

90-Day State-of-the-Church Assessment

by Pastor Doug Robinson-Johnson

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Introduction

Grace and Peace to the Community United Methodist Church of Crofton.

This report shares my initial impressions of the church through the lens of Bishop Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, with the addition of a sixth.

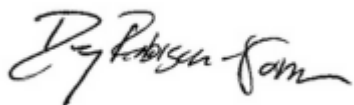
In many areas of ministry, I have continued fruitful practices familiar from the former pastor's tenure, including:

- **Regular office hours:** Tuesday–Thursday, 9 am–3 pm, and alternating Mondays or Thursdays dedicated to visitation, meetings, sermon/class preparation, or correspondence.
- **Leadership and discipleship:** Overseeing staff and cultivating a discipleship mindset among all leaders.
- **Pastoral care:** Visiting nursing homes, hospitals, and homes (by invitation through prayer concerns or when identified as “shut-in” by the Caring Team).
- **Worship leadership:** Preaching, leading worship, and administering sacraments. I've added small touches—such as wearing a robe at communion or a stole signed by children at baptisms—while keeping a casual, approachable preaching style that feels familiar and welcome.
- **Prayer and devotion:** Maintaining a disciplined life of prayer and personal devotion, with Friday as my sabbath day—a practice respected and honored by church leaders.
- **Hospitality:** Welcoming and loving all participants as Jesus would.
- **Faith formation:** Leading occasional studies such as *The Way of Prayer*, membership classes (*A Disciple's Path*), Bible study, and co-leading confirmation.
- **Pastoral rites:** Officiating weddings and funerals for members and non-members.
- **CDC Chapel:** Leading weekly chapel services with our CDC children each Wednesday.
- **Connectional ministry:** Staying engaged with the wider United Methodist Church through Charge Conference reporting, statistical reports, trainings, Annual Conference participation, and, most recently, HUB ministries with neighboring UMCs.

I am also working to strengthen Community UMC's witness in the areas highlighted by Bishop Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Most churches practice hospitality, worship, faith development, generosity, and service. But real growth—in both impact and numbers—comes when these are lived out as **radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, extravagant generosity, and risk-taking service**.

I already see much of this fruitfulness at CUMC. The narrative below reflects those **strengths**, along with **suggestions for areas we might continue to explore and grow**. These reflections are offered humbly from a pastor only 90 days into ministry here, but also from someone who has observed both fruitful and unfruitful patterns in local churches over 30 years. I hope that they spark conversation and inspire us to give glory to God revealed in our midst.

Gratefully,



Doug Robinson-Johnson
Pastor, Community United Methodist Church

Radical Hospitality

“Churches offer the gracious invitation of Christ to all people and guide them to a new way of life.”

- Intentionally inviting and welcoming others
- Embracing newcomers with warmth and genuine care
- Creating a culture of openness and belonging

Intentionally Inviting and Welcoming Others

The **CUMC Congregational Profile** requested a “spiritual leader... who welcomes others as Jesus does...holding space for differing opinions.” The Conference identified and appointed a pastor with a history of LGBTQ inclusion and the ability to lead from a respectful political center.

The church’s **Online Welcome** states:

All Are Welcome

“At Community, all are welcome with open hearts, open minds and open doors. We believe God’s grace is available to all people, no matter where you’re from, what you look like, or what you’ve done. That’s why our communion table is open to all.”

Embracing Newcomers with Warmth and Genuine Care

Hospitality was identified as one of the three greatest strengths in the 2025 Readiness 360 survey, showing growth since 2021. Guests in worship describe long-time members as warm, friendly, and genuinely curious. The **Vitality Team’s** focus on hospitality—through spring devotional resources and name tags in July and September, with coordinated greeters, and accessible children’s activities—has led to positive first impressions, return visits, and membership growth.

Offerings such as **Messy Church** and **Fellowship Hour** have further nurtured a culture of belonging, supported by the **Caring Team’s** consistent outreach through prayer concerns and the reintroduction of Sunday “Attendance Pads” to help track visitors. At present, follow-up with newcomers relies mainly on staff, but ***this ministry of love could easily be expanded so that more members share in welcoming others.***

Creating a Culture of Openness and Belonging

The **Realm database** is well-maintained by our Administrator and serves as a strong tool for connection. A new pictorial directory, made possible through a successful campaign, is helping to build community. With the church office keeping the database current, newcomers are more likely to receive follow-up, and members can more easily extend care to one another through Realm.

Another campaign encouraging small groups to rely more fully on Realm would further strengthen its use.

Because a formal membership audit has not been conducted in six years, the Vitality Team used updated Realm information to guide membership calls this past September.

Our online **communication** platforms are strong. The church website is high-quality, easy to navigate, and regularly updated. E-Connections continue to be effective, with an impressive 61% open rate. ***While the Facebook page is not updated as often—largely because members are not yet engaged in creating content there—it remains an opportunity for growth.***

The online worship service (see also “Passionate Worship”) is faithfully tended each Sunday by dedicated volunteers and is presented with clarity, warmth, and professionalism. ***However, guest comments made later in the day on Facebook—when most people tend to engage—often go unanswered. Responding to these comments could be a simple and meaningful ministry of hospitality for a few committed laypersons.***

In conversation with Conference Vitality Director Rev. Bill Brown, I learned that trends in online ministry do not typically favor growth for churches of CUMC’s size and budget, as more advanced options are widely available to consumers. Even so, our service is distinctive: it feels intimate, personal, and well-produced. ***Looking ahead, we might explore segmenting portions of the service to share more broadly, or curating unique content for audiences who may be underserved in today’s online landscape, which is often dominated by particular Christian perspectives.***

There are currently no regular printed newsletters or worship bulletins. Before Covid, the order was provided in a bulletin; afterward, nothing was printed for some time. In July 2025, a leader’s outline was shared with a few worship participants, and today we use a simple, streamlined outline. I am still discerning what approach best serves the congregation, while also appreciating the church’s commitment to reducing paper waste.

The **Child Development Center’s** connection with the worshipping community at CUMC is stronger now than it has been in decades. This is evident through shared messaging across both communities and the active participation of CUMC members on the CDC Advisory Board.

The Advisory Board has brought forward several **physical plant** improvement requests to the Church Council and Trustees. These include updates to the Multipurpose Building to create a more welcoming first impression—building on the weekly landscaping beautification carried out this summer by a dedicated team of beloved volunteers—as well as important safety upgrades, such as trimming tree branches over the playground for the safety of children and staff.

Passionate Worship

“Worship changes lives because it connects people with the presence and power of God.”

- Worship that is vibrant, authentic, and engaging
- Connects people to God through music, preaching, and sacrament
- Inspires deep devotion and life transformation

Worship That Is Vibrant, Authentic, and Engaging

The church’s **online invitation to worship** takes a welcoming posture, addressing practical questions about attire, children’s participation, and communion. These are often top-of-mind for guests, though ***additional guidance could help us connect more deeply with “seekers” or the unchurched.***

Upgrades in the **sanctuary**—including lighting, paint, carpeting, and seating—create a worship space that visitors describe as both “calm” and filled with “energy” and “hope.” Adjustable lighting helps set the mood, screens are used tastefully, and clear sound makes the service accessible to all ages. While the tech team manages sound effectively, the ***absence of hearing loops or other sound-enhancing devices remains a limitation.***

Connects People to God Through Music

Our **music ministry** is another vital strength. Passionate volunteers praise God in song through a Choral Ensemble (1st and 3rd Sundays), a Bell Choir (2nd Sundays), a Praise Band (each Sunday, and highlighted on 4th Sundays), and an orchestra (5th Sundays). We are blessed with a versatile **accompanist** who skillfully supports all worship styles. The **praise band is blessed by a staff leader** whose passion and personal touch inspire, as well as by talented soloists and an ensemble supported by a skilled drummer and bassist. While worship coordination is strong, the daytime meeting schedule limits participation from all leaders, but a ***new meeting time would be an easy remedy.***

Inspires Deep Devotion and Life Transformation

The current **blended worship style** emerged during the Covid shutdown, combining what had previously been distinct contemporary and traditional services. Some regular participants long for one style or the other. ***I will continue listening for the spiritual longing among long-timers and newcomers.*** The current flow of worship, moving from contemporary to traditional, feels logical, ***though over time, a more consistent blending may serve the congregation even better. Meanwhile, we can utilize demographic research data recommended by our United Methodist denomination (MissionInsite) to shape new worship opportunities here in the future.*** For example, MissionInsite reveals that residents within a 10-mile radius of CUMC appear to favor a traditional style of worship, but above style, they prioritize a **warm and friendly environment**—something CUMC already offers well, based on newcomer feedback. The next most valued element in the MissionInsite data is **quality preaching**, and our planning team has wisely allowed generous time and flexibility in worship for the sermon. Strong **lay leadership** enriches our services, offering authentic and contagious enthusiasm that supports both traditional and contemporary expressions.

Finally, worship is not limited to Sunday mornings. Sanctuary services can take place at any time, and worship also belongs in meetings, classes, and small gatherings. For example, one of our Sunday Adult Faith Formation classes regularly offers singing, the sharing of joys and concerns, and intercessory prayer alongside deep Bible study. What we model on Sundays shapes what disciples of Christ carry into every setting “where two or three are gathered.”

Intentional Faith Development

“Fruitful congregations offer high-quality learning experiences that help people grow in grace.”

- Systematic discipleship through Bible study, small groups, and spiritual formation
- Growth in knowledge, love, and service of God
- Moves beyond casual faith into deep spiritual maturity

Systematic Discipleship Through Bible Study, Small Groups, and Spiritual Formation

The Staff-Parish Relations Committee’s **Congregational Profile** requested the pastor create “a discipleship mindset that will support those who are active servant leaders in events but not engaging in [faith development opportunities].” The 2025 **Readiness 360 Survey** reflected **High Spiritual Intensity** at CUMC, suggesting that the 41 respondents lead from a foundation of Christian discipleship.

CUMC already offers a healthy mix of ongoing and seasonal studies and small groups for youth and adults. If the benchmark is 30% of worshippers in small group studies, then CUMC’s average adult Sunday attendance of 40 is excellent. Yet participation in studies does not always translate into the deeper discipleship envisioned by the SPRC. ***This suggests the need for a more intentional Discipleship System—a framework with clear on-ramps and off-ramps that helps participants discern why the Spirit has called them into study, and then guides them toward transformational practices both within the walls of the church and beyond them.***

Growth in Knowledge, Love, and Service of God

An intentional discipleship system would also strengthen the work of the **Lay Leadership Committee**, ensuring that people serve out of their spiritual giftedness and receive regular guidance in discerning how God may be calling them to grow. Currently, the Lay Leadership Committee has not been fully active for several years, with responsibilities falling to too few people. ***Rebuilding this team would spread responsibility more widely, reduce burnout, and increase alignment with the mission.***

The **CUMC website** clearly lists classes under the “Missions and Ministry” tab, making them easy for newcomers to find. On Sundays, three faithful and engaging leaders offer adult classes that are Bible-based and responsive to participant input in curriculum choices. ***Still, there is room to expand faith formation with groups that blend action and reflection, as well as ongoing classes that address practical issues like parenting, relationships, and finance—similar to the successful weekly GriefShare ministry.*** At present, there are no regular online faith formation groups to reach the estimated 10% of worshippers who primarily engage online. The Good Book Club attempted Online Sunday gatherings in 2025, but attendance remained small. ***Still, it would be wise to experiment with offerings on different days and times to extend faith development to our online-only community.***

Moves Beyond Casual Faith Into Deep Spiritual Maturity

The **2024–2025 Youth Confirmation Class** was a model of excellence. Supported by mentors, parents, and participants, the class used an outstanding curriculum customized for CUMC by our seminary-trained Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries. All confirmands completed the program, and one mentor’s continued relationship with his mentee—who now serves in worship as a communion steward—shows the lasting fruit of this model. ***The format should continue.***

Children and Youth Faith Formation also flourishes under the guidance of our dedicated and skilled Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries. For example, numerous young people completed reading the entire Bible this year! Annual Vacation Bible School, Music and Drama Camp, and regular studies have deepened discipleship. **Children’s Church**, held during worship, provides a safe and engaging space for children to connect with one another and scripture. However, the program relies on at least four adult leaders and often struggles to meet this need. ***For this***

ministry to grow, we will need more consistent volunteer support. Offering separate, age-appropriate lessons for older youth and younger children would make the program stronger, but it would also require additional committed leaders. This is the ongoing challenge for churches like ours: adults who volunteer for children and youth ministries do so during Sunday worship or Sunday School classes, often at the expense of participating in the very programs they value most.

Looking ahead, the **Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries** expects to vacate the position in June 2026. Given the SPRC Profile's statement that "continued growth in our congregational families with young children is crucially important," ***the congregation will need to discern whether to fully resource this position or raise up a committed team of servant leaders who can continue its high level of creativity, care, and outreach.***

Risk-Taking Mission and Service

“These ministries push us beyond service that is convenient to service that is extraordinary.”

- Bold outreach beyond comfort zones
- Serving the poor, neglected, and hurting
- Living out faith through action in the community and world

Bold Outreach Beyond Comfort Zones

The **Child Development Center (CDC)** will celebrate its 45th anniversary in 2025. From its beginning, CUMC’s story has included not only a place for worship, but also a place for education and community. The CDC has met its growth goals in recent years while maintaining a strong connection to the worship and service life of the church.

Conversations at meet-and-greets with parents and children, along with CDC Board meetings, highlight the many blessings of this ministry: quality care, affordability, safety, hours of operation that meet family needs when many other centers are closed, and no additional fees for activities like field trips. ***The after-school program appears to have the greatest potential for growth, which could open opportunities for safety-trained CUMC members to provide tutoring and enrichment. A refreshed CDC logo and expanded outdoor signage would also strengthen its visibility. In addition, the Fellowship Hall could benefit from renovation—perhaps removing features such as the accordion dividers and stage that no longer serve the mission of the school or the worshipping community.***

Serving the Poor, Neglected, and Hurting

Earlier **capital improvement plans** for a second floor on the Multipurpose Ministry Building (MMB) and a connector between the MMB and the Sanctuary were not realized. While this limits the vision of offering community space like the Crofton Public Library across the street, it may also be a gift, reminding us that many of our best opportunities for ministry and service are beyond our own walls. ***In the years ahead, the Church Council can help identify mission and service arenas where CUMC can make the greatest impact.***

The **CUMC website** reflects this vision:

“We express our love for God through active discipleship. To us, being the church is about sharing God’s love by offering hope and healing to those looking for more meaning in their lives. Acts of personal faith and public worship help us grow closer to God, but we also grow in our faith by taking action outside the church walls to help others.”

The following service and mission opportunities are listed on our website. Reserve fund balances are listed here alongside the pastor’s assessment of CUMC participant pathway to service in each mission:

- Baby Pantry & Crofton Christian Caring Council [\$4,500. Open to newcomers]
- Backpack Meals [\$10,700. Dedicated assembly team and delivery chain, but seeking additional onramps for newcomer participation.]
- Cancer Support Group [\$788. Currently paused.]
- Giving Tree [\$4,635. Easy participation, but newcomers need to sign up early to participate, or we expand the scope to serve more families.]
- SAGE (Senior Relationship-Building Group) [\$1,290. Paused—no new participants]
- Sassafras [\$18,700. Multiple avenues for participation of CUMC participants]
- Shawlers [\$418. Easy participation of newcomers]
- Social Justice [\$952. No active group. Fund used for posters.]
- ZIM VIM [\$5,482. Participation and output have been solid for 30 plus years; however, cost (\$6k) and schedule (3 weeks) are barriers for some.

Living Out Faith Through Action in the Community and World

This outward focus is visible in weekly worship through the **Side Offering**, which supports a wide range of ministries, and in the consistently full baskets for the Baby Pantry, Backpack Meals, and Food Pantry.

The **SPRC Pastoral Profile** also emphasizes a desire to build community partnerships. Among the most promising are the expansion of **Backpack Ministries** into additional schools and the continued support of the **Crofton Christian Caring Council**. In addition, ministries like **GriefShare** and the **Cancer Support Group**—led by those with lived experience—along with the rapid-response Care Team, could *give rise to new small groups that respond to emerging needs, particularly around mental health.*

Finally, the **Men's Fellowship Group** is being invited to embrace a “listening church” ethic, entering neighborhoods and institutions around CUMC to hear directly from the poor, neglected, and hurting—so that our mission and service remain rooted in the real needs of our community.

Extravagant Generosity

“Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth, not a fundraising strategy.”

- Giving that reflects gratitude, love, and commitment to Christ
- Encouraging a lifestyle of stewardship and selflessness
- Supporting ministry with joy and abundance

Giving That Reflects Gratitude, Love, and Commitment to Christ

The **SPRC Profile** acknowledges ongoing **stewardship challenges** at CUMC, noting that we are “struggling to meet the budgets necessary for a strong growth-oriented foundation. Congregational financial commitments aren’t forthcoming and we are working on ways to improve this.”

Membership giving declined from **\$415,487 in 2018** to **\$357,245 in 2024** (a 14.6% decrease). This trend reflects the impact of both Covid-era isolation and divisions within the wider denomination—such as disagreements over *Black Lives Matter* signage and recent revisions by the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. These issues revealed deeper rifts that had existed at CUMC for some time, as was true for many other churches in our area, where coordinated discord rippled through United Methodism.

Yet, in small groups and conversations, members have shared that while separation was painful, it has left our church more unified and hopeful. With renewed unity, I am confident that growth, joy, and abundance are possible here.

Encouraging a Lifestyle of Stewardship and Selflessness

Healthy churches regularly complete a **Membership Audit** to clarify the needs of their faith community. CUMC has not completed such an audit in six years. To address this, a **three-year membership audit process** began in September 2025, including house meetings in October and November 2025 (and likely again in 2026). These gatherings will allow leaders to listen carefully and allocate resources toward helping members grow in grace and service.

Our current discipleship resource, *A Disciple’s Path* by James Harnish, identifies five stages of relationship with Christ:

- Ignoring (stranger)
- Exploring (acquaintance)
- Getting started (friend)
- Going deeper (good friend)
- Centering (intimate friend)

At CUMC, these stages often align with our categories of “inactive,” “constituent,” and “member.” Different resources are required for cultivating simple friendship through **hospitality** versus deeper discipleship through **mentoring**, so knowing where people are on their journey is essential. The membership audit will help us discern whether our efforts are bearing fruit—transforming strangers into friends of Christ.

Supporting Ministry With Joy and Abundance

Each year, healthy churches also complete a **Stewardship Drive** or canvass to inspire commitment to the church’s vision and deepen devotion to Christ. Our Stewardship Drive for 2025 is based on Psalm 34:8 (“Taste and see that the Lord is good!”) and on Jesus’ desire in John 15:4 (“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”). As United Methodists, we covenant to share our **prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness**—and stewardship is about fruitful growth in all five areas.

For the past two years, CUMC has not had an active **Stewardship Team** as part of the Finance Committee. While staff and select leaders have faithfully communicated stewardship ideals, ***we look forward to building a stronger and more effective Stewardship Team in 2026.***

Our community context is promising. According to Mission Insite, the dominant geo-demographic group in Crofton is *C13: Booming with Confidence – Philanthropic*. Residents are active in their communities, frequently connected to arts groups, veterans' clubs, and, faith communities. They are generous givers, especially toward education, social services, and their churches.

CUMC is well-positioned to invite these neighbors into joyful, abundant living through generosity and partnership. Truly, joy and abundance are possible in Crofton.

Peace with Justice

Mission is no longer just charity—it's relational, reciprocal, and transformational for both giver and receiver.

- Cultivating a culture of appreciative invitation, openness, and acceptance
- Moving beyond friendliness to intentional relationship-building
- Partnering with others for justice, compassion, and change

Cultivating a Culture of Appreciative Invitation, Openness, and Acceptance

At the May 2025 New Appointment Conference, the SPRC and pastor were challenged to cultivate **beloved community** using resources shared by Rev. Dr. Stacy Cole Wilson.

Dr. Cole Wilson identifies several ways churches can continue to cultivate a culture of openness and acceptance (beloved community):

- Continuing lifelong learning
- Recognizing and addressing power imbalances by sharing leadership and lifting often-overlooked voices
- Practicing cultural humility, including supporting inclusive language and signage
- Building empathy by approaching differences with curiosity rather than judgment

According to the Readiness 360 survey, CUMC's greatest areas of growth between 2021 and 2025 were in **Cultural Openness, Hospitality, and Spiritual Intensity**. Here are a few examples of that growth which I've observed:

Staff demonstrate great care and sensitivity toward the beautiful spectrum of human needs and abilities across ministries. The **CUMC Good Book Club** inspires lifelong learning across a broad range of perspectives and **will hopefully continue this**. The class response to one particular story of gun violence motivated church leaders to add additional layers of safety for the CDC. Students of the current "Way of Prayer" study are learning the importance of naming God beyond the most common "Father" to include dozens of additional, Biblical characteristics of God, such as "living water" and "shepherd." Participants of worship have heard "Jesus Loves Me" in Spanish and have seen Spanish-language blessings on bulletin boards. Sermons regularly lift examples and illustrations that balance gender and race. Our street signage with rainbow colors, suggesting the church might be making space for people who may feel excluded in other spaces, has drawn newcomers. **At the same time, regular accessibility and sensitivity audits could help us continue to address imbalances and deepen our hospitality.**

Moving Beyond Friendliness to Intentional Relationship-Building

In July and August 2025, the *Preamble to the new United Methodist Social Principles* was shared in worship as Affirmations of Faith. One of the affirmations included the following:

"Differences are a precious gift and daunting challenge. They can stretch the church's capacity to live and minister faithfully. Yet God calls our church to difficult discipleship, with Jesus as our guide and the Spirit as our daily strength. With God's help, we accept the challenge to follow the high calling 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.'" (Mic. 6:8, NRSV) John Wesley's General Rules continue to inspire United Methodists to faithful practices that will do no harm, do good, and follow the ordinances of God ("The General Rules of the Methodist Church: The Nature, Design, and General Rules of our United Societies," The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (Nashville: The Publishing House of The United Methodist Church, 2016)). We recognize the challenges before the church to engage with honesty and compassion through deep listening, hard conversations and shared ministry, even when we do not agree on all matters."

While the Readiness 360 Survey identified Hospitality and Cultural Openness as strengths, it also revealed **Missional Alignment** as our church's weakest capacity. According to the survey, this shows up as:

- A low priority for reaching new people
- Fear of backlash if the church chooses mission-driven decisions instead of maintaining the status quo

Members recall painful divisions when “Black Lives Matter” signage and anti-racism studies at CUMC followed the deaths of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and Eric Garner and others. The United Methodist Church encourages churches to lean into many pressing social issues, including “Racism, Ethnocentrism, and Tribalism,” but some fear this work will cause division within the congregation. Without careful attention, this fear can lead to inaction, internal factions, or the loss of passionate members.

CUMC’s strengths in **spiritual intensity** and **cultural openness** can help us meet these challenges. By leaning into empathy and curiosity, we can face fears of division and loss with courage. ***In 2026, Community UMC may have the opportunity to engage in intentional history timeline storytelling—an appreciative inquiry process that invites the congregation to look back on key moments of strength, resilience, and God’s faithfulness as a way to build trust and inspire future ministry.***

Partnering with Others for Justice, Compassion, and Change

Our calling is not only to offer direct care through mission and service, but also to engage in upstream responses to evil, injustice, and oppression. Every United Methodist vows at baptism and membership to resist such forces through the freedom and power Christ gives us.

The broader church continues to wrestle with justice issues in the Social Principles. This offers CUMC members opportunities to join other United Methodists in meaningful movements, even when our own congregation may feel hesitant. Locally, the new Greater Laurel Hub of area churches creates fresh possibilities for collaboration across six congregations. Clergy are already strategizing together, and lay members will soon be invited to join in shared ministries.

Here at CUMC, our high **spiritual intensity** and **cultural openness** equip us to lean into empathy and curiosity rather than fear.

The upcoming church-wide study, *The Six Conversations: Pathways to Connecting in an Age of Isolation and Incivility* (Heather Holleman, 2022), can help us build trust. As we practice these conversations together, we will create greater safety, deeper vulnerability, and stronger bonds of community. These steps can draw us nearer to the fullness of life and peace Jesus promises to all.