

LOVE FOCUS INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION BELIEVES THAT ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE ARE CALLED TO JOIN IN JESUS'S GREAT COMMISSION: ANYWHERE AND ANYTIME. WE SEEK TO BRING COURAGE, FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE TO PEOPLE WITH A VARIETY OF DAILY LIFE ISSUES. AS AN ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES WITH A MISSION, WE WANT TO HELP AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE BE SET FREE TO PUT THIS CALL INTO ACTION – WHETHER THAT MEANS GOING OVERSEAS OR AT HOME.



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Love Focus International Association operates as a non-profit Christian Association of Churches organized within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Service code. A religious body organized for, and dedicated to, carrying out the principles of a faith according to the requirements governing the creation of institutions of faith. EIN: 45-3652944.



Association Handbook 2023-26



A CALL TO ACTION

WELCOME TO OUR ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side... Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

John 20:19–22

As Christian people we are a sent people. The people Jesus Christ sent out to preach were ordinary men, huddled together. But their fear was no obstacle to Jesus’ purposes for them. He gives them his peace, he shares his Spirit with them and sends them.



And the manner of his sending of them is special: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” These first Christians are sent just as the Father had sent the Son, and in the power of his Holy Spirit. As Christian people today we too are a sent people: caught up together in the mission purposes of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Love Focus International Association reflects its broad-based vision to embrace other Christian churches, clergy & lay Christians as an association of churches, all working together to meet the spiritual, social and physical needs of their community.

My hope and prayer is that as a member of the LFIA community you will feel supported and valued

in whatever your particular call may be: whether that be to your next-door neighbor or to your neighbors on the other side of the world. And I hope this Association handbook will help resource you to live your life of service, knowing that you do not do so alone. You do so with brothers and sisters the whole world over. With them you too are sent, just as Jesus was: by the Father, in the power of the Spirit, and for the name of God to be glorified.

So may our God bless you and make you channel of blessing to people in need anywhere and anytime.

With my love in Christ Service.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Theo Nkwopara".

Rev. Theo Nkwopara *President/
Presiding Spiritual Leader
Love Focus International Association*

LOVE FOCUS INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION STORY



Introduction

1. As Christians we must realize that we are called to a significant role to not only lead individuals to Christ and to guide their spiritual formation but also to transform culture and society, even in our Dark Age. You are not merely a pawn in a cosmic chess game between God and Satan. You can make choices to make a positive impact to the lives of people in need. You can make choices to respond to God's call for significant service. As Ephesians 2:10 says, you are God's masterpiece, his work of art, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for [you] to do" (NIV). You were created by God to make a significant difference in this world—whether in the home, in politics, in education, in business, in the arts, in law, in the media. It may not be prominent. Your impact may never be publicized, but just as surely as those faithful, humble monks walked with God and quietly invaded and changed their world, you can make a lasting difference in your world.

LIKE MOTIVATION OF THE MONKS

What was it that motivated these scholars—many of them from noble, wealthy families—who by nature enjoyed the reclusive life of study and prayer, to abandon the security and the predictable schedule of the large, well-established monasteries of their homeland and leave it all to become missionaries to strange lands and pagan people?

Love For Christ

The foremost motivation, especially for the early monks, was simply their love for Christ.

People of faith, including William Wilberforce and John Newton, worked together to abolish the slave trade; they fought for the rights of oppressed people at home and they launched out on dangerous seas to share Jesus with the world. So began the mission movement we know and love today.

Love Focus International Association (LFIA) began as a vision as the name of the organization implies, love is the focus of Love Focus International Association (LFIA). Our mission is to bring courage, faith, hope and love to people with a variety of daily life issues. Our Christian love comes from the Holy Spirit according to (Galatians 5:22). The Bible speaks about it as an action and attitude, not just an emotion. Love is a by-product of our new life in Christ according to (Romans 5:5 and 1 Corinthians 13). Christians have no excuse for not loving, because love is a decision to act in the best interests of others.

Our identity has always been that of an association of Christian Churches.

VISION

This Association is an international, intercultural, interracial association of churches and fellowships which seeks to realize Christian unity in local, national, and world relations. The Association seeks fellowship, mutual support, and common ministries that reflect the unity of all who see themselves within the Christian tradition.

RELATIONSHIPS

Love Focus International Association has at heart an institutional relationship with Christian churches, clergy & lay Christians, all working together to meet the spiritual, social and physical needs of their community. Through the Association local churches, gatherings and fellowships find it possible to find and develop connection with the wider church through this movement. In mutual encouragement and resourcing through the Association, local churches are strengthened.

Joining the Association

All association church members make the following affirmation:

We affirmed that we share common religious doctrines, principles, disciplines, or practices with Christian Evangelical theology with Anabaptist distinctives, and its mission is to help the member churches fulfil the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus declared, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Matthew 22:37-39.

Some members of the community will express that commitment through service as mission partners, or as mission associates or local partners or short-termers (LFIA's) people in mission activities). It is membership of the association that primarily marks us out as being part of the Christian Church Evangelical movement.

Evangelistic outreach remains our calling whether it is with people in far off lands or among our closest neighbors.

WHO ARE WE? OUR COMMUNITY VISION AND IDENTITY

What do we want to see?

We want to see all God's people engaged in God's work, bringing challenge, change, hope and freedom to people anywhere and anytime.

As we join in God's work, through Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit we see that:

- The love of Christ **renews** people and places
- Pioneering leaders **forge new paths** of transformation
- People with a variety of daily life needs **flourish**
- The **healing of hurts** begins

As association members we work and pray together to see this vision fulfilled.

What does this vision look like in practice?

We are a community of people set free to follow God's call. We believe that all of God's people are called to join in God's work, whether that means going overseas or at home, and we want to help set other people free to put their call into action.

As an association, it is God's mission that is our passion. Our common commitment is:

- To **participate** in the great commission
- To **learn** from the great commission
- To **pray** for more laborers

This may be made possible in many ways: in local groups, through forums with particular emphases, through social media and publications, through advocacy and campaigns. Some of these will be organized centrally via LFIA staff, but overall the community is centrally resourced rather than centrally led. Each association member is encouraged to work out a particular expression of their calling, singly or with others, wherever God may have called them to be.

Like all associations we need leadership, to keep us true to our calling and our vision. And it is important that our leadership is committed to listening to the whole association. Our executive leader, who in turn is held accountable by Love Focus International Association trustees (who are association members) that holds the leadership accountable. The association also has a Regional Representative who is appointed by the trustees at the annual convention pursuant to Love Focus International Association Constitution and Bylaws.



Our core values

- **Innovating:** we try new things, ask questions, cross boundaries
- **Evangelistic:** we share Jesus in word and action
- **Relational:** we get alongside people, becoming a genuine part of the communities where we find ourselves
- **Faithful:** where others have left or given up, we remain committed for the long-haul

As an association of Christian Churches, and in the fulfillment of our vision, as we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto every good works which God has ordained that we should work in them. We commit ourselves to live by these values.

What do we do?

Our community calling

Our call is to see people set free to play their part in God's vineyard.

God calls people, both individually and together, to engage in his work in the world. Our focus is to see both individual disciples and communities of disciples set free to play their part in this association. A third priority expresses our desire as an association of churches to be as effective as we can be in delivering the first two, putting our call into action.

Thus as a community we will work to set people free to play their part in God's vine yard by:

- **Training** disciples for the work
- **Partnering** with churches
- **Maximizing** our effectiveness in delivery of services

“Love Focus International Association understands – that we are all called to be witnesses to the good news, and that the way we are called to witness may be different from the way many others may expect – and celebrates, encourages and trains people to pursue these God-given vocations.”

In all of the above we will seek to be faithful to the foundational

principles of the association as developed by the leadership) and expressed below:

- Follow God's lead
- Put prayer first, money second
- Success depends on the quality of the people answering the call of God
- Begin humbly and on a small scale
- Rely on the Spirit of God

Stewardship and giving

Throughout scripture we see constant themes of how those who consider themselves people of God and followers of Christ need to take very seriously the stewardship of the resources which have been entrusted to them.

As part of this we have a hope, and expectation, that all association members take their giving seriously and prayerfully, full of gratitude for all they have been given themselves.

We would also encourage all association members to consider making gifts to Love Focus International Association as part of this commitment. Such gifts to Love Focus International Association will enable us all to engage with innovative mission initiatives in many years to come.

“Being part of this Association of Churches has been vital, in both senses of the word. In the times when things haven't worked the way I expected, it has reminded me to start simply, to wait and to take small but significant steps with God. It has challenged me to wrap everything I do in prayer – in simple conversation with God. Reflecting on the many challenges of organization – the successes and the struggles – I've learned that risk is something to be embraced, that stepping out into what feel like scary places with God is actually life giving and wonderful. But, it has also taught me that I can't do these things alone, I need others, I need community.”

Rev. Theo Nkwopara– President/ Presiding Spiritual Leader

REFLECTIONS ON GLOBAL MISSION

Shifting our perspective
and getting past our
cultural glasses.



Mission takes many forms and is something for all Christians to be involved in. It is needed in every country, not just materially poor ones. However, I have often seen mission and development become confused. There is no reason that the two can't come together sometimes, but I have at times witnessed an unhealthy connection between them. Please allow me to share this reflection, as I believe it does affect us all as we support international mission work.

When we come from a materially wealthy country and visit a less materially wealthy country, I believe we often see the relative poverty, missing the riches that also abound. I suspect it may be the same vice-versa: someone coming from a materially poor country may arrive in the average western country seeing only the riches and miss the relative poverty. Our cultural glasses will always affect how we see and interpret situations.

Starting slowly

When I went to the United States in 1984, all I knew was that I would be working with churches I was content to go, see what was already happening and join in. I soon realized not much was happening for Sunday School at the organization where I worked. I gradually became involved in different things as the Holy Spirit guides me, but a lot of events have occurred over the years to where we are now.

At this time, I understood things more fully than I would. I am so grateful for this chance to get involved slowly – it gave me much needed time to think and pray about the right way forward.

I was particularly grateful for this time as it meant I was able to help with different churches, which opened my eyes and increased my awareness of the context. Even though I had spent time in ministry, in Nigeria it was in a very different time and location.

I was encouraged by these words from our Lord Jesus Christ "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you".

Often people from a different culture assessing what is needed bring something which may be good.



Witnessing change from within

I became increasingly excited as I saw the work of Love Focus International Association and the positive impact it's having on people that come in contact with the organization. Change was slow, but I believe it was meaningful and would have a long-lasting impact on communities LFIA provided services.

The first step, which went on for years, was foundational Bible studies. The studies included themes such as who we were created to be, how the church is to be salt and light to the community and how to see resources which are available even where there is a high material poverty rate.

As I hear about people who were helped by LFIA, the more testimonies I hear, the more excited I became. Real transformation was coming to communities we were engaged in.

Parable of the Talents Strategy

QUESTION: What does the parable of the talents mean?

ANSWER:

While on earth, Jesus Christ used parables in explaining about the Kingdom of God to the people. These parables usually went unexplained except to His disciples or a select few. Among all his parables, one stands out, the parable of the talents. It still affects economics activity today!

According to the following parable, in this case talents have to do with money received.

Parable of the Talents – Matthew 25:14-30

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Parable of the Talents – Meaning

The master gave a considerable amount of money to each servant, in keeping with the servant's abilities. The first two servants were faithful to care for their master's money. They were rewarded accordingly. The third servant lacked faith and the master saw this as worthlessness. He lost what he had and was punished. From the passage above, we conclude that God gives talents to every Christian. These talents vary from person to person. However, we have to give account of these gifts to their owner.

Since Jesus was referring to the Kingdom of God in the parable, we learn that our lives are not ours to live according to our wishes. We owe our lives and wealth to God! As Christians, we are waiting for the return of Jesus Christ to earth. We are like those stewards, faithfully using our Master's assets while waiting for His return.

The Talents Parable: Enduring Economic and Investment Principles

The Parable of the Talents is one of the most recognizable and commonly quoted parables in finance. It wisely declares that "if you are faithful with a few things, you will be faithful with many." Less commonly understood is how the parable illustrates investment principles that are useful today.

From the perspective of a financial professional or theologian, the economic context and investment principles in the parables should be obvious. However, financial analysis and biblical exegesis rarely if ever meet, and the economic significance of the parable has been forgotten. When Wall Street's financial professionals recognize the parable's enduring principles, they will be better equipped to steward talents and create human flourishing.

Jesus' Investment Strategy

Matthew's gospel records Jesus' illustration of eight talents, the equivalent \$40 million USD.¹ The owner in the parable administers the same investment process used by today's institutional investors to multiply the talents.

The Parable of the Talents is best understood by recognizing the Mosaic Law in the first-century economy. Matthew was a Jewish tax collector and familiar with Mosaic Law; including the codification of investment principles for fair dealing, fair value, and settling accounts on the Sabbath and Jubilee. The estate owners and landlords illustrated throughout Matthew's gospel parables were common in the first-century economy. Wealthy landowners would hire servants to manage their estates and return periodically to collect revenue and settle debts. Jewish law prescribes this could occur after six years' work—every seventh year in accordance with the Sabbath and Jubilee. Matthew's audience understood this firsthand as wealthy landowners and servants in Israel near the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon. The Parable of the Talents gains appropriate significance by recognizing the landowner's enormous wealth, the servant's faithful and good stewardship, and the investment principles recorded by Matthew.

The Talents

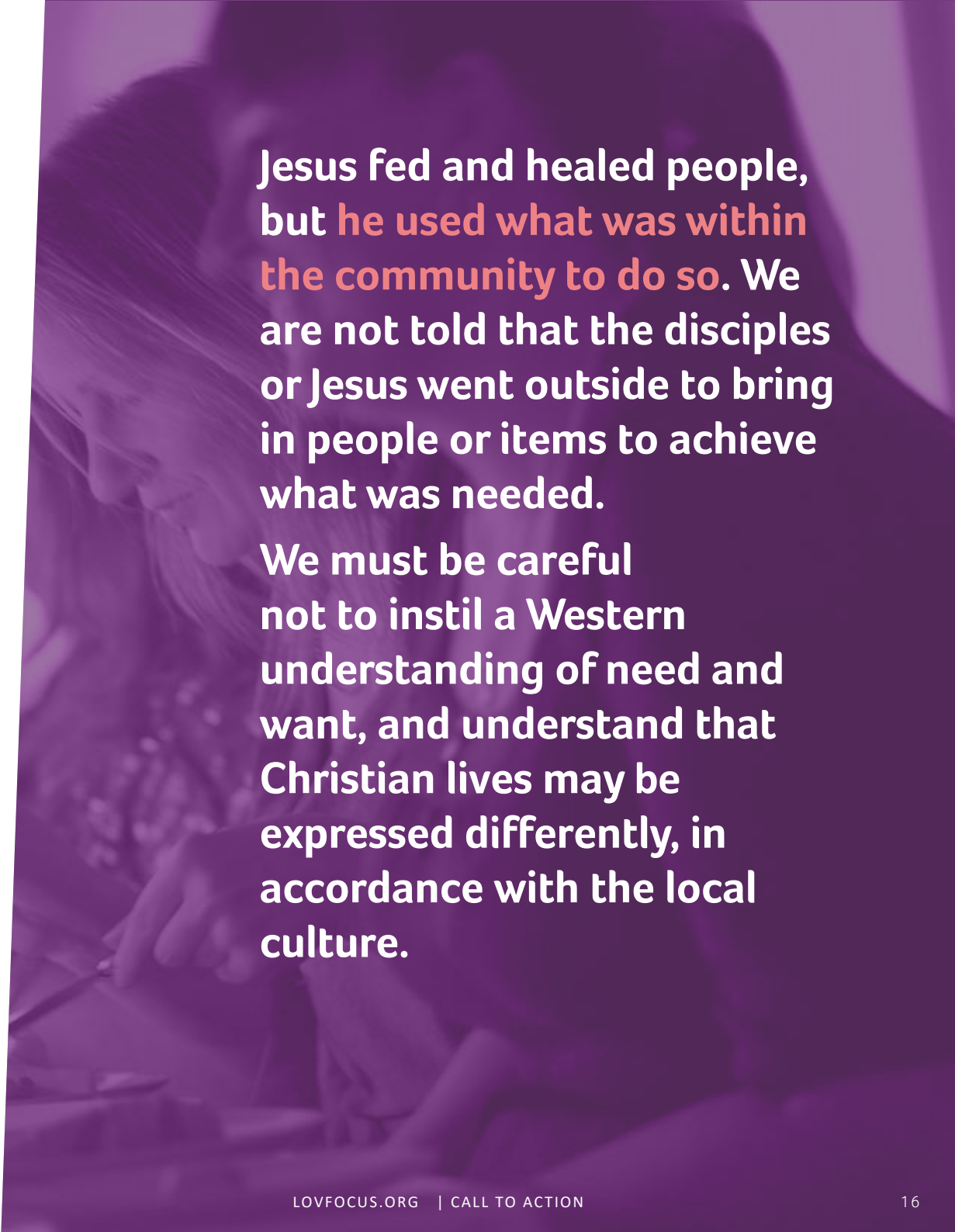
In Israel, a talent of silver weighed approximately 100 pounds (45 kg), a talent of gold weighed an estimated 200 pounds (91 kg). Both Tyre and Sidon were affluent cities and famous for their gold and silver. Talents were also a monetary unit (not a coin) valued at approximately 6,000 drachmas or the equivalent of 20-years wages!

At the time of this article in 2012, a talent equals \$1,028,260 (USD), based on 20-years wages of U.S. inflation-adjusted median income of \$51,413. A talent of silver is calculated at only \$48,000 given a \$30 per-ounce market price.

The wage standard is highly influenced by countries' wage scales, and the silver standard lost reliability given the metal's decline in long-term value relative to other metals. Most importantly, neither effectively convey the means of a wealthy estate owner. Based on the most reliable long-term "gold standard," a talent at market price of approximately \$1,600 per ounce equals \$5,120,000 (USD)! Given the large sum of money and responsibilities awarded to the servants, the parable deserves closer examination to uncover its meaning and usefulness in today's economy.

The Stewards

The servants in the parable are stewards and can be understood in today's context as investment managers. Two of the stewards industriously apply the principles and invest \$35,840,000. Through successful investing and trading, they multiply the talents and earn a 100% return over a long-time horizon. Faithful stewardship results in being given greater responsibility. The best-performing steward increases his initial investment from \$25,600,000 to \$56,320,000 of assets under management.



Jesus fed and healed people, but **he used what was within the community to do so.** We are not told that the disciples or Jesus went outside to bring in people or items to achieve what was needed.

We must be careful not to instill a Western understanding of need and want, and understand that Christian lives may be expressed differently, in accordance with the local culture.



The increase is from \$25,600,000 in capital appreciation and \$5,120,000 in additional deposits taken from the unproductive steward and reallocated by the owners. According to the parable, faithfully using God-given abilities and the inherent power and influence from wealth “dynamis” will be rewarded with additional opportunities for stewardship. “To everyone who has, will more be given” (Luke 19:26 and Matt. 25:29). To Matthew, the landowner is not miserly economically or spiritually!

The Portfolio Approach

The owner of the talents demonstrates trust in his servants and in the principles of modern portfolio theory already at work in the first century. Effective management includes allocation, diversification, and weighting of the talents among different strategies and asset classes. The manager, preparing for a journey, maintained investment goals for his talents. He must have been familiar with his servants’ work, knew their track record, and trusted them accordingly with his property. The manager selected three stewards and weighted the talents investment according to the stewards’ abilities: 62.5% to the lead manager, 25% to the second, and 12.5% to the third respectively. The stewards diversified the talents through investing, trading, and in high yield savings.

The Strategy

The stewards demonstrate their understanding of the owner’s goals and their investment mandate by investing the talents “at once.” The steward’s knowledge of the long-term investment time horizon, confirmed by the owner’s journey, combined with the act of immediately investing the talents indicates their understanding of the time value of money. The parable also indicates the stewards went about investing according to their abilities, undoubtedly with different strategies, and among the different asset classes described in the parable and elsewhere in the gospel of Matthew.

Given the owner’s investment goals and description of the steward’s investment actions, we may deduce their respective investment styles. Matthew uses four separate Greek verbs describing the stewards’ investment actions; *ergazomai*, meaning to make gains by trading; *poieō*, to bear or cause rightly to perform with the designation of time; *kerdainō*, to profit or gain and avoid loss; and *apokryptō*, to hide or save. By transliterating the Greek verbs in Matthew’s economic context, the lead manager is best understood as a trader and long-term investor. The second steward is also a long-term investor, but has limited capital and is therefore presumed less active and likely sought a fixed rate of return.



The third manager hides the money in savings, commonly done in a field, rather than seek some type of yield from the bankers. The parable is clear that there is no reward or return without assuming some level of risk.

The Results

With the owner-of-the-talents' goals established and the stewards' investment mandate clear, the talents are allocated and performance systematically reviewed. Following the owner's journey, he meets with the stewards who report their investment results and account for the talents. The lead manager reports a 100% return on assets, comprising 71.43% of the owner's total return. The second steward also had a 100% return, comprising 28.57% of the total return. The third steward returned the principal talent with no capital appreciation, income, or interest. The weighted return for the owner over the long term was 87.50%. The 100% return of the faithful stewards could illustrate 12% compound average annual returns during a typical 6-year Sabbath economic cycle, for example. To complete the investment process, the owner reallocates the talents from the underperforming steward and rewards the best performing lead manager with \$56,320,000 or 73% of \$76,800,000 total assets under management. Two stewards remain in faithful service to the owner while the third is removed from his responsibilities.

The financial system is intact! The lead manager is motivated and rewarded by his success. The second steward performs well and is also rewarded. The third is removed from management.

The Cost

Finally, the stewards' compensation must also be understood in context. From the beginning, the stewards order their life around faithful service and are employed by the owner to invest the talents. The lead manager and the second steward share with the owner. The sharing is participation in the benefits of profit described by the Greek *eisrechomai*, to enter into society with. For the stewards, there is both financial gain and social improvement from faithful service.

The Value

Throughout the parables, the mysteries of how the economy of God operates are revealed to the disciples, but withheld from the unresponsive crowd. Similar comparison can be made among discipline investors and the so-called herd. Parables produce very different results in different people, just as there are varying results among investors. Diligent analysis and exegesis of the Parable of the Talents' economic context and principles reveal their present and eternal value. As John Wesley put forth in his printed sermon "The Use of Money," 1872 edition.



It is therefore of the highest concern that all who fear God know how to employ this valuable talent; that they be instructed how it may answer these glorious ends, and in the highest degree.

Love Focus International Association Conference/Convention

The Annual Conference and other Association gatherings shall serve as opportunities for fellowship, prayer, worship, Christian education, and spiritual growth.

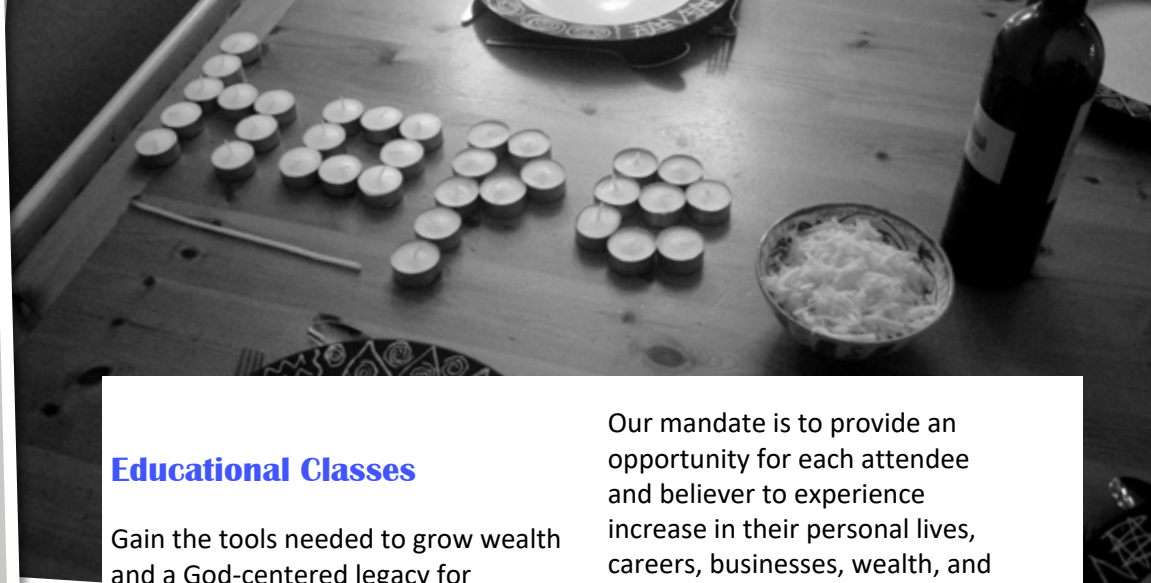
The Association shall gather in Annual Conference/Convention made up of US Region and Africa Region member Christian churches, gatherings and fellowships, at a time, date and place determined by the Board of Directors of Love Focus International Association.

LFIA purpose-filled lives in alignment with God's calling. Through inspiration, transformation, and equipping, we aim to help every believer fulfill their God-given purpose.

African Christians In Particular

Despite Christians being a majority in many African communities, poverty disease conflict and environmental degradation abound. This appalling state of affairs propels us to focus on love in action by working through the church families and individuals. Our Love Focus Africa Mission is as passionate about missionary work as it is about changing mentalities and creating an enabling environment in Africa and beyond so that the People of God build their own solutions and take ownership of their future.

Our mission is fulfilled in partnership with the local churches and the local communities using our sustainable assistance approaches including capacity building and empowerment with self-help initiatives.



Educational Classes

Gain the tools needed to grow wealth and a God-centered legacy for generations to come with practical strategies and a new, empowered mindset.

EQUIP ADVANCED TRAINING & MENTORSHIP

Ongoing education that offers personalized coaching, mentor-ship, and resources to support you on your financial journey to advance God's Kingdom. We want to lead a transformational encounter of believers surging their lives God's way, by inspiring, transforming and equipping believers to do all that God has called them to do in the workplace and business.

Not only do we believe that – we want to be a part of seeing that reality in our lifetime! From live events to digital media and ongoing education and training, we want to impact every sphere of our community with the Power of God and the life-altering truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our mandate is to provide an opportunity for each attendee and believer to experience increase in their personal lives, careers, businesses, wealth, and legacy for the generations to follow. Because of John 10:10, Jesus Christ said "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly". We believe that there are always opportunities to live a better life, and that can happen suddenly and powerfully.

Hebrews 7:25

"Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them".

The Association's Prayer

Lord, as you have entered into our life and death, and in all the world you call us into your death and risen life, forgive us our sins; and draw us, we pray, by the power and encouragement of your Spirit, into an exchange of gifts and needs, joys and sorrows, strength and weakness with your people everywhere; that with them we may have grace to break through every barrier, to make disciples of all peoples and to share your love with everyone, one person at a time anywhere and anytime to your own glory and praise alone! **Amen.**

So we turn our attention now to our work today, to our call to action.

We Speak these words of blessing upon all those in and around our association – the thousands seen and unseen – who are praying with you:

Blessing

For your call to action today. May you be gifted with imagination to forge new paths of transformation.

May any breaking be gentle, revealing the life of Christ within you.

And may you know, above all, that you are loved.

For the love of Christ renews people and places **and the healing of creation starts.**

The feeding of five thousand

He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them.

Mark 6:34

Father, by your grace, in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and in Jesus' name we are given the gift that we may be available to the crowd; we are fed in order to feed; served that we may serve; healed in order to heal.



Jesus dares us to imagine that we can learn to handle the challenges of our relationships in new ways. Though I'll admit, it's much easier to embrace 'love your neighbor' as a lofty platitude than as a practical mandate. The situations we actually face are often confusing... Real community happens with people who know us too well, who, despite all they know and the ways we disappoint them, still see our dignity and keep believing that we are being transformed by love.



DWELLING IN THE WORD

We encourage association members to engage in the practice of Dwelling in the Word. This process has been developed to help us listen to God and to one another. It's a group practice but many of the principles can be adapted for personal use.

At the heart of Dwelling in the Word is the experience that hearing takes time and attention. In 2023–26 we are suggesting that this passage from the book of Acts is one that we might dwell in together for these years. It's exciting to imagine how, in God's grace, this part of the Word might shape us for life and purpose

2023-26 Dwelling in the Word passage: Acts 6:1–7

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip,

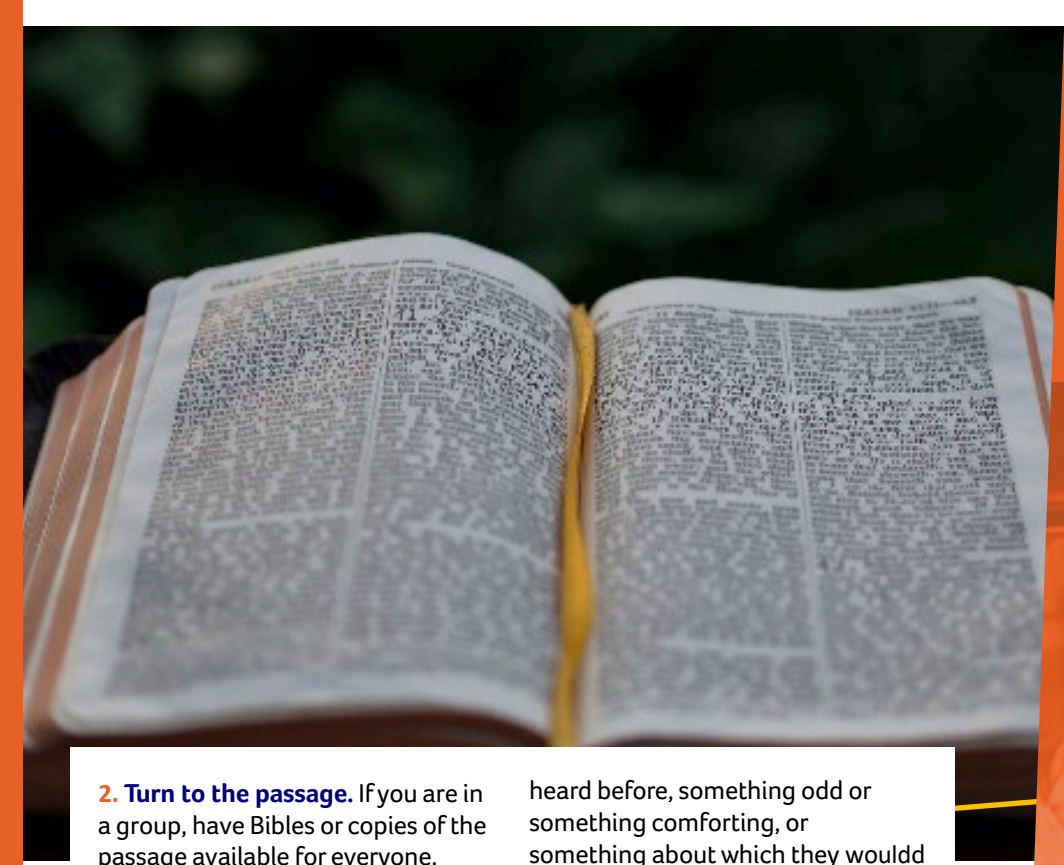
Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Steps for Dwelling in the Word

1. Start with the following prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide us in attending to the Word of God.

Our loving heavenly Father, Though our destination is not yet clear, may we trust in your faithful promises; Though we may be uncertain of ourselves, may we be rooted in your love and mercy; Though our attention is inclined to wander, may we hear the things you are saying to us; Though we often neglect your influence, may we be convicted of your power to conform us to the image of your Son, In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen!



2. Turn to the passage. If you are in a group, have Bibles or copies of the passage available for everyone.

3. Slowly read the passage. In a group one person reads the passage out loud, taking their time and allowing some following silence to let the words have their impact.

4. React on what springs out to you – something you have never heard before, something odd or something comforting.

5. If you are in a group, find a person in the group whom we might call “a reasonably friendly-looking stranger”. We listen to that person as he or she says what they heard in the passage in a particular verse, phrase or even single word. They may mention something they had never

heard before, something odd or something comforting, or something about which they would like to ask a Bible scholar. Listen well, because your job will be to report to the rest of the group (in fours, sixes or the whole group) what your partner has said, not what you yourself said. Some people take notes to help them focus and remember. Introduce your partner by name to the group and share what you heard them say. Enable a conversation among the whole group exploring what God may be saying to us today from the themes arising from the Word.

6. Spend time in quiet, asking God to help you frame what you have reflected on for the day, week, or month ahead.

In a group setting, over time, Dwelling in the Word forms a community of the Holy Spirit, where the Spirit is a welcome and expected presence. It gives the group the chance to see that they are living a story, and that their story is a part of God’s story. It is not magical, or formular or prescriptive. It is holy. In God’s mercy and grace we pray that it creates the community of goodwill that opens time and space for spiritual discernment for the sake of God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto every good works.

ASSOCIATION AFFIRMATION

“But who do you say that I am?” remains one of the most powerful questions ever asked by Jesus. Our answer to it has huge implications. If our response is anything like that of the disciple Simon Peter – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” – nothing will ever be the same again. It’s a question that calls us into joyful commitment, whatever the cost.

We invite every association member to undertake an annual period of self-examination as part of the rhythm of life. An opportunities to renew our commitment to living and sharing the way of Jesus together as an association. This involves praying for souls to be saved, learning from the Holy Spirit and participating in an evangelistic outreach. In all this we aim to be cultivating an evangelistic, faithful relationship in our communities.



