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This ministry focus paper entitled

HOME GROUPS WITH PURPOSE
BRINGING CHURCH RENEWAL AND STRENGTHENING SPIRITUAL
RELATIONSHIPS AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
MILTON, PENNSYLVANIA

Written by

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:



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HOME GROUPS WITH PURPOSE
BRINGING CHURCH RENEWAL AND STRENGTHENING SPIRITUAL
RELATIONSHIPS AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
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A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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BY

STEPHEN G. SHIRK
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ABSTRACT

Home Groups with Purpose: Bringing Church Renewal and Strengthening Spiritual Relationships at First Presbyterian Church in Milton, Pennsylvania

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2012

The goal of this paper is to develop a strategy for renewal at First Presbyterian Church, Milton, Pennsylvania. The strategy is designed to strengthen spiritual relationships within the church through a home group ministry that facilitates discipleship, fellowship, and ministry within the church. First Presbyterian Church is a two-hundred-year-old mainline church in the northeast.

The church has a colorful history of influence in the small town of Milton. Over the last several years, however, decline has threatened the town and the church of mostly aging baby boomers. Church members have limited spiritual friendships and lack opportunities to nurture one another's faith. A recent Natural Church Development survey revealed a lack of passionate spirituality within the church. In order to nurture Christian community, home groups will be introduced to encourage spiritual friendships and discipleship through mutual ministry.

This paper contains three major sections. The first section describes the ministry challenges including the state of community relationships in America, and the challenges and opportunities of a small town community and main line church.

The second section describes the biblical and theological foundations for relationships within the Christian community. It begins with a review of six books, and then explores biblical images and connectional practices along with a theology of renewal and its practical implications.

The final section provides a practical strategy for introducing ongoing home groups at First Presbyterian Church. A plan for leadership development, experimentation, and ongoing evaluation is set forth that is culturally sensitive. The end result should yield a group of leaders within the church who work together to nurture spiritual renewal through home groups.

Theological Mentor: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD.

Words: 299

To Caroline, my beloved wife and companion who encouraged me
throughout this project. To my daughter Ashley and son Alex
who gave permission for me to focus my energies.
To my parents Wes and Jeanne Shirk
whose love and generosity carried me through.
To God be the glory!

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible teaches that God is love and those who love live in God. At the heart of the Gospel is the joyful call to all people to enter into the life of God, who is revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit. Within God's self is a trinity of welcoming love. God's hospitality is the foundation for relationships within the church and the basis for the church's outreach to the world. As the Apostle John so passionately wrote in 1 John 4:7-8, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."¹ The communal nature of God calls the Church to respond by building Christian communities of love and transformation that reflect God's character to the world. This project is designed to create such a community within the life of a two-hundred-year-old mainline church in Pennsylvania.

First Presbyterian Church is located in central Pennsylvania in the town of Milton along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. The church began in 1811 and recently celebrated two hundred years of continuous ministry on December 4, 2011. The church has about 350 members with an average attendance of 135 on a Sunday. It is part of the Presbyterian Church (USA), a denomination of more than two million members. The present building is a beautiful brown stone church with stained glass windows and a clock tower, located in downtown Milton, Pennsylvania, a small town of about 7000 people. I have been pastor of the church for more than 17 years. The town has been on the economic downturn since the 1960s, but the church today is healthy with active

¹ All Scripture quoted is from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991) unless otherwise noted.

boards, many young families attending, and visitors almost every week. The potential for growth is strong because this is a congregation made up of people who love the Lord and believe in reaching out.

The need this project seeks to address is the lack of spiritually transforming relationships within the church. An unhealthy culture of privacy and isolation has developed over many years. The members are not used to taking the time that is necessary to develop loving relationships, with few exceptions. Many members who are not part of a large family clan feel unknown and unloved. Even though they have attended the same church for years, some do not even know each other's names. A small percentage of the congregation attend Sunday school where members get to know one another, but most people come to church on Sunday and leave without making significant contacts. A favorite hymn is "They'll know we are Christians by our love," but people cannot really love if they do not know one another. As Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson write, they are, "sacrificing authentic community on the altar of casual camaraderie."²

Unfortunately, First Presbyterian Church has not yet benefitted from the revolution that has been transforming churches for the last fifty years. This revolution has been a rediscovery of the power of small groups. Jesus Christ modeled the importance of redemptive relationships throughout his earthly ministry. Gathering twelve disciples together, he poured his life into them so that they, in turn, filled with his Spirit, would transform the world. His life with the twelve could be called the first Christian small group. The early church, born on Pentecost, was empowered to take our Lord's dream of

² Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 61.

unity in diversity into the world. God created all humans with a hunger for community—a hunger that church fellowship is designed to satisfy.

This project calls First Presbyterian Church to hope and renewal through a deeper experience of and commitment to God’s covenant love. It seeks to “reweave the bonds of community.”³ The hope is that a renewed vision for transformational community will take hold and deepen Christian friendships while assisting in the process of sanctification. Community fosters spiritual transformation. Donahue and Robinson write, “as teaching pastor John Ortberg reminds us at Willow Creek, that no one drifts into spiritual transformation. It requires effort.”⁴ The Apostle Paul writes, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:13-14). People learn from sermons and Bible studies, but lives are generally transformed through loving relationships: “Small groups offer a connection—between Jesus, others, and ourselves—that purifies us.”⁵

This topic is of interest to me because of my long history with groups. I became a Christian in the early 1970s and was immediately exposed to the work of Lyman Coleman, a pioneer in the small group movement. Through my experiences in Young Life and church youth groups, I learned that God uses groups to transform people. I took

³ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 62.

⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵ Ibid., 42.

what I learned in my early years and applied it to my first job as a youth director in a suburban Philadelphia church. Over my seventeen years there, my leaders and I built up a program attracting over three hundred youth on a weekend. Nearly every week those youth would be broken down into groups for sharing and prayer. Time and again our leaders noticed that the small groups were where the real spiritual transformation took place. In those groups, the youth soon felt safe to open up about their struggles. The groups provided our leaders with valuable experience in leadership, accountability, and relationships. Many of those leaders were themselves transformed and went into full-time Christian service.

My desire is to bring those same principles to bear on the congregation in Milton. Some church members have already had very positive experiences with small groups. They know that groups can make lasting connections that develop trust and facilitate self-disclosure. The hope is that the church will catch a vision for what groups can do to transform lives for Christ. First Presbyterian Church has been experimenting with small groups for about ten years. But the influence has remained small. This project seeks to develop an ongoing plan that will encourage more participation and work to change the church culture. The ministry challenge presented at First Presbyterian Church, the biblical mandate to cultivate community in the local church, and my personal convictions about the power of groups to foster community lead to the thesis of this project: to bring about church renewal and strengthen spiritual relationships within the congregation of First Presbyterian Church by implementing ongoing, home-based, small groups designed to enhance discipleship, fellowship, and ministry.

To address First Presbyterian Church's ministry challenge, this paper is divided into three sections. The first part focuses on the ministry context. Chapter 1 begins with a description of the current trends in American culture that foster individualism and isolation. The church has a unique role and opportunity to present an alternative style of life where Christian love and caring can happen routinely. Chapter 2 describes First Presbyterian Church of Milton, the target audience for the project. This church has a rich history and many stories of success and growth. But too many of the members have developed perceptions of the Christian life that encourage individualism and isolation. Many members seem to think the Christian life is mostly about attending worship and nothing more. They have resigned themselves to being isolated and no longer expect to find true community. Promising pockets of change are presented and described to show there is already some new life coming into this town and congregation.

Part Two looks at the theological issues related to the development of Christian community from a Reformed perspective. Chapter 3 reviews relevant books to shed light on how the nature of God as Father, Son, and Spirit relate to the human need for community. Authors such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Richard Lovelace, as well as more contemporary writers like Gareth Icenogle and Peter Scazzero, have much to contribute. Chapter 4 presents a section on ecclesiology that considers first various images of community in the scriptures. Presbyterian and Reformed churches have taken various approaches to these biblical mandates over the years. This chapter explores a variety of spiritual practices that advance fellowship, discipleship, and ministry. In Chapter 5, the theme of spiritual restoration and renewal will be traced through key passages from the

Bible, culminating in 1 John 3, where the apostle describes God's love and repeats Christ's command to love one another. Christians' love for one another will ultimately convince the world that they are Christ's disciples.

Part Three describes the practical plans and timetable for implementing this project. After identifying and stating the preferred future, Chapter 6 enumerates and explains goals, along with a clear strategy for implementing the plan. It identifies the target population for the project and describes qualifications for group leadership. In order to implement the plans, the final chapter of the project lays out a timeline and addresses leadership concerns and needed resources. An evaluation process completes the plan, using objective measuring devices to assess results.

PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

This chapter provides a description of the people who make up First Presbyterian Church, Milton, Pennsylvania. The first section describes the breakdown in relationships that affects all Americans. It explores some of the contributing factors to the current crisis, paying attention to the implications for ministry. Section two introduces the town of Milton, Pennsylvania, with its rich past and current challenges. The third section illustrates hope for community renewal displayed both in the town and the church.

A Crisis in Relationships in America

In the year 2000, Robert Putnam released the fascinating book titled *Bowling Alone*. It quickly became a national bestseller. In the book, Putnam surveys the decline of what he calls “social capital,” defined as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹ The title of the book comes from the fact that the number of people who bowl has increased

¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), 19.

over the last twenty years, while the number who bowl in leagues has decreased; demonstrating that many people today are “bowling alone.” Putnam tells a heartwarming story of two men whose only connection to each other was their bowling league. One of the men found out the other needed a kidney transplant, so he (a white man) decided to donate his kidney to his teammate (who was black); thus illustrating the value of social capital. Putnam describes the implications of these trends for social clubs, voting patterns, and even religious participation. This dense book makes a simple point: People do not connect with one another in meaningful ways as much as they have in the past. The resulting relationship deficiency creates a longing in our society for the kind of authentic Christian community that the local church was designed to offer. Yet churches are feeling the detrimental effects of the same social trends through decreasing attendance, intermittent attendance patterns, and difficulty in finding leaders who will to commit to church involvement and leadership.

Randy Frazee’s book, *The Connecting Church*, begins with a chapter titled “The Loneliest Nation on Earth.” In this chapter Frazee quotes George Gallup, Jr., who “concluded from his studies and polls that Americans are among the loneliest people in the world.”² The standard of living is high compared with the rest of the world, and Americans experience unprecedented freedoms and mobility. Yet Gallup goes on to write, “We are physically detached from one another. We change places of residence frequently. One survey revealed that seven in ten do not know their neighbors. As many as one-third of Americans admit to frequent periods of loneliness, which is a key factor in

² Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 24.

the high suicide rate among the elderly.”³ God designed the church to be a community of intimacy, love and nurturing, yet churches can be lonely places when they have no organized plan for connecting members of the congregation. In many churches people come in the front door looking for friendship and soon exit out of the back door feeling frustrated and alone.

An obvious contributing factor to the crisis in relationships is the perceived lack of time and the increased speed of life. Dr. Richard Swenson has written extensively on the subject of “margin,” a term he uses to describe “the space between our load and our limits.”⁴ Swenson claims that margin is what protects one from the "overload syndrome." In his book by the same name, Swenson explains that the greatest contributing factor to margin-less lives comes as somewhat of a surprise: progress. "Progress," says Swenson, "always gives us more and more of everything faster and faster. Getting more and more of everything is wonderful—as long as that is what we need. When saturated, however, getting more of everything faster and faster becomes a problem."⁵ It was Gandhi who wisely said there is more to life than increasing its speed. Swenson's 2004 book *Margin* demonstrates the exponential increase in the speed of life, using some interesting graphs in the appendix of the book. The graphs illustrate "the rapid and unprecedented changes

³ George Gallup, Jr., noted in Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, 33, as quoted in Phillip Langdon, *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 1.

⁴ Richard Swenson, *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

in American Society."⁶ Areas of life demonstrating exponential increases from approximately 1980 to 2000 include total mail, health care costs, existing home costs, volume of advertising, number of prisoners, bankruptcy petitions filed, and federal debt, to name a few.⁷ Because these changes have come so rapidly, Americans often go through life without being aware of the problem. The lack of margin has contributed to the crisis in relationships in America because relationships take time. But an increasing majority of people feel overloaded and stressed in the areas of emotional energy, physical energy, time, and finances. Trusting friendships take time to develop and mature; and cultivating community requires a fairly heavy investment, but many Americans feel that, at the end of the day, they have little left to invest.

The impact of this trend on rural Pennsylvania life is emphasized in a recent article about declining state Grange membership trends. The Grange is the nation's oldest agricultural organization. It began as a social fraternal order that would allow farm families to band together to protect their mutual interests. The article noted that the organization became especially popular after the Depression when times were hard. But today membership is down 88 percent: "Membership in the Pennsylvania State Grange peaked in the 1950s with more than 90,000 members. . . . Today there are 11,000 members. And 70 percent of them are 70 years old or older."⁸ According to the article,

⁶ Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), 215.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

⁸ Rick Dandes, "State Grange Membership Declines 88 percent," *Sunbury (Pennsylvania) Daily Item*, April 23, 2011, B 2.

older Grange leaders blame themselves for keeping control over the organization and not encouraging young people to join.

Technology is another important factor in the transformation of relationships in America. Technology is changing so rapidly that one could say it is one of the largest contributing factors to the absence of community and also one of the greatest hopes for its recovery. Robert Putnam draws this conclusion when he writes, "No sector of American Society will have more influence on the future state of our social capital than the electronic mass media and especially the Internet."⁹ Recently, the power and influence of social media sites Facebook and Twitter became apparent during the Arab Spring of 2011. Many people are connecting electronically today and some churches are using the internet as their primary mode of community development. Young people are often so wired into their friends' lives that they have trouble making face-to-face contact. In his book *The Dumbest Generation*, Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at Emory University, laments the detrimental effects of the Internet and technology on his students' reading, writing, and thinking ability: "In an average young person's online experience, the senses may be stimulated and the ego touched, but vocabulary doesn't expand, memory doesn't improve, analytic talents don't develop, and erudition doesn't ensue."¹⁰ He continues, "For most young users, it is clear; the Web hasn't made them better writers and readers, sharper interpreters and more discerning critics, more knowledgeable citizens, or tasteful consumers. In the ACT's National Curriculum Survey, released in

⁹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 410.

¹⁰ Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2008), 109.

April 2007, 35 percent of college teachers agreed that college readiness of entering students has declined in the last several years, and only 13 percent stated that it had improved."¹¹ Whether technology proves to be useful in creating communities or only pseudo-communities is a matter for debate. Facebook and Twitter may give the illusion of connecting people at the expense of masking the human souls' need for deeper face-to-face and heart-to-heart connections.

One might expect that the increase of two-income families would be a major contributing factor to the crisis in relationships and reduction in social capital. However, after analyzing the data, Putnam estimates that the movement of women into the workforce accounts for only one-tenth of the total decline.¹² This is due to the fact that women who work out of the home have increased opportunities for social interaction, though they may have less time available. Single parents who work out of the home have the least time available for social involvement, while women who work part time by choice seem to have the most involvement in community organizations, leading Putnam to conclude, "one practical way to increase community engagement in America would be to make it easier for women (and men too) to work part-time if they wished."¹³

Significant changes have occurred in American culture in the last thirty years, many of which contribute to isolation and loneliness. God designed people for relationships, yet many Americans are finding them harder to come by. The reduction in

¹¹ Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 110.

¹² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 202.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 201.

social capital has contributed to isolation in many towns and communities. A closer look at a small town in Central Pennsylvania will serve as an example of how these principles are playing out in real life. The town of Milton will serve as the subject for this inquiry.

Milton, PA – A Microcosm of Small Town America

Along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River about 25 miles south of Williamsport,¹⁴ the town of Milton (3.4 Sq. miles) is located in a rural valley of farms and light industry. In 1910, the population was 6,975¹⁵ while in 2010 it stood at 7,042.¹⁶ The average household income is \$35,812 which is considerably less than the state average of \$49,520.¹⁷ Home values have risen in the last 10 years from an average of \$79,000.00 to \$98,000.00. The mean average home price for the state is considerably higher at \$165,000.00.¹⁸ As of March 2011 unemployment was at 9.1 percent compared with a state average of 8.0 percent.¹⁹ The percentage of residents living in poverty in 2009 averaged 23.0 percent (19.3 percent for White Non-Hispanic residents, 55.2 percent for Black residents, 46.6 percent for Hispanic or Latino residents, 61.2 percent for other

¹⁴ Williamsport, Pennsylvania, is the home of Little League Baseball.

¹⁵ Frederick Converse Beach, George Edwin Rines, eds., *The Americana: A Universal Reference Library, Comprising the Arts and Sciences, Literature, History, Biography, Commerce, etc.*, Volume 13 [book on-line] (New York, Scientific American Compiling Department, 1911), http://books.google.com/books?id=JGIWAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false. html (accessed February 1, 2012).

¹⁶ Demographics of Milton, Pennsylvania, City-Data.com, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Milton-Pennsylvania.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

race residents, 15.2 percent for two or more races).²⁰ Figure 1 below illustrates the number of children in the Milton Area School District who qualify for reduced or free lunches. Many people in the community are surprised to learn that these numbers have steadily increased to over 50 percent. Figure Two shows the distribution by school. Baugher Elementary shows the highest number of qualified students. Baugher serves the Milton Borough including the neighborhood surrounding First Presbyterian Church.

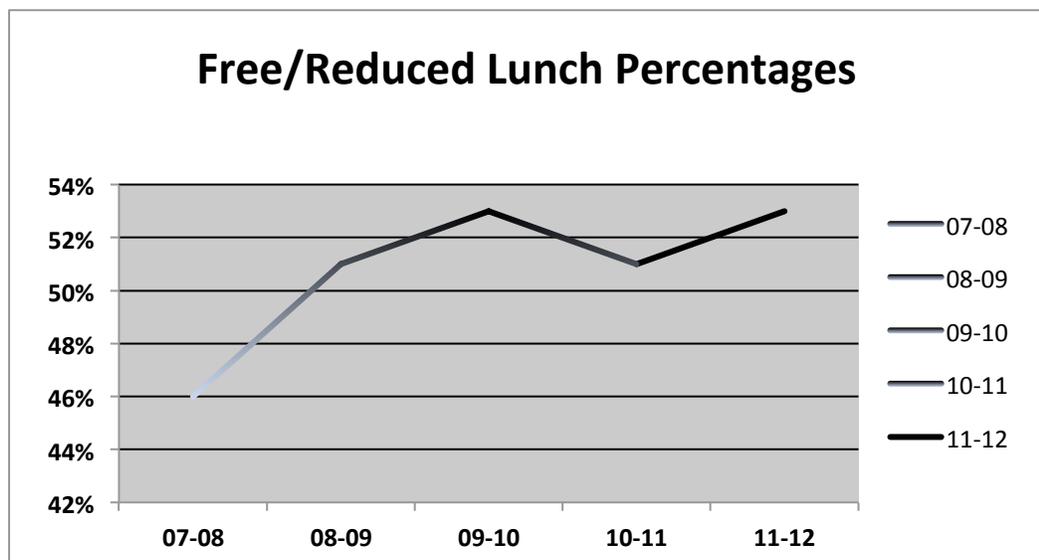


Figure One²¹

²⁰ Demographics of Milton, PA, City-Data.com.

²¹ Figure One was solicited for this project from the Milton Area School District Superintendent's office, Cathy Grollier, Superintendent, 1 February, 2012.

Free/Reduced Lunch History by Building					
School	Year				
Building	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12
Baughers Elem	56%	61%	64%	62%	62%
Middle School	49%	51%	54%	51%	54%
Senior High	32%	38%	41%	41%	43%
Montandon	46%	56%	61%	56%	57%
White Deer	49%	49%	44%	44%	47%
Total	46%	51%	53%	51%	53%

Total District Percentages					
Year	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12
Total	46%	51%	53%	51%	53%

Table One²²

The above statistical data paint a picture of a town characterized by economic hardship and family stress. Another indication of family stress is the number of substantiated child abuse cases in our county. Out of sixty-seven counties in Pennsylvania only eight counties had a higher number of substantiated abuse cases in 2010.

Milton is a town with a colorful history. One of its best known sons, Dr. James Curtis Hepburn, was born in Milton in 1815 and became a medical doctor and missionary to Japan after it was opened to the West by Commodore Perry. Hepburn was at one time a member of First Presbyterian Church. His name is well known in Japan even today because he was the first to develop a Roman character system for writing Japanese, called the Hepburn System. He was also the first person to translate the entire Bible into Japanese and was president and promoter of Meiji Gakuin Academic College, which later

²² Table One was solicited for this project from the Milton Area School District Superintendent's office, Cathy Grollier, Superintendent, 1 February, 2012.

became Meiji Gakuin University.²³ First Presbyterian Church has received numerous guests from Japan in the last fifteen years who came to Milton to see the birthplace and home church of Dr. Hepburn.

Another famous son of the town was former Pennsylvania Governor James Pollock. Born in 1810 in Milton, Pollock became the governor in 1854, and was appointed Director of the Philadelphia Mint in 1861 by President Lincoln, his personal friend. Pollock is well known for placing on our national coins the exceptional phrase, “In God We Trust.” He was called “the great Christian governor.”²⁴ Milton is also the home of Chef Boy-ar-di, a company founded by Ettore (Hector) Boyardi (1897-1985) and currently owned by ConAgra. Boyardi is well known for his canned spaghetti sold nationwide that became popular shortly after World War II.

The town of Milton faces many challenges but is working hard to present a good face to the world. It is a town where the pace of life is slow. It is small enough that one might meet and speak with many friends at the local supermarket or on a downtown street. The major challenges include the loss of area businesses, including one of the largest employers, American Car and Foundry (ACF). School enrollment is projected to decrease significantly over the next ten years and local police have called attention to a noticeable increase in drug traffic and gang activity in recent years.

The Milton Area Ministerium is an organization of local pastors. About ten churches out of twenty-five in the area have been active in this group, and there has been

²³ W.T. Linn Kieffer, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Milton, Pennsylvania, 1811-1936*, Self-published. 113.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

a good sense of camaraderie among the pastors. The Ministerium sponsors a food distribution program. Events throughout the year include Lenten Bible studies and the annual CROP Walk to raise money for hunger. Milton has two large churches that attract over five hundred on a weekend. These churches have multiple staffs, newer facilities, large stages, worship bands, high-tech lighting and sound, and effective children and youth ministries. They have something for everyone and have been successful in attracting members from the older churches who have longed for a more contemporary church experience. Milton also has many small churches of less than fifty trying to stay alive. The percentage of the population affiliated with a religious congregation is 60.22 percent.²⁵ With 40 percent of the people being unchurched there is a great need for Christian outreach.

First Presbyterian Church is known as one of the healthy mainline churches in the area. With average attendance of 135 the church is stable financially, and though most of the worshippers are over fifty, there are some young families who attend with their children. In the last sixteen years, Milton has had three churches close and a number have moved to part-time staff. At least two new Spanish speaking congregations were started recently and three large churches in town have added Spanish ministries. The religious community has always been a source of strength for this town. But the landscape is changing and there is clearly a great need for renewal.

²⁵City-Data, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Milton-Pennsylvania.html> (accessed on February 1, 2012).

Opportunities for Improving Community Relationships

Like in many small towns, children's sports events are perhaps the most popular way the town routinely gathers together to exhibit spirit. Local high school football is an obvious example, but the people of Milton also give tremendous support to girls' softball, club soccer teams, T-Ball, and Little League baseball. Increasingly, these events hold practice and games on Sundays, making it almost the new religion for many people.

An annual event that exemplifies town unity is the Harvest Festival. Each September for two consecutive weekends, Milton attracts thousands of visitors for what used to be called the Tomato Festival, when the Chef Boy-ar-di company would bring in the tomatoes from local fields. This event involves scores of people working together on pageants, concerts, and events over the two-week period, concluding with a parade through town that usually attracts over six thousand people.

Being adjacent to the Susquehanna River, everyone in Milton has a flood story to tell. The worst flood in recent memory came during Hurricane Agnes in 1972, when much of the town was permanently changed. It was a time of great suffering, but it also served to bring the town together like never before. There are many stories of people working to help each other during this crisis. First Presbyterian Church members recall how the church and manse had five feet of water in them, requiring hundreds of hours of labor to clean up the mess. People gave unselfishly of their time and money to restore the church and manse. It was an amazing display of community spirit and provided a model of hope for future community efforts.

More recently the town has gathered for large prayer meetings after some of the national tragedies that have affected the country. When the Oklahoma City bombing took place, the churches held a prayer meeting at the high school with over eight hundred in attendance. After September 11, 2001, churches organized another evening of prayer at the high school football stadium with six hundred people gathering together to pray for the nation. These pockets of community spirit demonstrate the unique atmosphere of unity and solidarity for God and country in this small town.

The Hand-up Foundation is a new ministry in town that combines a large for-profit recycling center with a thrift store and provides counseling and opportunities for work to give people “a hand up, not a hand out.” This ministry has built low income housing in the town, with more projects in the works. Love INC is an organization started by the Ministerium that connects people's needs for rides, light housework, and companionship with people in area churches willing to volunteer their time. The “INC” stands for *In the Name of Christ*. This Christian ministry has a hotline number for people to call. The needs are then screened by Love INC staff. The ministry is funded through donations mostly from local churches.

Relay for Life is a two-day event sponsored by the American Cancer Society to raise funds to fight cancer. Teams solicit donations and camp out for two days at the high school football stadium walking around the track and listening to local bands. Special events include a moving survivor's walk in the evening with luminaries placed around the track. The effort was started in Milton by Ed Coup. Ed was working for the Cancer Society at the time and offered to start up this event in the town. He credits the churches

and people of the town for being generous and supportive.²⁶ Ed began by collecting donors' names and holding a few meetings to look for volunteers. With just a handful of helpers he collected corporate sponsors and solicited the churches for teams to participate. Many of the churches jumped right in and some formed multiple teams. The monetary goal for the first year was set by the Cancer Society at \$10,000 but they raised more than \$25,000 that first year. The next goal was \$35,000 and they raised \$67,000. As the event grew in size, it eventually had forty teams signed up and raised over \$167,000 for cancer research. It became a wonderful example of the vitality in this small town that proved its ability to come together to fight a common enemy. Milton inspired a number of other local towns to start their own events. Ed said that many people look at Milton as blue-collar town with many problems, but this event proved that Milton has a lot of community spirit and many great people who enjoy working together on a common goal. Relay for Life is a model of working together.

George Venios, a member of First Presbyterian Church, has written two books on the town's history. George is now working full time on a revitalization plan for the town through an organization called TIME (The Improved Milton Experience), a model of people working together. George became interested in helping the town because of his stint on the school board and a term as a church Trustee.²⁷ His pride in the town was instilled by his parents who were Greek immigrants. Growing up in the 1960s, he experienced the downtown in its heyday. He mentioned the flood of 1972 that destroyed

²⁶ Edward A. Coup, interview by author, telephone, Milton, PA, 1 February 2012.

²⁷ George S. Venios, interview by author, telephone, Milton, PA, 1 February 2012.

so much of the town, and how the government sponsored redevelopment changed the town forever. The very next year, in 1973, the Capital Theater burned down, leaving a big empty lot in the downtown. George called this an “iconic event” that seemed to impact the town psyche. Because of George's fond memories of his childhood and town pride, he worked hard to bring people together through the TIME organization. The group has had many successes including building a gazebo, starting a summer concert series, opening a well-stocked model train museum, refurbishing store fronts, and building a downtown walking tour that teaches the town’s history. A new park was built with exercise equipment, and three large murals, painted on downtown buildings, emphasize the town’s history. George noted that local newspapers said, “Milton is experiencing a renaissance.” He had nothing but positive things to say about people’s responses to his efforts. His strategy has been to get people to reminisce about what the town once was in order to invigorate hope for the future. He believes it is working. Thinking about a rich past seems to be effective in getting people to envision a brighter future. George noted that other organizations are impacting the town positively such as the Milton Panthers booster club called *Panther Pride*, the Harvest Festival that attracts almost ten thousand visitors a year, and the new Cultural Festival that is designed to celebrate diversity within the area population. Milton, Pennsylvania, is clearly a town made of people capable of working together.

First Presbyterian Church demonstrates the same positive characteristics. The following description of a recent event is an example of the church at its best. The event took place in May of 2011 and was called *Faith in Action Sunday*. The idea came from a

local Mennonite church that successfully implemented a program of church-wide service that involved cancelling worship for a Sunday and having church members go out into the community to “be the church.” This is actually a national program sponsored by World Vision and Outreach Ministries. The Presbyterians gathered a team of twelve people to visit the Mennonite church in order to talk with the head of its program. The enthusiasm of the Mennonite leader was contagious, and the Presbyterians all came away excited. The timing was good because First Presbyterian was celebrating its 200th birthday and decided to make this event a part of the celebration.

Various committees with strong leaders worked on each aspect of the day’s events. On Sunday, May 22, 2011, First Presbyterian planned to have the choir and children visit local nursing homes, providing a concert and hand out gifts delivered by the children. Another team decorated local graves for Memorial Day and work teams were sent out to clean up parks and spread mulch, paint walls at the Hand-up Foundation, and build a ramp for a handicapped resident. The church held a block party the same day in the church's parking lot, where they offered everything for free as a gift to the community. More than three hundred people come out for free food, games, a puppet group, musical groups, and clogging. The church also had a dunk tank (for the pastor and others—all good sports), rented inflatable games, and they provided face painting for the children and lots of give-away plants and clothes. The church involved well over one hundred of its members in running these activities and ministries and everyone felt it was a huge success. The day ended with a brief worship service and slide show at the church with time for testimonies from the participants. It was a day that the whole church came

together for a multi-faceted outreach to the town. Many in the congregation expressed great joy observing the church working together and reaching so many in the community with the love of Christ on the same day. Out of this event has come a renewed desire to do hands-on service work for needy people within the congregation, and there is great momentum for a second *Faith in Action Sunday* in May of 2012. This is the church doing what it is meant to do, an experience of the church at its best.

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH CONTEXT: A MAINLINE CHURCH CELEBRATING TWO HUNDRED YEARS

This chapter will describe the context for ministry at First Presbyterian Church. The first section will describe the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination with its history and challenges. Then a brief history of First Presbyterian Church will be presented along with a description of the membership. A discussion of the polity and practices of the church will be addressed along with opportunities and obstacles for a new home group ministry.

The Presbyterian Church (USA), A Denomination in Transition

At the end of 2011 the Presbyterian Church (USA) had just over 1,952,287 members in 10,466 congregations.¹ The greatest concentration of church members is found in Pennsylvania. This once thriving denomination is deeply affected by a theological divide over the authority of Scripture and the essential tenets of the faith. In the last ten years the denomination lost 20.2 percent of its members or 618 entire

¹ Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), "Church Statistical Reporting," <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/6/21/stated-clerk-releases-pcusa-2011-statistics/> (accessed October, 29, 2012).

congregations. A brief history of the denomination will provide the context for the current divide and loss of membership.

Presbyterian Heritage

Presbyterians trace their heritage back to the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century and specifically the French lawyer John Calvin (1509-1564) whose mission was one of reform and restoration within the medieval church. At the age of twenty-seven, Calvin wrote a book called the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that became the foundation for the non-Lutheran branch of protestant theology known as Reformed Theology. John a. Mackay describes Calvin's focus in his *Institutes*:

[This book] was an effort to reach back to the Christianity of the Bible and the Apostolic Church. Taking the scriptures alone, rather than scripture and tradition, as his supreme authority, and looking to the Holy Spirit rather than to the church of his time for guidance, in his interpretation of the Christian truth, while being most deferential to the opinion of the great Fathers of the Church, Calvin sought to construct a system of Christian theology.²

Calvin created a form of church government in which the ultimate authority is vested in the Presbytery, a church court made up of equal numbers of ministers and lay leaders. Calvin differed from Luther in that Calvin believed the Bible should be applied to all aspects of life including the political realm.³ Calvin spent most of his life in the Swiss city of Geneva where he instituted democratic reforms. His teachings greatly influenced the spread of capitalism and democracy forming the foundation for the freedoms all Americans share today. John Knox came from Scotland to study with Calvin in Geneva and took Reformed teachings back to Scotland, ushering in the Scottish Reformation.

² John A. Mackay, *The Presbyterian Way of Life*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

Early American Presbyterians came from Scotland and Ireland. Presbyterianism is characterized by a representative form of government that is neither hierarchical, in that there are no bishops, nor congregational, but is made up of elders elected from the congregation. The most important description of Presbyterian beliefs is found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism* of 1647. Presbyterians came to America forming congregations as early as the 1630s. The first organization of churches, called a Presbytery, began in Philadelphia in 1706. The denomination has always maintained high standards for an educated clergy, a commitment that limited its growth in the early years of the country. The denomination is well known for its mission efforts to Native Americans, Black Africans, and Asians. It is also known for its many divisions. Over the years Presbyterians have divided over theology, revivalism, slavery, women's rights, civil rights, and gay rights. At the heart of its many divisions is a debate over the place and interpretation of the Bible.

Issues Affecting Evangelicals

In the twentieth century, a great divide surfaced between liberal and conservative factions within the denomination. In 1923 J. Gresham Machen, distinguished professor at Princeton Seminary, published a book titled *Christianity and Liberalism* in which he argued that the beliefs of the liberal mainstream constituted a different faith altogether. "It may appear," writes Machen, "that what the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion that is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct

category."⁴ In 1926 the denomination gave up requiring that the essential tenets of the faith be specified for ministerial examinations:

During the four decades that followed the 1926 General Assembly, generations of Presbyterians leaders were ordained without reference to any doctrine that the denomination deemed essential. During examination, candidates for ordination were asked to receive and adopt 'the essential tenets of Reformed faith,' but nowhere were these essential tenets specified. The result was precisely what J. Gresham Machen predicted, a broadly inclusive leadership that defied theological definition.⁵

Machen subsequently took nine other professors from Princeton and formed Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. In 1967 the denomination took another step away from orthodoxy when it decided to make subscription to the *Book of Confessions* a non-requirement, effectively turning the confessions into a theological museum. Since ministers were merely to be "guided" by the confessions, the door was left open to almost any belief or denial of belief among the clergy. The denomination also introduced the Confession of 1967, a new confession which took a position on biblical authority contrary to every other confession in the book. For example, the *Westminster Confession* states, "The authority of Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."⁶ But the Confession of 1967 states, "Scripture is nevertheless the words of men,

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923), 6.

⁵ Parker T. Williamson, *Broken Covenant: Signs of a Shattered Communion*, (Lenoir: NC, Reformation Press, 2007), 45.

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, *The Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church (USA)* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 126.

conditioned by language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written."⁷ The combination of a weak view of Scripture and a total lack of theological standards for ministers allowed the mission of the church to be obscured by liberalism's agenda. In 1971 Black Panther Angela Davis received a grant of \$10,000 from the United Presbyterian Church Fund to Combat Racism. Davis had been arrested when a judge was shot by a gun registered in her name.⁸ The grant was given while she was in jail. Though Davis was later acquitted of all charges, the outcry from the people in the pews echoed throughout the Church for many years. Liberation Theology moved the church further and further into an anti-capitalist Marxist stance for decades. The World Council of Churches, heavily funded by the PC (USA) became the mouthpiece for the cause of liberation. During the 1980s denominational officials supported Daniel Ortega's Sandinista campaign as a "mission" of the church in Nicaragua: "The Presbyterian Church (USA) poured thousands of dollars into Sandinista support projects. Much of this money was laundered through a labyrinth of interconnecting, quasi-independent ecumenical organizations."⁹ The gap between the agenda of denominational officials and the mission of the people in the pews was ever widening.

Another disturbing trend in the denomination affecting Evangelicals and many moderates was illustrated in 2000 at the Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference. It was there that Rev. Dirk Ficca gave a keynote speech on Christianity in a pluralistic world. In

⁷ Confession of 1967, *The Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church (USA)* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 265.

⁸ Williamson, *Broken Covenant*, 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

that speech, Rev. Ficca said, "If God is at work in our lives, whether we're Christian or not, what's the big deal about Jesus?"¹⁰ The fallout from this outrageous statement carried into the General Assembly meeting of 2001 where a debate ensued over declaring Jesus Christ as the "singular saving Lord." By a vote of 369-163, the General Assembly declared that Jesus is "unique." In its article on this debate, *Christianity Today* reports, "The Rev. Joe Rightmyer, executive director of Presbyterians for Renewal, . . . said, 'What has crept into the life of the Presbyterian Church is not just differences of opinion, it is unbelief.'"¹¹

Evangelicals within the PC (USA) have felt more and more marginalized within the Church. The women's ordination issue pushed some Evangelicals out of the Church in the 1970s when the denomination decided to make it mandatory that clergy support women in all levels of ministry. From the 1970s to today the issue of gay ordination has increasingly been front and center in the debate over the authority of Scripture. In 2010 a majority of the 176 Presbyteries voted to allow each Presbytery to determine its own ordination standards. This was another move intended to keep the peace in this deeply divided organization by allowing Presbyteries to ordain practicing homosexuals, bisexuals and transgendered people if they wished. In 2012 a new Reformed body was begun to provide fellowship and organizational structure for Evangelicals in the PC (USA) who felt they could not accept the current stance on gay ordination.

¹⁰ *Presbyterian Church (USA) News Note* #6154, August 16, 2000, qtd. in Williamson, *Broken Covenant*, 134.

¹¹ Williamson, *Broken Covenant*, 136.

Consequences of Recent Changes

First Presbyterian Church in Milton, Pennsylvania, is rethinking its denominational connectivity in light of these recent developments. For the past three years, the Session of First Presbyterian Church has been withholding the General Assembly portion of per capita monies, about one third of total per capita, in protest of denominational policies. This amounts to \$6.63 per member in 2012, for a total of \$2,320.00 annually. The reason for withholding the money is to keep it out of the hands of the mostly liberal employees at denominational headquarters. Many in the congregation have expressed concern over the unbiblical direction of the PC (USA) over the last few years, and no one in the congregation has objected to the Session's withholding action. Over the past fifteen years, the Church has lost members to more conservative denominations. Many members are weary of the battles taking place at Presbytery and General Assembly over the same divisive issues. In March of 2012, the Session decided to look into designing a "Gracious Separation" policy to bring to the Presbytery for churches that wish to leave the denomination. Unfortunately church property is held in trust by the Presbytery in the PC (USA), and many churches are hesitant to fight in the civil court system, which often rules in the denomination's favor. First Presbyterian Church is a part of Northumberland Presbytery, which has set aside the year 2012 to discuss the future of the Presbytery and its churches in light of recent decisions. It is estimated that 30-40 percent of the churches in the Presbytery would leave if not for the property clause.

First Presbyterian Church Celebrating Two Hundred Years

On December 4, 2012, First Presbyterian Church celebrated its bicentennial. It was the first church chartered by the newly formed Presbytery of Northumberland in 1811. At that time the Rev. John Bryson was travelling through the region holding Sabbath services in Milton (1800 to 1810). Rev. Thomas Hood was the first pastor installed by the Presbytery, but the church received his services only once a month. The church shared buildings with other denominations in the early years until 1838 when the first building was erected, twenty-seven years after its organization.¹² That building was replaced in 1857 when a larger building was constructed on the same site. This building burned down along with most of the town in the great fire of 1880. The current building was then constructed on a new site with services beginning in 1882. Attendance at the first service was 302.¹³ A home for the pastor was then built next to the church and both structures were dedicated in 1887 with virtually no debt remaining.

Flood damage has been a part of this church's story as it is located one block from the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. The worst flood was in 1972 when hurricane Agnes hung over Milton for five days, raising the river to fifteen feet above flood stage. The church and manse were swamped with five feet of water. As the waters receded, the church pulled together to clean and repair the buildings. Many people look back to this time as a positive demonstration of community spirit. Each time the river rises, people

¹² W. T. Linn Kieffer, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church of Milton, Pennsylvania 1811-1936* (Self-published, 1935), 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

come out of their homes and share stories and help each other with flooded basements and debris removal.

I have served First Presbyterian Church for almost seventeen years. The prior pastor served for eight years, leaving under a cloud due to a contentious vote that failed to approve the conversion of the manse into offices. About a dozen members left over the issue, some of whom returned during the current pastor's tenure. Church members look back nostalgically to a well-loved pastor, Dr. Phillip Jones, who served two pastorates ago. Dr. Jones was a good preacher with a deep voice and commanding personality who ran the church in an old-school style with just a few men sharing most of the responsibility. He served the church from 1955 to 1986 when attendance was better than today. During the church's recent bicentennial celebration, many older members recalled the good old days when "Father Phil," as he was known, would endear his congregation with his passionate sermons and not a few idiosyncrasies.

Church Health and Statistics

For the past ten years church membership at First Presbyterian Church has been stable, fluctuating between 310 and 340 members. The PC (USA) reports that the average PC (USA) church is 191 members.¹⁴ Worship attendance at First Presbyterian Church has dwindled from 170 to 135 over the same period. The national average attendance is 107.¹⁵ Sunday school enrollment at First Presbyterian Church has plummeted consistently

¹⁴ Presbyterian Church (USA) Research Services, "Ten-Year Trends," http://apps.pcusa.org/tenyeartrends/report/7891/all_statistics.pdf (accessed June 5, 2012).

¹⁵ Ibid.

from a ten year high of 75 to about 40 with most attendees currently being adults (this reflects enrollment, not attendance). The Pastor's Open Forum class at First Presbyterian Church has been the most consistent with about fifteen to twenty attendees each week.

In *Studying Congregations*, the authors note the importance of special occasions in the life of the church: "By attending to the regular routines and assumptions of the congregation's life . . . you can begin to outline its implicit theological identity."¹⁶ Important activities of this church include the Mother's Day banquet, Lenten dinners, Sunday school quarterly breakfasts, coffee hours after worship, and other activities centered around eating. Other routines include monthly committee and board meetings, choir practice, the annual Thanksgiving meal, and for the last two years Faith in Action Sunday when worship is cancelled and church members blanket the community with service projects.

Envisioning Change

Various attempts have been made to create vision and change within the church. Using Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* in 1997, the congregation decided on a purpose statement similar to one recommended in the book.¹⁷ The leadership noticed that the church committee structure aligned with the church purposes with one exception. The Stewardship Committee, one of the five existing committees, did not seem to fit with any

¹⁶ Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 35.

¹⁷ Purpose statement: "Our purpose is to bring people to Christ and membership in His church, nurture them to Christ-like maturity, equip them for their church ministry and mission in the world, to the glory of God."

of the five purposes of the church in the purpose statement. It was also observed that church fellowship, an important aspect of membership, was not covered by any standing committee. So the Session agreed to drop the Stewardship Committee, turning its responsibilities over to the Session in general, and created a Fellowship Committee, responsible for designing and implementing fellowship events throughout the church year. This change has been helpful in fostering friendships in a church with many new faces.

Another endeavor to create vision and change, Total Family Sunday School, was an attempt at developing a Sunday school for all ages. It began by attracting almost 100 people but proved to be a program that involved more preparation work than the volunteers could handle. Too much of the technical preparation fell to the pastor. Volunteers were either not willing or not able to give the program the time it needed for success. After about three months the Sunday school went back to its more traditional format. Since then attendance has seen a slow decline as fewer and fewer parents in the church are willing to commit to bringing their children on a weekly basis. This decline in turn has discouraged the leadership so that the teacher base has shrunk. The low numbers in classes has made it difficult for teachers and students to maintain a positive morale.

Natural Church Development Survey

Natural Church Development (hereafter NCD) is a program of church study that determines areas within church life that need to be addressed to allow for natural growth. The premise of NCD is that all healthy organizations grow. But growth of an organization or church is often limited by the abilities of an organization in certain key

areas. NCD has studied seventy thousand churches on all six continents and discovered eight key strengths of growing churches. They developed a test to help churches discover in which of the eight areas the church is weak. Churches that improve in their weakest area will remove barriers to natural growth. First Presbyterian took the test and discovered that the church scored below average (fifty percent) in all eight categories, a common discovery among older main-line churches. The church health value of “passionate spirituality” was the lowest score (thirty-two percent) when compared with other churches around the world. Passionate Spirituality is defined as loving God with one's whole heart, mind, body and soul. The fruit of passionate spirituality is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.¹⁸

At First Presbyterian Church, some of the most spiritually passionate members felt they outgrew the church and moved on to more active churches, leaving behind members who see church attendance as a responsibility. Christian Schwarz, the founder of NCD explains, “The concept of spiritual passion and the widespread notion of the walk of faith as ‘performing one’s duty’ seem to be mutually exclusive.”¹⁹ He discusses the problem of nominalism, or going through the motions half-heartedly, as being more of a problem in some traditions than others. Schwarz writes that "some traditions are more prone to nominalism, while others may be more prone to legalism. While in some churches those who live their faith nominally have to justify themselves, in other church

¹⁸ Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, *Releasing Your Church's Potential* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), Notebook Section 4, 1 & 4.

¹⁹ Christian A Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL, ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 26.

traditions the very opposite is true--those who want to live their faith with passion have to justify themselves. Although they are accepted, they are deemed a sub-culture."²⁰ This may help explain why members of the church who became more serious about faith felt they had to leave.

A church health team was formed in 2006 to develop goals to address this minimum factor. According to Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, "Small groups provide a wonderful environment to nurture passionate spirituality. If passionate spirituality is being developed in individuals and in small groups, it will spill over into the larger gatherings."²¹ Working with the conviction that this passion is more caught than taught, small groups were introduced into church life in 2006 to address the deficit. The groups seemed to be effective at bringing people together and fostering spiritual friendships. About sixty people have been members of various groups in the last few years. The content used was published curriculum often featuring John Ortberg as the video teacher. One or two groups seemed to bond and expressed a desire to continue meeting. The goal of a growing love within the group seemed to be achieved. Other groups did not have such a natural desire to continue.

The Need to Improve Relationships

Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow writes, "Perhaps at no time in history have individuals been more insistent that they can be spiritual without the church, that they can follow their own conscience and develop their 'personal faith' in a way that is uniquely

²⁰ Christian A. Schwarz, *The Three Colors of Your Spirituality*, (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart, 2009), 18.

²¹ Logan and Clegg, *Releasing Your Church's Potential*, Notebook Section 4, 11.

theirs."²² What many individuals ignore is the simple fact that people are social creatures. God designed faith to be passed down within a community. Whutnow argues that the reason community is so important is that "it is the basis even of the individual's identity. We discover our identity as we interact with other people."²³ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon make the same point in their book *Resident Aliens* where they write, "What if our true selves are made from materials of our communal life? Where is there some 'self' which has not been communally created? By cutting back our attachments and commitments, the self shrinks rather than grows."²⁴ The church must be clear that a primary facet of its mission is to foster relationships that nurture faith.

The need for growing spiritual friendships at First Presbyterian Church is critical as this church has come from a long and traditional mainline past. There are many families that have been in the church for years. These people are well connected and satisfied with their level of friendships because of their history, memories, and extensive family relationships. But this very strength makes it difficult for newer members to find a place to connect. Professor Leith Anderson, in a class on church growth, depicted this problem using dominos. In order to connect dominos one must find a place that is open and not already connected. If the dominos are already all connected up it becomes harder and harder to find an open spot to make a connection. The same is true in a church. Most

²² Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 65.

people can only service so many friendships. If the older church members are already linked up and comfortable with their circle of friends, the new families will not be able to make meaningful connections. Anderson advised church leaders to connect new members with other new members who are not already connected up. At First Presbyterian Church, this is an apt illustration of the frustration many feel as older members of the church and community have a hard time making room for newer church and community members. With the added challenge of varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds being represented in the church, the difficulty of having the church bond together is formidable. A new emphasis on home groups could help to break down barriers and introduce long time members to newer believers and seekers.

Hope and Challenge for a Church of Baby Boomers

First Presbyterian Church could be described as a church of aging baby boomers. When young people under age eighteen are removed from the total, the average age of a church member is about fifty-seven, which happens to be the age of the current pastor. Many of the current members have little involvement in church life beyond weekly attendance. Only one-third to one-half of the members participate in other activities throughout the year. One reason for this is that many are senior citizens who naturally limit their activities as they age. But there are also quite a few long time members who seem reluctant to socialize. Some describe themselves as socially backward or “country folk.” They are willing to open up with the pastor but not with each other.

Adult Sunday school is one place where some friendships are deepening. The Pastor’s Open Forum class has about twenty-five members who seem to enjoy being

together. It is a place where discussion happens about current events, Bible issues, and life problems. The discussion helps members get to know and trust each other. Recently many in the group have been gathering for fellowship and get-togethers outside of church activities. Two other classes have also helped to foster spiritual friendships in the church but have recently lost membership. The Rainbow class for senior women and the New Disciples class have both dwindled to just a handful of members. The friendships in these groups are close but shrinking.

Tres Dias (Spanish for “three days”) is renewal movement that came out of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s. About thirty-five members of First Presbyterian have taken part in the three-day event that offers concentrated teaching on basic Christianity. Some new friendships have developed out of this ministry, especially among people who have become leaders on subsequent weekends. Weekend leaders spend many hours in preparation meetings where personal stories are shared and team members often bond together. The spiritual depth of a *Tres Dias* weekend has helped members of the church to establish stronger spiritual ties with one another and a deeper experience of God.

Ministry to children has been a constant source of struggle for First Presbyterian Church. In the early 1990s, the former pastor built up the Sunday school program and had dedicated leadership. A plan was drawn up at the time to convert the pastor's home, located on the church property, to Sunday school rooms and offices. Many church members disagreed and felt it was unnecessary. This divided the church between the "zealous Sunday school crowd" and the "old guard." The contentious plan was eventually

voted down and soon the pastor left along with some of the most vocal Sunday school leaders and advocates. Ever since that time, it has been a struggle to get teachers and build up a solid church school program. Twice the church has hired a full-time youth pastor and both efforts bore some fruit. The problem these staffers faced was getting volunteer help for the ministry. It became a one-man show and soon failed. More recently the church has supported an outside youth ministry and allowed the church building to be used on a weekly basis. This ministry has been effective in reaching some of the neediest young people in the town. Youth are now being reached for Christ at the church. But unfortunately none of the church members' children have been involved in this ministry perhaps because they see themselves as moving in a different socio-economic crowd. The church is not currently reaching its own young people through any focused effort.

Leadership and the Reformed Tradition

It is important now to turn to the leadership structure of the church and how leaders function formally and informally within the church community. In the Reformed tradition, the governing board of a Presbyterian church is called the Session and is composed of elders elected by the congregation for three year terms. At First Presbyterian Church there is also a board of Deacons and Trustees who report to the Session. The Session is responsible for all of the ministries and property of the local church. The pastor is the moderator of the Session and usually votes only to break a tie. The Session at First Presbyterian Church, with its fifteen members, has five committees that manage Christian education, mission, worship, fellowship, and outreach. This describes the formal structure of organization.

There also exists an informal structure in the church that one might call “clan leadership.” In First Presbyterian, a small town church, certain people and families have exercised authority and given permission over the years. In the eyes of many people, these families and individuals have earned the right to have an influence even when they are not formally in places of leadership. While some people who are not currently serving on a board try to lie low and keep quiet, others are not so inclined and readily give their opinions, pro or con. An example of this informal leadership is how the current pastor not only had to go through a formal interview process with the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC), but on the same day was invited with his family to attend a pool party picnic where he was informally vetted by a key family in the church. Before decisions are made it is wise to confer with the informal networks of decision makers because their opinions often matter even more than those of the elected officials. For example, when the Session of the church decided to install projection screens in the sanctuary paid for by a benefactor, a person not part of the Session met privately with the benefactor. He then blind-sided the pastor at the next meeting explaining that the woman changed her mind and the project was not to be funded. On the other hand, when people are questioning a project and a key person or family endorses it publically, everyone falls in line to support the plan.

Stated and Apparent Values

The core values of First Presbyterian Church were approved in January of 2009. The values state that First Presbyterian Church is Christ-centered, Bible-based, disciple-making, and outreach-oriented. Being Christ-centered means that Jesus Christ is the

supreme life example and his work is should be the work of the church. Paul writes in Colossians 1:18, “And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” Bible-based means that the church's teaching and mission comes from the Bible, God’s inspired word to us. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Disciple-making refers to efforts to make disciples who practice spiritual disciplines including prayer, Bible reading, fellowship, and giving. Disciples must discover and use their spiritual gifts in the church and the world. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” And Ephesians 4:11-12 states, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Outreach-oriented means it is a primary goal of the church to share Jesus Christ with those who do not yet know him and bring them into the family of God. In Acts 2:46-47, the Bible says this of the early disciples, “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

It is no secret that the apparent theological values at First Presbyterian may not coincide with these above-stated values. The members of the church may want their sermons to be Bible based, but many of them do not read the Bible for themselves. There

is a big difference between being Christ-centered and being church-centered. The first one focuses on a relationship with the invisible God revealed in Scripture. The second focuses on human relationships and institutions. A church can be friendly without being specifically outreach oriented. Outreach refers to actively bringing in new people and supporting programs and events that reach the unchurched. Disciple-making sounds good, but if it is something only the pastor and one or two others are interested in, then it is not really a value of the whole church. The challenge of these core values at First Presbyterian Church is keeping them in front of the people and constantly explaining their meaning and implications. Since the values were described in 2009, they have unfortunately disappeared from view.

Current Leadership at First Presbyterian Church

A survey was recently made of the leaders' perceptions of their abilities. Fifteen board members were asked to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses using a simple survey that asked two questions. The first question was, "In your Christian life, what do you see as your strengths and weaknesses?" The second question was similar, "In your work as a board member, what do you see as your strengths and weaknesses?" Each board member was to give three answers to each question. Board members listed their Christian strengths. They see themselves as faithful, optimistic, joyful, willing to help, and from a good Christian background. They said they were disciplined in devotions, loving, helpful, full of faith, reliable, generous, and had a ministry to the sick. Others described themselves as capable leaders, polite, a good Christian example, and able to persevere. Evaluating the challenges in their Christian life, they noted a lack of

relationships, physical and emotional challenges, difficulty seeing the negative, lack of planning, too busy, lack of spiritual discipline, staying focused in devotions, temptation to misuse the internet, lack of patience with God, lack of personal evangelism, trouble praying out loud, no longer comfortable leading--but willing to serve, having trouble saying no, and striving for perfection.

The strengths they described in their board ministry work included willingness to challenge others to do God's will, experience on the board, love toward board members, intuition, knowledge of the church property, knowledge of congregation's needs, dedication, being a team player, deference to group decisions, ability to listen, desire to work with people, commitment to support the church with time, talent and treasure, consistent in prayer for board and pastor, ministry to sick, public lay reading, foresight, attention to detail, sensitive, knowledge of board history, and a conviction that we are Christ-driven. The challenges they listed in their work on the boards were lack of foresight, occasional apathy, physical limitations, doubt about the future of the denomination, lack of skill in evangelism, reluctance to volunteer, lack of confidence in leading, unskilled in financial analysis, lack of patience with chronic issues, listening, impulsiveness, talking too much, avoiding responsibility, not contributing enough at meetings, uncomfortable speaking in a group, accepting others' attitudes, troubled by lack of follow-through, lack of time, lack of knowledge of church policy and polity, and being new to the church.

Clearly some board members appreciate the relationships they have formed with others on the board and in the church, while others are aware of a lack of such

relationships. This could be attributed to a few simple factors. Personality differences could account for some of the disparity. Some of these people are extroverts, while others are more introverted. Some have been on the board for years and feel comfortable participating, while others who are newer may not. Some board members see each other socially while many do not have any contact outside of board meetings, which usually do not allow time for building relationships or personal sharing. Home groups could assist board members in building deeper relationships of love and commitment.

Empowering Leaders for the Future

Few board members noted specific skills they had developed in direct ministry with people. The purpose statement of the church says, “Our purpose is to bring people to Christ and membership in His church, to nurture them to Christ-like maturity, equip them for their church ministry and their life mission in the world, all to the glory of God.”²⁵ This statement explains that the mission of the church is the development of people, but few elders see their gifts in this area. The church needs constantly to provide new ways for adults to gain experience leading others toward spiritual development in a non-threatening environment. Small groups are naturally a good place to start. Since First Presbyterian Church has not had a consistent small group ministry, the only small groups that have been consistent over time are the boards and committees. These meetings use a business model and do not provide for personal sharing, prayer, Bible reflection, growth

²⁵ Purpose Statement developed in 1998 using Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

and accountability. A new ministry in this area could be effective in developing these skills among the leadership.

Many leaders at First Presbyterian Church have been reluctant over the years to chair a Session committee even after they were on the committee for two years. The pastor has been frustrated by this lack of confidence and competence. Training for leadership has been provided by the Presbytery and occasionally from outside sources and guest speakers. Nevertheless, much work needs to be done to bring more church leaders to the place where they are willing to lead others. NCD lists empowering leadership as one of the eight quality characteristics of growing churches. First Presbyterian scored 41 percent in this area, which is below the 50 percent average for churches in the study. Professor Robert Logan's course on Natural Church Development gives several characteristics of empowering leadership. Empowering leaders must cultivate a vibrant growing relationship with Christ as a first step. They must continue to grow in character, relationships, skills, learning and ministry. Growing leaders cultivate mentor relationships. Empowering leaders address blockages, such as complacency, lack of vision, fear and timidity, lack of certainty in calling, and poor delegation and change skills. Finally, empowering leaders focus on disciple-making through authentic relationships with family, pre-Christians, and disciples.²⁶

²⁶ Robert E. Logan and Thomas T. Clegg, *Releasing Your Church's Potential* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart, 1998), 2-4.

Opportunities and Obstacles for Home Groups

Home groups have been successful at First Presbyterian Church but have lacked follow through and organizational structure to keep them going. Before the present pastor came to the church there was no history of home group studies. Home groups began in 2006, and developed out of the Natural Church Development study when, in the fall of 2006, five groups began to meet using a study based on a book by John Ortberg titled *If You Want to Walk on Water, You Have to Get Out of the Boat*. Each group had a DVD of teaching by Ortberg, a participant's guide, and a leader manual. Training was provided to group leader volunteers who offered to have groups in their homes. Each group provided refreshments each week for eight to twelve participants. The people who signed up were the mostly regular attendees for other events within the church. Each week the leaders of the groups reported to the pastor on their progress and the feedback was mostly positive. The use of DVD teaching gave the groups some spiritual depth while taking the pressure off of leaders to teach.

A second round of groups was offered the following spring, using Ortberg's *The Life You've Always Wanted*, and these groups were slightly less well attended. The youngest couples were the first to drop out. One group from the first round wanted to stay together and had obviously bonded. But even though the numbers shrank, the response was still enthusiastic for most groups. This time Philip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace* was used as for the content. More leadership was needed from the congregation in hindsight. There was not enough supporting structure in place to help the

groups grow. Yancey's teaching was also less popular and the third round of groups went back to using John Ortberg's materials.

In the spring of 2012, a new approach to groups was tried during Lent. Based on Larry Osborne's book *Sticky Church*, this new approach used the Sunday sermon as its content. The pastor designed a discussion handout each week with a warm up ice breaker. Elder and Deacon volunteers were used as group facilitators. After a common meal at the church, 40 to 50 participants gathered in groups throughout the church building for a half hour and followed the instructions and questions provided by the pastor on the handout. One immediate challenge became apparent. Many people who attended the dinner had not attended worship the previous week. The dinner was drawing in quite a few people who did not attend the church at all. But the target group was the regular worship attendees. Thus goal of discussing a sermon everyone had heard was not attainable with the people attending. Some kind of outreach group would have been more appropriate. Nevertheless, some groups really enjoyed the experience while others tolerated it without complaining. It was an experiment that was only mildly successful.

On one particular night, one of the groups veered off the subject and began talking about how friendly the church was. In that group was a couple who had been attending the church for about two years. The wife began to feel uncomfortable because she looked around the room and realized that few if any of the "regulars" had taken the time to speak with her in the last 2 years. She felt so alone during that discussion that she decided consequently to leave the church and try another. Although this woman has returned to First Presbyterian Church, this incident points to another challenge in the

church culture. The old guard feels very comfortable and thinks the whole church is friendly, while many new people struggle to find a place in the church and have a hard time building relationships. This is a primary reason why a regular and consistent small group ministry would be helpful at First Presbyterian Church. Younger singles and couples are looking to forge new relationships in the church, but they have a limited amount of time to give to church matters. If their needs are not met quickly, they will move on and try to get their needs met elsewhere. The church needs to draw these people into relationships as quickly as possible and groups have the power to achieve this goal. Larry Osborne writes, "If the back door of the church is left wide open, it doesn't matter how many people are coaxed to come in the front door- -or the side door, for that matter. . . . Our churches need to be stickier. Stickier churches are healthier churches."²⁷ The author continues,

Transparency is hardly the hallmark of most churches . . . the stereotype of a church is a place with lots of plastic smiles. Small groups can change that, because by their nature and structure, they naturally foster greater honesty and transparency. Just think about it. Where would *you* be more likely to be open and honest? In a living room or a classroom? With twelve people or twenty-five people?²⁸

One perennial obstacle in First Presbyterian is childcare. Almost no one in the church is interested in providing child care for activities at the church. In recent years four or five people have been paid to staff the church nursery because volunteers have been few and far between. Even finding people for the paid position that admittedly has

²⁷ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

few hours to offer has proven to be challenging. This problem will need to be addressed in the new plan for a small group ministry.

Fortunately, I have had quite a bit of experience with small groups. About two-thirds of this experience is with youth groups which operate somewhat differently from adult groups, yet the basic principles of group dynamics are the same. Back in the 1970s, this pastor was exposed to the excellent work of Lyman Coleman, a pioneer in the field of Christian small group ministry. The pastor attended seminars and conferences on small group ministry and has participated in numerous church and para-church groups. One of the great benefits of small groups he discovered was how they energize group leaders who have a good experience. Giving new volunteer leaders real responsibility for a group and watching how they grow and enjoy the outcome is a blessing that can bring revival to leaders. Volunteer group facilitators have not been hard to find. Most people in church believe they can facilitate a group even if they believe they cannot teach the Bible. And most groups are willing to encourage and work with a novice leader, at least for a while, as they learn how to keep things moving. Quite often everyone is surprised by the outcome. This serendipity moment is when ministry becomes fun and invigorating. Of course, a bad group experience can sour everyone's opinion of groups very quickly. But this problem can be minimized by careful preparation and training. Bad group experiences cannot, however, be avoided all together because each group has so many variables that affect a good experience. It is often the intangibles in a group, such as who shares a special need, or what interpersonal chemistry develops, that make or break a group experience. Leaders must recognize this so that they do not give up too quickly.

Leaders should expect a dull or troubled group experience every once in a while. But the power of groups to transform the body of Christ has been proven time and time again.

The challenges that have appeared in the past, if properly addressed in the new plan, can help to guide the future effort to greater success.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of various literary sources carefully chosen for their relevance to the discussion of Christian community and renewal. The first section deals with the nature of Christian community and renewal within that community. Authors Richard Lovelace and Dietrich Bonhoeffer bring perspectives from different time periods and traditions in recent church history. The second section explores the theology and practice of spiritual relationships from a Reformed and Evangelical perspective using books by Peter Scazzero and Gareth Icenogle. Then a variety of spiritual practices will conclude this portion of the theological reflection using authors Andrew Wheeler and Marjorie Thompson.

The Nature of Christian Community and Renewal

This section of the project presents a theology of renewal and survey of relevant literature beginning with Richard Lovelace's *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*. Lovelace surveys the landscape by discussing some of the roots of evangelicalism. After presenting many insights from the First and Second Great

Awakenings and revival movements in America, Lovelace comes to the biblical models of cyclical and continuous renewal. It is here that the theology of renewal begins to emerge.

The Old Testament is one long story of cyclical renewal. It tells how God's people attempt to follow God and fall away over and over again. The reason for this cyclical pattern is clear. Lovelace writes,

First there is the gravity inherent in human sin, a kind of entropy in human nature which guarantees that the vigor of spiritual life will constantly run down unless it is renewed through the channel of dependent prayer. Second, in response to prayer God pours out his Spirit and revives the declining life of his people, raising up new leaders and turning the hearts of the laity to himself.¹

Lovelace does not imply that renewal comes about because of human initiative. If it were up to fallen human beings, there would be no repentance. It is God who initiates. A clear example from the Old Testament is found in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, where God raises up pagan king Cyrus to call the people back to the Promised Land.

In the New Testament, the atonement of Jesus and the subsequent union of the believer with Christ in his death and resurrection provide for a permanent kind of renewal. The story of the New Testament church is one of relative success in ever enlarging circles of Gospel ministry. The redemptive benefits of the atonement are justification and sanctification. These are at the heart of spiritual renewal. Lovelace writes, "most of the major awakenings have involved among their central catalysts a balanced proclamation of justification by faith and the necessity of progressive

¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 66.

sanctification.”² The preconditions for continuous renewal are an awareness of the holiness of God (his justice, his love) and awareness of the depth of sin (in one’s life and community). Renewal itself stems from a clear presentation of the following points of the Gospel:

1. Justification: You are accepted in Christ
2. Sanctification: You are free from bondage to sin in Christ
3. The indwelling Spirit: You are not alone in Christ
4. Authority in spiritual conflict: You have authority in Christ.³

The secondary elements of renewal include:

1. Mission: following Christ into the world presenting the gospel through preaching and social demonstration.
2. Prayer: expressing dependence on the power of the Spirit individually and corporately
3. Communion: being in union with his body in micro and macrocommunities
4. Disenculturation: being freed from cultural binds
5. Theological integration: having the mind of Christ toward revealed truth and the culture.⁴

In the great opening chapter of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes that knowledge of God and knowledge of self are interrelated: “Men and women cannot know themselves until they know the reality of the God who made them, and once they know the holy God, their own sin appears so grievous that they cannot rest until they have fully appropriated Christ.”⁵ Renewal then involves both an awakening to the realities of human nature and the nature of the one true God.

² Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 74.

³ Ibid., 75.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, qtd. in Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 82.

Lovelace's chapter on renewal in the congregation accurately describes the frustration pastors feel in the local church. Ministers may become aware of new movements of the Spirit in the church but "their congregations tend to slumber peacefully on."⁶ Lovelace points to the required concessions by pastors:

The ultimate concern of most church members is not . . . evangelistic mission and social compassion, but rather survival and success in their vocation. The church is a spoke in the wheel of life connected to the secular hub. Pastors gradually settle down and lose interest in being change agents in the church. It becomes tacitly understood that the laity will give pastors places of special honor . . . if the pastor will agree to leave the congregation's pre-Christian lifestyles undisturbed and do not call for the mobilization of lay gifts for the work of the kingdom.⁷

The point of this discussion is that large structures such as a church or denomination become acculturated and quite resistant to change over time. They become ineffective because of size, the forces of entropy, and resistance to change. Small groups are necessary in the church because they are better equipped to accomplish the tasks God has given. Lovelace writes, "The local congregation is like a whaling vessel. It is too large and unwieldy in itself to catch whales, so it must carry smaller vessels aboard for this purpose. But the smaller whale boats are ill-advised to strike out on their own apart from the mother ship. They can catch a few whales but they cannot process them, and smaller boats can easily be destroyed by storms."⁸ What Lovelace recommends is an in-depth preaching of the gospel which focuses on the primary elements of renewal. Most people unfortunately believe their justification is based on their level of sanctification. Their focus is on the inadequacy of their obedience and not on Christ. The resulting insecurity

⁶ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204-206.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

is demonstrated in pride, defensiveness, and criticism of others. A renewed understanding of justification by faith is the antidote, but, “where justification is preached without an equal stress on sanctification, the good news is always perceived as ‘too good to be true.’”⁹ Lovelace continues,

As Romans 6 makes clear, the ground of sanctification is our union with Christ in his death and resurrection, in which the old nature was destroyed and the new nature created with the power to grow in newness of life. The Holy Spirit begins to apply this completed work in the believer’s life at regeneration and continues it in a progressively enlarging sphere of renewal in the personality. This renewal will be complete only in the final resurrection.¹⁰

Lovelace recognizes that renewal in the church is always dependent upon the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit encourages and responds to the prayers of the people. Deep prayer and dependence upon the Spirit of God must be practiced in conjunction with preaching and theological teaching for significant renewal to take place.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* is a classic treatment of the community Christians share in Jesus Christ. The author begins by noting that Christian community is a privilege that is not always available to the believer. He writes, “Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him.”¹¹ He argues that followers of Christ may at times find themselves to be strangers in a foreign land. There were many times in Paul’s life when he was deserted by all but his Lord. Nevertheless, where communal life exists it is a wonderful blessing of grace for God’s people. Bonhoeffer insists that Christ is at the center of Christian community because it is in

⁹ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 213.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, trans. by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1954), 17.

Christ that believers belong to one another. Each one needs the other because God brings the word through others. It is Christ who brings the Church together, breaking down barriers between brothers and sisters: “Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man. Christ became the Mediator and made peace with God and among men.”¹² Unity is established when Christians come to Christ as sinners in need of a savior. Bonhoeffer sees God’s grace in Christ as the fountain of this unity. He continues, “When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us we then owed to others.”¹³ Bonhoeffer makes an astute observation in his first chapter when he writes about “the danger of confusing Christian brotherhood with some wistful idea of religious fellowship . . . He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter.”¹⁴ This warning is significant because human beings are designed to long for community. But a general sense of community that is not based on Christ is a great threat to genuine Christian fellowship. In other words, Christians dare not settle for less than what God has intended for the Church to experience in Christ. And when Christians discover community in their midst, they must be thankful for whatever level God has allowed them to experience and find contentment. Pastors, for instance, are tempted to be chronically dissatisfied with the congregation they serve because it does not live up to their expectations. Bonhoeffer writes, “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 - 27.

which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”¹⁵ Human love is powerful, but Christian love is better because it cares about truth; it does not make an idol of itself; it is love for Christ’s sake. People in our contemporary society are wrestling with this very issue today. In the debate over Gay ordination and Gay marriage, people are asking, “What is the loving thing to do?” The assumed answer is that marriage and ordination should be seen as a right that cannot be denied on the basis of sexual orientation. But Bonhoeffer counters by saying, “I do not know in advance what love of others means on the basis of the general idea of love that grows out of my human desires—all this may rather be hatred and an insidious kind of selfishness in the eyes of Christ. What love is, only Christ tells in his Word.”¹⁶ He concludes the chapter on community by observing that short retreats can develop human closeness rather quickly, and these experiences are often sought after by Christians. Yet these experiences can be cheap imitations of true fellowship in Christ. Bonhoeffer warns that “we are bound together by faith, not experience. . . . For Jesus Christ alone is our unity.”¹⁷

In chapter two Bonhoeffer writes about “the day with others” and the Christian rituals he says are essential to family and community life. The reading of scripture and the use of the Psalms is recommended along with singing. But Bonhoeffer insists singing should be in unison: “The soaring tone of unison singing finds its sole and essential

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

support in the words that are sung and therefore does not need the musical support of other voices.”¹⁸ He is concerned that harmonizing will take the congregation’s focus away from the words and onto the skill of the singers. Though people today do not find good harmony to be a distraction but rather an enhancement of a cappella singing, the author’s point concerning the importance of singing scripture is a useful one for all Christian gatherings.

Bonhoeffer’s chapter on “the day alone” makes the point that one must not use community fellowship to run from one’s self. Christians must learn to spend time with God alone as well as in groups. Silence is an important aspect of being alone with God and one which many saints have found challenging, yet essential. The purpose of being alone is for scripture meditation, prayer and intercession. Bonhoeffer argues, “Since meditation on the Scriptures, prayer, and intercession are a service we owe and because the grace of God is found in this service, we should train ourselves to set apart a regular hour for it, as we do for every other service we perform.”¹⁹

When Christians gather in groups they must be diligent to avoid pride, gossip, and being judgmental. It is a discipline of the tongue. They must also welcome everyone, and not look down on the weak, the lowly, and the needy. “The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship,” Bonhoeffer writes.²⁰ The first service of group members is to listen to one another as an expression of love: “Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and his own follies.”²¹ The second service is active helpfulness. In modern times this has been called the ministry of interruption. Deeds of love and mercy must be marks of Christian community life even when they are inconvenient. The bearing of other’s burdens is also an essential quality of communal life along with the ministry of the Word between friends: “We speak... we admonish... we warn... we are gentle and we are severe with one another, for we know both God’s kindness and God’s severity.”²²

Bonhoeffer argues that confession of sin is vital to the life of the church: “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It draws him from the community. The more isolated a person is the more destructive will be the power of sin over him . . . sin wants to remain unknown. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart.”²³ In order to prepare for confession the community is called to meditate upon the Ten Commandments. Confessing to others is not seen as a law for Bonhoeffer, but is beneficial especially for those who would benefit from hearing the forgiveness of God articulated by the community. Confession must not be seen as a “work” nor should one person be designated to hear all confessions. It is proper preparation for the sacrament of communion for the body to come together in confession. The Lord’s Supper becomes a celebration of the joyful outcome of the Gospel as it is practiced in the life of the Christian community.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

²³ *Ibid.*, 112.

Diana Butler Bass writes about the benefit of reading Bonhoeffer: “When I first read Bonhoeffer, I was attending an evangelical college and worshipping at evangelical churches. Evangelicalism had practices galore, but it lacked any sense of connection to the historic church or Christian traditions outside its own particular subculture.”²⁴ She argues in her book that some main line churches are being renewed through the use of ancient spiritual practices that connect the old with the new. Reflecting on the benefits of practices in Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, Bass writes, “Christian practices are the constituent parts of a larger Christian way of life, as revealed, modeled, and taught by Jesus Christ. Christian practices necessarily involve reflection, imagination, tension, attention, and intentionality. Practices imply practice, repetition, craft, habit and art.”²⁵ The modern church is wise to recognize the benefits of ancient practices.

Spiritual Relationships from a Reformed and Evangelical Perspective

Peter Scazzero, in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, points to the soft underbelly of American church culture and sees a need for significant change. Church culture has the power, by the Holy Spirit, to bring people to maturity in Christ. But too often a church develops a culture that fosters immaturity, and becomes a place of repressed emotions and false fronts. Church leaders get so caught up in their own needs for success and validation that they ignore physical and spiritual limits, damaging family relationships and casting a dark shadow over the cause of Christ. This book offers much wisdom for churches seeking to improve relationships and capitalize on spiritual

²⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

friendships. Emotional health is a relatively new subject for churches. In the past much of the substance of church ministry and small group life has been focused on spiritual growth that is often disconnected from other areas of life. What is needed in the church is a more holistic approach that sees discipleship in the context of full-orbed humanity. Spirituality, as important as it is, is merely one aspect of being human. Scazzero shows how spiritual health and emotional health go hand in hand because emotions are the language of the soul. Scazzero writes, “I believe the thesis of this book—that emotional health and spiritual health are inseparable—will amount to a Copernican revolution for many in the Christian community. It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.”²⁶ Human beings, after all, are emotional, social, physical, intellectual and spiritual beings created in the image of God. American culture often ignores the spiritual side of reality while the church often ignores the importance of emotional maturity.

Scazzero includes a helpful survey in the book that can be used by any church to determine levels of emotional maturity. The survey is based on the seven principles of emotional health which emphasize a Christian community’s need to look beneath the surface, break the power of the past, live in brokenness and vulnerability, receive the gift of limits, embrace grieving and loss, and make incarnation the model for loving well while slowing down and leading with integrity.²⁷ It is essentially a matter of becoming aware of what goes on beneath the surface of life. Scazzero notes, “We cannot grow an

²⁶ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 52.

²⁷ The survey is on pages 61-67 of Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*.

emotionally healthy church if we ourselves are not addressing issues deep beneath the surface of our lives.”²⁸

Scazzero presents a biblical basis for this new paradigm of church health. Humans tend to resist looking under the surface because of what they often uncover. In Jeremiah 17:9, the Prophet describes the human heart as deceitful and sick, beyond human understanding. Sin causes people to hide from God and one another, and the accompanying sense of shame causes deep loneliness. Thus it takes time, energy, solitude, and a solid understanding of grace to uncover the emotional issues of the heart. The author points to the dual nature of Jesus, noting that the church often ignores or denies Christ’s humanity, while clinging to his divinity. An appreciation of Jesus’ humanity is a key to understanding and exploring one’s own. On the night before Jesus went to the cross, Scazzero writes, “we see a fully human Jesus- emotionally depressed, mentally confused, and spiritually overwhelmed. He is being pushed to the ends of his human limits.”²⁹ Once church leaders embrace their human limits, and allow the gospel to penetrate their emotional life, they will begin to lead people from a position of full-orbed human authenticity, and find that Christ’s yoke is easy and his burden is light (Mt 11:30).

Chapters five through eleven of Scazzero’s book explain the seven principles that move churches and leaders toward emotional health. In looking beneath the surface, leaders must become convinced that the truth really does set one free. It is often some

²⁸ Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

deep pain in relationships that initiates this journey of self-discovery. The four components of looking beneath the surface include an awareness of what one is feeling and doing, exploring motives, linking the gospel and emotional health, and getting rid of “glimmering images.”³⁰ In practice, this involves asking many important questions such as: Why am I always in a hurry? Why am I so impatient? Why do I dread the upcoming meeting? Why do I avoid confronting certain people at church? What might God be saying to me?³¹ It is the gospel of God’s free grace that enables Christians to face themselves because they are already acceptable to God in Christ. If every person is a combination of Jekyll and Hyde, the gospel makes it safe to bring out that other person. This is what Scazzero means by getting rid of glimmering images. Christians do not have to fake a glittering image. They can be honest about their old nature as well as their new nature. Because of Jesus' acceptance, they have nothing to prove and nothing to hide. This kind of human authenticity creates deep fellowship between Christians and is the kind of fellowship needed at First Presbyterian Church.

The second principle is to break the power of the past. Genograms can be helpful with this task. Genograms, essentially diagrams of family trees and relationships, help people to think about their family of origin and its influence on current behavior that so often lies beneath the surface. Once major influences in one's life have been identified, Scazzero believes Christians can be re-parented through the church. This is what the Gospel means when it says anyone who is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). People take their significant influences from the past with them wherever they go. If seven

³⁰ Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

people have a board meeting, there may be more than one hundred influences at the table that can cause havoc when they bang up against each other. By uncovering these influences, and becoming aware of them, Christians can understand one another, and appreciate their own motivations. But the process is life- long and new insights should be expected along the way.

Principle three is to live in brokenness and vulnerability. This means understanding one's wounds as gifts for ministry. It takes humility, and an acceptance of one's imperfections, and often a willingness to share one's besetting sins with others. It happens when a pastor acknowledges drug dependence, goes to a rehab facility, and returns willing to retell the story of struggle and freedom over and over for the benefit of others. This is how the author learned this principle first hand. God's grace transforms wounds into gifts when they are brought out into the light. God's people are then able to find victory over them through Christ.

Accepting one's limits is another important step in developing emotional health. This is difficult in churches that are growing because leaders often believe that burning out for God is somehow spiritually admirable. Scazzero had to learn in his growing church that limits can also be received from God as gifts. John the Baptist provides a biblical example of one who accepted his limitations when he was told everyone was leaving his church and following after Jesus. John's reply is recorded in John 3:30: "He must become greater, I must become less." People in leadership must respect God-given boundaries so that they will not be overburdened by the needs of the church. They need to receive human limitations as friends. A person may have limits due to his or her

personality, season of life, life situation, and emotional, physical and intellectual capacities. One may have a special needs child or struggle with anger or have wounds from the past that will all have an effect. These issues may or may not be limiting, but they are a part of one's makeup. Boundaries can be taught in the church and in small groups to enable the church to appreciate them.

Scazzero goes on to show that grief and loss are experiences in life that can open people to God or shut down communication. In emotionally healthy churches, grief and loss are embraced, not denied. That is because they are pathways to compassion, and can transform human character into the character of Christ. Paying attention to the grieving process is well illustrated in the Bible by David in the Psalms, and by Jesus whom Isaiah described as a "man of sorrows and familiar with suffering" (Is 53:3). The writer of Hebrews said that Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered. Once people learn to listen to their pain there comes a period Scazzero calls, "waiting in the confusing in-between."³² This may seem to be time wasted but churches and leaders must recognize that God can yet be doing a wonderful work. Finally comes the phase Scazzero calls allowing the old to birth the new. Making allowance for the grieving process has many benefits that include a greater capacity to wait on God, increased kindness and compassion, less desire to impress, and a greater sensitivity to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the marginalized, and the wounded.³³

³² Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 172.

³³ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

Another principle leading to emotional maturity is making the incarnation a model for living well. Jesus left his throne above, came down to live among his people, and took on their humanity in order to save them. Scazzero writes, “The life of Jesus teaches us the three dynamics of what it looks like to incarnate: entering another’s world, holding on to yourself, and hanging between two worlds.”³⁴ Each step is challenging and well-illustrated in the book.

Finally, Scazzero recommends that leaders learn to slow down and lead with integrity. Spiritual disciplines, the daily office, and Sabbath keeping can help leaders to find fellowship with God throughout the day and week. Scazzero discovered that the great challenge of leadership is to manage one’s self and to learn to love one’s self as God does. He also provides guidance on how to lead the church to be more God-centered in its routines, including the guidelines his church adopted that he calls the “rule of life.”³⁵

Gareth Icenogle’s book, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry, An Integrational Approach*, is a wealth of information that covers the Old Testament, Gospel, and Apostolic foundations for small group ministry. The purpose here is to summarize the theological foundations found in this work. The author argues that the God of the Bible is a “community of being” and an “eternal small group . . . around whom the greater community of eternal beings is gathered.”³⁶ God created humanity

³⁴ Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 187.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 224 ff.

³⁶ Gareth Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry, An Integrational Approach*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 371.

male and female to work together with God in a community of intimate love. But this human community continues “to develop itself outside of intimate community with God”³⁷ and is thus broken and dying. God from the beginning “has worked to restore and complete” the human community which can “choose to receive or reject” God’s offer of restoration.³⁸ In rejecting God’s offer, the human community experiences “a shallow form of community” and continues in a struggle for “control, identity, intimacy, and meaning.”³⁹ If the human community accepts God’s offer of restoration, then God works covenantally by “re-interjecting divine community in the midst of human community” so that “humanity takes on a redemptive form of family with God in their midst.” Jesus Christ “reconciles, restores and completes the purpose of the primeval small group.”⁴⁰ His followers came together as “a new community with the resurrected Christ”⁴¹ sharing in the same community Jesus shared with the Father. The Holy Spirit, also called “the Spirit of Jesus” in Acts chapter sixteen, draws the human community into fellowship with the triune God and with one another wherever two or three are gathered in faith. Icenogle writes,

Small groups who meet in the nature and name of Jesus are communities of reconciliation. Small groups are communities where persons can experience forgiveness, healing and maturity. They are spaces where human relationships can take on the character of Jesus with Abba God, like Jesus with the Twelve. It is in this small group community of love and trust that broken persons and

³⁷ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations*, 371.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 372.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 373.

relationships experience freedom to share failure, pain, hurt and addiction. They have the freedom to self-disclose, to confess and to listen and respond with true love.⁴²

The church is made up of small groups “scattered around the world” and bound together by God’s Spirit. These “ecclesia” organize and systematize to serve the movement of the Spirit. But systems can easily become idols in themselves when serving them becomes more important than serving the Spirit. Renewal enables persons and institutions to become flexible again and move according to the leading of God’s Spirit as they “return to their first love”. Renewal and reform come from the Spirit. “The ultimate expression of human community is the eternal community between God and humanity, focused in Jesus Christ. The life together of Jesus and the Twelve, of the Spirit and ecclesia, is an anticipation of the permanent and complete divine-humanity community. God desires to be with humanity in community forever and ever.”⁴³

Along with this discussion of the theological purpose of small groups, it is important for this project to consider the power of groups to transform and mature people. In the chapter titled "Small Groups as Formational and Transformational Community", Icenogle makes a bold statement: “Spiritual growth is a process and product of being in community. Isolated individuals cannot grow spiritually. We remain in spiritual infancy when we refuse to participate in community (koinonia).”⁴⁴ This bold statement is true because growth is a process of knowing and being known. Paul

⁴² Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations*, 373.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

Tournier, the noted Swiss physician, states that we can't get to know ourselves through introspection. Introspection is like peeling the skin off an onion. You remove layer after layer and discover there's nothing left. Tournier claims that the only true route to self-knowledge is dialogue with others.⁴⁵ The New Testament letters addressed to various churches mention ministry to “one another” dozens of times. Icenogle presents a helpful list of these passages of scripture making the point that church life is about learning to serve and care for one another so that Christians can take the love and concern of God out into the community.

Varieties of Spiritual Practice

The purpose of Andrew Wheeler’s book, *Together in Prayer*, is “to help group members pray more effectively in a group setting and to help group leaders set the stage for community prayer times that will be a highlight of a group’s life together.”⁴⁶ The New Testament presents groups of believers praying together but in many churches today it is only the pastor or “a small set of people” that are comfortable in this role. Small groups enable people to participate because group members are less intimidated, better able to share needs and pray specifically, and are often more disciplined. Jesus made it clear that praying together is important: "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:19-20).

⁴⁵ Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 71.

⁴⁶ Andrew R. Wheeler, *Together in Prayer: Coming to God in Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 15.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, it is a group prayer that he teaches them. When the Lord was preparing for the cross, he took a small group, three of his most trusted disciples with him in to “watch and pray.” As recorded in the book of Acts the disciples came together for prayer over and over before the great acts of the Holy Spirit took place. The Apostle Paul commanded the church to pray in many of his letters: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Rm 12:12). “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph 6:18). “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col 4:2). “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (Jas 5:16).

One of the reasons churches do not find that community prayer comes naturally is that “corporate worship doesn’t train us in the kind of participation community prayer requires. Small groups provide more of a participatory environment.”⁴⁷ Praying in groups “requires a certain amount of vulnerability” and that requires a buildup of trust.⁴⁸ There is a temptation to pray so that others will hear and not primarily for God to hear. Humility, simplicity, and orderliness are all hallmarks of biblical group prayer. But the greatest admonition is to practice love. Wheeler argues, “When we truly listen and join in with the prayers of others—rather than just focusing on our own requests—we are showing love to others in the group. When we pray for one another, we are showing love. When we

⁴⁷ Wheeler, *Together in Prayer*, 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

restrict our own tendencies in prayer in deference to others in the group, we are showing love."⁴⁹ Group prayer always works better when ground rules are provided.

Like a symphony, group prayer is not about soloists each playing their own piece, but about each person contributing to a larger whole and truly listening to one another. Group members should learn to focus prayer on God and the group, or individuals within the group, and not on themselves. Wheeler says that groups can do this by listening to the pronouns they use in prayer, for example, how often the word "I" is used. Too often group prayers are really exhortations to the group and not primarily focused on God and God's will. Other problems in group prayer that take the focus off God are counseling (subtly telling others what to do or what they need), giving information (perhaps because needs weren't shared prior to prayer), sermonizing, and cheerleading.⁵⁰ An important question to ask is, What is this prayer asking God to do? After all, it is God who changes things, not prayer.

Jesus taught that when believers agree in prayer they will be answered. Wheeler says, "Truly agreeing together in prayer is the fulfillment that most prayer groups are crying out for and too few are experiencing. Making God the focus of our prayers by addressing him and not others in the group, and seeking his will and kingdom and not our own agenda- these bring agreement within the group."⁵¹ Community prayer is described

⁴⁹ Wheeler, *Together in Prayer*, 37.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-50.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

many places in the Bible.⁵² Groups could prepare for a deeper prayer life by studying the subject and these passages.

A summary of the steps for growth in group prayer would include the following from chapter seven in the book: be aware of where each group member is emotionally relative to group prayer, create a safe environment, clarify logistics such as how the group will know when prayer time is over, set the focus or subject of prayer, manage the sharing of prayer requests to allow for time to pray, and provide leadership guidance for the group in order to deepen the focus on the real needs of the group members. Prayer for healing is an important part of developing a biblical prayer ministry, but can also become a thorny issue that requires maturity. An even more difficult area is that of confession.

Wheeler writes,

From a group perspective, confession requires a level of intimacy and openness that, frankly, most groups do not have. Even groups that have met for a period of time often fail to develop the kind of trust required for confession. Many groups have some people who would be comfortable with shared confession and others who would not. People newer to the group will likely be more reluctant to participate in this aspect of prayer.⁵³

Even though this type of prayer and sharing is difficult, the benefits are worth the effort.

Group members find they are not alone in their struggles; and the resulting accountability can increase spiritual growth and allows for healing and the development of humility.

Wheeler's book is filled with many practical suggestions for group prayer, which he

⁵² Acts 1:14; 23-26; 2:42; 4:23-31; 6:4; 12:5,12; 13:3; 16:25; 20:36; Mt. 18:19-20; Jas 5:16 (from a list on pp. 81-82 of Wheeler, *Together in Prayer*).

⁵³ Wheeler, *Together in Prayer*, 114.

defined as “praying to God with people.”⁵⁴ The appendix contains a helpful questionnaire that can be used to evaluate a group’s “prayer quotient.”

Soul Feast, An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, by Marjorie J. Thompson, provides a good survey of spiritual practices that can help individuals and congregations renew and deepen their walk with the Lord. Thompson states the purpose of the book in the prologue: “The essence of it all is learning greater intimacy and freedom in our relationship with God. And the key is giving the spirit of God time and space to rearrange our interior furniture— setting our disordered priorities and putting love of God and neighbor center stage.”⁵⁵ This would also serve as a good definition of “renewal.” There are many in the church today who feel “something is missing from the diet of our rational, secular, and affluent culture . . . we are aware of needing a transcendent compass.”⁵⁶ The reasons given for the spiritual hunger in the U.S. include the modern worldview of rationalism, rapid technological advances, glorified superficial values, a pervasive fear of violence, and a restless dissatisfaction with church. But ultimately it is God who made us with a deep hunger for God’s self. “God is the primary factor behind the spiritual seeking of our time,” she writes.⁵⁷

The various spiritual practices that take up the bulk of Thompson’s book come from across the Christian church spectrum. *Lectio Divina* is the practice of spiritual

⁵⁴ Wheeler, *Together in Prayer*, 40.

⁵⁵ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 2005), xi.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

reading. It is reading in such a way as to allow God space to speak and to force readers to listen. Just as a cow chews the cud to get all the nourishment from its food, the believer uses the steps of *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer that flows from meditation), and *contemplatio* (contemplating or resting in God) to get the most from the practice of spiritual reading. Teaching this practice in the church is like teaching people to feed themselves. It is essential for spiritual life.

Prayer is obviously a vital practice in the spiritual life. It is a matter of learning both to listen and to speak. One can listen to God through scripture, creation, others, life circumstances, even dreams and premonitions. Journaling is a practice that enhances the listening process. When praying for others, various visualization exercises can deepen the experience. The practice of contemplative prayer is learning to enjoy God's presence as a father of a new born might gaze upon his child for long periods of time. After all, God made us for the purpose of enjoying God as well as bringing glory to God. When the community gathers for worship it is vital to emphasize the necessity of preparation for the congregation and its leaders. Thompson insists, "The single most important thing we can do to change our experience of public worship is to revitalize our practice of personal worship."⁵⁸ Many churches in the Reformed Tradition do not encourage use of the body to enhance corporate worship. Practices such as lifting the hands, kneeling in prayer, anointing with oil, passing the peace and coming forward acknowledge that "we are embodied creatures."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

The literature reviewed above provides many insights that are relevant to enhancing discipleship through small groups in the church. Specifically, First Presbyterian Church will benefit from laying a foundation of prayer and dependence upon the Holy Spirit for renewal, as suggested in Lovelace. Teaching on the necessity and challenges of authentic and healthy community from Bonhoeffer and Scazzero will create the felt need required for change. Preaching a theology of small groups using the material in Icenogle will present a biblical vision for change. The rich diversity of spiritual practices in Wheeler and Thompson will help groups at First Presbyterian Church develop spiritual depth along with relational and emotional growth. Leaders at the church will be trained in these practices so that they are ready to guide their small groups to a deeper walk with Christ and one another.

CHAPTER 4

ECCLESIOLOGY

In the seminal book, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, George Hunsberger writes, "The same pressures that threaten the continued survival of some churches, disturb the confidence of others, and devalue the meaning of them all can actually be helpful in providing an opening for new possibilities. . . . The present is a wildly opportune moment for churches to find themselves and to put on the garments of their calling, their vocation."¹ The Bible contains various images of church relationships--God given word pictures to lead God's people into a deeper fellowship with God and each other. These images can move the Church to rediscover its calling. The three images that have been chosen for this project are the vine and branches in John 15, the head and the body in I Corinthians 12, and the bride and bridegroom of Ephesians 5. Each image emphasizes a different aspect of the connective nature of the church. With guidance by the Holy Spirit, each can move the church in the direction of renewal.

¹ Lois Barrett *et al.* *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.), 78.

Connectional Images of the Church

In John 15 Jesus takes a common image of the vine and its branches to describe his own relationship with his disciples:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. (Jn 15:1-9)

Just as the branches must remain connected to the vine, so the followers of Christ must remain connected to Christ. The implication is that true followers of Jesus can become disconnected from the vine for various reasons. What is needed is a reconnection and a plan for a new continuous connection, what this project is calling continuous renewal.

The image of the vine also implies that staying connected to Christ is a responsibility of each disciple. The Lord is giving a command for Christians to obey if they are willing.

And just as a branch that is severed from the vine quickly dies, so the disciple or church that is severed from Christ will also soon become lifeless. This is the problem of many older churches and has been a problem at First Presbyterian Church. Churches and individuals can easily lose Christ as the center of church life and replace the Lord with an idol of success, busyness, or survival. In order to bear fruit, the church must remain connected to Christ. John 15 contains the last of the "I am" statements and introduces the

metaphor of vine and branches to teach of the believers' (and church's) connection with Christ. In verse 1 Jesus uses the metaphor to describe his relationship with the Father: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener" (Jn 15:1). The context, according to *The New Interpreter's Bible*, is important to note:

In v. 1, Jesus' self-identification is lodged in the context of his relationship with God, in v. 5 in the context of his relationship with the community of his followers. When Jesus speaks of himself as the vine, then, his words are not only self-revelatory, but are revelatory of the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and the community in the life of faith as well. All three elements—gardener, vine and branches—are essential to the production of fruit.²

It has been demonstrated throughout this project that the triune God is the original community of persons as Father, Son and Spirit, a circle of love and fruitfulness. John 15 shows how Jesus connected the fruitfulness of the community with his own relationship with the Father. Gail O'Day states that "Jesus has involved the disciples in the intimacy of his relationship with God."³

One might ask, what Jesus means specifically by his image of bearing fruit? *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary explains, "'To bear fruit' is a common image in the OT to speak of the community's faithfulness (e.g., Ps 1:3), but it is important to ask what the metaphor means in the specific context of the Farewell Discourse . . . 'Bearing fruit' emerges as another way to speak about the works of love that are required of Jesus' followers (14:12, 15, 21, 23)."⁴ The love that God expects from the community is

² Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 757.

³ *Ibid.*, 759.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 757.

underscored once again as Jesus calls the community his friends. In the Greek language the word for friend is *philos*, which comes from the word *phileo*, to love. O'Day writes, "The English noun 'friend' does not fully convey the presence of the love that undergirds the Johannine notion of friendship."⁵ Thus, the beloved of God, the community of disciples, are to remain connected to God through Christ in order to bear fruit through loving relationships in the world.

John 15 challenges the way in which the institutional church is understood and maintained today:

For the Fourth Gospel, there is only one measure of one's place in the faith community—to love as Jesus has loved—and all, great and small, ordained and lay, young and old, male and female are equally accountable to that one standard. Were the church to shape itself according to the Johannine metaphor, it would be a community in which decisions about power and governance would be made in the light of the radical egalitarian love of the vine image.⁶

The implications of John 15 are obvious for this project. If the purpose of the church is to be a community centered in Christ and growing in love for one another and the world, then church members must first be firmly connected to Christ and one another. This project aims to increase these two connections by introducing small group ministry at First Presbyterian Church. Small group ministry can enable the church to renew its love for God in Christ and its love for one another through strengthened relationships. Loving relationships within the church are the foundation for effective ministry in the world.

Another important connectional image in scripture comes from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, where Paul uses the human body as an image of dependent

⁵ O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 758.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 760.

relationships within the church. The context is Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. Paul explains that there are many different gifts but they are all given by the same Spirit. He uses the human body to illustrate how a variety of gifts or gifted believers can form one body—the church. The human body, Paul states, has many parts, but it is one body. In the same way the church has many differently gifted people, but they have been brought together by God to form one body: the body of Christ. An eye or hand or foot cannot sever itself from the body and survive. Rather, these appendages must remain connected to the body in order to live and function. In the Corinthian church there was great diversity; there were Jews and Greeks, slaves and free persons. Paul insists that each is vitally important to the body. This is a very affirming concept for contemporary church members who may feel insecure. Each person is needed, Paul teaches; even the parts that are less honorable are treated with special honor (1 Cor 12:23).

In I Corinthians 12:12-13, Paul writes that it is the Spirit of God who unites the members of the body in the act of baptism. Just as there is one Spirit at work, so there is just one body. Christians have a foundational unity through their baptism. They are baptized *into* Christ. But this unity honors diversity. The metaphor of the body acknowledges the plurality of gifts and abilities within the one body. I Corinthians 12:14-26 explain how the one Spirit distributes many various gifts among the members of the body. God has arranged the members as he wanted them. In the same way God has arranged and distributed the differently gifted members of the church. Members with low self-esteem are assured of their importance. Members who have a low esteem of others are reminded that every member is equally important. The differences found within the

church are necessary. Having shared together in the death of Christ, each one belongs to the other. I Corinthians 12: 27-31 apply what has been said. No person has all the gifts that God has distributed. Only some are apostles, named first perhaps to emphasize Paul's authority. Tongues are near the bottom of the list to emphasize what Paul has been saying throughout chapter twelve. Once again he reminds his readers that God has sovereignly distributed the gifts as God or the Spirit sees fit.

I Corinthians 12 provides biblical guidance for this project because it lifts up the concept of Christian connection, using the metaphor of the human body. The members of the church are connected by virtue of the fact that they were baptized into Christ and are therefore members of the body of Christ. Even when they do not welcome or recognize this connection, they are nevertheless interconnected and necessary to the body and to one another. The passage implies that some church members tend to sell themselves short. They may feel disconnected from the body and each other. Small group ministry enables church members to reconnect by spending time with each other and opening up about life and ministry. Church members gain confidence as they experience the love and grace of others in the group. Church members who are confident of God's love and their place in the body will have a greater impact on friends and neighbors. The unity of the body is a birthright of each Christian.

A third and related image is that of a bride and bride-groom in Ephesians 5. It is an image that emphasizes the joyful anticipation of becoming one. In the passage the Apostle Paul begins by explaining the roles of wives and husbands in mutual submission and love. Jesus Christ is the model for the deepest human relationships. His sacrifice

raises the bar for the kind of sacrifice required by love. Paul uses the metaphor of a marriage to describe the mystical union of God with his church:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Eph 5:25-33)

It was noted in the Corinthians passage above that Christ is the head of the church and the church is his body. This concept is reiterated in Ephesians 5, but Paul introduces the pledge of troth into the image so that the highest form of human love becomes a metaphor for God’s relationship with the church. The marriage relationship is one of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the other. Christ gave the ultimate demonstration of sacrificial love on the cross. The marriage relationship should be characterized by the same passionate love and devotion. Marriage is characterized by union, by becoming one flesh. The union of Christ and the church forms the basis of human love between husband and wife. Moreover, the union of Christ and the church has a purifying effect. The church becomes “radiant, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish” (Eph 5:27). This image speaks to the importance of relationships within the church, implying that mutual self-giving has an improving effect on the rest of the body. As church members learn to serve and give themselves to one another, the church becomes stronger, better, more powerful; and that church reflects the glory of God more clearly to the world. Healthy churches are

churches where the members give themselves unselfishly to one another in love and submission. Small groups, bound together by love and covenant, learning to care for and build up one another, will form the foundation of a healthy growing church organism.

Reformed and Presbyterian Distinctives

A fundamental teaching of the Reformed branch of Christian theology is God's covenantal relationship with his people. A covenant is an agreement between two parties and usually includes promises and consequences, also called blessings and curses. In the covenant, God chose to reveal himself to a certain people and through them to bless the entire world. The covenant relationship is how the holy transcendent God relates to finite fallen creatures. As this project focuses on renewal through small groups, it is important to understand that the model for human relationships has always been the love relationship within God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Theologians speak of three basic theological covenants. The covenant of redemption is the agreement to be found within God himself to bring about redemption for his people. The covenant of works describes the relationship God formed with the first man, Adam. Since Adam failed to live in covenant faithfulness, God planned for a covenant of grace, by which God chooses and redeems all those who by grace through faith are found to be in relationship with his Son Jesus. Throughout the Bible God relates to his people through covenant promises. For example, God made promises to Noah, Abraham, and David. The Bible shows how Jesus came to fulfill God's promise to save his people from their sins through the new covenant in his blood. The Westminster Confession of Faith explains in Chapter VII, 6, "the

ordinances in which this covenant are dispensed, are the preaching of the word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper."⁷ In *Leadership Is an Art*, author Max DePree makes the point that covenants are to be preferred to legal contracts when dealing with human relationships. He argues that legal contracts are not ideal because they are too constricting to allow human relationships to flourish. "A covenantal relationship," he says, "rests on shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals, and to management process."⁸ The concept of covenant becomes important to the forming of small group relationships as will be shown in chapter six of this project.

A distinct aspect of Reformed and Presbyterian church government is the concept of elder parity. In the Bible, God gave the New Testament church elders to lead the people. In the PC (USA), there are currently two categories of elders: ruling elders and teaching elders. Teaching elders are pastors who have been trained to preach, teach and lead the congregation along with the ruling elders, who are elected from the particular church body. Parity is the principle of shared power; it protects against pastors having too much power within the church. Parity is about the balance of power. On a Presbytery level, there is an attempt to keep the number of teaching elders and ruling elders about equal. It is important to Presbyterians that elders' gifts are used and recognized along with pastors' gifts. Ministry within a local church should be a shared ministry between ruling elders and teaching elders to maximize the influence of God's Spirit within the congregation. This is important to recognize because churches in need of reform have

⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith, VII. 6.

⁸ Max DePree, *Leadership Is An Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 39.

often given up on the principle of lay ministry and the members have deferred to the pastor in most teaching and leading aspects of church life. Renewal comes in part by empowering the laity and reclaiming the principle of elder parity.

Reformed churches are confessional churches. These churches believe that at various times in history God has led church leaders to write creeds and confessions. One example of an early creed in the New Testament is “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3). An early confession found in *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church is the Nicene Creed. At a Ligonier Pastor’s Conference on the peace, unity and purity of the church, Bible teacher R.C. Sproul gave a message about a well-known phrase in the Nicene Creed describing the church as, “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.” It was an encouraging message on Christian unity. But Dr. Sproul noted that the Church today does not appear to conform to this four-word description. Instead, the Christian Church appears to be hopelessly divided on so many essential teachings of the Bible. But the oneness that Sproul spoke of was to be found in another well-known phrase from the Apostle’s Creed, which pre-dated the Nicene Creed. It is the idea of the communion of the saints. Dr. Sproul explains,

The idea is based on the New Testament principle of the mystical union of the believer with Christ. Every first year Greek student learns the difference between the prepositions *en* and *eis*. *En* has to do with being in something such as a room. *Eis* has to do with moving from a point outside to a point inside. We are called to believe INTO Christ Jesus. When we have done that, then, we are *en* Christ, and Christ is *en* us. This is where we find the essential unity of the church. If I am in Christ and you are in Christ, then we have a profoundly important unity among ourselves that cannot be destroyed.⁹

⁹ R.C. Sproul, *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*, Ligonier Pastor’s Conference, October 12, 2010, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/strongonstrong-holy-catholic-and-apostolic-strong.html> (accessed September 4, 2012).

Augustine spoke of the visible and invisible Church based on Jesus' teaching of the wheat and tares growing up together. The visible church is and always will be a mixture of believers and non-believers. The lack of unity is thus very real. Sproul states, "Those in the invisible church [however] have an unbreakable unity with Christ and with each other."¹⁰ Sproul warns that the Church must guard against a false peace and unity decreed by the prophet Jeremiah when he spoke of those who cried, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. True peace and unity in the Church can only be based on the truth of God found in scripture. Likewise, the Church must guard against the other extreme: that of being so zealous for purity that it unjustly disturbs the peace and unity of the Church. Some churches have such a narrow view of the truth that they unjustly accuse true believers of being lost or apostate.

The Church is holy in that it wears a cloak of righteousness obtained by Christ through his life, death, and resurrection. Martin Luther called this an alien righteousness. It is not holiness inherent to the believer but a gift of God's grace in Christ to be received by faith. Holiness refers to being set apart, consecrated, different. The word for *church* is *ecclesia*, which means "called out ones." Dr. Sproul explains: "That is what makes us holy. We are called out by the holy one to be holy as He is holy. The Lord has enabled the church to be the church by indwelling the church with the Holy Spirit."¹¹

The term *catholic* means universal. The Roman Catholic Church claims the title of catholic because it has no national borders. But Protestants recognize this same

¹⁰ Sproul, *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*.

¹¹ Ibid.

principle of unity in the Church when they look to their union in Christ and membership in the invisible Church. Protestants believe there is only one true Church in Jesus Christ. The Church is also “apostolic” as it submits to the authority of the apostles laid out in the New Testament. The cry of *sola scriptura* during the Reformation highlighted the belief that

the only text that can absolutely bind the conscience is Scripture. The church is described as a building in the New Testament. What is the church’s foundation? Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone. But the foundation of the church is the prophets and apostles. If the foundation be shaken can the building stand? No, . . . The authority of the apostles is the authority of Jesus . . . Whoever receives the apostles receives Jesus, whoever rejects them rejects him. If you reject the apostles, you reject the one who sent them. A true church submits to the authority of the apostles. . . . The one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is the church that Christ built and owns. . . . It is the task of the visible church to make the invisible church visible.¹²

Presbyterian Strengths and Weaknesses

Confessions can be an aid or a detriment to renewal. A confession that has stood the test of time, such as the Westminster Confession, can provide a bedrock foundation of truth for the Church to return to time and time again. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther was hoping to reform the Church through his study of Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews in the original Greek language. Reformers who followed had inherited corrupt teachings from the Middle Ages and turned to the original scriptures and teachings of Augustine and others to mine the truth. When error creeps into the Church, as it always does, creeds and confessions call the Church back to the truth, and truth, according to Jesus, sets the Church free.

¹² Sproul, *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*

On the other hand, confessions can become nothing more than dead orthodoxy leaving church members who may be spiritually dead feeling pious because they believe all the right doctrine. Roland Allen writes,

Nevertheless our doctrine so dominates our minds that we scarcely believe that men can love Christ and be saved by Him unless they know and use our doctrinal expressions. . . . When we preach the doctrine, the doctrine occupies the first place in our thought; . . . When we preach Christ, the Person is in the foreground and occupies the first place in our mind. . . . the Person is greater than the doctrine and far excels it.¹³

Presbyterians have often been called the “frozen chosen” because there have been periods of dead orthodoxy in their history. The reason is that it is possible to believe all the right things, the doctrines of orthodoxy, but be joyless and lifeless. Like the Dead Sea that has water coming in but no water flowing out, a Christian can grow in head knowledge without putting that knowledge into life practice. The faith then becomes all head and no heart.

The value of creeds and confessions has been debated throughout Christian history. Certain fundamentalist groups are vigorously anti-creedal and accept no confessional documents. Their cry is “no creed but the Bible.” The idea is that if we have the Bible we do not need confessional statements. One could also argue that if we have the Bible we do not need sermons. Sermons, creeds, and confessions are important ways of stating what the church believes. The movement in the PC (USA) to make the confessions a guide rather than requiring subscription could be seen as an anti-creedal stance. The change was made to allow for diversity of beliefs within the church. But if

¹³ Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 57.

confessions act as a barrier to unbelief, then taking down the barriers opens the door to what used to be called an unconverted clergy. Commenting on the reason for the anti-confessional mood in the church today, Ken Gentry writes,

Many factors are at work generating this anti-creedal sentiment today. Among these we may list the following: an increasing permeation of society with a relativistic, existential concern for the moment; a loss of a sense of the significance of history; a democratic concern for non-coercion and individual freedom of belief; a pervasive tendency to simplification, as well as other considerations.¹⁴

Non-coercion, freedom of belief, and simplification are all sound principles when applied properly to the Christian faith. But when the church makes them ultimate they can introduce confusion and become quite detrimental.

The doctrinal slide in the PC (USA) is clearly attributable to a lack of confessional orthodoxy. The fact that unbelief has crept into the PC (USA) is clearly tied to the church's determination to unhitch from the historic confessions of orthodoxy. According to the fall 2011 Presbyterian Panel Report, only 41 percent of pastors agree that "only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved." The number drops to 27% of specialized clergy.¹⁵ The *Presbyterian Church Book of Order* 2011/2013 begins with the claim that "the triune God . . . redeems all people."¹⁶ This is universalism, the belief that all people will be saved, irrespective of belief in Christ. The 2001 General Assembly failed to support a motion to declare "the singular, saving lordship of Jesus Christ."

¹⁴ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *In Defense of Creedalism*, Covenant Media Foundation, <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt566.htm>, (accessed September 9, 2012).

¹⁵ Presbyterian Panel Fall 2011 Report, http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/research/pdfs/panel_profile_survey_2011_summary_color.pdf (accessed September 6, 2012).

¹⁶ *Book of Order, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II. 2011/2013, (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2011), F-1.01.

Instead they declared that Jesus is “unique.” Clearly confessions can help to guard the church from leaving the faith once delivered to the saints. Inclusion and diversity are good values, but when they become ultimate values, the church loses the clarity of its faith and message to the world.

The Church in Continuous Renewal: Ancient Practices, Recent Movements

Lovelace writes,

The essence of spiritual renewal is “the love of God . . . poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (Rm 5:5). The substance of real spirituality is love. It is not our love but God’s that moves into our consciousness, warmly affirming that he values and cares for us with infinite concern. But his love also sweeps us away from self-preoccupation into a delight in his unlimited beauty and transcendent glory. It moves us to obey him and leads us to cherish the gifts and graces of others. Paul tells us that love is a far more reliable measure of spirituality than our gifts or works of theological acuity, and that it is one of the few things that lasts forever (1 Cor 13:8, 13). And Jesus says that the highest fulfillment of the will of God in our lives is to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and to care for others as we care for ourselves (Mk 12:30-31).¹⁷

Continuous renewal involves maintaining life with God at the center. It is ideally a life dominated by joyful obedience. It is a life characterized by love for God and neighbors. Throughout history the Church has experienced times of falling away and seasons of returning to God. A few examples will help illustrate this dialectic movement.

Concerns about church renewal can be traced back to the second century Montanist movement. The followers of Montanus believed that the Church must reclaim the ecstatic gifts of the Holy Spirit that had seemingly died out. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* describes Motanist teachings: “What they called ‘the New

¹⁷ Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life: A Guidebook for Spiritual Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, 1985), 18.

Prophecy' was basically a summons to prepare for the return of Christ by heeding the voice of the Paraclete speaking, often in the first person, through his prophetic mouthpieces."¹⁸ The movement was subsequently labeled a heresy by church leaders such as Jerome because the prophecies uttered were not in accordance with the scriptures. It is interesting to note that this movement had many of the same characteristics of modern fringe Pentecostal and charismatic renewal groups, such as bizarre and erratic behavior and ecstatic speech.

Saint Antony of Egypt is traditionally considered to be the father of the monastic movement in early Christianity. He was a prominent leader among the Desert Fathers whose spirituality was for the purpose of renewal and return to God about the third century A.D. Antony heard a sermon on Matthew 19:21, where Jesus said to the rich young ruler, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Believing his life could be perfected, Anthony moved into the desert and renounced the comforts of life, including rich food, baths, rest, and anything that made life comfortable.¹⁹ Over centuries monasticism matured from being primarily a monk's lonely solo struggle against sin, to being a communal movement making a concerted effort to care for all of society: caring for orphans, the poor, maintaining hospitals, educating children, and even providing work for the unemployed.²⁰ Monastic communities were constantly concerned with reform of

¹⁸ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1984), s.v. Montanist.

¹⁹ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), s.v. Antony of Egypt, St.

one kind or another. Each community had a different approach to perfecting the Christian life. Most were well respected and many became wealthy and influential. As medieval society changed so did society's view of monasticism:

By 1100 monasticism was on the defensive. It was no longer clear that monastic service to God and society was commensurate with the praise and gifts which society lavished on the monasteries. . . . Perhaps the last great revival of monastic spirit came in the autumn of the Middle Ages with the appearance of the mendicant orders. The Dominicans and Franciscans captured the collective imagination of a society in crisis. Francis of Assisi represented the perfection of both monastic and Christian idealism in his effort to imitate the life of Christ in all its purity and simplicity. By taking the apostolic ideal outside the monastery, Francis gave it one last flowering in the culture which had given it birth.²¹

The Reformers doubted the value of monastic life as a true way to live out the gospel. The repetitive prayers, fasts, and ceremonies, they said, were meaningless. The vast wealth that monasteries accumulated could be better spent on the needs of the general public.²² Nevertheless, the influence of monastic reform can be felt today with the current interest in spiritual disciplines and the daily office developed through monasticism. The popularity of spiritual retreats, spiritual direction, and interest in the writings of the Desert Fathers can all be traced back to this early reform movement in the church. One theological lesson that can be drawn is about the place of the imitation of Christ in the Christian life. Though it has an important place in Christian practice, it can be overvalued. Writing about the process of continuous renewal, Lovelace said, "Spiritual

²⁰ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. Monasticism.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

life flows out of union with Christ, not merely imitation of Christ.”²³ In other words, the Christian life is empowered by Christ and not primarily by the efforts of the believer however good intentioned they may be.

A more recent example of a renewal movement can be found in *Tres Dias*, mentioned in Chapter 2 for its influence at First Presbyterian Church. In the late 1960s and early 1970s this lay movement, which began in the Catholic church in the 1940s, attempted to give people a genuine encounter with Christ. The reasoning behind the movement was articulated by Lovelace in the preceding paragraph: that renewal stems from union with Christ, or as it was termed in the 1970s, an “encounter” with Christ. What *Tres Dias* does best is give non-Christians and nominal Christians a focused time in the presence of God and the love of a mature Christian community. It is built upon basic principles that can shed light on how renewal happens and how small groups can contribute to continuous renewal in the church.

Tres Dias invites people to come away from their normal surroundings to a three-day retreat. Renewal often requires a change of routine and exposure to new relationships. It is more caught than taught. At *Tres Dias*, people are asked to remove their watches, relax, and allow God’s Spirit to speak through the scriptures and the leaders who share their faith primarily through fifteen talks. These talks make up a short course on Christianity. (In the Catholic church, the movement began as *Cursillo de Cristiandad*, which means “short course in Christianity.”) After each talk, the candidates (the pilgrims on the weekend for the first time), talk around tables, sharing their own

²³ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 74.

stories with increasing depth. Faith sharing is at the very core of this ministry. But it is supported by traditional services of worship, communion, table fellowship, and acts of love poured out on the candidates from the larger community.

The problem in many church gatherings is that they focus on the business of managing and maintaining the organization. Glen McDonald writes, “Every gathering of Christians, large or small, has to manage an appropriate agenda of ‘Business.’ But business is not why we are in business. Some of the fiercest blasts in Scripture are reserved for those who would hold back the rush of God’s Spirit for the sake of polishing the organizational apple.”²⁴ Faith sharing is often missing from church life and can be restored through small groups. It is a key factor in maintaining spiritual renewal in the church. People need to articulate their faith because it helps them believe it. It also helps to hear how others are experiencing the Lord.

A *Tres Dias* weekend is filled with laughter, love, good food, lively music, heart-tugging stories, and opportunities for people to make decisions about the direction of their lives. It is a weekend bathed in prayer. The leadership team puts in countless hours of planning to make it all run smoothly. At the end of the weekend, the larger community comes to a graduation ceremony, where more faith sharing happens and candidates get their chance to speak. This meeting is another highlight of the weekend and concludes with communion. Everything that is done is Christ-centered, prayer-supported, and carefully planned to bring the candidates into an authentic encounter with the risen Christ. It is very effective at reviving the faith of people from across the denominational

²⁴ Glenn McDonald, *The Disciple Making Church: From Dry Bones to Spiritual Vitality* (Grand Haven, MI: FaithWalk Publishing, 2004), 4.

spectrum. Candidates leave with new Christian friends. They are welcomed into a local ecumenical fellowship that meets monthly for worship and support.

Tres Dias fosters continuous renewal for people who stay connected after their weekend in some way. It may be a reunion group or the monthly meeting. It is most effective when a candidate becomes part of a future team caring for new candidates. For renewal to be continuous there needs to be an outreach aspect to it where new people are brought into the family. Small groups emphasize this with the “empty chair” that reminds the group that new people are always welcome. And groups must always be looking for people who are ready to take leadership and start their own groups. Every leader needs an apprentice. Churches must have an increasing number of people taking leadership and bringing people to Christ. Christian Schwarz writes, "Just as the true fruit of an apple tree is not an apple, but another tree; the true fruit of a small group is not a new Christian but another group; the true fruit of a church is not another group, but a new church; the true fruit of a leader is not a follower, but a new leaders; the true fruit of an evangelist is not a convert, but a new evangelist."²⁵ This is how *Tres Dias* has continued to be a powerful influence for renewal.

The material in this chapter has demonstrated the value of rediscovering the biblical purpose and nature of the church. This rediscovery is essential to the revitalization of First Presbyterian Church. Teaching and preaching on the biblical images of the church will emphasize the importance of relational community and call people to repent of shallow fellowship. Illustrations from ancient and modern practices

²⁵ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, 6th ed., (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 68.

will be used to challenge the people with what the church once was, and what it could be in the future. Hope for renewal will develop as God's vision for the church is clearly resented to the people over time.

CHAPTER 5

THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL RESTORATION

Renewal in the church and in one's spiritual life is necessary because human beings are prone to wander from God's will. The great hymn of the Church, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," echoes this truth poetically in verse four: "O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be! Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above."¹ This chapter will consider how this problem is addressed in scripture. It will trace the theology of renewal and its implications for the Christian life. Examples of renewal will also be presented with an eye on renewal through home groups.

Renewal Themes in Scripture

In his book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard writes, "One of the greatest obstacles to effective spiritual formation in Christ today is simple failure to understand and acknowledge the reality of the human situation as it affects Christians and non-

¹ Robert Robinson, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," (No. 30) in *Worship His Majesty Hymnal*, (Alexandria, IN: Gaither Music Company, 1987).

Christians alike. We must start from where we really are.”² One of the greatest truths fleshed out in the stories of the Bible is that people turn away from God and go their own way, often leaving a trail of broken relationships, suffering, and trouble. The fallen condition of the human soul is magnified by its very greatness. God has given an immortal soul to every human being. But in Jeremiah 17:9, the Prophet states, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Human beings resent God’s sovereign rule of the universe and compulsively seek to be their own god. They do not want to allow God to be God, causing alienation from God, others, and self. The first commandment addresses this central human problem: “You shall have no other god’s before me” (Ex 20:3). Denial of the problem only complicates the matter. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3:18, “there is no fear of God before their eyes.” The Alcoholics Anonymous organization discovered that the road to recovery for an addicted person is to first of all to quit playing God. This involves a daily surrender.³ Willard writes, “One of the amazing things about the human being is that it is capable of restoration, and indeed of a restoration that makes it somehow more magnificent because it has been ruined.”⁴ John Calvin described the issue in stark terms when he wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “[As] the surest source of destruction to men is to obey themselves, so the only haven of safety is to have no other will, no other wisdom, than to follow the Lord wherever he leads. Let this, then, be the first step, to abandon

² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

ourselves, and devote the whole energy of our minds to the service of God.”⁵ The biblical witness testifies to the destruction and devastation human beings bring upon themselves and the world as they wander from God and occupy God’s throne in the struggles of life. In the Bible God is relentlessly pursuing his people, calling them back to himself, and exposing their pointless rebellion through prophets and other messengers. The victory of God is that in Christ human beings are not merely restored to their pre-fallen condition, but lifted higher to reign with Christ in the heavenly realms. They are given a new heart, a heart of flesh that increasingly is filled with love for God, others, and the self. They have a new increasing desire for joyful obedience to God and service to others. This ultimate outcome is prefigured in the Bible by various stories and pictures of renewal and restoration.

The prophet Haggai was raised up by God to lead a restoration and renewal movement in 520 BC. Prior to Haggai’s time, the kings of Israel had mostly led the people away from the Lord. God brought judgment upon the nation through the invasion of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. The people were taken into exile for about seventy years, but God would soon lead them back to their destroyed city. W. Eugene March writes, “[Haggai] has been portrayed as one of those persons who returned from the exile determined to lead restoration efforts and overcome the lethargy of those who had escaped exile and remained in Judah. Haggai presented a message of hope grounded

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, trans. by Henry Beveredge, (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Printing Company, 1846), 555.

in the hard reality of a destroyed land.”⁶ It is interesting to note that in the generations before Haggai,

the Temple played an important, though much more limited role. The people as a whole did not go to the Temple. It was the sanctuary of the king and his household. After the people’s return from the exile, however, the Temple became the center of social and economic activity in a way never seen during the days of the kings.[...] The prophet’s task was to assist in these early stages of the [restoration] process by pressing the need for rebuilding the Temple, and this he did vigorously.⁷

In the book of Haggai, the prophet asks an important question: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains in ruins?” (Hag 1:3). The commentator continues: “Haggai’s basic appeal was straightforward: Since the leaders and the people had built houses for themselves, they should honor God by rebuilding the Temple.”⁸ His job was to motivate them to turn their attention from self-concern to God’s concerns. Their homes were finished while the Lord’s house remained unfinished. In Haggai 1:7 the Prophet writes, “Give careful thought to your ways.” The people needed to focus (literally to “set the heart”) on their current circumstances and how they could be different if they heeded the word of the Lord. The Temple was a symbol of God’s relationship with his people. It “was a place chosen by God where human beings could expect to encounter God, to be challenged and renewed by the divine presence. Thus Haggai’s call to rebuild the Lord’s Temple was a

⁶W. Eugene March, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: The Book of Haggai*, Vol. VII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 708.

⁷ Ibid., 710.

⁸ Ibid., 716.

declaration of God's essence and authority."⁹ Haggai's message was heeded: "The whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord" (Hag 1:12). It was God who "stirred up the spirit" of the leaders and the people to respond. In Haggai 2:7-9, the Prophet gives the people this wonderful promise:

"I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord Almighty. "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the Lord Almighty. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty.

Haggai's message brought hope because the coming of the one desired by the nations, understood by many as a reference to the Messiah, will not only restore the temple but bring even greater glory than was known in the original.

Another well-known biblical image of renewal comes from Psalm 23. Ken Bailey writes about the meaning of the Hebrew words: "Psalm 23:3 is traditionally translated 'he restores my soul.' Popularly understood this phrase means, 'I felt depressed, the Lord restored my soul. I am no longer depressed.'"¹⁰ Bailey goes on to explain, "The Hebrew *naphshi yeshobeb* can be translated literally 'he brings me back' or 'he causes me to repent.' The key word *yeshobeb* is an intensive form of the verb *shub* (to repent). Thus the theme of repentance is clear in the Hebrew text of Psalm 23 although lost in the English translations."¹¹ Once again God's initiative in renewal is brought out in the

⁹ March, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 718.

¹⁰ Kenneth Bailey, *Finding the Lost Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

scriptures. It is ultimately God who by grace brings his people back to himself and his will. In the book of Haggai, it was God who stirred up the spirit of the people to respond, and so it is God who “causes me to repent” in Psalm 23. This is a great encouragement to those who pray and work for renewal in the church. It is an encouragement to pray and acknowledge dependence on God.

The Apostle Paul talks about renewal in Romans 12:1-2 where he writes,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Here the Apostle urges the church not to be conformed to the image of the world. The J.B. Phillips translation renders this verse as, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.” A primary reason that renewal is necessary is because of the constant pressures upon the church to conform to the world’s agenda. Richard Lovelace calls it the process of enculturation. He writes,

Since we are inextricably bound up with corporate sin through our participation in nations and institutions, there is no way that we can avoid implication in the guilt of the fallen world, and therefore biblical saints confess the sins of their community along with those they have personally committed. But we are required to separate ourselves as much as possible from the unholy force field of this planet’s corporate flesh; to break our conformity to its characteristic ideologies, methods and motives; and to speak and act prophetically against its injustice and restraint of full human liberation.¹²

Lovelace uses a colorful image when he talks about the “unholy force field of this planet’s corporate flesh.” It is a powerful force field that churches must be aware of and they must work diligently to break away from it. The importance of renewing the mind

¹² Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 94.

cannot be overstressed. Willard writes, “As we first turned away from God in our thoughts, so it is in our thoughts that the first movements toward the renovation of the heart occur. Thoughts are the place where we can and must begin to change.”¹³

To illustrate how unconscious ideas can influence cultural behavior, consider how powerful the concept of independence has become in America. Randy Frazee demonstrates how contemporary suburban America fosters independence but unfortunately is also perfectly designed to inhibit true community. He explains that increasing wealth allowed for mobility out of the tight small neighborhoods and into the sprawling suburbs in the mid part of the last century. Prior to about 1950, most people in the world knew their neighbors and mostly trusted and cared for each other. Their lives were intertwined out of necessity. Before there was air conditioning, the front porch was the coolest place to be, encouraging social interaction. Stores were within walking distance. Interdependence was a necessity of life. Today the idea of independence has taken over. People cocoon in their homes isolated and often fearful of neighbors, travel to malls where they know and talk to no one.¹⁴ Frazee’s observations underscore the old adage that ideas have consequences. Improving Christian community requires an understanding of the subtle unconscious assumptions of American culture that have negatively influenced it. Renewal of the mind is an important step in the renewal of the church. But renewal must never be seen as merely an intellectual exercise.

Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan theologian of American revivalism, writes in his book *Religious Affections*, about the true marks of revival in the Christian's life.

¹³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 95.

¹⁴ Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, 111-113, 120-121.

Edwards' experience in the First Great Awakening taught him that many false signs of the Spirit's work can creep into the church. His writing is valuable here because of his concern for keeping the mind and heart (affections, passions) together. He writes,

He who has no religious affection is in a state of spiritual death, and is wholly destitute of the powerful, quickening, saving influences of the Spirit of God upon his heart. As there is no true religion where there is nothing else but affection, so there is no true religion where there is no religious affection. As, on the one hand, there must be light in the understanding as well as an affected heart; where there is heat without light, there can be nothing divine or heavenly in that heart; so, on the other hand, where there is a kind of light without heat, a head stored with notions and speculations, with a cold and unaffected heart, there can be nothing divine in that light; that knowledge is no true spiritual knowledge of divine things. If the great things of religion are rightly understood, they will affect the heart.¹⁵

Presbyterians are often characterized as being stronger in the intellectual than the emotional aspects of faith. Edwards' words will serve as a strong corrective.

The Heart of Renewal: Union with Christ and One Another

It has been emphasized that it is God who initiates the process of salvation and renewal by bringing people back to himself through Christ by the Spirit. People are brought into a right relationship with God through faith in Christ. Baptism is the initiation rite that illustrates dying with Christ in his death for sin and rising with Christ in his resurrection from the dead. The heart of the gospel is explained in Romans 6 where Paul talks about the union of Christ with the believer:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 49.

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:3-11)

This great passage lays out the grace-work of justification. When a believer trusts in Christ, she or he is put into a right relationship to God and becomes a member of Christ's body. Believers are united with Christ and with one another. It is a process of being ingrafted into Christ's body. Author Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen writes, "This leads to mystical union between Christ and human beings. Christ as the source and mediator of the covenant becomes one with us and so, in the church, there is a union between the human and the divine."¹⁶ Believers are members of one body. This unearned gift of God creates a new person and a new community. The old is gone; all things have become new. Believers must be constantly taught and trained to live into this new way of life. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 4 where he writes,

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:1-6)

Sanctification is the process by which Christians learn to live a new life worthy of the calling they receive in Christ. It is a life characterized by unity and love for others. It is also a work of grace by which the Holy Spirit enables the believer to put off the old

¹⁶ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 54.

nature and put on the new as Paul explains when he writes, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). The grace-work of God is designed to transform lives and communities. God becomes the source of life and hope. The sovereign God works everything together for good for those who are called according to his purpose, as Paul writes in Romans 8:28. God’s purpose for his people appears in the very next verse, “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). The goal of renewal is a people characterized by Christ’s love and self-giving.

The Goal of Renewal: A People Characterized by Love

Renewal becomes necessary when love grows cold. It is successful when people are set free from the tyranny and idolatry of self-love to be able to experience the love of God in such a way that they desire to give that love away to others. The goal of renewal is a people characterized by love. The writer of I John emphasized the primacy of God’s love repeatedly: “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19); “Not that we loved God, but that he loved us” (1 Jn 4:10); “Brethren, let us love one another because love is from God” (1 Jn 4:7). These words are echoes of John’s gospel message, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16); “By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (Jn 13:35); “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love” (Jn 15:9); “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends, and you are my friends” (Jn 15:13).

The Epistle of I John, like the gospel of John (and the book of Genesis), begins at the beginning: “That which was from the beginning . . . this we proclaim concerning the word of life” (1 Jn 1:1). Jesus’ eternal fellowship with the Father is front and center. The goal of the writer’s proclamation is found in verse three: “We proclaim to you that which we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship [Greek: *koinonia*] with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” The father and son familial relationship is the foundation for fellowship within the family of God. I John 3:1 returns to this theme with these immortal words, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” The power of this statement is magnified by the fact that human beings, though made in God’s image, do not by nature bear much resemblance to the holy God. Nevertheless, the God of the Bible is able to create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Because Christ gave his life for the Church, we are able to be called God’s children. *The New Interpreter’s Bible* makes a key point: “The initiative for creating children of God belongs entirely with the God of gratuitous love. . . . Children do not give birth to themselves.”¹⁷ The church is the *ecclesia*, the “called out ones.” They are called out by God. The source of love within the church is “the love that the Father has lavished on us” by his calling.

Every building needs a foundation. The foundation that John builds upon is given a different spin in chapter three. Back in chapter one, the message was, “That which was from the beginning [...] this we proclaim concerning the Word of life [...] which was with the Father and has appeared to us” (1 Jn 1:1). The message from the beginning

¹⁷ C. Clifton Black, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: The First, Second, and Third Letters of John*, Vol. XII (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998), 410.

concerned the pre-existent Christ. In chapter three a different interpretation is given, “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another” (1 Jn 3:11). These are different views of the same picture of Christ. For Christ is the expression of God’s love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son” (Jn 3:16). Love is foundational: God’s love for humanity and humanity’s love for one another. The great commandment that Jesus gave “in the beginning” was to love God with all one has and to love neighbors as well. There is an old story attributed to Jerome about the elderly apostle John being carried into the congregation at Ephesus to preach. His message was always an exhortation to love one another. When his listeners asked why he repeated it so often, he would reply, “Because it is the Lord’s command, and if this is all you do, it is enough.”¹⁸

The transformation that God is requiring of the Church is expressed in 1 John 3:2: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” God desires that the children in his family bear the family resemblance. Here is the restoration of fallen humanity originally created in the image of God in Genesis chapter one. The love of God, lavished on his children, transforms them from being lovers of self to being lovers of God and agents of transformation in the world. But this love that characterizes God’s people is a costly love, just as God’s love cost God the death of his only Son. John writes, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material

¹⁸ David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, J.A. Motyer and J. R. W. Stott, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 11.

possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 Jn 3:16-18). Christian love for others is to be measured by Christ’s love for the Church. It is a love that is willing to give even the ultimate gift of one’s life. Fortunately, the ultimate price is not often required. People are rather called to give a little at a time.

Historic and Contemporary Renewal through Home Groups

To see how the above theology operates in a specific setting, a brief overview of the early Methodist movement will be helpful. Methodism originated as a renewal movement within the eighteenth-century Church of England. John Wesley (1703-1791) began a field preaching ministry similar to that of George Whitfield (1717-1770), and called people to a personal experience of faith into which most of them had already been baptized.¹⁹ He is known for starting small groups designed to nurture holy living among those who responded to his preaching. With his brother Charles, John Wesley began to form small societies in Oxford, England, to promote his view of holy living:

Borrowing from the success of various English religious societies, Wesley created Methodist societies for his followers. “Society” came to mean a local or regional group of Methodists which met weekly. [He] developed a set of General Rules to guide them. Methodists were expected to attend society meetings regularly for worship, preaching, and fellowship. [T]he weekly class meeting designed to be small and attendance by non-Methodists was restricted. Each class [...] was designed to be a place of support, confession, prayer, and stewardship. It was here the lay preacher was particularly active. Classes were subsets of societies and every Methodist was expected to be present for class meeting. Bands, smaller than class meetings were for Methodists only. Bands provided an intimate setting for spiritual self-examination. Each week, members reviewed a series of searching

¹⁹ J. Gordon Melton, series ed., *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, Series: Encyclopedia of World Religions (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 374.

questions compiled by Wesley. Bands, classes, and societies were meant to support and enable the individual's growth in faithful discipleship.²⁰

It appears that the organization that Wesley implemented was one of the keys to the success of early Methodism. By 1791 there were over 70,000 Methodist members in Britain.²¹ Wesley maintained control over his flock until his death and insisted that his societies remain "connexional": "He opposed the idea that each congregation should be independent; rather, they should all share resources as determined by the global needs of mission. The societies, and the preachers, were in connection with him."²² The annual Conference of Preachers gave out the preacher's assignments and was responsible for the rules and discipline of the Connexion. Another key to success was that Methodists experienced warm fellowship in their meetings: "The Methodists, in their societies, took the injunction to 'bear one another's burdens' seriously, and the interdependent 'connectional' nature of the movement reinforced a strong sense of identity."²³ Piety was obviously a serious concern for Methodists. In Wesley's groups it was common to ask another person about the condition of his or her soul. This and similar questions enabled group members to reflect on their spiritual condition and hold one another accountable to spiritual progress. Wesley's groups focused on two main aspects of discipleship: works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety included the inner disciplines of prayer,

²⁰ Charles Yrogoyen Jr. and Susan E. Warrick, eds., *Historical Dictionary of Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005), 283-284.

²¹ Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, Vol. 3 L-R (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1209.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

worship, sacrament and study. Works of mercy were acts of justice and kindness. Wesley called this “practical divinity.”²⁴ In early Methodism, accountability was at the heart of discipleship. Wesley recognized that weak and sinful people are unable to save themselves, they need other believers to help them become like Christ. So each group formed a covenant outlining the areas of growth agreed upon by all, and this formed the basis for accountability. The leadership of the group would rotate each week, making sure everyone was being faithful to the covenant. The success of Methodism demonstrates the importance of discipling people through small accountability groups meeting weekly.

A contemporary example of the success of small home groups can be taken from the history of North Coast church in the suburbs north of San Diego, California. Pastor Larry Osborne came to the area in 1980 and began his ministry with a small church of less than two hundred adults meeting in a school cafeteria. By developing a unique approach to small group ministry, the church has grown into a multi-site mega-church of more than seven thousand in weekend attendance.²⁵ What Osborne discovered was the importance of closing the back door of the church. He did this by making his church more welcoming and “sticky”: “Churches that close the back door effectively do so by serving their congregations so well that people don’t want to leave. And happy sheep are incurable word-of-mouth marketers.”²⁶ The book describing this approach to small groups has been referenced already and is called *Sticky Church*. At North Coast Church,

²⁴ Hillerbrand, *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, 1210.

²⁵ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

an average of 80 percent of the attendees in its weekend services also attends a small group. The unique aspect of these groups is that they focus on the sermon presented the prior week. Osborne believes that the key to success in his ministry has been these sermon-based groups because they help to “velcro” people to one another and the Bible. One key to success was hiring a staff member who focused on small groups and making clear the expectation that all leaders would participate.²⁷ Osborne believes that sermon-based groups are less intimidating than traditional weekly Bible studies because the sermon-based content levels the playing field. Everyone heard the same sermon and has an opinion, even if they have little Bible knowledge. The groups are also less intimidating for leaders because their role is to facilitate discussion rather than teach the group.

At North Coast Church group members are encouraged to choose a group based on who is in it rather than where or when it meets. The goal is to group people together according to natural affinities like age and marital status. Groups begin with refreshments and socializing, and then spend time sharing prayer concerns. Questions are provided in the weekly worship bulletin and group members write down answers prior to the meeting and often read their answers in the group. Three levels of questions are provided: Getting to Know Me, Into the Bible, and Application.²⁸ The last part of every group is the prayer time, and most groups split up by gender for this time. Each group is asked to complete one service project a year from a list of alternatives. They are also asked to establish a group covenant and plan dates for social gatherings. Groups meet for three quarters during the year and take the summer off.

²⁷ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

Osborne believes that a key to success at North Coast Church is his dogged determination to remain focused on developing long-term intimate relationships rather than using the groups for some other purpose such as discipleship or evangelism. He writes, “To measure the quality of relationships, I look for stories of mortgages and rents being paid, meals provided, hospital visits, holiday and vacations spent together, encouragement, and tough confrontations. All in all, the same stuff I’d look for in a healthy extended family.”²⁹ North Coast Church and the early Methodist movement demonstrate the power of groups to foster Christian community.

The material in this chapter, when presented over time at First Presbyterian Church, will serve to bring renewal of the mind and heart. Church members must understand the theology of human nature and how fallen creatures become alienated from God and one another. The consequences of sin, described in the Old Testament with stories and images, will be preached and taught. The unique pressures that destroy community in this modern age will be explained. And the central message of love, so beautifully described in First John, will call the church to a deeper love for God and one another. Practical illustrations of what this looks like when fleshed-out will be drawn from early Methodism and the North Coast Church to cast a vision of hope.

²⁹ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 106.

PART THREE: STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

GOALS AND PLANS

The goal of this project is to move First Presbyterian Church toward spiritual renewal through an intentional process of strengthening spiritual relationships within the congregation by introducing ongoing, home based, small groups designed to enhance discipleship, fellowship, and ministry. Part One presented the crisis in relationships in America and described the town and church with its many possibilities and challenges. In Part Two, the theology of renewal was explored in the Bible and relevant literature with an emphasis on historic and contemporary models. In Part Three the preferred future for First Presbyterian Church will be described and explored focusing on a strategy to implement the goals of this project. The strategy will be built around a two-phase process. The first phase will be the training of leaders in a small group called a “turbo group.” Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson explain, “Turbo groups are small groups filled with apprentice leaders. . . . A turbo group functions as both a real small group and a training group.”¹ The turbo group will be led by the pastor. The second phase will be

¹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 196.

launching pilot groups led by the newly trained leaders to test the new model. Eventually as groups meet and grow, a group of people with administrative gifts will form the steering team to oversee the groups and work to increase participation in the church.

A Vision of Change

At the very heart of this project is a vision of a church filled with passion. Passionate spirituality is one thing that is missing at First Presbyterian Church. The vision to be cast before the people is that of a church that is on fire for God. The results that are hoped for include people who enjoy getting together, sharing burdens together, and praying together. It is a vision of a leadership who truly love and sacrifice for each other. The church must become open to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the source of power in the Christian life. Christians who are on fire for God have a deepening love for the scriptures, prayer, Christian fellowship, and mission. In a church that is being renewed, one finds a focus on the grace of God that is demonstrated within the fellowship by acts of compassion. People whose lives have been transformed by grace have a desire to share that grace with others.

At First Presbyterian Church changes are needed to strengthen spiritual relationships so that God's love can flourish among the members. The Apostle John wrote in his first letter: "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). A church of increasing love will be a church that experiences the grip of God's love. This happens ultimately through a sovereign act of God's Spirit working in the heart of his people. Without God's gracious activity, nothing of any value will change. But the means God most often uses includes a deep dependence on God in prayer, vibrant preaching and

teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God-centered worship that comes alive, and people in leadership who demonstrate Christ-like qualities of passion and commitment within the congregation.

A church of increasing love is a church that takes time for relationships. There is no substitute for this step. In his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes,

It is not enough just to say relationships are important; we must prove it by investing time in them. Words alone are worthless. “My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action” (First John 3:18, *Today’s English Version*). Relationships take time and effort, and the best way to spell love is “T-I-M-E.”²

Warren continues, “Whenever you give your time, you are making a sacrifice, and sacrifice is the essence of love.”³ One cannot truly love others whom they do not know. The effort to change must be a church-wide effort, and it will take time and resources such as those described in this project to overcome the inertia that exists to keep everything the same.

The vision presented in this project is that of a church of improving spiritual relationships. Such a church gets people talking about the Lord and their relationship with Jesus. People get beyond day to day matters and increasingly share with one another about the deeper issues of life. There is open discussion about the Bible and how it applies to life. There is a mutual concern for one another’s souls. As trust grows within the congregation, there will be a new sense of accountability for practicing one’s faith. Spiritual disciplines will be encouraged among friends. Accountability will be welcomed

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 127.

³ Ibid.

and encouraged. People will be increasingly motivated and energized for a common mission as each one rediscovers their purpose as a part of the body of Christ.

Small groups are the key vehicle for moving the church toward this preferred future because human beings are social animals. People tend to become like those with whom they spend the most time. Groups allow for Christian socialization, the process by which values and behaviors are passed on to others. Groups also allow more people to experiment with and develop their spiritual gifts. Groups enhance relationships through the sharing of life experiences, prayer, and love. Groups can help the church to focus on relationships, scripture, and applying scripture to everyday life. The small group gatherings described in this vision of the future will address the need for Christian friendships in a culture that discourages close relationships.

Goals for a Preferred Future

The primary purpose of this project has been described. Now the recommended actions of the project will be stated in four goals of increasing specificity that work together to bring about the desired change. First, it must be recognized that change in any organization is difficult. John R. Kotter, Professor of Leadership, Emeritus, at Harvard Business School, gives a list of eight reasons organizations fail in their efforts to change. The reasons are allowing too much complacency, failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition, underestimating the power of vision, under-communicating the vision by a power of ten (or one hundred or even one thousand), permitting obstacles to block the new vision, failing to create short-term wins, declaring victory too soon, and

neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the corporate structure.⁴ Each of these cautions must be considered in forging a strategy for change at First Presbyterian Church.

In *Leading Congregational Change*, authors Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James Furr make an important point about change: “Change is driven when a significant gap exists between a vision of the future that people sincerely desire to achieve and a clear sense that they are not achieving that vision. As this recognition grows, so does their willingness to change their perspective and try new approaches.”⁵ A strategy for change must do a good job of helping the congregation experience the gap between the preferred future and current circumstances. This is part of the vision casting process.

The first goal is built upon these principles of implementing change. It is to expose church members to a new vision of church life found in the scriptures and lived out in many churches across the country. The vision that is communicated is like a two sided coin. The vision must clearly present both hope for a preferred future and the reality of current circumstances. To do this church leaders must be prepared to live with the tension this goal is designed to create within the congregation. The tension is necessary in order to motivate people to leave the comfort of their current reality and pursue a vision of how things could be. The command to love each other is often emphasized at First Presbyterian Church. But this goal goes further in that it seeks understanding on the part of the people, and looks for a response from the people to change and take new action. This goal will be accomplished through vision casting and preaching. The new action that

⁴ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 16.

⁵ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2000), 100.

is being encouraged is participation in home groups that will enhance discipleship, fellowship, and ministry.

The word “discipleship” should be defined as it is central to the goal. Discipleship is about following Jesus in the details of life. A disciple is a learner. A disciple of Christ is one who learns from Christ and the Bible how to live life differently. Discipleship is a process of putting off the old nature that the Apostle Paul describes in Ephesians chapter four, and putting on the new nature: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). Discipleship is another word for sanctification, the process by which Christians become more and more like Jesus Christ. Discipleship is about developing discipline in one’s Christian life. Small groups will be talking about the disciplines that help Christians grow. As trust grows, there will hopefully be an increasing willingness to hold one another accountable to basic discipleship practices and spiritual disciplines such as daily prayer, Bible reading, and character transformation. The groups will then become a primary motivation for progress in the Christian life.

The second related goal is more specific. It is to encourage church members to meet together in a new setting of home groups. This goal is based on the value and power of spiritual relationships and the dynamics of meeting in homes to help break down walls and cultivate intimacy. The church must see that this type of relationship, foundational to Christianity, cannot happen in a large group setting with an investment of just one hour a

week. Small groups are necessary and have been used by God throughout church history to bring people to spiritual maturity. Members who feel they already have enough friends will need to understand God's call to widen their circle and deepen their experience. Hesitant people must be coaxed to break out of their shells and let others into their lives. Change must be encouraged by exposing the unacceptability of the status quo. Church structures will need to be reevaluated to better support this goal.

A third related goal is still more specific. This goal is to grow the small group ministry measurably by establishing five to seven new home groups that will fellowship with food, sharing, and prayer, followed by a choice of formats including fellowship, sharing, prayer, video teaching, discussion, and/or work on an outreach project. The hope is that with proper preparation and the movement of the Holy Spirit, people will see the benefits of meeting together to bring about renewal in the hearts of the people.

The fourth goal is to see a measurable increase in group members' participation in ministry. This is a vital aspect of discipleship. The small groups will be the primary place of meeting ministry needs as the new effort grows. Teaching, modeling, and practice in using Bibles, sharing, caring, and prayer will all best be carried out within these groups of increasing love. God gives gifts to every member of the body of Christ to be used in service to others. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4,

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13)

God wants his people prepared for works of service.

The word “ministry” is important to define at this point. Ministry is not confined to what people do at church nor is it defined as specifically a “Christian” activity of some sort. A follower of Jesus will learn to see all of life and everything one does as ministry when it is done to the glory of God. Paul writes in Colossians 3: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Col 3: 23-24). Disciples learn that they serve the Lord in whatever they do. Thus small groups will be talking about daily routines and, with proper guidance, learning to see that all that they do is to be done to God’s glory. Too many Christians have compartmentalized life into the spiritual and the secular. The goal here is to help group members remove this sacred-secular split in their thinking and allow God to transform their vision for ministry where they are.

Having an outward focus is very important to the life of a group. Relationships thrive when people are energized by a mission and work together in the same direction. Groups that become ingrown quickly lose their way. Jeffrey Arnold argues that

inward-focused groups die. At one time in the small group movement, “family style” life commitments were in vogue in some circles. The idea was that you would make a lifelong commitment to your group, so that the bonds could imitate those of a family. Unfortunately, these long-term groups were nothing like families, because even (especially?) families have an “outward focus.” That is, from generation to generation, children are born, move out, find partners, form new families, and so on. A family tree is not a straight line. If it were so, families would die. Inward-focused groups face the same problem.⁶

⁶ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 11.

On a practical level, groups will be asked to plan and carry out a service project during the quarter. Examples will include taking care of a church flower bed, cleaning and painting a room in the church, doing yard work for a shut-in, picking up trash and spreading mulch in a local park, working at the local food bank, or visiting recent attendees and shut-ins in the church community. These will be simple projects that can be carried out by the group in a few hours.

To keep the home group ministry growing, a steering team will eventually need to be identified. This will happen toward the end of the first year as the new groups are enjoying the benefits of community. Steering team members need experience in groups in order to provide guidance. Group leaders will be asked to help identify people with administrative gifts who are committed to the group experience and who would be willing to meet periodically to keep the groups on track and growing. They will help leaders recruit group members, work with the pastor on long-range planning and advertising, encourage group leaders, pray, handle evaluations, and report to the Session twice a year. This group will help to keep the ministry ongoing.

A Strategy for Introducing Home Groups

Prayer for God's transformation, inspiration, and renewal will be solicited church-wide as a first step in the strategy for change. Recognizing that God is the source of renewal and hope in the church, it must be demonstrated for and with the church that prayer is the beginning of any good work. Prayer and strong biblical preaching will be combined to form the first step in a strategy for change. The church is dependent upon God to raise up leaders for the new work. Strong preaching will be used to cast the vision

for change and challenge the status quo within the church. Much of the material contained in this project will be used to develop sermons, but the discussion of relevant passages in Chapters Four and Five will provide the foundation for these messages. The themes of restoration and renewal in Chapter Four will be explored in these messages. The connective images of the vine and branches, the head and the body, and the bride and bridegroom are ideal for explaining what biblical fellowship is supposed to be. The Bible passages these images come from are rich in preaching material. In Chapter 5, the theology of restoration and renewal, woven throughout the Bible, was explored through various Old and New Testament texts. Stories of ancient and modern movements as well as contemporary churches transformed by small groups can illustrate the power of improving spiritual relationships within the church. Testimonies from successful groups within First Presbyterian Church, *Tres Dias*, and other local fellowships will also enhance the preaching. It is important at this stage to work with the church boards to evaluate the current spiritual condition of the church. The Natural Church Development (NCD) survey will give helpful insights. The desired outcome of the preaching and vision casting is to identify people who have a burden for change within the church.

A visioning team of church leaders will form a turbo group with the pastor. The team will be made up of people who have caught the vision and have appropriate gifts and connections within the congregation. Qualifications for the visioning team will be appropriate to the small town setting of First Presbyterian Church. It will be important, for instance, that the pastor personally get involved in asking people for their help. The pastor will need to spend time with individuals at first, and then gather a few interested

potential leaders and cast the vision of a renewed church in a small group setting. This gives the pastor the opportunity to demonstrate spiritual care and accountability as well as transparency. Improving relationships with a small group will increase the chances that others will catch the vision and respond when asked. In their book *Leading Through Change: Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era*, Barney Wells, Martin Giese, and Ron Klassen discuss the cultural steps to leading change in a small town church. They recommend that small town churches rely on key persuaders and diplomats, identify similar innovators in the farming or small business community as models of change, use history and tradition as metaphors for change, and offer people opportunities to sample the desired change.⁷ Each of these suggestions makes sense and can increase the chances of success at First Presbyterian Church.

The visioning team will be asked to meet with the pastor to form a turbo group for leadership training. The first task of the new group is to begin the journey of deepening their love for one another. In *Building a Church of Small Groups*, Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson write,

If you seek to build a church of small groups, make an unwavering commitment to instill authentic relationships into every group in the church. Weave these five practices—self-disclosure, care giving, humility, truth-telling and affirmation—into the very fabric of community life. . . . It takes intention to move groups from casual acquaintances to a committed fellowship of intimate knowers, extraordinary lovers, humble servants, gracious admonishers, and joyful celebrants.⁸

⁷ Barney Wells, Martin Giese, and Ron Klassen, *Leading Through Change: Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2005), 91-94.

⁸ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 70.

The turbo group will be introduced to Jeff Arnold's *The Big Book of Small Groups*. Jeff Arnold is a Presbyterian pastor in rural Pennsylvania. His book is designed for lay leaders and can be most helpful in casting a vision for the new effort. Another resource that will be used is Neal McBride's *How to Build a Small Group Ministry*. This book contains reproducible worksheets and surveys for the design phase of small group ministry. Becoming familiar with these resources will be an important aspect of this strategy.

If the desired tension is being felt in the congregation it will help with the next step of surveying people's needs and perceptions. The hope is to get a broad representation of the congregation for the survey. If people feel they helped create a new ministry they will be more apt to participate. McBride offers usable congregational surveys. Focus groups will also be used at board meetings and briefly after church to get more input. These groups will get people talking about present reality, future hope, and the nuts and bolts of getting people to meet in homes.

One important question surrounds the actual content of the teaching in the groups. Each group will eventually make its own decision about this and content will change over time. The study content is secondary to the benefits of meeting together, worshipping, sharing, and praying together. It makes sense to give people options and allow groups to choose their own content. The possibilities for video teaching are increasing each day as content becomes more available. One company, Blue Fish, recently struck a deal with some of the largest Christian video publishers and will be streaming the content to anyone in the church that has access to a computer or smart phone for one low monthly

fee. Blue Fish currently has about 1300 video teaching programs available.⁹ Video teaching has some advantages. If a church has few experienced teachers, video teaching allows for professionals to be brought in, so that leaders facilitate rather than teach. Group facilitating can be an important first step on the journey to actual teaching. A downside of video teaching is that some programs are popular while others are merely tolerated. And since First Presbyterian Church lacks teachers, it will be advantageous to give group leaders training and experience in actual teaching. Another downside of using video programming is that the emphasis of the group becomes learning rather than community building.

An alternative resource that clearly focuses on discipleship training is James Bryan Smith's *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*, which is a study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, designed for group use. This book assists group members in the process of spiritual formation. Smith discusses four components of change: renewing one's thinking and personal narratives, the practice of soul-shaping disciplines, in the presence of the community, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Each chapter is followed by a set of exercises called "soul training" that help readers put learning into practice. Smith argues, "I am convinced that while we can change by renewing our mind and practicing disciplines on our own, we find deeper and more lasting change within a community. We need others to help us see who and whose we are."¹⁰ A discussion group using this book will find deep fulfillment as members shape

⁹ For more information go to www.bluefish.com. Streaming content is available at RightNowMedia.com.

one another's faith. Surveys and focus groups will be used to help the visioning team make decisions about what content and resources to use. The pilot project will also experiment with content.¹¹

A promotion strategy will initially be part of the responsibility of the visioning team until a steering team is formed. They are in the best position to determine how to get others involved. The heart of the strategy should be the use of existing relationships. A personal invitation to join a group is much more effective than public announcements and sign ups. There are companies that provide promotional materials for church-wide focus efforts. One such company, Outreach, INC., has many small group promotions available.¹² These may or may not be appropriate for the rural church culture. Some people at First Presbyterian Church have been skeptical of “canned” programs used at larger churches. It should be noted that the initial promotion will not be church-wide as the pilot groups will be experimenting and perfecting the group experience. Once this phase is complete, a promotion strategy will become more important.

The name of the new groups must convey their purpose and be culturally sensitive. Since First Presbyterian Church is located in central Pennsylvania next to the Susquehanna River, fishing is a favorite pass time especially among the men of the church. F.I.S.H. is an acronym for Fellowship in Someone’s Home, suggested by Carl

¹⁰ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: 2009), 12.

¹¹ Suggested video teaching includes R. Vander Laan, *Faith Lessons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999); D. Tackett, *The Truth Project* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 2004); J. Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). J. Ortberg also has other series that are user-friendly.

¹² Information is available at www.outreach.com.

George in his book *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*.¹³ The title is catchy and communicates well what the group is partly about, friendships.

Keeping Groups Ongoing

Building home group leadership into the structure of the church is an important part of this strategy. There are various options that would ensure an ongoing ministry. Adding a part-time staff member would be a way for the church to recognize the importance of this effort. Having a key leader who is paid to work with the pastor and organize groups and train leaders would have a big impact on the church. There is more accountability and availability for a staff member. First Presbyterian has a part-time paid organist and choir director, setting a precedent for part-time staff. A staff member would help all the groups meeting at the church to begin to practice small group disciplines at their regular meetings. It is also quite possible that a volunteer would be willing to carry out the same rolls and tasks. The ministry must either come under the responsibility of an existing committee or new committee. Since the number of children in Sunday school has been shrinking, it may make sense to include the ministry under Christian Education. The Session may also consider establishing a new committee to support the ministry. It is this group that makes the final decision about staff and committee structure changes. But unless the structure of church organization is changed, the new work has little chance of being sustained over time. This project recommends the creation of a small group steering committee. It will be established toward the end of the pilot group ten-week

¹³ Carl George, *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership: How Lay Leaders Can Establish Dynamic and Healthy Cells, Classes, or Teams* (Taylors, SC: CDLM, 2007), 11.

session from suggestions made by group leaders. Leaders will be asked to identify people who are committed to the group and have organizational gifts and spiritual maturity. This new steering team will meet periodically, perhaps five times a year, to guide the ministry.

The Session will be encouraged to see this new ministry as a way to shepherd the people of the church and close the back door. In Presbyterian polity the elders are responsible for shepherding the sheep. Elders will be asked to participate in a group as a way to fulfill their calling. The leadership must fully participate to make the new way of being the church successful. Deacons in the church will be taught to see this ministry as a hands-on extension of their ministry. Small groups will extend care to individuals much more effectively than Deacons alone can. Deacons will be asked to get involved in a group to further their ministry.

Target Population and Leadership

At First Presbyterian Church, a handful of people already have experience leading small groups. This group is a good start for recruiting leadership but newer members and especially younger people may be well suited for the task. It is important for the pastor to recruit younger leaders and couples because they will have the best chance at forming groups of other younger people. Experience teaches that even some bright students as young as early high school age can benefit from an adult fellowship group. Groups that have succeeded at First Presbyterian Church to date have been mostly made up of the over fifty crowd. This project needs to break through that barrier and connect younger people to Christ and each other.

There are many criteria that can be used for selecting leaders. Donahue and Robinson suggest looking at who people “A.R.E.” This acrostic stands for Affections, Reputation, and Expectations. They write, “People suited to leadership love God, people, truth, and the church.”¹⁴ They also note that, “a person’s reputation offers clues to that person’s preparation for leadership.”¹⁵ The last quality refers to “being sure candidates understand and support expectations for service.”¹⁶ Making expectations clear about church and group attendance and behavior will be necessary. Looking at who leaders A.R.E. can go a long way in determining who would make a good leader.

Recruiting leaders for the turbo group will initially fall to the pastor in consultation with the Session. It is important that the pastor begin by meeting with individuals, casting vision, affirming gifts, and to then call potential leaders to a new way of life. Donahue and Robinson write,

It has been said that much of Christianity is about leaving. Abraham left his home when God called him to a new land. Men and women leave their birth families and cleave to a spouse. Jesus Christ calls us to leave behind the things of this world and take up our cross. Similarly, recruiting means asking people to leave behind some of what they now do and make time for leadership development.¹⁷

This is a very important recruiting concept. Many members of the church have allowed other interests to push God out of their lives. If the church is to be the community of it was designed to be, then many people will need to leave their current secular lifestyle for a more biblical way of life.

¹⁴ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

Once a group of ten leaders has been identified, a time and location will be established for the turbo training group using Arnold's and McBride's books. This group of ten people will be trained by the pastor, with input from past group leaders and consultants from other local churches that have had successful groups. Once the training period is complete, turbo group members, working in pairs, will invite a group of eight or ten people, couples and/or singles, to a gathering at a home where guests will get a chance to try out a group experience. Food, ice breakers, sharing and prayer will be offered, along with a brief Bible lesson on community. At the end of the meeting participants will be asked to commit to a ten-week session in the leader's home. This approach has many benefits. Having leaders choose whom they will ask enables natural affinities to influence the group makeup. Potential group members get to try out the group before committing. Peer influence will encourage buy in. If there are not enough positive responses, those who do commit can help recruit others to a subsequent gathering. If this plan is successful, it should produce up to five pilot groups of ten people, or fifty members and friends of First Presbyterian Church during the first semester.

The pilot groups will choose their own formats and be encouraged to experiment with formats and report on their findings. Group leaders will be supported by the pastor and/or staff and Session members via phone calls and e-mail during the ten-week pilot program. Resources will continue to be made available. McBride's book offers many resources for the turbo group including a suggested job description, team roles, and possible goals for the team. Arnold's book teaches the basic principles behind small

group ministry. Combined, these two resources have just the right materials to prepare turbo group members to lead a pilot group. Leaders will be taught to be on the lookout for potential new leaders who could be trained to lead a future group. They will also be looking for potential members of a steering team to keep the ministry ongoing. The pilot program will be evaluated after the ten-week session at an all-day debriefing session at the church. This evaluation process will lay the groundwork for expansion of the program inviting the whole church to participate.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

This chapter will address the plans for the new effort that have developed out of the previous chapters. It begins with a summary of the pilot project and includes a time line. The plans for leadership development and training will be described along with the resources that will be used and the personnel involved. Finally a plan for assessment will be given along with possibilities for adjustment.

The Pilot Project

The pilot project is designed to enable well trained small group leaders to lead experimental groups. These trained leaders will work in pairs leading a ten-week pilot group. The groups are designed to strengthen spiritual relationships and enhance discipleship, fellowship, and ministry. They will be experimenting with different formats and learning as they go.

A large part of implementing this change at First Presbyterian Church will be communicating Christ's call to discipleship and exposing the weakness of nominal belief and undisciplined practice of the faith. This must be done in a comprehensive way using

all the existing structures of services, meetings, boards, and gatherings to challenge all members and especially leaders to leave the old ways and live out the radical call to love God and neighbor. To that end it is hoped that the pilot project will pave the way for the whole church to be challenged to live out their faith in community.

The length of time required for leadership training is important. Many writers say that it is critical that this phase is not rushed. Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson write, “Turbo groups probably need at least nine to twelve months to appropriately train new leaders. It can happen more quickly if the group meets weekly or if leaders have prior small group experience. However, brand new leaders may need as long as eighteen to twenty-four months of preparation.”¹ Initially this project was looking at a five week training session. It is now recognized that this would be inadequate.

A Timeline

A season of intense prayer and preaching will lay the foundation for this new work. This effort by the pastor and church leadership will begin in the winter of 2013. At the same time the pastor will begin meeting with prospects for the turbo group, strengthening relationships, and casting vision. During this time the pastor will also prayerfully challenge nominal faith in the church, encourage dissatisfaction with the status quo, highlight Jesus’ radical call to discipleship, and lay the groundwork for seeing church life as being centered in community.

¹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 198.

Guidelines for groups described in this paper are available in the fall of 2012. These guidelines include a two phase approach to introducing small groups in the church. First, a turbo group made up of ten experienced and newer leaders will be led by the pastor using materials from J. Arnold and N. McBride. This group is expected to form in the spring of 2013. After a period of not less than three months, these leaders will work in pairs to start five pilot groups that will meet for ten weeks. It is hoped that these pilot groups will begin in the fall of 2013.

To help the new leaders recruit group members for the pilot program, a sermon series will begin in the fall of 2013. This will help prepare the congregation to hear the call to discipleship in a new way. Prayer will be encouraged throughout the church during this phase, asking God to raise up leaders. Following the ten-week pilot program, there will be a one-day evaluation meeting at the church. All leaders and group members would be asked to attend this event. This evaluation will give leaders and pilot group members a chance to reflect on their experience. Out of this planning day will come a decision about starting new groups in the church. It is very possible that the pilot groups will want to keep meeting for another ten weeks. This would be a welcome outcome. The goal is to foster spiritual relationships and ten weeks is not enough to accomplish that task. Potential new leaders will also be identified and if there are enough new leaders that want training, a new turbo group will begin. In this way leadership training will continue to a primary task of the pastor and/or staff member responsible for home groups.

Planned Resources

The meeting space suggested for these groups are church members' homes because this location encourages intimacy, openness and trust. Larry Osborne observes,

[A small group's] location, size, and makeup are much more conducive to authenticity than any sanctuary or Sunday school class can ever hope to be. Just think about it. Where would you be more likely to be open and honest? In a living room or a classroom? With twelve people or twenty-five people? In a group where there's always a new face, or a group where you already know everyone? For most of us, the answers would be the living room, the group of twelve, and the group where we know everyone. The small group setting wins hands down.²

Each home group will need a hospitality leader. This person will be responsible for planning the food and beverage to be shared at the beginning of each meeting. This role is important to help break the ice and allow people to relax and connect with one another when they arrive. If a hospitality leader offers pretzels, chips, and punch it sends a very different message than offering something homemade. Homemade food communicates love, and that is the goal of the person in charge of hospitality, to help group members feel loved.

Video teaching materials are resources that need to be readily available. Leaders using these materials must be sensitive to changing technology. Some homes still use VCRs while other homes have only DVD players and may or may not have Wi-Fi. Experience teaches that a rural church may have few older people who know how to connect and operate a DVD player. Technical needs must be planned for ahead of time. Another consideration is how ten to twelve people will be able to view and hear a TV.

² Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 54.

Some examples of video teaching materials have already been mentioned. Many popular Christian books in the last twenty years have been turned into video teaching programs. Here are just a few examples of such popular books: *Boundaries*, by Henry Cloud and John Townsend; *The Reason for God*, by Tim Keller; *The Story*, by Randy Frazee; *Expecting to See Jesus*, by Anne Graham Lotz; and *Who is This Man?* by John Ortberg. During the turbo group phase these resources will be evaluated. Video teaching, however, is not essential to the operation of any of these groups. Other models will also be considered. Jeff Arnold's *Big Book on Small Groups* contains many excellent suggestions in chapter eight including character studies, book studies, scripture memory, and inductive studies.³ Bill Donohue and Russ Robinson have helpful chapters in Part Two of their book, *Building a Church of Small Groups*. In this section they contrast truth-focused groups with life-focused groups. Truth-focused groups are concerned with getting the right answer. Life-focused groups emphasize understanding and sharing personal stories. The authors then present a third alternative: transformation-focused groups that are concerned with the middle ground where truth and life meet. A helpful chart from the book is shown in table 1.⁴

³ Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 146-149.

⁴ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 77.

Comparing Three Types of Groups

Truth-Focused Groups	Life-Focused Groups	Transformation-Focused Groups
Know the answers to the questions	Know the answers to personal problems	Know the truth about God and me
Focus on information: What does it mean?	Focus on introspection: How do I feel?	Focus on transformation: How am I becoming like Christ?
Reward members for being right	Reward members for being real	Reward members for being honest with God and others
Community is built on the principle of agreement	Community built on principle of acceptance	Community is built on the principle of authenticity
The goal is a well-informed student	The goal is a well-understood self	The goal is a well-ordered heart

Table 1

The authors explain that it takes skill to design questions that lead to discussion and self-disclosure. But once self-disclosure is achieved and the gap between God’s word and real life is exposed, groups must be pushed to take action and do something about it. This is when transformation begins to takes place. Even icebreakers that are often used in groups for self-description can be redesigned for self-disclosure. Spiritual intimacy requires moving from the one to the other.

Group covenants are used to set basic ground rules for operation. Neal McBride defines a group covenant this way: “A small-group covenant is a written compact or agreement that sets forth specific details, principles, and practices the group members commit themselves to uphold for the specified period of time they meet together as a group.”⁵ A group covenant will be important to decide upon in the turbo group and pilot groups. A good covenant should lay out the group’s goals, meeting parameters, length

⁵ Neal F. McBride, *How to Build a Small Groups Ministry*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 91.

and duration of the group, membership, expectations of participation, confidentiality, meeting format and agenda, child care, hospitality and refreshments.⁶

Food is another resource for making groups successful. It is also a way to get people more involved and committed. A person who volunteered to bring food to the next meeting will be less likely to miss. It has been mentioned above that good food is a way to express love and break the ice at a meeting. It may even become another motivation to attend. Good groups need good food. But preparing and bringing food should not become a barrier to participation. Some group members would enjoy baking each week while others might be intimidated by this. Group leaders will ask their groups to offer good food as often as possible. Occasional pot-luck dinners will also aid group bonding.

Childcare is often a challenge for small groups, but there are many ways to address the problem. Some groups allow children to gather in another room at the same time and come and go during the meeting. The problem is that these interruptions can cause a great distraction and even ruin a group. Babysitters are expensive, but a collection can be taken to offset parents' expenses for sitters. Church funds can be made available for this purpose. Some groups are able to meet while children are in school. Other groups may have rotating volunteers who stay with the children while the group meets. Many groups meet in the evening, presenting parents with significant challenges at bed time. Perhaps groups could meet later when children are in bed. The church nursery is also available for dropping kids off if volunteers can be found. This opens the possibility of a new ministry to the children. Another idea is to hire two people to staff the church

⁶ McBride, *How to Build a Small Groups Ministry*, 93.

nursery during group times. These issues will be decided as the groups are formed.

Parents who decide to join a group at First Presbyterian Church will be assured that their children's needs will be provided for with the help of the church in the best way possible.

Another resource that has been identified is Richard Peace's book *Spiritual Autobiography*. The author writes, "This guide will equip you to write and/or tell your spiritual autobiography."⁷ Peace argues that there is great benefit in reflecting on one's life and looking for the "footprints of God." Just as many Christians have been blessed by reading Augustine's *Confessions*, so there is great benefit in noticing God's activity in all life stories. Peace continues, "A spiritual autobiography is the story of God's interaction in our lives. It Chronicles our pilgrimage as we seek to follow God."⁸ The book is designed to be used in a group setting with guides for writing and sharing one's autobiography. This spiritual exercise will be beneficial at First Presbyterian Church because it will help group members share and learn about one another at a deeper level. Everyone is an expert on themselves, so all group members will come to the exercise on an equal footing. It is a faith sharing exercise that can be deeply affirming for the speaker and listener. Peace states, "It draws the strands of our lives together in a way that points us to their meaning; it reminds us of where true reality lies in contrast to the illusions of modern life."⁹

⁷ Richard Peace, *Spiritual Autobiography: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 6.

⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁹ Ibid., 58.

Funding for the new ministry is an important consideration. At First Presbyterian Church a fund was created many years ago that is used for special programs. This fund has enough money in it to buy books and curriculum, subsidize child care, buy training materials, and take care of unforeseen expenses. An alternative source of funding in the church is a large fund called undesignated memorials. Funding is readily available and the Session could identify other sources if needed.

Additional personnel will be invited to assist with the new effort. The church secretary must understand the plan for the new ministry and how she can assist the pastor and group leaders. She will set up appointments with potential leaders, send out letters and emails, copy and distribute materials, maintain the church website, and be another source of accurate information. The prayer chain is an important ministry at First Presbyterian Church and will be asked to support the new effort with special prayer a few times a month. Advisors have already been consulted from local churches that have functioning small groups. These experienced people will be brought in to address the turbo group in the training phase. A guest speaker can stir up enthusiasm. The Presbytery Executive has skills in church renewal and spiritual formation. He is a trusted dynamic resource person who will be more than happy to assist and encourage the church in this effort.

Assessment Plan

Evaluating the turbo group and pilot groups will help to mature this new effort at First Presbyterian Church. Neal McBride writes, "Evaluation is among the most neglected and unused tools available to help build small group ministries. It is commonly

misunderstood and deemed unspiritual. Nevertheless, it is a valuable process.”¹⁰ McBride defines evaluation as: “the systematic process of obtaining information and using it to for judgments, which in turn are used in decision making.”¹¹ Two kinds of evaluation will need to take place. The first kind is solicited from group members during the ten-week session. Email will be used because it enables almost instant feed-back from group members and leaders. At first this information will be received by the pastor, then later by the steering team when it is in place. The turbo group will be asked for feedback via email. This will teach group leaders to use the same process with their future group members. The second kind of evaluation is solicited at the end of the session. Specific questions will be designed according to the purpose of the group. Multiple choice answers will work best for analysis. A simple form of evaluation is included in McBride’s book on pages 181-184.

Another important assessment tool will be the *Natural Church Development* survey that has been used twice at First Presbyterian Church. This is the test that revealed the church’s weakness in the area of passionate spirituality. It will be helpful to use this test after one year of having consistent groups meeting in homes. The hope is that church members will score higher because they have become more passionate about their faith due to the encouragement of fellow group members. If so it will be a cause for celebration.

The day-long event that is planned for the end of the first ten-week period will be designed to help evaluate all the data. Input from the congregation at large will also be

¹⁰ McBride, *How to Build a Small Groups Ministry*, 171.

¹¹ Ibid.

helpful at this time to determine how the new groups are perceived. As the information is analyzed it will be integrated into a brief report. This report will be given to the Session and the highlights will be reported to the congregation through the church newsletter. After the next ten-week session another evaluation will be completed with the results going to the new home group steering team that should be in place. This steering team will be the primary goal setting and decision making group for the new ministry.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The intent of this project is to bring about church renewal by introducing small group practice that enhances discipleship and strengthens spiritual relationships at First Presbyterian Church. It is a project designed to strengthen relationships and is based on the foundational biblical principle that people are designed for community. Genesis 2:18 reads, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone.’” Having been created in God’s image, people are created for relationships. The God of the Bible, revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit, is a circle of eternal love, devotion, and surrender. Jesus Christ was sent to proclaim God’s love and restore broken relationships through his grace. The greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is to love God and one’s neighbor. This project joyfully calls church members to experience that love in fresh new ways.

As this project is brought to a close, it is important to summarize its findings and look to the future for the church and larger Christian community. The magnitude of change that is hoped for in this effort is great. Implementing the project will take time, patience, prayer, and a movement of the Holy Spirit of God at First Presbyterian Church. One reason the church is in need of renewal is that it has resisted change for so long. It has become stuck in habits that do not foster Christian community. This project challenges church leaders to rethink Christ’s call to die to self and follow him. Overcoming inertia and changing habits will take months of consistent effort and prayer. It will take concentrated new thinking on the part of the leadership. The goals of the project are ambitious. But Christ’s call to leave the old life for the new has always been a great challenge. Eddie Gibbs describes the problem this project seeks to address:

In contemporary Western Christianity, we have little understanding of the concept of discipleship. Those who are evangelized are brought to the point of decision, go through membership and then continue as a part of the worshipping congregation. Western churches suffer from a chronic problem of undisciplined church members, an environment that serves as a perfect breeding ground for “nominal Christianity.”¹

Confronting nominal Christianity is a spiritual battle that faces most if not all churches in the West. This project is designed to offer a path toward renewal through a home group ministry lead by the laity of the church. Implementing this project in a timely and sensitive manner will help connect people within the church and enable them to better respond to Christ’s call to love each other and follow him.

Part One of this project described the neighborhood of First Presbyterian Church, a two-hundred year old main line church in central Pennsylvania. Here I noted that the speed of modern life has had a negative impact on the communal nature of life in neighborhood and church. Although people have more methods of connecting with one another than ever before, there is nevertheless a great void in relationships created by many factors, including American values of individualism, increased wealth, mobility, opportunity, isolation, divorce, and spiritual malaise. I believe that these problems are really an opportunity for the Church to step in and help people connect to God and one another, filling the void that modern life has created. It is the Church that has the answer to the problem of relationships. The Christian community must lead the way and demonstrate a new and different way to live. A way of living that is unhurried where people learn to have ordered hearts.

¹ Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext* (Downers Grove, IL: Intersity Press, 2000), 79.

The small town of Milton, Pennsylvania, flanked on the West by the Susquehanna River and plagued by empty buildings that once purred with industry, is a functioning community of people, some of whom have lived together for generations. This community in which I have lived for seventeen years is a rural small town with many needs and also signs of hope. The main line churches in the area are clearly struggling to survive in a climate that is not conducive to church commitment. Something must change in order to keep people connected to the Lord and their faith community. People must be challenged to give up their own agenda to make room for loving and caring for others. Groups seem to be the natural way for this to happen. Randy Frazee writes, “You can have a small group and not have community—but you cannot experience community apart from a small group experience.”²

The town of Milton is the location of First Presbyterian Church and has many things going for it including a slowly improving downtown and an increasing schedule of successful regional events. I described some recent projects in the town that demonstrate good team-work. There are many people willing to pitch in, but the best people tend to get overworked and can easily burn out. I pointed to a new outreach at the church called *Faith in Action* as an example of the church working together to put feet on their faith for a day of service and celebration.

First Presbyterian Church is facing many challenges. It finds itself in a troubled denomination. The theological slide away from the Bible has presented the church with a challenging environment for ministry. A significant number of members have left the

² Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 22.

church for more conservative churches and denominations. At the present time, First Presbyterian is considering leaving the PC (USA). Another challenge is the demographics of the church—mostly aging baby boomers and seniors. Although the adult Sunday school is doing well, parents of young children are not committed to bringing them. Many community events are now competing for family time on Sunday mornings. This has hurt the morale of the church. Lyle Schaller says, “The biggest challenge for the church at the opening of the twenty-first century is to develop a solution to the discontinuity and fragmentation of the American lifestyle.”³

It may seem counterintuitive to start a program of home groups in such an environment. People may feel they are too busy for something new. What Christians must do in this environment is make a choice. It is a choice that has been handed down throughout history. Moses’ successor declares in Joshua 24:15, “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” The church must present the choice in stark terms, but it must do more. Randy Frazee writes,

The church of the twenty-first century must do more than add worlds to an already overbooked society; it must design new structures that help people simplify their lives and develop more meaning, depth, purpose, and community. . . . Christians must be focused on experiencing what God intended and created us to have—biblical community as members of the body of Christ.⁴

³ Lyle Schaller, from a speech given by Lyle Schaller at the Leadership Network Conference in Ontario, California, October 1998, quoted in Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, 37.

⁴ Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, 37.

The choice is between living like everyone else and following Christ. It is not possible, especially today, to live like everyone else and follow Christ. This project is designed to help church members understand the choice and presents an alternative.

Part Two of this paper presented theological reflection on the nature of spiritual renewal from a biblical perspective. Renewal is a sovereign act of God in the heart of the believer and in the life of the church restoring spiritual life and obedience. But it comes often as a result of prayer and can be encouraged through biblical preaching, teaching, and the practice of spiritual disciplines. Renewal involves repentance of sin and selfishness, and a turning to God, and a life of obedience. On the corporate level it involves recognizing sinful structures and patterns that separate people from God. The theological basis for renewal is the believer's union with Christ by grace through faith. It comes often with a new experience of grace and issues in a life of joyful obedience. Loving God and loving neighbor takes center stage when the heart is renewed. Biblical community can once again be embraced. A clear theology of renewal was presented using books by Gareth Icenogle and Richard Lovelace. The practical out-workings of a theology of renewal was crystallized through books by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Peter Scazzero, Andrew Wheeler and Marjorie Thompson. These books present a cornucopia of spiritual practices that lead the individual and the church to spiritual maturity. First Presbyterian Church will be learning from these books how to live, love, learn, and worship together.

This project has taken a careful look at what the church is meant to be according to the New Testament. There is quite a contrast between modern church experience and

the images of the church presented in the Bible. When these images are proclaimed, they challenge the church to be resurrected in Christ and live a brand new life. Images of the vine and branches, the head and the body, and the bride and bridegroom, are powerful portraits of intimacy. Yet rarely do church members experience such depth in their relationships. This project hopefully opens a door and lets light into the church—the light of the Holy Spirit.

The Presbyterian system is connectional in nature and was built upon Covenant Theology, principles of parity in leadership, and the bedrock unity found in Christ. The Confessions provided great stability for the church until recently. Now the future of the denomination looks dim to some, but others are looking to a future of less structure and more emphasis on local mission. God has brought renewal in the past and will not abandon his people. The Lord Jesus gave this wonderful promise to the church: “upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18, KJV).

This paper has also taken a careful look at the fallen nature of humanity. The human heart is prone to wander from the ways of God. A theology of restoration and renewal focused on biblical themes such as the restoration of the Temple in Haggai, the restoration of the soul in Psalm 23, and the renewing of the mind in Romans 12. The goal of renewal is the restoration of love in the heart: love for God and neighbor. The Apostle John makes God’s love the centerpiece of his first Epistle. Here he presents the highest challenge of all: that Christians lay down their lives for one another. The vision of a

restored humanity filled with a spirit of love and deference to one another challenges the nominal Christianity found in many churches.

Small groups have been used by God to bring people together at various times and places. The history of the early Methodist movement was presented to demonstrate the value of groups. A modern example of a church in California that learned to be “sticky” brought a contemporary perspective. These helpful models inspire and encourage the Church as it pursues a path of home groups.

Part Three described the strategy and plans for implementing the vision for home groups at First Presbyterian Church. The goals included increasing love, improving relationships, and the hope of renewal through a small group ministry. These goals challenge complacency in the church. They address the problem of nominal faith and shallow relationships. The group meetings become a vehicle for improving relationships and growth in discipleship—following Jesus.

The plan includes training leaders over a period of three months or more in what is called a turbo group. In consultation with the Session, the pastor will seek to intensify relationships with potential group leaders and prayerfully ask them to join his turbo group. But this group is more than a learning group; it must become a loving group. It is both a real small group and a training group. Out of this group of ten leaders will come five new groups, led by pairs of trained leaders, which will meet for ten weeks in homes for prayer, fellowship, and transformational learning. Video teaching is one option available to these groups. Leaders will be given sufficient books, materials and training

experiences to build confidence for leading their own groups. Once they are trained, these leaders will solicit members for their pilot groups.

Preparing the congregation is done through focused prayer and a preaching series using the biblical images noted above. These messages will present a theology of renewal and biblical community. People will be given opportunities to respond by joining a pilot group. Pilot groups will experiment with formats and content and will be asked for feedback to help leaders sharpen the experience. At the end of ten weeks, a special day will be set aside to evaluate the new ministry. The broader congregation will also respond using surveys and focus groups to give input to the new effort.

Keeping the ministry ongoing is a very important concern. The Session of the church will be asked to consider adding part time staff to manage the ministry. It must also consider changing the committee structure of the church in order to incorporate the new ministry. After the first semester of new groups a steering team will be formed of group members who will provide direction for the new ministry. This team will meet periodically to set goals, encourage leaders, evaluate the new ministry, and report to the Session. Eventually, a Natural Church Development retest will provide additional data.

The model that is presented here could be helpful to other churches that suffer from a lack of biblical community. I have found that my own faith has been renewed by studying the biblical and sociological principles outlined here. It is quite easy for a small town pastor to fall into routines that take the focus off what the church really needs. Managers tend to keep things running smoothly; but what the church needs today is courageous leaders who will challenge the status quo and call the church to radical

obedience. Perhaps there is not much hope for the old main line churches, but a subversive group of lovingly devoted disciples could have quite an impact on a small town church and community. And this is exactly what took place when the Spirit of God brought forth the church in the Book of Acts.

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