

## **Your Life + 20%**

### *The Power of Transformative Habits*

Leap of Faith 2013

#### **This title sounds suspiciously like marketing.**

As I write this, I'm on a plane to, of all places, Iowa City. Our church is a part of a loose network of churches who've agreed to befriend one another to the point that the pastors not infrequently travel to other churches to encourage and partner with them.

We've discovered something intriguing with these informal visits. This behavior alone seems to have provable benefits to the congregations involved. Churches have grown, become more diverse and report greater impact in their immediate neighborhoods. The pastor of the last church I visited—a prominent church in their city with about a thirty year history, later said to me, "Your visit strikes me as the most significant thing that's happened to our church in the last twenty years."

So, clearly, that all sounds very encouraging. But why do I bring it up here?

It's to make the point that very modest behavioral changes can often have results that outweigh the effort involved. The very small insight that pastors and churches who take an active interest in each others' well-being can make all of the churches thrive in measurable ways has been quite a day-brightener for many of my friends.

On this plane ride, I've been reading a new book by the Gallup organization, the most famous, most broad-based pollsters in the country for the last 75 or so years. It's called *God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America* and it reports on one of their typically massive surveys, this one of well over a million interviews, that tries to determine how religious Americans are and, in this case, additionally tries to tell us what difference that religiousness has made.

On the one hand, the news is not good for religion. As I've talked about in a few sermons, they agree with Harvard's Robert Putnam that the percentage of Americans who check the box "no religion" or "none" on surveys is rising rapidly to what's currently 16% of the population.<sup>1</sup> But, that said, America is still vastly religious and vastly Christian. 90% of Americans believe in God. 80% at least identify themselves with some religion. And, of those who do identify with a religion, 95% identify with Christianity. (The Gallup folks continue to report that, on the basis of self-reporting, 41% of Americans are in a church or other religious gathering each week.)

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<sup>1</sup> A number a bit smaller than Putnam's data suggests.

What's interesting is that they report that the most religious Americans have better "well-being" outcomes. Here's a summary quote that will give you the spirit of their findings:

"A few years ago, two psychologists, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, compiled a long list of character virtues that research data show are associated with being more religious—including quality of family life; lower levels of marital conflict; and higher levels of forgiveness, compassion, pro-social values, happiness, life purpose, psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction, coping with illness and psychosocial stress, and coping."<sup>2</sup>

So there! Who wouldn't want those benefits?

The author, Frank Newport, goes on to detail what he describes as statistically significant differences in physical and mental health as well, including noteworthy lower incidences of depression.<sup>3</sup>

One more little tidbit here before getting to what we'll be up to in this Leap of Faith. Newport tells us that their data suggests three primary benefits of commitment to a church that leads to all these good outcomes. Here's their big three:

1. Many religions either explicitly or implicitly promote norms of behavior that are in turn associated with higher well-being and healthy behavior.
  - a. *Meaning that most churches frown on binge drinking, illegal-drug-taking, promiscuity, maybe even smoking. Avoiding those things promotes all sorts of wellbeing.*
2. Religions by definition include a belief in God or a higher power. That belief can provide comfort, surcease<sup>4</sup> from sorrow, and inner spiritual calmness.
  - a. *The point here: this is what explains lower rates of depression, anxiety and bitterness.*
3. Active participation in a religious community provides individuals with friends, fellow worshippers, social networks, and social support.
  - a. *Each of which is highly correlated with wellbeing. (Another noteworthy quote for our purposes: "Putnam and Lim's research...shows that it is religious friends that matter, not friends in general." So—again—there!)*<sup>5</sup>

Newport closes this section of the book this way: "Savvy health-conscious Americans may increasingly adopt religion as a mechanism to increase their overall emotional health, wellbeing, and physical health. Joining a church may become as common as joining a health club."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Newport, *God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Now, as the statisticians among you will immediately flag, just because something is correlated (like being happier and being a regular churchgoer, say) doesn't mean it's causal (maybe the person's already-happy disposition made them the sort of person who'd also enjoy church services). The Gallup folks agree with that...and then still say they think these things are causal.

<sup>4</sup> No, thank you for asking, I've never heard this word before.

<sup>5</sup> Newport, pp. 61-63.

<sup>6</sup> Newport, p. 71. Just to note, I'd guess their stats suggest that a greater percentage of Americans in fact *have* joined a church than a health club, but I'll leave that alone here.

**So—you ask guardedly—*how* exactly will active participation in this Leap of Faith offer the hope of making my life 20% better?**

Well, of course, who's to say? Most human lives are remarkably stubborn at staying at about the level of happiness they currently enjoy.

But let's entertain the Gallup peoples' take on the world for just a moment. If it's true that one's level of activeness in one's place of worship brings about a greater possibility of these good benefits, can we take this insight one step further?

As a matter of fact, both the Bible and the teachings of the greatest sages in Christian history agree with Gallup and take them a few steps further. They suggest that, on top of those benefits which come from those "big three" insights about churches, whole-hearted followers of Jesus can hope for still-more good stuff if they (a) covenant together to follow a few simple habits and (b) exercise ever-growing faith in God.

Over the last decade or so, our church has had very good success with a faith experiment we've tried each Lent (the six weeks before Easter) that we've called our "Leap of Faith." Together as a church we've believed God for good things for ourselves personally, for friends and family who perhaps aren't experiencing much from God, and for our church as a whole.

Here are just a few of the hundreds of encouraging reports we've gotten back over the years.

*(During the last Leap of Faith, I felt that God) asked me to fast for my daughter, whom I had been estranged from for 8 years. Two months after the fast, with one phone call from her we were reconciled.*

*During the Leap of Faith, I had seven very specific prayers around my business. These were legal and tax issues that I saw no way out of, and they were enormous headaches that would cost me thousands of dollars. During the Leap of Faith, I saw six of the seven resolve. I would describe the resolutions as seeing problems simply dissolve. It was like a rock wall just disappearing into thin air.*

*A few years ago we had an ectopic pregnancy—a very painful and distressing end to a pregnancy which led to our doctor saying we may never be able to have children. (We weren't excited about the specific medical interventions that were proposed, so) we used the Leap of Faith to pray (for a child). At the end of the 40 Days, we felt God say it was time... Nine months later our son was born and we now have a beautiful two-year-old.*

*I prayed to see God working in my life. It's weird. I don't know when it started happening, but I do. It hasn't faded but only gets stronger even when I'm not as faithful in doing the journey work. I see Him and His hand in every aspect of my life... from my relationships, my financial situation, work... everything. It's been amazing to not feel alone.*

So we've discovered that exercising an extra-special amount of faith in the middle of a time when our entire congregation is trying to do the same thing has a lot of power to it.

Now there are risks to this sort of faith exercise, most profoundly of course that something you're particularly hoping to see God do for you doesn't happen. This can be particularly hard when someone else that you know and love *does* have a great answer to prayer during the Leap of Faith. Well, here's what I can promise you: if you participate in enough Leaps of Faith, this disappointment absolutely will happen to you. I guarantee it. In our decade of Leaps of Faith, a healthy number of the things I've most wanted God to do for me haven't happened.

And yet I love Leaps of Faith, and many people in our church would nonetheless say that they're among our most significant times together.

How can that be so if so many prayers appear to go unanswered? I think it's because what a large percentage of Leap of Faith participants discover is that, whatever happens to their particular prayer, they find that they do experience a good deal more of *God*. And that, they further discover, feels really good and really hopeful for their future, regardless of the specifics of one prayer, even a prayer with such important stakes. They discover that greater confidence that God is very much alive in their lives comes to matter a whole lot.

So how can the Leap of Faith make your life better by some percentage? That's how.

### **Seven practices**

But this year's Leap of Faith will try to bump that percentage just a bit higher still by focusing on seven central, abundantly proven practices of faith that the great sages tell us are particularly powerful in helping maximize our experience of abundance in life and God. We're talking many centuries of data to go on here. Seven practices that, again and again, are said to focus the practitioner on everything Jesus wants to do for their lives such that, at the time of any of our deaths, we can have great hope to be more joyful and grateful than we are today.

This winter and early spring, we're focusing on some of the core insights that our church has discovered in our first fifteen years together, the insights that are at the heart of the first two classes on our baseball diamond of classes. So we just finished a sermon series that tried to mine the depths of Vineyard 101: Discovering the Vineyard. And, in this Leap of Faith, we'll believe together for all the benefits of Vineyard 201: Essentials of Following Jesus. This is the class that, having taken it and covenanted together around it, opens up the possibility of leadership at many levels in our church. Because these are the practices that can ensure a rich life of faith focused on Jesus, which is at the core of where we all want to go.

Here's a quick look at these powerful practices:

The First Practice: Living by Faith

The Second Practice: Hearing God's Voice

The Third Practice: Discovering God's Story in the Bible

The Fourth Practice: Pursuing Personal Healing

The Fifth Practice: Reaching Outward

The Sixth Practice: Trusting God with our Money

The Seventh Practice: Praising God in all Circumstances

If you've been in our church for any length of time, many of these practices won't surprise you. Which perhaps makes sense—if they're so powerful, it stands to reason that we'd mention them whenever the opportunity came up. What I hope you'll find powerful in this Leap of Faith is the packaging of them together. It's not just one of these habits that creates a rich, lasting life of faith—that adds the extra twenty percent of value to the life we have—it's the package. Which we'll do our best to explore in some depth this Lenten season.

### **Let's run down the elements of this Leap of Faith.**

Here are the components of this Leap of Faith. As always, you should feel free to join in on all, any or none of them, depending on your circumstances and disposition. That said, of course the good reports we hear after Leaps of Faith most often come from folks who've wholeheartedly participated.

1. We'll try out the seven practices.
2. We'll enjoy the book of Acts together.
3. We'll pray Psalms together.
4. We'll pray the three prayers.
  - a. What do I want Jesus to do for me?
  - b. What do I want Jesus to do for my six?
  - c. What do I want Jesus to do for my church?
5. We'll fast in some fashion together.
6. We'll do all of this with a small group.

### **We'll try out the seven practices.**

The sermons will focus on the seven practices and, each week, we'll invite those of you in the services to commit to the practice in question to see how it feels. That week's small group will also focus on the practice of the week.

During the last Sunday service of the Leap of Faith, Palm Sunday, we'll invite those of you there to commit to these practices as a lifestyle and to go public with your commitment by signing our 201 covenant, which opens up many opportunities in our church.

### **We'll enjoy the book of Acts together.**

One of the most popular features of our Leaps of Faith is a daily Bible guide that Brian Housman—usually with a few friends—puts together. This offers our whole church one 40-day stretch each year in which we're each looking at the same part of the Bible, which opens up a common conversation. Each year a different theme is picked, which we hope relates to the theme of Leap of Faith as a whole. Acts of the Apostles is a remarkable book—the only history of what Jesus' closest followers actually did as they took his teaching and the Holy Spirit's empowering to heart. What does a faithful, whole-hearted life of following Jesus actually look like? This is the best picture we have in the Bible. And, as an added bonus, it's an action-packed narrative.

### **We'll pray Psalms together.**

One of the great benefits of the Leaps of Faith is that we're all invited into a deeper, more-immediate experience of God and we can cheer each other on as we go. Prayer, clearly, is a big part of what makes these times special.

This year we'll hope to pray three Psalms per day together. As we talked about in some depth in a sermon series at the end of 2012 into the first couple weeks of 2013, the most popular way to learn prayer for the last 3,000 years has been to pray each Psalm, in order, as if it's your own prayer. This is a strange practice! We're invited to imagine we're a soldier in battle or that we're being slandered by formerly close friends or that the history of the Israelites is our own immediate history. But the wisdom has been that, as we do these things, we'll learn the ins and outs of how God wants us to pray. What are the opportunities in prayer? How can regular prayer along these lines change our experience of day to day life? Of connecting with God?

A key part of a "your life + 20%" experience is being remade as someone who can receive God's full blessings right in the day to day circumstances of your actual life, and the Psalms have been a key means by which this has happened for godly people for millennia. If you pray three Psalms each day during the Leap of Faith, you'll have prayed approximately 120 of the 150 Psalms before you're done. If you're a completist, you might decide to pray a robust four Psalms each day, and you'll be able to complete the entire Psalter (with a little left over) during the Leap of Faith. I don't think you'll regret taking that opportunity! (I have two friends who, after doing this exercise, made their next task *memorizing* the entire Psalter so they could pray it at any time...)

### **We'll pray the three prayers.**

#### **1. What do I want Jesus to do for me?**

During this Leap of Faith, we'll invite you to ask God with some real persistence for something that you'd be encouraged if he'd do for you. We'll invite you to even consider things like fasting about that and joining in with a small group—even if only for these six weeks—so that you can experience the power of praying for these things with others. These prayer experiences are often very encouraging.

*I had been on a break from communicating with my family for nine months and my prayer was that we would be able to talk again. It was answered!*

*During last year's Leap of Faith, I was very thankful for "serendipitously" getting a new direction in my research, which had been stalled for about three years and for getting an answer to a relationship question I had.*

*When the Leap of Faith started, I asked God to help me fall head over heels in love with my husband. I really wanted to not just work hard at a marriage but think the highest of my husband and really admire him even with his flaws. I really think God changed something that not only built on what we'd worked hard at, but took our enjoyment of each other to another level.*

*Four or five years ago during the Leap of Faith, Dave asked: What would you do for God if there were no limitations? As he often does, he allowed for a few moments of quiet time and the answer came instantly and obviously: I would care for orphans. I'd worked with kids for years, so it didn't seem too far off base, but this was different, more personal and more persistent. I spent eight months fleshing out the idea myself, with God and others. Then I took the leap and started the process of adopting a child through the foster care system. Fourteen months later I met my daughter and fourteen months after that she became my daughter in the eyes of the law.*

*Leap of Faith answer: Amazing job for my husband, better than he could have secured on his own without God's intervention.*

*During a Leap of Faith several years ago, I prayed for a suicidal friend who had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. About half way through the Leap of Faith, she suddenly ceased to experience the symptoms she had been dealing with (constant fatigue, will to live, depression, unbearable despair) and to this day, though she has occasionally felt very tired, those chains have been broken off her. She is a healthy, lovely 23-year-old wife and mother of two and one of my closest friends. Praise Jesus for her ability to live and enjoy her life abundantly!*

*I was part of an adulterous relationship, but couldn't find a way out. I was plagued by not having the power to stay away and prayed for the Lord's strength to help me. Glad to say I have not been in any contact with that person in four months.*

*I have been praying for the last two years during our Leaps of Faith to ask if God would provide a Christian woman into my life. And all of a sudden God blessed me with someone who I feel is a perfect match. This has really changed my life. We are getting married in June.*

*We had been trying to get pregnant for 1.5 years. We had gone to the doctor to get fertility treatments and were about to start the treatment when the Leap of Faith started. The fertility drugs were sitting in our fridge ready to be used the following week if our last natural attempt failed. During the Leap of Faith, we prayed to get pregnant and we did! Without treatment. The drugs sat in our fridge until they expired a few weeks ago.*

*I've needed to have these times of intense connection to God and I look forward to Lent each year, especially how this church does it.*

One of the strange, wonderful truths of faith in Jesus is that he wants us to come to him with the things we want and need, knowing that if we don't, we *will* go elsewhere. Off the top of my head, here are a few of the places where we're told that. (These quotes will all be from the New Living Translation unless noted.)

***You do not have, because you do not ask.  
(James 4:2, ESV)***

***"I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you."  
(Matthew 18:19)***

***"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."  
(Matthew 21:22)***

Or, heck, dash over to the Psalms, which are full of shameless *asking*, even for things that we might hesitate being so forward about, like, for instance:

***Please, Lord, please give us success.  
(Psalm 118:25b)***

***I love the Lord because he hears  
and answers my prayers.  
Because he bends down and listens,  
I will pray as long as I have breath!  
(Psalm 116, 1-2)***

These and other scriptures tell me that God is honored whenever we ask *him* for the things closest to our hearts. Again, the idea is that, if we don't go to him, we *will* go to other sources.

So take a moment, pray if you want or just get still. And then jot down:

*What do you want Jesus to do for you during these next 40 Days? (Maybe there's more than one thing.)*

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Now what?

First off, congratulations! You've done a key thing—you've crystallized in your heart and on paper what you want God to do for you, a very important thing. Having done that, can I encourage you to do a few

things in order to take advantage of the Leap of Faith in reference to the things you've just written down?

**1) Ask God for these things every day during these next 40 days.**

As you ask, he might speak to you about what you're asking for. Obviously, pay attention to that! But, in the spirit of Matthew 7, God gives good gifts to people who "keep on asking" him for them!

**2) Tell someone else what you wrote down and ask *them* to pray for you about those things too.**

This might be your spouse, if you have one and/or someone in your household or your small group, if you have one.

And it would be neighborly of you if you prayed about *their* things! Jesus says he's uniquely present and at work when two or more people come before him with things (Matthew 18:20). Your chances of seeing something happen go way up when someone else is praying too—and they might even have more faith than you do, so you can leech off of them!

**3) Consider fasting for these things in some way.**

At the end of this manual, I'll offer some suggestions for what that might look like.

Now please do remember how we began this manual. I'm eager for God to very much give you the things you're praying for! I've experienced some very encouraging next steps in my life through my own prayers during previous Leaps of Faith. But, as you do this, a KEY part of your Leap of Faith will be praying this next prayer.

As you pray your three Psalms and pray about what you want Jesus to do for you, make sure daily to pray that God would become more real to you each day during the Leap of Faith.

This, again, might be our biggest hope for your Leap of Faith, that you'd get the gift of God's real presence through all your highs and lows. If you miss every other aspect of this Leap of Faith, I'd encourage you not to miss this.

**We'll pray the three prayers.**

**2. What do I want Jesus to do for my six?**

*This church has transformed the way I view my responsibility for serving God in helping others come to faith and experience of Jesus. I am both much more awake to my role in collaborating with God in this endeavor in every relationship I'm in and much more free and relaxed in doing so, confident that it doesn't depend on me and my knowledge, but on paying attention to the evidence of God's acting in others preceding my engagement with them.*

*Recently my daughter has opened her heart to Jesus. She had come to the Christmas Eve service. Jesus is healing her of many illnesses. She also accepted a Bible I bought her at the bookstore and she's been reading it. Praise God!*

*I've seen my wife follow Jesus and big changes happen in her life.*

We have a theory that now, happily, has a long track record behind it that seems to bear it out. It's that each of us, whatever our own level of faith in God or lack thereof, knows at least six local people who, best as we can figure out, don't seem to be experiencing much from God. Our theory, additionally, is that there's a good chance that nobody is praying for these people. So, during each of our Leaps of Faith, we've invited participants to take at least these 40 days to pray each day for their six.

These prayers can take whatever focus seems best to you. My prayers often invite God to make himself real to my six, to encourage them however God sees fit, to remove any blinders over their eyes that might keep them from truly seeing what God is doing around and in them. A friend of mine tells me he prays that God will bless his six at exactly the place they need blessing, and that they'll have a strong sense that they owe those blessings to God. The daily Bible guide will have daily suggestions of how to pray for your six. Pray whatever works for you. But pray each day and see what God does.

Before a recent Leap of Faith, I realized that my six had all moved on and each one was now out of my life. I didn't know who my six should be. God had an intriguing suggestion. I felt God's encouragement to just pray for "my six," not knowing who they were, but believing that God knew. So, feeling foolish, I did that for a week or so, each day, and then, in a flash, I knew who each of the six was. I've kept it up since then, and I've seen some really encouraging things happen with them.

So take a minute to ask God: who are your six?

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) \_\_\_\_\_

**We'll pray the three prayers.**

### **3. What do I want Jesus to do for my church?**

One of the great gifts of the Leaps of Faith is that we're not in this alone. The power is that we're doing this together. And during past Leaps of Faith, we've seen some remarkable things happen as we've prayed together for whatever's on our hearts for the church as a whole. We've seen this church campus

discovered and funded. We've seen a new site start up. We've seen expansive ministries to our neighborhood and our country started up. Just remarkable things, and all catalyzed as we've prayed this prayer during our Leap of Faith.

And many remarkable things have happened for many people as we've, together, believed God that we could really make a difference for many peoples' lives, usually people we didn't yet know.

*Kind of tough to put into a simple summary, but basically my life has meaning now since I started coming to the Vineyard from a non-church background.*

*Our walk with God was on life support nine months ago. We were dead. We had come from a bad church experience and were hurt, bruised, and not at all sure that God loved us. We heard messages of God's passionate love, the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation and how God wants to personally bless us by speaking to us and through his Holy Spirit. We were blessed to find a small group where our renewed walk with God could be nourished and encouraged. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! God is good.*

*I came to Cambridge estranged from God but have reestablished a relationship and am learning to be dependent on his faithfulness every day. My heart is always full of gratitude for finding Vineyard and finding a loving father waiting for his prodigal daughter to return.*

*My experience of the Vineyard for the last five years has been incredibly life-changing. I wandered in one Sunday after seeing an ad on the T, not knowing anyone here, not believing in God, not having set foot in a church in sixteen years. I never stopped coming back. And everything changed for the better since then.*

*Coming to Boston, I was tired of churches/ Christian culture. I had lived that life too long. I didn't want to go to church again. However, I still felt I needed to hear thoughts outside myself, so I somehow found myself coming late, sitting in the back with my coffee every Sunday at the Vineyard. And I listened to thoughts that resonated within me every Sunday. No Christian-ese, no "exclusive worldviews," but instead a love for one's neighbor. And on a personal level, God always seems to be one step ahead—it's often as if on Sunday the message has been tailored for my current state. Long story short: Vineyard has been a key instrument in God becoming real to me again.*

*I was brought up in a church and did not feel much from that. However in my first times at the Vineyard I have felt a huge rush and warmth that I now know to be the Holy Spirit. I feel opened up to love others and to God.*

Our church is in a major transition right now as Grace and I prepare to move into our next ministry and our church prepares to receive an awesome new senior pastor. This year has been a particularly important year of revisiting our foundational sense of calling and mission that we felt God gave us fifteen years ago, as we got started, and that created the church that could welcome friends like those who comment above.

In this foundational time, one with such promise as we look forward to a new season of consolidating and expanding the many powerful things God has been teaching us, will you pray each day for our church? Pray whatever is on your heart—so long as it's daily! But, if you're at a loss, can I suggest a few things?

**You could pray that God would empower our next senior pastor to, with all of our leaders and congregants, take this church to new heights of power, influence and ministry.**

**You could pray that God would pour out abundance—spiritual (more of the Holy Spirit! More healings of all kinds! More connection with Jesus!), financial (no need to elaborate on this one), relational (deeper friendships! Deeper love for each other and for our church as a whole!) and in all ways—on our church.**

You get the idea. Will you pray each day for our church? Let's see together how God answers those prayers!

**We'll fast in some fashion together.**

*Last year during the Leap of Faith, I learned the value of fasting! I am such a food person. I never wanted to fast, but I did. Now I feel God pulling me closer, meeting me, answering prayers through the fasting and prayer that I have done since that time.*

*I decided to fast from caffeine and found out that I could get up in the morning better. So, although my prayers weren't answered, I've had a wonderful year after decaffeinating myself. Mornings are no longer painful and sleep comes much easier.*

As you pursue these things, you might want to **consider fasting in some way**—a central element of Lent for many people over the centuries. You might have noticed that when people really wanted something from God in the Bible, they almost always fasted.

What does fasting do?

Fasting tells God and our own spirits that we really are desperate for *God* to meet some need or hope that we have. If you participate in this year's Leap of Faith, you're hoping for profound vision for your *life*. That sounds like "fast territory" to me.

Though fasting—in any fashion (and we'll talk about some options in a minute)—is, by definition, *hard*, it's actually meant to be a *joyous opportunity*. Suddenly we're really serious about something with God; we're really expecting him to come through; we aren't just playing around. That can often be exhilarating!

**What are options for fasting?**

Well, first off, fasting often involves abstention from food in some way. Most people find themselves **fasting from one or two particular things**, like caffeine or desserts. However many people are helped by more-aggressive choices. So, for shorter fasts, that can be a total abstention from food. These are

usually called “**water fasts**,” because water is the only thing going into us. For the most part, I don’t recommend these at any length beyond a week’s time, because after that, health problems can ensue. (Clearly God can speak and call you into anything—but I’d just be aware of the risks if you water fast for more than a week, and be in good touch with a doctor. You can also feel free to call our church office for more suggestions about fasting.)

***Also, I do not recommend water fasts if you’ve ever suffered from an eating disorder.*** Those in our midst who’ve suffered from eating disorders historically have a difficult time separating this sort of fasting from the very motivation that drove them to the disorder, and thereby risk serious health problems. There are other great fasts that will do you a lot of good, if you’ve been in this situation, and can I ask that you’d pursue those?

Again, other food-abstention fasts involve imposing some sort of **conditions** on our eating over a period of time. This can involve anything from giving up some beloved food item for a time (again, with desserts or sugar or caffeine being popular favorites) to something more challenging, like the so-called “**Daniel fast**,” which involves abstaining from everything but vegetables.

For longer fasts, I’ve sometimes done a “**one meal a day**” fast. It’s pretty much what it sounds like. The key is to actually eat a *smaller* meal than you normally would at the time, and to make that “it” for the day. If you ever know I’m on a “one meal a day” fast and it looks after awhile as if I haven’t lost an ounce, have a little talk with me.

People often pursue “**juice fasts**.” Again, this would customarily apply to *shorter fasts*, but it’s just like a water fast, except you’re allowed to drink juice, which will keep your blood sugar up and actually allow you to function at near-normal capacity.

*Are there any non-food-related options?*

You bet! Fasting from **television** is a popular choice for folks who aren’t fasting from food. Or **computer games**. Or **catalogues**. Or whatever you’d notice.

These can really involve, under God’s direction, doing without *anything* that feels costly to give up for a season. I’ve heard about fasts from *criticism*!

The point of fasting is that, under God’s direction, we’re feeling desperate for something and we direct that desperation towards God. It’s just hard to truly be desperate for God and what he might do for us when our bellies are full and all our needs are abundantly provided for.

*What does it mean to fast “for” something?*

If you fast, I’d encourage you to let God know, frequently, what it is you’re fasting *for* which, I’d think, would at least tie into the “what do you want Jesus to do for you during this Leap of Faith?” category. So, for instance, during one long fast I realized in, like, Day 3 that I didn’t really have a specific *focus* for my fast, and I asked God. He seemed to tell me that it was a fast primarily on behalf of a close friend of

mine who was really far from God. Not long thereafter, that friend plunged himself into a life of pursuing Jesus for the first time in his life.

*Does fasting help us lose weight (and I know you're asking that on behalf of a friend)?*

Isn't this one of life's colossal bummers? The answer, from all reputable sources, is, "No, not really." There are two problems that keep this from being, for most people, about weight loss. First, once we've fasted (from food) for awhile, our metabolism slows way down (a good thing if we were ever to face famine!). Second, sadly, it seems to be human nature that, whatever weight we lose in fasting, we quickly put back on once we resume our previous diet. One national level leader who's known for his frequent long fasts actually seems to have gotten significantly *more* overweight as the years have rolled on.

Now, the upside of this truism is that we really *can* let God know that we're doing this because we want deeper desperation for and connection with him. This really is about more than body image.

### **We'll do all of this with a small group.**

With many hundreds of examples by this point, I can say emphatically that Leaps of Faith deliver the goods vastly more powerfully when you do this with a group of other people also doing this. There's really no debating this. If you're in one of our small groups, each week you'll have ways to encourage each other in the Leap of Faith and to experience it more deeply. If you're not, can I encourage you to— if you're reading this in a church service—go immediately to the information kiosk in the front lobby, get a list of small groups, and commit to visiting one near you this week? Even if you only go to the group during the Leap of Faith, your hope of truly finding a life + 20% will go up dramatically with this one step.

### **A Word from Evadne:**

#### ***An interactive way to pray for our church***

During this Leap of Faith, the teens in our youth group invite you to visit the **Sanctuary organ loft** to pray for our church during this time of transition. Inspired by *1 Corinthians 12*, the **teens have designed and set-up interactive prayer stations to guide you in praying for our church body and all of its unique parts**. Our hope is that God would use this prayer space to unify our church as one body during this Leap of Faith season.

We welcome you to prayerfully walk through the space alone or with friends and family. You are free to engage with as many or as few of the prayer stations as you desire and visit as often as you'd like. All ages are welcome!

The space will be open *starting Sunday, February 24<sup>th</sup>* and will be available to the *congregation every Sunday before and after services during the Leap of Faith*. (The prayer stations may change during the course of the Leap of Faith.) To regulate traffic flow, we invite you to access the space by walking *up the left stairwell and down the right stairwell*. There will be signs to guide you.

Whether you consider yourself a prayer warrior or an amateur, our hope is that through this space you'll find prayer to be accessible, powerful, and fun! We look forward praying with you this Leap of Faith season!

Updates on the prayer station will be communicated through the Announce email list. Questions should be directed to Evadne at [evadne@bostonvineyard.org](mailto:evadne@bostonvineyard.org). Children of all ages are welcome and encouraged to participate, but should always be accompanied by an adult. We apologize that the space is not handicap accessible-- there were limited space options available to us.

**There it is: this year's Leap of Faith!**

I'll be praying for you that this will be a very, very encouraging time of connection with God, connection with others in our church, and rock-solid growth in God and life. I'm praying that the transformative habits we'll be exploring together set you up for a profoundly functional, lifelong experience of connection to God and to the plan God has for you. Can't wait to hear how it goes for you.