

NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

BETTER TOGETHER:
A MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM CONNECTING THE LOCAL CHURCH
WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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CULTURE

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One of my motivations in pursuing this degree was the desire to see Paul and Luke Snodgrass inherit a church positioned for faithful ministry well beyond my brief time as a pastor. This is but a small step toward that goal, but I hope it helps to sustain the youthful optimism, joy, and affection my boys have for Christ and his church. I appreciate their patience in our daily commutes as I somehow find a way to correlate every NPR news story to my dissertation. More importantly, I am inspired at how they serve in our local church and invite their friends to experience God there. If every church had a Paul and Luke, this project would be much shorter.

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It remains a mystery to me that a God who exists in perfect, trinitarian community would send his one and only Son so that all people might be invited into that relationship. This “circle dance” of love that I have experienced is deeply satisfying and reminds me of the purpose for which I was created. By grace, the singular pursuit of my life is to join with God in inviting as many people as possible to experience it for themselves. My deepest prayer is that God would use this project to create churches equipped to extend this life-giving community beyond the walls of the church. As Jesus prayed, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21)

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated in memory and honor of my parents, Rev. Dana (1951-2015) and Dr. Roxianne Snodgrass. For over 40 years they faithfully dedicated themselves to the work of ministry through the local church serving as pastor, musician, administrator, mission president, Sunday school teacher, kids camp volunteer, and a host of other titles for which they will never be recognized. Their lives have been an example to me of what God can do through those surrendered to the lordship of Christ. Their faithfulness to the mission of God through the local church has been a constant reminder to not give up on this people God has raised up for the restoration of all things.

This project reflects an understanding of ministry that in some ways is different than what I saw modeled by them, but upon closer examination I am convinced it is merely a variation on a theme. My father offered a benediction at the conclusion of every worship service that included this line: “Lead us to those we can help.” I hope to offer something fresh that God can use for the renewal of the church and human flourishing in the community, but at its core this project is calling the church to be exhorted by God into the world, committed to the plans and purposes of God, and led “to those we can help.”

My father cheers all of us on from the Great Cloud of Witnesses. My deepest prayer for *Better Together* is that God would use it through the power of the Holy Spirit to lead the church to those we can help and point them to the One who is making all things new.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vi
Abstract	vii
Chapter 1: Minding the Gap – The Discipleship Gaps in the American Church	1
<i>The Gap Between Missional Theology and Practice</i>	
<i>The Gap Between Instruction and Empowerment</i>	
<i>The Gap Between a Missional and an Attractional Model</i>	
<i>The Gap Between the Church and Community</i>	
Chapter 2: Measuring the Gap (Literature Review)	22
<i>Missional Church Movement and Its Shaping of Theology in the Local Church</i>	
<i>Navigating the Cultural Shifts of Post-Christendom</i>	
<i>A Missional Approach to Discipleship</i>	
<i>Creating Effective Community Partnerships</i>	
Chapter 3: Bridging the Gap <i>Together</i> – Missional Discipleship for the Community . . .	69
<i>Worship as Missional Practice</i>	
<i>Polycentric Leadership Structures</i>	
<i>Each Disciple a Minister</i>	
<i>Extending Life Giving Community: A Missional Vision for Life Groups</i>	
Chapter 4: Becoming a Church Your Community Can’t Live Without	97
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Educational Philosophy: Transformative Learning Theory</i>	
<i>Proposed Artifact: Better Together</i>	
<i>Standards of Publication</i>	
<i>Conclusion</i>	
Chapter 5: Conclusions	110
<i>Artifact Development</i>	
<i>Considerations for Future Study</i>	
<i>Conclusion</i>	

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – The Loci of the Discipleship Matrix	48
Figure 2 – The Horizontal Axis	51
Figure 3 – The Vertical Axis	52
Figure 4 – The Center of the Discipleship Matrix	54
Figure 5 – The Three Circles	73
Figure 6 – The BCCN Leadership Structure	79
Figure 7 – Fivefold Gifting Descriptions	84
Figure 8 – BCCN Fivefold Gifting Survey Results	85
Figure 9 – <i>Better Together</i> Curriculum Framework	105-7

ABSTRACT

J. Mark Snodgrass

Better Together:
A Missional Discipleship Curriculum Connecting the Local Church with Strategic Community
Partners

As congregations in America begin to embrace a missional understanding of theology and ministry practice, existing churches influenced by attractional models of ministry will need to recognize the culture shifts necessary to move towards more missional expressions of church. The discipling ministry of the church is a vital component in shaping congregational culture, however, it has historically been disproportionately focused on insular and cognitive education models to the neglect of the transformative effect that serving one's community with a missional passion has on the disciple and those outside the church.

Using Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), this leadership development curriculum imagines discipleship built around the mission of God with the goal of shaping a congregation's culture for mission and producing disciples who embrace their role in it. The curriculum culminates in active involvement in strategic partnerships with other community-based organizations.

CHAPTER 1

MINDING THE GAP

Introduction

As one steps off “the Tube” in London an automated female voice instructs passengers to “mind the gap,” a safety precaution designed to help those exiting and entering to not trip on the three-inch space between the subterranean transit car and the passenger platform. It is mostly an inconsequential distance but were a person to not “mind” it and stumble during rush hour, the consequences would be significant.

There are gaps to mind as American church leaders evaluate the realities of ministry in the 21st century, a present increasingly characterized by cultural pluralism and post-Christian sentiments in virtually every area of American life. From 2007 to 2014 the amount of the American population that identified as “Christian” declined from 78.4% to 70.6%, a decrease largely attributed to losses among Mainline (-3.4%) and Catholic (-3.1%) respondents but which included a significant share of Evangelicals (-.9%) as well. As American church leaders “mind” the challenges of waning engagement, they also must take note of the increase among the non-affiliated (+6.7%) and non-Christian (+1.2%), representing a combined 27.7% of the American population.¹

This sociological data is consistent with what philosopher Charles Taylor has described as the “secular age.” This is not a time of no religion but is descriptive of a society in which all religions are questioned, and any claim of divine authority is disputed.² A secular people no

¹ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), May 12, 2015. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> accessed September 27, 2021.

² Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness*, Ministry in a Secular Age (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017) kindle location 115.

longer have an imagination for divine activity or transcendence within the context of a church. It's not that people in pluralistic contexts are disinterested in other-worldly experiences, but they no longer see the "church and religious institutions as the central organizing mechanism for this activity."³ Missiologists Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile have described the plight succinctly: "The old categories of 'Christendom' (Europe) and 'churched culture' (United States) no longer describe the complexity of Christianity in the world, especially as the church in the Global South continues to grow, and as Europe and the United States both become more religiously and culturally pluralistic."⁴

The Missional Church Movement, or "Missional Conversation," has articulated the urgency of this reality in the literature, research, and pastoral resources it has produced over the last four decades. A major driver of the conversation in the United States has been "The Gospel and Our Culture Network." Begun under the leadership of George Hunsberger, this coalition of writers and researchers has served as a catalyst for missional thinking and practices in the United States.⁵ The result is an emphasis in ecclesiology and the sociology of religion informed by a robust theology of mission rooted in God's trinitarian nature and the church's vocation as a "sign, instrument, and foretaste" of God's Kingdom.⁶

³ Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, Colorado: Group, 2015), 18.

⁴ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 4.

⁵ Missional Church Network. "History of Missional Church." Accessed September 27, 2021. <https://www.missionalchurchnetwork.com/history-of-missional-church>.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 110.

Local church pastors and leaders in the United States are giving full attention to these developments, many observing first-hand the confirmation of these statistics and cultural trends in their ministry contexts. They experience the waning engagement of congregants with traditional church programming and observe significant decreases in the number of young people connecting with their church. Additionally, American clergy are aging, and many ecclesial leaders wonder how local churches will find pastors once the Baby Boomers fully enter retirement.⁷

The local church pastor is aware of these issues, but what about the lay leader? What about the most engaged church member who anecdotally recognizes something has changed, but does not have the language to articulate what it is? How does the local church pastor have a conversation with lay leadership about macrotrends in religious engagement? What are the contours of missional theology that animate the imagination of the pastor but are foreign to Sunday School teachers in the local church? What are critical issues that must be addressed to equip the laity for missional engagement with the community? These are vital questions as any fresh ecclesial expression in the local church cannot be the sole work of a pastor or professional staff. Just as liturgy properly defined is the “work of the people,” the church’s mission must also emerge from an empowered laity in partnership with pastoral leaders.

These questions represent a gap between the laity and the clergy, and this dissertation and proposed artifact seek to lessen the divide. The “missional conversation” has been transformative in equipping the clergy with language to understand ministry in an emerging post-Christian American context. Additionally, it has animated pastoral imaginations for leadership and service in this developing reality. The conversation, however, cannot remain exclusively at the clergy

⁷ Ron Benefiel and Greg Crow, “Denominational Trends and Covid 19: Strategies for the Future” paper presented to DMN926 Wesleyan Missional Theology for Urban and Multicultural Contexts on January 26, 2021.

level but must matriculate into local church boardrooms, evangelism and outreach committees, discipleship teams, and annual strategic planning sessions. Although new models of church disregard these structures in favor of more nimble organizational systems, established churches with traditional structures have a vital role to play in fresh expressions of mission and faithfulness. Dry bones can and must live again.

The proposed artifact is a small group curriculum entitled, *Better Together: Becoming a Church Your Community Can't Live Without*. Over the course of six weeks, this series of lessons seeks to introduce lay leaders in established churches to some of the critical issues related to the missional conversation, articulate a robust theology of mission that flows from the trinitarian life of God, and equip them for effective engagement with their community. The community and the parish-based church are better when working together so that everyone can thrive.

The curriculum specifically targets established, American congregations, as much of it developed from the context of this author who serves a thriving 100-year-old congregation in Arkansas.⁸ There are similar curriculums that have emerged from the missional conversation, but most of them are targeted for core groups of church plants.⁹ *Better Together* specifically seeks to be a resource for the pastor wanting their congregation to reflect deeply on the mission of God, experience a Spirit-empowered change of culture, and discover how the local church is called to join God in this mission and become a more faithful missional presence in its community.

⁸ Throughout this dissertation, “established” will be used to describe organized churches more than 10 years old with traditional leadership structures and polity. The word “traditional” may also be used, but this has nothing to do with worship style or musical preferences. Rather, it is another way of describing the church as “established” and connected to a Christendom worldview, which is the target audience of the *Better Together* curriculum.

⁹ An example of this is J.R. Woodward and Dan White’s book, *The Church as Movement* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2016). It’s a practical resource that has both laity and clergy in view but assumes a team that is starting a church. Similarly, Michael Breen is a leading voice of practitioners in the missional church conversation. His method of discipleship is called the “3DMovement.” It brings several critical conversations together but offers strategies more hospitable to a new church plant than an existing church seeking revitalization.

Congregants are often unsettled by changes that are happening in their community and in the church. This curriculum offers a hopeful perspective on trends that are often perceived as alarming. It hopes to instill within those who are accustomed to traditional church culture that the idea of a pluralistic society is not so much a threat to the church as it is an opportunity for missionary engagement in ways that result in fuller and deeper understandings of the Gospel.

Better Together emerged from the following gaps that exist in the local church: 1) the gap between missional theology and practice, 2) the gap between discipleship as cognitive instruction and the empowerment of people for ministry, 3) the gap between the commonly used attractional model of ministry and one that is more missional in nature, and 4) the gap between the church and its community. After establishing these gaps here in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 is a review of relevant literature that attempts to measure the critical issues related to these gaps, offering a descriptive overview of the theological, sociological, and practical influences of the artifact. Chapter 3 is more prescriptive, exploring how the leadership of Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene (the ministry context of this author) bridged some of these gaps through initiatives of discipleship, leadership development, and community partnership.

Chapters 4 deals specifically with the artifact, describing its content and development, as well as offering a brief consideration of its educational philosophy, Transformative Learning Theory. Chapter 5 is a preliminary evaluation of how the artifact has shaped the ministry of Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene and concludes by offering suggestions for further study.

The Gap Between Missional Theology and Practice

The Missional Church Movement emerged from an understanding of the *missio Dei* as the primary interpretive thread in the narrative of Scripture, culminating in the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus and continuing through the commissioning of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the Father sent the Son, the Spirit is also sent, inhabiting the followers of Jesus and enlivening their message. This “Good News” of what God has done in Christ is carried by the Spirit-empowered proclamation of a people, who are sent to “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)¹⁰ As this missional reading of scripture captured the minds of theologians and pastors imagining what a new expression of faithfulness might be in the post-Christian West, the call became clear for the “church to return to her missional nature and design.”¹¹

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, a missional hermeneutic has animated the imagination of pastors and ecclesial leaders in Europe and the U.S. as seen in the publishing of books, the production of resources, and in the rise of movements like Lausanne and the Gospel and Our Culture Network. Additionally, seminaries and Bible colleges have integrated missional thinking into their curriculum, introducing emerging pastors to a primary reading of scripture and a baseline understanding of historic Christianity as an invitation for the church to participate in God’s mission.

The development of missional theology represents a significant shift in the interpretive framework of many practitioners in Western contexts, specifically in the way it has been presented as a renewed expression of the church’s pre-Christendom vocation. The persistent challenge for the pastor is how one takes a missional theology and uses it to guide the practices of the local congregation. Religious practices have been defined as the “ongoing, shared activity

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Biblica, Inc, 2011)

¹¹ Chris Beard, “Missional Discipleship: Discerning Spiritual-Formation Practices and Goals within the Missional Movement,” *Missiology: An International Review* 43(2) (2015), 178-179.

of a community of people.”¹² What a community of faith believes about God’s nature and mission in the world must be expressed in its interior practices of liturgy and discipleship and in its external practices of mercy, evangelism, and peacemaking.

Missional theology, therefore, invites congregations to embrace a renewed practice of mission in the wake of Christendom’s unraveling. However, most congregants are unaware that anything has changed. This is especially true in regions of the United States like the “Bible Belt” where many Christians are still living in a Christendom worldview and see their church as a part of that story.¹³ This is very problematic in casting a vision for missional practices and engagement. Pastors may be calling their church to a particular set of missional practices, but one must not neglect Alisdair MacIntyre’s reminder of the importance of narratives in shaping practices: “I can only answer the question of ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”¹⁴ Connecting missional theology and missional practice in the local church begins with helping congregations understand what story they are a part of.

Broadly speaking, the modern, institutional church living in the story of Christendom has reduced the ministry of the laity to the insular programming of the parish. Kathleen Bliss described this scenario in her theology of the laity entitled *We the People*, in which she described the disproportionate amount of focus on lay people only volunteering in ministries that directly

¹² Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999), 48 quoted in “Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices” by Amy Plantinga Pauw in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 34.

¹³ Gallup Inc, “The Religious Regions of the U.S.,” Gallup.com, April 6, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232223/religious-regions.aspx> accessed October 12, 2021.

¹⁴ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 250.

impacted congregational life at the expense of their role in wider society.¹⁵ This assessment is over 50 years old, and it has aged regrettably well. A contemporary missional renewal movement in the Church of England builds on her description of this gap between the faith of the laity and their engagement in society: “She queried whether church leadership was equipping lay people sufficiently to understand their faith and to explain it to others, arguing that – thus equipped – laity could help to bridge the widening gap between the church and a secularizing culture.”¹⁶

The potential of the laity to bridge this gap through faithful engagement in mission remains the hope for the church after Christendom. A church with a robust missional theology will equip and send its laity into their spheres of influence where they might intentionally practice their faith in ways that draw others to the Gospel. In this way the people who are transformed by the hope and mystery of Christian worship in all its forms go into the marketplace as commissioned agents who continue the mission of Jesus.

The Gap Between Instruction and Discipleship

In 2011, Mike Breen, the founder of 3D Ministries wrote a blog that shocked the Missional Church Movement, prophetically announcing its failure.¹⁷ As a luminary of the movement with a track record of starting vibrant missional communities and equipping others to do the same, this prediction not only captured the attention of the Christian blogosphere but also of those in partnership with Breen who knew this pronouncement was not made lightly. The intention was not to hasten the demise of a movement but to catalyze its future. In Breen’s

¹⁵ Kathleen Bliss, *We the People: A Book about Laity* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

¹⁶ *KINGDOM CALLING: The Vocation, Ministry and Discipleship of the Whole People of God*. (S.I.: CHURCH HOUSE PUBLISHING, 2020) available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Kingdom%20Calling%20Web%20Version.pdf> accessed October 11, 2021.

¹⁷ Mike Breen, “Mike Breen: Why The Missional Movement Will Fail.” Verge Network. September 14, 2011, <https://vergenetwork.org/2011/09/14/mike-breen-why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/> accessed October 4, 2021.

estimation, the movement lacked clarity and intentionality in its process for making disciples, repeating a refrain that captures his philosophy of ministry: “If you make disciples, you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples.”¹⁸

This critique of the missional church movement could also be applied to established congregations, who for multiple generations have relied on a vehicle like Sunday School to form people into Christ-like disciples. This educational structure reflects a disproportionate emphasis on cognitive ascent, prompting Sam Metcalf to conclude, “Christianity in the West has long been characterized by its orientation to knowledge and information. It’s not obedience that counts, but what we know.”¹⁹

Every Sunday in the United States, adults still come into classrooms arranged like college lecture rooms with dry erase boards (many of them mounted where a blackboard once hung), a lectern, and rows of chairs facing a teacher. This presupposes a form of Christian education intended to impart at an intellectual level the information prerequisite to becoming a better follower of Jesus. The emphasis on instruction underscores a false dichotomy between the mind (what we think) and the heart (what/who we love). This arrangement has prompted James K.A. Smith to write about the Western church’s misplaced understanding of humans as primarily “thinking” creatures. Smith argues this is an anthropology more aligned with Descartes than with the Bible or early Christianity.²⁰

¹⁸ Breen, “Mike Breen: Why The Missional Movement Will Fail.”

¹⁹ Sam Metcalf, *Beyond the Local Church: How Apostolic Movements Can Change the World* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 193-4.

²⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Volume 1 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009), 32.

Like other elements of a traditional church structure in the wake of Christendom's unraveling, this educational model may have run its life cycle. In the mid-20th century, the Sunday school of the neighborhood church served as a community hub for activities and was a hallmark of American life as even non-religious and non-participating parents sent their kids to the local church for Sunday school.²¹ The vitality of the Sunday school in America resulted in a programmatic approach to ministry, with the local church at the center of civic and public life. Churches developed a variety of classes and enrichment programs to meet the needs of the community. Educational space became a priority for church construction, a trend Van Gelder and Zscheile observe as the "neighborhood church," with large educational wings complementing a sanctuary representing the priority for age specific classes for the Sunday school.²²

Today, however, many of these educational wings are underused as the Barna Group reported in 2016 that only 17% of Americans report having attended adult Sunday school in the last year.²³ Moreover, most traditional churches have a discipleship culture where the primary focus is on cognitive ascent to doctrine and biblical literacy when what is most needed in a post-Christendom culture is a renewed concentration on formational practices that integrate the mind, heart, and body of the disciple. One researcher concludes, "Neither cognitive processes nor

²¹ Timothy Larsen, "When Did Sunday Schools Start?" *Christian History: Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/when-did-sunday-schools-start.html>.

²² Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 139.

²³ "The State of the Church 2016," Barna Group, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>.

brains learn: persons do...the body is not merely a support system for the brain/mind, but an indispensable component in motivation, attention, cognition, etc.”²⁴

Minding this gap between instruction and empowerment is crucial to the previously mentioned gap between missional theology and practices. Becoming a follower of Jesus engaged in mission is not a matter of being filled with the right ideas but participating in a community that rightly aims one’s affections. Missional theology, no matter how well taught or preached, must find expression in the practices of the congregation when it is gathered as well as when it is scattered. The gathering prepares and equips the church for the scattering, for it is in the context of worship that the whole person participates. Moreover, according to Smith worship is where the affections of the heart are properly aimed: “We are made to be such people by our immersion in the material practices of worship – through affective impact, over time, of sights and smell in the water and wine.”²⁵

Churches seeking to close the gap between cognitive instruction and the empowerment of missional disciples will have to think holistically. Participation in a mission-centered liturgy pronounces a benediction that sends the church into the world. The practices of the early Methodists offer a vision of what the church sent on mission can be as “works of mercy” were considered equally formational as “acts of piety” (i.e., the more traditional practices of spiritual formation). The early Methodists were encouraged to engage in all types of charitable endeavors that alleviated human suffering and contributed to social transformation. Wesleyan scholar Ron Benefiel notes how this practice has continued in contemporary iterations of the movement,

²⁴ Doug Blomberg, “‘The Heart Has Reasons That Reason Cannot Know’: Thinking, Feeling, and Willing in Learning,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 17, no. 1 (March 2013), 63, available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/205699711301700105> accessed October 15, 2021.

²⁵ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 33.

“Wesleyans engaged in acts of mercy as a means of participating in God’s love for those in need and in obedience to clear scriptural mandates. But they also understood acts of mercy as means of grace—means that God has established for our own growth in holiness. In other words, for us to grow in Christlikeness, as God has intended, we must engage in activities through which God’s mercy is conveyed to others.”²⁶

Discipleship is multifaceted and includes much more than the instruction of believers in biblical literacy and Christian doctrine. It must simultaneously integrate opportunities for the equipping of believers to serve and to experience in one’s heart the joy of being sent with Jesus as a full participant in God’s mission.

The Gap Between Missional and Attractional

Emerging out of the Church Growth Movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the attractional church model placed an emphasis on a narrow understanding of evangelism in an attempt to correct declining trends in traditional churches.²⁷ As the Baby Boomer generation disengaged from their generational church roots, the attractional church was an effort to identify “an unbeliever’s felt needs and connect those needs to the gospel so that unbelievers might be won to Christ.”²⁸

Buoyed by the meteoric success of attractional “megachurches” like Saddleback Church (Orange County, CA) and Willow Creek Community Church (Chicago), many pastors adopted

²⁶ Ron Benefiel, “Christian Holiness and the Wesleyan Mission of Mercy: The Character of the People of God in the World” paper presented to DMN926 Wesleyan Missional Theology for Urban and Multicultural Contexts on January 26, 2021.

²⁷ Alan G. Padgett, “The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique” (1992). Faculty Publications. 259. https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/259 accessed on October 20, 2021.

²⁸ Philip W. Sell, “Leadership in the Missional Church: Pastoral Realities of Post-Christendom” in Michael J. Breen and David M. Gustafson, eds., *Missional Disciple-Making: Disciple-Making for the Purpose of Mission* (Pawley’s Island, SC: 3DM Publishing, 2019), 155-6.

these consumer-based methods to revitalize their congregation, driven by a sincere desire to introduce people to saving faith in Jesus. In 1970 only ten churches in America averaged more than 2,000 people in worship, but by 2010 it was estimated that there were more than 1,500 such churches, evidence that the attractional-consumer based model was finding an audience with Americans in search of a religious experience to meet the diverse needs of their lives.²⁹

The numerical success of this model was undeniable, leading to the creation of leadership resources focused on critical issues like seeker-focused preaching, family ministry, marketing, small groups, facility management and just about anything one could imagine as necessary to replicate growth. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* stands as the quintessential manual for ecclesial leaders wanting to learn the attractional strategies that propelled Saddleback Church to a membership of more than 20,000 people.³⁰ With over one million copies sold since its release in 1995, the book has had a tremendous influence on pastors of all denominational stripes and has left an indelible imprint on local church leaders hoping to invigorate their ministry.³¹

In this model, the pastor is an entrepreneur, seeking to connect people in his or her "market" to the goods and services of the church. The attractional model thrives on the church's ability to identify a growing population center and market its message and programming accordingly. This was Warren's strategy in choosing Orange County, CA in 1980 as ground zero for his calling to plant a church, as U.S. census data identified this as one of the fastest growing areas of the country. Warren described the alignment of an expanding demographic and a clear

²⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 202.

³⁰ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub, 1995).

³¹ Jonathan Howe, "Rick Warren Announces Search for Saddleback Replacement." News & Reporting. Accessed October 18, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/june/rick-warren-saddleback-retirement-replacement-search.html>.

sense of divine providence: “I heard God speak to me, ‘That’s where I want you to plant a church!’ My whole body began to tingle with excitement, and tears welled up in my eyes. I had heard from God.”³²

In the decades since Saddleback’s founding thousands of churches have been planted in the United States using some variation of Warren’s approach, and many planters can testify to a similar theophanic experience in choosing their location and recount stories of undisputable life transformation. As a way of doing church that is more than 40 years old, this approach has been critiqued and deconstructed, but the piety and sincerity of the planter as well as their commitment to a specific aspect of biblical evangelism should not be lost in the conversation. Many people have invested their entire lives in this pursuit believing it to be a faithful expression of the church in their time and place.

To its credit, one could argue that the attractional church represents a form of contextualization that recognizes the consumer nature of Americans. Warren states explicitly in *The Purpose Driven Church* the goal is not to compete with other churches for market share, but to “offer people something they cannot get anywhere else.”³³ The critique offered here is not to question the altruistic and earnest intentions of attractional church planters, but to recognize the fine line between contextualization and syncretism. As one considers the challenges of ministry in a post-Christian context it’s important to ask, “How is the attractional church model a faithful representation of the mission of God?”

³² Jeffery L. Sheler, *Prophet of Purpose: The Life of Rick Warren*. 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 97 quoted in Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*. Ministry in a Secular Age, VOLUME 2. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 146.

³³ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 44.

Critics raise concerns about an attractional model's potential to call American Christians to follow and embrace the *kenotic* ways of Jesus. For instance, in this approach it is difficult for new converts to not perceive Jesus as the one who meets their needs and helps them accomplish their personal goals. This becomes problematic when confronted with the self-emptying message of Jesus as discipleship then feels like a "bait-and-switch." This was confirmed in a self-study conducted by Willow Creek entitled, *Reveal: Where Are You?*³⁴ Both qualitative and quantitative research of the megachurch revealed that participation in the church's programming did not have a significant impact on one's growth towards Christ-likeness. This prompted the megachurch to shift its discipling efforts away from an events-based approach to one that valued relationships and spiritual practices to move people along a spiritual continuum, with "Christ-centered" as the goal of this journey.³⁵

Attractional churches are taking note, and many are using Willow Creek's resources to undergo a similar evaluation and transformation of their discipleship process. Voices from the Missional Church Movement, however, warn that the attractional model at a fundamental level promotes religious consumption rather than the radical discipleship envisioned by Christ's invitation to, "Follow me." One critic explains, "The sad reality is that a person cannot consume his or her way into being a disciple. No amount of consumption of religious goods and services, provided by well-intended church vendors can form a disciple..."³⁶

³⁴ Gregory L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007).

³⁵ Gregory L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *MOVE: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 20.

³⁶ Sell, "Leadership in the Missional Church," 159.

Discipleship has the potential to be reduced to a series of classes, the culmination of which is the participants' involvement in the programs of the church, not necessarily the empowerment and sending of disciples on mission with Jesus. As one envisions a missional model of discipleship the influence of the attractional model on the local church and on national denominational bodies must be considered. There is an abundance of literature and pastoral training resources based on these principles, which will continue if they are judged to "work." The lessons of Willow Creek, however, reveal that attendance and participation doesn't automatically produce disciples. Attendance and participation must be correctly aimed towards the cruciform life of Jesus. The loves and affections of disciples must be directed towards the Kingdom, a path that does not guarantee the fulfillment of individual needs and personal wants but does reveal a life-giving community that remains mysteriously attractive despite the constant presence of the cross.

The Gap Between the Church and Community

The population of the United States has grown rapidly since the 1960s, swelling from 180 million in 1960 to over 320 million in 2015. This trend is expected to continue with a significant portion of the growth coming from immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.³⁷ As the U.S. becomes more diverse, churches that are predominantly white with significant ties to traditional European faith traditions face the challenges of diversification. Many recognize the diversity gap that exists between their congregation and their community but are ill-equipped to address it.

A common strategy for white, well-resourced churches in diversifying urban areas is to move out of browning inner cities and into the suburbs. As early as 1961, social justice advocate

³⁷ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 16.

Gordan Winter referred to the church's participation in "white flight" as the, "Protestant exodus from the central city."³⁸ This movement of churches to the suburbs reflects the shift from parish-based congregations to family-based congregations. A family-based church is more likely to relocate to the suburbs when the most engaged members move there first, motivated by the good intention of developing a ministry to people more like them and with whom they are more likely to have regular social interactions. This phenomenon is well-documented and is undergirded by the golden rule of the Church Growth Movement known as the "homogenous unit principle."³⁹

The unintended consequence of this is the loss of the parish-based approach to congregational life. A predominantly white church in the suburbs will be filled with people of similar ethnicities and economic statuses, drawn together by what they have in common. While this is a simple and efficient strategy for organizational development, it widens the gap between the church and a community full of people that do not fit the targeted demographic.⁴⁰

White flight and the emergence of the monoethnic, suburban megachurch is a contemporary phenomenon that is easily observable and represents a familiar experience for both clergy and lay leadership teams. The church's retreat from the city did not happen in a vacuum but is a manifestation of just one of the historic ways the church has understood its relationship to its immediate context. The authors of *The New Parish* succinctly summarize this historic journey by using four prepositions: the church in, of, for, and with.⁴¹

³⁸ David A. Basic, *The City: Urban Churches in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2020), 37.

³⁹ Donald McGavran, "The Homogeneous Unit in Mission Theory," *Papers*, no. 140 (2018), <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruitspapers/140>.

⁴⁰ Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 44.

⁴¹ Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 35-45.

In the New Testament, Paul writes to the church *in* Thessalonica, *in* Corinth, and *in* Ephesus. The church begins in a place, rooted in very specific communities. Drawing upon their Jewish heritage with synagogues imbedded in specific locales, the early Christian communities understood their identity as vitally connected to a city. When Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, it became the “church of” a particular city, moving the energy of the collective church body in a geographic place to the church “of” the state accompanied by political influence and encumbered by civic bureaucracy.

This paved the way for the third epoch known as the “church for,” which describes the church’s missionary activity in the wake of the colonizing powers of the West. As the church emphasized its mission endeavor “for Africa” and “for Asia,” a dichotomy emerged between the Christianized West and “heathen” non-western nations. This is not to disparage the good and beautiful service rendered by the God-called servants of the modern missionary movement, but a critique is helpful to properly understand how sending churches developed a truncated understanding of mission “over there” to the neglect of missional faithfulness in their own backyards.⁴²

The final preposition partially explains the exodus of established churches away from the cities and into the enclaves of suburbia: the “church with.” The rise of evangelicalism, with its soteriological emphasis on making a personal decision to follow Jesus, created a situation in which one could be a Christian without being a baptized member of a local church. Ministries and parachurch organizations began training people to be “with” people like them as a means of introducing them to Jesus. Consequently, Christians were encouraged to be with students, with

⁴² Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 35-39.

seekers, with bikers, and with any group like them to “win” them.⁴³ The progenitors of the Church Growth Movement did not invent the homogeneous unit principle but correctly articulated it as the most efficient strategy for American evangelicalism to achieve its *de facto* soteriology anchored in an understanding of mission as personal evangelism. When an urban landscape changed and was no longer “like” the families that comprised the inner-city church, it was not only covert racism that sent them to the suburbs but also a narrow sense of mission where they could be “with” those most like them and hopefully evangelize them.

Advocates for “the New Parish” are inviting congregations to think in fresh and imaginative ways about their church and the community in which it is placed. They propose an additional set of prepositions rooted in the incarnational ministry of Jesus that call the church to be “within” and “in-with.” Just as Jesus became flesh and “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG), a parish-based church values the immediate, geographical context in which it is located, recognizing the complex web of relationships where the church lives out its faith incarnationally in the community.⁴⁴

The church “in-with” is a combination of the “in” of the early church and the “with” of the modern church, hoping to ground this desire for proclamation in the context of real places with diverse personalities and needs. The parish-based congregation desiring to be “in-with” its community has a vision for all to thrive and flourish, not just people that resemble them. They are eager to collaborate with others for the well-being of the community confident that such an

⁴³ Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 45.

⁴⁴ Basic, *The City*, 138.

interest will provide an ample platform for the Holy Spirit to organically bear witness to the Gospel in the context of reciprocal, life-giving relationships.⁴⁵

The imperative to be “within” a specific context grounds the church in the story and identity of a particular community. This approach imagines the energy, programming, budgets, and calendar of the congregation being responsive to the needs and opportunities around it. The church “within” intentionally narrows its footprint, “rooting deeply in the place God has planted you and expecting that your sense of community, your formation and your participation in God’s renewing mission will integrate right where you live your everyday life.”⁴⁶ The “New Parish” is not a “quick fix,” but represents a “long play” for pastors and lay leaders with the potential to narrow the gap between their church and their community.

Conclusion

Pastors of established congregations in America are familiar with these gaps as they represent significant vestiges of Christendom that remain in the leadership and ministry structures of the local church. One of the obvious advantages of church planting is being able to optimize a congregation for post-Christendom ministry from the beginning. New ecclesial expressions are emerging from the Missional Movement that are both exciting and hopeful. The established congregation, however, has a significant role to play in the future of the church’s mission. For instance, the average age of a congregation in the Church of the Nazarene in USA/Canada is 55 years.⁴⁷ As pastors accept appointments in these contexts one of their

⁴⁵ Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 47.

⁴⁶ Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 47.

⁴⁷ Rich Housel, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2021. Housel, director of the Nazarene Research Center adds: “The median year [of Nazarene churches in USA/Canada] is 1957, meaning that of all the churches still existing in 2020, half were started in 1957 or before, and half were started since 1957.” A significant number of churches have been started in recent years, making the average age (55) younger than the median age (64).

challenges will be to lead a multi-generational congregation in ways that are mindful of an emerging post-Christian culture. A new imagination of missional engagement will be required, one that lives within the limitations of the people and resources available. As any seasoned pastor will testify, this kind of discernment is often a slow and deliberate process.

It would be short sighted to think the upheaval of Christendom's dissolution is the first time the church has navigated the tumult of cultural change. The Kingdom of God comes as "new wine," and the church historically has struggled to receive it in "old wineskins." Church history is full of these moments but is also replete with testimonies to the faithfulness of God.

In some contexts, the new wineskin that is needed is a missional church plant. For the established church, however, pastors and lay leaders must discern together what new thing God is doing and how their congregation can participate. Discipleship is the means of forming a culture of mission and partnership. In many ways this will be a process of "re-discipleship," as some practices will need to be abandoned and some will need to be recovered. This is the hope for *Better Together*. By providing a shared language and experience for pastors and lay people, a culture shift can begin that moves traditional and attractional models of ministry toward the new missional expressions that God is wanting for these congregations.

CHAPTER 2

MEASURING THE GAP

The *Better Together* curriculum is built on a missional reading of scripture and vision for ministry that attempts to bridge the gaps highlighted above. Before building a bridge, however, proper measurements must be made, starting with the term, “missional.” The concept’s broad popularity in the American church may undermine its usefulness. As this review of relevant literature will demonstrate, however, missional is more than a fad or technique. It is a way of deep theological reflection that inspires the church to announce good news to the world in both word and deed.

The first section measures the impact of the Missional Movement on the resourcing of pastoral leaders. It highlights the influence of Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998), considered by many as the “Father of the Missional Church Movement.” His prolific writings are consistently cited by contemporary authors and remains a foremost influence in shaping the church’s engagement with the post-Christian West. The section concludes with a consideration of the biblical theology of Christopher J. H. Wright, which provides practitioners with a cogent missional framework for teaching and preaching.

Section two considers the cultural shifts that are shaping ministry in America. A hallmark of the Missional Movement is the announcement of Christendom’s dissolution and the unraveling of traditional ecclesial structures. This is briefly considered before looking specifically at ministry in the wake of American individualism, a phenomenon that has influenced the rise of church growth strategies that pragmatically accommodate this disposition rather than redemptively challenge it. These are all cultural realities that must be measured carefully before attempting to bridge the gap between the church and society.

The third measurement of this review is a survey of missional discipleship in the Wesleyan theological tradition. The gaps *Better Together* intends to bridge are not deficiencies in technique or strategy but reflect an opportunity for the church to evaluate and renew its approach to discipleship. After a biblical foundation for missional discipleship is presented, the review explores Tammie Marie Grimm’s “Discipleship Matrix” as a theological framework for the different factors that contribute to the discipleship process in the local church. Discipleship is more than cognitive instruction but includes the *ethos* of the congregation and its perceived *telos* in tension with the spiritual disciplines and aspirational virtues that accompany an experience of entire sanctification.

The review concludes by returning to the gap between the church and its community. Missional thinking invites the church out of its enclaves to imagine what role it can have in the “peace and prosperity of the city.” (Jer. 29:7) It is vital, however, that churches properly evaluate what faithful community engagement looks like and consider best practices from the world of community development and organizing. This section evaluates traditional ministries of poverty alleviation and considers a holistic approach to forming partnerships with others in the community who share a commitment to the city consistent with the biblical vision of *shalom*.

Missional Church Movement and Its Shaping of Theology in the Local Church

The American church has become fascinated with all things “missional.” No single book is the cause of the word’s popularity, but the release of Darrel Guder’s *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* was unquestionably significant.⁴⁸ Concerning the rise of the Missional Movement, one writer described it as the “biggest

⁴⁸ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, eds., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1998).

development in Christianity since the Reformation.”⁴⁹ Although this description is sensational, it does speak to the broad embrace of the concept among American church leaders. A common thread in this embrace is the influence of Lesslie Newbigin.

The Influence of Lesslie Newbigin

Lesslie Newbigin returned to Great Britain in 1974 after completing nearly 40 years of missionary service in India. His distinguished career in ministry and prolific writings imagined what a fresh encounter with the Gospel might look like for the Western church, famously asking the question, “Can the West be converted?”⁵⁰ The Gospel’s potential to transform the post-Christian West was never in doubt, but whether the church would recognize the urgency of a renewed sense of mission remained the question. This was the primary focus of his ministry as one of the first leaders to “mind the gap” created by the rise of pluralism in the 20th century. He stands as a seminal figure in the modern church most notably as a prolific writer whose works coalesced around a call for the church to renew its original vocation as a people sent on mission with God.

Written in the twilight of his life, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is largely regarded as a thorough expression of his mature thought on mission and culture.⁵¹ It recognizes modernity’s influence on Christian epistemology in light of the pluralism that has come to characterize Western society, exploring how one might “know” the claims of the Christian faith are true amid so many competing worldviews that are all viewed as equals in this cultural milieu. Newbigin

⁴⁹ Christopher B. James, “Education that is Missional: Toward a Pedagogy for the Missional Church” *Papers* 2013, 18. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruitspapers/18> accessed November 10, 2021.

⁵⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 (January 1987): 2–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693938701100101>.

⁵¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans; WCC Publications, 1989).

summarizes the dominant epistemological position of the modern world as scientific knowledge, which is viewed as modernity's ultimate claim of truth for it can be tested and proved. That which can be proved by the scientific method becomes the default "plausibility structure" by which all other truth claims are judged. Christian belief from this perspective is viewed as something different and subservient to scientific knowledge since it cannot be empirically proven.

Newbigin fears that the church has allowed modern plausibility structures to undermine its own creedal confessions. He cautions those who perceive pluralism as an experience new to the church, reminding them that this was precisely the environment in which the New Testament was written.⁵² Newbigin refuses to be anxious about the church's prospects but offers a hopeful vision for how the church can respond to this contemporary experience of pluralism, especially in how it goes about its missional vocation. Rather than subjecting the claims of the Gospel to the scientific method, he invites the church to embrace unashamedly and humbly its own "plausibility structure," namely the call to "indwell" in the biblical story:

...we get a picture of the Christian life as one in which we live in the biblical story as part of the community whose story it is, find in the story the clues to knowing God as his character becomes manifest in the story, and from within that indwelling try to understand and cope with the events of our time and the world about us and so carry the story forward. At the heart of the story, as the key to the whole, is the incarnation of the Word, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus defines for his disciples what is to be their relation to him. They are to "dwell in" him. He is not to be the object of their observation, but the body of which they are a part. As they "indwell" him in his body, they will both be led into fuller and fuller apprehension of the truth and also become the means through which God's will is done in the life of the world.⁵³

⁵² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 157.

⁵³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 99.

Newbigin summons the church to indwell in its own story confidently and faithfully not as a sectarian enclave or an ideological bulwark but as a sent people trusting in the merits of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit to accomplish all their endeavors. The appropriate answer to the nervousness of the church in the face of secular encroachment is a resilient affirmation of this transcendent story. When this story is affirmed and shared a pluralistic society is not a threat to the church but an opportunity for missionary engagement in ways that result in fuller and deeper manifestations of the Gospel.

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society provides an epistemological foundation for a missional practice of evangelism that focuses on ministries of mercy and hospitality. In serving one's neighbor and collaborating with one's community for the mutual flourishing of the city, the church is practicing a holistic apologetic that resists the modern impulse to prove Christ's lordship through the plausibility structures of reason. A people fully indwelt in the biblical story demonstrate its authenticity in tangible acts of love as it embodies the incarnational and cruciform ways of Jesus in pluralistic contexts. In doing so, it provides space for the Holy Spirit to call and speak. This posture has become common in the missional movement and is consistent with Newbigin's understanding of the mission of God: "The words explain the deeds, and the deeds validate the words. Not that every deed must have a word attached to explain it, but that the total life of the community whose members have different gifts and are involved in the secular life of the society in which they share, will provide these occasions of challenge."⁵⁴

One could argue that "personal evangelism" as practiced by the modern evangelical church with its emphasis on cognitive creedal assertions is unnecessarily subjecting the Gospel to modernity's plausibility structure. On the other hand, the call to "social action" untethered

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 133.

from the biblical story and without some connection to the faith community is a humanistic pursuit of that falls short of the church's calling. As the church calibrates the appropriate tension between proclamation and service, Newbigin points to the life of Jesus as one who faithfully integrated both into his life and ministry. Both are essential practices of the church and are not mutually exclusive but exist in a tension of which the church must always be mindful. Newbigin reaffirms God's faithfulness in this process: "It is always a work of the Holy Spirit. It is always mysterious. The ways by which the truth of the gospel comes home to the heart and conscience of this or that person are always mysterious. They cannot be programs and they cannot be calculated. But where a community is living in alert faithfulness, they happen."⁵⁵

A Biblical Theology of Mission

The missional conversation at the level of pastoral leadership often focuses on strategic initiatives like church planting and externally focused ministries. The strength of the movement, however, is not clever strategies or innovations although those are certainly necessary for local church practitioners. Rather, a significant body of literature from contemporary thinkers has emerged that articulates a robust theology of mission that serves as the doctrinal backbone of the movement.

For pastors attempting to lead a renewal of mission in the local church, a cogent and succinct biblical theology is needed to support their preaching and leadership. Christopher J. H. Wright offers *The Mission of God's People* as a biblical theology that presents the people of God sent on the mission of God as the common thread that ties together the entire biblical narrative.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 133.

⁵⁶ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010).

This illuminating journey through the entire Bible builds upon his earlier work, *The Mission of God*, in which God's redemptive and reconciling purposes for all creation are offered as the unifying hermeneutic through which the nature of God and his dealings with humanity should be understood.⁵⁷ Both volumes call the church to ask itself the most fundamental of all existential questions, "Who are we?" and "What are we here for?" Wright argues convincingly that the church is that community that God has called into saving and loving relationship so that they might participate with God in the accomplishment of his mission of redemption and reconciliation.

Wright, like Newbigin before him, uses a missional hermeneutic to emphasize the importance of a people who "indwell" the biblical story. He narrates the story of God's election of Israel in great theological detail, carefully highlighting God's promise to bless the world through Abraham and his descendants. As his expositions seamlessly move into the New Testament, the life of Jesus, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church are presented as a fulfillment and continuation of Israel's story.

The church, therefore, is presented clearly within the narrative arc of the Bible, a position of ultimate importance for sustained missional faithfulness. The church is the continuation of what God began in Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Israel was created to be a light for the nations (Is. 49:6), Jesus fully embodies this as the "light of the world" (Jn. 1:5), and now the church is charged with extending Christ's illuminating presence (Mt. 5:14). This ecclesiological reading of the Bible presents the grand narrative in which the church is invited to participate. It's been a missionary movement from the beginning.

⁵⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

The Bible consists of four basic movements: 1. Creation, 2. Fall, 3. Redemption, and 4. New Creation. The mission of God's people must be understood in light of this story and its different parts. Recognizing that redemption occupies the majority of the biblical witness, Wright breaks this section down into seven sections with the work of Christ as the centerpiece and ultimate expression of God's redemptive purposes for creation.⁵⁸ A people who understand the story they are a part of will continually look to Christ, the centerpiece of their story, seeking to embody his character and continue his work.

As a theology of mission has captured the imagination of pastors and church planters, many are challenging the laity to focus on the marketplace and embrace the Spirit's call to live at work as a sent people. Christians are discovering how to make their business, classroom, clinic, or office a platform for the mission of God. Wright argues this posture is thoroughly biblical as the work of stewarding the garden was humanity's original vocation before the Fall.⁵⁹ The Christian committed to missional living understands their daily work as more than a means for acquiring wealth, but as a vocation worth doing with all one's effort and integrity. (Col. 3:17) Wright reminds Christians that one's daily work contributes to God's ultimate "new creation" as Revelation envisions the kings of the earth (i.e. stewards of creation) entering the new Jerusalem with their "splendor" and "honor." (Rev. 21:24-27) Christians committed to missional living are to consider their work as another aspect of human life that is being redeemed by God and thereby enjoined in the New Creation. Wright admonishes, "Your daily work matters because it matters to God. It has intrinsic value and worth. If it contributes in any way to the needs of society, the

⁵⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 40.

⁵⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 223.

service of others, the stewardship of the earth's resources, then it has some place in God's plans for this creation and in the new creation."⁶⁰

This optimistic view of physical world is a hallmark of missional theology and stands as a sharp critique of the pervasive view among evangelicals that the Bible's eschatological hope is singularly focused on individuals going to Heaven. In this prevalent evangelical view the physical world we live in will ultimately be destroyed and replaced with some ethereal nebulous where disembodied souls float through eternity. Poverty alleviation experts Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic refers to this distorted eschatology as "Evangelical Gnosticism."⁶¹ Like the ancient heresy, this brand of modern Gnosticism envisions a dualism in which spiritual realities like God and the human soul are good, while earthly realities like the human body and physical suffering are bad. In this bifurcation, the Gospel is disproportionately focused on the spiritual, directing the energy and resources of the church toward the proclamation of doctrinal truth, while neglecting the responsibility of the church to care for the physical needs of its community. A biblical theology of mission resists such a divide and envisions a holistic and integral approach. Not only does a biblical eschatology anticipate a new heaven and renewed earth, but it presupposes an ecclesiology in which God's people are invited to partner with God in his mission to bring it about.

The Mission of God's People ties the entire biblical story together as a calling for the church to recover "the wholeness of the Gospel."⁶² Wright correctly argues that the Gospel is both personal and cosmic. It's individual and communal. The Gospel cannot be reduced to

⁶⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 242.

⁶¹ Brian Fikkert and Kelly M. Kapic, *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn't the American Dream* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 93.

⁶² Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 274.

personal piety but must include the transformation of whole communities. Furthermore, believing and living are inseparable. A whole Gospel will produce people on mission with Jesus whose testimony is matched by the beauty and purity of their lifestyle.

Navigating the Cultural Shifts of Post-Christendom

There are multiple perspectives in the missional conversation over the last 30 years on what a theology of mission looks like and how a church is to join with God in the work of redemption. These can be nuanced in distinct ways depending upon a writer's theological heritage or how willing they are to allow sociological data to shape a vision for ministry. The entire movement, however, is agreed that Christendom is dissolving and churches in Western cultures are now living in post-Christian ecosystems. Newbigin was among the first voices to unpack this new reality, but many people in local churches remain ill-equipped to describe the cultural changes they see happening, both inside and outside the church.

The following is a brief historical survey of Christendom's rise and fall, moving to a more nuanced discussion of American individualism in a post-Christian context. A proper measurement of this cultural milieu is imperative for missional leaders hoping to lead renewal movements in the contemporary American church. A vision for ministry must be aware of this reality and its impact on the strategic endeavors of the local church.

The Fall of Christendom

The fidelity of the church to its divinely appointed mission is largely dependent upon its capacity to thrive as a movement and to resist the temptations of comfort and familiarity found within the bulwark of institutionalized religion. It is impossible to read the history of the Church without noticing this constant tension, a pressure that is episodically released in reformations or

revivals, as old wine skins prove to be unsuitable for a Word that is “living and active.” (Heb. 4:12)

Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE legalizing Christianity in the Roman Empire. This decision would ultimately lead to Christianity’s “triumph” in the West, as the state was now married with the church. Reflecting on this new arrangement, Bryan P. Stone writes:

Though the transformation was not immediate, so significant was the shift from Christians being a persecuted, deviant minority to Christians running the apparatus of the state and persecuting those who were now perceived as religious deviants that one might build a good case for the distinction between a pre-Constantinian church and a Constantinian church as in many ways more fundamental than more prominent distinctions within present-day Christianity such as Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, liberal, conservative, evangelical and mainline.⁶³

The Church baptizes Constantine’s politics, happy to be free from the threat of persecution and endowed with newfound power and influence. The result is the loss of a movement and the establishment of an institution, commonly referred to as *Christendom*.

In the early days of the church, it was difficult for someone to become a Christian. It required a renouncement of the dominant cultural religion and a subversive confession of faith in an itinerant Jewish rabbi who was crucified, resurrected, and exalted as Lord. Now that Caesar embraced this claim as his own, the spread and growth of Christianity as an institution became a state-sponsored venture, one imperial authority hoped to leverage for political gain. John Wesley writing in the 18th century laments, “Persecution never did, never could give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received...was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches,

⁶³ Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2007), 117.

honours, and powers upon the Christians, more especially upon the clergy.”⁶⁴ Bearing a cross becomes *en vogue* under Constantine. Christ’s radical call to love one’s enemies is negated by the ambitions of the empire. The cruciform life that once distinguished believers from the world is sucked up into the *ethos* and power structure of the state, resulting in a new dominant culture that bears the name Christian but fails to embody its true essence.

The shadow of Christendom continues to loom over a 21st century Church attempting to live out the *missio Dei* in the world. That shadow, however, is becoming smaller as the institutions of Christendom lose influence in the world. Churches in America lament this loss, often looking to vestiges of Christendom in national and local government to prop up an ecclesial influence in society. Alan J. Roxburgh described this decline of traditional ecclesial structures in America as the “Great Unraveling” in his 2015 book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*.⁶⁵ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile build on this idea throughout their volume, *Participating in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*, advancing Roxburgh’s thesis that the way forward will not be found in the church dressing up existing structures to be more flashy and attractive or entrenching itself against the dominant cultural milieu as Christendom’s last hope. Rather, these voices coalesce to imagine the church joining with God and embedding itself in the neighborhood in a new and deep way of discipleship that is attune to what God is already doing.

⁶⁴ Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 119 quoting John Wesley, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, Franz Hildebrandt, Gerald Robertson Cragg, and Frank Baker, *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons II, 34-70* (United Kingdom: Clarendon, 1975), 462-3.

⁶⁵ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape for the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015).

Ministry to the American Individual

Van Gelder and Zscheile present the mission of God rooted in his trinitarian nature and how a church amid cultural, technological, and generational shifts might faithfully and contextually participate in this. Even as the national narratives of individualism and consumerism dominate the imaginations of emerging generations, the church has a powerful vocation to invite a fragmented and broken culture into an alternative story that envisions a hopeful future.

The “Great Unraveling” has been accelerated by various technological shifts, not the least of which is the rise of social media. Generations Y and Z are leaving the church for other “tribes” who promise more meaningful connection than is normally experienced in the church. Van Gelder and Zscheile explain, “The hunger for community remains, but people leave the church in part because the church isn’t providing it.”⁶⁶ Causation for this exodus of young people from the church is a multifaceted discussion, but the influence of the digital revolution on the church cannot be ignored.⁶⁷

Social media gives people connectivity but deprives them of intimacy. Authentic relationship with others who support them, genuinely care for them, and are in close enough physical proximity to hold them accountable has been replaced by hyper-connectivity in which, “the only referent a person now has for making decisions is him- or herself, with the focus

⁶⁶ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 229.

⁶⁷ For a thorough discussion on this trend see Josh Packard and Todd W. Ferguson, “Being Done: Why People Leave the Church, But Not Their Faith” *Sociological Perspectives* Vol. 62, Issue 4, 2019.

shifting toward pursuing personally meaningful experiences...People have begun to tribalize in order to secure some form of community.”⁶⁸

In these “substitute” communities, young people are given significance and the opportunity for meaningful participation. This stands in sharp contrast with the traditional authority structures of the church and the professionalized clergy. Ecclesial hierarchies are designed from the top down, embodied most clearly in the weekly sermon as the lone authority figure stands before the congregation and offers a one-way stream of information and moral exhortation. This is an obvious caricature of the preaching moment, but it represents the authority structures to which those who are “done” with the church are resistant. They seek a more dialogical and participatory environment, one that encourages meaningful user engagement beyond serving on the parking team or handing out bulletins at the door.

The disenchantment of young people is exacerbated by the significant amount of ministry in the local church that is reserved for the resident “professionals.” In most church leadership models, the clergy and staff prepare Christian goods and services for religious consumers to enjoy, an inadequate attempt to engage a people hungry for significance. So much of their lives is already marked by unexamined consumption, and the church, which should be calling them to join God in the redemption of all things, gives them yet another product or a menial volunteer opportunity within the insular programming of the church. Van Gelder and Zscheile contend the church’s hope for reengaging this group is through increased opportunities for meaningful participation and dialogue:

There is a major opportunity for churches to provide what few spaces or communities in American society are providing: generative spaces for conversation across lines of social difference and interpretation of the longings and losses that define human life. Unlike

⁶⁸ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 198.

other organizations, the church can do this in the context of prayer, discernment, and making connections with the stories of the gospel.⁶⁹

In describing the challenge of the established church to build community in this hyper-individualized environment, Van Gelder and Zscheile explain, “A culture of individual autonomy that has been taken to an extreme trajectory has eroded many traditional structures, institutions, and ways of belonging...The nation increasingly finds itself splintered into cultural micro-tribes.”⁷⁰ As the church deals with the unraveling of its institutions, an emerging generation appear to be looking elsewhere for relational connectedness, searching for life’s ultimate meaning through other narratives.

A group of sociologists led by Robert Bellah describe the origin of America’s individualism in *Habits of the Heart*.⁷¹ The United States, as a child of the Enlightenment who became an adult in modernity, has always idealized the “rugged individual,” an identity now intensified by the algorithms of social media. Individualism emerged in America in response to the struggle against “monarchical and aristocratic authority that seemed arbitrary and oppressive to citizens prepared to assert the right to govern themselves.”⁷² This skew towards the individual, as embodied in the philosophy of John Locke, was tempered by Protestant Christianity, which placed individual autonomy in the context of moral and religious commitments.

As the influence of Christianity fades from the center of public life with its inherent emphasis on selflessness and commitment to a higher authority, Americans are becoming

⁶⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 230.

⁷⁰ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 14.

⁷¹ Robert N. Bellah, ed., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁷² Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 142.

increasingly individualistic without the influence of a “community of memory” (i.e. church) to keep personal passions aimed at a common and benevolent telos. Bellah’s warning in 1985 is as predictive as it is prophetic:

We thus face a profound impasse. Modern individualism seems to be producing a way of life that is neither individually nor socially viable, yet a return to traditional forms would be to return to intolerable discrimination and oppression. The question, then, is whether the older civic and biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights.⁷³

The challenge for discipleship in this broad context is calling people to lay down their rights and embrace the cruciform life of Jesus when virtually every other impulse of the dominant culture is to leverage one’s rights for the sake of personal upward mobility. This has been exacerbated by the internet and social media, a phenomenon foreseen by Bellah in 1996 when online engagement was still in its infancy, “...the Internet, the electronic town meeting, and other much ballyhooed new technological devices are probably civically vacuous because they do not sustain civic engagement. Talk radio, for instance, mobilizes private opinion, not public opinion, and trades on anxiety, anger and distrust, all of which are deadly to civic culture.”⁷⁴

Moral philosopher James K. A. Smith argues that America’s “rugged individualism” is reinforced by the regular practices, rhythms, and routines of the culture, something he calls, “cultural liturgies.” A cultural liturgy is a “thick” identity-shaping practice that explicitly or implicitly aims one’s loves and desires toward a vision of perceived human flourishing. Smith draws from St. Augustine positing that human beings are not primarily *thinking* creatures but

⁷³ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 144.

⁷⁴ Robert N. Bellah, “Individualism and the Crisis of Civic Membership,” Religion Online, accessed November 9, 2020, <http://www.religion-online.org/article/individualism-and-the-crisis-of-civic-membership/>.

loving creatures. Paraphrasing Augustine, he writes, "...our ultimate love is what we worship."⁷⁵ Consequently, discipleship must be more than cognitive instruction but must include the cultivation of particular loves and desires that point the follower of Jesus toward the Kingdom of God.

Smith uses the language of worship to underscore the secular worldview-creating practices that are a part of daily life. "Liturgies are the most loaded forms of ritual practice because they are after nothing less than our hearts. They want to determine what we love ultimately."⁷⁶ In Christian worship, the source of human flourishing is the triune God as the regular, communal practice of gathering as the church liturgically aims the disciple towards a relationship with God and his people that is the source of ultimate meaning and joy. By contrast, Americans participate in competing "liturgies" at the shopping mall, the sports stadium, and in national patriotic celebrations. These are just a few of the ways in which human desires, affections, and allegiances are aimed toward visions of the "good life" that compete with a whole-hearted devotion to God and reinforce the ideology of American individualism. Smith warns,

From the perspective of Christian faith, these secular liturgies will often constitute a *mis-*formation of our desires – aiming our heart away from the Creator to some aspect of the creation as if it were God. Secular liturgies capture our hearts by capturing our imaginations and drawing us into ritual practices that "teach" us to love something very different from the Kingdom of God.⁷⁷

This brief look at individualism in America is not to suggest that calling people to follow Jesus has ever been an easy task for the church in any age. Jesus's call to servant leadership and

⁷⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Volume 1 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009), 51.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 87.

⁷⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 88.

laying down of personal rights and entitlements for the sake of others has always been a counter-cultural vision. It does, however, highlight one of the unique challenges the American church faces in the 21st century as ecclesial leaders and pastors are waking up to a post-Christian reality. America no longer speaks a common “second language” steeped in the biblical values of objective truth, respect for authority, or selfless commitments.

Ministry in a Secular Age

The loss of a Christian “second language” for Americans is a result of what philosopher Charles Taylor has described as the “secular age.” According to Taylor, the secular age is “an age in which all belief systems are contestable, and any claim of divine action is questioned.”⁷⁸ The American church was built on the assumptions of these shared, communal values, but as they fade and are replaced by a diverse and individualistic value system, pastors are adjusting to the new challenges of a secular age. Andrew Root builds upon the work of Taylor to write a trilogy of books entitled, “Ministry in a Secular Age,” in which he describes some of the defining cultural moments of the 20th century and reflects theologically on the practice of Christian ministry in this milieu. At a time when pastors are worried about waning church attendance and participation in institutional programming, Root reminds practitioners that the issue is deeper: “...our issue isn't necessarily people leaving the church but instead people no longer having ways to imagine the possibility of divine action or transcendence.”⁷⁹

Taylor suggests three different phases of history for understanding the progression towards the secular age. In the first, known simply as Secular 1, the pre-Enlightenment culture perceived the world as enchanted. Everything was fused with spiritual meaning and the great

⁷⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, kindle location 117.

⁷⁹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, kindle location 117.

cathedrals and institutions of the church were infused with innate spiritual energy that spilled over into the physical world. Even after the Enlightenment, this worldview prevailed, extending into the 1950s in America.

In Secular 2 an Enlightenment understanding of the world becomes more prominent. Americans began to understand secular space as a-religious. The sacred and the secular each have their own domain where people are free to enter the sacred and pursue the religious. However, these domains do not intersect. Disconnected from the transcendent pursuits of sacred space, individuals turn inward and the pursuit of discovering one's authentic self becomes the most important priority.⁸⁰

Root contends many church leaders are in a "Secular 2" frame of mind, approaching ministry as a turf war with culture.⁸¹ To gain ground, churches position faith formation as a pursuit more intellectually plausible than atheism, younger than Hollywood, and more attractive than the fleeting happiness of individual pursuits. Arguably, they are making the same mistake Newbigin describes as being a slave to modernity's plausibility structures. The Gospel is being evaluated by the scorecard of Secular 2 rather than the beauty of a life-changing encounter with Jesus, like Paul's Damascus Road experience.

The third phase, Secular 3, refers to the current situation in which nothing is transcendent. Root succinctly explains, "Where Secular 1 sees transcendence in different planes of existence and Secular 2 relegates transcendence to a spatial division between the religious and the a-religious, Secular 3 ultimately finds transcendence and divine action unbelievable."⁸² In

⁸⁰ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 6.

⁸¹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 123.

⁸² Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 109.

such an arrangement, the church cannot reduce its ministry to participation in its programs. Rather, it must renew its commitments to the Gospel. The message of being “in Christ” is the only message strong enough to resist the gravitational pull of Secular 3 and its disenchanting world of physical imminence. More than institutional commitments, the church calls a secular people to faith. Root explains, “Faith is *actually to enter into Christ*; it is to have our own being taken into the being of Jesus. Faith is to find our self bound to the faithfulness of Christ, who goes to the cross out of obedience to the Father.”⁸³

One cannot ignore the statistics of waning participation of young people, but rushing headlong into a narrowly focused campaign to attract contemporary youth is a short-sited endeavor. As the church indwells its own story (Newbigin), it can embrace the challenges of this Secular Age in total dependence upon the faithfulness of God. Despite the pull of Secular 3, humanity will always have an innate desire to discover and experience the transcendent, but the programs of Christendom built on the assumptions of a bygone era are no longer viable alternatives for this encounter.

The church in every age will be the only people to offer the world Spirit-empowered ministry, and this, argues Root, is what the church does best. He explains, “The only thing the church offers the world is ministry! And this only thing, as we’ve seen, is everything. It is the very location of Jesus Christ; it is the energy to turn death into life and make us new beings who have our being and action in and through ministry.”⁸⁴ Our culture has many options to entertain children or give self-help advice. The church, however, offers ministry, the ultimate pathway to

⁸³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 119-120.

⁸⁴ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 201.

becoming who humanity was authentically created to be. It's an invitation for one to die with Christ to experience his resurrected life and share this life with one's neighbor.

Conclusions on Ministry in America

The Great Unraveling, as unsettling as it may appear, has the potential to create new missional engagements untenable under the cumbersome burden of older structures. However, if one is looking for quick fixes and "how to" lists, the literature largely avoids such conventions. Rather, the church leader is invited to imagine new expressions of faithful ministry free of the trappings of Christendom and to think contextually about their community. Perhaps more than anything else, these voices are equipping leaders to ask better questions: How might the church decentralize its ministry and spread out into the neighborhood? What does ministry in America look like without a building? How does the church as a platform increase relational connectedness for a fragmented culture? These are only a sampling of the kinds of questions a new generation of church leaders will have to ask themselves and their congregations as they participate in God's mission in America.

The complexity of these questions requires a full-bodied theology at a time when theological reflection often takes a backseat to a baptized version of executive leadership training. Van Gelder and Zscheile contend that faithful missional engagement in America will not be realized by a traditional, evangelical reading of the Great Commission as the locus of the church's mission, as if God was not on mission until Pentecost. Rather, a trinitarian theology places mission in the heart of God, eternally present within the Godhead. Because God is missionary by nature, his church must be missionary in nature and operation. Elaborating on the implications of this theological vision, the Van Gelder and Zscheile envision discipleship in the contemporary American church as, "a deep and abiding participation in God's love through the

power of the Spirit... This rule is cruciform, shaped by meeting humanity in the depths of its suffering. It offers the promise of hope in a cultural moment in which many alternatives seem exhausted.”⁸⁵

One thing is abundantly clear: Constantine cannot fix the problem he created. As the church loses the political power and cultural influence it inherited from its Constantinian past, it must turn once again to one who makes all things new. Dry bones can live again, but they are not brought back to life in the king’s palace but in the valley. As the church embraces its place on the margins of a society it will learn to live where the first witnesses to the resurrection always called home. The early church never strayed far from the margins for this is where the mission led them. Here the church will thrive as the embodiment of the *missio Dei*, free of nationalistic influences and completely sustained by the life-giving nourishment of the Holy Spirit, enlivening its proclamation and service.

A Biblical and Theological Understanding of Missional Discipleship

As contemporary theologians and practitioners approach the task of making disciples in a post-Christian culture, a common critique of traditional discipleship programs like Sunday school or small groups is they represent an attempt at spiritual formation that “has been focused on learning and gaining knowledge rather than the transformation of a whole person’s life.”⁸⁶ Rote memorization of a catechism or the ability to articulate certain creedal statements is a vision for disciples that falls short of Jesus’s call to follow him, a holistic invitation that includes one’s entire being.

⁸⁵ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission*, 286.

⁸⁶ Andrew Hardy and Dan Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, After Christendom Series (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 23.

Missional Discipleship in the Bible

Drawing from *Missional Discipleship After Christendom* by Andrew Hardy and Dan Yarnell, the following presents a biblical vision for missional disciples that understands the original call of Jesus to become a disciple who makes disciples and thus, an active participant in the mission of God.

The Synoptic Gospels. Jesus issues the first call of discipleship: “Follow me.” This simple mandate to walk in his steps, listening to his instructions and learning his ways, is woven throughout the Synoptic Gospels, forming the essence of a pre-Christendom invitation that must be the foundation for a post-Christendom revival.⁸⁷ These historical accounts of Christ’s life and ministry present a picture of discipleship that is framed by three imperatives as the disciple is commanded to come, follow, and go.

It is striking how often Jesus invites his disciples to come, something that prominent rabbis in the first century would not do. A rabbi would wait for would-be followers to come to him, but Jesus seeks those who would be least likely to receive rabbinical tutelage and invites them to *come*: those who are weary are invited to *come* (Mt. 11:28), Peter is invited to *come* out of the boat (Mt. 14:29), children are invited to *come* (Mt. 19:21), after selling one’s possessions they are invited to *come* and follow (Mt. 19:21), and the faithful are invited to *come* and share in the Master’s happiness (Mt. 25:34). Jesus is taking initiative in seeking those who are lost and inviting them to be a part of his mission.⁸⁸

After one *comes* to Jesus, they are invited to *follow* him. The Synoptics make clear to the reader that being summoned by Jesus includes the call to follow him in the way of the cross, a

⁸⁷ Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 28.

⁸⁸ Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 30.

way that is often unclear to the disciples. Peter, for example, embodies the disciple who is confused about the full implications of discipleship. He confesses Jesus's identity as Messiah in Mark 8 but fails to grasp that Jesus will walk in the "narrow way" (Mt. 7:13) of a suffering Messiah, a road that few choose to traverse. Dan Yarnell explains, "Following is more than just physical movement, but involves the deeper commitment to embrace the kingdom values and live them fully, whatever the cost."⁸⁹

In each of the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is seen sending the disciples, commanding them to *go* out as partners, participants, and emissaries of his Kingdom. The "twelve" in Luke 9 are sent as authorized agents to continue Jesus's work, an action that is repeated and expanded upon in Luke 10 as the "seventy-two" are sent on a similar operation. Throughout the Gospels, the disciples are sent as the proxies of Jesus, a commissioning that crescendos in different ways after the resurrection. For Luke it is accompanied by the promise of the Holy Spirit. (Lk. 24:49, Acts 1:8) Matthew's "great commission" contains a trinitarian imperative as the climax of Jesus's call to discipleship. Those who *come* and *follow* are now *sent* by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to *go* and be disciples who make disciples, inviting others into the life-giving community they have experienced through Jesus.

The Pauline Epistles. The epistles of Paul reflect this mandate as he gives careful oversight and direction to the continued spiritual growth of these congregation. His desire for their spiritual maturity is summarized by his prayer for the Philippians, asking God that their love would, "abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1:9-11)

⁸⁹ Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 30-31.

This desire for Christlikeness continues throughout the Pauline corpus, most prominently in Paul's themes of "imitation." This first appears in Thessalonians as Paul boldly commends the young congregation for becoming "imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." (1 Thes. 1:6) Their imitation is referenced again in 1 Thes. 2:14 as they became an example for other churches who were also experiencing suffering. In both instances, imitation was linked to suffering, a clear reminder that the way of discipleship must include an embrace of the cruciform life of Jesus.

Paul's most explicit use of the imitation motif is in Corinth, when he says to the troubled church, "I urge you to imitate me." (1 Cor. 4:16) This theme swells near the end of the correspondence as he urges them, "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ." (1 Cor. 11:1) This exhortation is especially poignant set against the Corinthian church's well-documented internal struggles with division, sexual immorality, and doctrinal fidelity. This is Paul's urgent plea to protect the unity of the church and remember the commitments made to one another.

Commentators are right to point out the communal nature of this call, often in contrast to popular evangelicalism that sees these texts through the lens of the individual. In their proper context the call to imitate Paul, and therefore Christ, reminds the church of their responsibility to one another. Yarnell explains, "What seems to be implied here is the sense of servanthood, sacrifice, and the humility of Christ as the overall ethos that forms and informs the apostle, and therefore becomes a paradigmatic expression of what a Christ-like community can become."⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 85.

Imitation as a paradigm for discipleship is evident throughout the Pauline epistles, but the most notable aspect of this motif is that it continues the method of Jesus. First century rabbis invited their followers to imitate the Torah, but Jesus called the disciples to imitate him.⁹¹ As the literal embodiment of God's love for humanity, he stood as the moral exemplar, inviting his followers to walk in this cruciform way, to imitate his speech, and to emulate his compassion for others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously captures the essence of this call: "When Christ calls a man he bids him to come and die."⁹² Reducing this call to cognitive recognition of a doctrinal statement may qualify for church membership or designate one as a cultural Christian, but this alone does not mark one as a passionate follower of Jesus Christ.

Christians throughout the centuries have reflected on the totality of Christ's call, prompting devotional classics like *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis, *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon, and the aforementioned *Cost of Discipleship* by Bonhoeffer. A social learning theorist underscores the importance of imitating Christ in both word and deed, "People can acquire abstract principles but remain in a quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars."⁹³ A missional approach to discipleship as demonstrated by the Synoptic Gospels and the witness of Paul is a commitment to come, follow, and go, imitating Jesus, the ultimate moral exemplar, in every aspect of one's life.

Missional Discipleship in the Wesleyan Tradition

⁹¹ Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 78.

⁹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 8.

⁹³ Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, Prentice-Hall Series in Social Learning Theory (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1986) quoted in Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 77.

The call to go and make disciples is not general but specific, pointing to a particular kind of disciple that is to be formed by these efforts. In 2006, drawing upon their Wesleyan-Holiness theology, the Church of the Nazarene adopted a formal mission statement for the denomination, “To make Christlike disciples in the nations.”⁹⁴ The emphasis on “Christlike” is key, highlighting the ultimate goal of the disciple-making endeavor. Consequently, for churches in the Wesleyan theological tradition, the mission of the local church is only beginning at conversion. It continues through ministries that cooperate with the Holy Spirit to see the virtues and character of Christ formed within the disciple and reflected to the world through love, obedience, and faithfulness. The following explores discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition, highlighting its goal as the ongoing sanctification of the believer.

Tammie Marie Grimm, in researching the discipling and educational ministry of the United Methodist Church, has developed a framework for understanding this process. Her “discipleship matrix” builds upon the work of ethicist and Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre as, “a theoretical framework demonstrating Christian transformation as the result of an undivided life that integrates its various elements: Christian identity and vocation, the classic disciplines of the Christian faith and the role of Christian community.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Church of the Nazarene. Board of General Superintendents. 2009. “The Nazarene Future ... Making Christlike Disciples in the Nations: Quadrennial Address, 27th General Assembly, Church of the Nazarene, Orlando, FL.” *Holiness Today* 11 (5): 22–25.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=42579&site=ehost-live>.

⁹⁵ Tammie Marie Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation: The Practice of Wesleyan Discipleship and Transformative Learning Theory” PhD diss. (University of Manchester, 2016), 52.

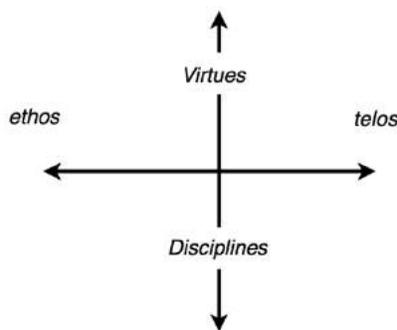


Figure 1 – The loci of the Discipleship Matrix⁹⁶

Sanctification: Recovering the Goal of the Christian Life. In his seminal work, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that after the Enlightenment a conception of a common human goal, namely the development of communal virtues, transitioned to individual projects of utilitarian self-improvement.⁹⁷ As this developed, the educational energy of the church shifted towards programs that enriched a variety of human elements and the goal of the church’s educational ministry was distorted with an assortment of self-help or personal interest curriculum coming to the forefront.⁹⁸

The need for a clear and common goal of discipleship becomes even more apparent as one attempts to disentangle the church from the influence of Christendom. In this arrangement where the church is coupled with cultural and economic power, the practices of the faith have the potential to be measured by their “usefulness” to the “empire” or by their effectiveness in

⁹⁶ Tammie Marie Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 63.

⁹⁷ Alasdair C. MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ This is explained in further detail in Richard R. Osmer, “Empirical Practical Theology” in Cahalan and Mikoski, eds. *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 61-77; Additionally, John M. Hull explains the dynamics of modernity transitioning to post-modernity in chapter 1 of *What Prevents Christian Adults From Learning* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 3-43.

producing positive organizational growth metrics. For instance, evangelism can become a “results oriented” practice as it has developed into a programmatic and sometimes ideologically driven exercise. Christians trained through the local church have focused almost exclusively on aggressively persuading people to make particular cognitive assertions of faith. The practice can feel like a recruitment campaign for ecclesial membership, despite the biblical and historic precedent of evangelism being the natural result of Christians living in the beautiful, virtuous, and counter-cultural ways of Jesus. This is what first drew people to Christian communities in the earliest days of the church. It was certainly not active recruitment campaigns. The exceptional and virtuous lives of the first Christians are the only plausible explanation for the explosive growth of the church in the midst of expansive, systematic, and violent persecution.

One can see this way of living partially recovered by the faith communities of the Wesleyan revivals. Like the pre-Christendom church, the early Methodists were a marginalized community that was defined by their works of piety and their works of mercy. In short, they were known for their character. This comparison is painted with the broadest of historical strokes, but clearly both groups were understood as a distinct kind of people. Wesley attributes this not to their works, but to the work of God in sanctification.

Herein lies a Wesleyan understanding of the kind of virtuous life that should be the goal of the discipling and educational ministries of the church. Grimm eloquently brings MacIntyre’s framework and Wesleyan theology into fruitful congruence:

Sanctification is to be so filled with the Spirit of God as to have no other distraction or purpose than to love God and to demonstrate his love to neighbours. To be made perfect in love for God and love for neighbour is to experience entire sanctification by imitating Christ. Imitating Christ’s attitudes and actions certainly determines a worthy *telos* for the Christian disciple.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 57.

On the other end of the horizontal line is *ethos*, which is the community of people in which the pursuit of holiness is undertaken. According to MacIntyre, one's movement towards sanctification is a "socially established cooperative human activity" that includes the culture of a community and encompasses the values to which it adheres.¹⁰² It is impossible to ignore the influence of community and the formational impact it has on one's spiritual growth. Discipleship is not exclusively an individual endeavor, but one that must be undertaken corporately within the context of a faith community. *Ethos*, therefore, is "the rule of life that governs the specific context in which disciples engage in specific activities or disciplines."¹⁰³

The Vertical Axis: Virtues and Disciplines. On the vertical axis are virtues and disciplines. Virtues have always been a centerpiece of the great philosophical traditions of Western civilization. The Apostle Paul, however, provides the simplest list of these "acquired human qualities" (MacIntyre) in his letter to the Galatians: "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Gal. 5:22-23). Grimm describes virtues as "the qualities of Christ that characterize his mind and the manner in which he acted in the world."¹⁰⁴ Wesley commonly referred to virtues as "affections" or "dispositions" and was careful

¹⁰² Grimm, "Holistic and Holy Transformation", 60.

¹⁰³ Grimm, "Holistic and Holy Transformation", 61.

¹⁰⁴ Grimm, "Holistic and Holy Transformation", 58.

to note that they were not the result of human striving but were made possible by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁵



*Figure 3 – The Vertical Axis*¹⁰⁶

Disciplines are at the bottom of the vertical axis and refer to those classical practices of spiritual formation designed to move the believer to a more mature relationship with Jesus. In the Wesleyan tradition, these are often called “means of grace,” classically understood as an “outward sign of an inward grace.” The early Methodists loosely classified their disciplines in two categories: 1) works of piety, which referred to those inward spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible reading; and 2) works of mercy, which referred to those means of grace through which the believer might extend God’s love to those in spiritual, physical, or emotional need.¹⁰⁷ Drawing upon this Wesleyan tradition of means of grace, Grimm defines disciplines as used in the matrix as, “any and all activities Christians engage in to demonstrate love for God and for neighbour.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 132.

¹⁰⁶ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 66.

¹⁰⁷ Benefiel, “Christian Holiness and the Wesleyan Mission of Mercy”, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 63.

With virtues at one end and disciplines at the other, one can easily see how this tension plays itself out not only in one's personal spiritual growth but in the development of a discipleship ministry in the local church. This provides a helpful framework for understanding the dialectic between "being" and "doing." Grimm's pastoral sensitivities are present as she observes the common practice in the local church of someone coming to faith and immediately being told what practices to embrace and how to do them. While this direction is good, it operates on the assumption that one's progression towards Christlikeness will continue in a simple linear direction based solely on engagement in spiritual practices.¹⁰⁹ A holistic picture of discipleship keeps the importance of spiritual disciplines and the development of Christ-like character in proper balance. Richard Foster is instructive: "God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us."¹¹⁰

Holiness of Heart and Life: Living in the Center of the Matrix. As the vertical dialectic of virtues and practices intersects with the horizontal dialectic of *ethos* and *telos*, the *Discipleship Matrix* forms a conceptual framework for a holistic understanding of discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition. Grimm posits that the nexus created by bringing these elements together is where the work of sanctification takes place. No single element is exclusively responsible for growth in Christlikeness. Rather, the entire process of sanctification is a transformational enterprise initiated by divine grace as humans respond and cooperate with the Holy Spirit.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Grimm, "Holistic and Holy Transformation", 64.

¹¹⁰ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) 7 quoted in Grimm, "Holistic and Holy Transformation", 65.

¹¹¹ Grimm, "Holistic and Holy Transformation", 69.

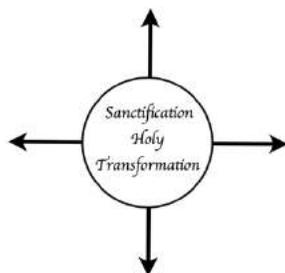


Figure 4 – The Center of the Discipleship Matrix¹¹²

Therefore, Christian educators must envision how to live and direct their ministries towards the center of this matrix. It is a calling to discern the right balance of virtues and practices and how such a balance moves towards the *telos* of holiness within the *ethos* of a faith community. As these elements converge, Grimm explains the picture of discipleship that emerges:

First, the endeavour and practice of discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition is a transformative experience that affects all aspects of a disciple who seeks to become more like Christ made possible by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Second...discipleship is a cooperative enterprise of human effort and divine grace. Third, Christian discipleship is a lifelong undertaking in which a disciple's growth and maturity in Christlikeness is both individually and corporately conceived.¹¹³

The *Discipleship Matrix* enables the practitioner to drill down into what Wesleyan scholars consider to be the heart of the movement. For Wesley, everything returned to “holiness of heart and life.” Blevins and Maddix explain, “As a broad description of transformation, holiness of heart and life encompasses Wesley’s objectives in evangelism, social reform, and educational practices for children and adults.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 69.

¹¹³ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 69.

¹¹⁴ Dean Gray Blevins and Mark A. Maddix, *Discovering Discipleship: Dynamics of Christian Education* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2010), 79.

The matrix rightly identifies holiness as the *telos* and brings the other components that contribute to one's sanctification into a cohesive and collaborative relationship. It is a tool that can be used to evaluate educational programs, curriculum, and one's spiritual walk. It aids the teacher in the process of discernment, something Blevins and Maddix argue is integral to Christian education: "Discerning which practices are truly means of grace involves both critical investigation and a constructive (or imaginative) appreciation of God's ongoing activity. Discerning the appropriate context and quality of formative practices, their relationship to basic beliefs, and their location in each historical period is a key challenge."¹¹⁵

As one considers the challenges of ministry in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the unraveling of Christendom, the *Discipleship Matrix* is an invaluable tool for the practitioner in the local church. This is not a time to chase the latest fad or pivot to utilitarian programming. Rather, it is a season for the church to live at the center of the matrix and be reminded of its North Star - holiness of heart and life. This is the goal of discipleship, one that will not be achieved without a proper understanding of the communal *ethos*, the classic disciplines of the Christian life, and the virtues the Spirit desires to engender in his people.

Creating Effective and Faithful Community Partnerships

The church's embrace of missional has been a rich and necessary renaissance of theology, as faith communities are understanding the Bible through this lens and reflecting on God's missionary nature. What this has meant in practice is an embrace of initiatives that move the church outside its formal liturgical life and into less formal "work of the people" in the broader community. Established churches are often seen as disconnected from their context, creating a perceived "gap" as mentioned in the introduction. Missional practices have sought to

¹¹⁵ Blevins and Maddix, *Discovering Discipleship*, 88.

close this gap by encouraging partnerships with other organizations that are contributing to the flourishing of the city.

The creation of these partnerships must be done carefully and through a process of prayerful discernment and informed research. Sometimes what the church perceives as a “need” may not actually be the most important issue that needs attention. Furthermore, labeling outreach activities as “missional” becomes a catch-all designation given to anything outside the normal programming of the church even though the activities may not be in alignment with the biblical vision of the *missio Dei*.

The creation of effective and faithful community partnerships is essential, especially as one considers the potential of a parish-based approach to ministry. The following is a review of resources coming from the world of Christian community development. It’s intended to equip the pastor and leadership with the perspective they need to understand their community, recognize both its assets and needs, and discern what ministries and partnerships are in alignment with the mission of God. It is essential that the local church have a holistic understanding of poverty and learn to engage this issue from a biblical and socially responsible way.

What is Poverty?

On the surface, people living in affluent and developed contexts would have little problems identifying poverty. Most know poverty when they see it. Poverty is the disheveled neighborhood, the family on food stamps, or the economically depressed community in America’s “rust belt” or the forgotten farming community in the rural south. However, a biblical definition of poverty transcends these stereotypical images. It’s not what you think.

Material Poverty. The most common definition of poverty is determined by material abundance or scarcity, a condition consistently addressed in scripture. The Prophets warn against

the exploitation of the poor, Jesus repeatedly makes a special effort to minister to the marginalized, and the early church gives special attention to widows. Christians seeking to live out their faith have multiple examples of heroes in scripture specifically ministering to the materially poor.

A comprehensive look at scripture reveals that poverty is multifaceted, an understanding that is foundational to any church wanting to engage in transformational ministry with the poor. In *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert argue that a disproportionate amount of resources and energy have been spent addressing material poverty, a condition they describe as a symptom of more pervasive disease. They envision a holistic approach: “Material poverty alleviation is working to reconcile the four foundational relationships so that people can fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.”¹¹⁶ Human beings are created to live in harmonious and interconnected relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

Relational Poverty. The Bible reveals that poverty is primarily a relational condition. This is consistent with the biblical vision of *shalom*, a term often translated simply as “peace,” but as a biblical concept it means so much more than the absence of conflict. It refers to all these relationships functioning efficiently and holistically for individuals and communities. Bryant Myers, in his seminal work on transformational development, *Walking with the Poor*, concludes, “Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.”¹¹⁷ At the

¹¹⁶ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor--and Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 74.

¹¹⁷ Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Rev. and updated ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011), 143.

most basic level, therefore, poverty must be understood in relational terms and not in comparison to physical abundance or scarcity.

Traditional poverty alleviation strategies have addressed physical needs and failed to address the lack of relational wholeness that have contributed to those material deficits. “A person experiences relational poverty when they are unable to enjoy a proper relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.”¹¹⁸ When a breakdown in one of these four key relationships occurs, it creates dysfunction that sometimes manifests itself as physical need, but not always. The absence of *shalom* extends beyond the materially poor, a condition Myers describes as, “the poverty of the non-poor.”¹¹⁹ Relational poverty is experienced by people across the economic spectrum, as evidenced by high rates of workaholism, divorce, and substance abuse among the affluent. Everyone experiences relational poverty in some way, but some are more equipped to hide it than others.

Spiritual Poverty. This relational brokenness is pervasive in all aspects of human life, resulting in an economic, political, and social system that makes daily life a struggle to survive for many. What causes this breakdown of relational wholeness working against the life God intends? The Christian story is unequivocal in its diagnosis: human sin. Sin is rebellion against God and his purposes for creation. It is the exertion of one’s desires over and against the well-being of others and the will of God. This is the human condition that undergirds all aspects of society, resulting in income inequality, economic injustice, generational disenfranchisement, and systemic racism.

¹¹⁸ Brian Fikkert and Kelly M. Kapic, *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn’t the American Dream* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 165.

¹¹⁹ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 145.

A Christian worldview recognizes these realities as the “bad news” of scripture, manifestations of the spiritual poverty of humanity. There is “good news,” however. Through the reconciling work of Jesus, the church can offer a way out of spiritual poverty in all its forms and into a life of relational wholeness and peace.

This holistic understanding of poverty demonstrates both a warning and a promise for poverty alleviation ministries. The warning is to remember that material poverty is a symptom of a greater disease. Although addressing immediate needs and delivering resources may be the most expedient thing to do, it falls short of the church’s missional mandate, treating a symptom while failing to address the underlying condition. The promise is in the latent potential for the Gospel that is present in the poverty alleviation efforts of the local church, as they are intentionally designed to include proclamation and opportunities for response.

The Biblical Story of Change

Social service providers often adopt a “theory of change” as a unified philosophy to guide their vision, strategies, and initiatives. Similarly, it behooves ministries to adopt a “story of change” based on the metanarrative of scripture, answering the following fundamental questions as a basis for their work: 1) What is the goal of life? and 2) How is this goal achieved?¹²⁰

What is the goal of life? As poverty alleviation ministries in the America build out their strategies, care should be taken to ensure the dominant narrative of the “American dream” doesn’t replace the overarching narrative of scripture. Because America places a disproportionate emphasis on the accumulation of physical goods and material wealth as a means to happiness, it’s not uncommon for churches to tacitly adopt a similar goal in their approach to ministry among the poor. On the surface, the “American dream” narrative sounds like a simple equation,

¹²⁰ Fikkert and Kopic, *Becoming Whole*, 39.

one that could even be expressed syllogistically: *Material abundance is necessary for human thriving. The poor do not have material abundance, but we do. Therefore, we will give our excess to enable the poor to thrive.* As reductionistic as this sounds, if church benevolence volunteers in America were to critically evaluate their ministries many of them would find this to be the “theory of change” driving their ministry, rather than God’s story of change in the Bible.¹²¹

The Bible offers a counter-cultural narrative, one that recognizes the relational and spiritual nature of poverty, as well as what God has done in Christ to transform those who experience it. God, who exists in perfect, trinitarian relationship within himself, created humanity to live in relationship with him and in the *shalom* of relationships with others. These relationships are broken by sin, as evidenced by single moms who can’t make rent, by children who can’t pay attention in school because of hunger, by immigrants who are coerced into working for unlivable wages, and by men who have been passed up for high-paying union jobs because of systemic racism.

The Christian story of change recognizes that the ultimate goal of ministry with the poor is a restored relationship with God, self, others, and creation. Benevolence programs or government assistance can provide material things, but the temporary relief of food one did not choose or dollars for which someone has not labored does not accomplish the ultimate goal of restored relationships. In fact, when carelessly administered, such efforts disempower the poor, rather than facilitate the relational wholeness God intends.¹²²

¹²¹ Fikkert and Kapic, *Becoming Whole*, 39.

¹²² Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 4.

A vision of restored relationship recognizes that the poor are suffering the two-fold loss of *identity* as those created in the image of God and *vocation* as those entrusted to work and steward the earth. “Both identity and vocation are critical from a biblical perspective. We must know who we are and the purpose for which we were created. Therefore, restoring identity and recovering vocation must be the focus of a biblical understanding of human transformation.”¹²³

Therefore, based on the Bible’s story of change, the goal of ministry with the poor is to facilitate human thriving through restored relationships with God, self, others, and creation, as people realize their identity as image bearers and embrace their vocation as stewards of creation and its resources.

How can this goal be achieved? This is a noble goal, but given the limited resources of poverty alleviation ministries in the local church, how can it be realized? Fortunately, the Bible’s story of change does not present a lofty goal without the supernatural means of seeing it achieved. Moving people from poverty in all its forms into relational wholeness is a miracle of grace, one that God is committed to accomplishing through his church.¹²⁴ This is good news for those on the front lines of this work. God is committed to human flourishing, a truth that on its own is enough to know this goal can and will be realized! Recognizing the supernatural component of this work separates Christian ministries from social services and government agencies, a reality that can be easily overshadowed by the intense and overwhelming nature of this work.

Local ministry leaders can be encouraged by knowing this is God’s work, and he will accomplish it. Their role is to partner with him in what he is already doing. This begins by

¹²³ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 178.

¹²⁴ Fikkert and Kapic, *Becoming Whole*, 207-8.

knowing their context and evaluating their resources in order to discern how God wants to use them. Every ministry is different, every context is nuanced, and every community has unique needs. There is no one-size-fits-all approach in determining the “how.” There are, however, principles that should shape holistic ministry programming with the poor. The following is a synthesis of ministry design principles from Brian Fikkert, Kelly Kopic, and Bryant Myers:¹²⁵

1. Learn and respect the history of a community.
2. Move people from participation to empowerment.
3. Ministry should be rooted in and point back to the local church.
4. Integrate God’s story of change into volunteer training.
5. Use relief, rehabilitation, and development practices appropriately.
6. Focus on assets, not on needs.
7. Use participatory rather than blueprint approaches.
8. All interventions should be pro-work.
9. Intentionally invite people to saving faith in Jesus, including whole-person discipleship techniques.
10. Address broken systems by navigating existing ones, creating alternatives, and/or reforming them altogether.

These principles serve as a guide for practitioners in the development of ministries that not only alleviate material poverty but move people toward relational and spiritual wholeness. By keeping them at the forefront of program design, they ensure that the goal of the Bible’s story

¹²⁵ Fikkert, Kopic, and Myers are leading experts in Christian community development and poverty alleviation. Their work is largely congruent with one another as demonstrated throughout this section. These principles are drawn from Myers’ *Walking with the Poor* (Chapter 7) and Brian Fikkert and Kelly M. Kopic, *A Field Guide to Becoming Whole: Principles for Poverty Alleviation Ministries* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2019), 151.

of change is not lost, helping to prevent a drift toward unhelpful practices that ultimately disempower the poor and perpetuate cycles of generational poverty.

The following section highlights some of the historic ways that churches have neglected these principles.

Church Benevolence Programs: A Story of Good Intentions

The church has a proud legacy of engaging in radical acts of courage and compassion, many times resulting in revolutions that have changed society. It was Christians that cared for unwanted babies in ancient Rome, who worked for the abolishment of slavery in Great Britain, and who engaged in peaceful protests to establish civil rights in the United States. Many churches today, however, are serving the poor through ministries of benevolence that fall short of this rich tradition of social transformation.

Benevolence Funds. Parish-based benevolence funds offer help as needs arise. On the surface this seems like an appropriate response to a material need. However, benevolence funds aimlessly dispersed without a long view of transformation may do more harm to a materially poor person than good.

Fikkert and Corbett argue that a church's response to a need reflects what they believe is the cause of their problem.¹²⁶ If the church believes a person's problem is a lack of material resources, it will consult its established benevolence policy and disperse resources accordingly. If a church is thinking holistically, however, it considers the person's lack of education, need for job preparedness, the gaps in community resources, or the relational poverty that has caused this need. Each of these factors warrants a different response. For instance, if one believes a lack of knowledge is the root cause of the need, a church might consider moving benevolence funding

¹²⁶ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor--and Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 52-53.

toward educational options in its community. To refuse to do so is to merely treat a symptom of a deeper disease.

A benevolence approach is not entirely ineffective and clearly is the most appropriate action during a tragedy or a truly unforeseen circumstance. This is rarely the case, however, when benevolence funds are released.

Food Assistance Programs. The church's role in hunger relief initiatives is well documented. Soup kitchens, food pantries, and homeless shelters are scattered across the United States in both urban and rural areas, many of them with deep connections to a network of sponsoring congregations. Offering a "cup of cold water" in Jesus's name will always be one of the most tangible things believers can do for those in need. And yet, our food assistance programs are riddled with disempowering practices that, "give a man a fish" and do nothing to teach fishing. Moreover, most churches are not even considering the deeper work of liberation and development that might empower marginalized people to "own the pond." Why do so many churches invest large amounts of resources in handing out food and so little in the holistic development of people?

Robert Lupton, a Christian community development expert in Atlanta, has written about his efforts to move congregations from one-way distributions of food to community grocery cooperatives. In the co-op model, the target community is organized, and their collective buying power is leveraged to provide affordable food for the most vulnerable. The community owns the "store" where the food is purchased by qualifying participants at drastically reduced rates. He recounts in *Toxic Charity* the exasperated response of a church pantry worker to his long-term proposal, "It's just easier to give the food away."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 112.

Churches need to approach this issue with the same honesty and candor. It is undoubtedly easier, but is it better? Is it holistic? Is it in keeping with the Bible's story of change?

Providing Relief When Development is Needed. This is characteristic of the church providing relief when the hard work of development is what's necessary. Relief is "the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis."¹²⁸ The Good Samaritan is an example of relief, one that Jesus exalts in commanding his followers to "go and do likewise." (Lk. 10:37)

Development is "a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved – both the 'helpers' and the 'helped' – closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation."¹²⁹ Church leaders can look to the biblical example of Stephen, who organized a ministry that distributed food but also integrated the whole church, ensuring that relationships with God and one another were strengthened in the process. (Acts 6)

Distinguishing the need for relief from the need for development is crucial for churches that want to make a difference and be a transformational agent in their communities. Fikkert and Corbett explain, "One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make – by far – is in applying relief in situations in which...development is the appropriate intervention."¹³⁰

Examples of this abound, but the most glaring may be the world's response to Haiti after the devastating earthquake of 2010.¹³¹ Charitable organizations, both Christian and secular, poured relief into Haiti, a country with a long history of dependency upon its more developed

¹²⁸ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 99-100.

¹²⁹ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 100.

¹³⁰ Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 101.

¹³¹ *Poverty, Inc.* directed by Michael Matheson Miller ([Grand Rapids, Michigan]: PovertyCure, [Sausalito, California]: Ro*co Films Educational, 2015)

neighbors. Long after the initial relief phase was appropriate, agencies failed to move towards development. Haitian farmers had no incentive to plant or harvest rice because the market price had been depressed by the constant influx of free, imported rice.

Could churches, with the best of intentions, be doing the same thing? By refusing to do the hard work of development, could they be disempowering the poor? The biblical theory of change says a missional church can do better.

Conclusion – Evaluating the Challenges

The strength of a movement is its agility. Likewise, unburdened by the bureaucracy of institutions, renewal movements in the church often gain momentum and adherents before ecclesial overseers can satisfactorily evaluate it. The Missional Church Movement has matured beyond this point as evidenced by its mainstream embrace among major denominational hierarchies in America. Consequently, the word “missional” is overused making it an ambiguous modifier commonly used to describe novel, externally focused ministries, making this measuring of the gaps necessary.

Crafting a vision for missional faithfulness is a challenging endeavor. The church has not been immune to the broad cultural shifts and the advent of disruptive technologies that have made navigating change and transition a regular part of leadership. Knowing what the gaps are and accurately measuring them, however, is a faithful exercise of discernment that a wise leader will do. This review of literature has been an attempt to recognize the contours of American culture, explore the depths of God’s missionary nature, and imagine who the church can become as it participates with God in his mission to save the world. The measurements reveal the following:

1. A theology rooted in the missionary nature of God is a framework that will serve the contemporary church well, but it must be expressed in the church's practices.
2. As the vestiges of Christendom continue to hold influence, the church must learn to see secularism and pluralism as opportunities for faithful ministry and not as signs of impending doom.
3. For many churches, making the shift to a missional model of ministry will require a culture change. The attempt to employ missional strategies will fail if not supported by a culture (*ethos*) of mission (*telos*) in the church. A renewed commitment to discipleship rooted in meaningful ministry and service is an effective tool in shaping a congregation's internal culture.
4. Ministry outside the walls of the church must include partnership with other organizations that are working for the flourishing of the city. The church is a latent hub of personal resources waiting to be released. A missional leader will discern who in the community is doing work in alignment with the mission of God and deploy people and funding accordingly.

CHAPTER 3

BRIDGING THE GAP TOGETHER

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd tells the story of Prince Vladimir the Great sending envoys to Constantinople to explore Byzantine Christianity. The sights and sounds of the Christian community evoked a sense of awe and wonder, causing them to question whether they were on earth or in Heaven. They encountered a transcendent beauty that drew them to the truth of the faith and ultimately led to Russia's adoption of Christianity.¹³²

This apologetic of beauty has always been a hallmark of church. The first Christians were known for their love and for the remarkable lives that they lived. One example of this is the rise of Christian funeral associations in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Giving the dead a proper burial was costly and was exclusively reserved for the nobility and the wealthy. As Christianity spread with its fervent belief in a bodily resurrection, Christian funeral associations began to serve communities throughout the Roman Empire by properly embalming and burying the poor. The bodies of the indigent would normally be thrown into a pauper's field or discarded with the carelessness of the daily trash. The Christians, however, honored them, ministered to their families, and prepared their bodies in hope of the resurrection to come.¹³³

The investment of time and resources to bury the dead might be perceived by some as wasteful, but it was a lavish display of love that contextualized the depth of God's love for humanity. The modern-day example of this is Mother Teresa, whose ministry to the dying in Calcutta embodied a beauty that reflected the ways of Jesus to the world and confirmed the truth

¹³² Brian Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World: Rediscovering the Allure & Mystery of Christianity* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2012), xiii.

¹³³ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 57-8.

of the Gospel. This is the beauty that will save the world. Zahnd explains, “Thus the cruciform (the shape of a cross) is the eternal form that endows Christianity with its mysterious beauty. Simply put, the cross is the form that makes Christianity beautiful! The cross is the beauty of Christianity because it is at the cross that we encounter co-suffering love and costly forgiveness in its most beautiful form.”¹³⁴

The focus of this dissertation and curriculum is on the established American church with an attractional model of ministry. In that context, evangelism has historically been understood as a cognitive enterprise focused on the apologetics of reason. In a post-Christian reality, however, the church is invited to recover the apologetic of beauty it embodied in its infancy. If Newbigin’s admonition to not embrace modernity’s plausibility structure of reason is to be heeded, the church will imagine how it can do ministry in ways that fully indwell the biblical story and its divine aesthetic of life out of death, victory through suffering, and beauty from ashes. This is a compelling narrative for a post-Christian world with the potential to bridge the gaps between the church and culture, especially when told through the beautiful lives of God’s people as they serve their community on God’s mission.

Ministry in a post-Christian context is like the position of the Israelite exiles in Babylon. They faced the challenges of remaining faithful to their story, but they were also called to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city.” (Jer. 29:7) A local church in partnership with others in its community to promote human flourishing reflects this dynamic. A congregation can remain faithful to its unique forms of worship and at the same be intentional about sending people in partnership with others outside the church as bridge builders both to *and* with the community. In

¹³⁴ Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World*, 6.

this way, the church extends the life-giving presence of God in mutual partnership with its neighbors.

The four prescriptions in this chapter are for the established, American church with an attractional model of ministry that desires to bridge the gaps described in Chapter 1. The first two bridges are more internal, calling the church to match its missional theology with the formational practice of worship and to recalibrate its leadership structure to be more empowering for the laity. These inward-focused prescriptions are necessary to create a culture shift in the church for a more missional model of ministry to take root and for community partnerships to gain high levels of participation.

The last two bridges envision a church in partnership with its community, as it sends an empowered laity into the marketplace and establishes criteria for effective community partnerships. As the church comes alongside organizations from different social service sectors, a secular culture sees a beautiful and convincing people committed to human flourishing, providing a platform for the church to offer a winsome testimony to the grace of God.

Worship as Missional Practice

The beauty of a church engaged in partnership for the flourishing of the city is a compelling witness, but the formation of a people willing to do this does not happen serendipitously or in a vacuum. Rather, it begins with the formational practices of the local church that are intentionally aimed at the mission of Jesus. The church's practice of worship is the locus from which all other practices flow, and thereby is integral to a missional vision of ministry.

The attractional model of ministry that is so prevalent in American evangelicalism primarily views the weekly worship gathering as an introduction to faith for "seekers." Every

element of the service is designed to be easily understood by a non-believer, thus creating multiple “on ramps” for someone who may be exploring the Christian faith.¹³⁵ In this model, the worship event is filled with new music styles and creative presentations of the Gospel. The weekly gathering becomes primarily focused on evangelism, something that Marva Dawn warns as misplaced, “...we *should* be using new music and new worship forms; however, we use them not to attract people, but because they are faithful in praising God and forming us to be his people. If we choose a certain musical style or other elements simply to appeal to those outside our walls, then we are forcing worship to bear the brunt of evangelism, which is instead the task of all believers.”¹³⁶

When done well there is an other-worldly beauty in Christian worship that is attractive and awe-inspiring, creating the sensation of a “thin space” between earth and Heaven. However, its primary function is not to attract nonbelievers, but to ascribe “worthiness” to God, the only one deserving of our ultimate affection. In this sense, worship is a “thick” practice filled with meaning and is the most significant, formational event for the worshipping community. Dawn is instructive, “...the worship service is part of the entire educational process of the Christian community by which God’s people are equipped to introduce others to his worthiness.”¹³⁷ The beauty of worship evokes a holy curiosity for unbelievers, but its most significant impact is the beautiful lives that are shaped by the liturgy and sent as bridge builders who extend life-giving communion with God to the culture.

¹³⁵ Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2011), 20.

¹³⁶ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1999), 123.

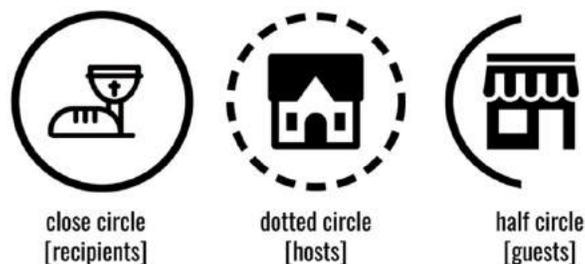
¹³⁷ Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, 123.

In the regular weekly rhythm of American life, people are formed in so many ways that run counter to the mission of Jesus. They are invited to consume their resources on toys and experiences they do not truly need, and they are compelled to achieve success and acquire stuff that ultimately do not satisfy. Worship, therefore, is an integral practice for the church desiring to create disciples committed to the mission of Jesus, for it is in worship that human desires and affections are rightly aimed toward the things of God. Connecting with the missional heartbeat of God is not something that will happen on a cognitive level but will be experienced in the heart as one's desires are transformed through the practice of worship. James K.A. Smith explains, "Worship is the ordering and reordering of our material being to the end for which it was meant."¹³⁸ Worship, therefore, is a missional practice. It is intentionally forming a particular kind of disciple, one who encounters the Word Incarnate in worship and desires to be a vessel of incarnational presence in the world.

As the congregation is blessed and sent from the worship gathering, it embodies what David Fitch calls "faithful presence" in the world. "Faithful presence names the reality that God is present in the world and that he uses a people faithful to his presence to make himself concrete and real amid the world's struggles and pain."¹³⁹ Fitch proposes three circles in which missional disciples embody this in the world: the close, dotted, and half circle.

¹³⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 143.

¹³⁹ David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016), 10.



*Figure 5 – The Three Circles*¹⁴⁰

In the close circle, the worshipping community is gathered around the table to hear the story of Jesus and reenact it through the sacrament of the Lord’s Super. The circle is close, not closed, as Jesus, the host, invites all to the table to receive his grace, healing, and forgiveness.¹⁴¹

The benediction of the worship service sends the congregation into the dotted circle. In homes and in the “third places” where friends gather, the worshipper is transformed from guest to host, as the presence of Jesus does not stay in the sanctuary but is made known in these spaces. The porous nature of the dotted circle allows for new friends and those in need of God’s healing presence to come in and find grace through the ministry of those who have feasted at the Lord’s table.¹⁴²

Christ’s presence is also not limited to the homes of disciples. As the followers of Jesus move into the world, they make the presence of Jesus known in the missional practices that characterize their lives. The key difference is that they recognize their place as a guest in the spaces of the world, thereby making Christ a guest where the hurting and broken can encounter him.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 40.

¹⁴¹ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 40.

¹⁴² Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 40.

¹⁴³ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 41.

This is a helpful paradigm for understanding the vocational call of disciples. They move out from the Lord's table and into the world where they become a means of grace. This movement is nourished and sustained through the life-giving presence of God revealed in worship. As disciples move away from the close circle into the world and back again, they participate in God's mission to redeem the world. Fitch cautions that becoming stuck in the close circle leads to an insular cycle of maintenance, while being constantly engaged in the half-circle produces exhaustion.¹⁴⁴ Moving regularly and consistently through the circles is a faithful rhythm of mission, as the church is "inhaled" into the life of God in worship and "exhaled" into the world as full participants in the mission of God.

Polycentric Leadership Structures

Missional church planting movements are growing and having a significant impact on the American church. The V3 Movement led by J.R. Woodward has trained and sent over 200 church planters to start what they would call "nontraditional" or "new" expressions of church that are highly contextualized with an entrepreneurial spirit that imagines church in a variety of places and forms.¹⁴⁵ This is just one example of grassroots movements that are embracing a missional theology to guide strategic engagement with a post-Christian culture. The strength of these movements is their creativity and ability to nurture vibrant churches that are connected and engaged with their community in meaningful ways.

For the missional church planter, leadership is understood as shared and more equally distributed than in the hierarchical structures of established churches. J.R. Woodward argues that a reimagined leadership structure is paramount to building the kind of faith community that

¹⁴⁴ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 42.

¹⁴⁵ "About V3," V3 Movement, accessed November 3, 2021, <https://thev3movement.org/about-v3/>.

sustains a disciple's passion and engagement in mission. In a move away from hierarchical leadership, he proposes a "polycentric" network of leaders that recognizes the many interrelated centers of influence potentially present within a new church plant. He writes, "The beauty of polycentric leadership is that it includes a relational group of people who learn to share responsibility, engaging in both leading and following, giving time for each leader to be on mission."¹⁴⁶

In this model, the pastor is no longer at the top of the organizational chart nor directly responsible for the success or failure of the church. Leaders are cultivated, equipped, and released with meaningful responsibility to accomplish the work of the church. He explains, "Christian leadership is not intended to be a one-man band, with a solitary figure declaring from a pulpit or executive office, with everyone else as spectators. Instead, the New Testament writers used the term *diakonia*, meaning 'servant' or 'service,' to identify people in leadership."¹⁴⁷ A polycentric approach organizes the church in a network of servants who understand their unique gifting and are empowered to lead externally in their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces as well as within the internal life of the church.

In the V3 Movement and its development of new churches, the number of leadership circles has varied, depending upon the size of the church and its rate of growth. There is no "copy and paste" model that is applied unilaterally to all new church ventures. What remains constant in the develop of these circles, however, are principles of mutual submission derived from trinitarian theology: 1) Community before clergy, 2) Submissional before sergeants, 3)

¹⁴⁶ J. R. Woodward and Dan White, *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016), 58.

¹⁴⁷ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 65.

Disciples before deciders, 4) Consultative before concrete, and 5) Accountability before autonomy.¹⁴⁸

Without explaining these principles in detail, one can see a vision for a church culture in which leaders are gracious and mutually submissive to one another. It is a noble vision of leadership that points to the perichoresis of the Trinity as a powerful image of the kind of cohesion the Spirit is wanting to engender in the church as leaders of circles within the church mutually submit to one another for the sake of God's mission: "The church today likewise needs a plurality of gifts and input in its leadership. Certainly there are different roles, not identical, not superior or inferior, but all equally contributing to the movement."¹⁴⁹

The potential for this structure is great, as it has the potential to reposition the church for ministry that can be more easily multiplied by those outside the professional clergy that have a clear sense of their calling and giftedness. However, when applied to existing church structures there is also the potential for friction. Most existing churches, especially those who are tied to denominational bodies, have vertical organizational structures that vests power and decision making at the top. Sam Metcalf warns that redistributing power and authority will not be easily accomplished or effortlessly integrated into traditional models: "...an essential key to effectiveness is the reemergence of the apostolic structures of the church and of the apostolically called people to populate them. Such a reemergence will require a shift in thinking, particularly among some religious leaders – both pastor and denominational – about the legitimacy and essentiality of the structures needed for many with apostolic gifts to thrive."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 67-68.

¹⁴⁹ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 66-67.

¹⁵⁰ Metcalf, *Beyond the Local Church*, 17.

Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene (BCCN) was founded in 1921 and represents an established congregation with a traditional leadership structure. Its governing board is comprised of eight at-large and three *ex officio* members elected at the annual meeting of the congregation in keeping with the directives of the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene. The senior pastor serves as the board chairperson and leads the church staff as chief executive with the vested authority of the board to hire and terminate employment. The pastoral team is comprised of three full-time pastors and two part-time pastors. Throughout its history it has operated with a vertical leadership structure consistent with denominational directives.

While gathered at a leadership retreat in January of 2020, the church board discovered a lack of lay leadership in the congregation. The qualitative consensus of that gathering described a “steep step” for a new person wanting to connect with the church and desiring to engage in ministry. This step was particularly acute in moving someone from consumer of church programming to participant in ministries that made a missional impact and fit their unique giftedness. The board identified moving people into significant places of leadership as a goal for the future.

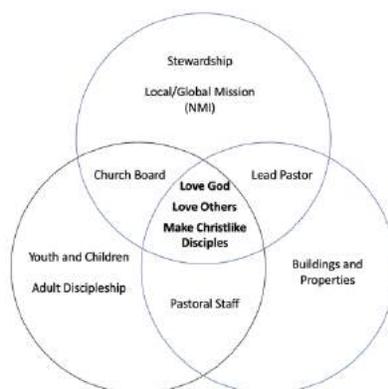
An immediate action step was identified and then a long-term study was undertaken. The immediate step was the *More* campaign that launched in late February 2020. This church-wide curriculum and sermon series based on the book *More* by Todd Wilson equipped lay people to understand their unique calling as disciples sent on mission with Jesus.¹⁵¹ It used a simple framework entitled “Be-Do-Go” that helped people answer three questions: 1) Who am I created to be? 2) What am I called to do? and 3) Where am I called to go? This basic paradigm for

¹⁵¹ Todd A. Wilson, *More: Find Your Personal Calling and Live Life to the Fullest Measure* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

understanding the vocation of disciples was the first step in moving people into deeper levels of missional engagement.

The *More* study gave the church shared language for the importance of an engaged laity equipped for ministry, but it did not address the systemic issues of traditional governance structures that kept leadership in ministry at the levels of elected board members and paid staff members. The pastor and church board began a long-term evaluation process of the church's leadership structure. Through a series of meetings, it was discovered that the board primarily understood their identity as a governing board, giving oversight to property, finance, and personnel decisions. It perceived the pastoral staff as the primary architects of ministry expecting them to cast vision, plan events, recruit volunteers, and execute programs. The conclusion was that BCCN was a staff-driven church with a board primarily focused on oversight.

The pastor, pastoral staff, and board mutually agreed that moving toward a “serving board” rather than a “governing board” was best for the health of the congregation. In addition to creating a board structure that promoted lay ministry, leaders desired for the church to be defined by a culture of mission. The idea of polycentric leadership circles, as described in *The Church as Movement*, was presented as a model for consideration to accomplish both objectives.



*Figure 6 – The BCCN Leadership Structure*¹⁵²

Because the polycentric model is most easily applied to new churches, leaders of BCCN had to discern what it would look like to adopt this approach within an existing hierarchical leadership structure. Using *The Church as Movement* as a field guide, the pastor proposed a hybrid structure that maintained the stability and familiarity of the historic model and incorporated the collaborative principles of a polycentric structure.¹⁵³ Evocative of trinitarian imagery, this arrangement imagines three spheres of leadership that come together to accomplish the mission of the church: the lead pastor, the church board, and the pastoral staff. Each is essential to the church’s operation and existence, yet dependent upon the others and mutually submissive to them. When these three spheres of leadership are “in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 6:25) the mission of the church (located at the center of the diagram) is accomplished.

Each sphere of influence has essential components of the church represented by a team of people: Buildings and Properties, Discipleship, Global/Local Mission, Stewardship (finance and personnel), and Youth and Children. These teams are comprised of a mix of staff people, elected board members, and non-elected lay people. Previously, the board/staff was responsible for all these areas of ministry, but in this arrangement separate teams of elected and non-elected lay people can participate. The intention is that this would give someone who may not be elected to the board a chance to exercise gifts of leadership and creativity, thus providing an additional

¹⁵² Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene, *Leadership Team Retreat* (Bentonville, 2021).

¹⁵³ This evaluation is like a change the United Methodist church recently made in its leadership structure. The “simplified model” reduces the numbers of parish committees focused on oversight and consolidates their responsibilities in a smaller group of lay leaders. This enables a more efficient structure of governance so the laity can be focused on ministries of spiritual renewal, discipleship, and revitalization.

opportunity for someone to not just consume religious programming but to be a significant contributor to the ministry of the church.¹⁵⁴

From a tactical standpoint, this new arrangement also required a rearrangement of meeting schedules as board members could not be expected to attend a team meeting and a full board meeting every month. It was resolved that full board meetings would be reduced from ten times a year to six times a year. Each board member would serve on one of the five teams represented in the three spheres of influence. Those teams would meet four times a year, twice in the spring and twice in the fall at events called “Team Nights.” These evening gatherings would begin with refreshments and then move into a brief time of inspiration and vision casting in the sanctuary. The majority of the evening would then be spent with the teams meeting separately to plan for existing ministry endeavors and dream about future initiatives in keeping with the scope of that team’s work and alignment with the mission of the church. Each team has a board member on it who will report on the team’s work at the next full board meeting. The work of the full board will be to make major decisions regarding finances, personnel, and buildings as well as to discern with the lead pastor a long-range vision for the congregation.

The strength of this approach is its capacity to engage multiple groups of people in the design and execution of ministry initiatives. New people who are just discovering their giftedness in ministry can be invited to participate on a team, giving them a significant place of connection and leadership. Additionally, this allows board members to not be bogged down with the work of oversight every month, allowing them to dream, build, and execute ministry in partnership with the pastoral staff.

¹⁵⁴ Ann A. Michael, *Synergy: A Leadership Guide for Church Staff and Volunteers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 39.

The weakness of this approach may be its idealism, as it imagines a people engaged in mission in such a way that mirrors the perichoresis of the Trinity. The leaders of BCCN are familiar with the messiness of the church as personal agendas, the blind spots of well-intentioned leaders, and the frailty of human existence create conflict that make a model of mutual submissiveness a serious liability. By necessity, the lead pastor maintains executive authority over the pastoral staff and the board maintains its position of oversight of the lead pastor. For this polycentric approach to succeed, those with positional authority (i.e., the board and the lead pastor) will need to discern carefully when to lay that authority down and when to exercise it. Such a move requires a tremendous amount of vulnerability and trust.¹⁵⁵ However, the potential for collaboration and multiplication increases when others feel affirmed and empowered. This is an inviting prospect for the discerning leader looking to create a missional culture in an established congregation.

Each Disciple a Minister

The complimentary component to polycentric leadership structures is a renewed emphasis on the spiritual gifts of ministry. In the book of Ephesians, Paul identifies the blueprint for how the Spirit empowers and sends leaders to this work: “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:11-12) Apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd (pastor), and teacher (expressed as the acronym APEST) are not gifts exclusively for professional clergy but are given to each

¹⁵⁵ Michael, *Synergy*, 39.

person of the church. For a polycentric leadership structure to be effective, disciples must identify their gifts and be equipped to exercise them.

This kind of diversified and empowered leadership, while prescribed in the Bible, is rarely practiced. Many churches continue to exist with ecclesial or corporate hierarchies that place singular personalities at the top. The American evangelical story is littered with high profile leaders of large ministries and organizations who abused their power in ways that were hurtful, immoral, and in some cases, illegal.

It is ironic that often these precipitous failures mirror the biblical story of David. It would be *smart* to take the necessary steps to avoid the moral compromises that led to David's abuse of power, but it would be *wise* to go further back in the narrative and consider Samuel's warning (1 Sam. 8:6) to those who want a king. David Fitch notes that what the world needs is the mutuality of diversified leadership structures and the equitable distribution of authority. Too often, however, churches recognize this need but continue to insist upon a king. They default to vertical corporate structures for the sake of efficiency and scale.¹⁵⁶

A church that emphasizes the fivefold giftedness of the entire church and not just the clergy becomes a sending and equipping church, releasing disciples on mission in their relational networks and spheres of influence. Lesslie Newbigin envisioned local churches taking this approach and expressed frustration that equipping the laity was neglected in the Western church. He queries, "Is it not an illusion that constantly fogs our thinking about the Church that we think of it as something which exists manifestly on Sunday, and is in a kind of state of suspended animation from Monday to Saturday?"¹⁵⁷ The church sent and scattered in these various contexts

¹⁵⁶ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 152.

¹⁵⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, "Bible Studies: Four Talks on 1 Peter," in *We Were Brought Together*, ed. David M. Taylor (Sydney: Australian Council for the World Council of Churches, 1960), 96-97 quoted in Michael Goheen,

is the “royal priesthood of Christ” (1 Pet. 2:9), a vocation that is learned in life-giving communion with God and others but is focused on those who have yet to experience it for themselves.

Ministry cannot be sustained by the pastor or a professional staff but is the “work of the people” who understand how the Spirit has equipped them to be an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher engaged in the mission of God. Woodward explains the potential for multiplication when pastors equip and release people for this kind of ministry, “As we uncover and awaken the fivefold typology in our missional communities and in our neighborhoods, we will not only be able to live out our calling but also help others discover theirs.”¹⁵⁸ As churches debate how to retain emerging generations, missional thinkers argue that attractional models have set expectations too low. A church committed to mission should raise the bar not just for young people but for the entire church, helping everyone discover their giftedness and how they can be significant part of what God is doing to save the world.

There are multiple resources that explain in detail the function of the gifts and cast a new vision for how these gifts can be utilized well when leadership is more evenly distributed in the church.¹⁵⁹ Fitch’s simplified APEST taxonomy, however, is sufficient here:

Gift	Ministry
Apostle	Initiate, gather, and pioneer new works, calling people to live now in the kingdom.

The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 109.

¹⁵⁸ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 42.

¹⁵⁹ Both of the following resources contain extensive research and application of the Fivefold Gifting: Woodward, J. R. *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World*. Downers Grove, IL: Praxis-IVP Books, 2012; Hirsch, Alan, Tim Catchim, and Mike Breen. *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church*. 1st ed. Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series 57. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012.

Prophet	Speak the truth and call of God into a situation, especially the injustice and neglect of the poor.
Evangelist	Bring the good news to those who are hurting.
Shepherd	Tend to and sustain people’s souls, especially the hurting.
Teacher	Help explain and deepen people’s faith.

Figure 7 – Five-fold Gifting Descriptions¹⁶⁰

Eric Knopf, inspired by Woodward’s research, has developed a spiritual gifts analysis based on the APEST typology.¹⁶¹ This online assessment helps people discern how they fit vocationally in the mission of God. The tool is not an exact science, nor is it designed to be. However, it enables people to understand their gifts for ministry and how they can best collaborate with others to make a polycentric vision flourish.

In conjunction with the *More* campaign at BCCN, life groups took Knopf’s assessment in February of 2020 and studied the five gifts. In the last pre-covid pastoral report, the average number of adults that participated in life groups was 68, which represents the most engaged families in the congregation.¹⁶² Among this group, 29 responses were collected from those who took the assessment as part of the study.

Gift	Primary Gift	Secondary Gift
Apostle	2	6.9%
Prophet	4	13.8%
Evangelist	7	24.1%
Shepherd	9	31%
Teacher	7	24.1%

Figure 8 – BCCN Fivefold Gifting Survey Results¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ David Fitch, *Seven Practices for the Church on Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books an imprint of Intervarsity Press, 2018), 100.

¹⁶¹ “Take the Five Fold Ministry Test Now (Free).” Accessed November 8, 2021. <https://www.fivefoldministry.com>. This test was built as a companion to J.R. Woodward *Creating a Missional Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Intervarsity Press, 2012).

¹⁶² Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene, *2019-20 Annual Pastor’s Report* (Bentonville, 2020)

¹⁶³ Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene, *Fivefold Gifting Survey* (Bentonville, 2020)

After the survey was completed, the pastoral staff and board discussed the results in a regular board meeting. The discussion was framed with the following qualifiers: 1) The assessment tool is not an exact science, but an effective starting point for someone wanting to explore their giftedness. 2) The number of responses is not adequate to conclusively assess strengths or deficiencies in the church, as those who do not regularly attend LG were excluded from the study. Both those qualifiers helped leaders to frame their reactions and interpretations with appropriate limitations. By nature, a survey is a quantitative tool, but the discussion with BCCN leaders based on these limited results produced a helpful qualitative assessment of the state of lay leadership in the church. The consensus coalesced around three discussion points:

- 1) Shepherd was the highest in both primary and secondary giftedness. The church has always perceived itself as “caring,” but this is an anecdotal perception at best. The more likely correlation is that the church has consistently trained Life Group leaders to be “shepherds” of their group, with the expectation that pastoral care is done by Life Group leaders in addition to any pastoral staff. This function of Life Group leadership has consistently been emphasized as the church transitioned to a multi-celled congregation after doubling in size from 2000-2010.
- 2) The lack of apostles is troubling and may reflect the staff-driven nature of the leadership structure. As the church has depended upon the staff to dream and initiate ministry, respondents have not had opportunity to develop the gift of apostle. By contrast, intentional effort was made to train Life Group leaders as shepherds.
- 3) Evangelist was the second most common gift, which is not surprising as the church has been significantly influenced by the Church Growth Movement. A common denominator

in resources of this nature is an emphasis on evangelism. Consequently, just as intentional training on shepherding may explain it being the most common gift, a regular emphasis on evangelism may have shaped the laity's understanding of their giftedness.

The gifts assessment was a helpful process for the BCCN board and staff. Rather than discern next steps for ministry based on a gut feeling or one's instincts, the group felt like it had a better picture of how laity perceived their giftedness. The leaders concluded that if the polycentric leadership model was going to be operational, the laity would need to develop a stronger sense of their missional vocation. For a diversified leadership structure in the church to be effective, everyone needs to understand that they are a minister. They have unique gifts given to them by the Spirit and the work of ministry is not exclusively for professional clergy. Rather, professional clergy are there to train and equip the laity as all are sent by God on mission and each person has a unique role to play.

Northwest Arkansas, the metro area where BCCN is located, has a heavy concentration of churches, but the signs of secularization are becoming more prevalent and a diminishment of Christian influence in cultural, political, and societal life is felt by church leaders. Christendom's unraveling is slower in the Bible Belt, but it is constant and is not slowing down. While the empowerment of the laity may be perceived as a strategy to mitigate the effects of a post-Christian culture, it is so much more than a technique. A laity equipped for ministry and sent on mission with God is a vision for the church to move towards its divine *telos* and to thrive beyond Christendom, as each disciple recognizes his or her vocation as bridge builders in their homes, neighborhoods, school, and businesses.

Extending Life-Giving Community: A Missional Vision for Life Groups

The first three sections of this chapter have outlined significant changes BCCN has made in its approach to ministry. Understanding worship as a missional practice, embracing a polycentric leadership structure, and placing a renewed emphasis on the fivefold gifting of the laity are intentional initiatives designed to create a more missional culture in a congregation that mainly identifies with an attractional model of ministry. These changes are incremental, recognizing that shifting an existing culture is delicate pastoral work. For missional initiatives to take root, however, churches must have a hospitable culture receptive to ministry designed for post-Christian realities. The culture-shaping prescriptions in this chapter culminate in the final one, a missional vision for discipleship.

Churches have often separated “missions” or “outreach” as separate functions of the church, reserved only for those with that specific calling or interest. Missional discipleship does not allow for such a dichotomy, as participation in God’s mission is not an optional “add on” to a church’s menu of other programs. Rather, mission is the essence of what it means to be the church.

Missional disciples, having experienced life-giving community with God in worship and in fellowship with one another, are called to extend this life-giving community to the world through their life’s witness and vocation. The trinitarian language of John’s Gospel encapsulates this calling: “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn. 20:20-21) Through the power of the Spirit, disciples are sent just as the Father sent Jesus. When the disciple is sent from worship and into the world, the Word becomes incarnate as an extension of the life-giving community God desires for the world to experience and enjoy.

As pastors recognize this imperative, it becomes necessary to bring the corporate worship gathering and the organizational focus of small groups into missional alignment. Worship gatherings are reimagined as experiences where disciples are inspired and sent rather than entertained. With a polycentric leadership structure in place, small groups become cells where apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers equip others to be sent as Jesus was sent.

An important facet of this approach is that it forces the church to decentralize. No longer is the primary focus of ministry the weekly worship gathering or event-based programming. When leaders are released to build missional small groups scattered throughout a locale, the energy and attention of the church is forced to look outward to what God is doing in the immediate context of the church. Groups join in this mission together through partnership with other community organizations and externally focused service projects.

This contrasts with the attractional model that disproportionately centers the church's energy on the weekly gathering and then tries to reverse engineer it to create discipleship groups. A missional approach builds disciples first in the context of small groups. Michael Breen succinctly describes the wisdom of this, "If you make disciples you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples."¹⁶⁴

Austin Maxheimer and Zach Below serve as discipleship pastors at OneLife Church in Evansville, IN. Like most fast-growing church plants born in the 1990s, this multi-site church was built largely on an attractional model of ministry. After recognizing the need to shift the church culture to a more missional model, leaders at OneLife began to cast a vision for this

¹⁶⁴ David M. Gustafson, "Making Disciples on Mission: An Old Task for a New Era" in Michael J. Breen and David M. Gustafson, eds., *Missional Disciple-Making: Disciple-Making for the Purpose of Mission* (Pawley's Island, SC: 3DM Publishing, 2019), 27.

change, a message that was actively reinforced by a dramatic restructuring of their small group ministry.

Maxheimer and Below contend that small group structures need to be critically reevaluated, as prevailing models overemphasize fellowship and Bible study that is done largely in a vacuum from the world. This is inconsistent with the apprenticeship model that Jesus embodies in the Gospels. The disciples learned from Jesus, their rabbi, who taught them simultaneously as he sent them on mission. Small groups and Sunday school classes are underutilized cells of latent spiritual energy waiting to be actualized for mission.¹⁶⁵

A missional model of discipleship recognizes that learning the counter-cultural ways of Jesus happens “on the way,” as small groups are sent from the church. This shift envisions every group adopting a ministry or community project that is consistent with the missional heartbeat of the church, committing to ministries and organizations that offer the opportunity to build relational bridges with the people they serve. OneLife Church embraced this approach to infuse missional passion throughout its congregational life. Years of experience with traditional small group models confirmed to them that a programmatic emphasis on fellowship does not always result in mission. However, as they embraced a missional model of discipleship, they discovered an emphasis on mission will always result in fellowship. Groups reported feeling more connected and engaged in what God had called them to do as a groundswell of missional culture emerged from their new small group paradigm.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Zach Below and Austin Maxheimer, *From Couch to Community: Activating the Potential of Small Groups* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2014), 106.

¹⁶⁶ Below and Maxheimer, *From Couch to Community*, 119.

The following are three ways leaders of attractional churches can begin to reimagine small group ministry and leverage this existing structure as an extension of the life-giving community found in relationship with God and in fellowship with others.

Coming N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood. As churches begin to understand their identity as a people scattered throughout their city, it will be imperative for individual groups to know their neighborhoods. J.R. Woodward, having planted missional communities throughout Los Angeles, has used a process for exegeting one's community using the acronym N.E.A.R. (narrative, ethics, associations, and ritual).¹⁶⁷ It equips small groups to gain a contextual understanding of where they live and how they can be a significant blessing to the neighbors around them. As a group works through the process, these are the basic questions they will ask:

1. Narrative – What story is our neighborhood calling us to embody?
2. Ethics – How do people in our context define success?
3. Associations – What primary organizations and institutions are shaping people's identity and destiny in our context?
4. Rituals – What core practices do people engage in that shape their identity and sense of mission in life?

For too long the church has taken a “come and see” approach, waiting for the world to get curious and enter the church on a Sunday morning to discover what faith in Christ is all about. Equipping groups, not just the pastor or a select group of people, to get N.E.A.R. moves the entire church to take a “go and be” approach. This is at the core of what it means to practice incarnational ministry. Scott Nelson explains, “The basic premise of incarnational mission is that just as Jesus was sent by God the Father to be God's presence among the people of the world, so

¹⁶⁷ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 193.

too is the church sent, in the power of the Spirit to be God's presence and to live for God's purposes in a specific context."¹⁶⁸

The Ministry of Hospitality. Jesus spent much of his time gathered around a table with his disciples, but table fellowship was not exclusively reserved for insiders. The Gospels are intentional to record Jesus eating with those marginalized by society and considered unclean by religious standards.

Missional small groups are intentionally designed to be "open circles" with room for those who are not formally connected to the church. Traditional small groups tend to be closed circles, comprised of people already connected to the church. In fact, entry into a small group is often preceded by a connection to the church. A missional approach seeks to reverse this, making the small group the front door to the church. Scott Boren describes the posture groups should take in adopting this approach: "By definition, hospitality is a practice that receives people where they are. People in our neighborhoods are not objects to be won. They are people loved by God. The art of hospitality allows others to enter our hearts without expectations."¹⁶⁹

Churches have created a false dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship. A missional approach understands discipleship as occurring both before and after conversion. Beard explains, "...within the missional movement, discipleship does not begin at the point of conversion, but rather at the point when a Christ-follower builds a relationship with another...discipleship is not limited to those 'already saved.'"¹⁷⁰ As small groups embrace an

¹⁶⁸ Scott Nelson, "The Eight Practices of a Disciple on Mission" in Michael J. Breen and David M. Gustafson, eds., *Missional Disciple-Making: Disciple-Making for the Purpose of Mission* (Pawley's Island, SC: 3DM Publishing, 2019), 73.

¹⁶⁹ M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2010), 152.

¹⁷⁰ Beard, "Missional Discipleship", 182.

“open circle” philosophy, those who may not know God are invited into the life-giving community of disciples where they have the opportunity to belong *before* they believe.

Community Partnerships. Missional leaders understand Jeremiah’s call to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jer. 29:7), an especially salient call as the American church embraces a position of exile, no longer living at the center of cultural power and influence. This reality is an opportunity for mission more than it is a reason for panic. The N.E.A.R. assessment helps groups understand both the needs and assets in their community. This information is crucial in the missional discernment process as they ask, “Where is God at work and how can we join him in the renewal of our city?”

The potential for the church to have a positive impact on its community is great as most congregations have a higher concentration of altruistic people than any other organization. The missional church will look for community partners that align with the values of the congregation and point groups toward high impact community development opportunities, especially those that promote healthy relationships marked by genuine friendship and reciprocity. Andrew Hardy explains how this approach serves as a bridge into the *shalom* God desires for all people to experience: “In terms of the people of God engaging incarnationally in community development projects, it can mean that the commonly shared project in that place can be invested with something of the sacred story of God. Community organizing is one important way for people to collaborate together for the common good.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Hardy and Yarnell, *Missional Discipleship After Christendom*, 160.

This is a vital step in bridging the gap between the community and the church, but one that must be approached with careful discernment. The authors of *The New Parish* offer a basic framework for missional small groups discerning how to forge a new partnership.¹⁷²

1. Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?
2. How might we as a gathered community be formed if we act in this way?
3. Will these actions invite us to be more faithfully present to God, one another, creation and our parish?
4. Will we be invited into mutually beneficial relationships with others?
5. Will this action invite the flourishing of life for all and for creation?

These are the discerning questions of a church committed to God’s mission in a specific location. As God directs disciples into partnership with others, the world will see a beauty of mutuality and empathy that points them to the Gospel. New Parish advocates conclude, “When followers of Jesus share life together in a particular place they become much greater than the sum of their parts – they actually become something altogether new. The parish forms the context, and relationships of faith form the connectivity for wonderful new possibilities.”¹⁷³

Conclusion – The Beautiful Community

In 2010, BCCN launched a giving initiative called, “The Hope Campaign.” It was a bold funding strategy that challenged people to give of their time and treasure to local ministries. Some of these were directly administered by the church, but some of them were outside organizations doing significant work to alleviate poverty.

¹⁷² Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 129.

¹⁷³ Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 22.

The campaign was fully funded giving the church a platform for various ministries to help those in need. It was a significant moment in creating an understanding of mission that included local ministry in the same vein as what commissioned missionaries did in global contexts.

The campaign continued annually and became a fixture in the church's perception of God's mission. The church was proud of the different organizations that it supported, but these relationships became narrowly defined by the congregation's unidirectional role as funder. There were occasional projects to physically serve and build relationships with the organizations, but they were singular events where volunteers dropped in and completed a task. Ultimately, the service events were not ways to build lasting and reciprocal relationships.

In 2019, the church's life group directors and the lead pastor began to imagine a missional discipleship strategy. The logical place to begin was with the community partners that received funding from the church as there was already an existing relationship. Rather than doing singular projects with these organizations, every life group was encouraged to adopt one and focus on building a long-term relationship with both the organization's leadership and those it served.

One life group chose an addiction recovery ministry called, "Hope is Alive." This long-term, residential program uses the accountability of living in a group home to help people get sober and develop strategies for living free of addiction to drugs and alcohol. The program is explicitly Christian, introducing people to the Gospel's power to transform their life, and this message is infused in all its treatment options. The group began to meet with Hope is Alive on Sunday nights, bringing residents a meal and leading studies that focused on the Christian faith, personal finances, healthy relationships, and job preparedness.

One life group participant is a nurse practitioner, who discovered many residents did not have access to basic healthcare. She committed to give all the residents a free check-up and connected them with a community health program where they were able to get connected to more extensive care. Another participant is a prominent business leader who began to work with residents on their resumes and prepare them for interviews. The relationships developed through this partnership eventually became reciprocal, as residents connected with group members over dinner, in their homes, and in other social settings. The group not only extended life-giving community to others but received it in return through these new friends.

This is just one example of the beautiful bridges a church can form with its community through missional partnerships. This approach not only shapes the people of God, but also creates a natural entry point for those in the community with no faith background. Most people, regardless of their skepticism or hostility towards faith, want to engage in activities and causes that make a difference in their neighborhood. A small group on the frontlines of community service is a natural way to invite someone to belong before they believe. This recognizes the cultural *ethos* of an emerging generation that is more likely to invest its energy in a social cause than in an exploration of church dogma. Someone who would never accept an invitation to attend church, might be more likely to join with a small group in a worthwhile project.

Churches generally measure their success by how many people gather for the weekend worship service. A missional approach to discipleship reorders this metric. Small groups living life together on mission with Jesus become the front door of the church and a faithful expression of the congregation's missional presence in the community. As they are transformed in worship and equipped by pastors, groups are then sent by the Holy Spirit to engage their community. The number of groups sent and the means of strategic engagement must be considered alongside of

Sunday morning attendance figures. A measurement that accounts for this dynamic more accurately reflects the biblical vision of the church being inhaled into the life of God through worship and exhaled by the power of the Spirit into the *missio Dei*.

CHAPTER 4

BETTER TOGETHER: BECOMING A CHURCH YOUR COMMUNITY CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

Introduction

The proposed artifact is a small group curriculum entitled, *Better Together: Becoming a Church Your Community Can't Live Without*. This series of six lessons serves as an introduction to some of the critical issues an established church with an attractional model of ministry will need to address to embrace a missional ecclesiology. *Better Together* is designed for the pastor wanting their congregation to reflect theologically on the mission of God, develop a church culture of mission, and discover how the local church can become a more faithful missional presence in its community through partnership with other organizations.

Established churches in America see culture becoming post-Christian and are often unsettled by these changes in their community and church. This curriculum offers a hopeful perspective on trends that are potentially perceived as alarming. If the church does not speak honestly and pastorally into these realities, other voices will, often in ways that peddle in fear that heightens anxiety. The curriculum is written to start a hopeful conversation for laity who may be troubled by the realities of Christendom's unraveling but also have a genuine desire to see their church become a healing presence in their community. The loss of Christian dominance in a pluralistic society is not so much a threat to the church as it is an opportunity for missionary engagement in ways that result in fuller and deeper understandings of the Gospel.

Educational Philosophy: Transformative Learning Theory

Better Together is designed around a theory of adult learning known as "Transformative Learning." (TL) This theory, first proposed by sociologist Jack Mezirow in 1978, asserts that adult learners can assimilate new concepts, information, and knowledge in ways that redefine

previously held assumptions. The result is a refined and sometimes completely new worldview. Tammie Marie Grimm explains, “Transformative learning is concerned with the process of re-ordering the knowledge already attained by a learner, rather than acquiring new knowledge and assimilating it within previously developed schemes.”¹⁷⁴ As this reordering of knowledge is used to construe a new or revised worldview, the future of one’s actions can be altered.¹⁷⁵

In addition to Mezirow, other perspectives of TL have been proposed by John Dirkz, Lewis Rambo, and James Loder. Dirkz describes the experience of “deep learning,” in which patterns of transformation, “include both cognitive/rational processes but also emotional and intuitive insights.”¹⁷⁶ Rambo’s research focuses on learning that happens in the context of an epiphany experience that results in fresh insights, redirected emotions, and enduring development of character. This “epiphany” experience for adults is similar to biblical conversion stories, providing a rich framework for Christian discipleship in understanding how adults integrate spiritual realities into their daily lives.¹⁷⁷ Loder’s work describes “convictional knowing” as a paradigm for processing “disorientation” and integrating new found perspectives into one’s value and belief system, “through both reestablishing correspondence or continuity with the past while also seeking confirmation of the transformative insight within a present interpretive community.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 24.

¹⁷⁵ Francis A. Payette, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Transformational Learning,” *Didache* 3, no. 1 (September 2007) <http://didache.nazarene.org/index.php/volume-3-1/678-v3n1-transformational/> file

¹⁷⁶ Dean Blevins, “Transformational Teaching Insights from Neuroscience,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10, no. 2 (November 2013), 410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000211>.

¹⁷⁷ Blevins, “Transformational Teaching Insights from Neuroscience”, 410.

¹⁷⁸ Blevins, "Transformational Teaching Insights from Neuroscience", 411.

This brief introduction to TL and its main contributors demonstrates the richness of this social science for Christian discipleship, a possibility Tammie Marie Grimm has explored extensively in her Ph.D. thesis, “Holistic and Holy Transformation: The Practice of Wesleyan Discipleship and Transformative Learning Theory.”¹⁷⁹ Using her work as a guide for TL, *Better Together* was designed around these core elements of transformational learning: experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse.

Experience. Transformative learning is primarily about making sense of one’s experiences, especially those that disturb previous held expectations or assumptions. Cognitive dissonance, for example, is a starting point for moving people toward a new perspective, something akin to what is described by TL researchers as a “disorienting dilemma.”¹⁸⁰ These disorienting events serve as catalysts for the formation of new perspectives and can transpire as a single major event or as a series of smaller but regular occurrences.

According to Mezirow, adults will process the disorienting dilemma through two ways: 1) a frame of reference and 2) point of view. A TL theorist explains a frame of reference as, “the web of assumptions and expectations through which we filter the way we see the world.”¹⁸¹ According to Mezirow, point of view is the “immediate and specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgements” that form how people make sense of what is happening and determines what their response will be.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Tammie Marie Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation: The Practice of Wesleyan Discipleship and Transformative Learning Theory” PhD diss. (University of Manchester, 2016).

¹⁸⁰ Payette, “The Role of the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸¹ Patricia Cranton, *Promoting and Understanding Transformational Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 2nd Ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 22 quoted in Grimm, “Holy and Holistic”, 127.

¹⁸² Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 127-8.

One's frame of reference when they are young is markedly different than it is in middle or late adulthood. Transformational learning envisions a more dependable and inclusive frame of reference as one ages and encounters diverse situations. This transformation does not occur simply because of aging, but TL asserts that it is possible if a learner is willing to consider new frames of reference and connected to communities that intentionally foster such exploration. Ultimately, TL envisions the possibility that one's frame of reference might be transformed to not determine a course of action based on knee-jerk reactions.

Better Together addresses multiple issues that may be a “disorienting dilemma,” especially for people who have been in the church for a long time. For instance, in Session 3, participants are introduced to the idea of Christendom and its dissolution as it is replaced by an emerging secular culture. While many participants have lived through this and passively observed these changes, this will most likely be the first time they have used this sociological and historical lens to interpret these realities. As culture has changed, many churches have become entrenched, functioning as enclaves of Christian culture. Introducing this concept in the context of a church gathering may be unsettling as it may be perceived that the ideological safety of the church community is being breached. This, however, is a necessary stop on the way towards transformation. *Better Together* wants participants to deal with these realities within the familiarity of the church so that they can begin to understand these new cultural realities as missional opportunities to be embraced and not as calamities to be feared.

Critical Reflection. For this kind of transformation to take place, the learner must engage in critical reflection. Adult learning theorists define critical reflection in a variety of ways, but the consensus is that it is a highly cognitive exercise in which long-held beliefs and values are questioned based on prior experience and reinterpreted to form new ways of understanding. Put

simply, when learners are engaged in critical reflection they are asking: 1) What is going on? (content), 2) How did it happen? (process) and 3) Why is this happening? (premise)¹⁸³

Faith communities should be safe places to reflect critically on beliefs and how these beliefs find expression in the world. In *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning*, John M. Hull describes the practice of “thought stopping” as an additional adverse response to cognitive dissonance. Hull found this to be common in conservative and fundamentalist faith communities, as well as in cults like the Jehovah Witnesses. This endemic practice of these closed communities discourages adherents from asking questions as leaders continually pivot to the absoluteness of their dogma as the ultimate answer to every question and paints questions about its certainty as a deficiency in one’s faith.¹⁸⁴

Although this is an extreme example, “thought-stopping” happens to a lesser extent in non-militant religious groups as well. The local church, especially those in the Wesleyan tradition, should embrace a culture of critical reflection and seek to promote this practice in their educational environments. Critical thinkers can bring their doubts and questions to the study of scripture and theology while remaining people of great faith and vibrant spirituality. In fact, as understood by TL, critical reflection in the church can make one’s faith stronger as it refines long-held beliefs and practices through the fire of thoughtful analysis.¹⁸⁵

Rational Discourse. The final major component of TL is rational discourse. This is more than conversation but is the medium through which the learner can search for a common understanding with others and seek corporate affirmation or correction of one’s interpretation or

¹⁸³ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 130.

¹⁸⁴ John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults From Learning* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 121.

¹⁸⁵ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 130.

belief. Rational discourse is imperative for the learning process as adults thrive in environments where they can participate, contribute, and process new and disorienting experiences.¹⁸⁶

There are multiple avenues for rational discourse in *Better Together*. Participants interact in creative ways that serve as an introduction for each lesson, and there is a discussion response to the content at the end. This kind of interaction allows those experiencing “disorienting events” to process the new information with people they trust and to arrive at new conclusions in collaboration with others.

The Role of the Holy Spirit. Transformational Learning is a helpful paradigm for presenting the content in *Better Together*, one that provides a hospitable environment for the Holy Spirit to accomplish the ultimate goal of “holiness of heart and life.” This is the only way to true transformation and is what distinguishes the use of this theory in secular adult degree programs and the educational ministry of the church. Spiritual transformation is the work of the Spirit, and any learning theory is a tool those filled with the Spirit might use to illuminate what God wants to accomplish as people move towards Christlikeness.¹⁸⁷ Grimm envisions the difference transformative learning could have on discipleship in the local church:

Transformative learning offers a means for Christians to dismantle previous conceptions of the world and to re-scaffold thinking in light of new ideas and experiences about the Kingdom of God. Transformative learning encompasses more than just helping Christian disciples to re-think the world. For Wesleyans, it inaugurates new ways of living that are consistent with increasing and deepening love of God and neighbour as the goal of discipleship.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 131.

¹⁸⁷ Payette, “The Role of the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸⁸ Grimm, “Holistic and Holy Transformation”, 27.

Proposed Artifact: *Better Together*

Better Together is built around the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17. Jesus prays specifically for the church, asking that his mission would continue through them, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” (Jn. 17:20) Jesus envisions his message being carried on by the life and witness of a Spirit-filled community of people who are sent into marketplaces and neighborhoods as extensions of his love. The prayer is not focused exclusively on the church but includes those who would come to faith through their faithful presence in the world. As the prayer of Jesus demonstrates, the church is better when intentionally engaged with its community, and the community is enriched as well. The church and its community are better together.

Words like “outreach” or “mission” in American evangelicalism conjure images of people knocking on doors trying to convince total strangers to believe certain doctrinal statements. As the church seeks new expressions of faithfulness in the 21st century, it is necessary to question if this is the kind of presence Jesus envisions in his prayer. Does the church in America have an imagination for an approach that goes beyond cognitive assent to doctrine and is more holistic in its relationship to those outside of its walls? Can the church become a people who live such lives of beauty that those who do not know Jesus are drawn to him by its shared life together? Could a church committed to faithful presence become a people indispensable to its community?

Jesus prayed that it would be. To that end, evangelism and outreach can no longer be conceived as a one-dimensional enterprise focused solely on doctrinal affirmation. The *Better Together* experience is designed to help people think more holistically about their role in the mission of God. It is an invitation to consider the relational nature of God, and how the church’s

relationship to its community should reflect the trinitarian life of God. The goal is that participants would reimagine their lives as extensions of the life-giving community God desires for everyone to experience.

The six lessons are broken down into three sections. In the first section, “Community with God,” presents the trinitarian life of God as a paradigm for the kind of life-giving relationships that should characterize a follower of Jesus. The goal is to move from an understanding of the Trinity as a theological concept and embrace this reality of God’s nature as a blueprint for the kinds of relationships that should characterize the life of the church. Jesus was sent by the Father to open the way for humanity to participate in this relationship, and now the church is sent by the Spirit to do the same.

In the second section, “Community with Others,” participants will think about the kind of church Jesus prays for them to be. The church is a sign and foretaste of God’s ultimate plan for humanity. Jesus envisions the local church as a winsome and beautiful community that reflects the love of God. This section equips participants to understand their place in the mission of God that is at the heart of what it means to be the church.

The final component of this experience is “Community with our World.” Participants will be equipped to think about their neighborhoods, workspaces, and playgrounds as places where God is already at work. As a sent people the church is called to join with God and participate in what he is up to outside the walls of the church. As the church takes the time to listen and get to know its immediate context and the stories of those who live there, it will become an extension of the life-giving community of God.

The final session culminates with a list of community organizations that would make fruitful partnerships for a small group to explore. Leaders will use the “Community Partnership”

worksheet to discern what kinds of partnerships are possible with the resources and gifting of the group. This process will need to be worked out with the senior leadership of the church to ensure the partnerships are in alignment with the strategic vision of the church.

The following grid offers a snapshot of what biblical and cultural themes are covered and what the objectives of the lesson will be.

Title	Text	Description	Objectives	Section Outcomes
The Invitation	John 17:20-21	Christians believe that God exists as Trinity, a perfect community of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Salvation is God’s gracious invitation to participate in this perfect relationship as humanity is welcomed into the love that binds the members of the Trinity to each other. Any vision for the local church must be rooted in this experience of life-giving community with God.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the overall theme of the class. • Present the doctrine of the Trinity as more than historic dogma but an essential element of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. • Discuss an understanding of salvation that is rooted in God’s trinitarian nature. • Unpack the implications of a relational God creating humanity for relationship. • Emphasize the practice of worship as a means of experiencing community with God. 	Lessons 1 and 2 are focused on “ Community with God. ” The following are intended outcomes for learners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an awareness of God’s trinitarian nature as a model for the kinds of life-giving relationships the church is called to facilitate in its community. • Integrate the restoration of <i>shalom</i> in the community into a holistic understanding of the mission of the local church. • Imagine how one’s daily rhythm of life might be a faithful expression of God’s healing presence for the world.
The God Who Sends	John 20:19-23	A belief in God as Trinity is a declaration of selfless love emanating from the heart of God. It is this love that compels God to send Jesus to redeem humanity and restore relationship. This is God’s mission that emerges from the heart of God. As the Church is sent by the power of the Spirit, it is a continuation of Jesus’s mission and the embodiment of his message.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the concept of God’s mission emerging from God’s nature. • Define the mission of God as the restoration of <i>shalom</i>. • Discuss the implications of a God who sends (i.e. Jesus, Holy Spirit, Church). • Define the practice of presence and what it means to “live sent” in the world. 	
The Mission Has a Church	Luke 4:14-30	In Luke 4, Jesus outlines how his mission is to 1) proclaim good news to the poor, 2) announce freedom for the prisoners, 3) give sight to the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the unraveling of Christendom as an opportunity for new expressions of faithfulness. 	Sessions 3 and 4 are focused on “ Community with Others. ” The following are intended outcomes for learners:

		<p>blind, and 4) set the oppressed free. This vision of salvation and liberation is carried on by the Church that is filled by the Holy Spirit. This is not the church's mission, but God's mission that has a church.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer a corrective to the false dichotomy of mission as a private profession of cognitive faith or direct engagement in social action. • Establish a holistic understanding of mission (both proclamation and social action) based on Jesus's sermon in Luke 4. • Discuss the implications of a church committed to holistic mission. • Equip participants to do a "discovery walk" to become awakened to opportunities to join God on mission in their immediate contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become aware of the cultural shifts of "post-Christendom" and view them as opportunities for mission. • Demonstrate an ability to integrate a missional understanding of the church as a platform for proclamation and social transformation. • Articulate how their unique gifting as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher equips them for ministry in their daily life and in the church.
Everyone is a Minister	Ephesians 4:11-13	<p>The role of vocational ministers is important, but the effectiveness of the local church is dependent on each member recognizing their unique giftedness for ministry. According to Ephesians 4, everyone is gifted by the Holy Spirit to minister in some way. The people of the local church must recognize their giftedness and be equipped for significant ministry in their local spheres of influence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpack the dynamics of the entire church being sent on mission and not just professional clergy. • Present the church as a place where people are equipped/sent and not as a place to consume religious goods and services. • Define the "five-fold gifting" of the Holy Spirit from Ephesians 4. • Assist participants in discovering their giftedness using Eric Knopf's "five-fold" gifting analysis. • Discuss how the contours of one's spiritual giftedness find meaningful expression in daily life. 	
When the Church Goes Global	Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8	<p>Jesus clearly prays that the church would be a beacon that confirms to the world that he was sent to the Father. Historically, the church in the West has seen the fulfillment of this prayer in its emphasis on global missions. Today, the same zeal that first sent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the difference in "missions" (a program accomplished somewhere else) and "mission" (a lifestyle for disciples in their local contexts). • Locate a biblical understanding of the mission of God as both 	<p>Sessions 5 and 6 are focused on "Community with Our World." The following are intended outcomes for learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express a commitment to God's mission through global and cross-cultural agencies as well as in the

		missionaries across the world should characterize local churches who are willing to be sent across the street. Our mission is global and local. It's glocal!	<p>global and local (glocal) in scope and potential.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present a brief history of the missionary movement and how a paradigm shift to “glocal” is a faithful reading of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20. • Discuss the potential for “Marketplace ministries” as people envision their vocational lives as platforms for the Gospel. 	<p>local context of the church.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate a willingness to use one’s vocational life to extend the life-giving community of God to others. • Develop a deeper understanding of their community through the N.E.A.R. assessment. • Express an interest in exploring community partnerships as an opportunity for missional engagement for one’s family or small group.
Getting N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood	Jeremiah 29:4-7	Just as the exiles were called to “seek the prosperity of the city,” the church is called to work with others for the flourishing of their community. The first step in effective partnerships is intentionally getting to know one’s community. This concluding session invites participants to “get N.E.A.R.” the community to discover its 1) Narratives, 2) Ethics, 3) Associations, and 4) Rituals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpack “exile” as a metaphor for the church in post-Christian contexts and the exilic call of God to “seek the shalom” of the city. • Offer the power of proximity and the potential of partnership as ways to be a missional presence in one’s community. • Explain the N.E.A.R. matrix (Narratives, Ethics, Associations, and Rituals) as a way to better understand your church’s context. • Present a list of local organizations that could be potential partners for the church, small groups, and/or individuals. 	

Figure 9 – Better Together Curriculum Framework

Lesson Structure. The lessons are designed to take learners on a journey of reimagining who the church can be in a 21st century context and how participants can embody faithful presence in their communities and spheres of influence outside the church. Each lesson is comprised of 4 major components that form a chiasmus:

A. Where We Are

B. Who God Is

B'. Who We Can Become

A'. Where We Are Sent

1. *Where We Are.* This section gets participants thinking about where the church is, especially in its relationship to culture. These questions and exercises will help participants evaluate the role the local church plays in their community. Along the way, common assumptions about the church may be challenged, potentially creating a certain level of “cognitive dissonance” or “disorienting events” for participants. This is part of the process, consistent with Transformative Learning Theory. This section is intended to provide a starting point for the journey towards transformation.
2. *Who God Is.* As churches experience the disorientation of rapid cultural change, the nature and character of God must always be the compass by which it reorients itself. This section takes learners into what the Bible reveals about God and allows them to reflect theologically on who God is and the nature of his mission in the world. The picture that emerges from this teaching will inform who the church can become, as well as how and where it is sent.
3. *Who We Can Become.* Based on who God is, holy conversation allows people to imagine who they can become. This is consistent with what Transformative Learning theorist would call, “rational discourse.” This section will mainly be discussion and reflection questions. The role of the teacher will be to facilitate the discussion and to give everyone

a chance to contribute to a shared vision of the kind of people the local church can become.

4. *Where We Are Sent*. The lesson will conclude with a practice intended to put what has been learned into action. Culture change in the local church takes time and intentionality. Becoming a church integral to the flourishing of the community doesn't happen overnight. These practices are intended to shape the culture of the church for mission. As individuals engage in a variety of exercises intended to open their eyes to the needs of the community, the teacher can use these experiences as a springboard for collective action and partnership in the community.

Standards of Publication

The backbone of the artifact is the Leader's Guide. This resource was written for the adult Sunday school teacher or small group leader. Each lesson contains a list of resources one might need to teach it and a "teacher preparation" section that offers some background and commentary on the subject matter of the lesson.

The "Who God Is" section is the core of each lesson. A teaching manuscript for this section is included. Teachers will need to personalize it according to their own teaching style for maximum effectiveness.

The curriculum does include a video option for the "Who God Is" section as many churches are using video-based curriculums. The strength of this approach is that it allows a subject matter expert to present the content, and an in-person facilitator leads the other activities in response to the video content. These videos were recorded by the author when this curriculum

was presented to a focus group at Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene in the fall of 2021. They are available on Vimeo for leaders wanting to utilize them.

The leader's guide is available for download as a PDF. It is accessible on a folder on the author's Google drive. It's presented in standard document formatting, with one-inch margins and easily printable on 8.5x11 paper.

Several of the opening activities involve handouts, access to websites, or visual presentation capabilities like PowerPoint or Google Slides. Those resources are provided in the appendix of the artifact, and the PowerPoint files are also included in the Google drive folder.

Conclusion

Better Together is designed to expand the missional imagination of the local church. Jesus's prayer in John 17 is a grand vision of what God wants to do in the world through his people. Through the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit, this curriculum can be a catalyst for participants to experience the life-giving community of God, build community with one another, and extend live-giving community to their world.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSIONS

Artifact Development

Having grown up in the low country of South Carolina, I know first-hand that brackish ecosystems are fascinating biospheres. The mingling of fresh water and saltwater in coastal estuaries produce unique plant life and animal adaptations. A similar reality is present as I reflect on eleven years of pastoral leadership at Bentonville Community Church of the Nazarene (BCCN). During this time, I have introduced missional theology and practices to an attractional church context. These two approaches, while often placed in a dichotomy, are not mutually exclusive of one another as a whole. A commitment to cultivate an “ecclesial estuary” where missional and attractional can live together has guided the development of the artifact.

At 100 years old, many would assume BCCN is on the back side of its life cycle, but the congregation has enjoyed an organizational renaissance over the last twenty-five years that is continuing. For most of its history, the church existed as a “family church,” a single-celled congregation of about one-hundred people with three or four family groups composing a large share of the active membership. From 1998 to 2009, the congregation doubled in size and has consistently averaged around three hundred in morning worship over the last ten years (2010 – 2020). The factors contributing to this growth are multifaceted, but the most obvious factor is the convergence of a rapidly growing region, a transformative leader expertly trained in the best practices of the Church Growth Movement, and a healthy core of leaders willing to embrace these strategies. From 2003-2009, this pastor moved the congregation to adopt an attractional model of ministry within the framework of a distinctively Nazarene theology.

Recognizing the value *and* vulnerability of the attractional model has been a necessary step in thinking about how to move this congregation to embrace and embody a missional ecclesiology. It feels like brackish water as these seemingly incompatible ideas merge, but fascinating adaptations have occurred.

In 2012, the church's pastoral team, after reading *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*, recognized the deficiencies in discipleship that were present in the church.¹⁸⁹ Rather than completely embrace what the book prescribed to correct this, the team began to explore ways to move the church toward a more missional approach to ministry. The anchor of these initiatives was the launch of the Community Ministry Center in 2011. This facility expanded the church's food pantry and began to provide wrap-around services to families in need through biblical counseling and clothes. The weekly operation of the center gave the church a regular reminder of the human need present in the neighborhood.

Missional and attractional waters continued to merge in 2013 when most of the summer programming was replaced with community service projects with local non-profits. The initiative was called "Summer of Service" in which every small group was invited to choose a project from a menu of organizations that were contributing to human flourishing in the city. After several years of doing "Summer of Service" the culture of the church began to change, and more community involvement was added during the rest of the calendar year.

These changes were preceded by the success of the Hope Campaign (mentioned in Chapter 3). Launched in 2010, this holistic stewardship campaign created a base of support and raised awareness to the human needs around the church. The strength of this shift was that it

¹⁸⁹ Gregory L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *MOVE: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

enabled the church to look externally toward the city while maintaining the essential elements of the internal programming congregants had come to expect.

Over the last decade community involvement has become a core missional practice for people at BCCN that has significantly formed people to be like Jesus. The testimonies of what people have learned by serving with community partners confirmed to the life group leaders that this was an effective means of discipleship, one that resulted in lasting transformation. This approach became a core strategy of our life group ministry, as it became apparent that serving one's neighbor was teaching people as much about following Jesus as being in classrooms or in Bible studies.

This is just a brief snapshot of the ministry context that contributed to *Better Together*. It represents a change in church culture that many leaders perceive as necessary in their congregation as well. As established churches discern what faithful ministry looks like in post-Christian contexts, *Better Together* can be a useful entry point into the estuary where missional theology, community partnerships, and attractional models of ministry merge to create a beautiful people sent on mission with God.

For Further Study

Diverse Social Networks. As churches establish community partnerships, they build a diverse network of relationships with their community. A church willing to look outside of itself and invest in initiatives that are not directly under the umbrella of its organizational structure will become connected to people it would have otherwise not known. This diversification of relationships is referred to by community organizers and social scientists as, "Diverse Social Networks." Researchers have suggested that poverty alleviation must include the integration of

poor, middle-class, and affluent families, helping each to learn something from the other.¹⁹⁰ Churches are in a perfect position to be the catalyst for this kind of approach, something St. Augustine would describe as, *solvitur ambulando*, “It is solved by walking.”¹⁹¹

CirclesUSA is a social organization committed to this kind of approach. “The Circles program builds intentional relationships (social capital) across socioeconomic lines that help open up long-term pathways for economic mobility and self-sufficiency.”¹⁹² At first glance, it appears that a secular, social services organization is attempting to create the kind of community that should characterize a local church. However, the influence of the “homogeneous unit” principle appears to have created faith communities that resist such diversification. What can the church learn from this organization? How do church growth strategies influence efforts of this nature? These are important questions worthy of study for churches seeking to create meaningful connections with their community.

Transformative Learning. The “Learning Circle” is a paradigm for missional discipleship introduced by Michael Breen and Steve Cockram that describes the movement of repentance to belief as a journey of discipleship through the following loop: observe, reflect, discuss, plan, account, and act.¹⁹³ Chris Beard has taken these elements of the Learning Circle and correlated them with Mezirow’s Perspective Transformation, which serves as the backbone of

¹⁹⁰ Ryan Shorthouse, “Reducing Poverty by Promoting Diverse Social Networks for Disadvantaged People from Ethnic Minority Groups.” (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014) available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/files-research/reducing-poverty-social-networks-summary.pdf> accessed April 26, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Michelle Ferrigno Warren, *The Power of Proximity: Moving beyond Awareness to Action* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2017), 150.

¹⁹² Circles NWA. “Circles NWA.” Accessed November 17, 2021. <https://www.circlesnwa.org>

¹⁹³ Christopher B. Beard, “Connecting Spiritual Formation and Adult Learning Theory: An Examination of Common Principles”, *Christian Education Journal* Series 3, Vol. 14, no. 2 (2017), 258-9.

Transformational Learning. This correlation deserves further study but is only one example of the many ways this theory can find meaningful expression in the discipling efforts of the local church.¹⁹⁴

Polycentric Leadership Structures. Chapter 3 of this dissertation explains Woodward and White's approach to leadership in starting new missional communities. The strength of this approach is its collaborative approach and how it diversifies decision making and authority, allowing a range of people to exercise their spiritual gifts. However, as stated in Chapter 3, it is not a model that is easily transposed onto an existing church leadership structure.

The leadership of BCCN is embracing a hybrid of this approach, another example of ministry in a brackish ecosystem. This is a recent experiment, and at the time of this writing there is not enough evidence to accurately judge its strengths or weaknesses. This is a long play towards a culture shift. A beneficial congregational study would be to analyze two years of ministry in this model. Possible questions to ask would be: 1) How did this leadership structure promote increased engagement among the laity? 2) Did people gain a better understanding of their gifts for ministry (APEST)? 3) What kind of synergy was created between pastoral staff and lay leaders? 4) How has the role of the staff changed based on this structure? 5) Did this leadership structure create more efficient pathways for lay involvement in ministry?

Conclusion

One cannot ignore the emerging post-Christian culture in America, but most churches were founded on the assumption of Christendom. Consequently, patterns of ministry and programing were established in a former cultural reality and have been perpetuated with little

¹⁹⁴ Christopher B. Beard, "Connecting Spiritual Formation and Adult Learning Theory", 258-9.

adaption to the current. As pastors are placed in these contexts, the challenge before them is to lead these congregations into new expressions of missional faithfulness.

The tools of church planting are exciting in their ability to contextualize the Gospel in post-Christian contexts, but these are largely unhelpful for pastors tasked with leading intergenerational congregations with diverse pastoral needs, navigating ecclesial hierarchies, stewarding generational resources (i.e., physical buildings, trusts, foundations, etc.), and maintaining expected ministry programs. The responsibility of these structures, however, does not allow leadership to ignore the call to announce good news to a secular, American society. Churches should not see their established apparatus of ministry as a liability to mission but as a tremendous asset when reimagined through the missional call of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit, pastoral leaders can direct these resources towards new expressions of missional faithfulness.

Pastors may feel as if they are in between a rock and a hard place. On one side they are expected to maintain attractional programs, but on the other a post-Christian culture is no longer attracted to these programs. Seeing the challenges of ministry only in this bifurcated way leads to frustration and burnout. New expressions of faithfulness begin as the pastoral leader looks above the fog of technique, strategy, and sociological data and peers into the missionary heart of God as the inspiration for a new vision of who the church in America can become. The bad news of Christendom's unraveling is not inspiring or healthy motivation for church renewal. Rather, deep reflection on the mission of God is the source of the church's life and ministry, recognizing the enduring faithfulness of the one who calls.

Jesus prays specifically for the church sent on this mission in John 17: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of

them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” (Jn. 17:20-21) As the church is sent from worship and forges missional partnerships with others, it becomes a beautiful incarnation of God’s presence. It becomes enriched by those drawn to God through its witness. It becomes the church Jesus prayed for it to be, a church that is better together with its community.

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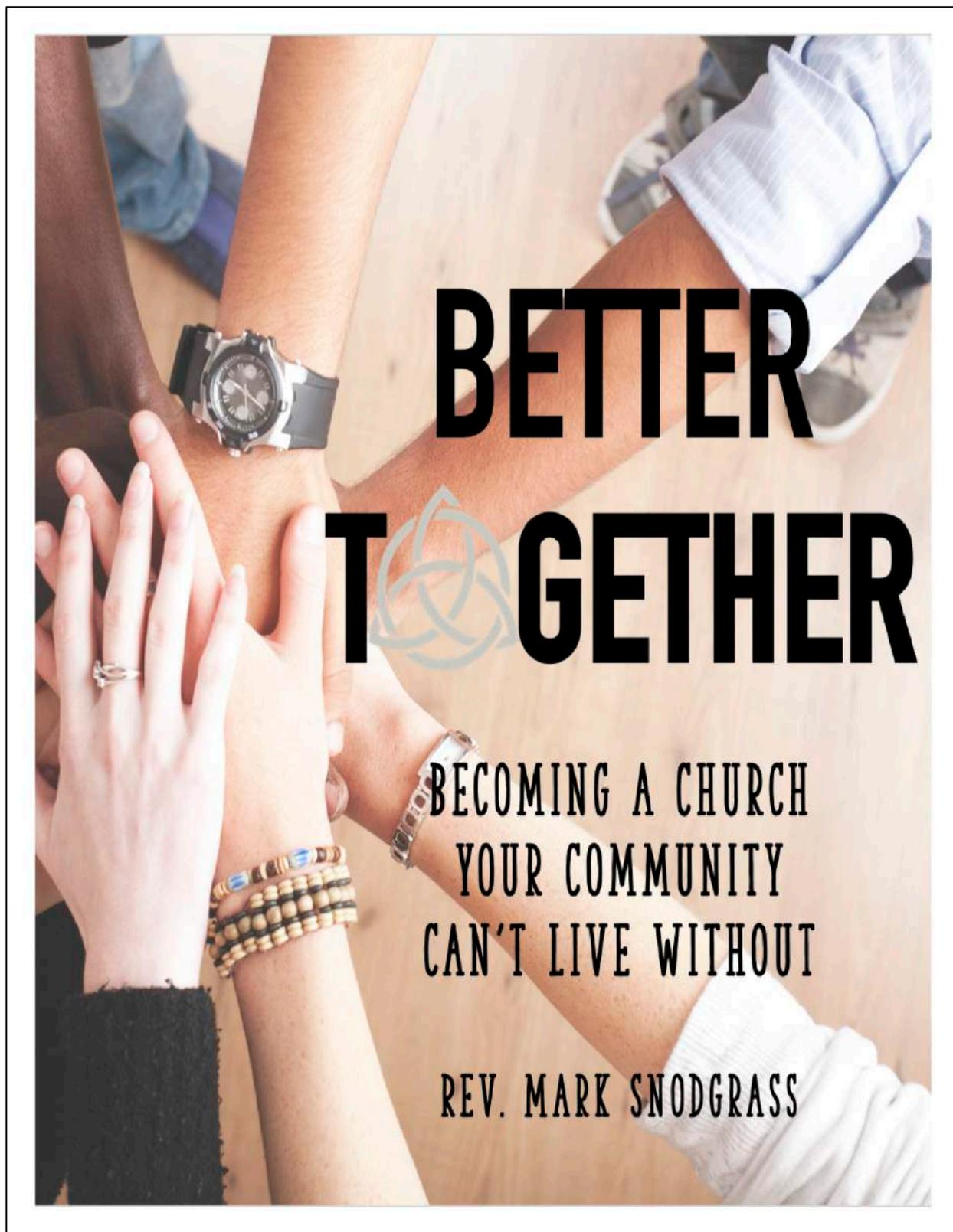
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BETTER TOGETHER

BECOMING A CHURCH
YOUR COMMUNITY
CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

REV. MARK SNODGRASS

Better Together: Becoming a Church Your Community Can't Live Without

Leader's Guide

By Rev. Mark Snodgrass

Outline

Community With God

"...*May they also be in us...*" John 17:21

Session 1 – The Invitation

Christians believe that God exists as Trinity, a perfect community of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Salvation is God's gracious invitation to participate in this perfect relationship as humanity is welcomed into the love that binds the members of the Trinity to each other. Any vision for the local church must be rooted in this experience of life-giving community with God.

Session 2 – The God Who Sends

A belief in God as Trinity is a declaration of selfless love emanating from the heart of God. It is this love that compels God to send Jesus in order to redeem humanity and restore relationship. This is God's mission that emerges from the heart of God. As the Church is sent by the power of the Spirit, it is a continuation of Jesus's mission and the embodiment of his message.

Community With Others

"...*that all of them may be one...*" John 17:20

Session 3 – The Mission Has a Church

In Luke 4, Jesus outlines how his mission is to 1) proclaim good news to the poor, 2) announce freedom for the prisoners, 3) give sight to the blind, and 4) set the oppressed free. This vision of salvation and liberation is carried on by the Church that is filled by the Holy Spirit. This is not the church's mission, but God's mission that has a church.

Session 4 – Everyone is a Minister

The role of vocational ministers is important, but the effectiveness of the local church is dependent on each member recognizing their unique giftedness for ministry. According to Ephesians 4, everyone is gifted by the Holy Spirit to minister in some way. The people of the local church must recognize their giftedness and be equipped for significant ministry in their local spheres of influence.

Community With Our World

"...*Then the world will know that you sent me...*" John 17:23

Session 5 – When the Church Goes Glocal

Jesus clearly prays that the church would be a beacon that confirms to the world that he was sent from the Father. Historically, the church in the West has seen the fulfillment of this prayer in its emphasis on global missions. Today, the same zeal that first sent missionaries across the world should characterize local churches who are willing to be sent across the street. Our mission is global and local. It's glocal!

Session 6 – Getting N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood

Just as the exiles were called to “seek the prosperity of the city,” the church is called to work with others for the flourishing of their community. The first step in effective partnerships is intentionally getting to know one’s community. This concluding session invites participants to “get N.E.A.R.” the community to discover its 1) Narratives, 2) Ethics, 3) Associations, and 4) Rituals.

Introduction: Why Better Together?

When you tell people about your church, what’s their first reaction? What is your church known for?

The first church I pastored was tucked away in a neighborhood that was virtually impossible to find. When the property was first purchased, it was believed that a four-lane boulevard was going to go directly in front of the church. Unfortunately, city planners moved the road a block south of the property, which eventually led to houses and apartments obscuring the facility from view and decreasing our visibility to the community. The most common reaction I got when I told people I pastored Grace Church was, “Where’s that?” Every...single...time.

In 2011, I accepted a call to a new church that was in the middle of downtown. It had incredible visibility and was strategically located near the epicenter of the city’s cultural life. The first time I encountered someone in town who asked me what I did, I was so excited to tell them, anticipating their instant recognition of this downtown congregation. I was disappointed when they replied quizzically, “Hmm...where’s that?”

As churches in North America grapple with the realities of ministry in a 21st century context, they are facing some variation of the same problem: the people they are trying to impact with the Good News of Jesus are largely unaware of their existence and uninterested in what they’re doing. This is true of churches tucked away in suburban neighborhoods, churches sitting prominently on town squares, small town churches, and rural churches. To put it bluntly, the townsperson on the street or at the grocery store doesn’t care about your church’s new advertisement in the newspaper or its shiny LED road sign.

Why? Did they ever care? If so, why not now?

I fear that the local church has decided they can live without the community. Undoubtedly, this was an unconscious decision for most churches, but it is the sad reality of churches that direct the majority of their resources inwardly. The result is a city full of people who unconsciously have decided they can live without the local church, and they don’t know what they’re missing. What should break our hearts is this: when people have decided they can live without the local church, it makes it that much easier to decide to live without Jesus.

Jesus prayed for something better! In John 17, he prays specifically for the church that would continue his mission, asking the Father, “*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.*” Jesus envisions his message being carried on by the life and witness of a spirit-filled community of people who are sent into marketplaces and neighborhoods as extensions of

his love. His prayer wasn't focused exclusively on the church but included those who would come to faith through their faithful presence in the world. If the prayer of Jesus is any indicator, the church is better when intentionally engaged with its community. Consequently, the community is too. We're better together!

For a lot of people in the church, they hear words like "outreach" or "mission" and immediately think of knocking on doors trying to convince total strangers to believe certain doctrinal statements. As the church seeks new expressions of faithfulness in the 21st century, we have to ask if this is the kind of presence Jesus envisions. Does the church in North America have an imagination for an approach that goes beyond cognitive assent to doctrine and is more holistic in its relationship to those outside of its walls? Can we become a people who live such lives of beauty that those who don't know Jesus are drawn to him by our life together? With the help of God, could we become a church our community can't live without?

I'm convinced that we can! Jesus prayed that we would be. However, in my experience in ministry I've learned that most people are still thinking of evangelism and outreach as a one-dimensional enterprise focused solely on cognitive assent. *Better Together* is designed to help people think more holistically about their role in the mission of the church. It's an invitation to think about the relational nature of God and what our relationship to our community should be like. The ultimate goal is that participants would reimagine their lives as extensions of the life-giving community God desires for everyone to experience.

In the first section, "Community with God", we will look at the trinitarian life of God as a paradigm for the kind of life-giving relationships that should characterize a follower of Jesus. The goal is to move from an understanding of the Trinity as a theological concept and embrace this reality of God's nature as a blueprint for the kinds of relationships that should characterize the life of the church. Jesus was sent by the Father to open the way for humanity to participate in this relationship, and now the church is sent by the Spirit to do the same.

The church is a sign and foretaste of God's ultimate plan for humanity. In the second section, "Community with Others," participants will think about the kind of church Jesus prays for them to be. Jesus envisions the local church as a winsome and beautiful community that reflects the love of God. This section equips participants to understand their place in the mission of God that is at the heart of what it means to be the church.

The final component of this experience is "Community with our World." Participants will be equipped to think about their neighborhoods, workspaces, and playgrounds as places where God is already at work. As a sent people, the church is called to join with God and participate in what he is up to outside the walls of the church. As the church takes the time to listen and get to know its immediate context and the stories of those who live there, it will become an extension of the life-giving community of God.

The *Better Together* experience culminates in calling your group to active involvement in strategic partnerships with community organizations who are actively engaged in work that contributes to the "flourishing of the city." (Jer. 29:7) As strategic partnerships are formed and relationships are built, the ministry of the church is expanded beyond the walls of the church.

These partnerships have the potential to be a beautiful expression of mission and increases the impact of your congregation.

This is not just another Bible study or small group curriculum. It's an experience intended to prepare your group for active engagement in partnerships outside your church or to optimize your group's existing partnerships. *Better Together* is built on the premise that serving one's community with a missional passion has a transformative effect on the follower of Jesus and those outside the church.

Facilitators of this curriculum should immediately consult the "Partners of Shalom" worksheet on page 61. It provides a guide for choosing community partners that are in alignment with the mission of the church. Together with the pastor or a directional leader of your congregation, use the worksheet to select community organizations that not only align missionally, but also fit the resources your congregation will be able to bring to the partnership.

Over the next 6 weeks, I pray that God uses these lessons to expand the missional imagination of your church. Jesus's prayer in John 17 is a grand vision of what God wants to do in the world through His people. As the Holy Spirit leads, I pray that your church experiences the life-giving community of God, builds community with one another, and extends life-giving community to their world.

Lesson Structure

The lessons are designed to take learners on a journey of reimagining who the church can be in a 21st century context and how they can participate in the mission of God in their communities and spheres of influence outside the church. Each lesson will be comprised of 4 major components.

1. **Where We Are.** This section gets participants thinking about where the church is, especially in its relationship to culture. These questions and exercises will help participants evaluate the role the local church plays in their community. Along the way, common assumptions about the church may be challenged, potentially creating a certain level of "cognitive dissonance" for participants. This is part of the process, providing a starting point for the journey towards transformation.
2. **Who God Is.** As churches experience the disorientation of rapid cultural change, the nature and character of God must always be its true north. This section takes learners into what the Bible reveals about God and allows them to reflect theologically on who God is and the nature of his mission in the world. The picture that emerges from this teaching will inform who the church can become as they are sent by the Spirit.
3. **Who We Can Become.** Based on who God is, holy conversation allows people to imagine who they can become. This section will mainly be discussion and reflection questions. The role of the teacher will be to facilitate the discussion and to give everyone a chance to contribute to a shared vision of the particular kind of people the local church is called to be.
4. **Where We Are Sent.** The lesson will conclude with a practice intended to put what has been learned into action. Movements take time and intentionality. Becoming a church one's community can't live without doesn't happen overnight. These practices are intended to shape the culture of your church. As individuals engage in a variety of

exercises intended to open their eyes to the needs of the community, the teacher can use these experiences as a springboard for collective action and partnership in the community.

Missional Partnerships

The final lesson concludes by presenting to your group a list of community ministries and partnerships that are in alignment with the mission of God. Compiling this list will need to be done 4-6 weeks before this final lesson is presented. A worksheet is provided in the appendix to help one think through the kinds of community partnerships that are a fit for your congregation. Before teaching any of these lessons, look at the worksheet and consult with senior leadership in your church about community ministries that would be a good fit.

Intended Outcomes

The curriculum is broken up into three sections, consisting of two lessons in each section. After completing each section, here are some intended outcomes the curriculum is designed to produce for your participants.

Section 1: Community with God (Sessions 1 & 2)

- Develop an awareness of God's trinitarian nature as a model for the kinds of life-giving relationships the church is called to facilitate in its community.
- Integrate the restoration of *shalom* in the community into a holistic understanding of the mission of the local church.
- Imagine how one's daily rhythm of life might be a faithful expression of God's healing presence for the world.

Section 2: Community with Others (Sessions 3 & 4)

- Become aware of the cultural shifts of "post-Christendom" and view them as opportunities for mission.
- Demonstrate an ability to integrate a missional understanding of the church as a platform for proclamation and social transformation.
- Articulate how their unique gifting as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher equips them for service in their daily lives and in the ministries of the church.

Section 3: Community with Our World (Session 5-6)

- Express a commitment to God's mission through global and cross-cultural agencies as well as in the local context of the church.
- Demonstrate a willingness to use one's vocational life to extend the life-giving community of God to others.
- Develop a deeper understanding of their community through the N.E.A.R. assessment.
- Express an interest in exploring community partnerships as an opportunity for missional engagement for one's family or small group.

As you begin this journey, make these outcomes a matter of prayer, recognizing that true transformation can only happen through the Holy Spirit!

*Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved
them even as you have loved me. - John 17:23*

BETTER TOGETHER

Session 1 THE INVITATION

Session 1: The Invitation

Session Objectives:

- Introduce the overall theme of the class.
- Present the doctrine of the Trinity as more than historic dogma but an essential element of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
- Discuss an understanding of salvation that is rooted in God's trinitarian nature.
- Unpack the implications of a relational God creating humanity for relationship.
- Emphasize the practice of worship as a means of experiencing community with God.

Supplies Needed

Blank pieces of paper

Markers/colored pencils

OPTIONAL: Scotch tape that will not leave marks on the wall

OPTIONAL: Monitor/laptop to show video teaching

Teacher Preparation: Trinity...So what?

John 17 is known as the high priestly prayer of Jesus. It gives us a glimpse into the inner life of the Trinity. What can be known about the Trinity is limited, which is why Christian doctrine throughout the centuries has resisted simple explanations, choosing instead to emphasize its mysterious nature.

This lesson will not attempt to explain **how** God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It will, however, invite participants to think about **what** God's trinitarian nature means for Christian living and for the mission of the Church.

In the prayer, Jesus asks that the Church would be unified, "*just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me*" (John 17:21). Jesus envisions the Church participating with the very life of God, enabled to experience the unity and love that God has within himself. The Church does not participate in God's trinitarian life solely for their enjoyment or security, but also as a means for those who do not believe to come to faith.

The Trinity reveals God's relational nature and serves as the basis for our relationship to God and to each other. The "glue" that binds the members of the Trinity together is called *perichoresis*, a word that literally means "circle dance." (*peri* = around; *choresis* = dance, choreograph) It captures the reciprocal nature of the selfless and self-giving love that each member of the Godhead has for the others.

This is a big "so what" of the doctrine of the Trinity: this reciprocation of love is extended to humanity in salvation. Through Jesus, humanity is invited into the very life of God. As humanity participates with God, this kind of love has the potential to characterize human relationships, especially those within the Church.

Class Introduction (5 Minutes)

Communicate in your own words the objectives for the class and how this experience has the potential to transform one's perspective on the church and its engagement in your local context. Based on the introduction, here are three main objectives this course hopes to achieve:

1. **Reflect and discuss the state of the church.** Churches are facing unique challenges, and this course attempts to bring awareness to those trends on a national level, but also invites participants to think about what that looks like in their local church. Too often, this discussion only happens at the clergy level or in upper tiers of church leadership. This class attempts to bring this discussion to the grass roots level of the church.
2. **Introduce a theology of mission.** Any time the church has faced obstacles, the faithful response has always been to look to God. Developing a robust understanding of God and his mission in the world will inspire his people to new expressions of faithfulness in the world.
3. **Equip people to engage in God's mission in the world.** We may learn a lot of things in our time together, but none of it matters if we don't take it to the streets! Let's discover our gifts for ministry and how each of us can engage in God's mission. Our ultimate prayer is that the Holy Spirit would use this time to help us collaborate on collective action for the flourishing of our community. With God's help, this is the first step in becoming a church your community can't live without!

Where we Are: What's your perspective of the church? (15 Minutes)

Let's start by thinking about where we are as a church. Everyone in this room, regardless of how long you've been connected to the church, has a working understanding of who the church is. Even if we haven't been connected for a long time, we have some idea of what the church does. Let's start with where we are: **What do most people think of when they hear the word church?** And since a "picture is worth 1,000 words," let's draw that.

Distribute paper and colored pencils/markers. Instruct participants to draw what they think people's perception of the church is. Explain that at the conclusion of the drawing, you will ask for people to explain what they drew and why. You might also remind them that this is not an art contest! Allow 10 minutes for drawing and 5 minutes for discussion.

NOTE: *If possible, tape the pictures in the room for the duration of the 6-week class. The final lesson will include a time to reevaluate the drawings, where participants will share how their perspective might have shifted. If unable to display in the room, collect the drawings and redistribute them at the final class.*

After 10 minutes or after everyone is done drawing, ask participants to share about their drawings. Be sure to ask them to explain **why** they illustrated certain features and encourage them to unpack the significance of them. Also, ask participants **why** they think most people assume the image or images they selected. If your group is large, divide your group into small groups of 3-5 so that everyone will have the chance to share.

Things to keep in mind as you facilitate this discussion:

- There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. People are sharing their perspective/perception.

- There will be both positive and negative reactions that are shared. That's ok. Resist the urge to correct something that you may feel is clearly out of bounds. Remember, this is to get your group thinking and to create a baseline perception of "where we are."
- Keep an eye on the time! Be mindful that some people may be deeply invested in their image of the church. Acknowledge the diversity of opinion and then transition with something like this:

Transition: Why do we have so many different images for the church? What is good about the different perspectives? What could be a problem? This is something we're going to explore over the next few weeks.

Our pictures represent our "**ecclesiology**." **It's what we believe about the church.** Many of you shared positive things about the church, and that's great! However, what do people outside of our church think? What picture would they draw? It's important that we consider this because what they think about the church affects what they think about God. Let's explore who God is so that we can make sure our life and ministry together accurately reflect his love and character to the world.

Who God Is: God's Invitation to Community (15 Minutes)

The following lesson provides the material you can share (paraphrase) with your class. Be sure to include Jesus' emphasis on prayer for the church, God's ability to live in full relationship with each other in the Trinity, and the definition of *perichoresis*. You can play the video of Rev. Mark Snodgrass teaching this material, available at: www.vimeo.com/user/96044079/folder/6196985

The Prayer of Jesus: John 17

The story of the Bible begins with God graciously revealing himself to humanity. We think of God revealing himself to Abraham and making a promise to bless the world through his descendants. This story crescendos in the person of Jesus, God's fullest revelation of himself. The writer of Hebrews says, "*he has spoken to us by his Son...the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*" (Hebrews 1:2-3) If you want to know who God is, look to Jesus!

We certainly would love to know more about Jesus than is present in the four Gospels, especially with so much being on the line – i.e. what humans can know about God! Our desire for more knowledge or our obsession over what we don't know, is evidence that we don't fully appreciate what God HAS revealed.

For example: The prayer of Jesus in John 17 reveals SO much about the relationship he had with the Father. It's an invaluable picture of who God is and instructive for the kind relationship the people of God are invited into and are called to extend to the world. This prayer is going to guide our journey together as we seek to be the kind of church our community can't live without. As we dive into the prayer, we're going to ask ourselves, "**Are we becoming the church Jesus prays for us to be?**"

Let's start by reflecting on what the prayer reveals about God. After praying that God would be glorified, Jesus prays for the church, asking that the relationship that he has with the Father be extended to them:

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

There's so much to unpack in just these two verses, but let's start with, "just as you are in me and I am in you." (v. 21) This points to a core doctrine of the Church: the Trinity. Although the Holy Spirit isn't mentioned by name in this particular passage, the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is present throughout the Bible. Jesus is revealing the unity that exists in the relationship of these three.

A belief in the Trinity is at the core of what it means to be Christian. It confesses that God exists as one indivisible God in a perfect communion of three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians have tried for centuries to explain the "how" of this doctrine, and if you go to a theology classroom in seminary, you'll spend a lot of time talking about this.

It's interesting, however, that what usually ends up happening in seminary is an extended discussion on what the Trinity is NOT. We have a much easier time of explaining what this relationship is NOT than explaining what it is or how it works. Here's a video that reminds me a lot of theology class: "St. Patrick's Bad Analogies" on YouTube from LutheranSatire available at <https://youtu.be/KQLfgaUoQCw>

Modalism, arianism, and partialism...It's all going to be on the quiz at the end of class. (Make sure you wrote down that part about Voltron.)

As a doctrinal statement, here's the simplest diagram we can use to come to a functional understanding of this belief:

This certainly doesn't solve it all, but I think we can get caught up in the "metaphysics" of the Trinity and lose sight of the implications of this doctrine for our lives. Don't get me wrong, there is plenty there to "blow our mind" and rightly should consume our theological imaginations.

What should really amaze us, however, is the unity and perfection of God's trinitarian life. We know how incredible this is because we have experience with human relationships. We know they are hard! For example, we have a hard enough time maintaining the one-on-one relationships of our marriage, neighbors, and co-workers. Three-way relationships are notoriously sticky for humans!

God, however, exists in PERFECT relationship with each other! Forget about the metaphysics of water, ice, and gas all existing at the same time. That's nothing! Think about this: there's never



been a time when two members of the Trinity have had a “meeting after the meeting” where the other is excluded! That’s the real mystery of the trinitarian life of God!

What is it that binds the members of the trinity together? It’s a love so amazing that the early church had to invent a word for it: *perichoresis*. Let’s break it down:

Peri – round. From this prefix we get words like “perimeter.”

Choresis – dance. You might recognize this from words like “choreograph.”

Selfless, self-giving, self-emptying love flows reciprocally through the Trinity in a “circle dance” known as **perichoresis**. This is the “glue” that binds them together.

When you recognize this, it makes Jesus’s prayer that much more amazing: “may they be one as we are one.” Essentially, Jesus is praying that humanity through his life, death, and resurrection might be invited into the dance! This is an invitation our world desperately needs!

Theologian Brent Peterson explains it like this:

“God created as an extension of who God is – Love. The doctrine of the Trinity celebrates that God is not needy in any way. God did not create to help offset an anemic divine ego. Rather, God created so that love might flourish. Therefore, God created humans so that they might receive life in the very love of the triune God.”¹

God is inviting the world to dance! Moreover, the invitation is delivered through the testimony and witness of his people, the Church. Specifically, your local church!

(The following story is about a time that I was excluded and included. Think of something from your own experience in which a group of people was inviting you to belong. This is the invitation of the Trinity, but it is offered through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus!)

STORY: I went to our local community center during Christmas time, hoping to get a little cardio in on the basketball court. There’s a regular pick-up game there, and so I was waiting for my turn and got on a team. It was pretty evident through the first few trips up the court that I wasn’t going to get the ball. It may have been my salt-n-pepper hair or my sub-six foot frame, but for whatever reason, these strangers were not going to include me in the game plan. I got my cardio in, but it was clear I did not “belong” on the basketball court.

As I’m walking out of the building, a little dejected from my experience, there was a group of Christmas carolers, most of them in the golden years of their life. They were singing in “barber shop” style and it sounded pretty good. I stopped to listen, and on a few numbers, I started humming along. One of them said, “Hey, do you know this song?” I confessed that I had heard *Silent Night* a time or two. He said, “What part do you sing?” I sheepishly admitted, “On a good day, first tenor.” “HEY!” he said, “we’ve been looking for a first tenor! Would you like to sing with us?” Boy, would I!

¹ Brent D. Peterson, *Created to Worship: God’s Invitation to Become Fully Human* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012), 32.

I went on to sing 3 or 4 songs with them. It sounded pretty good if I do say so myself! At the end they said, “We sing at the Apple Glen nursing home every Thursday night! We’d love to have you join our group!”

That night I realized I was more likely to be included at the nursing home than on the basketball court. However, it felt good to be invited!

The question I want to leave you with is this: Which group was most like God? The basketball team or the carolers? I think we know the answer to that, so let’s make it a little harder: **Is your church more like the basketball team? Or the Carolers? Are we a community of people that readily invites others to participate?**

Who We Can Become: People of Perichoresis (15 Minutes)

Let’s dialogue about who we can become in light of this picture of who God is.

1. Jesus prays for “those that will believe their message.” How would you evaluate our church’s ability to welcome others who are not currently a part of our church?

This is a hard question, but be prepared for honest feedback. It may be difficult to hear the responses, but an honest evaluation of “where we are” is crucial to understanding “who we can become.”

2. What does it feel like to be excluded? Contrast this with what it feels like to be included?

Push participants to think about their experiences of inclusion and/or exclusion. Ask people to elaborate and remain sensitive to anyone who has a history of being excluded.

3. John 17 points us to the Trinity, a foundational Christian doctrine. How can we move from this being a creed we confess to a lifestyle that we live?

Christians need to do more than memorize scripture, regurgitate answers to a catechism, or debate the fine points of doctrine (“That’s modalism, Patrick!”). These are important, but they must be lived out. Use this discussion to lay a foundation for a more “holistic” or “integral” approach to theology: what we believe must find expression in our lives and how we imagine what the world could be.

4. Thinking of the Trinity as a model for the kind of people we can become and for the kind of relationships we are invited experience, how have you seen the church embody this kind of relational wholeness?

Move the conversation toward glimpses of when the church gets it right. They may be hard to see, but they’re there!

5. “Perichoresis” describes the self-giving and self-emptying love the members of the Trinity have for one another. In a world defined by self-interest, what are the challenges

for those who desire for this kind of love to characterize their life? By contrast, what potential is present in a community of people choosing to live in the self-giving ways of God?

This gives people a chance to name the fear of being a “door mat.” Rather than offering a false guarantee that it won’t happen, move the conversation toward the potential for transformation present in those that embrace this way. For example, the classic objection to pacifism is, “Who actually lives this way?” The Mennonite retort is generally something along the lines of, “I don’t know, but what if WE did?”

6. How can the church, both internally and externally, embody this kind of love?

This is a conversation about practices. In light of this idea of “perichoresis,” push people to think about tangible practices that promote this kind of love.

Where We are Sent: The Practice of Worship (10 Minutes)

Teacher Prompt: As you dismiss the class, remind people of the importance of corporate worship. It is in the gathering of God’s people that we engage in intentional practices that point us to God’s trinitarian life.

Teacher Resource: The church has sometimes confused the worship event as something for people to consume, which can degenerate into entertainment. By contrast, worship is a formative event that shapes us and reminds us of the “community with God” we are invited to experience in salvation. Stress the importance of meaningful engagement and participation in worship as a sign and foretaste to those outside the church.

Teacher Prompt: Remind people that worship is an “embodied” practice of the church. The emergence of online church has been a helpful tool, but the downside is that it has made the Gospel an idea or concept, perhaps even a special dispensation of knowledge that can be contained in the virtual world. This can become a form of Gnosticism (i.e. physical world is evil, while invisible spiritual knowledge available to a select few is good). Physically gathering for worship reminds people of the real and tangible community they are invited to experience with God and others.

Teacher Prompt: Here are some things to remind people to engage in worship with intentionality and purpose. Hopefully, this can be a starting point for becoming a community whose weekly gathering is a beautiful expression of the kind of life that is available to all.

- Show up on time.
- Sing...even if off key
- Make it a priority on your family’s calendar
- Share on social media about your church’s worship gathering
- Invite a friend to join you
- Serve in a ministry that contributes to the worship gathering of your church
- Come expecting to be challenged and transformed

All of this sounds pretty basic, but it's important we get this right if we want our worship gathering to be a faithful expression of the community God has within himself. Let's gather on Sunday mornings excited about experiencing community with God!

Total Lesson Time: 60 Minutes

Lesson Bibliography

Hastings, Ross. *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

Peterson, Brent D. *Created to Worship: God's Invitation to Become Fully Human*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012.

**BETTER
T  GETHER**

**Session 2
THE GOD WHO SENDS**

Session 2: The God Who Sends

Session Objectives:

- Introduce the concept of God's mission emerging from God's nature.
- Define the Mission of God as the restoration of *Shalom*.
- Discuss the implications of a God who sends (i.e. Jesus, Holy Spirit, Church).
- Define the practice of presence and what it means to "live sent" in the world.

Supplies Needed

Various news/current events magazines or copies of the daily newspaper.

Scissors

Poster board

Glue stick or tape

OPTIONAL: Monitor/laptop to show video teaching

Teacher Preparation: Sent from the Father

In the last lesson we dipped our toe into the doctrine of the Trinity. It's the first step in establishing an understanding of God's mission. Out of God's trinitarian nature, the Son is sent, the Holy Spirit is sent, and the Church is sent.

In John 20:19-23, a passage known as the "Johannine Pentecost," Jesus makes clear that those who accept the invitation to participate in the life of God are sent on mission to bring others in: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:21) Because God is love, he is compelled by his very nature to send the Son, the Spirit, and ultimately the Church. Theologian Thomas Noble reflects upon this:

*"Out of the abundance of God's unending love for the world, God sent God's Son to reconcile all of creation by the transforming energy of God's Spirit through the power of the cross and the resurrection. This triune God who is in name and nature love is a missionary God. God is steadfastly drawing the people of God in all the nations of the world into the body of Christ to bear witness to the gospel and to be a sacrament of God's reconciling mission 'for the life of the world.'"*²

This grand vision has *shalom* as its goal. The Bible's vision of *shalom*, often translated as "peace," is more than the absence of conflict. Rather, it refers to a state of wholeness, completeness, and order, most clearly seen at the conclusion of creation as God pronounces all of it "very good." The infinite number of living things that God had created were living in a state of well-being, the pinnacle of which was humanity living in *shalom* with one another and with God.³

² Keith Schwanz and Joseph E. Coleson, eds., *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011), 102.

³ Robert C. Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 36-37.

God is a sending God, whose very nature is a selfless love that drives him to send in order to redeem humanity to himself and restore relationship. As the Church is sent by the power of the Spirit, it is a continuation of Jesus's life and the embodiment of his message of restored *shalom* in the Kingdom of God.

Where We Are: Brokenness in the World (15 Minutes)

OPTION 1:

In this opening activity, you will invite participants to look through current events magazines, and/or multiple copies of the daily newspaper. Most offices with waiting areas have an ample supply of old magazines they'll be happy to donate. Participants will cut out pictures that represent brokenness in the world and affix them to a posterboard. In advance, prepare the posterboard with this heading, "As the Father sent me..."



The closing activity will be to add on top of the pictures of brokenness with images of what the church is doing in the world. A great source for these stories is Nazarene Compassionate Ministries magazine. Many churches that participate in the child sponsorship program have multiple copies sent to them. Ask your pastor where they might be. A PDF can be downloaded at: <https://ncm.org/magazine>. Once downloaded you can print off multiple copies for participants.

Quickly review last week's picture of God as a being that exists in perfect, relational wholeness. Remind the class of God's gracious invitation to humanity to "join the divine dance" (*perichoresis*).

Contrast this perfect and whole image of God with the brokenness we see in the world. Ask participants to cut out 3 or 4 pictures of brokenness, pain, or suffering in the magazines. Remind them they are specifically looking for stories or examples of *relational* brokenness. For example, a famine is not just a shortage of food for one localized area, but a systemic failure of the global food supply chain. How are the relationships that make up the distribution of food excluding those in need? That's relational brokenness.

The point of this exercise is to help people see the "bad news" that dominates the headlines as more than isolated incidents of violence or suffering. They are indicative of the countless ways our world acts in self-interest, resulting in relational brokenness.

After about 8-10 minutes of them looking for stories and cutting them out, ask them to affix them on a posterboard that you've provided. As they affix their story, ask each the following:

- Why did you choose this story? How was it significant to you?
- How do you think this story represents the brokenness in the world?

OPTION 2: Digital Scavenger Hunt

Quickly review last week's picture of God as a being that exists in perfect, relational wholeness. Remind the class of God's gracious invitation to humanity to "join the divine dance" (*perichoresis*).

Contrast this perfect and whole image of God with the brokenness we see in the world. Invite people to take out their phones/devices and scroll through the headlines of their preferred news provider. Invite them to find one story that fits the following criteria (perhaps choose 3-4 depending on time):

- Political Unrest
- Armed Conflict
- Food Shortage
- Abuse
- Ethics Violation
- Financial Crime
- Violent Crime

As people find stories that correspond with the chosen criteria, cross them off the list and have the person that found them briefly explain what's going on.

The point of this exercise is to help people see the "bad news" that dominates the headlines as more than isolated incidents of violence or suffering. They are indicative of the countless ways our world acts in self-interest, resulting in relational brokenness.

After about 8-10 minutes of them looking for stories, ask the following:

- How do you think these stories represent the brokenness in the world?
- Where do you see a breakdown in relationships in these stories?

Transition: It's clear our world is broken! Let's see what God has done and is doing to repair it.

Who God Is: A Sending God (20 Minutes)

The following is a teaching that you can deliver to your class, or you can play the video of Rev. Mark Snodgrass teaching this material, available at: www.vimeo.com/user/96044079/folder/6196985

In Search of Shalom

One of my favorite worship songs begins with this line, "*Do you feel the world is broken?*" It names a lot of what many of us feel as we scan the headlines. Sometimes, however, the brokenness of the world moves from the headline of some distant place and into our lives, and we become face to face with the brokenness of our world.

It's important to know: **it hasn't always been this way.** At the conclusion of creation God surveyed all that he had created. He saw an ecosystem in harmony with the animal Kingdom, and he saw the Man and the Woman created in his image flourishing in the Garden. He looked over

all of this and upon seeing a world reflective of the harmony of his divine nature he proclaimed, "It is good...very good." The world was in a state of what the Bible calls, *shalom*.

In many places in the world, this is how people greet one another, asking that God's peace rest upon their neighbor. This desire comes from the Bible. The word *shalom*, often translated as "peace," is more than the absence of conflict. Rather, it refers to a state of wholeness, completeness, and order. The Bible envisions humanity living in the good world God created in right relationship with 1. God, 2. Self, 3. Others, and 4. the Environment. When God said the world was "very good," this is the kind of relational wholeness he was surveying. This is *shalom*.



The God Who Sends

But what happened? It doesn't take long until the very good world God created descends into disorder and brokenness as a result of human rebellion. The humans chose to rebel in their self-interest in opposition to the self-less love of God. The result is a world full of war, disease, conflict, and death.

But God refuses to give up! He continued to speak all throughout the story of the Bible! The same word that brought order to the chaos at creation speaks to create a people through which he will restore *shalom* to the world.

The prophet Isaiah describes God's shalom-producing Word:

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
I so is my word that goes out from my mouth, It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

God's ultimate Word is made flesh in Jesus! The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate picture of *shalom*. Jesus lived in perfect relationship with the Father, with others, and with creation. This is what he was sent to do. Just as God sent his Word to proclaim order over the chaos, he sends the Word now made flesh in Jesus to demonstrate his love for humanity. You might recognize how John describes this:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... (John 3:16)

The Father, out of love, gave his Son for the restoration of *shalom*. This passage goes on to say,

...God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17)

In this amazing picture of God, we see the selfless love of the Trinity on full display. Out of God's love, **he gives and he sends!** The Son is sent by the Father, not for the work of condemnation, but for the work of salvation! This is the **mission of God: to restore shalom to creation.** Wherever relationships are broken, God is at work to restore shalom.

The People Who Go

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the culmination of what God is doing to redeem the world, but the mission continues. Just as God sent Jesus, he now sends his people through the power of the Holy Spirit to continue this work. Let's look at how John describes this:

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:19-23)

The remaining disciples were locked in a room, cowering in fear. Does that sound familiar? Perhaps your filled with fear as you think about the chaos in the world. But look what happens when Jesus shows up:

Jesus speaks "peace" into their troubled and fearful lives. Jesus shows them his hands and side. They are pierced. The implication is that the peace, shalom/wholeness, that God desires for us comes at great cost. It was only because the Father sent his Son. It was only because the Son obeyed. This way of peace is cruciform...it takes the form of suffering and the cross.

Notice what the "crucified" and resurrected Jesus does: he breathes "crucified" air on them. He sends them, just as the Father sent him. It was not a commission to go and conquer, go and establish centers of power, go advance Christian agendas... No, it was, "Go and live cruciform lives in the world." This is how *shalom* is realized and experienced by a broken world. A group of sent people, through the power of the Holy Spirit, commit to live like Jesus.

And because those original disciples committed to live sent, here we are today. Were they special? Did they have something we don't? Nope. In fact, they are not portrayed as exceptional people in the Gospel accounts. They made all the same mistakes that we do and were filled with the same doubts that we have. That day, however, they received the **power** of the Spirit and discovered the joy of living as sent people.

We can too! We must, because **God sends in order to restore.** Someone lived sent, that's why you're here today. The call from the God who sends is to go. It is a call to "live sent." Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you!"

STORY: Wells Crowther is a hero of mine that reminds me of the call to “live sent.” He was an equities trader that worked in the World Trade Center. He was successful in his job, but always had a desire to be an emergency responder. He was planning to transition to work at the local fire department in his hometown. He was a college athlete and always wore a red bandana when he played sports.

When the tower was struck, Welles was one of the lucky ones to get out. There was something inside him, however, that was sending him back into the burning building. He put on his red bandana and went back into the tower to assist the firefighters. We only know this story because there are 3 people who said they would never have gotten out had a young man wearing a red bandana not showed up to lead them to safety.

Welles was killed when the tower collapsed. I think of him and the mission God has sent the church to continue when I read this verse from Jude:

...save others by snatching them from the fire. (Jude 23)

God sends his people through the power of the Spirit to bring restoration to the world. He calls us, empowers us, and uses us, but we have to participate with him and “live sent.”

Who We Can Become: A Sent People (20 Minutes)

OPTION 1: Pictures of Shalom

Using copies of the *NCM Magazine*, have people look through it and cut out pictures or stories that represent the Church living as a “sent people.” Have them paste those pictures in the midst of the pictures of chaos that were previously pasted.

Ask the following of each person:

1. What story did you post?
2. How does that represent the church living as a sent people?
3. In what way is the restoration of *shalom* being accomplished in your story?



End the discussion by highlighting the sent people of God living and working in the chaos of the world. This is a great image of how the Church is sent: “as the Father has sent me, so am I sending you!”

OPTION 2: Discussion Questions

We spent some time today looking at examples of the brokenness in our world. As you worked your way through the exercise (or frankly, as you watch any news broadcast), how does experiencing the ‘bad news’ of the day feel to you?

1. Are you more likely to take on the weight of what's going on around you? Does it make you want to 'zone out' or does it make you want to take action?

In today's lesson, we unpacked the concept of shalom. Clearly, we have not reached shalom in today's world. However, this does not mean that God is not actively working toward bringing shalom back to the world today! In fact, it is His mission—to redeem and restore ALL things. He gave His Son on the cross for us for this very reason.

2. Do you think of the mission of God in this way? Do you believe part of what God is doing, the very message of the Gospel, is to make all things new? Have you considered how the Gospel is active not just in a personal way (God is making you new!), but also in a communal way (God is making the whole world new!) Does this change your perspective about what it means to share the Gospel? If so, how?

In John 20, Jesus then sends his disciples out into the world, but first, He does something curious—He breathes on them, and gives them the Holy Spirit. From today's lesson: 'Notice what the "crucified" and resurrected Jesus does: he breathes "crucified" air on them. He sends them, just as the Father sent him. It was not a commission to go and conquer, go and establish centers of power, go advance Christian agendas... No, it was go and live cruciform lives in the world.'

Ann Voskamp says it this way: "We don't get to be people of the cross in the world without being people who live shaped and formed like a cross in this world."⁴

3. What does that mean to you? What does it mean to live a life shaped and formed like a cross?

Here's the mind-blowing part of God's Mission: God has decided to include you and me in his plans to make all things new! He has chosen the Church as the vehicle by which He accomplishes this task. The very call that Jesus gave to the disciples that night is true for you and I today.

4. God is calling us to a life set apart. Can you think of some examples, though, of how maybe we've taken the "set apart" concept too far? How about examples in which we have not been 'set apart' enough?

Think about the lives of the disciples after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Did they become the wealthiest people on the planet? Is it likely that, put in modern terms, they'd have a large social media following or their own talk shows? They certainly went far and wide, and they proclaimed the Kingdom of God, as Jesus called them to do. But they did not live glamorous lives. Their lives were cruciform—gifted and sent, but not for fame or comfort, but for the glory of God. They were persecuted, jailed, and many were violently killed.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/AnnVoskamp/photos/and-at-the-end-of-a-long-week-thinking-maybe-this-cultural-moment-is-begging-for/1357924430886394/> accessed November 1, 2021.

5. In our American experience, we've been very fortunate to live in a place that accepts and even culturally affirms our faith. What do you think it means to live a cruciform life in our own context? What sorts of things characterize a 'set apart' life?
6. Back to the images we gathered together of the brokenness in the world. What do you think it means to be 'sent' to those spaces? Are we called to pursue those spaces? If so, what would cruciform living look like?

Consider, as a group, how you might approach with intentionality ONE place where you see brokenness. What does demonstrating the love of Christ look like there?

Where We Go: Faithful Presence – Living Sent (5 Minutes)

David Fitch has written a wonderful book entitled, *Faithful Presence*. He contends that the church has become too reliant on programs that require those who have yet to follow Jesus to come to the church. He calls the church to go out into the world and embody "faithful presence," an approach more consistent with the example of the early church.

Imagine what faithful presence looks like in your workplace or your neighborhood. Practice an awareness of this callings as you enter into those spaces this week. Ask yourself:

- In what ways are people experiencing brokenness in this place?
- Who might be unaware of God's love for them?
- How can I be an agent of God's mission of restoration in this place?

Leslie Newbigin writes, "He is the Son, sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit to be the bearer of God's kingdom to the nations."⁵ May we be the vessels of "Faithful presence" God uses to restore those around us.

Total Lesson Time: 60 Minutes

Lesson Bibliography

Fitch, David. *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016.

Linthicum, Robert C. *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995.

Schwanz, Keith and Joseph E. Coleson, eds. *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*. Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 24.

BETTER TOGETHER

Session 3 THE MISSION HAS A CHURCH

Session 3: The Mission Has a Church

Session Objectives

- Introduce the unraveling of Christendom as an opportunity for new expressions of faithfulness.
- Offer a corrective to the false dichotomy of mission as either a private profession of cognitive faith or a direct engagement in social action.
- Establish a holistic understanding of mission (both proclamation and social action) based on Jesus's sermon in Luke 4.
- Discuss the implications of a church committed to holistic mission.
- Equip participants to do a "discovery walk" to become awakened to opportunities to join God on mission in their immediate contexts.

Supplies Needed

- PowerPoint capability and/or printed copies of the "Spot the Difference" game.
- Flip Chart OR Dry Erase Board
- OPTIONAL: Monitor/laptop to show video teaching

Teacher Preparation

Church leaders at every level are feeling the effects of significant cultural change as they attempt to cast a vision for the church in the 21st century. It would be difficult to name all the cultural changes, but one significant shift is what scholars call the "unraveling of Christendom."⁶

Christendom is defined in different ways by historians, but for the purpose of this lesson it can be understood as ***a culture in which Christianity is the officially endorsed state religion or in which Christian morals, values, or traditions play a significant role in the formation of that society.*** The generally accepted date of the beginning of Christendom is when Emperor Constantine legalizes Christianity in 313 CE with the Edict of Milan. Shortly thereafter, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Without doing a deep dive into the history of Christianity, one can easily see the dominance of the Christian worldview on Western Civilization. However, *is this history of influence and power the best thing for the Christian movement?* John Wesley said this, "Persecution never did, never could give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received... was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and powers upon the Christians, more especially upon the clergy."⁷

⁶ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape for the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015).

⁷ Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2007), 119 quoting John Wesley, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, Franz Hildebrandt, Gerald Robertson Cragg, and Frank Baker, *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons II, 34-70* (United Kingdom: Clarendon, 1975), 462-3.

On the one hand, leaders lament the loss of influence as Christianity no longer occupies center stage in the shaping of dominant culture. On the other hand, the New Testament church emerged from a community that was NOT at the center of influence. Christendom's "unraveling" provides an opportunity for the church to recapture its true nature as a counter-cultural community called to live out the mission of Jesus in the world.

There are many questions the people of God need to ask in this season, but chief among them is this: will the Church vainly attempt to recapture the power and influence of Christendom or will it seek a new expression of faithfulness more akin to its New Testament roots? This lesson unpacks the mission of Jesus as revealed in Luke 4 as a paradigm for who the church should be in a post-Christendom world.

Where We Are: Spot the Difference

OPENING ACTIVITY: Using PowerPoint, bring up the "Spot the Difference" game on the screen. You can also print off copies of the PDF. Divide the group into two teams and see how quickly they can spot the differences in the images. Time them and the team with the lowest combined time wins. The PowerPoint provides for 2 rounds for each team. There's a 5th image just to do as fun with the whole group.

Transition by saying something like, "Churches are trying to 'spot the difference' as they think about the cultures they live in. Particularly in North America, the environment is different. Church engagement is not what it once was, nor is 'going to church' something that emerging generations even think of as something they should be doing." Here are just three data points from researchers that confirm what church leaders may be feeling:

- In 2007, 54% of Americans said they attended church regularly. In 2017 the number dropped to 45%.
- In 2012, 19.3% of Americans claimed "none" when asked about religious identity, a number that has steadily climbed and was at 26% in 2021.⁸
- Similarly, American's engagement with the Bible is declining as only 35% report reading the Bible at least one time in the last week, a decrease of ten percentage points from 2009.⁹

Let's try to 'spot the difference.' How are you feeling these cultural shifts? What trends do you notice in our community that signifies our culture's acceptance and/or engagement with Christianity is waning? (Using a flip chart or a dry erase board, list "differences" that participants are feeling with culture and church engagement).

Transition: Perhaps this list fills you with anxiety and worry about the future of the church. This is where we are, but let's look at who God is. None of this is a surprise to him.

⁸ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

⁹ "Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith," Barna Group, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

Who God Is: Proclaimer of Good News

The following is a teaching that you can deliver to your class, or you can play the video of Rev. Mark Snodgrass teaching this material, available at:
www.vimeo.com/user/96044079/folder/6196985

Not In Kansas Anymore – Christendom’s Unraveling

As we think about the state of the Church in North America, many leaders and church members are feeling a little bit like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. They are encountering a world that is unfamiliar to them and can only exclaim, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

Church researchers have called this disorientation that we may be feeling the “unraveling of Christendom.” It certainly sounds ominous, but let’s revisit church history to put this moment in its proper perspective.

First of all, **what is Christendom?**

Christendom can be understood as *a culture in which Christianity is the officially endorsed state religion or in which Christian morals, values, or traditions play a significant role in the formation of that society*. Christendom did NOT begin with the resurrection of Jesus or with the giving of the Holy Spirit. Rather, Christendom refers to a geo-political reality - not a spiritual reality. The generally accepted date of the beginning of Christendom is when Emperor Constantine legalizes Christianity in 313 CE with the Edit of Milan. Shortly thereafter, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Think about European history and how much political control the Church possessed. Part of our story as people of faith is that the Christian story was carried, for better or worse...most of the time for worse, by an institution with hierarchies, power structures, and agendas that were often times antithetical to historic Christianity.

Many might argue that the Protestant Reformation was a corrective of this, but it actually just traded one institution for another. For instance, before the Reformation the world was divided into “Christian” nations/domains and non-Christian. After the Reformation, those designations were understood as Catholic or Protestant. Christendom as a way of organizing and ordering culture remained.

It was this social order, with the Church at the center of political and cultural life, that gave birth to the church in America. This is a part of our story and a significant part of America’s story.

What we’re feeling in these days, as we look around and see that we’re not in Kansas anymore, is a pluralistic society in which engagement with a local church is not assumed. In fact, as our culture becomes more secular, people are turning to the traditional structures and programming of the church less and less.

This is disconcerting, but it’s actually an amazing opportunity to rediscover what it must have been like for the early church. We read about amazing growth of the early church in the face of

persecution and without great resources. What was it that characterized that group and how can we recover that?

On Mission with Jesus

What drove the early church was their desire to participate in the mission of Jesus. Returning again to the prayer of Jesus in John 17:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one...” (John 17:20-21)

Jesus is praying for a church that would proclaim and live out his message. In this way, those who do not know him and are not living in *shalom* would experience it through his people.

Trying to recover political power or cultural influence is a fool’s errand for the Church. Christendom’s unraveling is a perfect opportunity for the church to live out its true calling: to be a people passionately engaged in the mission of Jesus. Let’s revisit Luke 4 where Jesus most clearly explained what he was all about.

I want to take you to Nazareth, to Jesus’ boyhood home. It’s a Sabbath day, and Jesus has been given a chance to preach from Isaiah. This passage captures the mission and message of Jesus more than any other OT text:

*18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus said, *“Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* His life, death, and resurrection were inaugurating the “reign/Kingdom of God” in which these things Isaiah envisioned would be fulfilled. Let’s unpack this vision:

This quotation from Isaiah served as a mission statement for his life and ministry. Look at what he was about:

1) Proclaim good news to the poor. What kind of “good news” do the poor want to get? Not that you’ve given them money. Rather, that they are enabled to participate in the economy. That a pathway out of poverty has been established, and they are able to thrive.

2) Release for the prisoners. This refers to those who have been imprisoned unjustly. This is not what Herod or Caesar wanted to hear. Prison was a way to make people disappear.

3) Sight for the blind. This is not physical sight, but Jesus wants people of power and privilege to gain a new perspective. Very few people are eager to say, “I feel like I’m wrong on this issue, could you please change my mind.” Rather, people lived entrenched in ideological silos. Jesus wants to bring salvation that gives new perspective.

4) Freedom for the oppressed. Whole groups and classes of people were oppressed by others. The religious establishment was a part of this, as well as the Roman government. This was good news to the oppressed, but the people with power maintained their power through systems of injustice.

Part of the baggage many American Christians bring into this conversation is an over-spiritualizing of the mission of Jesus to the neglect of the tangible transformation life in Christ brings to communities. We've made fulfillment of Jesus's mission all about praying a certain prayer or offering a particular confession of belief.

The mission of Jesus, however, is both! He prays for those who will believe in John 17, an obvious reference to a confession of faith. But then he demonstrates in his life that this message is not complete without social engagement. The mission of Jesus must be understood holistically as both a faith to confess and a life to live. The mission of Jesus is interested in making both individuals and communities whole. One cannot be exclusively focused on saving one's soul and be unconcerned with their body or their community. The Gospel has the power to transform ALL of it.

The Mission Has a Church

The church has been dealing with the dissolution of Christendom for a while now, but this is a relatively new conversation in the U.S. We can learn something from a British missionary to India named Lesslie Newbigin.

After serving the people of India for a number of years, he returned to Great Britain to find scores of people living in a form of "cultural Christianity" that would continue to wain in an increasingly secular society. He sounded a call to the church to think like missionaries. He famously asked the question, "Can the West be converted?" Put another way: "Can missionary sending countries return again to a vibrant faith?"

The church in pluralistic societies living in vestiges of Christendom's past must think like a missionary would think. What is it about this Gospel that is such "good news" to our broken world? Is the Church in these contexts prepared to focus less on maintaining an institution and more on the mission of God? These are crucial questions central to the Church's reason for being. Newbigin's legacy is instructive for those charting a course for ministry in the 21st century, remind them that the Church doesn't have a mission; the mission has a Church.¹⁰

Who We Can Become: Good News People

The dissolution of Christendom is a challenging reality for the church, but at the same time it is a time filled with potential. It's an opportunity for the church to live its original vocation we see embodied in the early church. This time of church history was characterized by people who lived out the message of Jesus as seen in Luke 4. Let's unpack those elements of Jesus' mission:

¹⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 24.

1. Jesus clearly states he is proclaiming “good news to the poor.” Why do you think Jesus singled out the poor as recipients of his message? How do the poor receive the message differently than the rich?

God doesn't have favorites. The Gospel is available to all, but Jesus is specifically proclaiming his message to the poor. This speaks to the willingness of Jesus to not neglect people the world has forgotten about.

2. Returning again to the concept of *shalom*, how is poverty a relational concept? How can a deficiency of relational wholeness be just as detrimental as material poverty?

Don't allow poverty to be narrowly understand as an economic term. Expand people's understanding to relational brokenness. Those deficient in friendship and healthy relationships need “good news” proclaimed to them as well.

3. How are the poor today neglected by our culture? Our government? By the church?
4. Who are the “prisoners” in our culture? How are people caught in systems of bondage that take away their humanity? What can the church do to help people in these situations thrive?

Mass incarceration and the disproportionate number of minorities jailed in the U.S. is an example of this.

“Recovering of sight for the blind” is obviously pointing to Jesus’ miracles, but at the same time it’s metaphorically pointing to those who are spiritually blind. This connection is made every time Jesus performs a miracle of sight.

5. What does it mean to be “spiritually blind”? Is this a ministry to those inside the church? Outside the church? Both? How does the ministry of Jesus give new perspective to those who may seem at odds with one another?

In our divided world, Jesus wants to give a perspective that is not Left/Right, Liberal/Conservative, Christian/Non-Christian. He wants to lift people from seeing things only on ideological spectrums and see them through the lens of the Kingdom.

6. “Freedom for the oppressed.” How has the church historically responded to people who have been oppressed? What happens when the church sits on the sidelines of injustice?

There are beautiful and tragic examples in the history of the Church. The Black Church in the American Civil Rights movement is a beautiful example of a people of faith who took this element of Jesus's message seriously. By contrast, predominantly white churches in the south were “blinded” by complacency and complicity. They missed the opportunity to participate in the liberation of the oppressed.

7. How do these elements of mission align with how most people understand the mission of God?

Sometimes Luke 4 is regarded as radical and extreme. It makes people uncomfortable. This may be why Jesus was almost thrown off of a cliff after preaching this message!

Where We Go: A Discovery Walk

For this week, be sure to take some time to do a "Discovery Prayer Walk." Take a stroll around your immediate context (where you spend most of your time/where you have the most influence). Where do you see opportunities for the mission of Jesus from Luke 4?

1. Recovery of Sight (Awakening to the truth of the Gospel)
2. Good News for the Poor (Who are the poor - materially and relationally - around you?)
3. Freedom for the Prisoners (Who has been treated unjustly?)
4. Release for those in bondage (What kind of bondage - addictions, materialism, etc - do we see around us?)

Jot down some thoughts about what you see, who is in need, and begin to imagine your life as an "sign, instrument, and foretaste" (Newbigin) of the Kingdom of the God.

Total Lesson Time: 60 minutes

Lesson Bibliography

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**BETTER
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**Session 4
EVERYONE A
MINISTER**

Session 4: Everyone a Minister

Lesson Objectives:

- Unpack the dynamics of the entire church being sent on mission and not just professional clergy.
- Present the church as a place where people are equipped/sent and not as a place to consume religious goods and services.
- Define the “five-fold gifting” of the Holy Spirit from Ephesians 4.
- Assist participants in discovering their giftedness using Eric Knopf’s five-fold gifting analysis.
- Discuss how the contours of one’s spiritual giftedness find meaningful expression in daily life.

Supplies Needed:

- Every participant will need a smart phone or some kind of device to take the five-fold gifts analysis.
- Internet connection
- Paper copy of Five-fold Gifts analysis available for print at: <https://fivefoldministry.com/five-fold-ministry-paper-test.pdf>
- White board with markers/eraser.

Teacher Preparation:

The High Priestly Prayer imagines disciples in community with God and in healthy community with one another: “...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” (John 17:21) Because this union of persons is nourished and sustained by the Spirit, it has the potential to be a healing presence for lives wounded by the brokenness of the world. Chris Beard correlates this emphasis on community with the missional church movement: “A central plea of the missional movement is a shift from individualism and isolationism in the church to a renewal of community. Community is understood as God’s design for the church, both for edification and for mission.”¹¹ Jesus prays for unity so that the church might be optimized for mission.

How can local churches be healthy centers of whole relationships that have the potential to heal the world?

It begins by shifting our perspective on the church’s role in one’s life. For too long, American Christians have perceived the church as a place where professional clergy provide a variety of religious experiences for one’s consumption. Paul, in Ephesians 4, offers a different vision, one that understands every member as a Spirit-empowered agent of transformation. The local church, therefore, becomes a place where believers are **equipped and sent**.

J.R. Woodward offers a reimagined leadership structure in the local church as paramount to building the kind of life-giving community that sustains a disciple’s passion and engagement in

¹¹ Chris Beard, “Missional Discipleship: Discerning Spiritual-Formation Practices and Goals within the Missional Movement,” *Missiology: An International Review* 43(2) (2015): 184.

mission. In a move away from hierarchical leadership, he proposes a “polycentric” network of leaders that recognizes the many interrelated centers of influence potentially present within a diverse community. He writes, “The beauty of polycentric leadership is that it includes a relational group of people who learn to share responsibility, engaging in both leading and following, giving time for each leader to be on mission.”¹² In this model, the pastor is no longer at the top of the organizational chart nor directly responsible for the success or failure of the church. Leaders are cultivated, equipped, and released with meaningful responsibility to accomplish the work of the church. He explains, “Christian leadership is not intended to be a one-man band, with a solitary figure declaring from a pulpit or executive office, with everyone else as spectators. Instead, the New Testament writers used the term *diakonia*, meaning ‘servant’ or ‘service,’ to identify people in leadership.”¹³ A polycentric approach organizes the church in a network of servants who understand their unique gifting and are empowered to lead externally in their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces as well as within the internal life of the church.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul identifies the blueprint for how the Spirit empowers and sends leaders to this work:

“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd (pastor), and teacher (expressed in an acronym as APEST) are not gifts exclusively for professional clergy but are given to the entire church. For a polycentric leadership structure to be effective, disciples must identify their gifts and be equipped to exercise them.

Eric Knopf, inspired by Woodward’s research, has developed a spiritual gifts analysis based on the APEST list in Ephesians 4.¹⁴ This online assessment helps people discern how they fit vocationally in the mission of God. Tools like this are essential to make a polycentric vision flourish. Life-giving community cannot be sustained by the pastor or a professional staff, but must be the “work of the people” who understand their shared identity as disciples in community with one another and their vocation as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher engaged in the mission of God. Woodward explains the potential for multiplication when pastors equip and release people for this kind of ministry, “As we uncover and awaken the fivefold typology in our missional communities and in our neighborhoods, we will not only be able to live out our calling but also help others discover theirs.”¹⁵

¹² J. R. Woodward and Dan White, *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016), 58.

¹³ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 65.

¹⁴ Available at <https://fivefoldministry.com/>. This test was built as a companion to J.R. Woodward *Creating a Missional Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 42.

Where We Are: Fivefold Gifts Analysis (10 Minutes)

Explain to the class that today's lesson will look at the five-fold gifting of the Church from Ephesians 4:7-13. After reading that passage, highlight the 5 gifts that are mentioned here: apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd (pastor), and teacher. (The acronym APEST is commonly used to refer to these gifts). Ask the following question:

In your opinion, does this passage apply to clergy or laity? Explain your answer.

This is obviously a false dichotomy: Ephesians 4 applies to both! However, the point is to get people thinking about how these gifts of the Spirit are given to everyone, not just those specifically called to vocational ministry.

Let's discover how the Spirit has equipped each one of us. Invite participants to use their smartphones and go to: www.fivefoldministry.com. If everyone in the group doesn't have a smartphone or device, the test can be printed and scored by downloading it at: <https://fivefoldministry.com/five-fold-ministry-paper-test.pdf>.

Your group may be unfamiliar with the APEST categories, but that's better for taking the test. This enables them to answer the questions with less preconceptions than someone who has an extensive background in the church. Encourage the group to not analyze or over-think the questions, but to answer them as best they can based on their first impressions.

Here are a few disclaimers to this test:

1. It's not scientific, something the creator makes clear on the website. It's primary goal and the reason it's recommended here is get a discussion started about how God has gifted each person for his mission.
2. The "long" version of this test (45 questions) takes less than 10 minutes to complete and **is to be preferred over the shorter version.**
3. Encourage participants to answer the questions honestly, but if possible, try to avoid a lot of "3s." This is the middle of the 1-5 Likert scale and skews the results to the middle. Because this is not a scientific test, it's better if participants will move more definitively one way or the other as they answer the questions.
4. Even if participants minimize their number of "3s," the results will be pretty close to one another. It's rare for someone to score more than 35% or 40% towards any one of these gifts. The point of the exercise is to see where one might lean. This gives someone a small indication as to how God is shaping them for mission. Everyone has some element of all 5 gifts in them.
5. If someone scores low in one particular gift, don't let that be an excuse to ignore that aspect of ministry. Rather, encourage them to think of a low score as an opportunity to learn more about that aspect of ministry.

After everyone is done and has their score in hand, ask participants to remember their result and to be prepared to talk about it after the teaching segment.

Who God Is: One Who Sends (25 Minutes)

The following is a teaching that you can deliver to your class, or you can play the video of Rev. Mark Snodgrass teaching this material, available at:

www.vimeo.com/user/96044079/folder/6196985

Do As I Have Done

Are we becoming the church Jesus prays for us to be? That's one of the central questions of this experience. Let's revisit again what Jesus prays in John 17:

"...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (John 17:21)

Jesus envisions this community of people, the church, unified in spirit and in purpose, just as Jesus was connected to the Father and his mission in the world. This is the example for us to follow. Jesus gives us a concrete example of what that looks like in John 13:

¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:15)

He then picks up a towel and basin and washes his disciples' feet. This posture of servanthood means that no task is too low, and no position is insignificant. The disciple should be prepared to do anything in service to the mission of God.

So, what are the things that Jesus did? What are the ways that Jesus fulfilled God's mission that he was sent to accomplish? There are 5 unique callings we read of in the NT that Jesus embodied in his life and ministry. He did all 5 of these roles in amazing ways: he was an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher. All of these offices are described in the New Testament as unique and special ways the Kingdom is advanced.

STORY (Mountain Biking): In order to do what Jesus did in our own unique way, it's so important that we stay close to him and learn from him. I remember mountain biking with my friend Gary for the first time. I followed him so closely...I wanted to learn from him...I wanted a bike like his...I wanted to pedal like he did...when he turned, I turned...when he leaned to the left, I leaned to the left...when he went up, I went up...when he went down, I went down...when he went down a ramp and jumped over a ditch...I SLAMMED on the brakes!?! I can't do that!

"Do what I have done." Does that seem like an impossible standard to anyone else? Here's the good news: The intention was never for any individual to do all of this ON THEIR OWN. **It was always God's intention that a community of people embody this mission in the world.** No one is called to be "superman" as the embodiment of Christ in the world. Rather, the **church** is the body of Christ.

God has called a community filled with his Spirit to embody Christ's mission in the world. This is especially important as we think about the out-sized role we place on professional clergy. Too often we expect them to be apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher all in one person! One person doesn't embody Christ's mission in the world...it takes a community of people. This is what we do!

Mission is What We Do

The challenge comes in finding our role in this mission. Paul explains how different individuals are uniquely gifted to accomplish God's mission through the church. It all begins with grace!

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

*"When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people."*

⁹ (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:7-13)

Grace in this passage is not referring to saving grace. Rather, it's grace as in a gift, an ability, an equipping for a mission that apart from grace would be impossible. In Christ, we receive **saving** grace and **equipping** grace. We are saved from and saved for. *What's so amazing about grace?* It saves and it sends. We are saved by grace and sent by grace.

The church is then called to be a "gifted" community, with individuals manifesting their giftedness in their unique ministries. Let's take a moment to describe these different gifts, and I want to introduce J. R. Woodward's explanation of these gifts from his book, *Creating a Missional Culture*.

Dream Awakener (Apostle): a disciple who calls and equips others to participate in God's Kingdom.

Here are some questions to help you understand if you are an apostle:

- Do you feel the need to pioneer new ministries, especially when you recognize a need in the community?
- Are you gifted in creating systems and structures that equip people in their pursuit to follow Jesus?
- Do you help people discover their hidden potential and release them to live it out?

Heart Revealer (Prophet): a disciple who shows God's heart of justice and holiness to the church and the world.

You may be a prophet. Sounds ominous and foreboding, doesn't it? This doesn't mean you predict the future. Rather, **you rightly interpret the present!** You are a heart revealer: the heart of God and the heart of people.

You may be a prophet if:

- Your heart is broken by the injustice in the world or in your community.
- You have no problem speaking the truth and standing for the truth, even if it's uncomfortable.
- When you see something that is wrong, you move to action in order to correct it.

Story Teller (Evangelist): a disciple who proclaims good news and inspires others to do the same through their words and deeds.

On Billy Graham's tax return, it said "evangelist," and while that was his unique mission and he had a very specific way of doing it, this gift isn't limited to people who are able to speak to large crowds. Evangelists are not only called to preach in stadiums, but to tell their stories in coffee shops, ballparks, and breakrooms. Here are some questions that might help you determine if you've been gifted as an evangelist:

- Do you have a heart for people who may not have the hope you've found in Christ? So much so that you feel compelled to share with them in some way?
- Do you sometimes feel frustrated that the church is too inwardly focused on itself and not in reaching out to its community?
- Do you understand your vocation as a platform for the greater purpose of pointing people to Jesus?

STORY: I am an evangelist. I once told everyone on the square how great the Korean beef street tacos were at Table Mesa. People (including my wife) thought I was crazy, and I was. Those tacos were great, and I didn't want anyone to miss out on what I had tasted and seen.

Soul Healer (Shepherd/Pastor): a disciple who cultivates a life-giving faith in others through empathy and reconciliation.

Pastor is the word most commonly used to describe what I do professionally and vocationally, but that's not at all what Paul is talking about here. He's talking about a special gift to guide and care for those in need.

- How do you feel when those around you are hurting? Do you hurt with them?
- Do you find yourself walking with people through their pain, helping them pursue wholeness and holiness in the context of community?
- Are you a peacemaker? Do you want to help others in the congregation embody forgiveness and pursue reconciliation?

Light Givers (Teacher): a disciple who is immersed in God's story and effectively trains others to live faithfully in it.

How many of us can name every teacher we had from 1st through 12th grade? I can't tell you who won the SuperBowl 3 years ago, but I can name all of my teachers. Teachers have profound influences on our lives, not only for the things they teach us, but for the investments they make in our lives.

- Do you have expertise in a certain field and feel a desire to pass that knowledge on to others?
- Do you have a hunger to devour and understand the story of God in the Bible? Do you feel frustrated that others don't share that hunger?
- Do you have a passion to help the church understand the Bible in order to live faithfully for God and his mission?

Greater Things to be Done

Becoming a church "our community can't live without" starts with each person understanding their unique gifting and engaging in that every day. Dream Awakeners, Heart Revealers, Story Tellers, Soul Healers, and Light Givers...that's us...we are in this together and we each have a unique mission to play in this thing God is doing. Look at the picture of who are to become:

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:14-16)

Each part does its work! We don't have to be superman, but together we are the church!

Together we will do more for Jesus than we ever could alone.

STORY: I was once stuck at the airport in Charlotte. It was frustrating to see planes parked at the terminal. They were not made to be parked...they were made to fly! Out there! The same is true of the church. We were made to fly. We were made for mission.

Here's what Jesus promises about our life together:

¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12)

Greater things are still to be done...it starts today!

Who We Can Become: A Gifted People (15 Minutes)

Having taught through the high-level details of these gifts, give people a chance to share their gift analysis results. Remind everyone that it is not precise but is designed to provide a framework for how someone might be gifted by the Spirit.

Have everyone share their results. As they do, make a list on the whiteboard of the primary gifts represented in the room. Ask them as they share:

1. What surprised you?
2. What do you agree with? Disagree with?

Ask the group these questions:

1. How can these gifts be used inside the church? Do you have a clear sense of how your giftedness can be used in the existing ministries of the church?
2. How can these gifts be used outside the church?

Be sure people understand that their giftedness is from the Lord to be used in his mission, not just in the formal ministries of the church but in the places they live, work, and play.

Where We Go: In Our Community (10 Minutes)

Last week, we talked about doing a “discovery” walk. I invited you to look where there were opportunities for mission in our area. What did you find?

(List those on a dry erase board)

What does it look like for an apostle to address this issue? A Shepherd? An evangelist? A teacher? A prophet?

Total Lesson Time: 60 Minutes

Lesson Bibliography

Beard, Chris. “Missional Discipleship: Discerning spiritual-formation practices and goals within the missional movement.” *Missiology: An International Review*. 2015, Vol. 43(2), 175-194.

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**BETTER
TOGETHER**

**Session 5
WHEN THE CHURCH
GOES GLOCAL**

Session 5: When the Church Goes Glocal

Lesson Objectives:

- Explore the difference in “missions” (a program accomplished somewhere else) and “mission” (a lifestyle for disciples in their local contexts).
- Locate a biblical understanding of the mission of God as both global and local (glocal) in scope and potential.
- Present a brief history of the missionary movement and how a paradigm shift to “glocal” is a faithful reading of the Great Commission.
- Discuss the potential for “Marketplace ministries” as people imagine their vocational lives as platforms for the Gospel.

Supplies Needed

- White board or Flip Chart with markers/eraser.
- OPTIONAL: Monitor to show teaching.

Teacher Preparation

Jesus prays for the church to share the same community that he shares with the Father and the Spirit. He asks that the church be a physical representation of this spiritual community to the world: “*May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” (John 17:21) The relationship believers have with God and the relationships they share in the church are to be a life-giving community that draws the world to God.

Historically, the church has understood this mandate to extend life-giving community through a passage of scripture known as the Great Commission. In the Western church, this text was the impetus behind the Global Missions movement that began in the 19th century. The impact of the missionaries and sending agencies that were sent during this time can hardly be overstated. They had a tremendous influence upon the world and introduced many people to Jesus.

The robust missionary sending programs, however, functioned parallel to the prevailing colonialism of that time. This created a sense of superiority in the minds of the Western church, which has led to the anecdotal conclusion that “the West wins the rest.” While recognizing the impact of this movement, it is also helpful to critique its shortcomings, thus moving toward a model of mission engagement that recognizes how the cultural and religious landscape has changed.

Paul G. Hiebert has called this era of global missions (approx. 1800 – 1950), “the era of non-contextualization.”¹⁶ A majority of missionaries during this time operated under the assumption that there was nothing in a non-Christian culture that was compatible with the Gospel. As Christianity was introduced to cultures for the first time, it was necessary to tear down fundamental elements of the indigenous culture so that a Western brand of Christian culture might be established in its place. Anthropologists of this same era often referred to “culture” exclusively as the progressive, social reality of Western nations and used pejorative terms like

¹⁶ Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 167.

“heathen” or “uncivilized” to describe indigenous people groups living in an empire’s newly annexed borders. The underlying assumption was that there was a universal *telos* of “progress” toward which all people are moving.¹⁷ Using European standards for art, education, technology, medicine, and housing, Western cultures were judged to have gotten there sooner than others.

A North American church seeking to be faithful agents of *shalom* must be cognizant of its colonial past and turn toward more organic and biblical models for global evangelization, especially as the Global South is becoming more spiritually vibrant than the post-Christian West. The Great Commission certainly calls the church to partner with efforts aimed at the “ends of the earth,” programs that are commonly called “missions.” At the same time, however, there is a local “mission” for every church in every context (the “Jerusalem” and “Samaria” of the Lukan Great Commission of Acts 1:8).

The mission of God is embodied in the incarnation of Jesus, the ultimate example of contextualization. Jesus commissions his disciples in John 20:20, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Just as Jesus was sent to a particular culture in a particular way at a particular time, the church is called to no less in its pursuit of God’s mission.

The American church must now recognize that there are people groups in their own backyard where Jesus is not yet known. This can no longer be a function of professional missionaries on a global scale through a designated “missions” program. This is the work of the local church in their communities. The Great Commission is not exclusively global or local. It is “glocal.”

The first task of any missionary, rather at home or abroad, is a proper understanding of cultural narratives with the two-fold goal of introducing Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of all that is good and true, and presenting the cross and resurrection as the ultimate victory over the powers and principalities that stand against God’s vision of *shalom* in that context.

Where We Are: Reaching In and Reaching Out (10 Minutes)

Physical Illustration: The church is a body filled with the Holy Spirit that is called to reach out to others, but also must reach into the depths of its relationship with God and others. In this physical illustration, 4 participants will hold hands in a circle. Ask, “**What kind of model of the church is this? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? How does it fulfill the mission of God?**” It’s obviously an insular picture of a church.

Have participants turn outwardly and reach their hands out. Eight hands are reaching out covering a reach of 360 degrees. Ask the same questions: “**What kind of model of the church is this? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? How does it fulfill the mission of God?**” It’s no longer insular, but it’s also lost the cohesiveness that comes from worship and discipleship.

Have participants turn to the side. With one hand reaching in, grab the hand of the person directly across from them. This will form a cross in the middle of the circle. Now have them

¹⁷ Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 167.

extend the other hand. Discuss how the church is a community that “reaches in” to receive from God but is also called to “reach out” to those not a part.

Who God Is: A Missionary God (25 Minutes)

The following is a teaching that you can deliver to your class, or you can play the video of Rev. Mark Snodgrass teaching this material, available at:

www.vimeo.com/user/96044079/folder/6196985

Mission - Hold the S

Are we becoming the church Jesus prayed for us to be? Along this journey we’ve talked about experiencing the perfect relationship God has within himself and for the church to become a reflection of that relationship to the world. Jesus prays that this reflection to the world would accomplish something great. Look at verse 21 of his prayer:

May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21)

That’s a big “so that.” Jesus envisions the church being an instrument of his mission. It’s not just for us to be on display on a shelf somewhere for God to admire. Our relationship with Him and each other accomplishes God’s purposes.

Jesus says something similar in a passage known as the “Great Commission.”

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

Luke’s version of this is Acts 1:8, another very familiar passage:

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

STORY: I heard this passage a lot at “missions” conventions. And yet, we did very little cross-culturally in our local context. There was very little we did locally that was consistent with the heroes we celebrated at mission conventions.

For too long, we’ve made “missions” a program instead of a lifestyle. **The church must no longer understand missions as a program for over there but must embrace mission as a lifestyle right here.** We have to learn to hold the ‘s’ on our mission. It’s a lifestyle, not a program (but there is a place for World Mission programs too!)

You Are Now Entering the Mission Field

How did Christian mission become a program and what’s changed since then? Let’s put our present situation in context. In 1910, the World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh,

Scotland. It was the culmination of the 19th century missionary endeavors of the Western church. This systematic evangelization of the world was so expansive, some people who study this has said anecdotally of its legacy that it created an attitude in which, “The West wins the rest.”

However, the efforts of the church in this age were largely in colonial footprints and often reflected condescending or unhelpful perspectives on other cultures. My own tradition reflected this view of other cultures in its early days. The missions magazine was called, “Other Sheep” a title that would definitely be rejected today. Only if you believed the “West wins the rest” would you name your magazine this.

Additionally, the Christian mission in India is an example of missionaries proclaiming the Gospel in an empire’s footprint. In addition to the Gospel, missionaries exported Western culture to the neglect of a Gospel that by its very definition seeks to be contextualized for those receiving it. The incarnation of Jesus is the ultimate example of that.

After being rejected by an Anglican seminary for refusing to wear Western clothing, **Sadhu Sundar Singh**, an Indian convert to Christianity from the Sikh faith, reflected on the way British missionaries had attempted to evangelize his culture: *“This is what I have been trying to say to missionaries from abroad. You have been offering the water of life to the people of India in a foreign cup, and we have been slow to receive it. If you will offer it in our own cup – in an indigenous form – then we are much more likely to accept it.”*¹⁸

This scathing critique of the missionary movement is not without a counter story, one that is essential to putting this era in its proper context. Sociologist Robert Woodbury has studied the influence of robust missionary activity in the development of stable democracies in majority world contexts. He contends that **where colonial powers authorized and promoted the work of Protestant missionaries, the development of education and social services emerged at higher levels than in the wake of those colonizing powers that restricted such activity.**¹⁹

This was an imperfect era, but an effort God blessed sometimes despite us rather than through us. But times have changed. I remember leaving a church that had a sign placed over the door as worshippers exited: “You are now entering the mission field.”

We emphasized global, but neglect the other part of that commission: Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Mission is both a local and global calling. It’s **glocal**. And sometimes, the world comes to us:

STORY: I am confident that here in Bentonville, AR you will encounter people who adhere to a similar belief system. Many of our friends and neighbors from India are Hindu. I had 2 boys from India on my Upward Basketball team. I invited them to pray at the first practice, and one boy asked me, “Is that like meditation?” “Yes, it is.” I replied. His response: **“I fall asleep when I meditate.”** And in that sense, Christians and Hindus can find some common ground.

¹⁸ Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church*, 167.

¹⁹ Andrea Palpant Dilley, “The Surprising Discovery About Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries,” *ChristianityToday.com*, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/world-missionaries-made.html>.

Hinduism is the belief in many gods. The secular humanist says nothing is God, but the Hindu says everything is god. And here in our local context we are called to share Good News with all of them!

The Lord reminded me of that when I exited church on Sunday: I was entering the mission field. Everywhere in between these two extremes are various ideas of how people make sense of life. You may not have a high concentration of people in your area that adhere to a religion other than Christianity. It may not FEEL like a mission context, but most communities in our world are "Post Christian." This means they generally accept any narrative or any idea that helps them get through life. This is called **pluralism**.

Good News for Pre Christians

This is not new. In the book of Acts, Paul encounters people so pluralistic they even had an idol with an inscription, "to an unknown god." It sounds just like the world we live in. How do we share our story in a pluralistic society? A pluralistic world will listen to our words only when we they experience the authenticity of our lives.

Listen your way into a conversation. As the saying goes, "God gave us 2 ears and 1 mouth for a reason." Be slow to speak and quick to listen, even if what is said is wrong, offensive, or heretical. Hear people out.

Serve your way into a conversation. The greatest need in the world is not world hunger or a lack of clean water. The greatest need in the world is people who do not know the God who loves them. I'm glad to be part of a church who works diligently to provide hunger relief and clean water as a vehicle to start a spiritual conversation. We calculated that our church donated almost 15,000 hours of community service last year. Why? Because people are hungry? Yes, but more importantly, so that we would have the chance to serve our way into a conversation about the God who loves them more than we could ever imagine.

Wander/Wonder your way into a conversation. This is especially important to remember when you engage someone from a totally different belief system or culture. Chances are, they're eager to share about their culture and religious beliefs. Don't just google it when you get home...ask questions. When we show that we genuinely care we are opening the potential for a spiritual conversation.

STORY: I saw an ad for a car I wanted on Craigslist (for the record...don't buy a car on Craigslist). I called a man named Gobi and arranged a time to come and test-drive his '06 Hyundai. As we were driving, I noticed a little figurine on the dashboard. It had an elephant head on a man's body and was riding a mouse. (Now compared to some of the images from the book of Daniel and Revelation, that's nothing a Christian should be amazed by.) I knew what it was, but I played dumb, "What's this?" I asked. "It's an idol," he replied. We talked about Ganesha – the Hindu god of success. I didn't buy the car, but the conversation was totally worth it. It was a conversation I wandered/wondered my way into and it gave me a chance to learn his story and share a little bit of mine.

As we embrace mission in our local and global context, many may say it's "post Christian," but the people of God committed to the mission of God will always see it as "pre-Christian."

Who We Can Become: A Missionary Church (15 Minutes)

1. When you hear a phrase like the "Great Commission," what immediately comes to your mind? What images or activities of the church do you think of?

Discover the perception of your class when they hear these verses and phrases. These are central texts to the church and sometimes there is a disconnect between what a leader means when they say it and how it is perceived by parishioners. Use this question to discover people's perception.

2. How is our local context a "mission field?"

Unpack the ways your local context is filled with people who are living far from God. This is the first step of any missionary: contextualization. Furthermore, this is probably an opportunity to talk about the fact that people aren't going to come in to your church because you have a sign on the highway or an ad in the paper. The church must go to them. It's a mission field!

3. Compare and contrast "missions" as a program and "mission" as a lifestyle. Have you ever thought about the difference, and what does that mean to you?

The church is not a place where the Christians hangout. It's a people who gather to be equipped and sent out on mission. We gather in worship so that we can learn a way of living in the world that points to Jesus.

4. When Jesus commands his disciples to "go" (Mt. 28) and to "be my witnesses" (Acts. 1:8), how does this apply to ALL disciples and not just missionaries?

Bottomline: Everyone is a missionary. Talk about that identity and living with the same zeal as those 19th century missionaries who left the familiar for the unknown.

Where We Go: Think Global, Act Local (10 Minutes)

The story of the missionary is exciting and inspiring. They truly are heroes of the church who did exceptional things for the Lord. Perhaps, we become paralyzed when we hear their stories because we can't go and do the things they did. That is certainly not the intention in telling their stories.

We tell those stories because the church needs to think globally. We need to be reminded of this people from "every nation, tribe, and tongue" that God is bringing together through the Gospel. Thinking about the church from a global perspective is vitally important. With an enlarged perspective, we should be inspired to act locally. Said succinctly, "Think global; act local."

What does "mission" as a lifestyle look like for you? As you think about "acting locally," imagine your life as a missionary. Envision your vocational life as a platform for the Gospel.

What would it look like for you to approach your daily vocational life as a missionary? This is often called “marketplace ministries.”

Have people think about their vocational lives and the spaces where they spend much of their time. All of that is a platform for mission. Invite them to finish this phrase:

“I am a follower of Jesus who is called to make disciples through _____.” (brief description of their job/daily life).

Go around the room and have people finish that phrase. Hearing it out loud will reinforce the immediacy and tangible reality of this call. Conclude with prayer for the missionaries that are about to be sent into the world.

Total Lesson Time: 60 Minutes

Lesson Bibliography

Dilley, Andrea Palpant. “The Surprising Discovery About Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries.” *ChristianityToday.com*. Accessed November 15, 2019.
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BETTER T GETHER

Session 6 GETTING N.E.A.R. YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Session 6: Getting N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood

Session Objectives

- Unpack “exile” as a metaphor for the church in post-Christian contexts and the exilic call of God to “seek the shalom” of the city.
- Offer the power of proximity and the potential of partnership as ways to be a missional presence in one’s community.
- Explain the N.E.A.R. matrix (Narratives, Ethics, Associations, and Rituals) to better understand your church’s context.
- Present a list of local organizations that could be potential partners for the church, small groups, and/or individuals.

Supplies Needed

- White board or Flip Chart with markers/eraser.
- Copies of the “N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood” worksheet
- OPTIONAL: Monitor to show teaching

Teacher Preparation

In Scott Daniels’ 2017 book, *Embracing Exile*, he uses the story of the Israelite captivity as a metaphor for understanding the place of the contemporary church.²⁰ With the dissolution of Christendom, the church finds itself displaced from cultural power and influence. In America, the church has enjoyed significant influence for much of the nation’s history, but with the rise of pluralism in Western societies, it is now competing with other narratives and displaced from direct access to power.

Daniels documents a cyclical narrative in Israelite history: the people move from **exile** to **land** to **kingship** to **division** to **exile** again. It’s a cycle that repeats itself throughout the Bible, and one could roughly divide the periods of church history into similar categories. The important thing to remember about this cycle of biblical history is that one cannot move backward in the cycle. History only moves forward.

Some people make the mistake of thinking the church can somehow return to a previous era, marshaling resources and calling for cultural entrenchment to go back and recover something that was lost. An example of this is a book entitled, *The Benedict Option*, where the author urges Christians to try to reimpose Christian belief and Christian culture to save Western society.²¹ Diana Butler Bass warns against this pursuit: “St. Benedict didn’t turn *away* from the world but learned to see the world more deeply - and ‘his spirit was enlarged.’”²²

Embracing cultural exile is an opportunity for the church to have its spirit enlarged and learn a kind of dependency on God that was unnecessary in the height of Christendom. It’s a

²⁰ Scott Daniels, *Embracing Exile* (Kansas City: Beacon Hills Press, 2017).

²¹ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York, New York: Sentinel, 2017).

²² Diana Butler Bass, “The Cottage Blog” <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/embrace-or-escape> accessed October 30, 2021.

disorienting experience, but it is an important formational time. People question things in exile: Is everything over? How did we get here? Has God deserted us? These are faithful questions the Israelites asked as well.

The church must learn to understand our culture and our calling through the lens of exile. It is then that we can fully appreciate **Daniel's** message about living as God's unique people, or **Ezekiel's** message about whether these dry bones will ever live again, or **Isaiah's** proclamation that God is not done with the people. **Jeremiah** invites people to lament—to let go of the past and to receive the new thing God is doing.

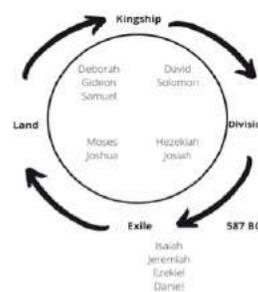
A word of caution regarding this metaphor is in order. In some cases “exile” language has been used by American Christians to reinforce a feeling that they are being persecuted. From this perspective, not praying in public schools or not allowing Christian invocations at football games are seen as systemic and organized persecution by a secular society. This is clearly beyond the scope of the metaphor. Furthermore, compared to the documented persecution of Christians in China and similar places, the displacement of Christian practices from civic life is a mere inconvenience and certainly doesn't qualify as persecution.

For this lesson, the focus will be on Jeremiah's word to the exiles to “seek the prosperity of the city.” As the church follows Jeremiah's call to “settle and build houses,” it will get to know its neighborhood and explore the potential of partnership with other organizations. This is not a call to retreat into Christian enclaves, but to embrace this season and engage with others for the flourishing of the city.

Where We Are: The Church in Exile (5 minutes)

This opening section will be brief to allow for more time on the “N.E.A.R.” assessment and the “Better Together” presentation. Introduce the concept of Israel's history as a paradigm for the church's history based on *Embracing Exile* by Scott Daniels. Here's an outline to introduce participants to that concept.

1. Israelite history has a cyclical pattern in it: exile, land, kingship, division, exile. This pattern repeats itself, offering a paradigm for how one might read the Old Testament.
2. The most significant moment of exile is 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar sacks Jerusalem and takes the Israelites into captivity. Large portions of the Old Testament were written by Israelite captives attempting to preserve their story and pass it on to the next generation. Therefore, exile plays a significant role in the Hebrew imagination and is an important part of our story.
3. Here's a vision for this metaphor of exile: “People who live in exile feel displaced. They feel like resident aliens. They feel like a people who have to live counterculturally...This sense of out-of-placeness is actually the way disciples of Jesus ought to feel.”²³



²³ Daniels, *Embracing Exile*, 8.

4. Many people have applied this pattern to Church history as well, specifically connecting it to the contemporary church in America. In lesson 3, we discussed the dissolution of Christendom, which feels a lot like exile. If this pattern of history is correct, the church is living in a period of exile.

Having made the claim that the American church is in a period of exile, take a moment and process that with your students. It may produce a certain amount of angst for some. Please be mindful of the note above in the “Teacher Preparation” about not allowing the metaphor of exile to be a way for American Christians to express a perception of persecution. The point of this metaphor is to lead people to place where they lament the loss of one experience and look forward to the new thing that God is wanting to do among his people.

1. How do you feel like the American church is experiencing exile?
2. Does exile sound like a hopeful time or a fearful time? Why?

Our teaching tonight begins with Jeremiah’s message to exiles. He doesn’t sugarcoat the reality of the situation but reminds the exiles of the Lord’s faithfulness.

Who God Is: Called to Flourish in Exile (25 Minutes)

The following is a teaching that you can deliver to your class, or you can play the video of Rev. Mark Snodgrass teaching this material, available at:
www.vimeo.com/user/96044079/folder/6196985

Some of us remember what it’s like to wait for a letter. Others, however, have only known this world of text messages. We send a text and then we instantly expect there to be little bubbles...signifying that our message has been received and the recipient is immediately typing a response.

The people of God were well acquainted with waiting. Let’s go back to a period known as the Exile.

We know that Jerusalem was ultimately sacked in 587 B.C, but there was a prelude to this in 596 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, did not completely destroy the city. Instead, he carried away the intelligent, the artisans, the skilled craftsmen...the “bold and the beautiful” if you will.

This small Israelite community living in Babylon were the first to struggle with the questions and dilemmas of exile. They asked hard questions: **“Where is God? What does it look like for us to live away from our homeland? What now?”**

There was a prophet named Hananiah who had a message: “This is temporary. It won’t last for long. Don’t get used to this. God’s about to do something miraculous...right now.”

I wish Hananiah’s message was true. As I have journeyed with Jesus, I’ve learned that God doesn’t microwave much. He’s not a fan of frozen dinners...he’s more of a **crock-pot** kind of

cook. And while I hate to wait, I've never tasted anything that used to be frozen that was better than something fresh out of the crock-pot.

When we began this journey a few weeks ago, I asked you to think about the kind of church we were becoming. Are we moving towards the kind of church Jesus prays for in John 17?

As we seek to answer that, one of the major transitions we're dealing with as a church is the dissolution of "Christendom." If you'll recall, this is the social order where the Christian worldview is dominant and at the center of cultural power. **As America becomes post-Christian, the image of the exile is helpful for us.**

There are some that are threatened by the prospect of Exile. I hear versions of Hananiah's message today: "this won't be for long." Or "things will go back to the way they were."

Jeremiah has a different message than Hananiah's. He's not promising a return to the past, but is inviting the exiles to embrace God's **future** in exile:

⁴This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

The Promise of Presence

Jesus commissions the church and promises his presence (Matthew 28)!

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

As we live in exile, we are connected to the very life of God (John 17).

...May they also be in us... (John 17:21)

Perhaps this new reality feels foreign, perhaps even scary, but Jesus promises his presence!

STORY: I was scared to death to lead worship at a service in the state penitentiary. The pastor leading this team looked at me and said, "God is with you at church, in your home, and he's with you here as well!"

And so, as we think about seeking the shalom of our city, we must remember that God is with us. This is the promise of his presence.

The Power of Proximity

Perhaps one of the things that keeps us from engagement is the privilege of safe distance from needs around us. We're able to go into our homes and not be bothered by the needs of our community.

One of my favorite pastors and leaders, Christine Hyung, reminded me in a sermon that “distance dehumanizes.” The further away we are from a problem, the less human it becomes. For some, social media has provided a remedy for that problem, but I think it’s created another problem: it has numbed us to the pain in the world by constantly filling our feed with urgent things in far off places. It may be “top of mind”, but we are still not in close, physical proximity to the brokenness God is wanting to heal.

Don’t fall into the trap of “social media” activism like “Scott” from SNL: (Video clip of “Thank You Scott” sketch available at <https://youtu.be/ODydKwMrHFo>. Stop the video around the 1:40 mark. By then, the point has been made and this avoids some more objectionable content).

There’s some value in social media awareness, but lasting change will only come from being in “proximity.”

As churches begin to understand their identity as a people scattered throughout their city, it will be imperative for individual groups to know their neighborhoods. J.R. Woodward, having planted missional communities throughout Los Angeles, has used a process for exegeting one’s community called N.E.A.R. (narrative, ethics, associations, and ritual).²⁴ It equips small groups to gain a contextual understanding of where they live and how they can be a significant blessing to the neighbors around them. As a group works through the process, these are the basic questions they will ask:

Narrative – What story is our neighborhood calling us to embody?

Ethics – How do people in our context define success?

Associations – What primary organizations and institutions are shaping people’s identity and destiny in our context?

Rituals – What core practices do people engage in that shape their identity and sense of mission in life?

For too long the church has taken a “come and see” approach, waiting for the world to get curious and enter the church on a Sunday morning to discover what faith in Christ is all about. Life Groups, and not just the pastor or a staff member, need to get N.E.A.R. The entire church needs to take a “go and be” approach. This is at the core of what it means to practice incarnational ministry. Remember: the Word became flesh! Jesus moved into the neighborhood.

The Potential of Partnership

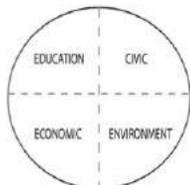
Jesus came near and amazingly entrusted his entire mission to his disciples who were then filled with the Holy Spirit: “Do as I have done.” (John 13) “As the Father has sent me, so now, I send you!” (John 20)

If Jesus entrusted his entire mission to the church, why is the church so afraid to partner with others? Shouldn’t we be equally eager to partner to see the flourishing of our city?

²⁴ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 193.

The singular greatest thing that keeps churches from doing this is fear. Hate is not the opposite of love. I believe fear is the opposite of love. Let's be eager to "create beauty together!"

Here are the areas where the church can find fruitful partnerships for shalom:



It is never easy crossing boundaries to cultivate partnerships, but it is important to God because our neighborhoods are important to God. When we, along with others, seek the restoration of our neighborhoods, we open up space for God's Spirit to meet us in surprising ways. God's Spirit hovers at those intersections of human interactions. We discover that God is not locked up in a building, but the Father, Son and Spirit are present where we are challenged to serve others and seek shalom.²⁵

Let's make beautiful things together. Let's be the church Jesus prayed for us to be for the sake of our community, for we are truly better together!

Who We Can Become: N.E.A.R. Our Community (20 Minutes)

Distribute the NEAR assessment that lists all the clarifying questions. Review it with them and then go to the white board to fill in a SWOT-type gride of your community.

Ask this question: How is our church well-positioned to come N.E.A.R.? How are you personally positioned?

What are our challenges in coming NEAR?

Where We Go: Better Together (10 Minutes)

Before class, use the "Partners of Shalom" worksheet to discover 3-5 organizations in your area that are doing good work in your city. Ideally, you will want to work with your pastor and a small team of influencers to compile this list. People will want to know these organizations are approved by the leadership of your church.

Briefly share a little bit about each one and provide a next step for anyone who would like to learn more. The goal would be that a small group (preferably) or an individual/family would get connected and form a partnership for the "shalom of the city" (Jer. 29:7). In terms of missional faithfulness, this partnership will be "better together" than if the church were to attempt these ministries on their own!

²⁵ Woodward and White, *The Church as Movement*, 214.

Total Lesson Time: 60 Minutes

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Getting N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood

NARRATIVES: The story our neighborhood calling us to embody.

1. What are the key slogans of this context?
2. What are the prime landmarks, and how do they shape the narrative of this context?
3. What lyrics have they committed to memory, and what story do the lyrics call them into?
4. What are people's dreams and hopes?
5. What are their fears and stresses?
6. What do people think about God, Jesus and the church?
7. What places of worship are available, and what do they tell us about this context?

ETHICS: Our community's definition of success.

1. Does the pace of life in this context aid or hinder people's ability to engage in solitude, silence and reflection?
2. Who promotes and hinders justice in this context?
3. How does the city shape people's conception of the good life?
4. Does the city promote the American dream or God's vision for the future, and how does this shape people's imagination?
5. Do the laws and law enforcement agencies help each person of the city, no matter their class or ethnicity, feel like a person made in the image of God?
6. Does this context's description of the "good life" cause people to consider others more important than themselves or to look out for number one?
7. Which behaviors are rewarded and which are punished?

ASSOCIATIONS: Primary organizations that shape people's identity in our context.

1. Is it easy or difficult for small businesses to flourish in the city?
2. Which institutions are caring for the homeless in a God-honoring way?
3. Are churches seeking to bring a greater sense of the kingdom to their neighborhood, or are they looking out for themselves?
4. What is the reputation of the religious leaders' churches?
5. Who are the most powerful people in the city, and do they promote justice or their own welfare?
6. What are the most influential media institutions, and how does their reporting influence people?
7. What are the primary educational institutions, and how are they shaping the life of the children and the city?

RITUALS: Core practices that shape people's identity and sense of mission in life

1. What activities do people engage in that give them a sense of worth?
2. What holidays are celebrated with the most vigor?
3. How do people approach their work? As a career or a calling?
4. What do people do in their free time, and how much free time do they have?
5. Other than work, what do people devote the most time to? What third spaces (such as cafés, clubs, parks) do people engage with the most?
6. How do people spend their time, their money and their talents?
7. In what ways do people seek to meet their need for beauty?

Getting N.E.A.R. Your Neighborhood

NARRATIVES: The story our neighborhood calling us to embody.

ETHICS: Our community's definition of success.

ASSOCIATIONS: Primary organizations that shape people's identity in our context.

RITUALS: Core practices that shape people's identity and sense of mission in life

Partners of Shalom

A worksheet to identify missional partnerships with the local church and the community

The Mission of God

Evaluate how your church is in alignment with the mission of God as articulated by Jesus in Luke 4.

1) Good News to the poor. Keep a holistic definition of poverty in mind. There are those in your community who are poor *materially* but also are poor *relationally*. How is your church proclaiming the “good news” to those experiencing both material and relational poverty?

2) Release for the prisoners. What evidence do you see in your community of systemic issues of injustice (racism, poverty, lack of education, etc.)? Think *local* in evaluating this. What kind of awareness does your church of these issues?

3) Sight for the blind. Jesus wants people to gain a new perspective and to see the world in light of the Kingdom of God. How are you equipping those *inside* the church to see the world with this perspective?

How are you introducing those *outside* the church to the truth of the Gospel?

4) Freedom for the oppressed. The Gospel has the power to bring freedom to those who are oppressed by the broken relationships of our world as seen in addictions, generational poverty, the dissolution of families, consumerism, workaholism, etc. What impact does your church have on the “oppressed” in your community?

The Shalom of the City

Evaluating how your church is aligned with the mission of Jesus from Luke 4 can be a sobering process. However, it is necessary as leaders should expect the assessment to uncover opportunities for improvement. As you pray about what the assessment revealed, write down three areas of ministry the Lord is leading your church to pursue.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Using the N.E.A.R. Analysis from Session 6, how do these three areas of ministry align with the identity of your neighborhood and its needs?

What organizations or community entities are already engaged in work or ministries like the three areas of ministry identified above?

The authors of *The New Parish* offer a basic framework for missional communities discerning how to forge a new partnership. Of the organizations you've identified as potential partners, consider the following questions as you review their websites, speak with their leaders, and learn more about their work:

1. Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?
2. How might we as a gathered community be formed if we act in this way?
3. Will these actions invite us to be more faithfully present to God, one another, creation and our local church?
4. Will we be invited into mutually beneficial relationships with others?
5. Will this action invite the flourishing of life for all and for creation?²⁶

These are the discerning questions of a church committed to God's mission in a specific location. As God directs disciples into partnership with others, the world will see the beauty of mutuality and empathy that points them to the Gospel and contributes to the "peace of the city." (Jer. 29:7)

Practical Considerations

List the assets the church can potentially bring to the partnership? (Personnel, finances, meeting space, etc.)

NOTE: Most non-profits and community organizations are narrow in focus and specific in programming. As you reach out to form partnerships, be sure you are not asking them to create something beyond the scope of what they normally do. The church is there to come alongside them and not the other way around. Be discerning and sensitive to ensure your offer of partnership is not creating more work for an already stretched staff and operating budget.

The "peace of the city" is a long-term goal. What potential is there for a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship?

What group of leaders at your church will steward and champion this partnership?

²⁶ Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 129.