Paul’s hope that they will “bear fruit in every good work.” Paul is creating a ministry for the future, based on the conviction that decisions should be made *today*, with an eye toward people’s needs *tomorrow*.

Paul wants us to be “filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (v. 9). Paul wrote to the followers of Christ in Colossae, a city on a major roadway in Asia Minor, a part of the Roman Empire that now lies in modern Turkey. The Colossians knew both Greek and Roman philosophy. They probably experienced cultural pressure from Jewish mysticism and the Hellenistic mystery cults known as “neo-Pythagoreanism.” There were a lot of schools of thought in Colossae. The people felt pulled in many different directions, just as we are pulled today by a variety of issues. To people embroiled in fierce debates, Paul prays that they may “be filled with the knowledge of God’s will.” This is not philosophical knowledge, but *practical* knowledge. This wisdom is “the ability to choose right conduct,” says New Testament scholar Andrew Lincoln; “here in Colossians the wisdom and insight produced by the Spirit have an explicitly ethical dimension.”

Paul does not want us simply to talk a good game. He wants us to show up and do what is right. That means we honor our commitments, care for our children, seek the welfare of our neighbors in the wider community, try to see the image of God in people who have different points of view, and work together for the common good. That is the kind of ministry that will make for a better future. Ministry based on doing what is right and grounded in wisdom has an ethical dimension. This is where we begin.

At the same time, we are challenged to “bear fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:10). This means following Paul’s guidance to the Colossians in showing each other “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.” It means bearing with one another, forgiving each other, and most of all practicing love, “which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:12-14).

In *The Ministry for the Future,* a friend of Frank May exhibits these qualities*.* As Frank is dying, she visits him. “She realized that she believed, as much as she believed anything, that when someone was dying, it wasn’t right that they be left alone, stuck in a bed, attended only sporadically by nurses and doctors. That wasn’t proper; it wasn’t human; it should never happen.” And so, this friend turned Frank’s room into her office. She stayed with him, doing her work, playing jazz on a radio, and talking to Frank, day after day after day. That is ministry, a ministry for the future; actions marked by compassion, kindness, patience, and love.

Such actions are not merely individual efforts. They should extend to community conduct, becoming part of the fabric of congregational life, so that the church becomes what Paul calls “the body of Christ,” the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today (1 Corinthians 12:27). The 16th-century mystic Teresa of Avila wrote:

*Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours,*

*Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,*

*Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,*

*Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

*Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

*Christ has no body now but yours.*

This is “ministry for the future” type thinking: knowing that what you do today matters for tomorrow. This is the same kind of thinking that biodegradable cleaning products manufacturer Seventh Generation embodies. On the company website, CEO Joey Bergstein explains:

“Seventh Generation is far more than just a name. It embodies the soul and spirt of who we are, what we strive to be, and what sets us apart.…Before we were Seventh Generation, we humbly began as Niche Marketing, opening our doors in Burlington, Vermont in 1988. When Niche acquired a mail-order catalog business that specialized in energy-, water-, and resource-saving products, an employee suggested the perfect name to guide this new endeavor: Seventh Generation. The name is based on an ancient Iroquois philosophy which instructs that ‘in our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.’ We knew it was a big name to live up to, but even from the very beginning, we were thinking big about how we could prove that business can be a force for good in the world and help protect the health of future generations.”

A vision to last seven generations. Think about that for a minute. If a generation is 20-25 years, that means the founders of our congregations made decisions 150 years ago (in 1872) with a view to how it would affect us today! And we should be making decisions that will affect our community seven generations from now (in 2172).

What is Federated Church’s vision for the future? Where do we begin? Where do we go from here? I submit that we can do no better than to follow the advice Paul gave the Colossian church. We must be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, leading lives worthy of the Lord, and bearing good fruit (1:9-10). We are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...to bear with one another…to forgive each other…to love one another…to let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts…and to be thankful (3:12-17). This is a ministry for the future that promises hope for all our tomorrows.

Thomas Aquinas defined hope as “the expectation of a good future that is difficult but possible.” Planning for the future is hard work. Envisioning a ministry that will last 150 years feels impossible. Holding onto hope in a world being torn apart is a daunting task. Jesus never said that discipleship would be easy. He did say it would be possible because the Holy Spirit would empower us (Acts 1:8). Jesus said we could do this work because he would be with us, always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20). We can have the expectation of a good future, as Paul says, because of the hope laid up for us in heaven (Colossians 1:5).

Charles Kettering, head of research for General Motors from 1920 to 1947, was responsible for numerous innovations that revolutionized the automotive industry. He personally held 186 patents. Even after leaving that position, he continued actively inventing, into his 80s. One of his much-younger assistants once asked Kettering why he talked so much about the future. “Why?” he replied. “I am interested in the future because I have to spend the rest of my life in it.” This is the kind of forward-thinking commitment that Paul envisioned for the church: a community in which people are rescued by God from the power of darkness and transferred “into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (vv. 13-14). That is a Christian community that future generations are going to need, so we should start building a “Ministry for the Future” now.

Prayer: Holy God, we thank you for the great gift of this church community and all the people touched by your grace here. Thank you for this church, built through the sacrifices of our ancestors in faith. May our worship be genuine and sincere; may the ministries that flow out of this place build people up in the name of Jesus Christ. Keep us from pure self-serving behavior and stir us to serve people who are most in need of your mercy; and despite all our efforts, may we never forget that we are saved by your grace alone. We ask your blessings upon us, that we may continue to dream dreams, sing new songs, and be a sign of your living presence in the world. We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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**Where Do We Go from Here?**

Sunday, July 10, 2022 [Colossians 1:1-14](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Colossians+1%3a1-14&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“It was getting hotter.” That is what Frank May noticed at sunrise, as he looked out the window of his apartment in India. He felt like he was in a sauna. “He was thirsty and the jug by his bedside was empty. All over town the stressed hum of window-box air conditioner fans buzzed like giant mosquitoes.…Wails of dismay cut the air, coming from the rooftop across the street.” The next day, the temperature rose to 107 and the humidity to 60 percent. People were dying. Frank walked to the lake and found a desperate scene. “There were many, many people in the lake, heads dotted the surface everywhere around the shores.…It just felt better.…They could sit on the shallowest part of the lake bottom, heads out of water, and try to endure.” Frank shut his eyes, fully immersed in the shallows. The night dragged on, feeling like years, and in the morning, he stirred and gradually he came up from the water. “Balancing his head carefully on his spine, he surveyed the scene. Everyone was dead.”

This gruesome scene is from the first chapter in Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *The Ministry for the Future*. In the story, Frank May is an aid worker, part of a group created to “advocate for the world’s future generations of citizens” and defend “all living creatures present and future.” The ministry’s staff includes lawyers, economists, and ecologists. It contains experts in earth, ocean, and atmospheric sciences. It employs an expert in artificial intelligence, as well as disaster and refugee specialists.

Now, let me come clean: I have not read this book. I read an article about the book. But I am intrigued by the notion of a ministry for the future. We typically make decisions based on our present needs. But what if we thought about the needs of future generations? What if we concerned ourselves with all living creatures, present and future? The critical shift is to advocate not for ourselves, but for future generations.

 In the apostle Paul’s prayer for the Colossian Christians, he asks that they “may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will” so that they “may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:9-10). Paul does not long for “the good old days.” He is not fixated on the past. He does not ruminate on what happened last week or last month or last year. Instead, he looks to the future, praying that the followers of Christ in Colossae will be equipped to face the challenges that lie ahead. Being filled “with the knowledge of God’s will” and leading “lives worthy of the Lord,” it is