



photo credit: Kristi Pascarella

## Building Trellises Together: Introducing Rule of Life

by Kevin Whitfield

I am not naturally the most disciplined person. I depend too much on my good intentions, but you know what they say about good intentions. The Book of Common Prayer gives us these words for daily confession: "Almighty and most merciful Father . . . We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts." The more I say these words, the more I know how true they are. I follow too much the devices and desires of my own heart, whether it is finances, food, anger, or consideration of others.

In the last couple years I've learned about an old Christian concept called a rule of life. Many Christians and Christian communities have used a rule of life to help them order the devices and desires of their hearts. What is a rule of life? The Anglican catechism describes it this way: "A rule of life is a discipline by which I order my worship, work, and leisure as a pleasing sacrifice to God."

To my surprise, the word "rule" has a beautiful image hidden within it. The Latin root is associated with a trellis. Some of you use trellises to guide the growth of your berries or your cucumbers so they can bear more fruit and remain easily accessible for picking. If they grew according to their own devices and desires, they would grow into a tangled mess. Good berries and cucumbers would be lost to rot.

The same happens in our lives. A trellis, a rule of life, helps us stop wasting aspects of our lives so we can bear more fruit for the kingdom of God and eternity. The catechism

poses this question: "Why do you need a rule of life?" The answer pulls no punches: "I need a rule of life because my fallen nature is disordered, distracted, and self-centered. A rule of life helps me to resist sin and establish godly habits, through which the Holy Spirit will increasingly conform me to the image of Christ."

Studies support this need for committed, godly habits. For instance, studies on charitable giving consistently show that those who plan ahead each year and commit to give reliably give more than those who do not plan. This applies across the spectrum of our lives. If I plan to exercise and make it a habit, I'm much more likely to exercise than if I depend on a spontaneous but somehow regular impulse.

Please take note that a rule of life is not a way that we work ourselves to God. It is a tool that the Holy Spirit uses to bring us closer to Christ.

On February 14, the church enters the season of Lent. This is a season of following our Lord in self-examination and repentance. We examine the places where the "devices and desires of our own hearts" are too often defining us. Will you try adopting a rule of life during this season? What could it look like to order your "worship, work, and leisure as a pleasing sacrifice to God?" Remember that support from others is a huge help. Who can start building a trellis with you?

If this is new, start with a small trellis. Pick one or two practices, whether prayer, fasting, sabbath rest, or giving. Here are a few of examples from our experience.

- The staff has committed to pray morning and evening each day as well as fast at least until lunch on Fridays. Knowing that others are doing this has encouraged me when I grow lax.
- Our family is stumbling our way through establishing a true rest day. Even our poor attempts have had ripple effects of ordering the remainder of our week and helping us rest and work better.
- Our family has committed to give 10% of our income each year to the church. The kids have spend, save, and give jars as a way to learn this practice. Guess which jar is their favorite?! In addition, we are trying to add in places where we can grow in generosity toward God and others, whether that is Lamb's Rector's Discretionary Fund or friends who serve God in other ministries.

## If You Love Your Neighbors, Hire Them

by Daniel Zimmerman

Churches always depend upon volunteer labor, and ours is no different. But it is important to note that we don't see work as a means to an end—a way just to staff the nursery and cut the grass. Work here is enchanted: it's a way that we participate in God's renewal of all things, the means by which we embody love to neighbor, a means of grace by which we are spiritually formed. Our work is imbued with meaning, purpose, and effect.

Nevertheless, volunteer labor won't be the sole way the work gets done at the Abbey. We're going to hire people and pay them life-giving wages for dignified labor. In fact, we've already started doing this. Here's why. Most churches have a benevolence ministry to meet the physical and financial needs of their congregants and neighbors—we call ours the Rector's Discretionary Fund. And for many people who request support from the church, the appropriate response is simply for the church to write a check. Life is full of unexpected calamities: car accidents, illnesses, layoffs. Throughout history, churches have collected offerings to meet these needs and bear the load with those who are suffering.

But for other people, money alone won't address the issues that are plaguing them. Some people need dignified employment, better wages, deep friendship, community, assistance drafting a resume, help opening a bank account, connection to social services, addiction counseling, or temporary housing. If we solely offer cash assistance without addressing these deeper needs, we may actually be harming people even as we are deluding ourselves with the belief that we have been generous. Our love may not be preferring the other; it could just be making us feel good. Work at the Abbey gives us real tools to address these deeper needs. It is the method by which we can be a hospitable, warm family to one another, bearing witness to the welcome we've found in Christ in concrete ways.

Furthermore, the way that we work here can offer a prophetic witness against the mechanized, dehumanizing ways that work happens in an industrialized economy. Much modern work treats workers as resources to be managed and exploited ("human resources"), not persons who bear God's image and express that divine mark through creative labor. When craft and creativity are stripped out of work, the worker is robbed of satisfaction in what they create. When laborers become cogs in machines, work becomes toil, and labor becomes drudgery. When we hire people and pay them good wages for meaningful work, we show that in King Jesus's economy, the labor is not in vain and the loads are light.

Philosophical reasons aside, I want to make the economic case for the work that goes on at our Abbey. Most churches face an intractable conundrum: their missional endeavors are in tension with



what it takes to be financially solvent. Because most churches operate solely on tithes and offerings, any missionary endeavor they pursue drains resources away from infrastructure, staffing, utilities. Abbeys' economic model reduces this tension. Because the work is the mechanism by which we love our neighbor, evangelize, partner with our community, steward our resources, and allow God to form our souls, and because it can support cashflow-positive business, our ministries are not a drag on our resources, but a boon to them. At abbeys, what is good for the soul can also be good for the wallet.

Let's take Abbey Coffee Roasters, for example. There are all sorts of costs to this business: green coffee beans, bags, a coffee roaster, a coffee grinder, propane, and employee wages. But because we can turn a profit on the coffee, all of this is paid for by the business. Moreover, the coffee business has already started funding other expenditures for the church. Abbey Coffee Roasters tithes its proceeds into the church's general fund. When we needed to upgrade our coffee brewing system to accommodate a growing Sunday attendance, the business paid for that too. The business paid for the coffee logo and labels to be created. Furthermore, the coffee business has introduced us to other members of the community. There are parishioners at our church, now, who found us by finding out about the coffee first. Local businesses have requested to source our coffee for their shops. We have already indicated to New Creation, a local nonprofit that helps human trafficking and domestic abuse survivors, that we will source coffee for their coffee shop at cost for the first years of their operation to enable them to establish a solid footing. In all these ways, we are not distracted from loving our neighbors by running the business; we are loving our neighbors by running our business.

I hope all this encourages you. More than that, I hope it fires your imagination about how God can use our work and our land to bless Rockingham County. And if you'd like to get involved, please chat with me. The fields are white and ready to harvest.

## Just as Needy as Those We Serve

by Levi Fuller

I have been reading and mulling on Mark's account of Jesus' healing of the paralytic in chapter 2:1–12. I keep coming back to this story in my mind throughout my day at the Community Services Board where I work on a small team that serves what our systems label "the hardest to serve"—adults living with serious mental illness, persistent substance misuse with long histories of chronic homelessness often co-occurring with years of recidivism and psychiatric hospitalization.

Let me first say that the work that I do in adult community mental health services is riddled with pleasant surprises and plagued by not-so-pleasant interruptions; hope for a better life and feelings of utter helplessness. Now imagine with me an office in a "cubby land" of sorts akin to what you might imagine a telemarketing warehouse would look like. At times this space can feel overwhelming with the number of case managers and other support staff talking on the phone with clients or to each other. Other times the floor has an oppressive weight to it, drab gray cubicles, sterile overhead lighting, with the heft of numerous, intense psychiatric emergencies we are all buzzing out of the room to engage in. I paint this picture of my daily work environment for you to imagine with me what I have been mulling over—this scene of a helpless man being lowered from the ceiling in a most startling interruption for Jesus and an even more startling display of God's life-restoring power.

Much of my work is unpleasant and, without boasting, I would say it is not for the weak of heart or spirit. It is also true that many days feel even more difficult than I bargained for. All the more, I love my work. Acknowledging this dialectical reality, let me paint one more picture for you. On my cubicle wall hangs a crucifix and on my desk a copy of the Scriptures, a small electric candle, a framed prayer for those who serve others sitting next to my pocket version of the Book of Common Prayer, and a photograph from when I was baptized.

In Wright's commentary on the story of the paralytic, he says that having met the living, forgiving God in Jesus we will find ourselves on our feet, "going out into the world in the power of God's love." In the work I do, my knee-jerk response to this passage is to imagine the face of this helpless man in the faces of those I see and serve on a daily basis. Upon further meditation, however, I am reminded of my own helplessness more than I am reminded of the call on my life to serve others. And this is the good news. In Mark, Jesus teaches us of our own need for the Suffering Servant to endure us with wisdom, patience, and courage, to strengthen us, and raise us up. It's in being served daily by Jesus through the Scriptures and prayer that I am restored and compelled to do the same in laying down my life for the suffering, friendless, and needy.

## Introducing the Fuller Family



Levi and Amy Fuller began attending Lamb at the end of the summer and have been incredibly blessed, encouraged, and refreshed by the lovingkindness of Christ's body and the ministry of the Scriptures and Sacraments. They find Lamb to be a gift to their own lives and that of their family, more often than not having to pry their three daughters Phoebe (6), Zoey (5), and Mallie (1) out of the creek to go home for lunch. It's a good thing when your children don't want to leave church on a Sunday morning! Even more to hear of the great things they are learning at Catechesis of the Good Shepherd on Fridays.

Amy is a homeschool teacher and, when she has time, a visual artist by training. Levi is an adult mental health case manager at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Community Services board, wrapping up his Masters of Social Work this summer at Virginia Commonwealth University. While Amy is a native of Rockingham Co., Levi hails from rural Tazewell, Co. in Southwestern Virginia. They love the outdoors, spending much family time together hiking in Shenandoah National Park or playing outside with their goldendoodle Hiccup.

# Serving God through Bible Teaching

by Ashlyn Holz

References are a very important part of being hired for a job position. “She is full of integrity. . . He is a team player. . . He knows this machine inside and out. . .”. References are fun to give when previous work has demonstrated abilities. But what about when someone doesn’t actually seem ready for the job?

Answering “How are you serving God through Bible Study Fellowship (BSF)?” has felt a bit like writing my own job reference. However, I began to realize that this is, in fact, more accurately giving a reference for God. How has *he* worked through BSF?

Although I am a “leader”, God is always the one who gets the credit. I have learned over the years that service in BSF has increased my appreciation of the body of Christ, grown my professionalism, and demonstrated his active word in my life through heart change.

I started to attend BSF pre-parenthood for a short time, and then brought kids to Pre-school BSF. Through the years, I stepped in and out of class, and finally was asked to be a Group Leader. I promptly said, “No, thank you.” I didn’t have time. I didn’t want to go to BSF several more hours each week for training. My kids were finally all in school! I could “start my real work”. Go earn some money! Have a clean house! Invite people over for supper! Learn to play an instrument! Hmm... can you see the focus here? Not bad things, but sometimes they were just excuses.

For two years I said no. What patience God had with me! The local BSF leadership kept giving me the opportunity to join them in this amazing ministry. And when I finally had no more reasons not to, I stepped out in obedience. This job was how I was being invited to serve alongside him. Bible study, for me, was a place of general familiarity and comfort. I had attended Christian school and college and had parents who led BSF groups. What I didn’t know back then, however, was how far I had yet to grow. BSF’s vision is to *Magnify God and Mature His People*. God would work wonders in my heart and mind as my focus shifted to gaze on him and his work rather than only myself and my goals.

Sometimes, those old goals rise up to distract me. I don’t even see it as a good service, because what have I to give? (My resume isn’t up to speed for this position!) But those days of disillusionment are when I find that I am being served by him through his people. Other leaders in the class are praying for the class, all the details, and each other. They too are called into this work. Encouragement in a community is strengthening.

BSF uses a fourfold method of study: personal study, discussion groups, lecture and commentary. Years ago, as I led my first discussion circle, I looked around. None of the faces of the women

were familiar. Some were young, some older, everyone unique. I had no idea of their personal story. Even for this extrovert, leading a group of strangers can be daunting! But as the weeks went by, and we dug further into the Bible, I began to realize that the ladies’ responses to the questions revealed their hearts. They experienced struggles, joy, challenges, and always God was there, working in their lives.

I continue learning to be a better leader through weekly leader meetings. Leader meetings are a place of incredible “on the job” training for excellent work. Currently, as part of my position at BSF, I prepare and give an expository, or explanatory, lecture on the weekly passage about every 6 weeks. This continues to be a struggle for me as the responsibility weighs heavy, and I never feel quite qualified. Pray for me! God has shown himself clearly and faithfully when it is my turn to teach.

Finally, the joy my family has in encouraging me to participate in BSF becomes my joy. I giggle when thinking about my kids’ ability to encourage me in this work when they see me faltering on a hard day. They know that staying in the Word and depending on him for the work he has called me to do makes me a better person too!

How has God been showing up for you as up you join him in his work? I know he delights to work with and through you too!

Ashlyn and her husband Tim have been attending Lamb since 2020 (with various daughters alongside them).



*Bible Study Fellowship is global, in-depth Bible class producing passionate commitment to Christ, his word and his church. BSF serves more than 400,000 class members in more than 120 nations in multiple languages. Locally, classes are available in person in Harrisonburg, Staunton and Waynesboro, for men, women and children of all ages. Online classes are also available! We are studying the book of John this year and Revelation starting in September 2024. The course runs through the school year, but anyone may join anytime. For more information and a sample lesson, visit [bsfinternational.org](http://bsfinternational.org). Ask Ashlyn (or Kara Zimmerman, another teacher from Lamb) about it as well.*