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TESTING HOW TO FORM A LEARNING COMMUNITY WHERE PASTORS
DEVELOP HABITS FOR INCREASED MISSIONAL INFLUENCE

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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JANUARY 2011

ABSTRACT

Testing How to Form a Learning Community Where Pastors Develop Habits for Increased Missional Influence

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2011

The purpose of this project was to test whether creating a short term learning group with pastoral leaders around simple practices of neighborhood engagement would lead to any shifts in priorities or weekly habits. The assumption was that most pastors of recognized churches in West Michigan take a chaplaincy approach to leadership, using work hours to prepare for worship gatherings, provide congregational care, and manage established programs. The thesis was that a time-limited commitment to specific practices and mutual learning would allow participants to gain new insights about their personal contexts and move toward a different set of leadership behaviors such as modeling hospitality and training others for neighborhood involvement.

Over seven months' time, eight seminary-trained leaders living in distinct neighborhoods and representing five denominations went on a shared journey to explore whether increasing their own neighborhood presence was sustainable or linked in any way to organizational influence. Participants, with approval of their church councils, were asked to devote six hours a week to "good neighbor" activities. They also agreed to take part in two one-day retreats, attend at least three monthly roundtables, and read two recommended books. The assumption and thesis were examined by comparing early and late reflection papers, responses to two similarly constructed interviews, and scores from a time management assessment tool.

This paper demonstrates that group members remained challenged by internal expectations of clergy, even as hopes for other possibilities were renewed. It affirms heightened awareness for each participant and greater potential for engaging congregational systems with missional imagination. However, it also acknowledges the limited behavioral impact of this approach and offers an assessment of contributing factors. A more comprehensive strategy is proposed for future learning communities that help shift leadership priorities. Throughout, interpretive links are made to larger social, historical, and theological narratives.

Content Reader: Alan J. Roxburgh, DMin

Words: 298

To my Dad whose life has consistently reflected the beauty of the gospel and challenged me to fully participate in the New Creation story

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INTRODUCTION

Moments of great clarity on the leadership journey are rare. There are times when one finds he or she is on a path different than one originally taken and becomes aware of the cumulative impact of unexpected events, new relationships, and simple choices. Memories of the recent past provide perspective on current challenges and future opportunities. The melancholy words of the often quoted Robert Frost poem seem profoundly true: “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”¹ These occurrences are not about reinforcing romantic, individualistic notions of reality but about understanding the implications of having moved in a given direction as opposed to another.

I had such a moment at the official beginning of my final project. I was sitting around a table with seven other pastor-type leaders getting to know each other through extended storytelling. It was a cold, snowy Saturday in February, and we were launching a learning group experiment with a daylong retreat. Each had been asked to share some autobiographical reflections, and things were going quite well. The energy level was high, the narratives went beyond the superficial, the prayers were encouraging, and hope was in the air. Yet, I could not help but notice a shared pain beneath the surface, a pain marked by lingering frustration and limited influence. A unique mixture of felt inadequacy and cautious optimism leaked into the conversational environment, reminding me of events almost a decade earlier that had started me down a different path.

¹ Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken and Other Poems*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993), 1.

I had just returned from three weeks spent with orphans and bush pastors in Mozambique and was gearing up for another ministry season as a pastor at a large, nondenominational church in suburban Grand Rapids. I was in charge of congregational life and ministry development and served as a member of the management team. It would not be long before I stepped into a point person, staff development role, but I was starting to feel unsettled about our whole programmatic approach just as a contingent of leaders made the annual trek to a national church leadership conference. Perhaps the trip to Africa had something to do with it, or extended reading and conversation about cultural shifts, or some sort of midlife crisis, or a growing awareness of minimal communal transformation and sporadic cultural engagement.

The conference itself brought me to the proverbial fork in the road. What I saw and heard astounded me, though the main emphases varied little from previous years. Speakers informed us that stated values should be translated into strategic objectives for which leaders are responsible. They reminded us that one cannot manage what cannot be measured, so those with the “leadership gun” in our systems must ensure clarity and success. Most struggling churches are run by “small dog” leaders, so we needed to place “big dog” leaders in influential positions. We could get clues from Jesus who is the most amazing visionary, strategic, teambuilding, servant leader who ever lived. His example in the Bible proves the truth of groundbreaking books on corporate leadership. To top it all off, a well-known Christian business executive walked us through a process by which we could solicit affluent members of our congregations and communities. The need to expand campus facilities and ministry programming is ongoing, and pastors should get over their fears of dealing with rich people so the kingdom of God can move forward.

I knew I was in trouble when follow-up discussions revealed my colleagues were not bothered by the crassly pragmatic assumptions of mission upon which the conference had been constructed. This included highly exegetically and theologically informed individuals. At that point, I recognized I had to move in a different direction and figure out how to live and lead with a different set of assumptions, assumptions more compatible with a contextual understanding of the gospel. I did not fully understand the implications of my response, but my hunch was it would likely mean an eventual exodus from the congregational environment I helped create and a less grandiose experience of leadership. I also anticipated a more integrated approach to life and relationships in the urban neighborhood where my wife and I were raising our family. We were beginning to see and feel the negative effects of a commuter lifestyle on our four teenage children.

My hunch turned out to be true. A little more than three years later, having developed greater capacity for ambiguity, I left my pastoral position and embarked on a bit of an adventure. Since then, my wife and I have helped launch an urban church plant under the Reformed Church in America, strengthen a network of house churches, and catalyze a missional turn by an established United Methodist Church. We have taken a non-staff approach to influence in each situation. We have gotten to know neighbors by walking our streets, having front porch conversations, hosting block parties, and serving on the boards of two local nonprofit organizations. On the career front, I now draw on years of experience in corporate business and pastoral ministry to coach congregations and nonprofits toward meaningful participation in community transformation. Much of my work is done with pastors and ministry leaders of long established local churches, the very people and situations I used to mock in my “cutting edge church” phase.

My mind replayed all of this as each group participant provided key details of personal and organizational narratives, including their greatest challenges and their hopes and dreams for participating in God's mission. With one exception, all were over forty years of age and facing the angst of divergent paths. They could continue to lead out of current metrics of success and draw primarily upon known skills, or they could begin a journey of engaging people in their neighborhood and congregational situations a bit differently. Part of their unspoken interest in the learning group was to test whether they could take next steps on a new path in the company of colleagues. I identified with the grief and gratitude, cynicism and hope filling the conversational spaces and felt the underlying tension of purposely going into unknown territory.

In a strange way, I was encouraged by this. My intention in creating a short term learning community for pastoral leaders was to provide an experiential, relational context in which new activities and ongoing reflection would increase the likelihood of moving down a different path. I was motivated by my own experience of working through disorientation, which included individual conversation partners but not a group of fellow learners. At the same time, five years of consulting efforts had revealed how difficult it was for many pastors to think outside of their current way of doing things. They had learned to behave in ways that brought organizational blessing and a sense of personal success. The desire to remain an expert remained strong yet conflicted with a growing awareness of needed change for future participation in God's unfolding purposes. In moments of frank one-to-one dialogue, they would admit they wanted help in figuring out what this all meant and how to proceed. For some, reading primers on postmodernism, entering emerging church conversations, and interacting with so-called missional

resources had only increased the frustration level. The need for moving beyond relative leadership isolation and finding local companions for the journey ahead seemed clear.

I understood I was taking a risk in framing a learning community as a short term pilot project with a narrow focus. Introducing only one aspect of cultural engagement (i.e. habits of neighborhood presence) and monitoring shifts in attitudes and behaviors over just seven months time might produce artificial results and fuel individualistic notions of influence. However, the participants were in a larger network of church and nonprofit organization leaders involved with community-oriented ministry and, with one exception, had some level of acquaintance with me. So, there was potential for ongoing interaction after the group experience. Also, the fact that each member had responded to an email invitation giving the background for the project and laying out a high level of personal commitment indicated considerable readiness for sustaining helpful practices.

Specifically, every person had agreed to take part in a clearly outlined small group experience for church leaders. All were expected to attend the introductory February retreat, to read two books on local mission, and to participate in at least three of five monthly roundtable conversations. Each covenanted to spend at least six hours a week, from March to August, in a variety of neighborhood-orienting activities and to keep a detailed journal. In addition, everyone consented to give “before” and “after” interviews, to make a final retreat presentation, and to write a six-to-eight page paper summarizing important findings and outlining next steps for sustaining missional habits. (More details of project participation, including hoped for outcomes, can be found in Appendix A.)

The project was built on the thesis that a time-limited commitment to specific practices and mutual learning with regard to “being neighbor” would bring new insights

and guide pastors toward a different set of personal and leadership behaviors. This paper provides the details of forming a collegial learning community marked by action and reflection, presenting findings which affirm increased awareness and changing attitudes but question impact on established behaviors and priorities. As a result, a longer term strategy for future learning groups is proposed. Along the way, these specific findings are linked to pertinent historical, cultural, and theological research and reflection in the construction of a larger narrative that includes most church leaders in the Western world.

Part One recognizes the multiple stories in which pastoral leaders find themselves. The first chapter probes personal, local, and regional narratives shaping church leaders in West Michigan in the light of five years of coaching/consulting efforts. Attention is paid to the particular challenges and opportunities of established faith communities in the area, and rigorous work with a church where the Missional Change Model² has been embraced provides points of comparison and contrast. Chapter 2 describes the denominational and congregational situations of participants, highlighting functional ecclesiologies, organizational patterns, and leadership priorities and establishing links to broader socio-cultural developments. Both chapters incorporate the feedback of group members via initial interviews and written autobiographical reflections.

Part Two focuses on the development of a missional imagination among seminary-trained leaders. Chapter 3 takes a confessional approach to the ongoing creation of a missional ecclesiology, outlining core biblical-theological affirmations while stressing the priority of local context and the experiential nature of true knowledge.

² Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 133-46.

A brief analysis of each project participant's missional understanding will be given, drawing upon interview responses, reflection papers, and roundtable interactions. The fourth chapter goes on to identify important frameworks for sustaining the action-reflection rhythms of serious theological work. It introduces tools and resources for pastors to consider and apply in their own settings, sketches out implications for specific group members, and challenges underlying assumptions about leadership behaviors.

The third major section centers attention on practices of neighborhood presence among a group of pastors and reports on key findings and outcomes. Chapter 5 is an extensive summary of individual participation and group interaction for this specific project, giving a detailed account of initial stipulations, unexpected developments, significant areas of learning, and proposed next steps of missional formation. Special consideration is given to the project's helpfulness in altering established views and habits and encouraging further discernment work. Chapter 6 revisits the irreplaceable role of local knowledge in developing a missional imagination. A "little theology"³ is built out of the admittedly limited experiences and responses of group members, and suggestions are given with regard to future activities and forms of engagement.

The paper concludes with an integrated summary of project activities, core insights, and tentative conclusions. A general proposal for other learning group experiments is reviewed in the light of expected and unexpected outcomes. Gratitude is expressed for hints that some project participants have gone down a path they may one day say "has made all the difference."⁴

³ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 119-57.

⁴ Frost, *The Road Not Taken and Other Poems*, 1.

PART ONE

THE STORIES IN WHICH PASTORS FIND THEMSELVES

CHAPTER 1

THE VIEW FROM THE COACHING BALCONY

Author Ronald Heifetz uses the image of a person standing on a balcony and gaining perspective of what is happening on the dance floor to communicate the value of awareness and reflection in the life of organizational leaders.¹ He does not press the metaphor inappropriately, making it clear that positional power, relational disconnection, and nonparticipation are not necessarily implied. In fact, a paradox needs to be accepted and practiced. A leader or leadership team must be able to get out on the dance floor with an understanding gained from the balcony while allowing the actual experience of dancing to inform the balcony view. The necessary rhythms of good leadership include activity *and* reflection, participation *and* observation, experience *and* interpretation.

Getting on the balcony is an ongoing, highly contextualized leadership activity. It is an apt metaphor for the work of an organizational coach who brings needed perspective and helps discern appropriate actions in specific settings. It also serves as a primary challenge to busy pastors shaped by narrow sets of congregational expectations in the midst of quickly changing communities. This chapter provides a view of pastoral

¹ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 252.

leadership in West Michigan that links autobiographical reflections of project participants to larger attitudinal and behavioral patterns identified from several years of consulting relationships. It incorporates relevant research data to supply the regional social-cultural background for this view and tells the story of Plymouth Church (where the Missional Change Model has been used) to highlight areas of leadership challenge and opportunity.

The emphasis on local context is intentional. It reflects a commitment to particularized epistemology in a world where grand human narratives, long term social arrangements, and universally held principles are breaking apart. Wendell Berry speaks to this in the hope of a “redemptive movement” for the common good, a movement that includes economic fairness, ecological health, and purposeful relationships:

If our efforts are fragmented and our victories are piecemeal, then we have got to think again and think better. In order to think better, I believe we are going to have to revive and reinvigorate the tired old idea of context. A creature can live only in a context that favors life. An artifact exists and means only in a context that supports it and reinforces its meaning.

The common denominator [for human wholeness] is the local community. Only the purpose of a coherent community, fully alive both in the world and in the minds of its members can carry us beyond fragmentation, contradiction, and negativity, teaching us to preserve, not in opposition but in affirmation and affection, all things needful to make us glad to live.²

This prioritization of localized understanding will be evident here and in all that follows.

The Unspoken Hopes and Dreams of Pastors

It is difficult to make the case that any small group of people is representative of a larger collective, but the seven individuals who joined me in a seven-month learning community may have come close. In aggregate, they helped tell a shared story of West

² Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 75, 77-78.

Michigan pastors in established, mostly Anglo churches facing unpredicted challenges in a quickly diversifying social context. This happened in spite of clear differences around the table. Two participants were serving in nondenominational congregations, one with Wesleyan roots and the other with Disciples of Christ connections. The Reformed tradition was well represented, with one leader from the Reformed Church in America and three from the Christian Reformed Church. One was pastoring a United Methodist Church congregation, and the influence of my Baptist background was duly noted.

Other differences were positional and geographical in nature. Two were senior pastors, two were associate pastors, one was a church-planting pastor, one was a pastoral intern, and two of us were seminary-trained leaders serving our churches and communities outside of formal clergy roles. Three members lived and served in an urban context, three in an outer urban context, one in a suburban context, and one in a mid-sized tourist town on the shores of Lake Michigan. However, it was quite telling that only one participant was a person of color, only one was a woman, and only one was under the age of forty. The dominant profile of baby boomer, white male, church pastor for this learning group was unfortunately not a surprise, given the social and cultural landscape of the region and the current realities of clergy relationships.

The significant racial, cultural, and economic separation of people living in metropolitan Grand Rapids and surrounding Kent County is well documented and reflected in local ministerial associations and clergy networks. In a county with a population of over 600,000, there are 3149 nonprofit organizations,³ (not including 760

³ Maria Gajewski, "Impact of nonprofits estimated at \$2.2 billion in Kent County," May 8, 2007, <http://www.gvsu.edu> (accessed January 11, 2010).

religious congregations). Even with more than 40,000 nonprofit jobs and hundreds of area churches, most non-Caucasian residents live in an urban environment, and huge disparities with regard to health, economics, and education remain. For example, the infant mortality rate for African American infants is triple the rate for white infants, the Income Disparity Index measuring the gap in household income by race is well above the national index, the poverty rate is more than three times higher among African Americans than in the Caucasian population, and there is a 20 percent difference in standardized test scores between urban and suburban students.⁴

Social integration factors do not increase much in the city proper where nearly 200,000 people reside. Very few neighborhoods reflect the 59 percent Caucasian, 19 percent African American, 18 percent Latino, and 4 percent Asian-Indian-Other demographic distribution of the larger population.⁵ In fact, separate pockets of cultural homogeneity are quite evident even within relatively small districts. The public school system, with 21 percent of students being Caucasian and 83 percent falling into the “economically disadvantaged” category, stands in stark contrast with the private Christian school system, which mirrors suburban school districts where more than 90 percent of students are white and less than 10 percent are seen to be at an economic disadvantage.⁶ One could almost endlessly identify indicators of disproportionate representation (e.g. less than 15 percent of employees with the City of Grand Rapids are

⁴ The Delta Strategy, “2008/2009 Community Counts: Community Report Card,” July/2008, <http://www.grcc.edu> (accessed January 9, 2010).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://www.schoolmatters.com> (accessed January 11, 2010).

minorities),⁷ but the fact that very few churches meet the formal definition of a multi-racial congregation perhaps stands out the most. Only twelve churches with more than one hundred members come close to the eighty percent or less dominant race threshold,⁸ and some of them face long term sustainability challenges.

It is against this social milieu, including a history of political and theological conservatism and a consistent lack of sustained collaboration among diverse faith communities, that the comments of group participant Steve DeVries can best be understood. When asked to identify his hopes for participating in God’s mission for the region, he honestly responded: “I am not sure I am ready to dream dreams for West Michigan yet. I will let you know when I do.”⁹ The failure of faith-based institutions to catalyze systemic change, combined with the inherent limitations of local government and the narrow interests of local businesses, has produced an attitude of cynicism among many pastors about grandiose visions of city and regional transformation. Decades worth of healing racism summits, prayer and worship conferences, citywide serving events, charitable giving, evangelistic efforts, and outreach programming have not fundamentally altered underlying causes of injustice or limited growing social fragmentation. Leaders recognize they and their congregations are part of the problem *and* the potential solution, but several are fatigued by large scale attempts to bring about needed changes.

⁷ The Delta Strategy, “2008/2009 Community Counts: Community Report Card,” <http://www.grcc.edu>.

⁸ Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 35.

⁹ Steve DeVries, “Autobiographical Reflections,” (February 2009). Note: Quotes from other group members in this chapter are taken from individual reflections also written in February/2009.

Yet, hope for a preferred future has not been squeezed out. The written autobiographical reflections of group members are instructive. As indicated earlier, these were shared verbally at the February retreat and became a source of energetic interaction and focused prayer. (Appendix B contains the set of questions to which each participant responded.) The language of kingdom and gospel was alive and well. Paul, the planter of house churches, wanted to “see his kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven” and to understand “how God is moving redemptively upon this city in a variety of ministry contexts.” Jim, a coaching and consulting colleague, desired to always “be used and useful in kingdom work.” Will, the senior pastor of a Methodist congregation, wished to “grow in how to make God’s kingdom more of a reality in people’s lives.”

Linda, pastor of compassion ministries at a large community church, hoped that “lives will be transformed by the unconditional love of Jesus Christ” and that “Sunday morning will actually not be the most segregated time of the week.” Josh, the seminary intern, affirmed that “God is truly at work” in our area and wanted to grow in being “a servant leader.” Dale, the outreach pastor of a suburban non-affiliated congregation, wanted to see more individuals and churches following God’s command to love foreigners. This was in addition to having people “embrace Christ” who then “follow him ... through baptism.” Steve, the senior pastor of a Christian Reformed Church congregation quoted earlier, acknowledged a desire for “increased cooperation among churches” that involves “an increased openness to the life of the community around us.”

These rather benign, generic responses were somewhat misleading and quickly gave way to more concrete, tempered expectations for participating in God’s mission. The written and verbal feedback of all participants reflected four distinct patterns of

shared hope, three of which were highly personal. The first area of anticipation related to increased influence through modeling. Members clearly wanted to grow in what it means to love one's neighbor, share one's faith, and serve one's community. They were concerned about credibility in living out their understanding of the gospel, in "practicing what they preach." However, each believed that a deepened experience of neighborhood presence and relational evangelism was possible. (The conflation of these two forms of engagement in some participants' minds will be addressed in the fifth chapter.)

The second area of expectation was for the companionship of colleagues. Participants acknowledged limited experience in important dimensions of mission but were looking forward to learning with others who faced similar challenges on the leadership journey. Words like "networking," "accountability," "growth," and even "friendship" came to the surface. This connected to the third area of common yearning: increased integration of organizational responsibilities with neighborhood relationships and simple community partnerships. There was a collective admission of the tendency to be consumed by internal congregational concerns and the need to "get outside the four walls." Cultivating a missional imagination within a given organizational environment while increasing one's personal involvement in local mission felt like a huge disconnect. Making things fit in the rhythms of daily life was both a concern and source of eagerness.

A fourth pattern of shared dreaming formed around partnership with other churches and community organizations, but the feedback was muted. Paul's desire "that churches might see how to do ministry together rather than always overlapping or even working at cross-purposes" was as grandiose as it got. Group members offered modest articulations of increasing support for specific nonprofits or neighborhood associations

and getting more involved with other congregations in shared areas of interest, but no mention was made of initiatives that included multiple institutional sectors or a larger coalition of local churches. The overall ineffectiveness of ecumenical efforts in the region was likely a factor, but so to was the rather weak connection of denominational churches. For example, the local district structure in the United Methodist Church and the classis structure in the Christian Reformed Church bring congregations together around issues of denominational governance and ministry accreditation, but limited work is done with regard to shared mission. In addition, independent Bible and community churches tend to have a self-contained understanding of community-oriented ministry.

Participants, of course, brought these significant yet scaled back expectations into the learning community project. However, dreams for loving accountability around mission, for true friendship, for greater personal wholeness, for increased wisdom in leadership, for learning how to meaningfully collaborate with others remain largely unspoken in their congregational settings. There is a sense of relative isolation attached to pastoral identity and missional passion that makes ongoing communication difficult. Underneath the surface is the prevailing feeling that one is missing it or not getting it right (whatever “it” is) which is connected to a partial history of failed leadership initiatives. The longing to be surprised by God and really experience the mystery of his grace is also quite profound and speaks to the raw functionality of congregational environments, even those considered to be on the cutting edge of worship and outreach.

In short, the seven other leaders who agreed to participate together in the neighborhood engagement project seem to embody the expectations of many pastors in the West Michigan region, and perhaps to some degree, those serving within the larger

North American context. The dream of participating in God’s mission remains. The hope lingers for God’s people to be a sign, witness, and foretaste of new creation realities. Yet, there is modesty about what can actually happen on local landscapes, a relentless desire to think and behave differently, and an acute awareness of personal and organizational limitation. Pastors of established congregations can confidently meet expectations of biblical preaching, spiritual oversight, and community service, but often feel ill equipped for influencing others toward sustained, creative cultural engagement. They know they are stuck inside a repetitive cycle of church life, but they want to get unstuck without dishonoring their own gifts and the ongoing story of God’s people in a place. Some of Steve’s comments provide an appropriate transition to the next section.

Throughout most of my life I have managed to stay involved in some way or another with a kind of relational evangelism. It is not natural for me, but it is not terribly difficult either. However, my current context is such that I could very easily get away with doing very little of it. As long as I tend to the felt needs of the congregation, they are quite happy to have me, and there is no organizational push for me to get out and “practice what I preach.” I do need a push. I like what I do as a pastor enough to fall into that rut, especially now that there are some hopeful signs for the survival of our church.¹⁰

Stuck in the Comfort Zone: Everyday Realities and Underlying Anxieties

A few preliminary statements about the broader cultural context and its impact on the life of established churches are in order. No attempt is made here to retell modernity’s story or to engage in nuanced analysis of the postmodern turn, but it is helpful to provide at least some background for the initial descriptions of group members with regard to their congregational settings. The groundbreaking work of Stephen

¹⁰ DeVries, “Autobiographical Reflections.”

Toulmin on modern culture and epistemology supplies a useful framework. Toulmin depicts the huge cultural transition that took place in seventeenth century Europe as a move from humanism to Enlightenment rationalism, a move motivated by overwhelming fear and the need for absolute certainty. A number of significant shifts occurred in the epistemological realm, namely: from the oral to the written, from the particular to the universal, from the local to the general, and from the timely to the timeless.¹¹ This fundamental transition from Aristotelian prudence to Platonic abstraction has profoundly shaped the church's theology and practice right up to the present time.

Citizens of the Western world find themselves in the midst of another major cultural transition. Most of those seriously engaged with historical, social, and cultural research argue a distinctive postmodern phase has been initiated, though expressions of hyper-modernity are duly noted. Part and parcel of this large scale move is an epistemological return to the oral, the particular, the local, and the timely enhanced by the emergence of previously unimagined technologies. The church in its denominational and local expressions has an opportunity to reframe its identity and mission, to perhaps become more human on many different levels, but the challenge is unprecedented. Many congregations have formalized approaches, practices, and interpretive frameworks developed in an Enlightenment world, a world deeply shaped by first rationalism and then romanticism, a world of multiple dichotomies and hierarchical organizations. One could crassly make the case that Protestant Reformation churches have become spiritual franchises in a very different world.

¹¹ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 30-44.

This has amazing implications for leadership and mission. The majority of pastoral leaders have been trained to preach, teach, and influence within a highly formalized understanding of what it means to be church. They are expected to be experts not only in interpreting and communicating biblical texts but also in maintaining a given church polity with its associated systems. Quite often these systems have become intertwined with a corporate imagination for visionary, strategic leadership and organizational success, along with the powerful narrative of consumer capitalism. Thus, there are tension points and disconnects between the focus of pastors, the expectations of church members, and the everyday realities shaping everyone.

The ways that learning group colleagues talked about their ministry environments reflected these tensions and provided hints of basic concern around meaningful mission and sustained leadership influence. The two senior pastors were highly aware and most articulate. Steve mentioned how the sixty-year history and denominational connection of his church had weighted ministry toward worship services. “I am a preacher, so that works for me; but I am also a preacher convinced that worship services are far less central to the work and calling of the church than most people in the CRC have grown up believing.” Will, having become familiar with the missional church conversation, talked about his greatest challenge: shifting the church he pastors away from an attractional model. He referred to a painful realization that materialized a couple of years previously. “I had been wrong about what the church was supposed to be and do. My desire to keep the consumer happy drove much of what we did. We expected people to find God in one of our services rather than moving out into their territory to demonstrate his love.” At the first retreat, he went into more detail about the long bout of depression this produced, the

leave of absence he had taken, and his continued use of medicine to manage the symptoms.

Other members also referred to apparent organizational intractability, consumer expectations, and felt constraints. Josh, a young leader of color, talked about the challenge of becoming a pastor in a white, upper middle class congregation with a history of seventy years. He wondered how it might “get out of some old paradigms that have dominated the leadership landscape for many years.” Paul conveyed the difficulty of trying to establish a network of house churches under the home mission(s) umbrella of the Christian Reformed Church, “a community with very traditional bones which normally employs conventional church growth strategies.” Linda pointed out the limitation of being an expert in her church systems and the challenge of “helping our large staff understand that it takes more than one pastor, her assistant, and a group of volunteers to provide compassionate care.” Dale mentioned how the church where he served, known for its creative ministry and outreach over thirty-five years, had become resistant to risk-taking in light of recent leadership changes. Jim identified the ongoing coaching challenge of moving congregations “beyond charity” in their approach to local mission and told the story of being marginalized as a leader in his home congregation.

Persistent disappointment with one’s self and situation, in combination with deep joy over emerging signs of life, seems to be the lot of so many pastors. Comments like “dying ministries” and “experiencing the underbelly of the church” and “not living up to expectations” and “lack of success” peppered early group dialogues, but stories of empowered service, renewed influence, and individual transformation within given ministry environments were also included. This is the experience of liminality and the

language of disorientation. More on this will be covered in chapter 2, but it has been noted elsewhere that the roles of Christian leaders such as those in this learning group were fundamentally shaped by modern realities: individualism led to the prioritization of counseling and care-giving, instrumental reason produced a love affair with structural technique and pragmatic instruction, and social fragmentation encouraged a renewed emphasis on body life.¹²

Group participants acknowledged the reality of chaplaincy expectations, a level of comfort in meeting many of them, and the continuing need to manage them. There was shared humor about “putting on the show” for Sunday morning spectators. Yet, they were also alert to the negative implications of these expectations for vibrant mission and the inherent fragility of their current function(s) in a quickly changing social landscape. Nobody was ready to jump the leadership ship, though Paul was admittedly on the edge. Nonetheless, finding a new way ahead, while feeling trapped in certain ways, was a mutual hope and concern. Like so many leaders who are part of “traditions in trouble” (even if currently appearing to be successful), these members were learning that “clarity and confidence can be maintained only so long as one does not ask too many questions” and were seeing the “potential dangers” in previously held commitments.¹³ They also seemed ready to respond to any work of the Spirit that felt “like an invitation to dance, to play, and to deliberate about [their] lives...relationships...societies...and...future.”¹⁴

¹² Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 18-22.

¹³ Kenneth J. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

Patterns of Pastoral Leadership in Forming Community-Oriented Ministries

The early reflections of learning group members about leadership and mission provide interesting areas of comparison and contrast with five years of coaching-consulting observations. When asked to support a discovery and planning process that leads to more members being involved in relational, neighborhood-oriented mission, my own experience indicates that pastors respond in rather predictable ways. While there are unique dimensions to each response, regular patterns can be identified. The challenges of any change process tend to bring out default attitudes and actions, both negative and positive. At least this is my current view based on formal coaching work with sixteen churches and mentoring conversations with dozens of pastors over a five-year period.

The occurrence of limited self-awareness is surprisingly common. Many pastors do not feel comfortable in their own skin, have not reflected deeply on formative relationships and experiences, are not completely honest about areas of strength and weakness, or cannot see how their leadership style may function as a bottleneck to broader involvement in congregational mission. This sometimes leads to an initial defensiveness or suspicion about probing new possibilities for shared life and mission. It can also produce inappropriate requests for control of the process or even a refusal to encourage the meaningful contribution of other leaders.

Another frequent reaction is to try to get out in front of the process by more vision casting in sermons or renewed personal involvement in service activities. The need to show the way taps into a singular, hierarchical understanding of leadership and feeds an understandable desire to be authentic and to make a difference. However, the necessity of engaging actual ministry structures and allowing others to imagine and design a new

future is often missed. The place of communal discernment can be minimized, and long established assumptions of what works and what ought to be are not confronted.

A third pattern is to ignore serious feedback from neighbors and other community stakeholders and to focus on increasing congregational health or improving current ministry programs. Mission via community engagement is understood to be a byproduct of well done worship gatherings, spiritual formation processes, and ministry programs rather than intrinsic to a faithful life together. In some cases, local and global missions are separated as distinct programs on the periphery of ongoing ministry. Pastors are often willing to delegate outreach stuff to others while they attend to preaching and ensure the perceived needs of members are met. This reflects a Christendom (i.e. church at the center of culture) imagination and neglects the specific ways God is at work in the world.

Bypassing significant differences or unresolved conflict is a fourth response. Any serious discernment process that moves a church toward renewed mission and needed change(s) brings a host of different views, opinions, and expectations to the surface. It does not take long for leaders to realize that many people have not been shaped much by mission statement revisions or listed organizational values or recent strategic planning outcomes, not to mention important sermons on key topics. This is frustrating and painful, especially if challenging feedback comes from real or imagined opponents. Past experiences of blame or failure can increase the anxiety factor. Thus, the tendency is to minimize tension, smooth over very real differences, and limit the number of forums in which good, well-intentioned, robust dialogue can occur.

It is not surprising, then, that these inclinations I have come to recognize were revealed in the feedback and conversations of learning group members. Participants

certainly indicated they could fall into the patterns mentioned above in their own settings. Each member not surprisingly exhibited the desire to lead by example, and the potential for fueling prideful expectations was present. Thankfully, the confessed need to learn from others was quite strong and demonstrated humility beyond the group experience itself. The language of casting a compelling vision leaked out from Will, Linda, and Dale but was tempered by a realistic view of their ministry situations. All, even Josh, a skilled community organizer, admitted they needed to be better at listening to neighbors and other community leaders. They knew God was at work in the world around them and that giving so much attention to internal congregational concerns did not lead to vibrant mission; at the same time, they felt most comfortable with an inside-out approach to cultural engagement. The stress of dealing with transitional conflict was brought up by Paul, Steve, and Josh, yet their prayerful request was for wisdom not avoidance. So, while responses of defensiveness, individualistic influence, insider priorities, and discomfort with differences were evident, so too were modifying attitudes and behaviors.

To be fair, it must be said that those in the group had a decent amount of self-awareness. Perhaps this was a reflection of an overall maturity in terms of age and leadership experience, but for the most part, members were alert to shaping influences, personality preferences, besetting sins, formative events, and individual skills and how these realities affected their leadership. The collective story included amazing human brokenness: abusive parents, personal addictions, divorce, family conflict, friendship losses, financial indebtedness, and career disappointments. It also involved life-changing encounters with God through loving parents, caring friends and mentors, Spirit-guided participation in ministry, and sustained cross-cultural work. Admissions of ongoing

skepticism, misplaced confidence, organizational distrust, relational impatience, and misguided expectations were common and linked to personal, familial, and institutional influences. In short, with Josh's youth and Paul's clear angst as a church planter duly recognized, group members felt relatively comfortable in their skin, warts and all.

The shared areas of formation and transformation that appeared early in the group interaction were fascinating. All mentioned conversion experiences or professions of faith as catalytic moments in their journey with God. Most occurred in early adulthood even though all, except one, had churched backgrounds. All identified extended cross-cultural engagements as significant. In fact, Dale and Steve had both been church planters in Spanish-speaking cultures, Dale in Venezuela and Steve in the Dominican Republic. All identified mentors who had shown them how to share their faith, how to serve others outside the church, or how to be hospitable toward those who were different. This might partially explain why these particular leaders were ready to participate in a neighborhood engagement project. It gave them an opportunity to draw upon joyful parts of their own stories and to possibly break out of felt constraints in their current roles.

This was particularly true for Steve whose involvement was the continuation of an extended discernment journey for himself and his church. His level of commitment stood out as the project unfolded, along with the clarity of his verbal and written insights. He did not dominate group interactions, but his words obviously carried weight. Steve was able to give helpful language to shared opportunities and challenges, language that came out of meaningful engagement with congregational systems and a growing understanding of missional leadership. His story at Plymouth Church provides a case study in the interconnectivity of leadership influence, organizational change, and sustained mission.

Plymouth Church: Insights into Pastoral Leadership and Adaptive Challenges

Steve DeVries, one of the learning community's members, is senior pastor of Plymouth Heights Christian Reformed Church in southeast Grand Rapids. This nearly sixty-year old congregation has been the recipient of this author's coaching-consulting efforts for over three years. It became a flagship church for the denomination in the seventies and eighties, reaching an official membership of over 1200 and gathering 1500 in worship. The gradually declining membership level over the last twenty years has mirrored the increasing racial and economic diversity in the surrounding neighborhood. Current membership has been at a plateau mark of 675 for the last four years. The story of Plymouth's recent embrace of the Missional Change Model, its ongoing discernment journey, and Steve's leadership responses illustrates the opportunities and challenges of mission-related pastoral influence and provides a fitting conclusion to this chapter.

Steve and Plymouth have been on a shared adventure over the last few years. In early 2007, Steve used a survey tool to receive necessary feedback on his leadership. He discovered a high level of trust and respect from church leaders and an implied challenge to become more relational and creative in his leadership style. He put together a personal development plan that included training ministry leaders for the collective mission of "equipping disciples to become neighbors and inviting neighbors to become disciples." This plan became a source of sustained coaching accountability over several months. Steve did increase his relational engagement with staff and some elders outside of official meetings but found difficulty in linking these interactions to meaningful mentoring.

In order to involve more church leaders in missional conversation and activity, an extended leadership development process was launched in June of 2007 with a two-

evening retreat involving three pastors and thirty council members. The use of a church readiness survey had been approved, and these leaders prepared to discover how God was working among Plymouth members, to recognize major areas of challenge/opportunity, and to discern next steps in mission. The survey was completed by the end of August, a summary report was given in September, and starting in October, monthly elder meetings were devoted to group discussions on survey feedback. Notes were taken from these multiple interactions to identify important learning(s), key questions, and significant issues in light of membership perspectives on ministry and cultural engagement.

After several months of prayerful, passionate dialogue, an offsite discernment retreat for fifteen elders and the three staff pastors was held in April of 2008. The fifteen deacons had been involved in some group conversations, but it was the elders who owned the overall process. Congregational members had been updated at key points, were fully aware of the retreat's importance, and had been asked to pray. Over the course of the weekend, fourteen significant congregational challenges were confirmed, but one stood out as the most daunting. The following statement of challenge was drafted: "At Plymouth Heights CRC, our most urgent challenge is to further our sense of mission by cultivating relationships with those who need a relationship with God. This is to be done where we live and work, as well as in the Plymouth Heights Neighborhood." At the end of the retreat, several elders mentioned that the long term process of discerning this biggest challenge had been the most rewarding work they had ever done.

A seven-member, multi-generational creative team of congregational members was commissioned to clarify the primary challenge and come up with an initial set of recommended actions to meet the challenge. The team began its work in May of 2008

with coaching assistance. Over a period of seven months, participants spent over fifty hours in weekly planning sessions, met periodically with council leaders, provided congregational updates, and designed a next steps action plan. The first part of the challenge was reworded: “At Plymouth Heights CRC, our most urgent challenge is to further our mission by cultivating relationships that invite others to share in new and renewed life with God.” The energy level remained high, and team members grasped the complex nature of the challenge and its interconnection with other challenges. Elders received notes from the creative team’s meetings, which sparked healthy debate on key issues in their own meetings. By the end of the year, a wide-ranging response to the challenge of relational mission was constructed.

The team gave a formal presentation to the council in January of 2009, proposing, among many things, a sustained congregational initiative on neighbor relationships, a restructuring of mission-related ministry to prioritize parish interactions, and a new boundary-crossing partnership with the faculty, parents, and students of the nearby public high school that included tutoring and peer mentoring. Council members approved the plan in their February meeting, and preparations for taking initial action steps began in the early spring with the involvement of leaders from the staff, creative, and elder teams. The expected ebb and flow of making progress marked the remainder of 2009. Restructuring brought renewed emphasis on parish presence, but service events often took priority. More stories of getting to know neighbors were told but not as many as expected. Creative feedback for ongoing mission was given through a newly formed team, yet it was sporadic and not as helpful as anticipated. The hoped for partnership with the local high school never materialized, as key contacts and leaders in both

organizations failed to take advantage of early brainstorming opportunities. However, a couple of unplanned engagements popped up: a neighborhood Bible study with unchurched women and a mobile food pantry focused on friendship formation.

All of this gives meaningful context to Steve's participation in the neighborhood engagement project for pastors. He did not come into the group with grandiose notions about leading by example, as important as that is for any leader. When he joined the learning group experiment in February of 2009, the Plymouth council had just approved the plan for greater participation in relational mission. He mentioned the total discovery and discernment process as something "that has really helped us focus on a broader understanding of the church's mission and built a healthy sense of momentum and direction." Nonetheless, Steve was possibly the most realistic *and* hopeful group member. He had the advantage of serious engagement with his organizational systems on the missional journey and was able to put his own development in proper perspective. Steve viewed his involvement as a natural step of action and reflection that paralleled the path of his faith community. His path and the congregation's path might intersect along the way, but he did not need to prescribe how and when that would happen.

Again, this heightened awareness of both the importance and limitation of his pastoral role reflected meaningful interaction with an organizational change process allowing and inviting others to help shape the future. He had learned to honor his own congregation's historical narrative, to bless the role of a trusted outsider, to increase the discernment capacity of elders, to encourage significant participation from unofficial leaders, to support creative initiatives, to manage conflict and work through differences, to ensure transparency in decision-making, and to be less worried about perceived failure

in a culture of professional excellence. Steve was beginning to cultivate a congregational environment in which more members could be actively involved in God's mission and had gained a deep appreciation of grass roots efforts. He, at key times in the discernment process, had brought clarity and challenge as a shepherding colleague, not as a clergy expert. Without minimizing his preaching, administrative, and caring responsibilities, he was figuring out new ways of influencing others. Thus, as Plymouth made a communal move toward greater neighborhood presence, it only seemed fitting that Steve would intensify his personal commitment as a leader and co-learner on the same journey.

As indicated earlier, Steve was aware of his tendency to meet traditional clergy expectations and to let things snap back like a rubber band in his organizational situation. The realities of staff changes, the turnover of council leaders, and the urgent nature of congregational care posed a hazard of returning to missional equilibrium. So, his participation in the learning group, while intensely personal, demonstrated the strongest link to congregational dynamics. During the course of the learning group experiment, other members seemed more predisposed to interpret their neighborhood encounters in individualistic categories and to struggle with integrating these experiences into their leadership contexts. In a host of small, yet vital ways, Steve was able to discern most clearly how changing individual priorities and habits would affect his leadership style and pastoral influence. More details will be given in chapter 5, but it would be fair to say here that all group members shared Steve's interest in the project: "I expect to be surprised and find God is even closer – in my brothers and sisters in Christ and in the community around us – than I thought he was." It would also be fair to say that they felt more isolated than Steve as they embarked on this brief learning expedition.

CHAPTER 2

ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVES OF INDIVIDUAL LEADERS

A detailed examination of all denominations represented by learning group participants is beyond the stated scope of this paper, let alone the historical particulars of each congregation. The specific information about Plymouth Heights CRC's recent history in the previous chapter was given only to provide context for the influential involvement of Pastor Steve DeVries in the neighborhood engagement project. However, over the course of seven months, remarks made by group members in roundtable talks, personal interviews, and final presentations revealed the deep influence of organizational realities. In fact, all were more or less in situations that accepted the basic tenets of hierarchical methodologies: 1) *Leaders as Head, Organization as Body*. Intelligence is at the top. 2) *Predictable Change*. Implementation plans are scripted on the assumption of predictability and control. 3) *Cascading Intention*. When a course of action is chosen, initiative flows from the top down. A program is defined and then communicated and rolled out through the ranks. This often includes a veneer of participation to get buy-in.¹

¹ Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 13.

There were times when a shared, accumulated fatigue of leading and working within slowly adapting environments leaked out. At vulnerable moments, often during roundtables, most members expressed a version of Margaret Wheatley's thoughts.

I am weary of the lists we make, the time projections we spin out, the breaking apart and putting back together of problems. It does not work. The lists and charts we make do not capture experience. They only tell of our desire to control a reality that is slippery and evasive and perplexing beyond comprehension. Like bewildered shamans, we perform rituals passed down to us, hoping they will perform miracles....Our world grows more disturbing and mysterious, our failures to predict and control leer back at us from many places, yet to what else can we turn?²

While such melancholy reflections did not govern group interactions, the lasting sway of a social engineering imagination for church life was evident, regardless of affiliation.

Accordingly, this chapter offers an overview of represented denominations and congregational situations influencing the attitudes and behaviors of participants. It also seeks to explain the functional ecclesiologies at work in the light of stated leadership priorities and practices. Challenges to sustained missional influence are identified, and potential areas of self-deception among pastors are probed in relationship to personal and organizational expectations. Much of the interpretive work is done by referencing initial interviews, an early time management appraisal, and notes from roundtable discussions.

An Anthology of Denominational and Congregational Stories

The denominational diversity of group members was briefly mentioned in the first chapter. Steve, Paul, and Josh were serving in Christian Reformed Church settings, Jim was involved in a Reformed Church in America congregation, Will was leading a United

² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 7.

Methodist Church congregation, Linda was on staff at a community church within the Wesleyan Church tradition, Dale was on staff at a nondenominational church started by the Disciples of Christ, and I was serving in a house church network with Anabaptist inclinations. In the midst of these differences, it would be fair to say that two primary, yet distinct ecclesiological narratives were influencing those in the learning community.

Four participants were clearly functioning within a “church as covenant” paradigm built on the teachings of Calvin who agreed with Luther that “the marks of the true church were the preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments” but who emphasized a “correct faith and an upright Christian life more strictly than Luther.”³ In this social construction, there is widespread approval of Calvin’s belief that there are “specific scriptural directions regarding the right order of ministry in the visible church” and for his “rather strict...emphasis on behavior and doctrine,” not to mention a distinctive understanding of “the integral relationship between state and church.”⁴ Within the West Michigan region, this view of cultural engagement takes a unique, almost “Christianizing society” twist through the ongoing influence of Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper. Thus, an understanding of mission is connected to the establishment and preservation of Christian schools, institutions, and organizations.

The other four participants found themselves operating within Free Church ecclesiologies, or what has been described as the “fellowship of believers” tradition.⁵ The architecture for church in this approach includes historical ties to the Radical

³ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-67.

Reformation (in contrast to the Magisterial Reformation), a distinctive view of the relationship between the Spirit and Word that gives individuals direct access to God and his saving purposes, and an understanding of membership that includes the voluntary participation of baptized believers only. It also emphasizes the priesthood of all believers, blurs conventional ministry distinctions between clergy and laity, prioritizes mission and evangelization in the life of the church, and incorporates a commitment to holy living that reflects separation from “the world,” even in the face of suffering and persecution.⁶ Since Wesley Park, Will’s congregation, is part of the evangelical wing of the United Methodist Church, these markers aptly describe its communal identity, even though episcopal polity and infant baptism are still part of the story.

All participants were in contexts of great compatibility with Avery Dulles’ “church as herald” model.⁷ This way of being church “makes the ‘word’ primary and the ‘sacrament’ secondary,” with a view that it is “gathered and formed by the word of God” and has the mission “to proclaim that which it has heard, believed, and been commissioned to proclaim.”⁸ It is an ecclesiology “radically centered upon Jesus Christ and on the Bible as the primary witness to him [that] sees the task of the Church primarily in the terms of proclamation.”⁹ Other descriptions of this model are relevant. “Christian proclamation...is to be understood as a linguistic event in which the body of Christ is constituted and assembled. The Church as an assembly takes place in the very

⁶ Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 59-67.

⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books/Double Day, 2002), 68-80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

activity of proclamation.”¹⁰ Also, “the primary bond of communion in this approach is unquestionably faith; and faith is seen as a response to the gospel, that is to say, the proclamation of the Christ-event.”¹¹ While group members in the “covenant” stream tended to have a more institutional understanding of this, and those in the “fellowship of believers” stream tended to have a more personal, evangelistic experience, a shared kerygmatic imagination for church life was obvious. The significance of this will be articulated below in terms of functional ecclesiologies and identified challenges.

Public domain information yields key patterns in the larger denominational narratives of those in the learning group. First, there has been significant membership decline in North America in spite of several mergers that took place in the late 1960s. This is hardly worth citing since the decreasing influence of mainline denominations has been researched and analyzed from countless perspectives, some hopeful¹² and some highly critical in light of perceived compromises.¹³ Yet, it seems important to note that profound declines are also taking place among those affiliated with the non-charismatic holiness tradition and conservative congregationalism. Alongside a thirty percent loss of membership over the last thirty years within the Reformed Church in America and a fifty-seven percent decline in the United Methodist Church over a forty-year period, the Christian Church has lost nearly two-thirds of participants since its 1958 membership

¹⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 73-74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹² For example, Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism* (Grand Haven, MI: FaithWalk Publishing, 2002).

¹³ For example, Roger Finke, and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

peak (in part due to a major restructuring in the late sixties), and the Wesleyan Church in the United States is marked by slow, steady decline despite a strong emphasis on evangelism and church planting.¹⁴

Second, with the exception of Will's involvement in the United Methodist Church which has nearly eight million members in North America, group members were associated with modest-sized, regionally-clustered denominations. The Christian Reformed Church currently has over 1000 churches and nearly 270,000 members with concentrations in the Midwest, the West Coast, and Canada. The Wesleyan Church is heavily concentrated in the Midwest with over 1600 churches and nearly 130,000 members in the United States. The Reformed Church in America with its 935 congregations and over 250,000 members has strong connections on the East Coast, in the Midwest, and in Canada. The Disciples of Christ churches, numbering over 3500 in the North American context, are located mostly in Southern and Southwestern states and account for over 690,000 members. This is perhaps not so modest, but the trajectory of participation indicates a much smaller scale in the very near future.¹⁵

There is obviously much more complexity to these denominational stories than basic ecclesiologies and membership numbers, but they do provide a mirror into some of the challenges faced by group members at the congregational level. For example, hints of anxiety about lack of growth and limited capacity for evangelistic influence were part of

¹⁴ For more detailed histories and official statistics, see the following web sites: www.rca.org, www.crcna.org, www.umc.org, www.disciples.org, www.weselyan.org.

¹⁵ The following entries at www.wikipedia.org provide helpful overviews when compared carefully to official yearbooks: "Reformed Church in America," "Christian Reformed Church in North America," "United Methodist Church," "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)," "Wesleyan Church."

early interviews and roundtable conversations. This was not surprising given that only Linda, a staff pastor at Kentwood Community Church, could report on conversion growth and membership increases in recent years. The church was celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, and evidently, worship attendance had grown by twenty-five percent since 2000 while the number of confessing, active members had increased by nine percent.¹⁶

The rest were in contexts similar to Steve at Plymouth Heights Church where participation rates had declined and then leveled off. Jim described Hope Reformed Church as having a nearly 140-year history and the experience of a ten percent membership loss and twenty percent lower worship attendance over the last decade. Will mentioned that Wesley Park UMC had been started in 1955 and had “grown younger” during his fifteen-year tenure with the implementation of a contemporary worship gathering, but membership involvement remained numerically flat. From what Dale indicated, Bella Vista Church’s worship attendance peaked in 2000 and then had declined by nearly sixty percent over the next six years, due in part to the departure of key staff leaders. Current attendance figures had reached a plateau for the last four years, but the major loss of members and attendees over a relatively short period of time paralleled another leadership transition early in Bella Vista’s thirty-five year history. Josh confirmed that Seymour CRC’s patterns over seventy years matched that of Plymouth Heights: a high point in the eighties and early nineties, gradual but steady decline for nearly two decades, and a mode of maintenance in the last few years. Even Paul, after planting a church five years ago called The Gathering in the hopes of eventually forming

¹⁶ Note: Historical details, membership participation rates, and worship attendance information for all represented congregations were offered in response to follow-up questions within the interview process.

a network of small, missional communities, reported that very few people had been added to the original core of participants. The fact that they were already “stuck” in terms of enfolding others was an obvious source of frustration and concern.

Five of the represented local churches were roughly the same size, each with between four hundred and six hundred active members. On one side of this spectrum was The Gathering with twenty-five adult participants; on the other side was Kentwood Community Church with an average worship attendance of over three thousand people and a recognized membership of nearly twenty-six hundred individuals. Thus, while church growth models and measurements were sometimes critiqued by group members, to some degree, everyone had been influenced by a view of church in which success or health was inseparable from attendance figures and membership rates. There seemed to be a shared sense that negative trajectories or lack of growth meant something was wrong or implied a leadership void. This feeling that something was lacking, in spite of articulated leadership gifts and renewed commitments to spiritual formation and mission, was a motivational source for group participation. Linda, too, while in a growing mega church situation, was not excluded from the concern that things were not quite right. She was aware that a form of consumerism was at work in Kentwood Community’s growth story, and attempts to strengthen links between her compassion ministries department and the local outreach initiatives of the missions department had not gone well.

What was striking in interviews and roundtable discussions was the relative absence of denominational influence in leadership formation or congregational life. The responses to individual interviews conducted within the first ten days of the mid-February retreat were quite instructive. (The template of questions for the first interview is

contained in Appendix C.) Hardly anything surfaced about denominational involvement when it came to personal development, individual and congregational priorities, collegial relationships, or helpful resources. Linda did mention her service on the district board of Wesleyan ministerial development, Will identified a very small percentage of his time being allocated to participation on the district UMC Leadership Development Team and to coaching young UMC pastors, and Steve talked about an encouraging connection to a small group of pastors in his classis, but otherwise the silence was deafening.

In fact, there were as many negative references as positive references to denominational realities. Paul was especially blunt about the lack of support from CRC Home Missions after the initial launch of The Gathering. This disappointment seemed to be more about the lack of follow-through from designated mentors than about the withdrawal of financial resources. Will declared that the UMC denomination has little room for a missional church leader and tends to create “follow the rules” kind of pastors. Jim admitted his tendency to give in to disappointment with regard to the hierarchical patterns of decision-making in the RCA and the lack of missional priorities at the classis or congregational levels (regardless of the General Secretary’s emphasis). Part of the reason he was in coaching and consulting work was to intentionally subvert the church-centered approach to community transformation dominating his own denomination. Josh indicated a chief motive for completing a Master of Divinity degree and getting credentialed as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the CRC was to prove a person of color could succeed in the midst of such pervasive cultural homogeneity.

The irony was that people and resources outside represented denominations were having much greater impact. Dale and Linda were tracking closely with available

resources, key leaders, and recent developments in the Willow Creek Association, and everyone mentioned some level of involvement with Willow Creek conferences or resources.¹⁷ Will, Jim, Josh, and Dale indicated their congregations had utilized the assessment tools of Natural Church Development in recent years, though admittedly with limited influence on church life.¹⁸ Jim, Josh, and Steve talked about the significant, ongoing influence of leaders and resources within the Christian Community Development Association.¹⁹ Paul expressed great appreciation for the organic church movement and its coaching resources,²⁰ while Will identified books, web sites, and training approaches loosely connected to the missional conversation.²¹ In addition, authors and influencers in the broader evangelical stream were acknowledged by different members as helpful companions: Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Tony Campolo, John Piper, Jim Cymbala, Becky McDonald, Larry Crabb, and Shane Claiborne.

This limited overlap between denominational and congregational narratives was not unexpected given a cultural context of social fragmentation, political uncertainties, and institutional distrust, but it is noteworthy. On a purely functional, operational level, all group members were engaging their systems in a way that assumed the autonomy of their local churches. Outside of credentialing processes and particular governance issues,

¹⁷ See www.willowcreek.com for a short history of the WCA, available resources, key leaders, and membership information.

¹⁸ See www.ncd-intertational.org for a listing of books, tools, seminars, and coaching assistance.

¹⁹ See www.cdda.org for a brief history and core philosophy of the CCDA, key leaders, membership information, and available resources.

²⁰ See www.cmaresources.org/greenhouse for suggested resources, associated networks, and training opportunities.

²¹ For example, see www.friendofmissional.org.

very little joint mission and ministry seemed to be occurring within denominational structures. Those writing from a broader, historical perspective of church structures have referred to this as the “process of congregationalization.”

Today’s global developments seem to imply that Protestant Christendom of the future will exhibit largely a Free Christian form. Although the episcopal churches will probably not surrender their own hierarchical structures, they, too, will increasingly have to integrate these Free church elements into the mainstream of their own lives both theologically and practically.... ‘The continuing global expansion of the Free church model is without a doubt being borne by irreversible social changes of global proportions.’²²

It makes one wonder whether pastors and churches shaped by denominational institutions will be able to make needed shifts over the long haul; their organizational leadership DNA and theological imagination may not be compatible with such highly localized ecclesiologies. It also causes one to speculate about the loss of potential for focused, collaborative mission and to hope for the creative adaptation of denominational systems to local and regional realities. Regardless, members of the learning group displayed an experience of church life and that was decidedly centered on individual congregations, and this was not the only area of tension between official allegiances and pragmatic challenges. The next section addresses this tension by highlighting the stated priorities and leadership behaviors of participants in their local settings.

The Functional Ecclesiologies of Project Participants

The first interview was not constructed to produce a full understanding of each person’s congregational environment or to necessarily discern a working theology of church among group members. Rather, the intent was to establish an attitudinal and

²² Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 59.

behavioral baseline on the front end of the project. However, replies to some questions provided a window into the participants' experiences of church life and revealed, in part, their functional understanding of the church's role in the world. As indicated above, this sometimes differed from formal denominational polity or from historic, conceptual ways of being church. Thus, for example, leadership actions connected to "congregationalism" were evident, even for those who were in the "church as covenant" paradigm.

Another apparent, enduring reality of congregational expectation was the expert role of pastors and other staff leaders. The clergy/laity division of labor was assumed in the interview feedback, though one might have expected a more egalitarian understanding of leadership from those in the Free Church tradition. This provided an interesting paradox in each situation: an approach emphasizing the independence of a given local church yet depending on credentialed leaders to accomplish the work of ministry and meet organizational objectives. In other words, the priesthood of all believers remained a shared Protestant ideal jeopardized by reliance on professional performance.

Steve was brutally honest when he admitted ego was involved in maintaining an expert role. Serving in a professional clergy role brought recognition and influence which helped him establish a "comfort zone" of engagement. Paul, in the context of a small church plant and bi-vocational leadership approach, lamented how worship events and outreach initiatives were still "pastor-centered." Josh, experiencing the challenge of pastoral internship, observed "a high dependency on staff to get things done." Linda talked about the pull of "living by a checklist" as the identified specialist for pastoral care and compassion ministries and how little time she actually spent equipping others.

Will identified preaching, congregational care, and crisis management as organizational expectations and was glad for significant overlap with his own sense of gifting. Dale confessed to frustration around a recent change in his staff role. He had gone from Interim Senior Pastor to Associate Pastor after the hire of a new teaching pastor, and he perceived that his leadership influence was much more limited. Yet, he pointed out several areas where his initiating energy was needed: administration, local service projects, mission teams, evangelism, and leadership development. Jim once again described his own coaching/consulting involvement as a move to subvert the sometimes limiting roles of expert leaders. After twenty-four years of participation in one church, he could tell multiple stories of unsustainable clergy initiatives and fixed dependencies.²³

In addition, a church-centered approach to cultural engagement and community presence was assumed by group members. This did not mean that they personally agreed with this organizational stance or were unaware of the weaknesses of a Christendom imagination, let alone basic incompatibilities with Gospel narratives. It did mean they were leading and influencing in situations where cultural acceptance was a given and the wellbeing of members was the starting point for ministry. The priority of worship events and life-stage programming was obvious, and the involvement of “others” essentially amounted to attending church-sponsored activities. For most, this meant an inordinate amount of time was devoted to preparing for corporate meetings in which the individual concerns and personal growth of attendees became a main focus. All those serving in a full-time staff capacity were spending at least ninety percent of their work hours on

²³ Note: Comments and quotes attributed to group members are taken from separate interviews conducted from February 17, 2009 to February 23, 2009. Detailed notes are in the possession of the author.

internal organizational expectations. Those serving in a roughly half-time staff capacity (i.e. Josh, Paul, and Jim) used, on average, one-quarter of their hours for various forms of community engagement. With such a small sampling and many other factors to consider, one cannot draw firm conclusions, but such a pattern suggests that bi-vocational, part-time roles are viable in promoting increased missional involvement for pastoral leaders.

Within in this church-centered stance, or attactional methodology if you will, was the accepted centrality of expository preaching. So, church was experienced not just as worship event, not just as preaching event, but as a particular kind of preaching event. Again, this was not necessarily viewed as the best approach to spiritual formation or missional development, but it was part of each leader's organizational reality. Thus, Will and Steve each devoted forty percent of their time to constructing sermons, Dale was sad he was not preaching as much but supported its preeminent place in worship gatherings, and Josh was using twenty percent of his internship time (in addition to his seminary training) for developing preaching skills. Linda hinted that, even as an ordained pastor in the Wesleyan Church, her oversight of counseling and congregational care at Kentwood Community was considered a support function to the Sunday preaching ministry of the Senior Pastor. Paul, amazingly, spent more than twenty percent of church-related work hours in dialogue with unchurched acquaintances; yet, he still gave an equal amount of time to preparing for weekly Bible instruction in house church gatherings. Jim indicated the majority of his time and energy in church settings was given over to mentoring and training that bumped up against the perceived effectiveness of Sunday sermons.

This may all seem incredibly consistent with the formal "church as herald" model mentioned above. However, what seems to have been somewhere lost is the communal

and mission-oriented nature of announcing the good news. Rather than proclamation radically centered on Jesus Christ in which his body is constituted for constant action in God's restoration of the world,²⁴ a good deal of energy seems to be expended on applying the Bible in a way that helps individuals meet life's challenges and make personal improvements. At least, this is what came out in the first interviews and conversations with group members. Yet again, this does not imply inability or ignorance with regard to proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom or providing biblical challenges around the way of Jesus. Nonetheless, the common language was revealing. Evidently, it was important for church members to "move from fear to faithfulness," to "find a good fit between gifts and ministry," to have "a clear purpose" for their lives, to "be effective" in their vocations, to "establish boundaries" in the midst of busy schedules, to "deepen and protect family relationships," to "develop Christ-centered lifestyles," to "accomplish God-given hopes and dreams," and even to "become more involved in evangelism and outreach."

These responses came out as group participants reflected on their communication skills and leadership influence in light of organizational challenges. Paradoxically, multiple references were made to prevailing patterns of individualism and consumerism and to the need for "prophetic" preaching and living on the part of leaders. Still, serious accommodation to these very patterns seemed to be taking place in core communication strategies and preaching methodologies. It brought to mind a chapter on "the myth of expository preaching" written by David Fitch.²⁵ He contends that what gets labeled as

²⁴ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 68-69.

²⁵ David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

expository preaching is a tactic that leaves the preacher in control of the text, the parishioner isolated from communal conversation, and everyone picking which nuggets of truth apply to their own situation. “Expository preaching reinforces the idea that meaning can be distributed as one more of the many ‘goods and services’ available.”²⁶

Each group member, from house church to mega church, was in an environment significantly shaped by what Charles Taylor refers to as the social imaginaries of modernity. These often unspoken beliefs, expectations, and accepted practices linked to the self-understanding of a given group or culture are, in the West, inseparable from the assumed moral goodness of individual equality and happiness. For Taylor, the tacit cultural agreement prioritizing self-interest in social relationships is expressed via economic institutions, political engagement in the public sphere, and notions of popular sovereignty where people act independently of formal structures.²⁷ What this meant for the pastors and staff leaders in the learning community was an embedded polarity between hierarchical organizational systems (in which their professional expertise was needed) and a social milieu where self-determining individual members ultimately had the final say, especially in the “non-spiritual” aspects of joint behaviors. Consequently, most group members hinted at internal disconnects between the “mission” and “business” of the church (and their complicity in this arrangement) and referenced obvious gaps between communal confessions, congregational activities, and individual lifestyles (including their own). This produced a fairly wide spectrum of identified personal and organizational challenges.

²⁶ Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 134.

²⁷ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

The Identified Challenges of Pastoral Leaders

As one would anticipate, when asked to name areas of needed personal growth and to consider appropriate shifts in leadership behaviors, those in the learning group gave a diverse set of responses. Josh, reflecting his youth, talked about his need to overcome “haste” and impatience in dealing with people and organizational processes. He also admitted his need to be more assertive and to better handle conflict. As a person who enjoyed “hands on” community organizing work, Josh hoped to spend more time training church members for meaningful engagement and raising their awareness of important neighborhood issues. He recognized his tendency to act independently in forming partnerships and developing projects. On the other hand, Linda, who spent so much time in a pastoral care/counseling role, felt she needed to take advantage of an “outside” appointment to serve as chaplain of the Kentwood Police department and to increase her involvement in social justice initiatives related to human trafficking. Like Josh, though, she wanted to improve as a trainer, mentor, and team-builder. It was far too easy to react to presenting needs and neglect the development of other leaders.

Dale, now as an associate pastor, wondered how he might lead more from the margins of Bella Vista’s systems but was convinced of the need to strengthen the “outreach factor.” He articulated his desire to be more involved “out there,” spending less time in the office, building relationships with un-churched people (especially Muslims), participating with other community organizations, and helping others take more risks in their evangelistic efforts. At the same time, he confessed to a “hit and miss” approach to personal spiritual disciplines and wanted to be more consistent when it came to prayer, scripture reading, and meditation. Jim simply stated his need to improve

at “starting where others really are than where I want them to be.” Given local church and local community involvement and multiple coaching opportunities, he hoped for “greater integration” in his work efforts and for more occasions to “lead by example.”

Paul was noticeably working through many emotions associated with church planting and leading a new faith community in a singular fashion with the constant pressure of unmet denominational expectations. He talked about his need to deal with loneliness and not personalize others’ criticism of his approach. Paul expressed a strong desire to “become fully vocational in ministry” since taking a bi-vocational approach felt like living in “another world.” He saw the importance of forming “a tighter relational network,” having “new followers of Jesus join the journey,” and moving from pastor-teacher to “apostolic shepherd” (i.e. developing other outreach-focused leaders to serve as house church pastors). More concretely, he had to “come up with a better plan.”

Will acknowledged passion for “becoming a missional leader” and constantly used the “m”-word when referencing personal and organizational challenges. At times, it felt like he was focused on only one side of a very real polarity (i.e. “attractional” and “missional”) for himself and others. He recognized impatience as an issue in leadership, citing his preference for “reaching the destination” rather than “paying attention to the journey.” This meant that sustained teambuilding and organizational planning were outside of Will’s sense of gifting, even as a highly relational influencer. Interestingly enough, he hoped to gain more skill in “casting vision for missional church” and in “modeling engagement with the community” while “putting things in place” for a more mission-oriented environment. Steve, the other senior pastor, provided a bit of contrast. He was not shy about highlighting his good political skills (i.e. attending to key details

and following up with others on matters of perceived importance), yet “interpersonal stuff” was an area of discomfort. “Floundering with the process of mentoring individuals and equipping others in small group settings” was a rather consistent experience, but Steve still wanted to “become more purposeful on a relational level.” In addition, he knew he needed to be more “hands on” with outreach initiatives and to have more “direct community involvement” as both neighbor and pastoral leader.

Several things associated with the growth and development of these particular leaders stood out after completing initial interviews. First was the highly independent approach to leadership and the relative lack of encouragement or accountability in their organizational environments. Outside of narrow performance metrics, they received little feedback and were pretty much on their own in terms of determining personal and professional priorities. Josh was an exception given his internship status and intentional pursuit of several, older mentors, but he had to admit these were important factors in counteracting solitary tendencies. Second, a lack of solidarity with ministry colleagues, whether inside or outside their local congregations, was evident. In the autobiographical reflections, most mentioned that a desire for meaningful peer relationships had led, in part, to their participation in the learning project. Yet, in the interview process, no one identified partnerships of mutual learning as a priority or needed experience.

Additionally, an “equipping gap” in leadership influence clearly existed. All mentioned training others for life and mission as something in which they needed to improve and/or give a higher priority. Jim’s response was muted, but everyone else put a great deal of emphasis on this. It was as if they intuitively knew their current leadership performance and expertise did not lend itself to the full, transformational involvement of

others in God’s purposes. They seemed to be searching for a territory of influence that lay somewhere between what they were doing in their official roles and what they were trying to model in their personal lives, and the lingo of equipping is what surfaced. This implied disconnect with actual spiritual formation and active mission in a church setting was not just relational in nature, it was systemic. More will be said in the next section, but partial engagement with interrelated organizational systems was very much an issue.

On the organizational side of things, group members were asked to identify adaptive challenges faced by their congregations. Heifetz’ distinction between technical and adaptive leadership was provided,²⁸ and then interviewees pointed out challenges needing to be met through new ways of thinking and behaving. Linda described the lack of cultural and racial diversity at Kentwood Community Church and the difficulty of sustaining evangelistic passion, even in a “seeker sensitive” approach. In light of these challenges, she felt like she and others needed to better discern what *not* to do. From her perspective, trying to meet membership needs through multi-faceted programming diverted energy and attention away from these larger concerns. Josh had a unique view of his situation at Seymour Church. He talked about the limited capacity of current staff members and how they created unnecessary dependencies in the life of the church. The staff, with its ministry area focus and performance-oriented leadership, was itself an adaptive challenge to the fulfillment of a shared mission. As a result, Josh thought he should be more courageous in his training strategies and more direct in staff dialogues.

Paul reflected on the gap between “confession” and “way of life” fully evident as he attempted to construct a shared faith journey with others. He felt the burden of always

²⁸ Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, 127, 138-44.

addressing lifestyles having little to do with what Jesus proclaimed and modeled. He was honest enough to say his penchant for dwelling on negatives had to be overcome for progress to occur. Will depicted a congregation whose members had been shaped by a UMC organizational identity. They were proud to be Methodists and very satisfied with historical, institutional programming. He reverted back to the language of “attractional” versus “missional” and was convinced the most profound challenge was moving others church-centered activities and infusing everything with “missional thinking.”

Steve had a view that integrated Paul and Will’s perspectives. He articulated Plymouth’s primary challenge as “developing a dream of the kingdom that is truly shared.” He went on to say “our experience seems so far from this” and told stories of how consumerism and individualism were influencing leadership expectations of church ministry. With a hint of realism and a touch of insightful melancholy, he declared: “I need to continue to preach the dream and work the edges.” Jim, thinking about both his congregational setting and his coaching efforts, mentioned the relative lack of “shalom work” on the horizon. The adaptive challenge was personally dealing with organizations and leaders who remained focused on technical changes. The question on adaptive work reminded him to become more courageous and assertive in helping others create future scenarios for mission and ministry. Dale, like Linda, brought attention to the evangelistic and outreach dimensions of Bella Vista’s overall approach. He had a strong sense that leaders and members had settled into a “personal growth” model of ministry and that relational connections with “unchurched” or “less churched” people had to be stronger. He hoped to be faithful in relationship-building at the personal level and to bring more focus to this challenge within the ministries for which he was responsible.

Again, shared patterns emerged as project participants thought about adaptive challenges in their congregational contexts and how they might respond. Parallels with noted individual growth areas could easily be drawn. Perhaps most noticeable was “the solution provider” stance each took in their organizational situations. The need to have answers, to solve problems, to be a catalyst for important changes was foremost in their thinking. It was hard for these leaders, regardless of their personality, gifting, or environment, to escape expert, singular notions of influence. They were compelled to be the ones who “got it” and to help others “get it.” While most demonstrated humility and confessed limitations in group interactions, the hubris (and stress) of perceived indispensability in their ministry settings was undeniable. Other than Jim explicitly stating he was intending to “be a co-learner and step aside from the expert role” and Josh mentioning his senior pastor as a good mentor, there was absolutely no mention of gaining wisdom from staff colleagues or congregational members.

Most of the identified organizational challenges, including increased racial diversity, more consistent involvement in relational mission, and forming faithful lifestyle patterns, were indeed adaptive in nature. If things were going to be different, new attitudes, behaviors, and responses were needed. Yet, there was a technical feel to the descriptions and reflections of group members. To be crass, it seemed that if these individual leaders could get more individuals in their congregations to do more of a set of something(s), then the collective assumption was that things would get better in terms of living out kingdom priorities. As such, the urgency of fully engaging organizational systems, of fully including others and learning from them in the construction of a preferred future, of developing solidarity with at least an interested few, of creating a

highly participative environment for ongoing mission was mostly lacking. In another words, those in the learning group read their organizational challenges through the lens of their own personal challenges and defaulted to their own skill development as a primary source for congregational change and renewed mission. This not only foreshadowed the limited effect of the project itself on developing new leadership habits but also hinted at common blind spots and misperceptions on the part of group members.

The Vital Lies of Current Pastoral Ministry

Several years ago, author Daniel Goleman produced a groundbreaking book exploring some of the reasons why self-deception is part of the human condition.²⁹ He used the language of “vital lies” to describe how people, motivated by things such as self-protection, social reputation, family acceptance, or financial benefit, can ignore or distort or limit key aspects of reality. Based on early feedback and interactions with those in the learning community, pastors and other visible church leaders are not immune to acting out of misguided notions of what is true and how change takes place. There were signs that, despite honorable intentions, remarkable gifts, spiritual vitality, and even self-awareness about strengths and weaknesses, many in the group were living inside false narratives about themselves and/or others in their spheres of influence.

As indicated above, one mutual, limiting conception was that of singular leadership. Heifetz provides an apt description for this particular lie: “The myth of leadership is the myth of the lone warrior: the solitary individual whose heroism and

²⁹ Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

brilliance enable him to lead the way. This notion...reinforces isolation.”³⁰ He later says:

Even if the weight of carrying people’s hopes and dreams and pains my fall mainly for a time, on one person’s shoulders, leadership cannot be exercised alone. The lone-warrior model of leadership is heroic suicide. Each of us has blind spots that require the vision of others. Each of us has passions that need to be contained by others. Anyone can lose the capacity to get on the balcony, particularly when the pressures mount. Every person who leads needs help in distinguishing self from role and identifying the underlying issues that generate attack.³¹

Everyone in the group would absolutely agree with Heifetz’ assessment, and most would likely challenge a critique of their leadership styles as being solitary, perhaps pointing to their participation in the project as proof of shared learning and influence. Yet, there was a pretty straight line in their thinking from their own growth and skill development to greater organizational capacity for mission. All the talk of using more time to train and equip others still was based on perceived expertise and did not alter hidden control in relationships. The almost complete silence about mutual learning and reciprocal guidance inside represented congregations may have indicated a basic acceptance of long held organizational and cultural expectations for pastoral leaders.

Another area of shared self-deception was the undervaluing of personal involvement in administrative matters and organizational oversight. Jim and Dale did reveal experience in and appreciation for ministry structures that helped people stay involved with a given expression of God’s mission. The others, having identified their specific gifts and skills (mostly clustered around preaching, teaching, encouraging,

³⁰ Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, 251.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 268.

shepherding, and caring), expressed distaste and scorn for management activities and told of efforts to avoid them as much as possible. Even Steve, who was politically skilled and had learned the importance of engaging other leaders and ministry systems, confessed “covering administrative and organizational details feels trivial” and that he sometimes avoids conversations with difficult personalities on such issues. Linda and Josh both expressed frustration over organizational processes requiring their attention, Paul admitted putting off administrative details and regular contact with denominational leaders, and Will straightforwardly stated he was “lousy with the details of organizational activities and communication” and had, with council approval, filled a half-time staff position for church management. Dale, too, while liking “the process of administration,” had little time for many of “the detailed tasks” related to communication and oversight.

No one would suggest these leaders ought to provide initiating leadership in areas outside their skills, experiences, or perceived gifting or spend lots of time in joyless tasks. However, based on several years of personal coaching experience, I would propose that a lack of meaningful engagement with key systems (and the people in them) can spell trouble for meeting congregational challenges and implementing needed actions. It can also reinforce an assumed dichotomy between “business” and “mission” and marginalize the impact of interpretive leadership. What most in the group did not fully realize was how their consistent presence in administrative contexts would provide ongoing “vision-casting” opportunities directly linked to organizational realities. Their intentional participation could lend itself to increased awareness on their part and more creative responses on the part of all involved in dealing with operational realities.

When combined with other blind spots, organizational aloofness can be especially treacherous for pastoral leaders.³² These include overestimating the life-changing force of weekly preaching and minimizing the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith. Most in the learning group were on the verge of doing just that. Though the inherent limitations of “behind the pulpit” preaching were acknowledged by all group members at various points in the project, huge amounts of time and energy were being expended to support, prepare for, and participate in this activity (and other formal instruction activities). This has been more fully described in a previous section, and one got the impression that each participant, in varying degrees, was emotionally invested in having the preaching event serve as a primary means of casting vision for kingdom life and equipping members for God’s mission in the world. Such “hope” continued in the face of unfavorable, recent research³³ and contradictory personal experience. In addition, the absence of references to the Holy Spirit’s ministry in individual or church life was conspicuous. Certainly, the presence of the Spirit was experienced and talked about in the scheduled retreats and monthly roundtables, and it was assumed in many of the interview responses, but the failure to give language to this indwelling, empowering reality likely indicated a highly functional approach to interpreting the Word, developing spiritual gifts, and involving others in mission and ministry. This presented a complex

³² For a broader discussion on the inherent dangers of leading in organizational settings, see Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 9-50.

³³ For example, see Christine Wicker, “How Spiritual Are We?,” *Parade*, October 4, 2009, 4-5. Wicker demonstrates how recent polling indicates a significant decline of participation in religious organizations and profound disconnects between official teaching and lifestyle decisions. Even with the exercise of caution about research assumptions and methodologies, several articles at <http://www.barna.org> point toward significant gaps between teaching/preaching strategies and membership behaviors.

set of vital lies: organizational structures are rather unimportant for mission fulfillment, preaching and teaching are central to individual and congregational change, and sustained transformation occurs via pragmatic interaction with God's Word and church programs.

One final area of unintentional dishonesty related to time management was surprising and troubling. During the first interview, each group member was shown the Time Management Matrix from Stephen Covey's well-known book, *First Things First*.³⁴ (A chart of the Time Management Matrix can be found in Appendix D.) After a brief explanation of Covey's premise that many people (and organizations) have an "urgency addiction," valuing busyness but acting inconsistently with stated priorities, participants were asked to place their job-related activities within one of the quadrants (i.e. to classify the quality of time spent on specific tasks as important/urgent, important/not urgent, urgent/not important, or not urgent/not important). After listing primary tasks linked to their leadership roles, without hesitation and without exception, each person proceeded to associate ninety percent or more of their work time with important activities, whether "urgent" or "not urgent." Evidently, no one did anything that would be considered trivial or wasteful, though once in awhile, urgent, unimportant expectations had to be handled.

Covey's research indicates that most people and organizations spend less than fifty percent of their time in important (i.e. mission-oriented) activities, and between fifty and sixty percent of time is used for urgent, but not important work. In an ideal, "high performance" situation, between sixty-five and eighty percent of time is allocated to things that are important, but not urgent. Even so, up to fifteen percent of time applied to

³⁴ Stephen Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 37.

urgent, not important tasks is expected.³⁵ The fact that all those in the learning group essentially placed themselves above “high performance” leaders, not to mention the patterns of “typical” leaders, hinted at unrealistic understandings of ministry/work habits. This disconnect with actual practices was especially obvious immediately after a retreat that had included confessions of work-related anxiety, stories of unproductive meetings and ministries, and prayers for increased faithfulness around kingdom priorities.

In addition, at the end of the interview, each person was asked to complete a simple assessment called “The Urgency Index.”³⁶ (A copy of this assessment tool is contained in Appendix E.) The tool’s purpose is to test whether one might depend on the immediacy of externally-driven events or link busyness to a sense of accomplishment. Covey associates a score of 0-25 with a “low urgency mindset,” a score of 26-45 with a “strong urgency mindset,” and a score of forty-six or more with an “urgency addiction.”³⁷ Amazingly, everyone’s final scores were either in the “low urgency mindset” category or on the low end of the “strong urgency mindset” category. Again, this was incompatible with several retreat comments and interview responses about number of work hours, internal and external expectations, overall life priorities, and personal patterns of renewal.

It was (and is) hard to discern exactly what was contributing to this serious, collective misperception. The construction of traditional clergy identities could have been a factor, notwithstanding strong words to the contrary. An inherent sacredness and importance was attached to fairly mundane activities, evidently due to some connection

³⁵ Covey et al., *First Things First*, 218.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

with a divine call and noble intentions. Another factor might have been the relative lack of direct organizational accountability. There seemed to be little experience in dealing with concrete, direct questions about behavioral patterns. The underlying cultural shame of not having a strong work ethic or not being efficient and productive may have been a reason for an inflated view of personal time management. An above average ability to play “language games” and give “right answers” may have lent itself to rationalizing established habits. Regardless of the core causes for the vital lie of “everything I do is important and essential,” two things were apparent early in the learning project. First, the capacity of these leaders to develop new habits was limited if they seriously believed no current activities were comparatively unimportant. Second, further development of a missional imagination was needed so that they could see themselves and their leadership behaviors in a new light, and this is indeed the topic of Part Two.

PART TWO

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MISSIONAL IMAGINATION

CHAPTER 3

CORE AFFIRMATIONS OF A MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

In a lecture given at Fuller Theological Seminary in early 2007,¹ Alan Roxburgh laid out the core confessions of those fully participating in the *Missional Church* conversation. This conversation was initiated in the early nineties primarily by early leaders of the *Gospel and Our Culture Network*.² The triad of biblical-theological affirmations outlined in the lecture was creatively reiterated in a recent book³ and serves as a structure for what follows in this chapter. It is a framework that creates an opportunity to interact with important resources and reflect on the perspectives, situations, and needed development of project participants.

First, there is unwavering affirmation of God’s mission in the world (i.e. the *missio Dei*). The focus of the biblical narratives is on God’s good purposes and just intentions for the earth and those who live on it. In the face of human rebellion and creational disruption, God himself is on a mission to reconcile all of creation, and God’s

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership Cohort 2” (lecture on developing a contextual ecclesiology, Fuller Theological Seminary, February 2007).

² See <http://www.gocn.org> for a brief history and overview of the ongoing conversation.

³ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One*, 75-111.

people embody and bear witness to this ongoing work of restoration. The Church is not so much a rescue station for the lost as it is a demonstration of God's saving intentions in Christ. She is servant of the gospel, chosen to bless the whole world and be a sign of God's past, present, and future activity. This implies followers of Jesus are not called to go on a mission *for* God; they are called to join God in his continuing mission. The confession of and commitment to the *missio Dei* also provides a helpful way of interpreting the central theme of Jesus' teaching and ministry: the kingdom of God.

The second affirmation of those seeking to live inside missional narratives is that the gospel is, by its very nature, relational and communal. God is inherently relational as Father, Son, and Spirit, and early church theologians referred to this as "perichoresis" (i.e. the "circle dance" of the inter-relational God).⁴ Creation itself, including human sociality, reflects his relational stamp. Fragmentation has entered the world through human rebellion against God's goodness and generosity, but the good news is that Christ, in his life and work, has overcome this brokenness and established peace with God, with other flawed human beings, with creation, and within individual selves. It is in the community of faith, through shared life and habits, that wholeness takes root in the soil of everyday existence. God is forming a "people" who display, albeit imperfectly, the relational realities of the coming new creation, realities made possible by Jesus Christ.

The third confession flows out the first two. There is distinctive beauty in God's creative, saving activity. Alterity (i.e. "otherness" or "difference") is part of God's design for human interaction and is not intended to be a source of isolation or exclusion.

⁴ George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 3-16.

The mystery in humanity's inherent differences, whether racial, cultural, geographical, temperamental, or otherwise, needs to be recaptured in the current world of globalizing sameness and franchised efficiency that often produces a superficial pursuit of intimacy. Areas of distinctiveness should be recognized and honored, and God's grace experienced as varied, colorful, and detailed in human activities and relationships. The gospel is encountered and lived out by particular people in specific situations, which is another way of saying the kingdom's good news is contextual and to be contextualized. Joining God in his mission involves discerning his unique work in specific locations among those with a given history and set of circumstances. There is not a ministry model or tool kit, spiritual life campaign, or community development plan that can be universally applied.

Underneath these three core assertions linking aspects of theology proper with key anthropological, soteriological, ecclesiological, and eschatological perspectives are two other important theological commitments. The first of these is a commitment to an understanding of creation in which the sixth day is not the end of God's creational activity. As his imagers, humans are invited to become co-creators, partakers with God in his designing and forming work. There is a very real openness to how God, in relationship with individuals and societies, sustains his original purposes for the world. People, through their gifts, choices, energies, relationships, and personalities, really do matter in the ultimate outcome(s) of creation's history, and the clues to God's creative-redemptive movement can be found in the context of human community. Some have referred to this as the divine/human cooperative, and this contingent understanding of divine activity challenges expressions of Reformed theology unduly influenced by philosophical determinism.

The second, related commitment is to Reality (or realities) shaped by “word” (i.e. language). The story of creation and the coming new creation is the story of God speaking and constructing reality. Again, those made in God’s image have been given incredible power to shape the actual state of things. Individuals, communities, societies, and nations can provide, via language, helpful “maps” for navigating life, but they can also usher in destructive forces by giving voice to twisted agendas. Part of the missional challenge in the West is that many church leaders have been formed in the language of Enlightenment abstraction, a language foreign to the biblical witness, a language void of needed mystery *and* concreteness in a context of unpredictable changes and ineffective institutions. Scripturally, “word” is something spoken in and through real relationships, bringing challenge *and* stability to the social order of things. It stirs the imagination, surfaces previously unseen possibilities in the unfolding stories of people’s lives, and subverts myths of objective detachment. This recognition of word-shaped realities points out the need for leaders who, as communal participants and practitioners, can create spaces in which new language emerges for living the gospel in these amorphous times.

With these confessions and commitments of missional church practitioners as a starting point, the rest of the chapter is devoted to interacting with key resources and applying pertinent insights to the lives and organizational situations of those in the learning group. In addition to the autobiographical reflections and early interviews with group members, notes from the five monthly roundtables convened in March through July of 2009 will be utilized. Revealed opportunities for developing new ways of

thinking, forming new habits, and cultivating different skills will be highlighted and assessed in terms of compatibility with a truly missional ecclesiology.⁵

The *Missio Dei*

Several writers have carefully and creatively pointed out the subversive nature of prioritizing God's saving initiatives and bearing witness to his reign. The cosmic story of God's mission is embedded in biblical texts and invites creative proclamation, communal participation, and shrewd cultural engagement. For example, the authors of *Storm Front: The Good News of God* introduce the challenge of faithful involvement in this transforming narrative given a consuming, idolatrous social context.

We believe that the church exists to participate in God's redemptive work in the world. This work takes as its focus not our wants and desires, but the way of life, the suffering and the triumph of Jesus. The gospel is not just a message to be proclaimed; it is the form of participation in what God is doing in and for the world.

One way of describing this participation in God's redemptive work is to say that the good news of Jesus Christ is *missional* from beginning to end....When considered from [the] standpoint of sending, the gospel has less to do with the alleged benefits that might come with believing in God and more to do with what God plans to do *with* those who answer Jesus' call to give up all and follow him.⁶

They go on to emphasize how communal identification with the crucified, risen Lord undercuts corrupted principalities and powers and allows for a new way of being in the

⁵ The methodology in this chapter and the next is to first integrate the insights of key authors and resources around core missional confessions and then to identify developmental opportunities for project participants in the light of these underlying commitments (and implied behaviors). This overall assessment and application of a missional ecclesiology reflects the author's interpretation of individual and group feedback and anticipates the more detailed analysis of project outcomes in chapter 5.

⁶ James V. Brownson et al., *Storm Front: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 2.

world. This is a way that reflects the fundamental goodness and grace of God, a way pioneered by Jesus and sustained through shared practices.

Many authors, in reflecting on the implications of the *missio Dei* and its inseparability from kingdom declaration and participation, cannot avoid drawing a contrast between what is often accepted as normal Christianity and what it means to live consistently and fully within God’s reconciling intentions. David Fitch is convinced “evangelical churches have forfeited the practices that constitute being the church” and that this giveaway is undeniably connected to “complicity with modernity.”⁷ David McCarthy is fully aware of “the power of our market economy to shape and govern our everyday relationships to people, places, and things,”⁸ and focuses on how to embrace God’s purposes in the context of middle class American life. He talks about what it means to develop a way of life that incorporates patterns of hospitality, friendship, peace, hope, and joy and offers some helpful reminders.

Sharing in God’s image, we take part in the ordering and ongoing life of creation. We are astoundingly useless to God, but yet central to creation. We are created not for servitude, but to be sons and daughters in the household of God’s creation, where we are called to fashion a good home – to rest as God rests and to enjoy community with God.

...Our relationship to creation is a blessing when ordered to God and a curse when things subtly overwhelm us. We take our place among our fellow human beings, joining together in common life and friendship, largely through the things we share, own, and pass between us, and through the things that, together or alone, we use to spend our days. We put our mark on the things of creation, which in turn shape how we inhabit our world and share life with our friends.⁹

⁷ Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 13.

⁸ David M. McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145-46.

Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat have written an imaginative, exegetically sound study of Colossians and are convinced this epistle “proclaimed an alternate vision of reality, animating a way of life that was subversive to the ethos of the Roman Empire.”¹⁰ Out of their good interpretive work, they seek to describe faithfulness to the gospel in an age of global capitalism and “postmodern disquiet,” issuing a call for Christ-followers to secede from the contemporary “empire” and renounce greed, sexual distortion, self-gratification, domination, violence, and endless consumption. At the same time, they call for participation in the “new humanity,” the social embodiment of God’s work in Christ. It is possible to learn the communal rhythms of love, compassion, humility, peace, forgiveness, and gratitude which bring great freedom from “the powers that be.”¹¹ N.T. Wright, in a wide-ranging approach to Pauline themes, also picks up on the revolutionary character of the good news that God has restored all of creation through his Messiah. Paul’s version of the gospel serves “as a counter-story to the now standard imperial narrative of Roman history reaching its climax in Augustus Caesar.”¹² Also,

[Paul’s] ecclesiology...sustains the church as community united across traditional boundaries, a community right under Caesar’s nose in Rome, which is called to demonstrate in that unity the fact that the true God has acted and will act to create a new version of humanity before which Rome’s attempts at uniting the world pale into insignificance. At virtually every point...all is focused...on the cross of Jesus, the point at which Caesar did his worst and God did his uttermost.¹³

¹⁰ Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147-68.

¹² N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 78.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Michael Budde has identified how difficult it is to pass on a vibrant, sustainable faith in an era of powerful “global culture industries” that shape people’s imaginations and consume so much of their energies. From his perspective, “what is at risk is not any particular interpretation of the gospel or the tradition of the church but the capacity to think, imagine, feel, and experience the ways formed by the Christian story.”¹⁴ With reference to the example and sacrifice of Christ, he comments:

...the passion of Jesus radically scales down all other desires, subordinating them to the central imperatives of proclaiming and living the new reality of the kingdom. It identifies the idolatry that is misplaced passion, that puts the ‘natural’ categories of cult, family, property, and purity above the imperative ‘follow me.’ The willingness to let go of inferior passions and loyalties, to ‘die to’ lesser goods, is a sign that passion for the gospel is taking root in believers and in communities.¹⁵

What is striking among those who think and write about the *missio Dei* is their consistent emphasis on the visible, historical, cosmic nature of God’s work in Christ and the importance of an ongoing, public demonstration of this work among professed followers of Jesus. Thus, the good news cannot be reduced to privatized experience(s), and alignment with God’s mission implies resisting and critiquing cultural forces at odds with divine generosity and love. Yet, it is good to remember “our lives must be determined by our loves, not hates. That is why Christians cannot afford to let ourselves be defined by what we are against. Whatever and whomever we are against, we are so only because God has given us so much to be for.”¹⁶ In fact, “a people formed by the

¹⁴ Michael Budde, *The Magic Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 9.

worship of a crucified God...might just be complex enough to engage in the hard work of working out agreements and disagreements with others one small step at a time.”¹⁷

This cooperation with God’s redeeming initiatives and reliable contribution to the common good is the special privilege of local churches in the social-political milieu of pluralistic democracy. With due respect for Jurgen Habermas, Gary Simpson writes:

As prophetic public companions, missional congregations acknowledge a *conviction* that they participate in God’s ongoing creative work. In a communicative civil society, these congregations exhibit a *compassionate commitment* to other institutions and their moral predicaments and to contesting the systemic colonization of the lifeworld....This vocational conviction and commitment yields a *critical* and *self-critical*, and thus fully *communicative* practice of prophetic engagement. Finally, ...congregations participate with other institutions...to *create, strengthen, and sustain* the moral fabrics that fashion a life-giving and life-accountable world.¹⁸

This perspective coheres with the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, well-known for his critique of modernity, a critique highlighting the hypocrisy of many modern assumptions and practices. In the midst of this relentless deconstruction, he reaffirms the core tenets of the Christian story and honors the significant place of local congregations in bearing witness to the reign of God. An extended quote from Newbigin’s famous chapter, “The Congregation as the Hermeneutic of the Gospel,” is illustrative:

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the ‘high ground’ which they vacated in the noontime of ‘modernity,’ it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns....It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all

¹⁷ Hauerwas, *A Better Hope*, 34.

¹⁸ Gary M. Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 143.

areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society.¹⁹

Developmental Opportunities

The developmental implications of this commitment to the mission of God in the world, permanently linking the work of creation and the work of redemption and calling forth a public witness in and through local communities of faith, were soon evident in roundtable interactions with project participants. As has already been indicated, all group members had language for a holistic gospel in which God was the author and the world's restoration in Christ was in view. Dale and Linda, occasionally joined by Will and Paul, tended to speak of salvation in individualistic terms, but phrases like "gospel of the kingdom," "sign-witness-foretaste," "embodying God's purposes," "missional ministry," and even *missio Dei* peppered the monthly conversations. There was some familiarity with Newbigin's writings, most had read several works by N.T. Wright, and at least two members had read books written by one of the following authors (perceived as thinker-leaders in the missional church movement): Craig Van Gelder, Darrell Guder, Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, David Fitch, Alan Roxburgh, Neil Cole, and Reggie McNeal. So, there was at least a conceptual understanding of the *missio Dei* and its implications.

However, some limitations as far as influencing their congregations toward greater discernment of and response to God's saving activity in the world were evident. These limitations have been referenced in the previous chapter in the discussion of functional ecclesiologies and vital lies, but further development of them is warranted

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 232-33.

here. The five, two-hour-long monthly roundtables all had the same basic structure: a shared lunch during which personal and project updates were given, a time of indwelling the Word (i.e. reflective scriptural engagement), and either discussion on one of the two assigned books (i.e. *God Next Door*²⁰ or *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*²¹) or group feedback on specific neighborhood encounters and observations. Interestingly enough, the challenge of forming attitudes and practices consistent with God’s mission surfaced in the group’s interaction with biblical texts. This was where, without exception, members fed expert identities and revealed very functional forms of interpretation and communication.

Engaging Scripture

Over the months, texts included Psalm 1 and passages from Luke 10, Acts 2, and Ephesians 1. After reminders of “empire” and “exilic” contexts for these Scriptures, the passages were read out loud two or three times, several minutes were then given to personal meditation, and this was followed by several minutes of group dialogue. The total amount of time given to shared scriptural engagement was between forty and forty-five minutes. The interaction was consistently energetic, with everyone participating and offering insights. Yet, those in the learning community had to be repeatedly pushed beyond applying these texts to an immediate personal or organizational concern. The default approach was to treat the text as something providing direct help or solutions to

²⁰ Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood* (East Brunswick: Acorn Press, 2007).

²¹ Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

pressing problems.²² Even in a somewhat open-ended, collegial setting, it was as if each person was seeing the biblical text as an item that could be managed to meet others' expectations and used to fulfill role responsibilities: whether in preaching, training, counseling, or consulting. The insistent pragmatism was striking and a bit surprising given the relatively flexible, teachable attitudes that were otherwise on display.

More details of individual responses will be given in chapter 5, but the assumed value of pragmatic, solution-oriented interpretation implied the need for greater capacity on the part of these leaders to appreciate the historical-cultural environments in which biblical texts were written and to creatively link specific passages to the ongoing story of God's initiating, reconciling activity in the world. Their interaction around Scripture indicated they would benefit from dealing more directly with three major crises in interpretive leadership: the pastoral crisis of social displacement, the theological crisis of re-speaking God, and the methodological crisis of how to read Scripture.²³ Interestingly, the project participants, who were all skilled in various forms of teaching and preaching, needed to dig deeper into the many layers of interpretive work. Somehow, even with rich devotional lives (as reported in early interviews), they had fallen into a "this is what it meant then, and this is what it means now" methodology. They had a ways to go before giving full voice to a Christian gospel that is intellectually credible in an unreflective society, politically critical and constructive in a cynical community, morally dense and

²² For example, Linda and Dale saw strategies for evangelism/discipleship in Luke 10, Jim, Josh, and Paul established links between reading the Bible, personal success, and ministry fruitfulness from Psalm 1, and Will and Steve initiated conversation on Spirit-filled preaching from Acts 2.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 8-10.

freighted in a self-indulgent society, artistically satisfying in a society overwhelmed by religious kitsch, and pastorally attentive in as society of easy but false answers.²⁴

Thus, the first area of shared growth connected to the confession of the *missio Dei* appeared as an interpretive-communicative challenge to group members, especially the two senior pastors. Without fully realizing it (and to their displeasure when pointed out), participants were almost intuitively reading and applying scriptural texts with a Christendom imagination. What would likely fuel their progress as creative proclaimers of the biblical witness is a keener, experiential understanding of cultural marginalization, which is admittedly hard to come by in West Michigan. Walter Brueggemann has effectively spoken to this reality:

I have suggested that in a de-centered, exilic community, no longer included in the cultural hegemony and no longer responsible for that hegemony, an alternative rhetoric is both possible and required. On the one hand, rhetoric concerning the de-centered is *testimony*, that is, an advocacy of a very odd truth, a truth that is off-centered and in deep tension with dominant, commonly accepted givens. Such testimony...is not utterance that is given as a large, universal claim. It is, rather, a local claim made here and now, in these circumstances and with the passions that pertain to this circumstance...On the other hand, rhetoric among the de-centered not only has a different intention...but also a *different style or mode of articulation*. It is not excessively solemn or rationalistic or final or given with too much sobriety. Rather it is an utterance that is playful, open, teasing, inviting, and capable of voicing the kind of unsure tentativeness and ambiguity that exiles must always entertain, if they are to maintain freedom outside the hegemony.²⁵

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 128.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 57.

Incorporating and Training Others

The second area for building greater missional leadership capacity among the members of this learning group relates to the “equipping gap” mentioned in the previous chapter, a gap partially sourced in an expert approach to influence. It also stands in tension with the first area of developmental challenge. In short, it entails the participation of others in the work of discovery, planning, communication, and active service. Within their particular organizational settings, while growing in their own interpretive and communication skills, these pastoral leaders were faced with the necessity of inviting and including others in the discernment journey. They needed not only to grow as creative messengers of God’s ongoing mission, but also to enfold others, and even depend on them, in engaging the local community with a Spirit-given awareness of opportunities aligned with God’s purposes. Another way of saying this is that group members had a clear opening to help in the formation of mission-focused, interpretive faith communities.

Again, in roundtable settings, the immediate feedback, after extended scriptural reflection, demonstrated a shared, tacit assumption that the first order of business was to correctly analyze the text. Josh, Dale, and Linda were never the first ones to jump into the conversation, but they knew how to respond once the “language game” had started. The others, and Will and Steve in particular, were ready to provide key data related to cultural context, language, and/or literary style, usually based on previous study, and to then move quickly to *the point* of a given passage.²⁶ The tone of their voices as they

²⁶ For example, the background details provided by Will and Steve in two extended conversations related to Luke 10 were impressive. However, they initially limited group interaction while revealing very particular interpretive lenses: Will was focused on developing missional strategies and Steve bemoaned the lack of prophetic warning(s) in current preaching and teaching.

dispensed this knowledge was almost professorial and stood in contrast to the mealtime sharing which came before and the learning conversation which followed. It was only when reminded of the larger socio-historical-cultural setting, challenged by previously unseen textual details, and asked a series of clarifying, more open-ended questions that group members stepped away from certitude and entered into inquisitive dialogue.

One can only extrapolate from this experience, but it is likely that by repeatedly playing the expert role in biblical interpretation and application, most group members had limited the capacity of their own local churches and/or ministry partners to engage in the ongoing, serious discernment work intrinsic to participation in the *missio Dei*. Other leaders and gifted members probably deferred to them in ways that diluted the influence of communal wisdom and lessened the potential for creative mission.²⁷ A primary purpose of having project participants meditatively interact with Scripture in a group setting was, of course, to demonstrate the spiritual power of collective engagement and model how interpretive skills can be used to bring out new insights from others rather than forcing alignment with the “correct” view. Yet, based on group interactions, this involvement of others in fusing biblical and modern horizons and discerning God’s specific intentions was a habit and skill needing further development.²⁸ As pointed out in

²⁷ The author is here developing a plausible explanation from two streams of project data. First, during their interviews, every group member mentioned equipping/mentoring others as an area of personal growth, an activity to which they needed to devote more time, or as an adaptive challenge within their organizational settings. Second, each member displayed a “biblical expert” attitude (i.e. confidence and inflexibility) at different points in group interactions. Determining whether this attitude indeed contributes to the equipping challenge (and the implied lack of participation from others) in congregational life would call for a round of interviews/assessments with church members. The reflections of participants in their final papers indicate the author might be on the right interpretive track. These are identified in chapter 5.

²⁸ Another example of conceptual inflexibility rooted in “correct” scriptural application surfaced in reflections on Psalm 1. Most in the group dismissed the Babylonian exile as the primary context for interpretive work and stayed focused on a personal holiness understanding. Jim, in particular, got visibly frustrated when gently pressed to view the passage differently.

the first chapter, Steve was learning how to do this with other leaders at Plymouth Church, and Jim and Paul had experience in creating participatory environments for liturgy and learning, but everyone had room to grow in inviting those who did not “get it” into relational spaces where, with other friends and colleagues, they could help with the larger, collective “get it” process. This is precisely where the commitment to God’s world-encompassing mission intersects with the communal nature of the gospel in local settings and leads to serious discussion of the second affirmation at the core of a missional ecclesiology.

Perichoresis: The Communal Nature of the Gospel

The lovingly relentless mission of the perichoretic God to redeem and restore all of creation is strangely, yet inseparably bound up with the formation of “a people” who embody his purposes and anticipate the ultimate, beautiful realities of new creation. Given God’s decisive revelation in his crucified, risen Son and the trajectory of a world temporarily controlled by misguided, even demonic principalities and powers, the construction by his Spirit of an alternative community, a “contrast society,” is a central part of the divine plan. As indicated above, becoming a distinctive people through shared practices consistent with the way of Jesus challenges the prevailing Christendom model of Church because cultural acceptance is not assumed and event-oriented worship is not the top priority. To reiterate: the gospel is by definition a socially-oriented, socially-constructed actuality centered in Jesus Christ, activated by the Holy Spirit, and given tangible, concrete expression in local communities of his followers.

In a groundbreaking work, German scholar Gerhard Lohfink expresses deep concern about religious individualism and the development of a “supermarket church.”

He sets out to explore what Jesus' preaching on God's reign had to do with community and points out how Jesus reconstructed what "family" meant among his followers by relativizing cultural understandings of clan, parents, children, and land. "Those who follow Jesus, who for the sake of the reign of God leave behind everything they have had, become a *new family*, a family in which, paradoxically, there are again brothers, sisters, mothers, and children."²⁹ Lohfink goes on to discuss the "light burden" of Jesus and its connection to communal dynamics:

The question whether the demands of Jesus can be fulfilled is not one which can ultimately be answered by an individual... Jesus' ethic is not directed at isolated individuals, but to the circle of disciples, the new family of God, the people of God which is to be gathered. It has an eminently social dimension. Whether or not this ethic can be fulfilled is something that can only be determined by groups of people who consciously place themselves under the gospel of the reign of God and wish to be real communities of brothers and sisters – communities which form a living arena for faith, in which everyone draws strength from each other.³⁰

With hope, imagining the impact of a contrast-society, he draws out the implications of Johannine themes:

The world has structured itself in such a way that God no longer figures in its interpretation of reality. The moment that Christ and the community of disciples which follows him live(s) the true, God-given construction of reality, the deceit of the world collapses. To the extent that human beings love the truth, they too will come to faith and join the community of disciples.³¹

Barry Harvey picks up on the distinctive nature of the Christ-following community and suggests that the Church can be understood as an *altera civitas*, another city, which not only recalls Augustinian imagery but also pulls together many New

²⁹ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

Testament political themes (such as city, citizen, foreigner, commonwealth, fellowship, and assembly). “From the standpoint of the New Testament, the life and teaching of Jesus resulted in the advent of a social group that, as those ‘looking for the city that is to come’ (Heb 13:14), promoted their own laws and their own patterns of behavior.”³² Since using this metaphor allows for a creative retrieval of pre-modern politics in the faithful re-formation of the post-Christian Church, Harvey’s purpose “is to help the church speak again in a self-consciously authoritative way and thus let it reclaim itself as a distinct people who enact a different story in the midst of the world, not for its own benefit, but for the sake of the world.”³³ By linking the image of “another city” to diasporic, new covenant dynamics, he makes an especially relevant point:

In place of strategy as the defining proposition of modern [institutions], the community in dispersion must practice the ‘art of the weak.’ A people well versed in this art operates in discrete actions...[and] forgoes the pretense of stability and control, relying instead on the ability to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves only at particular times and places.³⁴

Consequently, constructing a way of life bearing witness to the Trinitarian life of God, a life stamped into the interconnected realities of creation and human sociality and entirely revealed in the Christ-event, is inevitably tied to the political character of any visible community. “The church’s calling to be faithful in God’s service is definable in political terms....To be political is to make decisions, to assign roles, and to distribute powers, and the Christian community cannot do otherwise than exercise these same

³² Barry A. Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-58.

functions.”³⁵ This means that the life of the church can be dealt with in “ordinary human language” and allows for “an unblinking recognition that we deal with matters of power, of rank and of money, of costly decisions and dirty hands, of memories and feelings” so that “the difference between church and state or between a faithful or unfaithful church is not that one is political and the other not, but that they are political in different ways.”³⁶

The practice of the Eucharist is a good example.

Bread eaten together is economic sharing. Not merely symbolically, but also in fact, eating together extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity normally obtained in the family....In short, the Eucharist is an economic act. To do rightly the practice of breaking bread together is a matter of economic ethics.

The newness of the believing community is the promise of newness on the way for the world. That in the age of the Messiah those in bondage will be freed and the hungry will be fed is also a criterion, though a distant one, for political economics beyond the circle of faith....[Eucharist] demands *some* kind of sharing, advocacy, and partisanship in which the poor are privileged, and in which considerations of merit and productivity are subjected to the rule of servanthood.³⁷

Author Paul Wadell builds on Aquinas’ understanding of friendship with God to explore the gospel’s social dimensions and to bring together the personal and public aspects of being God’s people.

...I propose that the liturgy and worship of the church should form us into...the friends of God. Becoming such a community should impact every dimension of our lives, including how we understand all the relationships of our lives. Friendship with God should...[give] us important insights about intimacy, about the qualities of good relationships, about being able to distinguish between authentic friendships and counterfeit friendships, about befriending the misfits

³⁵ John H. Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), ix.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 20-22.

and strangers who come our way and perhaps most important, about the purposes of the best relationships of our lives.³⁸

Biblical friendship, while incorporating affection and intimacy in covenant relationships, is built on themes of worship and justice and verified through the historical practices of the Church. It is a source of hope and has implications for mission in the world.

None of us can hope alone. We need companions in hope. That is why hope is connected to friendship and community and impossible without them... But, like everything else in the Christian life, we are not to hoard this hope; we are to share it... Instead of surrendering to the numbing despair that characterizes our age, we should rage against it by showing where real hope can be found. There is no more holy ministry we can offer our world than to be a 'Hope Unit,' to be a church, a people, whose very way of life is an invitation to hope.³⁹

Friendships should enlarge our moral vision, never restrict it. Friendships should expand our compassion for others, not calcify it. As a mark of authentic friendship, a vision of solidarity sees the bonds we share with all of life. All people are part of us and we are part of them. We live in them and they in us because we all share the same source of life in God.⁴⁰

From the perspective of a biblically grounded systematic theology, the communal dimensions of the gospel, rooted in the character of God and revealed in and through his people, are inseparable from the larger story of God's world-wide restoration effort.

Two essential Christian convictions must round out the account [of Christian ethics]. One is the conviction... that my story is inadequate, taken alone, and is hungry for a wider story to complete it. That gives us the communitarian element in Christian ethics: My story must be linked with the story of a people. The other is the conviction... that *our* story is inadequate as well: The story of each and all is itself hungry for a greater story that overcomes persistent self-deceit, redeems our common life, and provides a way for us to be a people among all earth's peoples without subtracting from the significance of others' peoplehood, their own stories, their lives... Christian ethics, because its truth entails character, must find that

³⁸ Paul J. Waddell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

truth in a community that is of necessity story-shaped, and [it] *necessarily* involves us in the story of God.⁴¹

Even the detailed, classical exegesis of a New Testament book like Ephesians brings the reader to a similar place:

The emphasis placed in Ephesians upon the social character of God's work stands in contrast with the individualism of the alleged existentialist Paul. According to this epistle, God's dealings are with Israel and the nations, with the church and the powers of the world, in short with the whole of creation. Instead of going out to save souls, God establishes his rule and kingship over heaven and earth. All is to be submitted to the king he has enthroned at his right hand. The much-praised peace of the soul looks like a ridiculous mini-achievement beside the peace and order brought to the world. . . . Ministers of the Ephesian gospel of peace will not forget or neglect the cure of souls, but their concern for individuals will be embedded in the conviction that they are ambassadors of God's kingdom to the whole world. Their task will be fulfilled in the political and social as well as in personal domains.⁴²

Lament and Potential Growth

The commitment to the gospel's communal, social character, which is part of developing a missional ecclesiology, was a source of lament and personal pain for project participants and perhaps provided the most motivational energy for leadership growth related to mission. It was also the main reason given in roundtable conversations for joining the learning group in the first place. Lament came in the form of fragmented storytelling as meals were shared and was connected to the admitted gaps in the spiritual formation of church members. Several examples of attitudes and practices reflecting a

⁴¹ James W. McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 351.

⁴² Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1974), 45-46.

dominant “personal peace and affluence”⁴³ approach to life were offered in spontaneous updates of pastoral challenges. Personal pain was subtly expressed in petitions for help during extended prayer times, petitions revealing loneliness, doubt, and disappointment with the current state of affairs but couched in the language of faith and hope. As in the previous section, it must be said here that the developmental issues which emerged have a direct connection to the established patterns outlined in chapter 1 and the functional ecclesiologies and vital lies identified in chapter 2.

Involvement with Congregational Catechesis

Group members were enmeshed in congregational situations that are byproducts of the Christendom era, situations in which the experience of conversion has been pulled apart from the process of “resocialization.” In the first three centuries of the Church, this separation had yet to occur, and four distinct stages of the conversion journey emerged in the context of communal submission and participation: first, evangelization in which initial contact was made by/with believers, second, instruction and accountability for a truly Christian lifestyle, third, enlightenment in the basics of faith that included exorcism and training for baptism, and fourth, personal articulation of the meaning and experience of the sacraments.⁴⁴ Eventually, after Constantine legalized Christianity, children born to Christian parents were christened, and it became necessary to establish a process that

⁴³ Note: This was a phrase popularized in evangelical circles during the mid-seventies by thinker-author Francis Schaeffer. See Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, L'Abri 50th Anniversary ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005).

⁴⁴ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 21-22.

ratified the initial baptism. In short, rather than seekers going down a re-socialization path to become converted Christians, declared Christians stood in need of conversion.⁴⁵

Project participants were faced with this separation of faith-profession from a comprehensive socialization in the way of Jesus. Dale and Linda were in contexts emphasizing personal faith decisions and “believers only” baptism, while the rest were in infant baptism traditions that focused on a profession of faith process in adolescence or adulthood. What became clear in the midst of informal group interactions and follow-up one-to-one conversations was the diluted, somewhat fragmented approach to catechesis that marked all the congregational environments, along with the minimal participation of these leaders in communal, spiritual formation processes (outside of worship gatherings and ministry-related training sessions). Josh reported that he was “low man on the totem pole” in terms of staff seniority, so he was given responsibility to do the annual teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism with teenage profession of faith candidates. Dale taught an annual six-to-eight weeks long “back to the basics” class on the Christian faith, Jim was involved in mentoring a handful of young leaders around spiritual/life habits, and Steve participated as an elder-pastor in hearing professions of faith and facilitating their public expression(s). Linda tried to address discipleship issues and patterns in counseling sessions, Paul had a one-to-one (or couple-to-couple) discipleship approach to spiritual formation, and Will taught annual membership classes while facilitating public faith-professions that were sometimes associated with adult baptisms.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origen of Christendom*, 36f.

⁴⁶ A group consensus emerged in the second roundtable (out of discussion on the communal practices of the early church in Acts 2) that few church members were being enfolded in the way of Jesus through current membership processes. The author followed up with individual participants via email and personal appointments to identify leadership responses to spiritual formation concerns.

So, an apparent place for further development in terms of missional influence was more direct guidance and participation on the part of each leader in catechetical processes and ecclesial practices. This would involve engaging church systems and historical approaches to discipleship in a creative, comprehensive manner. It would call for going beyond introductory information, perfunctory expectations, false assumptions of family life, and an individualistic understanding of transformation. It would also call for some different expressions of leadership influence, those that were not quite so dependent on large group communication but invited the significant involvement of other experienced mentors and guides. For Linda, Dale, and perhaps Will, a next step likely meant working closely with small groups and ministry teams to shift expectations and introduce core, ongoing discipleship practices. For the rest, even Paul, a next step likely involved linking a more extended, experiential, relational approach to faith formation with an historical approach focused on mastering correct theological information. For all, helping others experience conversion as sustained re-socialization would bring the challenge of connecting a lot of ministry/mission “dots” over a long period of time by developing a loving presence and expectation(s) around clearly identified life patterns.

The irony of pastoral leaders lamenting the incongruent lives of church members while they themselves remained minimally engaged with the communal aspects of spiritual formation was hard to miss. However, the lament indicated partial awareness of complicity in a compromised spirituality and needless dependency on current leadership strategies and formation methodologies. It opened the door to new possibilities in developing common practices reflecting the truth of God’s reign. Inagrace Dietterich has given language to the inherent power of these practices and pointed group members in a

hopeful direction. After mentioning the collective habits of prayer, baptism, breaking bread, mutuality, repentance and forgiveness, discernment, and hospitality, she declares:

However they take shape, these practices not only form and guide the internal life of the community but also define the church's action within the world. Witnessing to God's creative intent for all humanity, they model and thus proclaim a different way of life to a watching world. They demonstrate how to confront division by practicing a unity that relativizes prior stratifications and classifications. They contend with materialism and consumerism by sharing the basic economic necessities of life. They confront moral relativism and societal conflict through processes of mutual accountability and loving guidance. They challenge competition and power politics by engaging in open conversations and sharing wisdom. They transform hostility and fear by creating safe spaces that welcome and honor the stranger.... Salvation is not a private transaction between the individual and God, but a social reality of transformed relationships.⁴⁷

Mutual Relationships and Shared Practices

In addition to higher levels of involvement with congregational catechesis, the confession of a perichoretic gospel challenged participants with a highly personal aspect of leadership development: their own participation in mutual relationships and communal solidarity. As has been mentioned several times, the relative lack of collegial friendships and meaningful accountability had contributed to lingering experiences of isolation and independent approaches to influence. This, in part, had brought these particular leaders into the learning community, revealing a shared desire for true companions on the missional journey. Yet, there was no doubt that living more fully inside the gospel's communal realities would mean addressing vital lies associated with singular leadership and stepping away from solution-provider roles and identities. Each group member needed to figure out how to deepen relationships and receive honest feedback within their

⁴⁷ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 182.

organizational contexts and how to enter “outside” collegial expressions of community that included mutual challenge and support around life practices.

Josh, as the youngest member of the group, was probably farthest along when it came to forming collegial friendships, but they came in the form of one-to-one mentoring relationships he had pursued. During roundtable conversations, he brought up insights he was gaining through multiple mentors: formal and informal mentors for pastoral ministry, former and current peer mentors for community development, and trusted friends who gave feedback on personal issues and family life. This approach reflected his outgoing personality and relational learning style, but it was far from communal and seemed to sometimes feed his leadership independence. The other project participants occasionally mentioned life-giving staff interactions or resources recommended by colleagues, but one got the sense of “professional protection” in these relationships. Steve, on one occasion, did bring up his participation in a classis book club and the recent, encouraging dialogue of fellow pastors around a challenging memoir,⁴⁸ but again, the interactions did not appear to proceed very far down the path of mutuality and accountability. The general silence in roundtable conversations about meaningful, peer relationships seemed to be consistent with the overall silence on this matter that occurred in the initial interviews. As initiator and facilitator of the project, I was modestly alarmed to find out early on that each of the participants, with the exception of Will, considered me to be a source of significant relational encouragement and challenge. Given the sporadic nature of my involvement in their lives, with Jim as an exception, this did not bode well for these leaders having a consistent experience of friendship or solidarity.

⁴⁸ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

A series of occurrences in the lives of two participants brought the shared pain of isolation into clear view. First, in early June, after the fourth roundtable, Linda learned that the founding, senior pastor at Kentwood Community Church was leaving after thirty years. This was personally devastating to her, having established a strong staff friendship with him over a long period of time, and for all practical purposes, she pulled out of the neighborhood engagement project. Her responses to follow-up calls and emails from other participants were brief and perfunctory, and she later reported on experiencing anxiety and depression and falling back on workaholic tendencies during an extended period of congregational transition. More details will be given in chapter 5 about the impact of this on group dynamics, but it is here important to note the pattern of relational withdrawal not only from the learning community but also from staff colleagues. The fact that an experienced counselor and pastor of compassion ministries embraced this pattern in a period of personal and organizational stress is striking.

Second, Paul experienced a major life crisis during the late spring and summer months, and this became an unexpected focus of the June and July roundtables. It seemed to be a case of emotional burnout in which years of bi-vocational ministry, financial pressures, marriage tensions, perceived failure, and lack of denominational support all converged. The church-planting model Paul had initially been given did not fit him well, his alterations to the model, which emphasized the home as a primary context for mission/formation, had produced conflict with sponsors in CRC Home Missions, and he was disillusioned and seriously reconsidering the whole project of “planting missional communities.” He had absorbed the discontent of denominational leaders and a core group of original members and was ready to give up, even though he

and his wife had developed relationships with literally dozens of unchurched neighbors. Again, more details will be later given, but the June and July roundtables went longer than expected, with nearly forty-five minutes in each gathering devoted to careful listening, challenging feedback, and discerning prayer on Paul's behalf. In addition, Paul benefitted from follow-up calls and emails initiated by the two senior pastors in the group. It was evident that the learning group was literally the only remotely communal space where Paul could deal with painful realities and reassess his sense of call.

Thus, the affirmation of perichoresis as both creational reality and inherent expression of the gospel opened up two areas of essential growth for project participants: first, increased intentionality and involvement with congregational catechesis, and second, the pursuit of truly mutual relationships and shared practices. It was soon clear that a seven-month-long learning community project would not begin to sufficiently address the attitudinal and practical complexities of developing a missional imagination in these areas and those mentioned in the previous section. However, it did provide a chance to point out developmental issues in group interactions and follow-up interviews and to have group members rethink some of their personal habits and basic leadership strategies. A final area of development was evident to all, given the racially-culturally homogeneous organizational contexts mentioned in the first and second chapters, and was directly connected to the third confession of a practical, missional theology. The next section brings focus to this confession and its implications for this group of leaders.

Alterity: The Risk and Beauty of Difference(s)

To use an admittedly limited metaphor, one can legitimately say the core affirmations under discussion are distinct, yet inseparable sides of the same theological

diamond. The mission of the triune God in a “groaning” world is linked to the actual restoration of things and relationships. The realities of restoration are anticipated and become evident in the Spirit-formed Community of Jesus-followers. This larger Community, manifest in local communities of faith, models the very life of God by honoring differences while maintaining the unity of common purposes and practices in Christ. It is in the “spaces” of difference that the beauty and creativity of God’s grace emerges, showing what is ultimately true of God, his world, and his future for this world.

A good resource for gaining a foundational understanding of alterity is British theologian and author Colin Gunton. In a heavily nuanced treatise, he speaks of the distorting, fragmenting, and pseudo-unifying aspects of the modern condition and offers a profound, interconnected, socio-theological development of God and creation. He points out “that salient aspects of modern culture [in its Christendom form] are predicated on the denial of the Christian gospel,” but “in reacting against Christendom, the modern world has bequeathed equal and opposite directions of being human in the world” (i.e. false notions of spiritual/material “relating” and universal/particular “knowing”).⁴⁹ Gunton highlights three main features of creation doctrine that challenge Platonizing tendencies and serve as fertile soil for his ongoing discussion: first, creation is one not dual, second, human being in the image of God is to be understood relationally rather than in terms of fixed characteristics, and third, there is continuity within discontinuity between the human and non-human creation.⁵⁰ He proceeds to talk of God’s “displacement” in social

⁴⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

terms: freedom has become slavery, individualism has produced sameness, independence has led to loneliness, and endless choice has contributed to loss of meaning and purpose. He also seeks to recapture creational tensions which have their source in the triune Lord: universality-particularity, unity-diversity, spirituality-substantiality, and individuality-sociality. In the midst of this reflection, a key question and initial response are given:

Where might we find a theology of being which resists the pressures for homogeneity by giving due weight to the particular? A beginning can be found in a theology of the Spirit [who]...relates to one another beings and realms that are opposed or separate. That which is or has spirit is able to be open to that which is other than itself, to move into relation with the other... It is here [in the truth that the church is a community not a collective] that we find the nub of the difference between the gospel and the modern world. God the Spirit is the source of autonomy, not homogeneity, because by his action human beings are constituted in their uniqueness and particular networks of relationality.⁵¹

Patrick Keifert works with the practical implications of God-created, non-negotiable difference(s) for established churches in relationship to their mission. First, he challenges the “ideology of intimacy” underneath the false solidarity and fragmenting sociality to which Gunton refers.

The final psychological dynamic of the intimate society is the superimposition of public and private imagery, which shows up in the way we imagine, plan, practice, and experience public worship...[People] believe healthy congregations are like warm, open, trusting families. They debate over the personality of the congregation, as if it were healthy to have only one...It is precisely this projection of the private onto the public that excludes so many strangers inside and outside.⁵²

Then he links the public reality of church in the North American cultural context with a biblical understanding of hospitality.

⁵¹ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 181,184.

⁵² Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 24.

The biblical vision stands in sharp contrast to the ideology of intimacy....Rather than projecting the private onto the public, it opens the door for the stranger. The biblical vision allows impersonal, public interaction through the command of hospitality to the stranger....Such impersonal regard for the stranger – such distance, we may even say – is necessary if one is to respect the difference between self and stranger. Rather than seeking oneness, a pull that would surround and coerce the stranger, the public actor hospitably appreciates the irreducible difference...[and] engages but does not engulf the stranger.⁵³

With regard to the intersection of worship, hospitality, and mission, this means “family imagery...needs to be supplemented and contrasted with the strong public image of the church as a company of strangers engaged in evangelical conversation and life on behalf of the world.”⁵⁴

In their own ways, Dulles and Karkkainen both provide a macro view of Church that allows for and appreciates historical, cultural, theological, and organizational differences. Dulles’ use of six primary models is rooted in the conviction that important differences and unique contributions in the larger body of Christ should be honored. “A balanced theology of the Church must find a way of incorporating the major affirmations of each basic ecclesiological type. Each of the models calls attention to certain aspects of the Church that are less clearly brought out by the other models.”⁵⁵ The hope is for fruitful conversations and mutual learning to occur so that an enriched understanding of mission and discipleship might be cultivated. To get past an individualistic ecclesiology, these “images and models...are needed to remind us that the Church is an organic and juridically organized community established by the Lord and animated by his Spirit.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 80.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

Karkkainen also is generous in his comparative approach to ecclesiological traditions and leading contemporary ecclesiologists. With obvious appreciation, he identifies the varied theological contributions of distinct, historically concrete expressions of Church and describes the unique, significant perspectives of influential twentieth century theologians. He takes note of the current rise in nontraditional forms of church around the world and attributes this, in part, to contextual particularities in which diverse gifts and creative expressions of community are needed. From his view, “newer Free churches have been successful in giving expression to the wider experience and expression of Charismatic ministry in their churches.”⁵⁷ In other words, gratitude for differences in a given community of faith translates into a more adaptive understanding of mission in diversifying local contexts.

Christian ecclesiology is always a provisional ecclesiology; not unlike Christian eschatology, it looks forward to a fulfillment not yet achieved. This insight also carries enormous potential. Ecumenical dialogue and exchange of gifts always takes place on the way, not with fixed, final positions or a maturity already achieved. [This implies] the abolition of ‘the laity,’ a passive, second-rank Christian class, and the re-introduction of the biblical concept of ‘the discipleship’ [where the Spirit has distributed] gifts to each member of the church.⁵⁸

Finke and Stark bring historical perspective to the importance of alterity in the Church’s fulfillment of its God-given mission. They convincingly argue that the “upstart sects” in the early American story (i.e. the Baptists, Methodists, and even Catholics) exhibited greater growth and cultural influence than the mainline denominations. Overall, Free churches were better able to adapt to the pioneering environment at the local level than the mainline churches who tried to establish a standard template of leadership and

⁵⁷ Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 145,149.

organization. Patterns for sustainable influence are laid out: passionate preaching, self-sacrificing ministry, a system of free churches, frequent revivals, the efforts of “lay” people, a missionary spirit, and a clear doctrine of sanctification.⁵⁹ Participation decline is associated with the absence of these qualities and calls for serious reflection:

Most churches and sects do not increase sacrifice and stigma over time. [They] lower the costs of membership and...reduce the benefits of membership as well. Thus our attention must focus on why and how the reduction of tensions with the surrounding culture weakens religious organizations.⁶⁰

Another way of saying this, in light of the “contrast society” view cited in the previous section, is that congregations tend to lose their distinctiveness as God’s witnessing people and end up preferring sameness and predictability in their sense of life and mission.

The authors of *Vital Signs* have also observed the loss of distinctiveness in cultural engagement among mainstream Protestant churches (i.e. the loss of alterity with regard to their presence and mission). Many in this situation “are asking whether there are limits to openness, whether there are boundaries to Christian faith and ethics – boundaries which ought to be drawn to resist the capriciousness of unreflective or unlimited choices.”⁶¹ Consequently, the process of denominational homogenization needs to be subverted at the congregational level and the “conservative” and “liberal” conflicts overcome through holistic mission.

Protestants continue to express an eloquent Christian truth: the world was created good and has been redeemed in Jesus Christ. By refusing to withdraw from the world or compartmentalize religious faith, they engage the complexities of culture with the conviction that God’s love and redemption in Jesus Christ will transform

⁵⁹ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005*, 113-16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶¹ Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Vital Signs*, 58.

both them and creation itself. This theological impulse has been central to mainstream Protestants' Christian identity, and it is a distinctive resource for their proclamation of the gospel in the next century.⁶²

The fascinating story of the Church of our Saviour in Washington D.C. and its founding leader, Gordon Cosby, provides some hints of what shared mission in the midst of multiple differences can look like. It is a story with surprising twists and turns that involves the formation of an urban, multicultural, disciplined, creative, inclusive, adaptive, multifaceted community of faith. The struggle to become God's faithful people in a particular place is evident, but so is the joy of being transformed (and bringing transformation) on the journey. A community of disciples marked by service and love has taken many shapes over the years. Even though the recent departure of Cosby and the sale of its main campus have created uncertainty about the future, the church's ongoing influence is not in question. Elizabeth O'Connor describes the early struggle:

We sat in our little groups and discussed [mission] week after week, but all our prayer, imagining, and investigation produced nothing which caught the common soul. We were slow to recognize that the very diversity of gifts made it impossible to find a corporate mission...If the church was to find servant structures, the small groups had to be formed around focused and defined missions with each mission also committed to an inward journey of prayer, worship, and study...The resources for [churches to discover mission] rest in the tremendous untapped potential of their own people. The difficulty is that we so often lack confidence in ourselves and in our companions and search for answers in some other place.⁶³

In other words, if God-given differences are taken seriously, there is no "one size fits all" expression of ministry and mission, but specific forms of engagement are continually discerned in a communal context. Moving into a hopeful future entails the embrace of

⁶² Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Vital Signs*, 18.

⁶³ Elizabeth O'Connor, *Servant Leaders, Servant Structures* (Washington, D.C.: The Servant Leadership School, 1991), 20-21.

diversity. “We will have to recover our gifts of faith and hope and endurance, evoke the gifts of other persons, and thus develop leaders and facilitators of a global network of small, disciplined, self-critical groups whose reflection will issue in purposeful action.”⁶⁴

The Challenge of Organizational and Relational Homogeneity

The confession of God-intended, God-created “otherness” gives several lenses for perceiving his mission in the world: socio-cultural, political, biblical-theological, ecclesiological, cultural-historical, and organizational. It also offered the biggest developmental challenge to project participants, a challenge of which they were generally aware. Each person led and served in congregational environments of racial, cultural, and relative social-economic homogeneity, and in only two cases (Jim’s and Dale’s) did this homogeneity reflect that of the immediate neighborhood. Community-oriented ministry, in most cases, amounted to partial financial assistance for struggling individuals (i.e. “benevolence”), food handouts, service projects, and time-limited tutoring/mentoring relationships with students in local schools. Sustained presence with those who were culturally and economically different was rare, and the connections that were taking place did nothing to challenge issues of power and control in the represented relationships.

Most mentioned they lived in growingly diverse urban, outer-urban communities, again with Jim and Dale as exceptions, but neighbor connections across racial-cultural differences were weak. The most meaningful relationships and closest friendships that were talked about represented, for the most part, life-stage similarities and cultural sameness. The hope, of course, for willing participation in the learning group was that

⁶⁴ O’Connor, *Servant Leaders, Servant Structures*, 89.

the proposed practices of neighborhood engagement would at least increase the personal experience of meeting those who embodied “difference.” In addition to the longing for collegial relationships, this desire for knowing “others” was an obvious motivational factor for involvement in the project. There was a shared intuition that the dominant experiential patterns of organizational and personal-relational uniformity was inherently limiting, and a new way forward was needed, a way marked by intentional encounters with diverse people and differing social contexts.

Cynicism about sustained partnerships with those who represent denominational, historical-theological dissimilarity has been duly noted in chapter 1, and the recent closure of the nonprofit agency devoted to ecumenical efforts in the West Michigan region is parabolic, not to mention the almost complete absence of interfaith dialogues and working projects. As a result, the most realistic opportunities for growth and development among group participants in relationship to the confession of alterity were personal and congregational in nature, and this was certainly evident in roundtable conversations and updates. While not a huge topic of conversation, the shared organizational challenge seemed to be overcoming the unintentional exclusivity of culturally homogeneous environments and moving beyond a superficial approach to welcome in public gatherings. Keifert’s analysis seemed quite applicable, especially for the situations in which Jim, Steve, Josh, and Will found themselves. Brief comments from each indicated a recognized limitation of seeking to become a “welcoming family” (via scheduled hosts, greeters, and ushers) in the midst of ritualized, formalized worship. Thus, cultivating a richer, deeper experience of communal hospitality that invited,

welcomed, accommodated, and included evident difference(s) was a leadership development opportunity for these participants and, actually, for all group members.

Encouraging Communal Hospitality

Josh brought important perspective to the public hospitality challenge. As a young, developing pastoral leader of color in a mostly white, Dutch organizational setting, he was able to tell multiple stories of ignorance, limited awareness, and/or sustained defensiveness about racial-cultural realities among Seymour Church's staff and council leaders. He reported on some of the stress he felt from trying to navigate the congregational environment utilizing both caution and loving confrontation.⁶⁵ Josh was convinced that a starting point for increasing cultural understanding and accommodation was to involve leaders in cultural competency trainings and/or learning groups. From his viewpoint, getting folks in formal, yet interactive learning environments with skilled facilitators created space for different narratives to be heard and new insights to emerge. The rest of the group concurred, each having been extensively involved with these kind of trainings, but they pointed out that this did not fully address life patterns precluding sustained presence with those considered to be "others." However, May's dialogue in particular served as a reminder that everyone could do a better job of consistently inviting staff colleagues and church members into awareness-raising learning opportunities.

65. For example, in the first interview, when asked to identify potential shifts in his leadership priorities, Josh mentioned training church members for meaningful engagement in a diverse neighborhood but admitted "I'm worried about it." Also, at May's roundtable, he asked for the group's advice on dealing with the refusal of the senior pastor and youth pastor to encourage diversity training. In the second interview, Josh identified "overcoming the cultural/racial separation that is part of the congregational environment" as Seymour Church's greatest adaptive challenge and admitted to "feeling torn" about current realities and having doubts "about people's willingness to change." The fact that Josh's "Urgency Index" score rose from 29 to 37 over the course of the project is not insignificant. Further detail is given in chapter 5.

Several, specific organizational dynamics were mentioned in early roundtables that connected to the “lack of diversity” reality. Before pulling away from the project, Linda revealed that Kentwood Community Church had embraced Willow Creek’s top down approach to building capacity for racial/cultural differences. More staff members of African-American and Latino heritage were being hired in the hope of attracting more residents from a highly diverse region in metro Grand Rapids. This four-year-long process had ruffled congregational feathers and left the ongoing involvement of some long term members in doubt, but the commitment of management team and council members remained strong. Dale indicated that encounters with significant social-cultural differences at Bella Vista Church occurred primarily through short term mission projects and service events. Will communicated that a monthly food distribution ministry sponsored by Wesley Park Church brought many members into contact with a whole spectrum of otherness, albeit from a position of control. Steve reported that a weekly basketball night at Plymouth’s gymnasium, a tutoring program at a local elementary school, and a newly formed, monthly food distribution allowed church members to connect with others who embodied cultural and economic differences. Yet, he admitted that in a recent discernment process, boundary-crossing, relational mission had surfaced as the most important adaptive challenge faced by Plymouth Church.

Josh, too, brought up the presence of Seymour Church members at the local Middle School’s afterschool tutoring program, but was especially enthused about a second year effort at community gardening that had strengthened neighbor relationships and organizational partnerships. Jim talked about the efforts of his home church to increase generational diversity by attracting young families to a new, contemporary

worship service and offering young people a place to hang out via a recently built youth center. From his perspective, things were not going well. Paul was encouraging his core group of members at The Gathering to embrace difference in the context of neighborhood friendships and relational evangelism, but he could only identify a couple of people who seemed to be making progress. On a positive note, those who had remained with Paul in the church planting effort seemed comfortable with the broad spectrum of those on a spiritual journey. Those with no church backgrounds and/or a limited understanding of the biblical witness were accepted into fellowship, worship, and serving activities. Dale, Linda, and Will indicated this was true of their congregational environments as well. Interestingly enough, these were the leaders in the situations most influenced by the Willow Creek model of church mission and ministry.

Accordingly, once again, the collective missional leadership challenge involved addressing church systems. In terms of public worship, group members needed to figure out how hospitality might be deepened to better accommodate racial-cultural differences. In terms of community service, introducing church members to more reciprocal, inclusive forms of engagement was clearly necessary but would require an unprecedented level of creativity, discernment, and patience, not to mention a commitment to foundational, cultural competency training that addressed distorted, misguided assumptions about those experienced as “other” (whether economically, ethnically, spiritually, or otherwise). To highlight the magnitude of the challenge, building capacity for hospitality and mutuality in mission would mean subverting the ideology of intimacy (Keifert) and recapturing a communal solidarity that included the tensions and benefits of multiple, complementary particularities (Gunton).

Increasing Diversity in Personal Relationships

On a personal level, group members had already begun to address their limited relational connection(s) with those who represented social-cultural-racial-economic-religious difference. Will was spending a minimum of four hours a week in a local bar. After several months of simply hanging out and getting to know staff and patrons, he was able to tell some colorful stories and speak of budding friendships. Steve was attending a weekly, urban, cross-cultural Bible study of nearly sixty men. He reported that the study was led by a couple of local black pastors, was marked by group accountability and prayer, and encouraged good conversations among those who tended to live in “different worlds.” Jim was doing coaching/consulting work with nonprofits in African-American communities and talked about growing friendships with staff and board leaders in the midst of culturally-related tensions (and his unmet expectations). Dale mentioned that he, his family, and a small group of Bella Vista Church members had helped a Muslim family from Northern Africa resettle in the West Michigan area. He felt like mutual respect had developed and was encouraged by recent, faith-related conversations.

Paul was experiencing alterity in the form of neighbors, friends, and extended family members who were suspicious of institutionalized Christianity; yet they remained open to his presence and guidance when facing hardship, physical limitation, or relational brokenness. He and his wife were stretched by all the opportunities to spend time with hurting people. Linda, with her long hours and heavy counseling schedule (of mostly church members), was perhaps most limited in consistently encountering social-cultural difference. However, by recently taking on the chaplain’s role for the local police department, she was beginning to see things in a new light and hear the concerns of

people from completely different backgrounds. Josh, of course, was drawing on his experience as a community organizer to meet and have conversations with a diverse set of neighbors. He also described initiating a dialogue with the staff of four local churches (his own, two other churches with Reformed roots, and a multi-racial, nondenominational congregation led by a team of three African-American pastors) and hoped that a solid partnership would form to bring great benefit to the Alger Heights neighborhood.

So, it seemed as if the timing of the neighborhood engagement project was good for building on these individual efforts to be with those representing otherness. The fact that this (i.e. a more diverse set of relationships and friendships) was an understood area of needed development and an obvious motivating factor would lead one to believe that moderate progress would be made by the end of the project. On the other hand, the truth that most of these efforts (excepting Josh's) were largely detached from congregational realities and geographical particularity called into question the longer term success of connecting the growth of individual leaders to increased organizational capacity for mission, especially around the communal confession and embrace of alterity. In addition, several clues were given in roundtable conversations about how members might interpret their development as leaders, a process that connected their distinct life stories with missional praxis and reflection. This is the topic briefly addressed in the next section.

Experiential Clues to Forming a Missional Theology

Certain aspects of each person's story repeatedly came up in the learning group's ongoing interaction and provided hints as to which of the above-mentioned *Missional Church* confessions might also serve as entry points for further theological development. Group members had been profoundly shaped by specific yet sustained experiences on

their life journeys, and, paradoxically, these experiences increased capacity for missional thinking and engagement while potentially limiting development of a missional imagination in key areas. A more positive way of framing this is to acknowledge that extended events and situations in each participant's life had provided a particular set of lenses through which to comprehend their own involvement in God's worldwide restoration project. This reality of focused understanding and finite response(s) is simply part of the human condition.

For both Steve and Dale, a decade of church-planting and leadership development in a Latino culture had become a primary shaping experience. Steve and his family had spent several years in the Dominican Republic working extensively with illegal Haitian immigrants. Dale and his family had assisted in planting two Venezuelan churches, one in Caracas and one in Barquisimeto. Steve's extensive experience among the outcast in another culture had heightened his sensitivity about political and social systems and their impact on economic realities. (I.e. he not only served in a "foreign" culture, he built a degree of solidarity with those scorned in that culture.) Dale had worked mostly with the Venezuelan upper-middle class which increased his concern and creativity for building relationships and sharing faith with those who had little knowledge of the Christian story.

As a result, while Steve tended to focus on the social justice side of the kingdom equation and Dale on the relational evangelism side, they both brought a distinctive, discernment capacity into the learning group project. When giving feedback to other participants, they seemed to be in sync about what God might be up to in specific circumstances. For example, they were able to give helpful language to some of Paul's unmet expectations on the church-planting adventure, but their advice to persevere in

current circumstances while probing new possibilities seemed counterintuitive to some of the other group members (who had a basic “just start over” mindset). Their ability to adapt to realities “beyond the four walls” and think of creative responses involving others was evident. Accordingly, the entry point of Dale and Steve for further theological development and missional reflection was indeed the confession of the *missio Dei* and its localized application. This would allow them to tap into their unique, cross-cultural experiences and utilize their discernment gifts. However, as indicated in the previous chapter, they would each need to be more content with working the edges of their church systems and intentional about engaging others in a sustained discernment process.

Linda, Will, and Paul had been profoundly affected by different versions of family brokenness and social displacement. Linda brought up the impact of her grandmother’s alcoholism and abandonment of family on her own mother. She also outlined the chaos of early adulthood: married young, got divorced and became a single mom, married again, managed a blended family in the midst of multiple moves, and eventually pursued professional ministry out of extensive volunteer work. Her role as pastor of compassion ministries in a large, regional church seemed like a good fit with her personal narrative. Will and Paul narrated their own substance abuse issues as adolescents and young adults and referenced alcoholic fathers and divorced parents as contributing to their early struggles. Both had come from non-Christian family backgrounds, had become followers of Jesus as young adults, and were profoundly influenced by older mentors early in their faith journey(s).

While each of these three participants had different personalities, leadership styles, and ministry contexts, they all admitted and demonstrated their ongoing pursuit of

meaningful relationships. They also confirmed a desire for others who struggled to find a supportive faith community and to experience a way of life that offered healing and wholeness. This intersection of genuine community with spiritual formation was a clear area of concern and passion. Consequently, the affirmation of a perichoretic gospel was a natural starting point for further reflection on life, mission, and leadership. As discussed in an earlier section, Paul, Linda, and Will were all challenged by individualistic notions of discipleship and life-change, but their heightened sensitivities to issues of acceptance, respect, and mutuality indicated tremendous potential for thinking creatively about life-giving, communal patterns consistent with the way of Jesus.

It was the youngest member and the oldest member of the learning group for whom appreciation of otherness became the most likely source for further, deeper contemplation on the nature of missional engagement. Josh and Jim formed a bit of an odd couple in group interactions, with both consistently promoting the need to be with and learn from those who represented economic, racial, cultural, or religious difference. Dale also brought a strong inclination to intentionally encounter and be hospitable to “foreigners,” but he was literally focused on non-citizens of the United States who were beginning to make a home here. Josh and Jim had a strong local, neighborhood focus as they talked about getting to know and work with others. Their similar views on good neighboring and joint ministry were somewhat surprising given dissimilar life narratives.

Josh was adopted from Bangladesh as a young boy, grew up in a large, multi-racial family that lived in an all-white neighborhood, had memory of both positive and negative incidents in local CRC congregations, and had extensive community organizing experience in urban environments. His identity was very much connected to the reality

of being “the other” in neighborhood, church, and educational environments. Jim, on the other hand, had grown up in a suburban, middle class home with parents who had gone through the Great Depression and identified with the Presbyterian Church. His first experience of racial diversity was in high school and was inseparably linked to tensions of desegregation. Coming of age in the sixties created in Jim a distrust of institutions and suspicion of authority, yet he ended up spending thirty years as a chemical engineer in the nuclear industry before completing a Master of Divinity degree at Western Seminary. He was a skilled project manager and had a wealth of organizational leadership experiences.

Regardless of these amazingly varied backgrounds, both Jim and Josh brought a spirit of relational adventure into the learning project. Each of them was discontented with enduring sameness in their personal lives or organizational situations. They visibly enjoyed talking about opportunities to be with, learn from, and support people different than themselves. Josh was doing this as a pastoral intern of a culturally homogeneous congregation in an economically and racially diversifying neighborhood. He was viewed and blessed as a bridge-building leader at Seymour Church and was indeed creating multiple opportunities for diverse groups of people to eat, talk, and work together. Jim was doing this as a coaching/consulting leader who found himself consistently interacting with leaders of African-American churches and with nonprofit organizations in mostly African-American and Latino communities. He was experiencing the hospitality of a diverse set of individuals and organizations, was offering his own brand of hospitality (in the form of needed gifts, skills, and resources), and was delighted to tell stories of mutual learning and collaboration which were not void of frustrations and unmet expectations.

The confession of and commitment to alterity, then, was an excellent launching point for Josh and Jim’s continuing theological development. They were unmistakably motivated to stay on a journey of discovering new kingdom possibilities and exploring the transformational power of complementary differences. Thus, they seemed uniquely prepared among project participants to think creatively and respond effectively about “welcoming the stranger” (or better yet, “being welcomed by the stranger”) in the context of local mission. As with other group members and their distinctive theological entry points, Josh and Jim also were challenged by painful occurrences of marginalization and self-protective tendencies, but the flipside of these limitations was the capacity to share life with those who were irreducibly dissimilar.

In addition to identifying the distinctive ways group participants were positioned for continuing missional praxis and reflection, it was also helpful to take note of key frameworks and basic resources that would help most (if not all) of them become more effective leaders. It was apparent that introducing certain tools and processes to this group of leaders might, at some point, help them view themselves and their ministry settings in new or helpful ways. The introduction of these approaches and their implications for specific learning group members is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

KEY FRAMEWORKS FOR MISSIONAL LEADERS

As the neighborhood engagement project moved toward completion, more details of multiple narratives emerged not only in roundtable dialogues but also through follow-up conversations in coffee shops, bars, and restaurants. It became clear that group members, in terms of developing their thinking and adjusting behaviors, would benefit from engaging with a set of resources connected to leadership practices, organizational systems, and cultural transitions. If they were to address vital lies, meet congregational challenges, and fulfill hopes related to mission, some conceptual and practical support(s) would be useful. This chapter refers to tools, resources, and processes perceived to be helpful for this group of leaders and identifies some of the reasons why this is likely the case. As such, it will be relatively brief and marked by summaries and general remarks. It should be noted that most of the mentioned resources were recommended to project participants either in the course of roundtable conversations or in the final interviews.

The first recommended resource is Chris Lowney's unfortunately titled book, *Heroic Leadership*.¹ Lowney, a former Jesuit and corporate executive, tells the story of

¹ Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003).

the Jesuit religious order and gives special attention to the uniqueness of their influence in the first two-hundred years of their existence. He makes applications to the challenges of twenty-first century leadership and, early on, highlights distinct aspects of Jesuit wisdom: First, we are all leaders and leading all the time, well or poorly. Second, leadership springs from *within*. It is about *who I am* as much as what I do. Third, leadership is not an act. It is my *life*, a way of living. Fourth, I never complete the task of becoming a leader. It is an ongoing process.² Throughout, Lowney gives and interprets historical examples of what he calls the “four pillars of success”: self-awareness, ingenuity, love, and heroism. He shows how the Jesuits were able to equip recruits who understood their strengths, weaknesses, and values, who adapted to a changing world, who engaged others with loyal affection, and who energized others with noble ambitions and courageous effort.³

While one could question some assumed dichotomies or the functional corporate language Lowney occasionally employs, his holistic understanding of leadership is undeniable, and his historical storytelling stirs the imagination about possibilities for individual development in the context of collegial community. Given the challenges and presenting issues among project participants which were described in Chapter Two, the value of Lowney’s approach is self-evident. He directly confronts the limitations of independent, expert leadership and points out the cultural causes of the equipping gap (i.e. untapped leadership potential). In so doing, he gives influencers like those in the learning group a chance to get on the balcony and take another look at the patterns (or

² Lowney, *Heroic Leadership*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 95-244.

non-patterns) of spiritual development, innovation, love, and courage in their own lives. There is also opportunity to reaffirm the place of structured, challenging companionship on the missional journey. One quote gives a hint of the wonderful deconstruction that occurs as Downey seeks to recapture a more life-giving model of leadership.

Who invented the yardstick that measures some as leaders and others as merely teachers, parents, friends, or colleagues? ... The stereotype of top-down, immediate, all-transforming leadership is not the solution; it's the problem. If only those positioned to direct large teams are leaders, all the rest must be followers. And those labeled followers will inevitably act like followers, sapped of the energy and drive to seize their own leadership chances. The Jesuit model explodes the "one great man" model for the simple reason that everyone has influence, and everyone projects influence...all the time.⁴

A very helpful resource that would help group members subvert their functional ecclesiologies and associated leadership expectations is Mark Lau Branson's practical tome applying the theory and practice of Appreciative Inquiry to congregational mission.⁵ Its strength is in reminding pastoral leaders that they are part of an ongoing organizational story and that they would be well-served by foregoing "blank slate" approaches to needed transitions. By engaging others through open-ended questions and extended conversations, the most transformational and life-giving dimensions of a life together can be discerned, and a future can be constructed that sustains Spirit-given energies, offers new possibilities, and meets identified challenges. A couple of other books from the Alban Institute, if treated as companion guides to Branson's work, would offer similar benefits. They include Luther Snow's application of asset mapping to

⁴ Lowney, *Heroic Leadership*, 17-18.

⁵ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

congregational life⁶ and a practical resource for managing organizational polarities.⁷ Taken together, they constitute a collective map that allows leaders of established congregations to accentuate positive realities, minimize intuitive resistance, and avoid common mistakes and misunderstandings on the way to a preferred future. In short, they promote the cultivation of organizational environments in which extensive participation, mutual discernment, and healthy tensions are considered normal.

Again, the importance and helpfulness of these resources for members of the learning project seems obvious. Each person, even Jim and Dale, acknowledged the need to more directly and more positively interact with organizational systems and embedded realities. When pushed to get on the balcony, group participants became aware of their problem-solving, gap-filling tendencies and confessed to personal frustrations with people (including councils and leadership teams) who were not easily aligned with their stated expectations. Will, in particular, had a clear mental map of how to move members at Wesley Park Church toward missional living, but his either/or understanding of church strategies spelled potential trouble (i.e. ministries were either attractional or missional, and members could be identified as those involved in either “internal” or “outreach” programs). A deeper awareness of Appreciative Inquiry and Polarity Management processes would help him reframe his role as a change agent.

Dale and Linda, as staff leaders in regional, staff-driven churches with histories of valuing what is “new” and “cutting edge,” could utilize these resources to help members

⁶ Luther K. Snow, *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

⁷ Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010).

construct a larger story of ministry and mission in which they were full participants, especially in their work with ministry teams and small groups. It would allow those in their sphere of influence to experience “vision” as a communal, “on the way” reality, not just something created for strategic purposes by a few visible, highly gifted, well-intended leaders. Paul would ease some of his felt burden by involving those who formed the core of his current house church (whom he saw as a base community for a whole network of house churches) in an appreciative planning process that dealt more realistically with actual gifts and expectations. His own idealism sometimes subtly demeaned the ordinary, daily/weekly expressions of people’s support and participation.

Steve, Josh, and Jim, as influencers in established Reformed congregations, were best positioned to make use of resources emphasizing the importance of sustained, life-giving organizational narratives. Steve had experienced elements of Appreciative Inquiry in Plymouth Church’s recent discernment journey, Josh was aware of asset mapping from a community development perspective, and Jim consistently applied these frameworks in his coaching work. However, greater familiarity with AI in particular would help Steve sustain creative mission initiatives and build greater discernment capacity with other leaders at Plymouth. It would also give Josh a solid methodology for inviting members of Seymour Church to be meaningfully involved in local mission. Jim was ready to assist the leaders of his home church in a discovery process that incorporated the insights of these resources, but, from his perspective, the senior pastor and consistory leaders were not yet prepared to move away from problem-solving responses to long term challenges.

Branson has a key section in his book entitled, “New Science as Metaphor.”⁸ In it he points out how the theory and process of Appreciative Inquiry is reflective of a new set of scientific ideas and paradigms that emerged in the twentieth century. A rather sharp contrast is drawn between the mechanistic categories of the “older” science based on the findings of Galileo and Newton and the revolutionary insights sparked by Einstein and Bohr. The conceptual gestalts of the new science which include quantum theory, chaos theory, simultaneity, self-organizing systems, and complexity theory indicate an understanding of the world that is far removed from a world in which predictability and cause and effect relationships are assumed. Its impact on organizational theory and behavior is mentioned, and hints of helpful applications to congregational life are given.

This brings up another set of resources that would help project participants think anew about their organizational situations. As indicated in the first two chapters, all were in environments influenced or shaped by assumptions of compartmentalized efficiency, hierarchical influence, and controlled outcomes. Authors and researchers wrestling with the new science’s implications for organizational life and leadership would at least open the door to different perspectives and behaviors and maybe even breathe new life into working theologies of church and cultural engagement. Several resources in this category have been earlier mentioned, including those authored by Wheatley⁹ and Pascale et al.¹⁰ In addition, interacting with one of Ervin Laszlo’s earlier, introductory works¹¹

⁸ Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 32-36.

⁹ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

¹⁰ Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*.

¹¹ Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996).

would give group members a broader understanding of major epistemological shifts taking place and affirm (when combined with biblical-theological reflection) any moves toward creative, integrative, adaptive mission.

The shift from the classical to the systemic worldview is healthy, and its completion is urgent....It can help people comprehend and explain the nature of the world in which they live, as well as their role and identity in that world....Alienation and anomie are on the rise, and adherence to an atomistic concept offers scant relief. There is an urgent need to go...to a more integrated but no less tested and testable view....The new systems view can provide the clues, the metaphors, the orientations, and even the detailed models for solving critical problems on the precious but increasingly crowded and exploited planet.¹²

Another work, while retaining the notion of singular leadership, does seek to develop a more complete understanding of leadership competencies using the images and language of complexity science. It is worthy of consideration and is another potential source for getting on the balcony and taking another look at the intersection of leadership influence and organizational life.¹³

Mention should be made of Everett Rogers' massive research in the diffusion of innovations¹⁴ which supplements many of the findings being discovered by the new science. Whether read in its fourth or fifth edition, Rogers' fascinating investigation into the process of introducing and implementing societal changes, using extensive research from the fields of agriculture and technology, provides important clues for anyone overseeing a change process in any social setting (including congregations). The interconnectedness of cultural awareness, change agents, communication, relational

¹² Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World*, 12-13.

¹³ Charles J. Palus, and David M. Horth, *The Leader's Edge: Six Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenges* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2002).

¹⁴ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

networks, and individual decision-making is highlighted, a reminder that complexity and unpredictability are intrinsic to establishing new, different methodologies. Though much attention has been given to the adopter categories and the bell-shaped curve of timed innovativeness (i.e. to general patterns of response when innovative technologies and practices are introduced), those in the learning group would do well to pick up on a core theme: sustained change is rooted in relational presence and trust. The stories and examples of unintended consequences (both positive and negative) could underscore the value of communal discernment in specific aspects of cultural engagement. Finally, given the static organizational environments of six group members, Rogers' discussion of social, organizational equilibrium and the role of change agents would be a particular source of insight. His identification of three types of equilibrium, stable equilibrium, dynamic equilibrium, and disequilibrium,¹⁵ along with his emphasis on leaders who pay attention to the dangers of stable equilibrium and disequilibrium, is especially applicable.

This invites reference to another previously mentioned, highly recommended resource.¹⁶ In a chapter on orchestrating organizational conflict, Heifetz and Linsky underscore Rogers' point that influencers must focus on resisting work avoidance (i.e. stable equilibrium) while limiting levels of distress (i.e. disequilibrium). They use the language of "creating a holding environment" and "controlling the temperature" in the context of meeting adaptive organizational challenges and offer specific suggestions for "raising the temperature," "lowering the temperature," and "pacing the work."¹⁷ The

¹⁵ Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 424-25.

¹⁶ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101-22.

advice given, not only in this chapter but in the whole book, would help project participants do a better job of addressing their specific ministry systems and overcoming conflict-avoiding tendencies. From what was shared throughout the learning project, Will and Paul, after individually promoting and modeling significant change(s), perhaps needed to lower the temperature a bit and create better holding environments. The rest, whether in particular ministry areas or in the broader congregational environment, would likely benefit from raising the temperature, but involving others in the process would be absolutely critical. It should be noted that drawing on Heifetz' distinction between technical and adaptive challenges brought thoughtful reflection(s) from group members during interviews and roundtable interactions. They recognized how much "technical" work they (and their congregations) were focused on and began to think more creatively about what meeting "adaptive" challenges would mean. This seemed to be a diagnostic process that brought some clarity to long term, mission-related leadership priorities.

Another useful diagnostic structure for pastoral leadership that is missional is found in an article in *Congregations* magazine written by Mark Lau Branson.¹⁸ Branson designs a triad of interconnected, overlapping, functional spheres of influence that form the substance of effective work in congregational settings. Holistic leadership that helps form faithful, interactive, visibly reconciling communities of faith has an interpretive dimension, a relational dimension, and an implemental dimension. Most pastors and staff leaders do really well in one or two of these areas and generally need help in at least one, but the importance of continued personal growth and communal involvement in each of these spheres cannot be overemphasized. This specific framework was brought up in one

¹⁸ Mark Lau Branson, "Forming God's People," *Congregations* (Winter 2003).

roundtable conversation and mentioned to two participants in final interviews, but its helpfulness for further self-evaluation and potential development was plain to see. Steve, Will, and Paul were strong interpretive leaders who were secondarily gifted to influence through relationships. Linda, Dale, and Josh were strong relational leaders who also demonstrated good interpretive skills. Jim was a strong implemental leader who also communicated concern and trustworthiness in relationships. Jim, Dale, and Steve were modestly engaged with their organizational systems, but everyone in the group would increase their influence by more direct involvement with the details of implemental leadership and by developing mutual relationships with other leaders gifted in this area.

The Missional Change Model was referred to in the Introduction and in chapter 1 in connection to Plymouth Church's (and Steve's) developmental journey, but its potential helpfulness for most group members became apparent. It incorporates most of the main insights from the previously mentioned frameworks, and its comprehensive nature increases the likelihood that communal discernment, innovative actions, and empowering leadership will become embedded patterns of congregational life. The iterative five-phase process of developing cultural awareness, understanding church realities, evaluating shared practices and programs, experimenting with new forms of community engagement, and committing to sustainable and innovative mission provides a roadmap for creating environments where shared, risk-taking mission is valued.¹⁹ Steve's challenge at Plymouth, after moving through the five phases in a mostly linear way over nearly two years, was to figure out how to sustain practices of discernment and creative planning in the midst of constant turnover with council and ministry leaders.

¹⁹ For a detailed description of the MCM's five stages, see Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 147-96.

Jim (in the context of his home church), Will, Josh, and Dale were in situations where serious interaction with the Missional Change Model would not only further their own development but also bring forth needed grass roots energies for community-oriented ministry. Paul and Linda, given their personal and organizational circumstances, were not positioned to implement the model. A better starting point for Paul likely involved a simple, realistic, re-covenanting process with his core group. For Linda, initiating a cross-departmental learning group focused on gaining familiarity with the missional conversation might be a good next step. Her multi-department, mega church reality posed some unique challenges, but developing awareness and understanding with a few others might point the way toward creative work on the edges of church systems.

There are certainly a host of other resources and frameworks that could be cited, but those that have been identified seem especially pertinent to the individual and organizational narratives of those in the learning group. It goes without saying that the biblical-theological-historical resources cited in chapter 3 would assist in the development of a missional imagination and offer clues for renewed leadership participation in the communal, mission-oriented formation process. Resources specifically related to habits of neighborhood presence will be identified in the next chapter, which describes in more detail the activities and outcomes of the group project. This description ushers in a new section offering analysis of the project's effectiveness, identifying gained insights, proposing next steps for collegial learning and action, and providing more reflections on the localized nature of missional formation and influence.

PART THREE

PRACTICES OF NEIGHBORHOOD ENGAGEMENT AMONG PASTORS

CHAPTER 5

A SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT

Much has already been made of autobiographical reflections, initial interviews, and roundtable conversations in telling the personal and organizational stories of project participants, identifying core challenges and opportunities, and recommending key resources for ongoing missional leadership development. This chapter will provide more detail on these components, but most attention will be given to the final retreat, second interviews, and concluding reflection papers in offering a complete overview and analysis of the project itself. Emerging insights and areas of learning among group members will be acknowledged, and a candid assessment of outcomes related to behavioral and attitudinal change will be given. Prospects for sustaining a neighborhood presence, individually or congregationally, will be considered, along with recommendations for future learning groups of a similar nature. Tentative conclusions will be drawn about the role of colleagues and the importance of trusted mentors on the transformational journey.

An Overview of Project Expectations and Details

Group members entered into the neighborhood engagement project with a clear awareness of basic expectations. This has been briefly explained in the Introduction, but

further details are here warranted. An email describing and outlining the project was sent in early January of 2009 to nearly two-hundred leaders of churches and community organizations, roughly half of whom could be categorized as seminary-trained pastors. Those receiving the email were part of a leadership network connected to the church and community development division of Volunteers In Service, a small, urban nonprofit with a history of connecting local church resources to community service opportunities. The developmental extension of Volunteers In Service which involves training, coaching, and consulting work with churches, community organizations, and community coalitions had been started in early 2004 to address the limitations of needs-based, programmatic, direct-service forms of community engagement. A set of core processes, incorporating the insights of appreciative inquiry and asset-based community development while emphasizing mutual discernment and shared planning, was established for contractual work. Along the way, bimonthly roundtables, leadership training events, blog dialogues, and individual consultations became part of a support system for more comprehensive, capacity-building, community-oriented efforts with interested churches and nonprofits.

Since I had come on staff in 2004 to help create and develop the “equipping” aspect of Volunteers In Service and to underscore the important role of local churches in neighborhood transformation, those receiving the email knew me or knew of me. Most had been involved with roundtables and training events; several were pastors, ministry leaders, or nonprofit directors who had participated in formalized process work facilitated by me or one of my colleagues. A whole spectrum of personal and organizational relationships was represented, so it was intriguing to see this spectrum embodied in the group that actually formed. Will had given permission to a mutual acquaintance to

receive email communication, but he and I had never met. Linda had attended a couple of roundtables, but we rarely interacted. Dale was a former “professional” acquaintance from Bella Vista Church with whom I had recently reconnected. Paul was an occasional conversation partner who also contacted me for advice on specific issues or concerns. I had gotten to know Josh and Steve through formal coaching work with each of their congregations, and they fell into the category of “professional friendships” (i.e. consistent personal interactions linked to ongoing coaching feedback). Jim was a colleague in the work of church and community development who had also become a personal friend.

It should be noted that, out of the roughly one hundred pastor-leader types who received the invitational email, fifteen responded with follow-up inquiries for the purpose of clarifying expectations. One pastor, after initially committing to the project, withdrew with the view that the approach was too simplistic. Two other church leaders hinted that previous negative experiences with colleagues prevented consideration for participation. Five respondents expressed genuine interest but could not be involved due to seasonal leadership commitments such as sabbaticals, short term mission trips, or transitional role responsibilities. Seven people ended up saying “yes” and committing themselves to the neighborhood-focused learning venture. They knew it represented a final project for my doctoral program, but as explained in the Introduction and first chapter, they also felt it was a good next step on their leadership journeys. Most came in with a personal growth motivation, seeing the project in terms of individual development for local mission that fit with their current staff roles, but Steve also saw his group membership as an extension of Plymouth Church’s initial application of the Missional Change Model, which meant he

was best positioned to eventually involve others in the overall learning process. This level of readiness has been fully described in chapter 1.

The daylong retreat launching the project was held on Saturday, February 14, 2009. (Appendix F contains the schedule of activities.) The wistful, yet hopeful nature of this time together has been portrayed in the Introduction. More time than anticipated was spent on scriptural meditation, autobiographical reflections, and prayer. This meant that only a half-hour (rather than an hour) was given to explanation of neighborhood engagement practices, and only fifteen minutes (rather than a half-hour) was devoted to matters of group accountability. The energy level remained high for most of the day, everyone contributed to the sessions of storytelling and prayer, and the interactions were marked by respectful challenge in the form of honest questions and responses. As a result, an environment of encouragement, support, and curiosity was established.

Templates for neighborhood walking, observation events, neighbor conversations, and stakeholder interviews were handed out, and examples of journaling these activities were given. It was agreed that walking, observing, interviewing, and keeping good written notes would be considered central practices, though other forms of presence such as basic hospitality, simple service, and hosting parties were also appropriate. Steve expressed concern that six hours per week devoted to the agreed-upon practices remained a daunting challenge, and Jim, Dale, and Linda concurred. After some pushback from me, given this level of commitment was an important dimension of the project, a consensus emerged that time spent in journaling and reflection would count as part of the six hours. The group, admittedly influenced by me, settled upon two books to read and

discuss: *God Next Door*¹ and *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*.² Jacobsen's work would be read first and become a source for conversation at the March and April roundtables. Carey-Holt's book would be grist for dialogue at the May and June roundtables. A third resource authored by Clemens Sedmak³ was held out as possibility for July's roundtable interaction if things proceeded reasonably well. Members decided email interaction (rather than Facebook or a Google group forum) would be the best way to give personal updates in between meetings, and roundtables would be scheduled a month in advance to provide some flexibility (e.g. April's roundtable would be scheduled at the March event). A version of the Daily Office was presented as another practice to consider, but most participants felt like this was "too much" for a short term experience. Before concluding with prayer, the first roundtable was scheduled for March 12, 2009 (a Thursday).

The five, two-hour-long roundtables were held on the following dates in 2009: March 12, April 17, May 15, June 18, and July 14. The average attendance was six, with Linda's June departure obviously a factor. March's gathering ended up being the only time (other than the February retreat) when all eight of us were present. Much has already been made of the monthly interactions in chapters 2 and 3, but it would be fair to say that these were times where project participants were consistently encouraged and challenged and grew in appreciation for one another. The modestly sized hospitality and training room at the Volunteers In Service offices offered an excellent environment for sharing meals and having good conversations. However, it was tricky finding dates on

¹ Carey-Holt, *God Next Door*.

² Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*.

³ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*.

which all could meet, so six became the threshold number, although July ended up with only five members in attendance. Interestingly enough, the group as a whole was highly critical of Jacobsen's book and deeply appreciative of Carey-Holt's work. *Sidewalks in the Kingdom* was experienced as an idealistic, almost impositional approach to community development, though the importance of architecture in creating beautiful, beneficial places was acknowledged. *God Next Door* was considered to be a much more accessible resource, dealing realistically with different living situations, providing a biblical-theological framework for neighborhood presence, and identifying a set of helpful activities and practices for good neighboring.

Linda's withdrawal from the project did not have an overly negative effect on the last two roundtables or the final retreat, but first concern and then disappointment was expressed when she gave only cursory responses to emails and failed to return phone calls. Even though she, along with Dale and Josh, tended to be on the quiet side in group interactions, her humor and perspective were missed. The unanticipated time spent listening to, praying for, and challenging Paul in June and July appeared to strengthen relational connections among the remaining participants, but it took engagement with Sedmak's book "off the table" and limited individual updates of neighborhood activities to very brief summaries. Mention should be made of the March and April roundtables in which everyone reported minimal interaction with their neighborhood environments due to wintry weather and the late arrival of spring. Relatively little walking and very few conversations had taken place. By May, it was obvious that Dale, Jim, and Linda (in settings of suburban architecture) were finding direct neighborhood interactions to be extremely difficult and had begun to broaden their application of good neighboring to

include previously established relationships in a larger geographical area. Will, after some initial walking and early interviews, had settled on a “third place” strategy⁴ and was spending all his hours at Galewood Tavern, even though it was located in a totally separate neighborhood at least two miles from where he lives.

The second one-day retreat was held on Friday, August 28, 2009, and served as an official conclusion to the agreed-upon practices of neighborhood engagement. (A schedule for the day can be found in Appendix G.) Again, as with the first retreat, it was a high energy day with everyone (except Linda) actively involved in the ongoing conversation. The purpose for the retreat was to have each member give a summary of activities and gained insights in the form of a half-hour presentation that allowed for group feedback. Not surprisingly, only five presentations were completed, and a follow-up roundtable for the other two presentations was scheduled for September 4, 2009. Josh took a power point approach that focused on his catalyzing role for the Alger Heights community gardening initiative. He told many encouraging stories about relational connections with neighbors and the cooperation of local businesses and associations, but it was obvious he had conflated learning group commitments with his outreach tasks as a staff member at Seymour Church. His already established patterns of engagement were affirmed through the learning group, yet he had evidently not been challenged to deeper reflection on what it would mean for him to train others for sustained presence.

⁴ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999). Note: the conceptual framework of this sociologist is now being used by some church-planting leaders with reference to transforming current “third places” or forming faith communities who in essence become “third places.”

Jim had pictures not only of his immediate neighborhood in South Haven but also of visible markers and key areas throughout the small city. He explained that, since so many houses in his neighborhood were second homes for those who lived in Chicago, Detroit, or other large Midwestern cities, he had taken a “whole town” view of the project and had gained feedback mostly from interviews with organizational stakeholders. In the process he had become even more aware of geographical separation based on race and economics and had joined the board of a local faith-based nonprofit to help address some of these systemic issues. Dale, too, had digital snapshots, and they were of people he had gotten to know in the course of the project. He, along with a group of people at Bella Vista Church, had decided to spend time with an immigrant, Muslim family, and he told many stories of key conversations and group outings. In addition, he and his family had gotten involved with a hospitality program through the local minor league baseball club. They had opened their home to two Venezuelan ballplayers and gotten to know them as well as other ballplayers and host families. Again, encouraging developments in relationship building were identified, but references to actual neighbors were noticeably absent.

Paul had images of people and places on the Westside of Grand Rapids where he lived and was seeking to establish a network of missional communities. He had clearly spent time walking his neighborhood and adjacent neighborhoods. His awareness had increased of geographical separation due to economics and race, and he was able to place this reality within the larger historical narratives of the Westside community. He also reported on important feedback received in interviews with teachers and administrators of local public schools, which had produced further reflection on another area of cultural

separation: private and public educational systems. Will mentioned some insights gained through initial neighborhood walking and interviews with political leaders in the city of Wyoming (an outer urban district of the Grand Rapids metropolitan area). However, he spent most of his time telling story after story of individuals he had gotten to know by simply hanging out at a local bar. He had structured his schedule to spend a minimum of six hours a week at the Galewood Tavern, and he had built an amazing amount trust with staff and patrons. This eventually allowed him to counsel, pray with, and provide care for individuals (and their families) who were initially hostile to him. Will affirmed he had begun to implement this strategy of presence before the group project, but he had been encouraged and challenged to sustain this strategy as a result of his participation.

Time ran out at the August retreat before Steve and I could give our presentations, so the group agreed to come back on the following Friday for a final two-hour roundtable luncheon. Unfortunately, Paul and Will ended up forgetting about this commitment, so only five showed up for the meal and conversation. It still was a time of joyful, helpful dialogue, but the energy level was much lower than during the previous week's meeting. Steve had pictures of block neighbors he had gotten to know better during the course of the project. He was able to give details of many personal and family narratives and explained how he and his wife had taken on the role of neighborhood host. His backyard had become a place of unplanned conversations and events. Steve used images from a large "going away" party for one neighbor to describe a spectrum of relationships that had emerged, and he was confident some relationships could be built up and sustained.

My presentation revisited my own history of neighboring (of which members were familiar). I had intended to function as a co-learner and full participant throughout

the project, building on patterns of presence that had been established in recent years. I had recently joined the boards of two small, neighborhood nonprofits, and as the project began, I anticipated splitting my time (i.e. the six hours per week) between continued practices of walking/hospitality and board responsibilities. I reported that unexpected family circumstances had limited the amount of time I had actually spent with neighbors. My/our life patterns had been significantly affected by my dad's life-threatening surgery, my wife's unexpected pregnancy and miscarriage, and weddings for two of our children (one of which fell in the joyful but "last minute" category). Furthermore, our eighteen-month-old house church disbanded when half of the core members moved out of our urban neighborhood to start an organic farming enterprise, and I assumed the role of board president for one of the nonprofits when an unanticipated resignation occurred.

Project participants were aware of most of these details, and the irony of the situation was not lost on anyone (especially in light of my occasional rants on societal fragmentation and the loss of basic neighboring skills). While I had not withdrawn from relationships or my long term commitments to neighborhood presence and practices, the degree to which my intended actions and project commitments had been disrupted was worthy of extended reflection. I had to confess that I had not adapted well as a coaching, facilitating leader and that my own sense of "not practicing what I preach" had restricted some of my follow-up responsibilities in the group experience. In other words, I did not directly address attitudes and behaviors inconsistent with the project proposal and group covenant because this felt hypocritical. I was able to identify this as a personal "vital lie" related to "authentic" leadership and admit I had unnecessarily avoided bringing proper accountability into the group environment. Those present at this last roundtable agreed

that more direct follow-up on my part would have helped them stay on track with their commitments. They also understood my frustration at having to “read my neighborhood” during warm weather months almost exclusively through organizational lenses (i.e. in the light of nonprofit programming, staffing, and funding challenges). Greater detachment from neighbors, while temporary, created lingering dis-ease and was a reminder of the importance of embodied presence and daily conversations on the journey of discernment.

After the final roundtable conversation on September 4, 2009, second interviews were completed and final reflection papers were turned by the end of the month. Linda, of course, was an exception, but after things at Kentwood Community Church had settled down and a new senior pastor had been installed, she granted an interview in late October and even handed me a paper that included some journal entries and brief reflections. The template of questions for the second interview was basically the same as the first, though verb tenses were changed and a final set of questions related to the learning community project itself had been added. (Appendix H contains this revised, expanded template.) The “Urgency Index” test was retaken to provide a point of comparison. (A summary of the total scores can be found in Appendix I.) This triad of interviews, time management assessments, and reflection papers provided a means of evaluating whether attitudinal or behavioral shifts had taken place or any intended outcomes had emerged. An analysis of the feedback and some tentative conclusions are the focus of the next section.

General Observations and Insights

The second interviews with project participants were enjoyable and informative, but they plainly revealed no major attitudinal or behavioral shifts had taken place in relationship to personal neighborhood presence or associated leadership activities. It was

a bit disheartening to find out that only Will and Josh had consistently given six hours to neighborhood engagement practices, and that the time they spent reflected approaches established before the learning project began. Steve and Paul had been fairly consistent in the core practices but admitted they had fallen short of the overall time commitment. The other three members confessed to significant inconsistency in terms of time and approach (i.e. they had not come close to six hours a week in neighbor-oriented activities and had redefined the terms of engagement). Steve was the only one who had kept a detailed journal, regularly posting observations and reflections. Follow-up questions in the interviews also disclosed that only Will and Steve had actually communicated with and received the blessing of their councils as they entered into the project. The rest of the group members had not involved other staff, council, or ministry leaders at all.

More specifically, and not surprisingly, interview responses indicated that very little had changed in terms of personal identity, sense of call and gifting, apparent strengths and weaknesses, basic use of time for given leadership activities, areas of joyful ministry involvement, established life priorities and habits, core relationships, or perceived organizational challenges. Outside of Linda's unique situation at Kentwood Community Church, nothing dramatic had occurred to affect lifestyle patterns, church environments, or leadership responsibilities. However, there were hints of increased awareness about self, organizational realities, and the importance of good neighboring that indicated small shifts toward a new imagination and greater potential for new habits linked to personal and congregational mission. So, while no new practices of presence had been firmly established, and most group members were unlikely to continue with the

specific, agreed-upon approaches of the learning project, there were verbal indicators of “vision” shift that created possibilities for future behavior modifications.

For example, Steve mentioned good neighbor skills as a personal strength in the second interview, which had not come up in the first interview. He also failed to mention the “good political skills” he had previously identified. He specifically said taking part in the project led him to “feel confirmed and empowered in relating to unchurched folks.”⁵ The “weight” of Steve’s position (i.e. the influence linked to his expert role) came up in reference to “fanning the flames of emerging missional energies” and “achieving balance between worship gatherings and community engagement.” As a result, Steve intended to spend roughly ten percent less time on preparation for teaching-preaching activities, ten percent less time on administration and supervision, ten percent more time on pastoral care and mentoring, and five-to-ten percent more time on personal outreach (including neighborhood hospitality). It is interesting that the language of “neighborhood” and “neighbor” peppered the responses, in contrast to the first interview, that Steve’s greatest concern was not sustaining neighbor relationships formed during the project, and that he identified ongoing dialogue with his task-oriented wife as an important activity for continued engagement. He also provided an interesting twist when describing how he needed to help Plymouth Church meet identified challenges. “I need to offer less ‘prophetic’ declarations and more ‘servant’ involvement; in other words, the ‘modeling factor’ must increase and ‘incarnational influence’ must grow.” In Will’s case, this would have been a disastrous response. In Steve’s case, this was a good next step on the leadership journey, an indicator of increased awareness and meaningful reflection.

⁵ Note: Quotes from group members in this chapter are taken from interview notes in the possession of the author. Six interviews were conducted in September/2009, one in October/2009.

Dale, on the other hand, gave very few clues of new thinking about leadership and mission. Outside of using hospitality language (i.e. “welcoming the stranger”) to talk about his involvement with local Muslims and his family’s experience with Venezuelan ballplayers, there were no substantive changes in his interview responses. He did bring up “self-leadership” and “strengthening relationships with immediate neighbors” (i.e. those living on the same cul-de-sac) as growth areas, probably in recognition that he had not fulfilled the baseline commitments of the group project. Dale’s desire to “help others experience the ‘foreigner’ or ‘stranger’ as neighbor” had been deepened, but at the end of the project experience, he was reading his own leadership, his congregational setting, and his “outreach responsibilities” in the same way as at the beginning. He also expressed cynicism about making connections with neighbors in the larger subdivision where he lived (i.e. those who did not live on the same cul-de-sac). His responses were textbook examples of how suburban architecture and attractional church methodologies can sometimes remove “place” from the horizon of local mission.

The second interview with Linda, conducted almost six weeks after Dale’s, had a similar feel. Since she had withdrawn from the learning community and the project itself after four months, it is not surprising that her responses also indicated minimal changes in terms of overall perspective and future leadership priorities. It was obvious her initial neighborhood engagement had been minimal and that the increased focus on community involvement and relational evangelism in her replies were not directly linked to the group experience. She had just gotten back from a national conference on church-based community development, and her new senior pastor had brought a renewed emphasis on personal evangelism into the congregational environment. In some ways, Linda’s early

participation in the project affirmed and anticipated insights gained from the conference and allowed her to adapt to new expectations for staff leaders at Kentwood Community. However, “neighbor” and “neighborhood” language was noticeably absent, and apart from raising new questions about personal participation in community-oriented ministry (i.e. creating more space in her busy schedule for knowing and serving others outside the church setting), assumptions of attractional worship, staff-led ministry departments, and individually focused evangelism/discipleship remained firmly intact.

Will’s replies pointed toward tiny, yet notable changes in thinking and intended actions. He still used the word “missional” quite a bit but was starting to think beyond preaching and personal example in terms of leadership influence. He was considering an adjustment to membership classes so that greater emphasis was placed on involvement in God’s mission at a local/neighborhood level. He was beginning to construct a formation process that linked spiritual disciplines to “a missional way of life.” The importance of encouraging council members “to form friendships with others” also came up. In other words, Will still wanted to be the initiating leader in moving things forward, but at least he was seeing new opportunities to interact with church systems and invite others to experience change through shared mission. In addition, he intended to spend ten percent more time in “relational evangelism” which implied less time would be devoted to daily administration and denominational tasks. It seemed as if Will had even more clarity about his preferred leadership activities (i.e. preaching and one-on-one relational contact) but was also aware that other approaches were needed to meaningfully engage church members. It was interesting that the language of “friendship” was used for connecting with unchurched people and only one mention of “neighborhood” occurred.

Paul's answers in the second interview were very similar to those in the first when it came to use of time, leadership gifts and priorities, and identified challenges. His commitment to evangelism, discipleship, and individual life transformation had been sustained, and his ability to form relationships with a broad spectrum of struggling, hurting people was still fully evident. Not a lot had changed, and yet it seemed as if everything had changed. He was less anxious, more comfortable with his bi-vocational situation, and ready to work with the few in his core group who were willing to take next steps in shared mission. Paul was also intending to spend more time building a stronger support base (which included greater attention to administrative and communication details) and cultivating friendships with those who had similar dreams. In his own words, he was looking forward to "renewing our vocation as urban missionaries and making key family decisions to support this direction." He was "making a shift in pastoral identity" which included "worrying less about denominational expectations" and "moving from a grandiose vision to more particular challenges." It appeared that Paul had become more aware of unhelpful idealism and inappropriate outside pressures and had come to terms with the daily and weekly realities of fulfilling his call. He would continue to work as a part-time painter, be faithful in deepening relationships and mentoring others, and "allow God to write the next chapters." So, even though Paul had been consistent in the habits of neighborhood presence throughout the project, this was hardly mentioned. He replied to the questions almost exclusively using the lenses of personal renewal.

Josh, too, gave answers indicating a significant amount of personal reflection. Questions lingered in his mind about his ability to lead and influence members of Seymour Church toward increased neighborhood presence and community partnerships.

Nothing was substantively different between first and second interview responses, but concerns about entrenched congregational patterns and doubts about long term pastoral ministry in this environment seemed more intense. It was as if Josh's renewed engagement of the Alger Heights neighborhood, which demonstrated significant overlap between project expectations and his intern responsibilities, had not only fueled his passion for community organizing but also sharpened his awareness of major social disconnects between a culturally homogeneous congregation and a racially, economically diversifying community. So, as a young leader of color being credentialed for pastoral ministry in a "very white" congregation, Josh felt a bit overwhelmed by the challenge of bridging social-cultural gaps in the context of local mission. He confessed to feeling anxiety and fear around racial-cultural conversations with other Seymour leaders, and, in a shift from the first interview, identified "overcoming cultural separation" (rather than "lessening dependency on staff members") as a clear, adaptive challenge. He thought it likely that this challenge and related challenges would be "addressed at the surface." However, he was still looking forward to "growing in what it means to be a leader" and would be using more of his time to develop preaching skills and create conversational spaces for interested Seymour members around "community presence, inclusivity, and justice." The contrast with other group members could not have been greater. Rather than moving toward increased attention, and energy "outside the four walls," Josh was recognizing the need to deal with the current realities of church life without forfeiting his evident skills in developing neighborhood relationships and utilizing community assets.

The final interview with Jim was far more relaxed than the first, and his responses were decidedly more focused on personal growth and stronger relationships in the context

of his coaching work. He had brought multiple roles into the learning project: resident of a mid-sized tourist town, visible influencer in an historic Reformed congregation, and consultant for capacity work in churches and community nonprofits. His interview revealed serious introspection about how to better integrate these roles and pay more attention to the people and places where he actually lived. This reflection was not absent in the first interview but seemed to reach a new level of seriousness in the second. As a result, Jim was intending to spend significantly more time within core coaching-consulting relationships and to increase involvement with churches and nonprofits in the South Haven area. He anticipated spending less time in administration and electronic communication and limiting the travel associated with “commuter coaching.” It was intriguing that Jim identified increased assertiveness in developing coaching relationships and greater courage in consolidating his various responsibilities as a dimension of needed growth. He was clearly more ready to take risks in “developing new patterns of life and engagement” and to include his wife Nancy in this process. Jim was hopeful of “forming organic neighborhood engagements out of listening” but remained cynical about forming relationships with his immediate neighbors, since many of them were not permanent residents. Noticeably missing was mention of ongoing influence within his home church.

As indicated above, all group members retook “The Urgency Index” survey at the end of the second interview.⁶ A comparison of scores from this assessment tool did not reveal any dramatic shifts in attitudes or behaviors related to time usage, and the simplicity of the tool prevents detailed analysis or firm conclusions about patterns of time

⁶ Note: Second interviews averaged ninety minutes in length, with the shortest interview lasting seventy-five minutes and the longest interview lasting two hours.

management. It was in the interview responses to time management questions that unrealistic notions of important and urgent behaviors emerged, along with idealistic interpretations of actual priorities. This has been fully described at the end of Chapter Two. However, some of the total scores at the end of the project did seem to indicate changes in life situations and organizational environments. Linda and Dale's scores were lower and perhaps revealed the completion of leadership transitions on their church staffs and less anxiety about their roles. Paul's lower score likely demonstrated greater clarity about his sense of call and realistic next steps to be taken on the church planting journey. As such, a more direct link to the project itself was probable. Josh's higher score could be attributed to seasonal realities: a return to seminary classes, a flurry of late summer events, and more oversight tasks as a pastoral intern. His increased stress level reflected his intuitive, reactive approach to influencing others, but it might also have been an indicator of his relative comfort with community-oriented ministry as opposed to working within church ministry systems (which became more of a necessity with the start of school). Jim's higher score probably was the result of more realistic responses to a handful of attitudinal statements. His first score was unusually low.

None of the participants seemed to be in danger of developing what Covey called an "urgency addiction." Josh and Linda were the ones most likely to live and lead with a "strong urgency mindset," which for Josh was consistent with personality patterns and for Linda was a feasible byproduct of a high pressure, staff-driven congregational culture. Will and Steve were amazingly consistent with their answers, perhaps an indicator of established identities and steady behavior patterns. Yet, there were small surprises in some of the particular responses, not only for them, but for other group members as well.

At the end of the project, Steve was more likely to presume on others' good will and to eat a meal while working on a project, but less likely to relate productivity to the mere completion of tasks. Will was slightly more likely to experience frustration with the slowness of others. Paul was much less likely to use a crisis as an excuse for lack of follow-through. Josh was more liable to be motivated by external pressure, to be distracted in the midst of a task, and to not set personal boundaries in crisis situations. Jim was less frustrated with the perceived slowness of others, but he was feeling more rushed in his work, more responsive to crisis situations, and more discontent with his current situation. Dale seemed to be much more focused in completing his role tasks, while Linda felt much less guilty about taking off work time. Oddly enough, she seemed much more task-oriented, feeling good about simply meeting basic, daily expectations.

So, while there are no straight cause and effect lines to be drawn between project participation and shifting attitudes, juxtaposing results from "The Urgency Index" with interview responses pointed toward the following, at times unintended outcomes. Josh, in terms of personal influence, perceived greater compatibility with his neighborhood environment than with his congregational environment, and this, in part, had increased his anxiety level. Jim was feeling a greater sense of urgency, but this was due to deep reflection about his somewhat fragmented life and a growing commitment to increased presence and participation in his city of residence. Will and Steve were focused on more intentionally engaging their congregational systems - Steve through increased modeling and group storytelling related to good neighboring, Will through more instruction on a missional life in non-worship settings. This meant slight alterations in their use of time and energy, but previously established priorities and practices remained intact. Paul had

dealt with some personal demons and accepted the inherent limitations of bi-vocational mission and ministry; the future effectiveness of his work on the west side of Grand Rapids remained uncertain, yet he was less anxious. Linda and Dale had experienced big organizational transitions and settled into personal forms of outreach that fit with their individual passions and ministry settings but had little to do with neighborhood presence.

This mixed bag of outcomes, while not entirely unexpected, still stood in contrast with the six potential outcomes listed in the original proposal. The only intended result admittedly experienced by all group members was “mutual encouragement and challenge on the journey of missional leadership.” The other initial, hoped-for outcomes seemed grandiose and idealistic as the project came to an end, yet partial fulfillment of them was actually a source of encouragement and an opportunity to think about how future learning communities might be more helpfully constructed. More will be discussed in the next section, which pulls together responses to the final interview question, shared insights from the reflection papers, and suggestions from the author on what might be included in forms of *communitas* that guide pastoral leaders toward increased missional influence.

Shared Areas of Learning and Next Steps

In the second interview, project participants were asked a final series of questions to get their honest assessment of the learning community experience and elicit recommendations for future cohorts. Their responses did provide some clues for future attempts at collegial learning around missional activity. Key patterns emerged in the responses which inform other anticipated versions of mission-focused development among pastoral leaders. Additionally, distinct levels of engagement and participation were revealed and confirmed.

Shared areas of appreciation included several activities within the retreat and roundtable gatherings: Scripture engagement, personal storytelling, honest dialogue, prayer, and mutual reflection on leadership and mission. Not surprisingly, Paul highlighted “the companionship of others” and a “safe place to ask questions that border on the sacrilegious.” Will seemed to capture the sentiment of all group members when he expressed thanks “for basic human interaction with other leaders” and the encouragement of “relatively transparent conversations.” Steve, Dale, Linda, Josh, and Jim all referred to insights gained from the stories and comments of other participants, and it was perceived (using Linda’s language) that the “good mix” of leaders in the group contributed to the learning process, though greater generational and racial diversity “would also be good.” So, the environment that had been created for meaningful relational interaction was a source of collective gratitude. Once again, while mentioned and described in a previous chapter, the isolation and limited accountability of many pastors and church leaders has created the need and opportunity for communal, collegial learning experiences. Simple “one another” practices can bring profound challenge and encouragement. In particular, the group habit of creatively, reflectively interacting with scriptural texts appears to consistently generate motivational energy for the tasks of mission.

The one aspect of the learning project everyone found most helpful was somewhat surprising given the actual outcomes (or lack of outcomes). Each person mentioned the sustained focus on neighborhood presence and good neighboring practices as something that prioritized “basic mission” and brought new insights. Paul talked of “affirming the first practices of neighborhood engagement,” Steve of “the recommended practices” as a source of meaningful accountability, and even Dale of “approaching neighboring as a

group.” Will, too, who had settled on a “hanging out” strategy, mentioned neighborhood walking as something that gave him “a feel” he did not have previously. Jim spoke of being challenged to form organic neighborhood relationships, though he did say that some of the original expectations felt “artificial in a project research context.” Josh was still energized at the end of the group experience about “re-walking all the areas of the Alger Heights neighborhood.” Linda, while not explicitly referencing neighborhood presence, did articulate “a community transformation focus for life and ministry” as a new priority. There was consensus that six hours a week was too much of a commitment, at least as a starting point for developing or renewing good neighboring strategies, but no one felt the suggested practices should be changed.

As was mentioned in an earlier section, the group unanimously agreed on the least helpful part of the project: the reading and discussion of Jacobsen’s book. The disdain for and frustration with this resource was still evident three months after the group had discussed it, perhaps a sign of pragmatic expectations related to varying local contexts. Along with the suggestion to eliminate this book as required reading, members gave a couple of other joint recommendations. First, the need for increased accountability was identified. Second, a longer timeframe was proposed. For example, Will said it would be good to “meet more often and develop a higher level of accountability.” Linda thought the “what will you stop doing?” question should have been emphasized more at the beginning and suggested a weekly check-in from the project coordinator as a future possibility. Paul felt that “making original expectations a greater part of the ongoing conversation” would bring greater success, and Steve admitted to a lingering feeling of “not meeting the original commitment.” All hinted that the relatively short timeframe for

the project affected the nature of their participation (i.e. they tended to treat the core practices as optional when faced with other leadership priorities), and at least half the members wondered if Linda and Paul would have acted differently in the context of a more extended group covenant. Jim put it best when he said “we failed to be together in dealing with lack of follow-through and inconsistent participation” and proposed “establishing a longer term approach to shared learning.”

Some distinct, individual suggestions are also worthy of mention. Dale encouraged “making similar geography a consideration” when forming future learning groups. This likely came out of frustration from trying to make neighbor connections in a suburban setting. He explicitly referred to bringing together pastors from the Rockford area in which he lives and works. Paul thought it would be helpful and challenging to “test this approach with some church planting types.” From his view, a neighborhood-focused discovery approach could help subvert the “targeted demographic” tactics of some of his CRC church planting colleagues. Josh advocated challenging participants to “figure it out” and be more creative in their own neighborhood situations. As one who consistently practiced good neighboring, he was well beyond the basics of walking, talking, and hanging out, and he wondered if other group members had really gotten in touch with the unique realities of their environments. This led to a good discussion on the link between established practices and creative engagement in local mission.

At any rate, a broad outline for the next version of collegial community began to materialize. A sustained focus on neighborhood engagement was in order, along with consistent gatherings/roundtables that included a high level of participation, interaction, and challenge. This amounted to carrying forward the best parts of this original learning

group. In addition, a longer timeframe for committed involvement would seem to allow for more natural development of relationships, activities, gained insights, and leadership implications. Group members acknowledged lengthening the terms of participation would create a potential obstacle for busy leaders, but three of them suggested that creating “a staged approach” with identified “off ramps” might be a partial solution. Increasing the accountability factor could be accomplished by ensuring three features: spending more time on the front end clarifying expectations and covering details of engagement, involving group members more directly in this construction process, and highlighting the unique role of the mentoring leader in following up with individual participants. More specific reflection on future learning groups will be given below, but it must be here mentioned that the joint feedback on this topic was fair, honest, and wise.

The final reflection papers were essentially more detailed, comprehensive expressions of the second interviews, with a couple of noticeable exceptions. Linda offered a combination of initial journal entries and top level insights from a situation in which she admittedly “put the learning community on the back burner.” So, her written thoughts, while not superficial, indicated she had not engaged in the same manner as other group members. Dale, on the other hand, refused to write a paper at all. His view was that he had learned everything he could, and this assignment amounted to busy work. After a phone conversation and several emails, it became clear he was steadfast in not fulfilling this original expectation. Needless to say, this was a personal disappointment and limited the qualitative feedback for interpreting project effectiveness. However, it was also not a shocking response, since Dale had been the first to alter the terms of neighborhood engagement to fit previously established relational outreach initiatives.

This was one last reminder of tendencies toward singularity, independence, and isolation in the sphere of pastoral leadership.

Comments in the six completed reflection papers⁷ indicated increased self-awareness on the part of all. With regard to neighborhood presence, Steve learned “to push myself a little further than I might have gone without being a part of the project.” He was able to confirm a love and enjoyment of his neighbors and neighborhood and connected this to “relating to people as a fellow human being rather than as a pastor” – a very interesting comment. He found out his neighbors “provide me with a glimpse of how life is lived in other faith, cultural, and socio-economic contexts,” yet at the same time “I bumped up against my own reluctance to change or to broaden my patterns of engagement” (i.e. to be more intentional about follow-up conversations). The distinct, almost separate ways Steve related to his immediate neighbors and members of his church led to some painful thoughts: “I am not always sure that the faith community I’m a part of is what I want for my neighbors. If I had to reinvent ‘church,’ it certainly would not look like the one I serve now. So I find myself pretty conflicted.” In the end, he came back around to saying, “For all its flaws, the church I serve does manage to point people toward Jesus. So a final ‘learning’ regarding myself is that I’m probably too hard on my church much of the time.” Steve is not the only pastor to express a love-hate relationship with a congregation after seeing and feeling profound social disconnects.

Jim simply stated: “I have found that it remains difficult for me to change habits in a sustained way. My patterns of living are pretty firmly established.” As a result, Jim

⁷ Note: These papers remain in the possession of the author. Quotes in this section are taken directly from these written reflections by project participants. They were all completed in September 2009.

discovered that “integrating ‘listening’ into my existing patterns was a much more successful approach than developing new patterns” and that it was “quite a bit easier to talk to people I have some level of acquaintance with about their views of South Haven.” He gave several examples of this and concluded that the aspect of discovery, which involved surprising responses from fellow residents, was “fun.” To use his words, “I remain curious about others’ views.” In a similar vein, Linda, hoping to break a long-established pattern of cocooning inside her home after long work days, straightforwardly said, “I have learned this is a harder habit to break than I thought it would be.” So, she “learned to be more observant of my neighbors, keeping my eyes open to people out for walks and purposefully standing near the sidewalk to visit as they came near.”

Will, too, mentioned: “I think the main thing I have learned about myself is that I have as much to unlearn as I do to learn. Old habits and old patterns of thinking are hard to break.” Yet, he was able to affirm a risk-taking spirit within himself. “I am learning that it is really never too late to try something new, even though it is dramatically different than everything I have been taught.” On the flipside of the coin, having spent hundreds of hours hanging out at Galewood Tavern, he identified a capacity to persist and endure that was previously untapped. Speaking of being one of the “regulars” and learning how to simply be present, Will said: “I have spent many hours here where little more than casual conversations took place, and sometimes not even that.” Josh, whose paper was more descriptive than reflective, felt like he had “grown up a lot this summer” in terms of overcoming his personal insecurities about leadership and gaining greater confidence in mentoring others for meaningful participation in the community. As such, he perceived he had “grown deeply” in prayerful reliance on God and that his call to

promote racial reconciliation and address poverty in a neighborhood context had been confirmed.

Paul tellingly entitled his paper “Beginning Again,” and after summarizing recent struggles with confusion and discouragement, he expressed surprise that “participating in this small learning group became a pool of fresh water for me.” He appreciated “a place where I could ask dangerous questions about my pastoral identity, if not the essence of the Christian journey itself” and spoke of experiencing “the life and love of the Lord Jesus” from cohort members. He actually listed nine different things he had learned about himself. Personal insights included a profound love for the city (i.e. its people and places), a tendency toward self-pity, a lack of attention to personal wellbeing, and patterns of frustration in working with church people. While these insights indicated a step forward in self-understanding, many of them were couched in pietistic language and amounted to a comprehensive confession of inadequacy. Paul had shrugged off the burden of inappropriate “outside” expectations, but it was evident he had not fully dealt with unrealistic expectations of himself. Somehow, he had fully absorbed the “guilt” dimension of his Reformed heritage more than the “grace” and “gratitude” dimensions.

It was encouraging to have group participants describe the particulars of their neighborhood environments. Even though the time commitment to habits of presence had not been kept by most, and some of the agreed-upon practices had been altered or diluted, everyone who turned in a paper was able to tell at least one neighbor story and provide specific descriptions of their neighborhoods. All, regardless of setting, recognized growing cultural diversity, identified “invisible” geographic boundaries around racial and economic differences, noted a lack of neighborhood awareness from

both residential and organizational stakeholders, and mentioned shared community concerns related to local schools and local businesses. Those in urban or outer urban contexts (i.e. Paul, Josh, Will, and Steve) also portrayed crime prevention and anxiety about dilapidated or abandoned houses as catalyzing realities at the block level.

For example, when Linda bumped into a Pakistani family living on the same street, had a conversation with a Hispanic family living behind her, and took note of several African-American families residing around the corner, she wrote: “It was a wakeup call to the changes going on around me.” Other little comments reflected a growing alertness to neighborhood realities. Paul, through a series of interviews with educators, found out that a quadrant on the Westside had an eighty percent poverty rate among school children. Josh described in detail how Alger Heights was “a neighborhood made up of two worlds: the north and the south.” Jim spoke of shared concerns in his tourist town community about the rising fraction of vacation housing and how this had raised real estate values and contributed to “breaking down any sense of community.”

Steve found “there are an amazing number of people in my immediate neighborhood who long for and appreciate the neighborhood experience.... It is the face to face stuff that people really want.” This apparently stood in contrast to the limitations of “commuter churches and commuter schools” in his area of the city. He also observed: “the poorer the neighborhood, the more likely that people have time to talk with you.” Will was struck by the financial challenges of the public schools and city government after a series of interviews and wondered how a collaboration of churches might help employ educators or public safety officials. In addition, after walking the neighborhood, he noted: “I discovered places I did not know existed, even though I had driven down the

same streets many times.” When in low income housing areas, he saw “people sitting around in front of their homes.” In middle and upper income areas, Will “never saw anyone sitting in their front yard, and most backyards had privacy fences around them.”

Interestingly enough, theological insights were of a more general nature than the new understandings of self and place described above. Paul confirmed that “God is very active...on the margins of society” and present “where the pain is.” Jim admitted he “found it very hard to discern God’s hand” but had a sense, through the beauty of his place and the people who lived in it, that “God is working ahead of us.” He concluded: “My listening and walking reminds me of the vast diversity through which God continues to work. It reminds me vividly that unity can never sustainably be confused with uniformity.” Josh offered several similar thoughts. Linda again was something of a minimalist: “God wants us to be in relationship with others....He gives us ‘community spaces’ to find Him among other people in the same place.” Will, after talking about growing friendships with a motorcycle gang member, a waitress being abused by her boyfriend, and a struggling married couple, simply said, “I believe God is at work in their lives” and felt that somehow “I have been used by God.”

From Steve’s perspective, “God moments” took place around openness and vulnerability, when “people simply shared their stories.” He and his wife had opened their home up for a short term group experience with neighbors, and he detected that “honestly talking about struggles and disappointments in life gave the group a sense of unity and solidarity like nothing else.” This “made space for God” (i.e. were times that “felt inhabited by God”) and for “neighbors to express care for each other” even though they did not have adequate language to express what was actually taking place. This

sharing of life stories linked to caring responses led Steve to conclude: “The Spirit... seems to work best in and through story and imagination.” After observing how his unchurched neighbor constantly walked his dog, formed relationships with other dog owners, and then asked Steve to pray for some of them, Steve wrote: “I could not help but think that God was present and active in what was going on.” It got him “thinking about all the ways in which God blesses people unawares” and affirmed that the presence of Ron and Walter (the neighbor and the dog) was “a pretty nice picture of God at work.”

The next steps of engagement referred to by group members amounted to a united statement of good intentions. Some would be carried out, but many would likely not be implemented outside of ongoing participation in a learning community. Jim stated, “I do hope to continue the effort” and wanted to “grapple with a more sophisticated approach” (i.e. strategies that were both geographically narrow and relationally broad). He knew his ability to sustain a listening presence “would be greatly raised if I could identify another person with whom to share the experience.” Steve intended “to do some volunteering with the Garfield Park Neighborhood Association” and to become an initiator of block parties and events. He was also “wrestling with the idea of a neighborhood get together to share a meal and talk about issues of faith” but felt he needed to do more “thinking, talking, and praying about it” with Lori his wife. Paul determined that he and his family needed “to return to practicing the sort of hospitality we engaged in when we first moved into our neighborhood.” After conversing with his wife and children, he declared: “We will walk across the street more, listen more, pray more, and share more.” He wanted “to work toward more intentional engagement in the public/common spaces around me.” Paul’s renewed passion for a network of house churches leaked out in a summarizing

statement: “I still very much have a vision for a Jesus community within walking distance of every neighbor throughout this city.”

Linda was far less grandiose with her proposed steps of action. She wanted to increase the hospitality factor by “bringing together neighbors in our home to get to know them better” as God provided the opportunities. She was in the process of replacing her monthly church small group with a “once a month neighborhood gathering.” Also, she hoped to share her experience in the project with Kentwood Community’s “Outreach Team” so they would better understand how to help members better connect with their own neighbors. Will was absolutely committed to the continuation of a “third place” approach at the Galewood Tavern and inviting other Christians to consider what this would look like in their own contexts. He explained the motivation for staying focused on this particular way of being missional: “I have found new life, new energy, and a renewed sense of calling on my life.” Will also referred to interviewing and building relationships with other community leaders, but this was clearly a secondary strategy. Finally, Josh planned to sustain and build upon the annual community gardening project, to catalyze an embryonic coalition of neighborhood churches, and to involve more Seymour Church members in community development efforts, all of which brought renewed attention to his leadership experience and capacity.

There were also interesting descriptions of how the project had affected the imagination and influence of participants. Linda admitted the cohort experience “made me feel guilty for not being more ‘out there’ as a Christian leader and as a long term neighbor.” She hoped to change some of her habits, and discovering that “with a little effort on my part, people are initially friendly” offered great encouragement to strengthen

neighbor connections. As she grew in good neighboring skills, she was eager to “help my own lay leaders develop connections themselves” and to also “learn from them” as they did so. Will wrote: “I find myself very grateful for the ways I have been stretched and challenged by this process, and I am not a process guy...but I am learning to be one because being missional is process-oriented.” So, seeing how to involve others and create an active learning environment around mission had challenged him to go beyond a “show and tell” style of leadership.

Josh indicated he better understood “being a leader means that I need to start imparting wisdom and responsibility on others.” With some hesitation, he declared himself ready to “equip others to access their gifts and dreams.” He also had a broader understanding of how to engage neighborhoods or identified communities. Admitting his strong community organizing methodology, Josh realized “at the beginning of our time together, I thought there was only one basic way to conduct this type of work.” Hearing from other group members had demonstrated “that this work can take place in a myriad of ways” and confirmed “community engagement and development may look different” because of distinct social contexts. Referring to Mother Teresa, he spoke of his renewed commitment to neighborhood presence as doing “small things with great love.”

Jim had some unique thoughts about the project’s influence on his coaching style of leadership. Having heard such different views from residential and organizational stakeholders, he felt overwhelmed. “Getting everyone to come to some consensus about moving forward on [key community issues] with such diversity seems insurmountable.” The project experience “reminds me that not only are there great differences of opinion about what is, there are also often great differences of interest in doing anything about it.”

Yet, Jim recognized that his greatest influence was within a “network of relationships” and that “to lead change requires great commitment from the relative few who will saddle up for the effort, including myself.” He was also determined to “engage more often in a collaborative type of decision-making.” His involvement in the learning community “serves to remind me of the importance of a just process” (i.e. of listening to and involving all interested stakeholders), “underscores the importance of being intentional about getting beyond unexamined assumptions,” and “reduces my expectations about the likelihood of [widespread] unity around any issue, particularly large ones.”

Paul came away from the project experience convinced that “positional authority, or that which is normally vested in the office of pastor, is waning.” This assumption, of course, was present before the learning community was formed and mirrored parts of his own leadership journey. Nonetheless, given this perspective, Paul was “looking to impact just a few who demonstrate the capacity for starting disciple-making movements themselves.” He was also determined “to avoid my past mistakes of initiating and/or creating every ministry opportunity for others,” an approach that “has not led to sustainable transformation nor...personal ownership among others.” He concluded his paper with a list of renewed commitments including personal discernment habits, training others, sharing life (in Christian community), and modeling hospitality. Paul admitted he did not know what to do about the racial, economic, and class divisions confronting him on the Westside, but he had a hunch that “patient networking is the best present course.”

Steve’s comments were both eloquent and insightful, a pattern of his throughout the learning group experience. He stated that the project “certainly confirmed in me the belief that we need to stop trying so hard to make our churches ‘attractive places’ for

people to go to, and start making our members ‘attractive people’ for other people to go to.” He did not literally believe church members could “be made” to be or do anything apart from their willing participation, but from a leadership perspective, “our attention should be directed to the kinds of things that will make our church members agents of transformation.” As a senior pastor, Steve was painfully aware that “the show” (i.e. the Sunday worship gathering) could “return to the center of the picture” with its shape “determined by consumer demands.” One intended response to all this was “to throw myself more into the kinds of things I have been doing in my neighborhood and encourage others to do so wherever I can.” Recognizing he still needed to be a good “show practitioner,” Steve also knew “it would be good for me to follow through personally in my neighborhood and work harder at fanning the flames [of good neighboring] in the little places where it seems to be catching on.” He was aware that this would “require a change in how I see my job and what I am willing and determined to spend time on.” It would also require more “intentionality.” Thinking about the Plymouth Church setting, Steve concluded: “We have been stamped and molded by the institution and organization of the church, and everything feeds back into that. Being a neighbor for our neighbor’s sake and for God’s sake is still a pretty foreign concept.”

Taking all the feedback from the two interviews, the two retreats, the five roundtables, the final papers, and many informal one-on-one conversations into account, a few additional comments from a facilitation perspective are appropriate. Looking back, as implied in earlier reflections, it would have been helpful to have written expectations about the blessing and involvement of councils or church leadership teams. Somehow, verbal instructions at the individual level did not translate into appropriate actions. This

approval of visible church leadership should have been a prerequisite, and the agreement of project participants to consistently interact with these leaders should have been part of the covenanting process. It would have also been good to spend more time reviewing and clarifying the actual terms of engagement in the first retreat. Furthermore, going over the tactical details of neighborhood walking, observing, interviewing, and journaling would have closed some interpretive loopholes on the part of some group members.

It would have been beneficial to maintain a strong, healthy tension throughout the project: greater involvement of group participants in constructing the terms and details of engagement combined with a stronger mentoring presence from the identified coordinator (i.e. me). I provided a fairly detailed roadmap for participation, but having the group wrestle more with the details, struggle with the personal implications, take ownership of communication processes, and adjust to the hard realities of implementation along the way would have limited the avoidance factor and eliminated the “artificial” elements to which Jim referred. At the same time, as explained above, entering the project with a player-coach mindset actually restricted my ability to provide a strong, direct, follow-up presence to each of the individual members. When “life happened,” my ineffectiveness as a “player” affected my role as a “coach.” This should not have been the case, since I have developed and sustained habits of neighborhood presence and did not need to feel guilty or “inauthentic” in bringing appropriate accountability to the group experience. So, while I remain committed to a “practice what I preach” form of influence, a learning community focused on shifting leadership habits needs a trusted mentor who is wholly devoted to overseeing the actual progress of each participant.

Looking forward to the next iteration of a neighborhood-focused learning group with pastors, basic components of the framework for participation have already been identified: a clear, sustained focus on habits of neighborhood engagement, the inclusion of monthly roundtables and/or retreats, a longer timeframe with three distinct stages, and an active, hands-on mentoring presence. Some of the specific activities that will continue will be interacting with key resources related to local mission, scriptural engagement/prayer/storytelling in roundtable settings, periodic interviews with individual members, and verbal presentations and written reflections at important stages of the learning process. New activities to be introduced include a more detailed assessment of time usage and feedback processes that help develop greater leadership and organizational capacity around local mission. It was obvious after completion of this project that dealing realistically with time management issues is an important dimension of a reprioritization process. So, while Covey's "Time Management Matrix" and "Urgency Index" were good tools for initial analysis in an interview setting, they were not sufficient in challenging participants to confront their actual behavioral patterns. Among the many available time management tools and approaches, those that actually track daily and weekly activities at key points (for comparison/contrast purposes) would likely work best, especially if aptly linked to ongoing group interactions.⁸

Even more specifically, the next learning community will be two years in length, with the first six months devoted to creating a highly participative group environment and establishing core practices of neighborhood engagement with eight-to-twelve individual

⁸ For example, the basic time management assessment and online templates for activity logs, time diaries, goal setting, and effective scheduling at <http://mindtools.com> could be helpfully utilized.

participants. The minimal time threshold for forming these practices will be four hours per week, and even with the incorporation of the insights and new activities mentioned above, the “feel” of the group will be similar to that of the pilot project. The focus will be on active modeling of good neighboring practices and on gaining appreciation for identified places (i.e. neighborhoods) as primary contexts for God’s saving activity. Increasing self-awareness of leadership influence and inviting others into good neighboring practices will be the hub of group participation over the following nine months. A *Pastor/Leader 360 Survey* tool⁹ will be used to give individual participants important feedback from church leaders and/or ministry colleagues, to connect a personal leadership development plan with preparing others for meaningful neighborhood presence, and to deepen loving accountability with other cohort members. The minimal time threshold for neighborhood engagement practices will increase to six hours per week, but this will now include training and/or coaching activities involving others in good neighboring. Engaging congregational systems and recapturing the best elements of parish ministry will be central to the nine-month-long third stage of the learning community. A *Church Readiness 360 Survey* tool will serve to heighten awareness of congregational environments and engage key leaders in a discernment and creative planning process. Again, organizational good neighboring activities will be the intended goal, and group members will be asked to increase their weekly time commitment to eight hours, a commitment broadened to include personal modeling, equipping others, and congregational planning around habits of neighborhood presence. (A rough draft proposal for a two-year-long cohort on neighborhood mission is found in Appendix J.)

⁹ Note: A description and sample of this tool, along with the congregational survey tool mentioned below, can be found at <http://roxburghmissionalnet.com>.

Needless to say, the approach outlined above comes with several challenges. The length and intensity of the next project will initially be intimidating to many prospective participants. However, a re-covenanting process at the six-month and fifteen-month markers will allow members to renew core promises or opt out of continued involvement in the face of unexpected life situations. In addition, there seems to be widespread readiness among pastoral leaders in West Michigan to reconsider parish approaches to ministry and to recapture the basic skills of good neighboring. It is likely the next project will start in the spring of 2011 with ten or twelve pastors. This longer term, more layered strategy of forming *communitas* around neighborhood presence also calls for an experienced mentoring leader, a role I am more than ready to step into. Creating a participatory learning environment, building relational trust, bringing accountability to agreed-upon practices, correctly and helpfully interpreting feedback tools, and coaching participants through specific individual and organizational challenges come with this territory, and these activities are a good fit with my sense of call and gifting. Yet, these activities will not be reduced to my singular influence but will reflect communal interaction and collective wisdom (i.e. the willing utilization of all represented gifts and experiences). A final area of challenge is deciding how to cover the expenses of such a sustained learning opportunity. Money changes everything when it comes to relational interactions, expectations, and the nature of learning environments, but it seems that going beyond an “at cost” methodology and appropriately valuing my coaching-coordinating-overseeing function will need to be factored into the financial equation.

So, as the pilot learning project with seven other pastor-type leaders formally came to an end in September of 2009, I was struck by the incompleteness of what had

actually transpired but also encouraged by the shared learning that had taken place. Each participant had greater awareness of his/her own neighborhood context, intended to spend more time in some form of good neighboring, and hoped to help others become good neighbors. Attitudinal shifts had taken place, but sustaining habits of neighborhood presence at individual or organizational levels was unlikely in most cases. The brevity and nature of the project simply did not point toward profound breakthroughs in leadership imagination or actual priorities, but there were some indicators that small behavioral changes were indeed underway. As a result, hope for establishing more effective learning communities among church leaders was alive and well. So, too, was renewed, deep appreciation for locality as a source of transformational participation in the *missio Dei*, and this is the topic of the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER 6

LOCAL CONTEXTS AND MISSIONAL FORMATION

The completion of the neighborhood engagement project with seven other pastor-leaders brought another opportunity for balcony work on the part of the author. Much analytical and reflective effort has been demonstrated in the course of writing this paper. Sometimes the needed interpretive response to what unfolded has seemed daunting, given the multiplicity of personal and organizational narratives, the varied dimensions of the project itself, the hundreds of pages of field notes, and the partial nature of the outcomes. Yet, the process has helped identify key patterns with regard to shared opportunities and challenges for pastoral leaders in sustaining a neighborhood presence and inviting others to do the same. It has pointed toward a slightly altered approach to collegial learning that will more directly link neighborhood presence with missional influence. As such, it is good to cycle back and autobiographically consider what assumptions about life, mission, and formation in local contexts held true and what were altered as a result of the project experience. These reflections comprise the next, short sections of this final chapter.

The Limited Self and Social Disconnection

The learning group project certainly intensified a deepening sense of limitation around what I (and others) “see” and “know.” I am more alert to my own narrow “field of horizon” and to that of individual others and to how, even in group settings, there are inherent restrictions in the collective wisdom. In some ways I do not fully understand, as one profoundly shaped by the written culture of the Enlightenment, I am experiencing the shift(s) to which Toulmin referred: from the written to the oral, from the universal to the particular, from the general to the local, and from the timeless to the timely.¹ My suspicion of grandiose notions for cultural change was aroused early in the project when I heard the spiritualized language of “bringing in the kingdom” and “being the church” and “subverting the empire” and even “being missional.” However, it did not take long to realize my expectations for the project, listed in the form of potential outcomes, were also grandiose and misguided, especially in a time-limited context. My idealism dies hard.

As a result, by the end of the learning community experience, I was more content dealing with the people and realities right in front of me. The partial fulfillment of hoped-for outcomes and the unexpected challenges of my own life situation had tempered initial expectations and brought greater appreciation for the “little” shifts in attitudes, the “small” steps toward behavioral change, and the “insignificant” stories of increased awareness. All of this does not discount the power of larger narratives (whether biblical-theological, historical-political, or socio-cultural), but I (and “we”) can only enter these stories from a particular vantage point and set of life experiences. This growing awareness of “limited awareness” is helping me hold a good number of assumptions in

¹ Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 30-44.

check as I go about the business of living, working, and relating in a specific time and place, and it certainly applies to the formation of future learning groups. Perhaps I am figuring out what it means to be more fully human in a broader spectrum of relationships.

On the other hand, upon completion of the project, I was again struck by some of the disturbing realities of late modernity (or post-modernity, depending on one's interpretive framework). The modularity of relationships, the fragmentation of personal stories and experiences, the loss of life-giving memories, the ongoing separation of people based on economics and race, and the liquidity of institutional connections were all on display, not only in neighborhood interactions, but also in the family and church situations of group members. As most participants described the lack of meaningful participation in social or political organizations and the functional tribalism of daily life in their neighborhoods, they did not seem to fully appreciate the impact of growing isolation in their own lives or in their church environments. This experience of separation from a larger story and from enduring relationships and purposeful activities is pervasive. Those in the group were able to partially concede this as they talked about the compartmentalized lives of church members, lives fueled by economic priorities. In most cases, too, some language was given to generational gaps or breakdowns in local church settings and to the challenges of sustained discipleship. However, the degree to which social capital had been depleted "in here" as much as "out there" was not recognized, especially as it related to leadership influence and organizational expectations.

Lesslie Newbigin,² Zygmunt Bauman,³ and Robert Inchausti⁴ are authors who have, with diverse sets of cultural lenses, addressed this "loss" and "breaking apart" in

² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

Western culture. The realities of competing plausibility structures, of increasing individual autonomy, of dissipating communal traditions, of failing public institutions, of dehumanizing global economics, and of discontinuous social change mark a new era in the West. These authors provide clues for God's people to live faithfully in such a historical-cultural context. Among them are working together for the common good of all, participating humbly and bravely in public sectors and spaces, establishing communal practices that provide resistance to dehumanizing patterns, continually reorienting to the biblical witness and Gospel narratives, discerning God's purposes in surprising people and places, and finding creative methodologies for communicating gospel mysteries that subvert the vital lies of self-protective attitudes and behavior. With these insights in the back of my mind as the project concluded, I was challenged to consider my own experience(s) of social disconnection, along with those in the learning group, but I was encouraged by the potential of future, collegial learning groups to incorporate these same insights and provide a bit of a roadmap for interested leaders.

Pastoral Leadership and Priestly Ministry

The time I spent with those in the learning community, along with recent encounters with neighbors in my place of residence, has me rethinking what pastoral leadership means when people are connected, rather than disconnected, to place and time. What happens when pastoral ministry and congregational mission are focused on respecting and serving people who live in an identified place? It certainly seems to imply

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000).

⁴ Robert Inchausti, *Subversive Orthodoxy: Outlaws, Revolutionaries, and Other Christians in Disguise* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).

a creative reclaiming of parish presence and imagination. First, who is “in” and who is “out” changes radically. If every neighbor in a place is “in” when it comes to support, advocacy, and friendship, as opposed to only those who gather for weekly worship in a building, life and ministry has a whole different look and feel. Second, embodied presence (i.e. “being with” neighbors in both an individual and organizational sense) and collaborative work (i.e. forming individual and organizational partnerships for neighborhood betterment) become primary concerns of local church pastors.

Giving priority to geography in forming relationships and discerning God’s unfolding purposes is a direct challenge to most expressions of pastoral leadership, whether in “traditional” or “contemporary” contexts. As has been fully described in the congregational narratives of project participants, many pastors find themselves in a chaplaincy mode, preparing and preaching sermons for church members, attending to their needs, and managing established ministry programs. Others are in a “spiritual entrepreneur” mode, immersing themselves in planning cutting edge worship services and putting together programs that appeal to seekers and church members alike. Making sure people come to church campus events and managing multiple staff members can also be part of this approach. Again, all those in the learning group were dealing with chaplaincy *and* entrepreneurial expectations, though Paul, Linda, and Dale had more of the latter. Regardless, the common denominator in both these modalities is an expectation of excellent Bible-based communication for those gathered.

A parish imagination does not dismiss homiletic skills for worship gatherings, but it does heighten the importance of being God’s ordained representative for people in a place, for bringing God’s saving purposes to bear upon the concrete challenges,

situations, and opportunities of those in a neighborhood. This encourages a priestly role of mediating and applying God's story in the particulars of people's lives and of advocating for them in the light of God's justice. There is also an implied challenge to equip and train others in priestly ministry so that this becomes a complete expression of congregational life and not just that of a singular leader. Additionally, a parish mindset invites a "prophetic" presence that humbly models gospel ways of being and relating and points neighbors and friends to alternative possibilities for living with one another, possibilities of God's shalom in *this* place. Among group participants, Steve, Will, Paul, and Josh were those who most consistently had the experience of priestly influence. Their stories of praying, counseling, serving, and sharing faith with those who would likely never darken the door of a church building brought joyful challenge to all in the group. It also obviously energized them and sparked their imagination for new ministry possibilities, though equipping others for this work would remain an area of growth.

From the "Ground Up"

By the end of the project, simply honoring people and respecting the very lives they are living had taken on even greater significance in my understanding of how transformation occurs and how God works to restore his world. Even through incomplete forms of neighborhood engagement, group members had to assume a listening posture in relationship with others, and to some degree had to give up on preconceived agendas and moral prescriptions. This allowed for meaningful interaction and creative, reflective responses to what was actually going on (e.g. Steve hosting a block party for a departing neighbor, Paul forming a tutoring team for a local school, or Josh working with apartment complex residents to host a monthly community dinner). God is up to something in

particular places among particular people in and through their daily circumstances, and prayerful listening is often the best relational response. During the second half of our time together, project participants began to tell stories of how they had seen something, or heard something, or bumped into someone, and one thing led to another, and eventually a new relationship developed or a new activity emerged.

The grass roots energy for change is vital not only in a neighborhood context but in the life of a congregation as well. Most group members communicated great concern about the lack of this in their organizational settings, and this was one reason why taking on more of a training role with other leaders came up so often. With differing degrees of awareness, they recognized that functioning as ministry professionals often prevented “ordinary” people from doing the actual work of finding innovative solutions to very real challenges. In some cases, this meant overcoming established patterns of ministry dependencies, and while there was doubt in conversations about how to go about this, there was consensus that the gifts, skills, and experiences of more church members had to be brought to the “planning for mission” table. Part of the leadership challenge was to create spaces for new thoughts and pioneering proposals to surface among informal and formal influencers alike. Otherwise, there would be no chance for sustained responses to mission challenges and limited capacity for changing the overall ministry environment.

The effectiveness of appreciative inquiry as a methodological framework for congregational change and of asset-based community development as a foundational approach for neighborhood transformation reveals the wisdom of respecting indigenous resources and knowledge. When people’s hard-earned insights are taken into account, when their participation is valued, when their skills and dreams are recognized, when

their distinctive resources are identified, and when they find their own voice(s), the likelihood of positive, long term change at multiple levels (individual, organizational, local, and regional) increases. In contrast, the historical-cultural-environmental garbage heaps of imposed priorities and grand agendas by the “knowing,” privileged few can hardly be accounted for, so great is their number. It hardly needs to be mentioned that the biblical witness, Gospel narratives in particular, is given from the margins of political power and tends to prioritize the place of ordinary people in kingdom activity.

Several authors and influencers have identified the bottom-up nature of human transformation and development, again from multiple backgrounds and viewpoints. Paulo Freire has offered a challenging pedagogical perspective out of his work among the Brazilian oppressed and illiterate.⁵ Bryant Myers has given a whole spectrum of practical insights out of extensive experience in international community development.⁶ A classic work on ethnographic interviewing by James Spradley provides a rather amazing framework and set of processes for gaining qualitative knowledge of people living and working in very specific situations.⁷ Alinsky’s seminal work on community organizing is worthy of mention,⁸ but so too is a more recent study and description of faith-based organizing in local contexts by Richard Wood.⁹ Those writing from practical

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Books, 2005).

⁶ Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

⁷ James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979).

⁸ Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

⁹ Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

ecclesiological and theological perspectives about the intrinsic value of local landscapes and their inhabitants include the previously mentioned Clemens Sedmak,¹⁰ Robert Schreiter,¹¹ and collaborators Rene Padilla and Tetsunao Yamamori.¹² Given the significant challenges of congregations represented by leaders in the learning group project, the stories from Padilla and Yamamori of local church ministry bringing hope and healing in under-resourced communities are especially inspiring. In addition, Sedmak's reminder that theological work is primarily about "waking up" and paying attention to God's revealing presence in local situations is very helpful.¹³

From a leadership development and personal influence standpoint, the priority of interpreting the patterns of localized life, with its implied subversion of grand schemes (whether individual or institutional), has been referred to as the "Summoned Life."¹⁴ In contrast to the "Well-Planned Life" in which life is experienced "as a well-designed project, carefully conceived in the beginning, reviewed and adjusted along the way and brought toward a well-rounded fruition," the person leading the summoned life starts with a concrete situation, emphasizes the immediate context, and asks several important questions, "What are my circumstances asking me to do? What is needed in this place? What is the most useful social role before me?"¹⁵ These are questions answered by

¹⁰ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*.

¹¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

¹² *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission*, ed. Rene Padilla, and Tetsunao Yamamori (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, 2004).

¹³ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 1-5.

¹⁴ David Brooks, "The Summoned Self," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2010.

¹⁵ Brooks, "The Summoned Self."

sensitive observation and situational awareness and, from a Christian point of view, spiritual discernment in a community of faith. They are not questions easily answered through the calculation, efficient strategies, and long-range goals of the well-planned life. Brooks exhibits profound analysis on when he admits that the “lone free agent who creates new worlds” has been the recipient of cultural admiration, but for those leading the summoned life “the individual is small and the [local] context is large. Life comes to a point not when the individual project is complete but when the self dissolves into a larger purpose and cause.”¹⁶ At the risk of oversimplification, a primary purpose of the neighborhood engagement project was to assist pastor-leaders in the development of a summoned life, and there were at least some indicators of progress.

Architecture as Theology

One of Richard Sennett’s earlier books came to mind early in the learning group experience.¹⁷ In *The Conscience of the Eye*, he provides a historical-cultural development of urban design and highlights the embedded world view of all architectural endeavors. When Dale, Jim, Linda, and even Will began to express frustration with limited neighbor connections from simply walking and observing, there was little doubt that residential architecture was part of the restricting equation. While there were certainly other factors (such as the preferred methodologies and assumptions about “outreach” mentioned in the previous chapter), the fact that these four members were affected most by suburban design elements in their places of residence was not

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992).

coincidental. The fenced-in backyards, attached front garages, absence of sidewalks, and small front porches made human contact more difficult in their settings. In Dale's case, the large spaces between houses and cul-de-sac road roads exacerbated the problem. The rest of us were in neighborhoods built for human contact and at least had stories of minimal connection to share.

For example, my neighborhood is marked by houses in close proximity, narrow streets with two-sided walkways, good-sized front porches, and backyard garages. Many houses still have original building materials, and there is a variety of architecture on display. Josh, Steve, and Paul were in similar environments, though theirs were not as deeply affected by the visible indicators of poverty – poorly maintained homes and empty storefronts. The lack of good-sized gathering places and decent green space in my area also stood in contrast to the others and hinders the experience of community solidarity. In any case, as members gave updates and told stories at roundtables, I was again struck by how small and big structural differences in residential communities literally influence the nature of human relationships, and by implication, the ways in which God works in these relationships. This is also why I was surprised at the negative reaction to Jacobsen, though he admittedly comes across as idealistic and dismissive of suburban realities. Even with these qualifiers, his invitation to incarnational imagination, wholeness, beauty, sustainability, friendship, and hospitality through building design and urban architecture seems entirely consistent with an informed embrace of gospel implications.¹⁸

All of this has alerted me to the limited awareness and knowledge I and other pastors have in this area. Taking note of basic design elements in buildings and public

¹⁸ Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 75-152.

spaces in not an established habit, apart from occasional journaling of neighborhood walks, but perhaps it should be; and perhaps more intentional reflection on neighborhood architecture should become more central to future conversations in a leadership learning community. Given that relational mission is an adaptive challenge to most congregations and their pastoral leaders, it would seem most helpful to identify all the contributing factors to this challenge. Certainly, commuter dynamics, compartmentalized lifestyles, and electronic technologies contribute to the growing problem of relational disconnection with neighbors, but so, too, does the core design of a given neighborhood. Architectural elements can encourage human interaction or create invisible gated communities. It is hard to “be present” when streets and homes communicate a preference for self-protection and isolation, and it would be good for individual Christians and established faith communities to spend more time thinking creatively about subverting, overcoming, altering, or even removing physical hindrances to human flourishing.

Congregational Life and Presence

The completion of the neighborhood engagement project, not to mention four years of participation in Fuller Seminary’s Missional Leadership Cohort and six years of coaching/consulting work with established local churches, had me once again rethinking, reimagining, and reframing congregational life and mission. In many ways, I am returning to traditional forms and practices for wisdom on the journey ahead. There is nothing profound or new about encouraging pastors, forming groups, engaging God’s Word, talking with neighbors, participating in worship gatherings, discerning the ways of the Spirit, serving in hidden ways, or setting covenantal goals with ministry colleagues. Yet, as implied in the Introduction, I would never have guessed life’s path taken could

take me “here.” I will mention again that I now have little patience for grandiose notions of organizational success or endless assessments of individual progress based on an artificial grid or episodic expressions of “community.” Even after becoming somewhat immersed in the multiple congregational stories of project participants, I still believe we need most expressions of “church” in our cultural context (whether Emerging, Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic, or Orthodox) to bear witness to God’s saving purposes. However, my attention is being drawn to congregations with extended histories in specific places.

If place and time matter in the world God has created (and they do), and if God’s shalom has something to do with *located* human existence (and it does), then God’s people are called to reflect a shared life with God in a particular place and to care for and be good stewards of that place in the spirit of humility and solidarity with “others” (also known as “neighbors”). Assuming this call is to be taken seriously and that communities of Christ-followers are to publicly model an enduring commitment to their literal neighbors, then most current expressions of local church ministry are directly challenged. This challenge was embodied in the conversations and incomplete activities of group members over nearly seven months as they wrestled with the implications of neighborhood presence, not only for their way(s) of life but also for congregational mission. Rarely asked questions lingered underneath the surface: What would happen if a congregation evaluated its success based on the quality of neighbor relationships and actual participation in community development? What kind of life together is linked to a strong geographical sense of mission?

I found it incredibly interesting that the two group members who struggled most with fulfilling initial project expectations were functioning within congregational

narratives almost void of parish ministry. Bella Vista Church and Kentwood Community Church (where Dale and Linda served respectively) had essentially constructed stories in which there was no memory or imagination for a shared geographical focus. So, Dale and Linda were challenged not only by the design of their living environments but also by the experience of displaced ecclesiologies. The other represented local churches, with the exception of Paul's, were also impacted by commuter membership and attractional ministry formats, but they at least had memories and stories of parish presence that served as grist for future mission. Even in the neighborhood where I live, it is the two oldest (Reformed) churches with a history of connection that are best known for their good work, for making a tangible difference in our place. They are not impressive when measured by membership growth or worship attendance or cutting edge ministry approaches, but they are well-respected by most of their neighbors. This is in stark contrast to the affluent Congregational church, the black Pentecostal churches, and the storefront Spanish churches, all of whom are fundamentally disconnected from the neighborhood's daily realities.

Thus, even as the pilot project for deepening the neighborhood engagement of individual pastor-leaders drew to a close, my thoughts turned toward the general practices of churches making progress in neighborhood engagement. The similarities between individual and communal habits were rather obvious, but the following reminders seemed worthy of consideration as a way forward for increased missional influence. First, gathered worship is an opportunity to be fundamentally reoriented to God's story in Christ and to become a meaningful participant in his unfolding purposes. Creatively re-imagined historical-liturgical frameworks appear to have greater potential for active

participation in Gospel narratives than those of contemporary worship or expository preaching which tend to be driven by the performance of a few. Second, hospitality can become a way of life. Welcoming *others* in the realm of public worship and in the context of home and family plays a huge role in shaping meaningful relationships that sometimes become friendships. Receiving the offered hospitality of *others* is the powerful flipside to life-giving neighbor connections. Third, spiritual formation is inseparably linked with communal mission. An approach to catechesis that allows people to reflect on their actual (not ideal) lives in the light of the biblical witness and to form appropriate responses furthering God's saving intentions in inherently invitational and transformational. Finally, establishing informal and formal neighborhood partnerships is a practical way to live inside the *missio Dei*. Really believing God is up to something through individual neighbors, local businesses, and community organizations reveals itself in creative, collaborative work for the benefit of everybody. Matching congregational assets and resources with those of the immediate community brings opportunities for sustaining betterment efforts and forming boundary-crossing relationships. It moves church members from staying in control of what happens into reciprocal interactions that create a neighborhood environment of solidarity.

SUMMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In an excellently written recent book, authors Steve Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh use the imagery and language of “home” and “homecoming” to creatively interpret the redemptive themes of Scripture from within a cultural context of intensifying social fragmentation.¹⁹ Early on, they quote from Edward Casey’s book entitled *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*:

...to lack a primal place is to be “homeless” indeed, not only in the literal sense of having no permanently sheltering structure but also as being without any effective means of orientation in a complex and confusing world. By late modern times, this world has become increasingly placeless, a matter of mere sites instead of lived places, of sudden displacements rather than of perduring implacements.²⁰

The final project described and evaluated in this paper was birthed in the conviction that this cultural analysis is indeed correct, that the biblical witness challenges extended displacement as a way of being truly human, that the Church in the West has been profoundly shaped by this displacement, and that pastoral leaders have an opportunity to re-imagine a “placed” experience of life as a primary expression of individual call and congregational mission. It was hoped that forming a short term, collegial learning community with a group of pastors and focusing on simple practices of neighborhood engagement would begin an attitudinal and behavioral shift toward “situated” priorities.

The author spent nearly seven months with seven other seminary-trained leaders who initially agreed to spend six hours a week in good neighboring practices, to take part in two one-day retreats, to participate in monthly roundtable luncheons, to read two

¹⁹ Steve Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christain Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

books on local mission, to write two reflection papers, to give two extensive interviews, and to offer support to other group participants along the way. A comparison of the reflection papers and the interview responses, along with the use of a time management appraisal at the beginning and the end of the project, provided an opportunity to monitor shifts in attitudes and behaviors (or “intended” behaviors) related to pastoral priorities and neighborhood engagement. As one might anticipate, core expectations were not completely fulfilled and unexpected events transpired. Only two members kept the six hours per week commitment to core practices, only two members gained the approval of leadership councils for their participation, one person dropped out due to unforeseen organizational distress, and one person refused to turn in a final reflection paper.

A primary assumption on which the project was constructed turned out to indeed be true. Those fulfilling pastoral roles in local congregations have been shaped by chaplaincy expectations and spend most of their time and energy on preaching, pastoral care, and sustaining programs. Even those who react to internally-focused priorities and/or are not functioning as senior pastors, and who want things to be different, still have to consistently deal with historically given responsibilities. The twists and turns of exerting missional influence, of turning a congregation’s attention toward local mission and neighborhood relationships, has been comprehensively described in chapter 1 and chapter 2. Group members provided fascinating details of their personal, local church, and denominational stories, which led to the identification not only of shared hopes and dreams, but also of shared challenges and misguided assumptions about self and organizational realities. The importance of developing a missional ecclesiology and taking advantage of available frameworks and practical tools was highlighted in chapter 3

and chapter 4. Furthermore, the implications of core theological affirmations and the relative helpfulness of particular resources were discussed in relationship to the real life situations of project participants.

The thesis that a time-limited learning community would bring new insights, increased awareness, and new behaviors related to neighborhood involvement turned out to be partially true. By the end of the project, group members communicated gratitude for the learning environment that had been established and gave language to new insights about themselves, their neighborhoods, and their church environments. For the most part, there was renewed, shared appreciation for the importance of neighborhood contexts, and the priority of forming relationships in local mission was acknowledged. However, the shifts that took place are best described as attitudinal and did not really move much beyond good intentions. Good behaviors of presence that had already been initiated before the project would likely be sustained, but new, personal habits associated with neighborhood presence stayed in the realm of “possible but not likely.” In addition, the recognized need to train others and work more directly with church systems did not translate into significant alterations of already established priorities. All of this has been depicted in chapter 5.

Group members gave helpful feedback on the creation of future, neighborhood-focused learning communities among pastors. The collective encouragement was to keep retreats, interviews, roundtable gatherings, core practices of neighborhood presence, and reading of key resources as part of the experience. There was also a unanimous challenge to involve group participants more directly in the details of engagement, to provide a stronger mentoring presence, to expand the timeframe well beyond six months, to include

“on ramps” and “off ramps” of participation, and to start off with a lower time-pledge to recommended practices. It was as if those involved in the pilot project intuitively recognized the complexity and difficulty of truly changing established behavior patterns and were advising an even higher level of commitment for taking part in future learning groups. All of this feedback was taken into consideration, and with the incorporation of some new tools and processes, a proposal for a new cohort has been created. This, too, has been described in chapter 5 and the details of the proposal given in Appendix J.

I came away from the whole experience as project coordinator with new insights about myself and a renewed commitment to grow as a facilitating leader and confident mentor to other pastors. I also have been challenged to think more carefully about the priority of local contexts and neighborhood environments in the formation of missional leaders and to re-imagine the possibilities of congregational mission that recaptures the best of parish ministry. This has been outlined in chapter 6 and instills hope and provides encouragement when thinking of the start of the next learning community. There is great joy in anticipating time spent with ministry colleagues who want to develop a “placed” understanding of life, mission, and leadership. A concluding quote makes the importance of this quite clear:

Christian faith is a faith that is always placed. Placed in a good creation. Placed in time. An incarnational faith. A faith rooted in one who took flesh in a particular place. And it continues to be a faith of embodied presence. The church is the body of Christ, and bodies can only exist in a place. Moreover, this is a faith with a placed hope – a new heavens and a (re)new(ed) earth. This is not a faith about passing through this world, but a faith that declares this world – this blue-green planet so battered and bruised, yet lovely – as our home.²¹

²¹ Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, xii.

APPENDIX A

Proposal: to establish a “learning community” with 6-10 local church leaders in metropolitan Grand Rapids (i.e. senior pastors, outreach pastors, and/or staff directors) around simple practices of neighborhood engagement.

Basic Framework for Participation:

- a signed covenant that outlines the expectations of this six-month commitment (by early February/2009)
- an initial one-day retreat for scriptural engagement, prayer, relationship-building, introducing “neighborhood presence” practices, and covering process details (in mid-February)
- five monthly luncheon roundtables for updates, shared insights, and prayerful interaction (one in each of the following months: March, April, May, June, July)
- five months of intentional neighborhood engagement that includes neighborhood walking, stakeholder interviews, and observation events (from the start of March to the end of July)
- a final one-day retreat for scriptural engagement, prayer, summaries of engagement, and reflections on leadership priorities/practices (in mid-August)
- a 6-8 page reflection paper that summarizes new/renewed insights and outlines next steps for developing “missional habits” on the leadership journey [by early September]

Additional Details:

Participants will be asked to:

- 1) attend both retreats and at least three roundtables
- 2) read at least two books from the following list: *God Next Door: Spirituality & Mission in the Neighborhood* by Simon Carey Holt, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* by Eric Jacobsen, and *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* by Clemens Sedmak
- 3) spend at least six hours a week (from 3/1 - 7/31) in practices of neighborhood presence (i.e. walking the neighborhood of personal residence, conducting interviews with local stakeholders, having conversations with neighbors, and hanging out in “community spaces”)
- 4) keep a detailed journal of neighborhood engagement (including summaries and reflections).
- 5) share insights and areas of personal growth with others in the learning community
- 6) make the above-mentioned reflection paper available to colleagues
- 7) pay \$150 to help cover retreat, roundtable, and resource costs
- 8) give an initial interview and a final/follow-up interview to Wayne Squires (the coordinator)

Potential Outcomes:

- discovery of connections between “neighborhood presence” and “mission” and “leadership”
- development of ongoing neighbor relationships (i.e. a growing experience of “being neighbor”)
- continued practices of neighborhood engagement as an intentional part of “spiritual formation”
- formation of new habits (i.e. different weekly rhythms) as a congregational-organizational leader
- mutual encouragement/challenge on the journey of “missional leadership”
- identified opportunities for future learning and activity with a “community of colleagues”

APPENDIX B

Key Questions for Autobiographical Reflection(s)

- 1. What are key factors and events in my personal background/history that have shaped my identity and sense of call?**
- 2. What are significant moments in my spiritual formation and development as a leader?**
- 3. How do I describe my current organizational/congregational context? What are the greatest opportunities and challenges I have as a leader in this context?**
- 4. What are my hopes and dreams for participating (individually and communally) in God's mission here in West Michigan?**
- 5. Why am I interested in this "neighborhood engagement" project? What are my expectations?**

APPENDIX C

First Interview with Project Participants (February/March of 2009)

1. As a follow-up to your autobiographical reflections, what would you identify as your strongest gifts and skills as a leader? In what areas would you most like to grow as a leader?
2. What areas of ministry involvement/oversight do you most look forward to? What areas of ministry involvement/oversight do you “put off”?
3. In a given week (or month), how are you spending your time? How many hours are roughly given to the following:
 - a. preparation for teaching/preaching?
 - b. counseling/pastoral care?
 - c. administration/supervision?
 - d. training/mentoring of individuals and/or teams?
 - e. committee involvement/participation?
 - f. serving on boards/committees of “outside” organizations?
 - g. personal evangelism/community service/neighborhood relationships?
 - h. other areas of responsibility?
4. Where would you place these activities in Stephen Covey’s *Time Management Matrix* (i.e. in the urgent/important quadrant, the urgent/not important quadrant, the important/not urgent quadrant, or the not urgent/not important quadrant)?
5. Which of the above uses of time would you categorize as of “your own choosing”? Which do you feel/think have been “assigned” to you?
6. What are your most important activities outside of your “official” leadership role?
7. When do you feel the greatest joy as a leader/influencer?
8. What current habits/life practices would you consider to be “life-giving”? What current habits need to be reconsidered, altered, or eliminated?
9. Is there a clear “adaptive” challenge in your congregational/organizational situation? How does this affect your leadership?

- 10. What people and/or resources have contributed the most to your personal growth over the last year?**

- 11. Do you envision any shifts in your leadership priorities over the next couple of years? If so, how does your “leadership team” (i.e. council, management team, board members, etc.) encourage and/or inhibit dialogue about these possible shifts?**

APPENDIX D

The Time Management Matrix

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	I <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crises • Pressing problems • Deadline-driven projects and meetings • Last-minute preparations for scheduled activities 	II <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation • Prevention • Values clarification • Planning • Relationship-building • True re-creation • Empowerment
Not Important	III <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interruptions, some phone calls • Some mail & reports • Some meetings • Many proximate, pressing matters • Many popular activities 	IV <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trivia, busywork • Some phone calls/email • Time wasters • “Escape” activities • Irrelevant mail • Excessive TV

APPENDIX E

The Urgency Index

0 = Never 1 = Rarely 2 = Sometimes 3 = Often 4 = Always

- _____ 1. I seem to do my best work when I'm under pressure.
- _____ 2. I often blame the rush and press of external things for my failure to spend deep, introspective time with myself.
- _____ 3. I'm often frustrated by the slowness of people and things around me. I hate to wait or stand in line.
- _____ 4. I feel guilty when I take time off from work.
- _____ 5. I always seem to be rushing between places and events.
- _____ 6. I frequently find myself pushing people away so that I can finish a project.
- _____ 7. I feel anxious when I'm out of touch with the office for more than a few minutes.
- _____ 8. I'm often preoccupied with one thing when I'm doing something else.
- _____ 9. I'm at my best when I'm handling a crisis situation.
- _____ 10. The adrenaline rush from a new crisis seems more satisfying to me than the accomplishment of long-term results.
- _____ 11. I often give up quality time with important people in my life to handle a crisis.
- _____ 12. I assume people will naturally understand if I have to disappoint them or let things go in order to handle a crisis.
- _____ 13. I rely on solving some crisis to give my day a sense of meaning and purpose.
- _____ 14. I often eat lunch or other meals while I work.
- _____ 15. I keep thinking that someday I'll be able to do what I really want to do.
- _____ 16. A huge stack in my "out" basket at the end of the day makes me feel like I've really been productive.

APPENDIX F

Neighborhood Engagement Cohort
2/14/09 Retreat Schedule

09:00 - 09:15 = Greetings and Continental Breakfast

09:15 - 10:00 = Indwelling the Word/Group Meditation

10:00 - 10:15 = Break

10:15 - 11:15 = Autobiographical Reflections/Prayer

11:15 - 11:30 = Break

11:30 - 12:30 = Autobiographical Reflections/Prayer

12:30 - 01:15 = Lunch and Conversation

**01:15 - 02:15 = Overview of Neighborhood Engagement Practices (i.e. “Reading” a
Neighborhood)**

02:15 - 02:30 = Break

**02:30 - 03:00 = Consensus on Other Group Commitments (e.g. the Daily Office,
Monthly Roundtable Schedule, Reading, Web Communication, etc.)**

APPENDIX G

Neighborhood Engagement Learning Community
Retreat Schedule (August 28, 2009)

09:00 a.m. - 09:15 a.m. = Coffee/Breakfast Snacks

09:15 a.m. - 09:45 a.m. = Indwelling the Word/Group Response

09:45 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. = Prayer/Short Break

10:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. = First Presentation

10:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. = Second Presentation

11:00 a.m. - 11:15 a.m. = Break

11:15 a.m. - 11:45 a.m. = Third Presentation

11:45 a.m. - 12:15 p.m. = Fourth Presentation

12:15 p.m. - 01:00 p.m. = Break/Lunch/"Next Steps" Conversation

01:00 p.m. - 01:30 p.m. = Fifth Presentation

01:30 p.m. - 02:00 p.m. = Sixth Presentation

02:00 p.m. - 02:15 p.m. = Break

02:15 p.m. - 02:45 p.m. = Seventh Presentation

02:45 p.m. - 03:00 p.m. = Wrap-Up Conversation/Prayer

APPENDIX H

Second Interview with Project Participants (September of 2009)

1. At the end of our “learning community journey (and at the start of another “ministry season”) what do you now identify as your strongest leadership gifts and skills? In what areas would you most like to grow as a leader?
2. What areas of ministry involvement/oversight are you most looking forward to? What areas of ministry involvement/oversight are you likely to “put off”?
3. In a given week (or month), how will you be spending your time? How many hours will roughly be given to the following:
 - a. preparation for teaching/preaching?
 - b. counseling/pastoral care?
 - c. administration/supervision?
 - d. training/mentoring of individuals and/or teams?
 - e. committee involvement/participation?
 - f. serving on boards/committees of “outside” organizations?
 - g. personal evangelism/community service/neighborhood relationships?
 - h. other areas of responsibility?
4. Where would you place these activities in Stephen Covey’s *Time Management Matrix* (i.e. in the urgent/important quadrant, the urgent/not important quadrant, the important/not urgent quadrant, or the not urgent/not important quadrant)?
5. Which of the above uses of time would you categorize as of “your own choosing”? Which do you feel/think have been “assigned” to you?
6. What will be your most important activities outside of your “official” leadership role?
7. When are you likely to feel the greatest joy as a leader/influencer?
8. What “life-giving” habits/practices will be part of this year’s personal leadership path? What current habits will need to be reconsidered, altered, or eliminated?
9. Is there a clear “adaptive” challenge in your congregational/organizational situation? How will this affect your leadership?

- 10. What people and/or resources will likely contribute the most to your personal growth over the next year?**
- 11. Do you envision any shifts in your leadership priorities? If so, how do you think your “leadership team” (i.e. council, management team, board members, etc.) will respond to these possible changes?**
- 12. With regard to the “learning community” experience itself, what did you most appreciate? What was most helpful? What was the least helpful? What recommendations do you have for future groups/leadership cohorts?**

APPENDIX I
Urgency Index Scores
(Neighborhood Engagement Project)

<u>Group Member</u>	<u>First Score</u>	<u>Second Score</u>
Paul Worster	29	23
Will Clegg	25	26
Josh Holwerda	29	37
Steve DeVries	25	26.5
Dale Dalman	28	23
Jim Schepers	17	24
Linda Jensen	34	29

APPENDIX J

Developing Habits and Skills for Neighborhood-Focused Mission *(A Proposal for *Communitas Among Pastors*)*

Purpose: to create an active learning community with 8-12 pastors over a period of two years in which each participant forms personal habits of neighborhood engagement, equips others for good neighboring, and helps his/her congregation develop an innovative parish presence.

Assumptions: Neighborhoods are places where God is already at work, places filled with untapped potential for holistic mission and spiritual transformation. In a cultural context of growing social fragmentation, pastoral leaders have an opportunity to cooperate with the Spirit's activity not only among congregational members, but also among the residential and organizational neighbors of given places. For many leaders, finding encouragement and resources to establish new priorities and influence others in different ways is an important step. A collegial learning group, such as the one being proposed, can provide an environment in which mission is re-imagined and needed leadership adjustments occur.

Basic Framework for Participation:

- a signed covenant outlining specific expectations for the two-year commitment; this will be discussed, finalized, and signed with other group members at the initial one-day retreat in May/2011; this covenant will be renewed at key stages (after six months and after fifteen months)
- four one-day retreats in May/2011, November/2011, August/2012, and May/2013; these retreats will involve scriptural engagement, prayer, relationship-building, and updates/presentations of outlined activities
- eighteen monthly luncheon roundtables for giving updates, sharing insights, interacting with key resources, and praying with/for other participants; these will be scheduled in June-October/2011, January-June/2012, September-November/2012, and January-April/2013
- four extended interview sessions of individual members with the group mentor to assess progress, identify concerns and opportunities, and evaluate next steps
- a fifteen-hour minimum of personalized coaching/consulting time with the group mentor; this will include interpreting feedback from assessment tools, addressing individual and organizational challenges, and forming developmental action-plans
- three distinct stages of neighborhood engagement; the first six months will be devoted to active modeling of good neighboring practices, the next nine months will involve training others for sustained neighborhood presence, and the final nine months will focus on shifting congregational systems toward parish ministry
- assessment processes that include a time management analysis, a Pastor/Leader 360 Survey, and a Church Readiness 360 Survey

Additional Details:

Each group member will be asked to:

- 1) gain the approval/support of a council or recognized leadership team
- 2) attend and take part in all four retreats and at least twelve roundtables
- 3) read at least eight books (i.e. one per quarter) from a recommended reading list
- 4) spend a minimum of four hours a week in modeling habits of neighborhood presence (the first six months), a minimum of six hours a week in modeling and training efforts (the next nine months), and a minimum of eight hours a week in modeling, training, and developing neighborhood-focused ministries (the final nine months)
- 5) keep a weekly journal of personal neighborhood engagement over the first fifteen months
- 6) offer autobiographical reflections in the first retreat and make 20-30 minute learning/storytelling presentations in the last three retreats
- 7) utilize above-mentioned assessment tools, go over results with the group coordinator, develop appropriate steps of action, and share insights with group colleagues
- 8) schedule the four interviews mentioned above with the group mentor; each interview will be roughly seventy-five minutes in length
- 9) write a final 8-12 page reflection paper that summarizes new insights, habits, and experiences gained from the learning community journey and outlines next steps of growth as a missional influencer
- 10) pay \$2250 in three installments to help cover the costs of overall administration, assessment tools, coaching time, basic materials, and food/rental for group gatherings; installments of \$750 will be due in May/2011, November/2011, and August/2012

Anticipated Outcomes:

By the end of the learning community, individual participants are expected to experience and/or demonstrate:

- the development of sustained neighbor relationships in the place of residence
- continued practices of neighborhood engagement as an aspect of personal call and spiritual formation
- the establishment of new habits as a congregational leader focused on neighborhood mission
- a greater capacity to discover and discern God's activity in/through the intersecting narratives of people and place(s)
- the development of strong, collegial relationships for ongoing encouragement and loving accountability
- creative opportunities for future collaborative learning and work

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