



the Bread of Life

your spiritual hunger

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By Matt Guzi

a co pastor at Hope Community church in charlotte and a Board member at Barnabas. Matt is married to Jen and they have 2 children, Taylor and Jacob

Bread of Life

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

-Proverbs 13:12

When it comes to spiritual hunger and Jesus' familiar words "I am the bread of life", too often I feel like the little boy in the joke about Sunday School answers. When the teacher asks "What's brown and furry and lives in trees?" The boy hesitantly answers "I know the answer is *supposed* to be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me." When it comes to spiritual hunger, I know that Jesus is the "right answer". I know I'm supposed to go to him, but it doesn't *feel* like my heart is hungry for him.

What do I do when I'm feeling hurt or lonely or inadequate? I know the answer is supposed to be Jesus, but it sure feel like I'm hungry for more meaningful friendships, more intimacy in my marriage, and the respect and admiration of my kids and the people I pastor (to name only a few of my own hungers). For most of us, knowing that Jesus is the bread of life is a long way from experiencing him in a way that practically satisfies the hungers rumbling around in our hearts.

Refrigerator Hunger/ Freezer Hunger

Experiencing Jesus as the bread of life requires us to look more closely at our hungers. Hungers fall into one of two categories – refrigerator-hunger and freezer-hunger. Refrigerator-hunger is that vague, nebulous sense where we find ourselves holding the refrigerator door open and staring in – not really sure what we want but confident that whatever it is, it's in there somewhere. We're pretty certain we're hungry, it could just be boredom, but either way we believe there's something hiding behind the milk that's going to satisfy us. So we stand there staring, searching for something that's going to connect with the unnamed hunger that sent us wandering off of the sofa. I regularly talk with people who have spiritual refrigerator-hunger. They have a vague hunger that they can't

name. Life is tasteless or depressing or frustrating. With a sense of mild guilt they give the Sunday School answer "I know what I need is Jesus." But when asked *how* they need Jesus, *what* they need him to be for them, the response is a blank stare. When we're hungry like this, being with Jesus is like going to the refrigerator. We know there's food in there, but until we know what we're actually hungry for, we're probably just going to stand there staring and feeling unsatisfied.

Freezer hunger is different. When I go to the freezer, I know exactly what I want and where it is – Oreo Ice Cream (3rd shelf on the left). There's no wondering or perusing, my hunger and my mission are clear and specific. Freezer-hungers are cravings. The tricky part about these cravings is that they're usually misplaced or misnamed hungers. There's no way that my body needs ice cream as often as I crave it!

The same is true of my heart hungers. When I have a craving to "check out" by playing a video game there is usually a heart hunger behind it. When a day of engaging in the messy business of people's hearts has left my longing to impact people or feel successful largely unfulfilled, an hour of beating Tiger Woods in golf is extremely appealing. I feel successful, I accomplish something (even if it is completely meaningless for the rest of my life), and I can simply select "do over" if I fail. It's an enjoyable distraction that I can easily convince myself is harmless. Of course, just like my craving for ice cream keeps me from eating something that might actually benefit my body, indulging in a video game quiets the real hunger that might otherwise take me to Jesus. Cravings, addictions, and idols are all just different names for the things we feed our hunger with. Alcohol, TV, pornography, shop-

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ping, or even good things like family and religious activity can serve as destructive substitutes for the bread of life.

Naming Our Hunger

Identifying our unnamed hungers and rightly naming our cravings is hard work. Often our hungers remain vague because they're embarrassing or painful or frightening to put words to. Some of us carry around shame and guilt over things we've done in our past (or are currently doing). We hunger for forgiveness, but asking for forgiveness requires naming the very thing we're ashamed of. Many men hunger to have their dad look them in the eyes and say they're proud of them. But putting words to that hunger feels weak, vulnerable, risky or even foolish. For women who hunger to be delighted in by their husband, naming that desire is painful because it requires admitting that they don't experience it now.

Identifying and articulating our heart hungers are often a prerequisite to having them satisfied. Before Jesus healed the blind beggar Bartimaeus he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" That seems like an obvious, even dumb question to ask – unless it was somehow important for Bartimaeus to articulate his desire to Jesus. Apparently, there was value for Bartimaeus in having to put words to what he had longed for all his life. In that culture, his blindness would have been a source of shame. It would have kept from even being able to hope or dream of a wife, or children, or a career. The words, "Rabbi, I want to see" would not have been easy to say. Feeling the depth of our heart's hungers never is.

A few years ago a friend of mine was experiencing some acute back problems and after several doctors couldn't relieve the pain she began seeing an acupuncturist. Over lunch I asked her if the acupuncture was helping. She responded that it was expensive and she wasn't sure if the pain was any better, but that it was worth it just to have someone want to know specifically where and how she hurt.

Experiencing Jesus as the bread of life doesn't mean we're not going to be hungry

anymore. Feeding on Jesus doesn't mean that our pain is going to go away. We'll still feel the sting of a friend's rejection, a spouse's neglect, a boss' criticism. But it does mean knowing that the God of the universe cares about where and how it hurts. Feeding on Jesus means putting words to the deepest hungers of our heart, by faith believing that he cares about them, bringing those longings to him and letting him speak to them.

Because of my story, one of the deep recurring hungers of my heart is to be enjoyed for who I am apart from how I'm needed. I enjoy being needed by people. I enjoy caring for people. But often the hunger rises in my heart in the form of the question "Do people enjoy me just *because* they need me?" When I feel that hunger I'm tempted to talk myself out of it, or demand that those closest to me fill it, or quiet it with a myriad of distractions. But the only thing that truly satisfies my hunger is to come into Jesus' presence, aware of my longing, and ask him to remind me and convince me of his affection for me. As his Spirit points me to the cross, my hunger doesn't merely go away, but finds its fulfillment in the one who delights in me without needing me.

I'm convinced that God intentionally gives us these longings to continually bring us back to himself. We're not good at remaining dependent. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert, God miraculously provided them with bread from heaven. Each day they were able to gather as much as they needed to satisfy their hunger for that day. Whenever they tried to save some for the next day, it spoiled overnight. God likes to keep us dependent on Him. Feeding on Jesus is the same way – He fully satisfies our hunger for today, but leaves us hungering for more of Him tomorrow.

God gives us deep heart hungers – for forgiveness, for meaning and purpose, for love – hungers that find their deepest satisfaction in him. And then he fills those hungers in a way that leaves us hungry again tomorrow. Either God is playing a cruel joke on us or He actually enjoys being with us, giving us himself, and fulfilling the deepest hungers of our hearts. The cross tells me it's the latter.

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By Amy Cole

Amy is a local spiritual director and is on staff at the Spiritual Guidance Program of The Shalem Institute in Bethesda, MD. She and her husband, James, are active members of Warehouse 242.

What Are You Hungry For?

What are you hungry for? This is the question my husband and I seem to ask each other most afternoons as we begin thinking about dinner plans. (Obviously, we are not the kind of people who plan a menu on Sunday for the entire week's worth of dinners!) And even though we love food, we often don't know what we want to eat. The spiritual journey is a lot like that for me.

I don't know what I hunger for spiritually. I know I am "hungry". I have a sense that I need God, and that I want God – but beyond that it is fuzzy. I don't know how I need God, or where I need to see God in my day. And even on those days when I can name some specific areas of need for God, I tend to be task-oriented and fairly near-sighted. I want help getting through tough spots in my day, dealing with difficult people, physical safety for my loved ones or healing for sick friends. I can name some things I want God "to do". But is that really spiritual hunger? Does that really get at the heart of what I long for in my relationship with God? I doubt it.

I often ask friends how they are praying for themselves and their own hearts. Many times this question is met by what I like to call "blank-stare-girl". Suddenly, she is stumped. She knows that she prays often, attends church and may even have an active devotional life, but this question renders her speechless. Eventually, she manages something like, "Hum...I don't know". The question that comes next may be: How would I know? Where would I begin?

Knowing why I have come to God in prayer requires knowing what is going on inside me. This means that I must be willing to look for the larger questions or fears or struggles that may be beneath the obvious places I need a miracle, or a break. It means knowing how I am feeling. At my core, am I anxious, sad, expectant, overwhelmed or relieved? If feeling words are not familiar or obvious, it may mean taking a look at "context clues," or what is going on in the circumstances of my life. Given all that is going on, how do I feel today? It means having some awareness of what I long for in life, and perhaps the honesty to name what is missing.

Those kinds of questions and reflections are not as much the *preparation* for prayer or for encounter with God as they are the already-happening, on-

going flow of awareness between the Spirit of God dwelling in my own heart and my conscious mind's understanding of my life as I know it. Jesus speaks of this in John 14. "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth...but you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." The Spirit of God illuminates what is going on in my heart – the place of my deepest longings and greatest fears. The Spirit helps me to name why it is I have come to God. It reinforces my need for God, and my intention to depend on Jesus for all of life.

One of the best ways I have found to facilitate this process of inner knowing, or self-awareness is engaging God through Scripture. Not only does Scripture help me to know God and even to hear God – but Scripture helps me know what is going on in my own heart, and how God might be speaking to that hunger. In addition to approaching the Bible for study, understanding or application, I seek to encounter God there. It is as if I am entering the vulnerable space of sitting with a newborn baby: watching, listening, attentive to even the slightest breath, open to the wonder and awe of life, building a relationship of simply being together without having "to do" anything.

How does that happen? About 15 years ago, while I was leading an inductive Bible Study (BSF), I came across an ancient monastic tradition of reading scripture called *lectio divina*, literally "holy reading" or "reading God". It involved reading scripture first through the lens of the mind – understanding it in the context in which it was written, who wrote it, etc. But *lectio divina* also invited me to pay attention to the words or phrases in the passage that seem to stir me, confuse me, excite me, or anger me. The theory being that if I can notice those words or phrases, I have a clue where God may be inviting me to deeper trust, fuller healing or richer life. It means paying attention to how scripture touches my heart, and staying present there long enough to let God address the hungers of my heart.

Encountering God through scripture in a way that stirs the head *and* the heart is disastrous for anyone seeking to read the whole Bible in a year! The goal is not quantity, but quality. The hope is not

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"You can learn to deactivate the fight or flight response. You can retrain your body's responses by developing a peaceful spirit."

Amy facilitates "Engaging God through Scripture," an eight-week course at the Barnabas Center using the lectio divina method of experiencing God along with principles of Barnabas Training. A new group begins April 9. Please call Barnabas at (704) 365-4545 to sign up.

simply that you know more *about God*; but that you come to a place of *knowing God* in a deep, interior way that can never be debated or lost. Think of it as savoring a Charms Blow-pop, rather than devouring extra-crispy french fries. A cow chewing cud is the image many early contemplative monks and nuns brought to mind to help them slow down and settle into a particular passage of scripture.

Six years ago on a retreat in Colorado, I woke from a fabulously fun dream that I shared around the breakfast table. An older, wiser woman immediately pointed out that my dream was very much like a passage found in the book of Ezekiel. I didn't even know where to find Ezekiel! And when she showed me the passage I knew I had never read it. But at that point, it was hard to ignore. I began hanging out in the passage from the stance of a student, reading study notes and biographical information about Ezekiel.

It was all very interesting, and it was exciting to learn more about metaphors and meanings of imagery in the text, yet I did not see the real relevance to my life. The passage describes a deep and healing river flowing from the temple in one of Ezekiel's prophecies. I tried to notice the words or images in the text which stirred me in any particular way. Initially, I was drawn to an image of trees and water that brought healing. I had been unable to become pregnant and had sought healing through prayer and medical miracles. The healing theme certainly resonated, and helped me recognize my continual need for healing as well as comfort from God there.

Several years later I noticed I was intrigued by the depth of the healing river in the passage. The depth seemed to speak of the boundlessness of God's Spirit and Love. I held that in my prayer and asked God to teach me more there. In hindsight, I can see that these six years have felt like boot camp of getting to know God in the person of the Holy Spirit - always active, always present. In delicate ways, the Spirit has helped me notice when I feel particularly alone, while at the same time meeting me there with comfort and tender love.

Over time I've gotten more comfortable with the mystery of the passage, and the weirdness of coming to it through a dream. I don't read it that often, but more through other parts of the Bible. In my heart, I'm trying to savor the words and images from the Ezekiel passage but be open to God in all of life, all of scripture. But I am obviously paying attention to the places and times when this particular passage should reappear. It has happened many times over the past six years. In fact, it happened just last week...

I had been in Washington, D.C., for work and was driving back to Charlotte. I stopped over at a monastery of Trappist nuns just outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. I have made many retreats there through the years, and the sisters are dear souls who love Jesus and who live a life of prayer. I arrived for the 7:30 A.M. Mass in the chapel. Being a life-long Presbyterian who is drawn to nuns and monasteries, I'm used to the awkwardness of not being fully welcomed to partake in communion at a Catholic Mass. I understand their reasons for this exclusion, and I want to have the inner freedom to accept each faith tradition's way of worship while being true to God in my heart.

Still, the angst was there. I was tired from an intense weekend of spiritual dialogue in an interfaith setting. I longed for the spiritual communion of those who follow Jesus as Lord. I really wanted to receive communion that morning in particular. I offered a short prayer of my "hungers." And, I confess, I considered ignoring the "rule" and faking being Catholic so I could fully participate in communion. As I headed into the chapel, I noticed a new sign on the board outside that specifically asked anyone not baptized Catholic to refrain from participating in communion. Eeek. Nailed.

“The goal is not quantity, but quality. The hope is not simply that you know more about God; but that you come to a place of knowing God in a deep, interior way...”

The service began. The nuns, dressed in full white habit, with black aprons stood in their choir stalls. Father Joseph, a monk from a nearby monastery, was there to celebrate the Mass. A few neighbors from adjoining farms joined me in the pews. We opened with prayers of confession, assurance of pardon, opening prayers and a hymn. Sister Jan, the only Southerner in the bunch, stood to read the Old Testament lesson. I nearly fell out into the floor when she began to read from “my” passage in Ezekiel! Everything in me felt like melted wax. The determined, willful woman who had earlier planned to fake her way through communion suddenly felt deep, unspeakable gratitude for simply hearing the words read from this familiar passage, and in a friendly southern accent. And it all seemed to happen so fast. I could hardly keep up as she slowly read the text that I had come to savor, yet still not fully grasp or understand.

The rest of the service floated over me. It suddenly did not matter that I was the only non-Catholic there. I felt I belonged in a way I never had. It did not matter that instead of holding out my hand to receive the host from the priest, I surprised him with crossing my arms and asking for a simple blessing. I was genuinely grateful for his blessing and sensed even more deeply God's blessing on my life. The pervasive sense of peace and belonging that came over me through the reading of Ezekiel lingered through the rest of the service and the morning. I wasn't sure what to make of it, and I quickly let go of trying to “make” anything of it – except to receive it as the food God seemed to have given to my hunger to be known, to be welcomed and to belong.

By Roger Edwards:
a counselor and teacher
at The Barnabas Center.

Midlife & Meaning

"If we will not learn to eat the only food that the universe grows... then we must starve eternally."-- C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain

Life expectancy for a U.S. male is 77 years. I know, because I looked it up. Just 77 years. So I got out my calculator and did the personal math. The result provoked a chilling realization: I passed the statistical midpoint of my life 14 years ago.

Now, this wasn't entirely a surprise. I already knew that I am (or was) 'middle-aged'. I haven't been asleep all these years. But when I saw that number sitting there, so static and real, I was disturbed. It caught me off guard. I wondered, 'Why would something I already know agitate me like that?' But then, midlife does this to me all the time. It awakens my heart to what my brain already knows. God designed midlife for this purpose – to transform 'knowledge' into 'understanding'. Midlife takes what is in your head and shifts it deeper - into your bones.

I could have done the math when I was 15. I knew the theory then, but I couldn't have understood the meaning. When you are young, you catch onto the ideas quickly, but as you age, it is more like the meaning catches you. Midlife takes the theoretical and makes it tangible.

For example, when you are young, you learn that life has its 'ups and downs'. You file this 'theory' in your brain. But later, it all becomes more than just a theory; life's 'ups and downs' becomes a 'tangible truth'. The difference is that 'tangible truth' doesn't lie in a static compartment of your brain, it lives all over your body. At midlife, when you think of 'life's ups and downs', you don't just think a truth, you feel the truth in the form of heart aches, bittersweet memories, core anxieties and hungry nostalgia. There is a difference between knowledge that sounds right in the head and understanding that resonates throughout your whole frame.

Midlife penetrates the bones. God designed precisely so. That's why I could feel the chill. But the question is whether you will be open to what midlife teaches. Perhaps you don't want your

bones chilled. In fact, my first reaction to my deeper understanding about my age was to re-check the math. I didn't like the infiltration so much. I was reluctant to let it settle into wisdom. But midlife is a patient teacher. Or more accurately, midlife is a relentless teacher. It keeps bringing the data.

Day by day, loss by loss, midlife moves the theoretical into the tangible. God is after you - all of you. He wants you to know what life means. And so He has designed a redemptive plan to accomplish it. Midlife is a part of it. God cursed the world with death and created, obviously, an endpoint in life. But the endpoint also means a middle - a middle that is a crucial stage in your life continuum. Still fresh inside of you, live the dreams of your youth, but by midlife, many of those dreams are dying. Midlife is stage in between dreams and death. Here, the human condition is experienced. You are forced to question what it all means.

Lesson of Midlife: Mortality

Midlife helps you internalize the human condition. For example, it helps you understand the most obvious lesson of day-by-day experience; the fact that 'days do pass'. Obvious. But obvious fact is not the same as depth of understanding. Every child knows the passage of time, but a midlifer feels it. That's how the obvious becomes profound. That's how midlife takes what you know in your head and shifts it into your whole person.

Internalizing the passing of time makes mortality real. When the math shows that most of your days have passed, you experience something beyond neural activity; you feel a shudder in your bones. You think, "How could that be?" But then, you can't deny it, for you are an eyewitness. By 40, you have observed the death of many days - 14,600 to be exact. Mortality is actualized by experience.

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"Midlife is designed to take what you know in your head and shift it deeper - into your bones."

The sober fact activates a core shudder. When you feel that 'most of your days have passed', you are in touch with the human condition. On the one hand, you feel the restriction of a limited life (death). But on the other hand, you feel the desire to expand life (dreams). Restriction and expansion are core human realities. That shudder you feel is the cosmic conflict between the two; the hope for life struggling against the curse of death. Something about life slipping away makes you realize how much you want it and you experience the pang of hunger. You think, "It hasn't been enough. I want more." A honest look at your history confirms this. Every day you gobbled up life, and then that night planned how to get more. But the next day wasn't enough either. Nor the next. Even half a lifetime isn't enough. Though you've had 40 years, you still want more.

Nothing is Quite Enough— It Isn't Here

Youth awakens your hunger for life. For what is youth if not hunger? But midlife deepens the awareness. By the time you are 40, you have had the repetitive experience that nothing satisfies that deep hunger. You have experienced disappointment when your plans have failed, of course. But you have experienced dissatisfaction even when your plans have succeeded. Chronic dissatisfaction is the lesson and gift of midlife. Midlife's reveals a raw truth: nothing is quite enough.

You hungered for intimacy while single, but the hunger didn't go away when you married. You hungered for significance, but no job or position has ever satisfied you for long. Midlife is a repetitive experience of the insatiable heart. A thousand episodes of chronic disappointment point to the same conclusion. No amount of life (quality or quantity) can fulfill the hunger of the soul. Youth arouses large expectations. And then midlife exposes that life is not large enough to meet them. Together those two lessons teach this; 'Your hunger exceeds the world. You hunger for God.'

Of course you already know that. In your head. That's why midlife's lessons aren't targeted at your head, but rather at your nervous system. Head knowledge of this world's insufficiency becomes more real when you experience it viscerally in the form of: empty success, betrayal, physical deterioration, personal failure. These experiences transform rational truth into tangible truth. God uses midlife to persuade you, mind, body and soul, that the life you so desperately crave - isn't here.

Nothing in this life, no matter how beautiful or good, is beautiful or good enough. Nothing (that is, no created thing) lasts long enough. Days pass, as does everything else. But you and your hunger are immortal. Every good thing around you is a derivative good, that is, it draws its life from the Original Good. Human dignity is also a derived good. Therefore, we can only draw our life from God. Nowhere else. Chronic dissatisfaction is the natural consequence of a natural law. Human life cannot be sustained by derivatives; our life must be drawn from the Source of Life.

Midlife and Redemption

Until you accept this truth with your whole self, you will futilely search for satisfaction where it cannot be found. You will squeeze the good things that God has made, trying to extract from them that which they don't possess. You will pressure your spouse or your friends to give to you that which they don't have. You will exhaust yourself in a cycle of disappointment. But the truth that 'it isn't here' can set you free.

Conventional thinking teaches that fullness comes from 'getting the most out of life'. But Biblical wisdom shows that fullness comes from accepting that 'life is not enough'. When you accept this, you begin to release your chokehold on life. You begin to release your spouse or friends from the pressure of being your security or significance. Maybe then, you can know them for who they are, rather than for who you want them to be. You begin to think about created things differently. When food doesn't have to satisfy your soul, perhaps you can begin to enjoy it for what it is. When clothes don't have to cover your spiritual nakedness, perhaps you can rediscover the comfort of your own skin.

Midlife helps you see the misguided cycle. It helps you admit how misguided you have been. Perhaps the chilling realizations of midlife (and beyond) are the only way that we will internalize the truth and admit our true hunger. If so, then midlife is a gift, though a difficult one. And not just midlife, but old age and death too. Chronic dissatisfaction, seen in this light, is a grace that exposes the world's inadequacy to nourish the soul. Midlife teaches us (mind, soul and body) to hunger for God.

Ironic. Hidden all along, in God's curse upon this life, is the blessing on which we rise to the next. This surprises me too, but this time the realization is bright and warm: midlife is yet another possibility for redemption.

“Chronic dissatisfaction is the natural consequence of a natural law. Human life cannot be sustained by derivatives; our life must be drawn from the Source of Life.”

“Isn't redemption ironic? Hidden all along, in God's curse upon this life, is the blessing on which we rise to the next.”

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The Bread of Life



Upcoming Opportunities

Date	Event	Facilitator
November 14-15, 2008	Barnabas Training Basic —A two day seminar to learn greater confidence and capacity to love others. Includes teaching on a biblical model of people and an interactive small group experience. Hosted by Providence Road Church of Christ	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
June 12-August 7, 8 weeks (skipping July 3 rd) Thursdays @ 6:30-8:30 6 women	Discovering Real Beauty— Uncovering your Struggle with an Eating Disorder — This 8-week group will help you tell your story and investigate how the damage in your life contributed to an eating disorder. Here is a chance to be encouraged by others similar to you and to find hope that healing is possible from this often secret and isolating struggle.	<i>Lauren Petters</i>
May 2-4 at Linville Gorge June 21 & Aug. 2 in Charlotte	The Quest —Men's adventure outing::backpacking, conversation, study and reflection.	<i>Pete Bondy</i>
Thursdays 11:30am-1pm April 10-May 29	Spiritual Formation Group —Borrowing from the ancient Christian practice of "lectio divina," this group will help cultivate a relationship with God through meditation, contemplative prayer, and learning to listen and respond to Scripture.	<i>Amy Cole</i>
Tuesday evenings Groups begin May 13	Honor's Program for Men/Advanced and Beginning —A 14-week small group program where men who struggle with sexually addictive behavior can come together to lay a solid foundation for relational recovery.	<i>John Pierce</i>
Thursday evenings Groups begin May 15	Honors Program for Women/Beginning —For women whose husbands struggle with sexual addiction to grieve losses and make decisions about their own recoveries. 14 weeks.	<i>Annie Schleyer</i>
October 6, 2008	Barnabas Golf Classic —a fundraising event for the Barnabas Center at the Palisades. Let us know if you'd like to play!	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Monday evenings Groups begin September 2008	Barnabas Training Level Two —This training extends and deepens the experience of the model of caring learned in Level 1. This is for individuals who have completed Level 1, are involved in caring for others, and want a context to gain skills and confidence through role play, care for others, and personal feedback.	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>
Groups begin in September	Barnabas Training Level Four —For graduates of BT Level 2, this small group assists 4-6 individuals to grow in confidence in the model of caring for others	<i>Barnabas Staff</i>