Thriving Congregations

# SPIRITUAL PRACTICES
## FOR THRIVING CONGREGATIONS

# ROOTED RELATIONSHIPS

Rooted Relationships form the foundation. Thriving communities are deeply connected: to Christ, to one another, and to their neighbors. Trust, vulnerability, and spiritual attentiveness shape their shared life.

# ROOTED RELATIONSHIPS

## Tending the Heart Root System

Building deep, meaningful connections within and beyond the congregation that nurture faith and clarify God's calling.

### FRAMEWORK

Thriving congregations are sustained by a relational root system shaped by deep connection with Christ, strong bonds within the community, and outward connections into the world. Like the American Elm, a tree whose heart root system includes both a taproot and a wide network of roots, congregations thrive when they are both deeply grounded and broadly connected. Rooted relationships reflect a theological vision of formation grounded in abiding in Christ (John 15), communal life, and practices that shape faithful presence. Relationships are not simply connections but 'holy friendships' that shape individuals and communities over time.

### THE HEART ROOT

The American Elm is one of the most common trees in our nation and it has the most distinctive root system. The roots of the Elm grow through a "heart root" system comprised of both a deep taproot that grounds it and a wide network of roots that provide stability and nourishment. Congregations thrive in similar ways, through deep spiritual grounding and wide, life-giving relationships.

The elm tree's heart root system offers a powerful metaphor: a deep taproot provides grounding, while a wide network of roots provides stability and nourishment. This symbol is an invitation for congregations to discern the depth, health, and distribution of their relational life. Use this practice to consider the depth and breadth of your congregation's relationships: spiritual grounding, relational strengths and generative growth that help your congregation thrive.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***Rev. Dr. Jon Singletary*** *is a professor in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. His research focuses on Christian contemplative and creative practices, specifically using the Enneagram as a tool for spiritual formation. He is the author of many published papers and the recent book,* ***Leadership by the Numbers****. His justice-oriented community organizing seeks to support marginalized populations, on campus and in the larger community. Most important to his journey are the relationships with his wife, Wendi, and his five children, Haden, Raul, Harper, Ainsley and Abbott.*

# Practice: Tending the Heart Root System

Materials: Several copies of the **Root System Graphic** handout, pens/pencils

***Instructions:*** *This practice works best in small groups. In groups of no more than 6 people, answer questions 1–4 below, writing responses on your handout; question 5 can be discussed in the larger group to consider how often to revisit this practice. Then, have each group share their responses. Have one volunteer ready to complete a separate graphic with the content from each of the groups.*

1. **Name the Taproot** – To begin, identify where the congregation experiences the deepest spiritual grounding and connection to Christ. Reflect on the settings where you experience the deepest spiritual grounding and nourishment. Identify 3-4 spaces where faith is most deeply formed. What are the most common opportunities outside of Sunday worship?

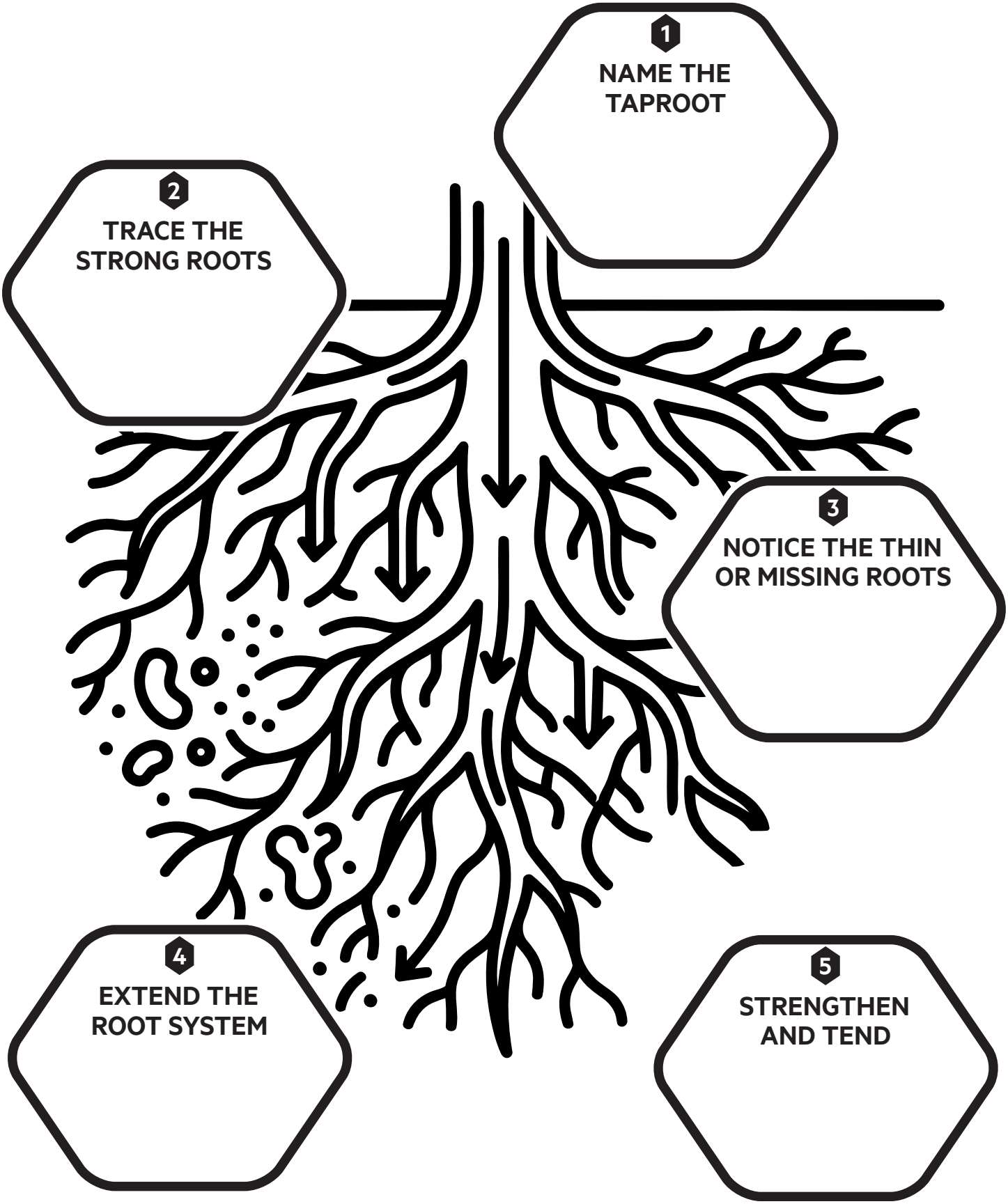
2. **Trace the Strong Roots** – The strongest relationships that reach deep below the surface are marked by trust, honesty, and care. Identify where relationships that offer these traits exist in your congregation. What are the settings where people are truly known and supported? How often do they take place? Who tends to participate? Who is less likely to be there?

3. **Notice Thin or Missing Roots** – Discern areas where relationships are shallow, absent or fragmented. Where are relationships evident across generations, and where do they focus on age-specific gatherings? How many opportunities take place outside Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights?

4. **Extend the Root System** – Identify opportunities for new relational practices. How might you deepen relationships through new practices such as shared meals? Through mentoring or storytelling gatherings? Are there intergenerational opportunities that might be of interest to youth and older adults? What might attract newcomers and lifelong members?

5. **Strengthen and Tend** – Consider how to nurture your existing roots and revisit the process over time. What existing relationships need nurturing? Identify ways to ask these questions every few years. How do you help foster a deeper root system connected to the taproot of our relationships with Christ as well as the network of connections we have with one another?

## KEY INSIGHTS

This practice moves from analysis to relational formation and emphasizes cultivation of relationships rather than simply creating an inventory.

# Root System Graphic