, the building of the kingdom where ever we find ourselves. Further, for Christians, we have been given our meaning: to bring into the here and now the way of Christ. This call to service in Christ's way infuses meaning in every aspect of living: our work, our public and private life, our spiritual life, all life. By grace, each of us is given the capacity to come into community with others, also seeking discern the path for self and for the community. One way we are given to live in this way is to discover, name and build on what we have been given: building on strength individually and together, resulting in building strength.

Finally brothers and sisters, what ever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,

whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, what ever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

(Philippians 4: 8-9)

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

(Galatians 5: 22-3)

*(Sources and quotes for this oral presentation were drawn largely from Web sources: Paul Monaco, Media and Theater Arts, MSU-Bozeman in a review of Authentic Happiness; James O. Pawelski, Vanderbilt University in "The Promise of Positive Psychology for the Assessment of [and Building] Character", (2004); _____, "Eudemonia, The Good Life – A talk with Martin Seligman" in Edge The Third Culture, 2004; comments, commentary reflections, discussions at the Authentic Happiness home page.)

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