All of the ten churches that have participated in the Ezra 3 Project have had new encounters with those Scott refers to as "anonymous people". Most of those ten churches have designed successful projects that have put them in partnership with organizations serving the anonymous among us. We recently met with our consultants who help us evaluate and track data on whether Ezra 3 is doing what we hoped it would. The most recent data shows that participating congregations measurably increased their belief in the church's vision, their belief that the church can accomplish that vision, and most importantly, they feel more connected to their communities than before participating in Ezra 3. Churches that felt stagnant now feel inspired.

Northwood is at an ideal time to participate in this final cohort of the Ezra 3 Project. You've completed your mission study and you're preparing for a new pastor - one that will likely be called part way through this cohort year. The churches who participated last year, during a season of pastoral transition, all named the Ezra 3 Project in their MPD - it helped them discern a vision and what type of leader they would need. The churches who participated with a new pastor found it to be a helpful way to discern a vision together and give direction to their new ministry together.

The purpose of the Ezra 3 Project is to guide congregations to align their building use with their missional identity in a way that serves their neighbors. We do this by using curriculum and meeting in a cohort with other participating churches. This is a commitment and it does take time, particularly for the design team. You would choose at least 3 people (up to 5) who would do the majority of the work while keeping the congregation informed. This team would be made up of your pastor (Scott, then the newly called pastor), a currently serving elder, and 1-2 members or regular attenders. The curriculum and cohort gatherings walk the design team through a process of clarifying your identity, listening to neighbors (those anonymous people in your neighborhood), then coming up with a way that you might use your building or property in a way that aligns those two things.

Reardan Presbyterian clarified that they are called to be hospitable and listened to the community's named need for after school care. They started an after school program where they encounter Jesus by serving the children in their community in need of safe after school care. They partner with the school district and have received grants beyond the seed grant we provided in order to hire a director who runs this program.

Lidgerwood clarified that their core purpose and origin story call them to serve children in the neighborhood, even though they don't have children in their congregation. They went from a loose partnership with the nonprofit "If you Could Save Just One" to an established partnership where the nonprofit is renting unused Sunday School space while they apply for grant funding to build a community center on a parcel of Lidgerwood's property. Their congregation is encountering Jesus by building relationships with at-risk youth in their neighborhood through this partnership.

The Spirit Lake's design team encountered the anonymous people in their community by joining a newly formed community coalition whose purpose was to bring together and improve the town

of Spirit Lake. The community coalition toured the church building and asked if they would be willing to host various arts gatherings - theater, concerts, etc because there was no other space in the community for that. The church said yes and they now encounter Jesus through people in the community coming into their building to enjoy the arts - people who otherwise might never come into their building.

Post Falls Presbyterian sensed that their unused Sunday School and Youth group space should still somehow be used for youth or children. Through the Ezra 3 Process of listening to their community they were put in touch with an organization that provides parenting classes and extra support for parents in need. This organization is excited for the partnership with the church and they are in the process of figuring out leases. The congregation is excited to encounter Jesus through building relationships with those the nonprofit serves (they don't want to strictly be landlords).

These are just a few examples of how participating churches have found new vision and opportunities to encounter those anonymous people outside the congregation. The Lilly Endowment (who funds this project) recently announced a new grant opportunity called "Serving Neighbors" that is based on what they've learned through this Thriving Congregation Grant - that churches who partner with nonprofits to meet the needs of the community thrive in ways they can't when they try to do everything on their own. That is what we have learned through our project and I hope you all will consider participating in this final cohort. I will be available to answer any questions you have following worship. May the Spirit guide you all as you discern whether you are called to participate in the Ezra 3 Project.