

THE Initiative

Walking in Unity with Jesus and His Followers

A Handbook of Guiding Principles for Committed Members

Welcome to The Initiative!

You have received this handbook because you signed a commitment to be part of *The Initiative*, or you have expressed a deep affinity for what our core principles are. Thank you for your dedication to, and your passion for unity and missional ecumenism around our One God!

We of the Leadership Council of *The Initiative* welcome you with open arms as together we work to spread the vision and message of Jesus Christ in John 17:21 – *“Father, may they all be one, just as you are in me, and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.”* (NIV)

In this booklet you will find a summary of the Guiding Principles of *The Initiative*. They are the foundation of who we are, and what we believe, since we formally began in 2017 as a way to continue John Armstrong’s two decades of loving labor for missional ecumenism and radical friendship. May the Spirit inspire and encourage you in our mutual mission for unity!

A Brief History of The Initiative

In the summer of 2016, the governing board of ACT3 Ministries faced an important decision. Dr. John Armstrong, the man who had established ACT3 many years earlier to help promote his passion and vision of missional ecumenism, was planning to retire in three years and the board needed to discern what the future of his ACT3 work was going to look like.

Over the course of his ministry, John had developed a unique calling as an Evangelical pastor and leader to help Christians from various traditions build relationships across divisions, so that followers of Christ would embody the love & oneness that Jesus prayed for in Gospel of John 17:21-23. John had a truly unique and charismatic way of living out that calling, adding to the challenge of figuring out what was next for the ministry.

When the ACT3 board met at the Green Lake Conference Center in Wisconsin in June 2016, the first consideration was to simply end the group in 2019 and move on. But as the group prayed and talked, some questions emerged which seemed to prompt a surprising move of the Holy Spirit. Was there a certain way that John lived out missional unity that other Christians could emulate? What were some of the specific things that John practiced as a part of that way? And

could a community of people come together and be formed around that way and those practices?

The board spent the next year trying to identify and articulate those things, and at the summer 2017 meeting finalized what became the covenant of The Initiative (the name is derived from its opening words). The next step was to invite folks who might be interested in being a part of the community to come together and engage with the covenant, while praying, worshiping, studying Scripture and building friendships together.

In the summer of 2018, 58 folks came together for the first Green Lake gathering of The Initiative. The following summer of 2019, another group again gathered at Green Lake for a time of prayer, worship, Scripture and building friendships. At the end of that gathering, John was honored and celebrated into his retirement, and 42 people signed the covenant statement becoming members of The Initiative. At the same time, the board of ACT3 transitioned to become the Leadership Council of The Initiative, a group tasked with giving ongoing guidance and oversight to the community and ministry of The Initiative.

Unfortunately, the pandemic hit shortly afterward (spring of 2020) and The Initiative adapted to being an entirely online community, focused on encouraging its members and friends to live out the practices and way of unity in the “new normal” of social distancing. After the pandemic, as the world and The Initiative began to return to in-person gatherings, we have continued to learn, adapt and grow in the face of many challenges. In the spring of 2021, the Council discerned that the community needed more intentional leadership and asked Scott Brill to become Executive Director.

Over the past 3 years, we have continued to gather in both regional and national contexts. And in 2024 we have begun the process of forming chapters of The Initiative in various places around the United States.

Guiding Vision of The Initiative

Our Covenant

We covenant together to live in an intentional initiative, practicing deep and growing friendship with God and others, that the love of Jesus might exceed all divisions.

Our Way

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

Walking together in the Way of Jesus (Acts 9:2) draws us into unity (John 17:21). We call this missional ecumenism. Led by the Holy Spirit, we will each take the initiative:

- to **pray daily** for a radical increase of love for the whole body of Christ;
- to **share our lives** with followers of Jesus from traditions other than our own; and
- to **work proactively** for greater missional unity in Christ’s Church.

We commit to this working, praying and sharing by:

- organizing or promoting regular engagement with others to demonstrate the love of Jesus and to pursue deeper unity. This commitment includes gatherings in many different contexts, both one-on-one and in groups.
- attending a gathering of the Initiative at least once each year unless hindered by health, family commitments, or other important reasons.
- financially supporting The Initiative and the wider work of missional ecumenism.
- inviting others to work with us in The Initiative as members or friends.

Guiding Principles of the Community

Statement of Action

The Initiative holds to no specific statement of faith or creed. All followers of Jesus the Messiah may sign a covenant of membership in this intentional community. We understand membership to be a commitment of personal action. It is a holy covenant to act and work in the Spirit for greater unity and radical friendship among all our brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. From our oneness with Jesus, and with one another, we will labor for deeper understanding and relationships of love with all people, both those of different faith traditions and those with no faith.

Joining The Initiative means that you:

- are saddened by the historic and ongoing disunity of our Christian churches
- are convicted by the words of Jesus in John 17:21: *“Father, may they be one as we are one”*
- have a desire to join other like-minded believers in working and praying for a radical new vision of oneness in the church and in the world, and
- are committed to taking specific, personal action(s) to bring about unity in the world in which you live.

Membership

All mature, committed, adult men and women of faith in Christ are invited to join The Initiative as covenant members. Whenever the The Initiative gathers – in national, regional, or local chapter settings – there will be an opportunity for folks to review and sign the covenant and the way of our community.

The Three Mandates

Members of The Initiative commit themselves to three specific actions to allow the breath of the Spirit of The Initiative to move more fully in the world through their efforts. These three mandates are:

1. to pray daily for a radical increase of love in the whole body of Christ;
2. to work proactively for missional ecumenism in one’s local community;
3. to share one’s life with others as possible, especially with followers of Jesus from traditions other than our own.

Dogmatic Position

Although The Initiative council accepts as foundational the essential beliefs of the Christian faith as stated in the Apostles’ Creed, we do not require assent to

an explicit doctrinal statement in order to become a member of The Initiative. The underlying theology of The Initiative is based on the following scriptural wisdom:

- the overwhelming love of God our Creator,
- the redeeming grace and mercy of Jesus Christ,
- the transforming power and passion of the Holy Spirit,
- the community of believers (the church) gathered around Jesus Christ,
- the consistent call to oneness and unity expressed by Jesus,
- the core apostolic beliefs of the ancient church as expressed in the New Testament.

The Initiative Is Not a Church

Belonging to The Initiative does not take the place of membership in a local church community. The Initiative strongly encourages all its members to worship regularly and to fellowship with a local body of believers. Although following the way of The Initiative will mean a commitment of time and resources, it is not intended to replace someone's local church community.

“Missional-Ecumenism”

The heart and soul of the ministry of both John Armstrong and The Initiative is what is best termed missional ecumenism. This term encapsulates the style of unity in the mission of Jesus practiced by The Initiative. We believe it captures two theological insights:

1. that God is a unity in **himself** (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and that as unity in relationship, he is a sending God; and
2. that God's revealed desire is that **we** be one with him (i.e. live in unity) in this mission process (sending and being sent); hence the term missional ecumenism.

“Relational Ecumenism”

Relational ecumenism refers to the style of ecumenism practiced by The Initiative—a style marked by simple hospitality, humble learning, and ongoing personal conversion. This commitment to radical friendship for the sake of unity is the explicit strategy and mission of our community members. We will work with and in the Spirit to find friendship and delight in one another's gifts and dignity while we pray and work for the whole visible church to be transformed by ongoing conversion and deep growth in community and mission.

The Leadership Council

A Leadership Council oversees discernment and leadership decisions for the ongoing direction and operation of The Initiative. This Council, composed of eight to ten members of the community, meets at least quarterly over Zoom and once in person annually for purposes of prayer, discernment, assessment, and decision making. The Council is legally responsible for the structure and bylaws of The Initiative, which are required for formal incorporation purposes. More information regarding the structuring of the Leadership Council (operating procedures, size, term limits, officers, etc.) are detailed in the By-Laws and Constitution of The Initiative (last revised in late 2020).

Yearly Gathering

“See how they love one another” [Tertullian]

Because concretely living out our relational oneness is a core principle of The Initiative, all members (unless hindered by health, family commitments, or other important reasons) are asked to meet at least once each year with others from The Initiative community. These gatherings will be held in a variety of settings – either nationally, regionally or in a local chapter – with different programs. These gatherings will be occasions to experience the love of the Lord and the oneness envisioned in Acts 2:42-47, to experience friendship across difference and division, and to share, learn, and grow in deeper understanding of missional ecumenism.

Financial Support

Joining The Initiative does not require a membership fee or a financial pledge. Since the community of The Initiative must operate both boldly and effectively in its work of missional ecumenism, we encourage our members to be good stewards of the community in all ways. Members are asked to prayerfully consider committing to regular ongoing financial support for its work. We understand that members will come from different professional and economic backgrounds and so we leave it to each member to discern their financial generosity. We will not prefer the rich or give favor to class or gender. Rather, as stewards of this vision we will give of our time and finances to the best of our ability and means. This basic understanding will always remain a core principle of The Initiative.

Appendix A

The Apostles' Creed

The most basic creed of the Christian church is the Apostles' Creed. Although The Initiative makes a statement of action, not a statement of faith, we intentionally choose the Apostles' Creed as a guiding set of ancient theological beliefs that reflect our general understanding of the historical foundation of our faith.

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the living and the
dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,*
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.*

** The word catholic here is defined as "pertaining to the whole Christian body or church." Thus in the creed this word does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but rather to the universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ, in all times and all places (see [http://dictionary reference.com./browse/catholic](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/catholic)).*

Appendix B

Suggestions for Living Out the Mandates of The Initiative

The list below contains some practical ideas about how members of The Initiative community might put our covenant, way and guiding principles into practice. These are by no means exclusive. We encourage you to be creative and flexible in your efforts toward unity on the local level. You will have opportunities to share stories of your experiences throughout the year and especially at our regular gatherings.

- Practice relational ecumenism by inviting others out for a lunch or to your home for a meal to get to know them, share stories, and build fellowship toward the purpose of increasing unity with those whose stories and experiences are different from yours.
- Form a local group of friends, neighbors, and clergy of all ages to get to know one another better, evaluate the level of local ecumenism, arrange prayer services, and pave the way for our continual work toward unity.
- Organize social/spiritual gatherings (such as fellowship meals, book studies) to which you can invite other Christians.
- Invite others to church suppers, workshops, Bible studies, book-club gatherings as an expression of Christian sharing and unity.
- Plan a tour of area churches with commentary and sharing at each site about devotional particularities, worship space, style, etc.
- Organize or take part in ecumenical or interfaith events sponsored by other churches, synagogues, or places of worship.
- Share occasionally in the actual worship or prayer rituals of other Christian faith communities, respecting the discipline of one's own church as well as that of the host church in regard to issues such as Holy Communion, baptism, etc.
- Help sponsor joint studies, committees, or service projects to confront local issues in your community, such as housing, hunger, violence, racism, economic justice, and relationships with neighbors of other faith traditions and of no faith tradition, etc.
- Encourage local church groups to include Christian unity concerns in their annual programs and projects.
- Pray for one another! Pray weekly in one's own church setting, and daily in private, for the unity of the church and for an end to all forms of divisiveness. Attend a liturgy during the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25).

Appendix C

Recommended Reading Resources:

Armstrong, John A. *The Unity Factor – One Lord, One Church, One Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2011.

- *Costly Love*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2017.
- *Tear Down These Walls*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021.

Beckwith, Bp. Mark. *Seeing the Unseen: Beyond Prejudices, Paradigms & Party Lines*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2022.

Bondi, Roberta C. *To Love as God Loves – Conversations with the Early Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together – The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1954.

Cleveland, Christena. *Disunity in Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

Katongole, Emmanuel and Rice, Chris. *Reconciling All Things – A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008.

Leithart, Peter J. *The End of Protestantism – Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Open Secret – An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Petersen Finch, Karen. *Grassroots Ecumenism*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2022.

Ryan, Fr. Thomas. *Christian Unity – How You Can Make a Difference*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015.

Thurman, Howard. *The Inward Journey*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1961.

Ware, Metropolitan Kalistos. *The Orthodox Way*. Yonkers, NY: SVS Press, 1979.

Wessman, Fr. Aaron. *The Church's Mission in a Polarized World*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2023.

Recommended DVDs:

One – Following Jesus' Call for Unity (Vision Video, www.visionvideo.com)

This Changed Everything – 500 Years of the Reformation (2 disc set) (Vision Video)

Will Faith Do Us Part? An Inside Look at Interchurch Marriage (Vision Video)

PRAYER FOR UNITY

[The leaders who organized the 500th Anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses at Wittenberg in 2017, also crafted this prayer. We encourage you to use this prayer perhaps daily as part of your commitment to The Initiative.]

Lord Jesus Christ,

You prayed:

"May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.

May they be one, so that the world might believe."

We pray that the body of Christ might be united in you,

the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Break down what stands between us.

Strengthen what unites us.

Give victory over what separates us.

Fill us with the power of your Spirit,

that we might seek ways

to unite with each other.

Bring about the day

when we can praise you together,

in the fellowship of all who believe.

Amen.

Appendix D

2023-2024 Leadership Council

Scott Brill (Executive Director, Worcester MA)

Alexei Laushkin (Co-Chair, Washington DC)

Rev. Robert Miller (Co-Chair, Chicago IL)

Tom Masters (Oakbrook Terrace IL)

Rev. Dr. Craig Higgins (Rye NY)

Dr. Elizabeth Woodard (Methuen MA)

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