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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

KINGDOM WITNESS IN NASHVILLE:  
CONNECTING THE SMALL GROUPS OF THE ACKLEN CHURCH TO  
COMMUNITY MINISTRY

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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KINGDOM WITNESS IN NASHVILLE:  
CONNECTING THE SMALL GROUPS OF THE ACKLEN CHURCH TO  
COMMUNITY MINISTRY

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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BY

J.P. CONWAY  
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## ABSTRACT

### **Kingdom Witness in Nashville: Connecting the Small Groups of the Acklen Church to Community Ministry**

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2014

The purpose of this project was to lead the existing small groups of the Acklen Church in forming ongoing partnerships with local community ministries. After surviving and rebuilding after the flood of 2010, the Acklen Church wrestled with its relationship to its neighborhood, currently in the late stages of gentrification yet within walking distance of many in poverty. Despite the abundance of churches in Nashville, community ministries and nonprofits consistently lack volunteers. For this reason, this paper argues for neighborhood partnerships, in contrast to mere episodic involvement. In the two years prior to the project, the Acklen Church developed positive momentum in a weekly relationship with Room in the Inn, organized through its small groups. Therefore, this paper argues that small groups represent a hopeful paradigm for further community partnerships.

The paper centers on a ten-week series entitled *Kingdom Witness in City*, conducted in the spring of 2013. The author wrote and presented a Sunday morning curriculum centering on the belief that the church is a community of kingdom exiles. Moreover, the mission of the church is to witness to the kingdom, and Christian exiles witness to the kingdom by loving the city. In developing the curriculum, the author drew inspiration from the writings of Gareth Icenogle, Everett Ferguson, Timothy Keller, Lesslie Newbigin, Ron Sider, James K.A. Smith, and Dallas Willard. On Wednesday nights, guest speakers from community ministries and non-profits presented on ministry in the city and offered avenues for partnership. On Sunday nights, small groups discussed these presentations and discerned opportunities, giftedness, and obstacles in relation to involvement. At the end of the series, the groups received opportunities to make partnership commitments.

In the spring of 2014, the author analyzed the mixed results of the series. The number of community partnerships of the Acklen Church more than doubled. However, the partnerships did not always come from the small groups. Moreover, busyness revealed itself as a formable foe to community service. In addition, the Acklen Church discovered that many of its members already participated in community partnerships yet never really shared or vocalized their involvement. Finally, the paper offers an assessment of a way forward in the Acklen Church's quest to witness to the Kingdom in Nashville.

Words: 368

To my wife, Beth, whose witness to the kingdom daily invites me into the reign of Jesus

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Acklen Avenue Church of Christ for their unwavering patience and support throughout this project. Their unflappable commitment to the city, in the aftermath of the flood, along with their deep desire to love their neighbors, provided the perfect context to explore these ideas. Thank you small group leaders, for your cooperative spirit and willingness to offer kind critiques. Thank you to my former congregations in Manchester, Connecticut and Smyrna, Tennessee for the ways you demonstrated what it means to be the body of Christ. Thank you Nora, Caroline, and Maisie, for being patient when Daddy had to go out of town, read alone, or write in his office. Thank you Beth, my partner in ministry, for the many nights you listened, your thoughtful feedback, and the many gaps you covered in my absence.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Acklen Avenue Church of Christ (hereafter, the Acklen Church or Acklen)<sup>1</sup> is a small, intellectual, and socially conscious congregation with a conservative biblical theology and Free Church ecclesiology. Started in 1934, the congregation has historic roots in the Restoration Movement (other times known as Stone-Campbell Movement) of the nineteenth century. The congregation still operates out of a desire for primitivism, a pursuit of the first century church ideal. The Acklen Church is a simple, “no frills” church with little programming or hierarchal structure. Located one mile south of downtown Nashville, Tennessee, the church building lies on a narrow strip of land between the fork of Wedgwood Avenue and Acklen Avenue. The Acklen Church straddles two urban neighborhoods, Edgehill to the north and 12South to the south.<sup>2</sup> Although the Acklen Church is surrounded by urban trends and needs, from gentrification to homelessness, it has yet to articulate and embrace a vision for its relationship with the city.

The Acklen Church has gone through several growth cycles, but over the last ten years, many young families have revitalized a slowly dying congregation. Within the classic brick building, one hears the sound of children everywhere. From time to time, members discussed community engagement but only sporadic engagement occurred. However, a recent crisis forced the issue. Tragically, in May of 2010, some areas of Nashville received thirteen inches of rain in two days. The basement of the church building flooded, leaving the facility unusable. Suddenly, since its meeting place was gone, the Acklen Church found itself talking urgently and theologically about place and

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<sup>1</sup> No other church resides on Acklen Avenue, and the name Acklen does not refer to any

<sup>2</sup> 12South refers to the area east and west of 12 Avenue South until the road changes names.

location. This began an eleven-month discernment and rebuilding process, which is explored in Chapter 2. Ultimately, they decided they were called to rebuild and minister in their existing neighborhood. My journey joins the congregation near this point, as I interviewed for their minister's position in April of 2011, just their second Sunday back in the building.

I grew up just outside of Nashville. My family raised me in the Churches of Christ tradition. There was a strong emphasis on personal piety and a tight ecclesiology. The congregation of my youth provided a warm place where everyone knew everyone. It was truly a family. Because of my mother's sudden death when I was eight years old, this sense of family magnified. In many ways, my church truly raised me. However, like a lot churches in the Christian subculture of the Bible belt, there was a Christian bubble effect. Many compartmentalized their lives into spiritual and secular categories with little if any crossover. While there was plenty of teaching and conversation on church, there was little emphasis on the kingdom of God. There was little if any community engagement or even conversations about how Christians should interact with their neighbors. Witnessing was synonymous with evangelism, but the church focused mainly on international efforts. Instead, domestically, there was a non-cooperative, sectarian mindset that led to a distrust of others. Often, this distrust limited partnerships with other denominations, non-profits, and community ministries. Simply put, the church focused inward, not outward.

Looking back, I see that much of this was tied to a Constantinian way of thinking about culture. Many people inherently assumed faith and culture should be fused, and erroneously believed this was the case in the United States prior to the 1960s. With this

nostalgic naiveté and a growing awareness of the complexity of faith and culture, many retreated into the safety of their churches and subculture of Christian schools, books, and music. They felt exiled, and their response was to build up a parallel world rather than to engage and dive into the tension of their neighborhoods. The exile motif is a significant theme, as Christians must understand their call to love their neighbors while being in the world but “not of the world”(Jn 15:19)<sup>3</sup>

After graduating with a ministry degree in west Texas, I relocated to the Hartford, Connecticut area to serve as a youth minister. As I lived outside the Bible belt for the first time, the Christian subculture mindset proved problematic. I simply could not form an ecclesiology tight enough to protect my teenagers throughout the week. Through endless internal programs, I tried to cultivate a strong community focused on personal piety, similar to my own teen experience. Like my childhood, there was much that was good and healthy in this. However, as the teenagers grew into adulthood, they had little ability to process and engage the world around them from a spiritual perspective. Teens who spiritually thrived in adulthood normally did so through a continuation of the Christian subculture, namely Christian universities.

As I moved back to Nashville, Tennessee in 2007 for my wife’s job change, I was determined to do things differently. Of note, I was impacted by a Baylor University study, which cited the highest faith retention rate among teens participating in ongoing community service and reflection alongside adults.<sup>4</sup> While I interviewed for ministry positions, my wife and I joined a small, downtown church with an active homeless

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the English Standard Version of the Bible will be used.

<sup>4</sup> “Community Service Develops Teens’ Faith,” *Baylor Alumni Magazine*, last modified Spring 2007, accessed July 2, 2013, [www.baylor.edu/alumni/magazine/0503/news.php?action=story&story=45581](http://www.baylor.edu/alumni/magazine/0503/news.php?action=story&story=45581)

ministry. In contrast to our previous church contexts with an inward focus, this congregation demonstrated a strong outward focus. In fact, it emphasized community ministry to the neglect of spiritual formation. This served as a powerful reminder for the balance, or flow, of external and internal focuses.

In July of 2007, I began serving as a youth minister in a suburb outside of Nashville. I was specifically drawn to my new ministry because the adults there wanted a renewed emphasis on community service. The flagship program for the teens was a weekly small group ministry. Unfortunately, the ministry had become cliquish and narcissistic. Alongside a team of adults, I led the six high school small groups through a process of discerning needs in the community. Enthusiastically, they selected ministry interests, which the groups coalesced around. Interestingly, several of their choices represented ministries of which I was previously unaware. In addition to their weekly small group meetings, the groups began serving in their ministry area three to five times a year. This drastically changed the culture of the youth ministry.

Of particular interest for my thought development, I was fascinated by the interaction with non-profits and community ministries as we developed a history with them. In the past, I had led teens in episodic service. As we developed partnerships, the ministries trusted us with more responsibility and even brought us into discussion on their future vision and direction. This was the greatest immersion I had yet experienced in the world of non-profits and social work. I was struck by the usual distance between the church and non-profits, despite the fact that most of the non-profits were faith-based with similar values.

With this background, I began to serve as a minister with the Acklen Church in August of 2011. Although we lived in Nashville, I had commuted to the suburbs for ministry, while my wife taught in the city at Lipscomb University. This thinned out our sense of community. We felt a strong calling to minister and raise our children in Nashville. In this way, our values matched the congregation perfectly, for it is predominantly made up of young families with the same goal.

Over 90 percent of the Acklen Church lives within the city limits. Many heavily participate in the city life: music, arts, sports, parks, restaurants, and so on. There is great interest and frequent conversation on social issues, especially politics and poverty. However, leading up to the flood, there was little collective congregational involvement in the community. They had participated somewhat in Room in the Inn, a ministry involving churches in the overnight housing of the unhoused November through March. As Chapter 2 will discuss, they returned to the building post-flood with a renewed interest in community engagement. They increased their participation with Room in the Inn from episodic to weekly. However, many rightly continued to see a problem that a church proclaiming social consciousness had experienced little neighborhood connection in fifty years.

The quest to address this problem is organized into three sections. Part One addresses the demographics of the city of Nashville, specifically south Nashville where the congregation is located and most members live and work. Also, careful attention is given to the make-up of the congregation, with unique emphasis given to the congregation's past community engagement as well as current opportunities for and challenges to community service. The congregation includes several unique skill sets and

interests, but the number of kids and levels of busyness must be addressed. Often, there is tension between the pull to focus inwardly on Bible study and children's ministry and the call to minister externally to the community. In addition, attention is paid to the congregation's history, from its beginning as a split from a neighborhood church to its evolution to a commuter church to the effects of the 2010 flood.

Part Two presents theological reflection needed for such a question, "What are we called to do in the city?" Attention is given to the Churches of Christ tradition. The congregation must balance its strong ecclesiological heritage while embracing a more holistic understanding of both the kingdom and exile, in addition to the practice of partnerships. Also, the false dichotomies of sacred/secular, evangelism/social action, and inward/outward are broken down. Moreover, the section will theologically reflect on the mission of the church to witness to the kingdom in the city.

Finally, Part Three will look at the strategy of each group forming a committed partnership with a non-profit or community ministry in Nashville. This strategy seeks to build on the success of groups as an organizational means of serving through Room in the Inn. Hopefully, the Acklen Church can increase their number of community partners, thus increasing neighborhood relationship and increasing community connection. The section will detail the training, tools, and facilitation of the discernment process. As I have meditated on the reasons why God might have led his people to rebuild on the corner of Acklen Avenue and Wedgewood Drive, the following quote by Leslie Newbigin continues to come to mind. The church is called to be "the place from which good news overflows in good action."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 229.

PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT

## CHAPTER 1

### COMMUNITY CONTEXT: NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

#### **Overview**

Nashville is a rapidly growing educational and cultural center, experiencing 37 percent growth over the last thirty years. With over 600,000 people, Nashville is the twenty-fifth largest city in the United States. Because of the Grand Ole Opry, Country Music Hall of Fame, and Music Row, it is widely known as Music City U.S.A. While country music is normally the first thing associated with the city, it is also a major hub for the Christian contemporary music industry.

But it is far more than a just music town. Because of the cultural influence of the music industry as well as many universities and museums (at least by southern standards), Nashville has long been dubbed the “Athens of the South.” In the late nineteenth century, surrounding the state’s centennial celebration, a replica of the Athenian Parthenon was built to celebration this nickname and cultural role in the south. Among Nashvillians, there is a strong sentiment that they are not rednecks but sophisticated southerners.

Along with the “Athens” moniker, many have referred to Nashville as the “Protestant Vatican” or “Buckle of the Bible Belt.” Besides the abundance of churches, the role of faith is seen culturally. Therefore, Nashville becomes a collision of Athens and Jerusalem, which makes the city a fascinating test case for faith and culture paradigms. For example, in the aforementioned music industry, many Christians invest themselves in Contemporary Christian Music, which separates faith onto its own label. On the other hand, the country music scene is full of faith and Jesus references, often alongside drinking, womanizing, and carousing. Of course, there is a growing secular or mainstream influence in the Nashville music scene, from Kings of Leon to Jack White.

Nashville has considerable economic diversity, which has kept it financially stable during the recent recession and aftermath. The three main industries in the city are music, publishing, and healthcare. Many come to Music City to try to “make it” in the music industry. Many of those, whether they “make it” or not, end up staying. Nashville boasts many Christian publishing companies including Abingdon and Cokesbury (Methodist), Lifeway (Southern Baptist), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian (Churches of Christ) and Thomas Nelson (no denominational affiliation). Healthcare is a major economic influence as well. The faith roots of this are seen in St. Thomas Hospital, Baptist Hospital, and the faith-based clinics for the underinsured and noninsured including Faith Family Medical Clinic and Siloam Family Health Center. It is startling that out of the fifteen largest for-profit hospitals in 2012, seven are in and around Nashville.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, several Christian colleges are located in the city: Lipscomb University

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<sup>1</sup> Molly Gamble, “15 Largest For-Profit Hospital Operators of 2012,” Becker’s Hospital Review, May 3, 2012, accessed June 15, 2013, <http://www.beckershospitalreview.com/lists/15-largest-for-profit-hospital-operators-of-2012.html>.

(Churches of Christ), Belmont University (nondenominational), Welch College (Free Will Baptist), and Trevecca Nazarene University.

Despite a local economy that held up well during the recent recession and an abundance of churches and faith, Nashville is still plagued by a variety of social problems. Over the last decade, there has been an increase in poverty, especially among children.<sup>2</sup> The public schools deserve more attention, and the lack of affordable housing calls out for a solution. Factors ranging from substance abuse to mental illness to lack of affordable housing to the stigma of a criminal record have left many individuals in a state of chronic homelessness. Urban renewal trends have pushed the poor out towards the suburbs, revealing a major weakness in mass transit. Finally, there has been an influx of immigrants and refugees over the last decade or so. Prejudice, lack of support, and language and cultural barriers leave many of these in a marginalized state. The rapid growth and change has left the city in a state of flux.

## **History**

However, these recent trends represent merely the latest in a long history of change. Both in the city as a whole and the specific south Nashville neighborhoods of Edgehill and 12South, demographic patterns based on ethnicity and socio-economic status are far from new. Settlers traveling down the Cumberland River built the first permanent dwelling, Fort Nashborough, in 1779. This site is two miles north from the location of the Acklen Church building. Like most cities of its era, the port became the hub and downtown center of the city. If one looks south from the location of the original

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<sup>2</sup> Staff Reports, "Poverty growing faster in Nashville than many other cities," *The City Paper*, January 20, 2010, accessed on May 15, 2013, <http://nashvillecitypaper.com/content/city-news/poverty-growing-faster-nashville-many-other-cities>.

settlement, one would see three hills. The westernmost hill was known as Rose Hill, later as Currey's Hill and eventually as Meridian Hill. During the Civil War, Fort Morton was built on the hill. It later became a rock quarry, and currently, it is now Rose Park, the largest park in Edgehill. The central hill is Kirkpatrick Hill, which later held Fort Casino. It now holds the non-operational Nashville Reservoir as well as Reservoir Park. The Acklen Church building sits at the bottom south side of Kirkpatrick Hill, with Reservoir Park on the other side of Wedgewood. The third hill to the east is St. Cloud. It is better known as Fort Negley, which has been preserved.

These hills contained the growth of the city southwards until after the Civil War. In 1843, Nashville became the permanent capitol of Tennessee. This acknowledged both Nashville's centrality and primacy in the state, and it further enhanced the city's status and economy. In 1850, south Nashville up to the hills was incorporated into the city. Very early in the War, 1862, the Union took Nashville and built the previously mentioned forts on the three southern hills. Under Union direction, a mix of free and enslaved Blacks built Fort Negley, the main fort. After the war, the fort was home to hastily constructed shacks inhabited by poor former slaves. It was also the site of Klu Klux Klan rallies, demonstrating the continued racial strain of the city.

During the post-war Reconstruction period, Nashville experienced rapid growth and expansion. In his *New Men, New Cities, New South*, Don H. Doyle states, "Of all the major southern cities, Nashville emerged from the war with fewer physical and political scars and with advantages gained in the war that prepared it for a formidable role in the new order of things."<sup>3</sup> The booming economy and influx of new residents pushed the

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 27-28.

population growth out. Wealthy Nashvillians moved out over the hills. Transportation enabled their flight, and the issue of race always seemed to lurk in the background. Much of this migration was around the Edgehill neighborhood, around Meridian and Kirkpatrick hills on the north side of the Acklen Church building. The following excerpt from the *Nashville Civic Design Center Report-Edgehill Neighborhood* demonstrates the trend:

The arrival of a streetcar line to Edgehill around 1890 made the neighborhood more attractive to downtown professionals. White commuters began to settle along 8th and 9th Avenues on the eastern border of the neighborhood and along 15th Avenue to the west. Before long, the Great Migration brought a flood of rural black migrants into Nashville as they sought work in the city or stopped there on the way north. The large growth in Nashville's African American population coincided with the rise in popularity of the automobile. Many of Nashville's white residents moved to new suburban areas further from downtown, segregating the once-integrated inner city neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>

Edgehill and 12South, on either side of the future Acklen Church building, became the new suburbs at the turn of the century.

The issue of flight is incredibly important for an understanding of the city, as well as the Acklen Church, and has enormous implications for Acklen's ministry in the community. White flight has played out over and over again in the city's history and is closely linked to the congregation's history. The issue of flight says a lot about what citizens are looking for in a neighborhood and community. When their surroundings do not meet their desires, they have the options of moving elsewhere, seeking to bring change, or simply befriending those around them. They can retreat or engage.

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<sup>4</sup> "Edgehill Neighborhood," Nashville Civic Design Center Report, last modified March 27, 2009, accessed May 20, 2013, [http://www.sitemason.com/files/gXp5Ty/edgehill2\\_web.pdg](http://www.sitemason.com/files/gXp5Ty/edgehill2_web.pdg), 8.

Christine Kreyling, with the Nashville Civic Design Center, has written an excellent work entitled *The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City*. Of this time period in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, she writes,

What the suburbs delivered was more than just a city with a larger footprint. Suburbia was an entirely different pattern of living. Its outlines go back to the ancient Roman patricians, who located leisure villas—daytime getaways—outside the city walls. These places of seclusion and relaxation grew out of the belief in the benefits of country life as cultivated by the urban aristocrat, not the farmer. The spatial remove of the Roman suburban villa from the urban masses defined the social distinction central to the suburb from its beginnings.<sup>5</sup>

As this statement reveals, there is a strong ethos to the suburban life—close enough to the action but far enough away for seclusion, even elitism. In this mindset, single-use space is preferred over mixed-use space because one wants to “get away.” In its worst form, it represents an escapist perversion of the Christian call to be in the world but “not of the world” (Jn 15:19). In many ways, it constitutes an incarnational response to the question, “What is the good life?” Uniformity, safety, and prosperity are its values. When these are violated, residents take flight.

However, in order to leave, residents needed two things. First, residents needed daily transportation enabling a commute to one’s job that most likely remained downtown. Second, residents needed sufficient population growth to receive a good price for one’s old home. From the Reconstruction to the Great Depression era, Nashville steadily grew and provided both. Poor rural workers and immigrants moved to the city as the suburbs continued to expand outward.

The end of the Great Depression and World War II produced a boom in Nashville, as it did in many American cities. Of this time, Kreyling writes, “The late ’40s in

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Kreyling, *The Plan of Nashville: Avenue to a Great City* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 15.

Nashville featured the first manifestation of the perennial question: ‘What are we going to do about downtown?’ In the automotive age, the central city was suffering from congested streets, the steady migration of retail to suburbia, and the decay of its building stock because rehabilitation seemed a poor investment.”<sup>6</sup> The migration along with its enabler, the automobile, created ongoing and complex urban change. The response to the downtown question was multifaceted, as Kreyling notes, and included public housing, urban renewal, and interstates, with primacy given to public housing.<sup>7</sup>

However, public housing only encouraged further flight by whites and wealthy blacks. As Kreyling notes,

There were good intentions behind public housing, which initially provided much better living conditions than the private sector alternative for those accepted in the program. But with the rise of welfare in the 1960s the concept behind this housing changed to one of warehouses for the permanently poor, which had seriously negative impacts on the projects and on the stability of the traditional neighborhoods around them.<sup>8</sup>

The *Nashville Civic Design Center Report-Edgehill Neighborhood* further explains this:

The Edgehill public housing campaign began at the center of the neighborhood with the construction of Edgehill Homes at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue South and Edgehill Avenue. The project was completed in 1954, and while it did away with deteriorating structures, it completely eradicated the traditional design of the neighborhood and eliminated commercial space along 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the neighborhood’s historical spine.<sup>9</sup>

The Acklen Church building is located less than a mile from both Edgehill public housing and 12<sup>th</sup> avenue.

Therefore, over the course of sixty years, in the Edgehill and 12South

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>9</sup> “Edgehill Neighborhood,” Nashville Civic Design Center Report, last modified March 27, 2009, accessed May 20, 2013, [http://www.sitemason.com/files/gXp5Ty/edgehill2\\_web.pdg](http://www.sitemason.com/files/gXp5Ty/edgehill2_web.pdg), 10.

neighborhoods, the resident posture changed from “fleeing to” into “fleeing from.” The neighborhoods around the Acklen Church building had gone from the suburban retreat to a diversified urban neighborhood with projects. They were becoming less and less desirable to the middle and upper class. During the 1950s and 1960s, many of the neighborhoods further south were built, as farmland became suburbs.

These trends became magnified when the interstates were built. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act. In *The Evolution of Federal Housing Policy*, Margaret Martin Holleman shows how interstate construction greatly disrupted neighborhoods: “Lower income, large minority population, partially blighted” neighborhoods like Edgehill were targeted.<sup>10</sup> The construction of I-65 disrupted the flow and rhythm of the neighborhood. Furthermore, it allowed residents to move further out and still get to their downtown jobs rather quickly. The wealthy escaped to the suburbs and the poor in housing developments were left in a neighborhood less and less desirable to good grocery stores and other needed businesses.

Another impactful trend was school integration. While Nashville did not have as much racial violence and tension as Little Rock, Memphis, or Birmingham, it still experienced significant racism. In 1957, Nashville began to integrate its schools one grade at a time, and in 1966 all grades were integrated.<sup>11</sup> However, many moved to other parts of the city or were granted transfers or exemptions. Integration was legal but not a reality. In response, the city began to bus students into other neighborhoods in an effort to achieve an ethnic mix proportional of the city. As Kreyling points out though, this

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Martin Holleman, “The Evolution of Federal Housing Policy,” *Nashville Civic Design Center*, [http://www.sitemason.com/files/hMYPwk/NCDC\\_FedHPolCS.pdf](http://www.sitemason.com/files/hMYPwk/NCDC_FedHPolCS.pdf), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Kreyling, *The Plan of Nashville*, 35-36.

brought about two additional outcomes, “the gradual erosion of the concept of neighborhood schools” and a sudden explosion in the start of private schools.<sup>12</sup> While it is unfortunate that many segregated themselves, it was a further complication to disrupt neighborhood schools. Sadly, many of the private schools created in response to integration were Christian schools, a legacy that continues to taint the community.

All of these changes severely eroded the social capital of neighborhoods. Transportation enabled people to separate work, school, and home. People became commuters and compartmentalized their lives to a degree never before seen in American life. Multi-use neighborhoods with a familiar rapport were exchanged for single use isolated neighborhoods. In essence, the sense of community thinned. Instead of thick neighborhoods where people walked to school and church, people drove everywhere.

Within this assessment, pessimism creeps to the surface. In hindsight, it is tempting to cite selfishness, greed, and even racism for every negative social change. However, as revealed in interviews with those who lived through it, it was often more complicated. Many families felt forced to move out as their property values declined to a position of financial strain. As crime increased in certain neighborhoods, many were fearful for their children’s safety. Interestingly, some Blacks took flight as well. It is important to remember that socio-economic issues played a role as well as racism and prejudice.

By the early 1960s, the people living in Davidson County outside the city outnumbered those living in Nashville proper.<sup>13</sup> There was a clear divide between the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33.

county and the city within it. In an effort to bring everyone together, the Metro Nashville-Davidson county government was formed in 1963. One of the elders with the Acklen Church, Bill Crouch, was the Nashville Director of Parks and Recreation at the time. In an interview with him, he relayed the positive nature of the merger, mainly because of the prevention of duplication of services.<sup>14</sup> Last year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the merger, and the city hosted numerous celebrations. At one such event, speaker after speaker credited the Metropolitan status as a key foundation for Nashville growth in recent years.

### **Recent Trends**

Since the 1980s, Nashville's growth has exploded. Many from the northern and western United States have moved into Nashville, as well as immigrants and refugees from other nations. Not surprisingly, those seeking the peace and safety of suburbia have moved farther and farther out. Like many American cities, it is not uncommon for downtown workers to commute an hour or more into work. However, the rise of gas prices and a younger generation's cynicism towards suburbia has been a component in urban renewal.<sup>15</sup> Also, in the last fifteen years, Nashville has revitalized the downtown tourist and nightlife area of Broadway and Second Avenue, built sports venues for the NHL's Nashville Predators and the NFL's Tennessee Titans, and added the brand new Frist Center for Visual Arts, Schermerhorn Symphony Center, and the Convention Center.

Because of all of this, the dominant trend in Nashville is urban renewal and

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Crouch, 2013, interviewed by J.P. Conway, 12 March.

<sup>15</sup> The indie band Arcade Fire released *The Suburbs* in 2010, which serves as a great example of this trend.

gentrification. The most coveted property is now ironically what it was two hundred years ago. People want to live downtown and walk to restaurants, coffee shops, art museums, parks, church, and even work. Sociology Professor Richard Lloyd, from nearby Vanderbilt University, is a leading voice on these developments. In *Searching for Greenwich Village: Culture and Design in the New Nashville*, he explains, “As in other Sunbelt cities with weak traditions of inner city living, Nashville’s developers, urban planners and entrepreneurs are designing new developments on the example of the Northern City, and especially that of New York’s Greenwich Village. This is seen in the adoption of principles of urban design advocated by Jane Jacobs and modeled on mid-century Greenwich Village.”<sup>16</sup> He summarizes the influence of Jacobs on Nashville in the emphasis on mixed primary uses, sidewalk level development, and an overall pedestrian culture. Lloyd lists five different neighborhoods following these trends, including 12South.<sup>17</sup> He discusses similar Nashville trends in *Reaching for Dubai: Nashville Dreams of a Twenty-First Century Skyline*. In his words, the now gentrified neighborhoods were attractive because they “were stocked with cheap Victorian styled houses and bungalows, which were turned over en masse and sold to successful waves of increasingly affluent new residents.”<sup>18</sup> Many houses on Acklen Avenue, near the Acklen church building, fit this description. In recent years, these homes have been fixed up and

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Lloyd, “Searching for Greenwich Village: Culture and Design in the New Nashville”, (for submission to *City and Community*, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Lloyd and Brian D. Christens, “Reaching for Dubai: Nashville Dreams of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skyline,” in *Global Downtowns*, ed. Marina Peterson and Gary McDonogh. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 128.

are now worth four and five times what they were fifteen years ago.<sup>19</sup> Lloyd colorfully describes the demographic that has moved in: “Single, childless, and apparently subsisting on cappuccinos, cupcakes, and cosmopolitans, the “creative class” cares little for signature suburban amenities such as supermarkets, malls, and good schools (dog parks are another matter), craving instead fitness facilities, cafes, art galleries.”<sup>20</sup> Both 12South and Edgehill match this description. The “single” relationship status of many urbanists is common and has ramifications for churches, especially the Acklen church comprised mainly of families. Along these lines, the recent census reported that 35% of Nashvillians live alone.<sup>21</sup> Within a mile from the Acklen Church building, there are expensive restaurants with valet parking, craft breweries with take home growlers, and shops exclusively offering cupcakes, coffee, popsicles, and bikes. All of these opened in the last ten years. In every case, they are in mixed used areas, and people access them via sidewalks. While there are parking lots, they are marketed to the pedestrian or cyclist as well.

David Koellein, a professor at O’More College of Design just outside of Nashville, elaborated on these themes in a presentation to the Acklen Church.<sup>22</sup> He emphasized the language in play in the recent trends. If one is excited about the changes, he or she calls it urban renewal or revitalization. If one feels displaced or threatened by the changes, he or she calls it gentrification. While there are programs to freeze property

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<sup>19</sup> Incidentally, this has made it nearly impossible for the young families with the Acklen Church to move in to the neighborhood.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>21</sup> “Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, last modified June 11, 2014, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/4752006.html>.

<sup>22</sup> David Koellein spoke at Acklen on May 22, 2013.

taxes for residents, one must meet certain age and wage guidelines. Moreover, this ignores the extent to which longtime renters are displaced when their old homes and apartments are suddenly demolished to build expensive homes for the wealthy. In addition, he added that urban trends around the country show city dwellers are increasingly disproportionately white and wealthy. While many of the new urbanists cite diversity as a value, their neighborhoods often become white and wealthy.

Despite the prosperity of the growing first-ring neighborhoods, Nashville continues to face the big city issues of crime, homelessness, and poverty, especially immigrants, and refugees. Recently, the 8<sup>th</sup> and Wedgewood area, just east and within in eyesight of the Acklen building, ranked as the eighteenth most dangerous neighborhood in the country, as measured by violent crime.<sup>23</sup> In April of 2013, a hundred yards from Acklen, a man was shot and killed during a botched drug deal in the early morning hours. Homelessness continues to be a vexing problem in Nashville. Homeless advocates usually estimate the homeless population to be in excess of 4,000. Currently, between Room in the Inn and the Nashville Rescue Mission, there are only 800 available beds in winter and 500 in the summer. There is only one non-profit for homeless families, Safe Haven Family Shelter, and it has a limited capacity of twenty-five families. In addition, many, including a couple of Acklen members, have lived in tent encampments around the city.

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<sup>23</sup> “Neighborhood Scout’s 25 Most Dangerous Neighborhoods,” Neighborhood Scout, last modified 2014, accessed May 12, 2013, <http://www.neighborhoodscout.com/neighborhoods/crimeprates/25-most-dangerous-neighborhoods/>

The recent census showed that 17.7% of Nashvillians live below the poverty line.<sup>24</sup> In 2010, the city released “Nashville’s Poverty Reduction Initiative Plan” with the goal of decreasing poverty by 50% in ten years.<sup>25</sup> The city’s areas of focus include childcare, economic opportunity, food, health care, housing, neighborhood development, and workforce development. As in many cities, poverty disproportionately affects those new to the country. The 2010 census reports that 9.9% of the city is Hispanic, double the 4.7% state figure.<sup>26</sup> In 2000, Hispanics made up 5.3% of the city, but by 2007, they had accounted for 19% of Nashville’s growth.<sup>27</sup> Over the last fifteen years, many Spanish-speaking congregations and ministries have sprouted up. The influx of immigrants is far more diverse than Latino, though. For example, Nashville has one of the largest Kurdish populations in the country, in addition to many other Arabs, Laotians, Vietnamese, Korean, and Burmese.

### **Role of Religion**

To understand the Christian role and response in all of these issues, an understanding of the religious climate is essential. As previously stated, Nashville is often referred to as the “Protestant Vatican” or “Buckle of the Bible Belt.” It is estimated that Nashville has over one thousand churches and religious buildings. Often, it seems

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<sup>24</sup> “Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, last modified June 11, 2014, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/4752006.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “Executive Summary and Action Committee Reports,” Nashville’s Poverty Reduction Initiative Plan, February 2010, <http://www.healthynashville.org/javascript/htmleditor/uploads/NashvillesPovertyReductionPlan.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> “Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, last modified June 11, 2014, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/4752006.html>.

<sup>27</sup> David T. Olson, *The State of the Church in the Nashville Metro Area*, (Minneapolis: American Church Research Project, 2009), 12.

there is literally a church on every corner. David T. Olson, with the American Church Research Project, has done some excellent research on religious statistics. This group believes Barna and Gallup overinflate church attendance statistics, so while the following numbers may seem low, Nashville ranks high compared with other cities.<sup>28</sup> In 2007, the American Church Research Project estimated 24% of the city was in worship on any given Sunday (19% Evangelical, 3% Mainline, 2% Catholic). From 2000-2007, the Evangelical population has grown while the Mainline and Catholic populations have remained steady. However, since the population has grown, the percentage of churchgoers has declined from the 1990 figure of 27.2%.

While there are many positives to the church culture, there are some negatives. There is a lot of competition between churches.<sup>29</sup> For years, Lipscomb University (affiliated with Churches of Christ) and Belmont University (formerly Baptist and now nondenominational) have played annual basketball games referred to as the *Battle of the Boulevard*, named for their common street. It is the highest attended game of the season, illustrating the competitive nature of religion in Nashville. Because of the plethora of options, many ministers believe they are competing with the church down the street to keep and grow membership. This competitive impulse leads to internal programming and excessive buildings, which unfortunately minimize outreach and community engagement.

The competitiveness and excessiveness of churches has led to a negative reaction by some. In line with the national trend, Nashville has more and more dechurched

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>29</sup> Once, I asked a new minister in another part of town what other churches were nearby. When he answered, he referred to them as his “competition.”

individuals. It would appear the dechurched are drawn to the city in disproportionate numbers, especially the areas of urban renewal and gentrification. Twenty-somethings or Millennials represent a prime demographic in urban renewal. The book, *UnChristian*, reports the high rates of dechurched individuals in the millennial generation as well as their negative views on the Christian faith.<sup>30</sup> In coffee shops around the Acklen Church, one hears conversations recounting personal rejection of the Christian faith of their childhood.<sup>31</sup> While there is openness towards spirituality, there is a distrust of institutions. This is expressed well in the following quote from Will Campbell, taken from a 2000 article he wrote reflecting on Nashville and Paul's visit to Athens:

Here in Nashville in 2000 A.D., religion is big and wealthy and powerful. It also tends to be self-centered, pietistic, legalistic, absolutist. It quantifies success by the count of its membership, the size of the offering, the worth of its corpus. We are up to our steeples in politics, in recreation and enterprise, in material trappings better suited to country clubs or corporate headquarters than houses of worship.<sup>32</sup>

Adding complexity to the issue of Christians engaging culture, there is often disconnect between churches and neighborhoods. Most of the churches in Nashville have been around for years, but as seen in this chapter, the neighborhoods have gone through considerable change, especially since the 1950s. Most churches in Nashville are homogenous, both ethnically and socio-economically. Originally, churches reflected their neighborhoods, but over the years, churches have not change as quickly as their neighborhoods. The automobile and commuter trends make this possible. The recent

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<sup>30</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> This reflects my personal observation from hanging out in the neighborhood.

<sup>32</sup> Will Campbell, "Religion in Nashville, A.D. 2050," in *Nashville: An American Self-Portrait*, ed. John Egerton and E. Thomas Wood, (Nashville: Beaten Biscuit Press, 2001), 179.

census says the average travel time to work is twenty-three minutes.<sup>33</sup> Many are willing to drive that far to church as well, often passing a number of other congregations on the way to the one of their choosing. Some worship in a part of town they only travel to on Sundays. However, this is problematic for several reasons. First, the homogeneity does not reflect the diversity of the kingdom. Second, commuting makes forming community all the more difficult. Third, many in the younger generations, especially the new urbanists, want their job, home, coffee shop, and even church to be within walking distance. For example, recently, a new couple came to Acklen. When asked why they chose our church, they simply said, “It was the closest one. We decided to be a part of this church before we knew anything about you.” To engage this ever-changing city, churches must know and relate to their communities.

### **The Flood of 2010**

As is often the case, desirable change comes in undesirable ways. Crisis has a way of bringing neighbors together. As mentioned in the introduction, on May 1-2, 2010, Nashville received more than thirteen inches of rain, nearly doubling the largest two-day total in recorded city history.<sup>34</sup> Tragically, ten people died in Davidson County, two of which were an elderly couple on their way to Sunday worship. Beyond the loss of life, thousands were displaced or lost jobs. Many homeowners were without flood insurance and lost everything. The property damage was in the hundreds of millions, and the city was declared a disaster area. However, Nashville came together in incredible ways. As

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<sup>33</sup> “Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, last modified June 11, 2014, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/4752006.html>.

<sup>34</sup> David Climer, “Foreward,” in *Flood2010*, ed. by *The Tennessean* (Nashville: The Tennessean, 2010), 4.

David Climer from *The Tennessean* reported, “Within three days of the flood, more than 12,000 people signed up to help Hands on Nashville, the agency coordinating volunteer disaster relief. And that didn’t include the volunteer efforts by neighborhoods, schools, churches, and individuals.”<sup>35</sup> Although Hands on Nashville is over 20 years old, its leadership in the flood gave its organization specifically and volunteerism in general a platform not before seen in the city. Hands on Nashville reports that “between May 3 and December 31, more than 22,000 people donated 91,000 hours to flood recovery and restoration efforts in more than 1,200 volunteer projects through Hands on Nashville alone.”<sup>36</sup> Hands on Nashville produced a book entitled *Take My Hand: How Nashville United in the Wake of the 2010 Flood*. The chapter entitled “Church on a Mission” highlights the key role local churches had in making lasting connections with neighbors whose homes flooded.<sup>37</sup>

### **Relationships between Churches and Non-Profits**

When interviewed, many non-profit leaders report a continued uptick in volunteerism since the flood. It continues to be a unifying event in the city. However, non-profits continue to lack volunteers.<sup>38</sup> Most reports suggest Nashville has over 1000 non-profits to go with its 1000 churches. Sadly though, churches and nonprofits rarely have close relationships. Of course, the exception is when a church begins a nonprofit. There are at least three main issues in the relationship between churches and nonprofits.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>36</sup> Hands on Nashville, *Take My Hand: How Nashville United in the Wake of the 2010 Flood* (Nashville: Hands on Nashville, 2011), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>38</sup> Over the past two years, I continually ask non-profit leaders if they have enough volunteers. They always say, “no.”

First, many congregations see nonprofits as competition. Congregational ministries depend on volunteers and are leery of members getting too involved in other commitments, even if they are worthwhile. Second, at times, the church is concerned about the values at play. Some churches worry about potential restrictions on proselytizing as well as how to navigate the complexity of working with other Christian traditions, other religions, and even the non-religious. This anxiety has kept many churches on the sidelines. Third, and this seems to be the most common complaint from nonprofit leaders, churches seem more interested in episodic involvement than true partnerships. Churches want to have a Service Saturday or a Christmas Project, but they are not as interested in frequent, ongoing commitments.

Christin Shatzer, the director of the SALT (Serving and Learning Together) program at Lipscomb University, offered essential insight. She serves as the university liaison with non-profits and volunteer opportunities for students. When she spoke at Acklen, she conveyed the frequent frustration nonprofit and community ministry leaders have when churches desire to serve when and how they want.<sup>39</sup> It comes across that churches care more about “feeling like they are helping” than “truly helping.” When asked to name the major needs in the city, without hesitation, she said three things in no particular order: mentoring of children and youth, assistance and empowerment for refugees and immigrants, and chronic homelessness and lack of affordable housing.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, the Acklen church building is located in south Nashville between the Edgehill and 12South neighborhoods. Both are the in the late stages of gentrification and are highly attractive to young, artsy, white professionals looking for walkable mixed use

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<sup>39</sup> Christin Shatzer spoke at Acklen on March 13, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> In my research, reading, and interviews, no one has disagreed with her assessment.

neighborhoods. The neighborhoods around Acklen have almost always been defined by flight, whether it was “fleeing to” or “fleeing from.” While the population around Acklen has changed from poor to affluent over the last fifteen years, it is still relatively close to those most in poverty-the homeless, immigrants, and refugees.

Before telling the congregation’s story, one should not that it will be amazingly similar to the story of the city and neighborhood. The process of telling these two stories and seeing their parallels has only reinforced my belief that churches must embrace and engage their neighborhoods. Finally, the sociological and historical groundwork will be laid for the belief that the Acklen Church should begin to engage the community through partnerships with community ministries and nonprofits. After the congregation’s history, a biblical and theological rationale will be offered as well.

CHAPTER 2  
CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT  
ACKLEN AVENUE CHURCH OF CHRIST

**History of the Congregation**

The Acklen Avenue Church of Christ began meeting in January of 1934. The following is an excerpt from the *Gospel Advocate* on December 7, 1939.

In January 1934, in a small storehouse at 810 Acklen Avenue, a number of brethren and sisters met for worship. This location was used as a meeting place until October, 1934, at which time a dwelling on the corner of Acklen and Beech avenues was purchased from R.O. Elliott. It was remodeled inside so as to have an adequate auditorium, classrooms for Bible study, and also equipped with comfortable individual seats and baptistery. The property is now almost free of debt. No outside contributions have been solicited or received to defray any expense, all obligations having been taken care of by regular weekly contributions. The present membership is more than triple the original number; and as the house is now not large enough for present needs, definite plans are under way for the construction in the very near future of a larger building. The congregation has never had a regular preacher, and has never offered any attraction save the gospel in its simplicity.<sup>1</sup>

While this excerpt is glowingly positive, the founding of the church was in actuality quite controversial. The members of Acklen Avenue split off from the nearby Lawrence Avenue congregation, in the 12South neighborhood. Details are sketchy, but it appears some of the elders of Lawrence Avenue led the break off group because of controversy

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<sup>1</sup> H. Leo Boles, "General History of the Churches of Christ in Nashville," *Gospel Advocate* 81, no. 49 (December 7, 1939): 1156.

over the preacher at the time, T.C. Wilcox. Unfortunately, those elders spread false accusations concerning members of Lawrence Avenue, and leaders of the *Gospel Advocate* had to get involved to restore peace and reconciliation. In the December 20, 1934 edition of the *Gospel Advocate*, a signed reconciliation statement was published, and the discord ceased.<sup>2</sup> Despite this controversial beginning, Acklen has been blessed with a surprising lack of conflict since then.

In 1955, the current building, alluded to in the excerpt, opened on 900 Acklen Avenue, a narrow strip of land where Acklen Avenue forks off from Wedgwood Avenue. Everyone walked to church. They did not even bother to pave a parking lot. Middle class Whites living in the neighborhood made up the entire congregation. At that time, parking was allowed on Wedgwood. Today, Wedgwood is a busy thruway; so parking is only allowed on Acklen. The numerical highpoint was in 1959 with an average attendance of around 250 between two worship services. Our oldest two couples, the Crouch family and the Eubanks family, remember this time well. As they describe Sunday mornings then, the neighborhood was full of families walking to and from church. It was a close-knit community where people knew each other well.<sup>3</sup>

As Chapter 1 described though, numerous changes were occurring that would bring rapid change to the neighborhood and ultimately to Acklen. As new neighborhoods to the south were built and the effects of the rapid change (racial diversity, crime, declining property value) were felt, more and more members of Acklen moved out to the new suburbs. At first, most members would commute back to Acklen on Sunday on the

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<sup>2</sup> W. E. Brightwell, "Congregations Sign Agreement," *Gospel Advocate* 76, no. 51(December 20, 1934): 1220.

<sup>3</sup> Crouch family and Eubanks family, 2012. Interview by J.P. Conway, 11 February.

new interstates. Over time, more and more found new congregations in their new neighborhoods.

Still, there were members who remained committed to Acklen. This contrasts with the nearby Lawrence Avenue congregation, founded in 1910, from which Acklen began. In 1966, the Whites packed up and built a new church in the suburbs, selling their building to the Horton Street Church of Christ, an African American congregation. The Horton congregation then took on the name Lawrence Avenue. This reflects at least a couple of things. For one, it shows how quickly the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood changed. Second, it shows the inherent racial divide that existed, even among churches. This time period was the first if not last test of Acklen's resolve.

By 1972, the average attendance was down to 125. By this time, most members commuted to worship. In 1973, the bus ministry began, which was a bright spot for the congregation in terms of outreach. Recently, I sat down with the Crouch family and the Eubanks family and asked, "What has been the highlight of your time with Acklen?" They had two answers. First, they talked about how much they enjoyed the bus ministry of the 1970s. They spoke of specific children to whom they taught the Bible, and they remembered many individual names. Second, they talked about the present, with the many young families and children running all over. Fran Crouch says it best, "As a church we almost died. We love the sound of crying babies in worship. For years, we just had silence." It is significant that neither family mentioned the attendance highs of the late 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

Back to the bus ministry, while many young children from the nearby Edgehill projects were brought into the building, a connection never formed with their parents or

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<sup>4</sup> Crouch family and Eubanks family, 2012. Interview by J.P. Conway, 11 February.

other adults. Since the bus ministry brought the kids to the church building and then took them home, it did not completely facilitate Acklen's presence out in the neighborhood. The bus ministry operated out of a "church building as fortress" mentality as the members sought to bring the children into their culture instead of venturing out in relationship. Of course, this was a well-intentioned ministry, and the criticism is only meant to help in Acklen's understanding of its future ministry options.

As the 1970s rolled on, more and more members left Acklen for congregations in the suburbs. Many of these were lured by the programming (children's ministry, youth ministry, elderly ministry) or overall sense of enthusiasm of a large church. Acklen simply did not have the resources to offer the internal programs that larger congregations offered. At this point, only a handful of members lived in the neighborhood around the building. With a depleted volunteer pool for the bus ministry, Acklen made the difficult decision to donate the buses to Inner City Ministry.

In 1981, Dr. Paul Prill came to preach at Acklen. Paul continues to serve at Lipscomb University as a communications professor and director of the Honors College. As had been the case for years, Paul's ministry role at Acklen was part time. A self-described former hippie with an infectious personality, Paul continues to be one of the most popular professors on campus. Acklen had long enjoyed a connection to Lipscomb, since it is only two miles away and affiliated with Churches of Christ. With Paul as the preacher though, the number of college students attending Acklen greatly increased. Without a neighborhood connection, this became the congregation's ministry.

In Paul's "Chronicle of the Acklen Avenue Church of Christ" written in 1985, he says: "During this time period, Acklen has moved its sense of mission to providing a learning

experience and mission support for college students.” For years, Acklen used a good portion of its meager budget to send college students on short-term mission trips. Several of these students went on to become missionaries, and two, Jason and Emily Miller, continue to be supported by Acklen in Tanzania.

However, in the 1990s, other larger congregations became more desirable for college students, and attendance decline. By the mid 1990s, attendance was down to forty or fifty, mostly elderly. The elders (Bill Crouch, Buford Eubanks, Paul Prill) began to think through what it would look like to “close” and merge with another congregation. And then, out of the blue, a new influx of college students came to Acklen. In the past, students had moved onto to other congregations or left town after graduation. This group of students seemed different. After graduation, many of them settled in Nashville and started families. About half of the current congregation can be traced to this late 1990s group of college students. In the early 2000s, the congregation stabilized around a solid fifty to sixty members. Most of the young couples had yet to have children. The church was tight socially, and like the lives of many twenty-somethings, they went on trips together and spent a considerable amount of time in each other’s homes.

### **Recent Changes**

Within the last five years, three things greatly affected the dynamic. First while some members already had children, a significant baby boom began about seven years ago. Prior to this, there were few if any children. All of the members who had older children and teenagers left for larger congregations. For a while, school age kids and teenagers were completely absent. The number of births and babies has been an enormous source of joy for everyone, but especially the oldest generation. However, it

created a need for children's classes and programs. The sound of children now fills the sanctuary, and worship can be a bit noisy at times. Moreover, it curtailed the amount of time members had for social and service commitments in and outside congregational life.

The second event worthy of mention is of course the 2010 flood. Although the church building is not in a low-lying area, the drainage system could not keep up with the rain. Therefore, the basement flooded up to a few feet. All of the classrooms, the kitchen, and the restrooms were nonoperational. Because of this, Acklen was without a space to worship. As one can imagine, displacement stirs a conversation on place more than anything.

For eleven months, the congregation met for worship in a classroom at Lipscomb University. Like most homes, businesses, and churches in Nashville, Acklen did not have flood insurance, as it is not in a flood plane. Therefore, it would only be able to rebuild if they exhausted their savings. Moreover, they would either have to take out a loan or do most all of the work themselves. Around this time, a commercial venture inquired about purchasing the property "as is." Also, a church a few miles away made a preliminary inquiry concerning merging. To make this decision, Acklen devoted itself to prayer, open discussion, and even a couple of surveys. The question of "Should we rebuild?" turned to "Why should we rebuild?" which eventually became "Why does God want us at 900 Acklen Avenue?" Ultimately, they decided to rebuild. For months, many individuals spent several nights a week demolishing, cleaning, and rebuilding the basement. Several congregation wide workdays were planned. It was truly an "all hands on deck" experience. Many credit this experience as a force of galvanization among

Acklenites. When the church returned to their building eleven months after the flood, it had only lost one family in the transition.

In their discernment over place, they realized multiple things. First, they felt a strong sense of loss in their displacement. Some grieved as old furniture, Bibles, hymnals, and other mementos from their shared history were thrown away due to water damage. Second, they realized their community life did not depend on a certain building or place. They had a good experience worshipping on the Lipscomb campus. In addition, they found themselves meeting in each other's homes more often. As they adapted to being without a building, they found their congregational life remained strong. This reinforced their theological belief that the building is a tool, not a reclusive sanctuary. Finally though, even as they continued on, they realized they missed 900 Acklen Avenue. They missed their building and location. As the Edgehill and 12South neighborhoods continued to be some of the most talked about neighborhoods in the city, they came to a consensus that God wanted them in the neighborhood. Therefore, as they moved back in April of 2011 (the same month I interviewed), the desire for community engagement was directly connected to the completed rebuilding effort.

Before delving into the community engagement thread more, a look at the third main change is in order. During the eleven-month displacement, Paul announced his desire to retire as the preaching minister after thirty years. For around half that tenure, he had served as both preacher and elder, and he desired to continue as an elder. In his early sixties, he expressed the desire to focus more on his pastoral and leadership duties as an elder, in addition to his teaching at Lipscomb. Paul officiated the wedding ceremony for many couples at Acklen, so his influence is immensely felt. The congregation was

comforted to know he would be staying on, but this forced them to theologically process both place and ministerial search simultaneously. Since they practice a flat leadership structure and have many gifted teachers and leaders, the search team told me they were looking for a public speaker and a leader to join the leadership team, not run everything. Specifically, they expressed a desire for leadership assistance in the areas of ministry to children and someday teens as well as community engagement, which of course leads back to the main topic.

Prior to this project in the spring of 2013, Acklen had three main community connections, which they sought to renew and expand post-flood. First, they had the long-term connection with Lipscomb University. Amazingly, 59% of Acklen adults attended Lipscomb University. Currently, eight members work at Lipscomb. However, Acklen has not had many college students the last eight to ten years. Perhaps, this is partly due to a new downtown church plant, which many students have been drawn to as well as the many children at Acklen, which make it more of a family church.

Second, a year prior to the flood, Acklen began its involvement with Room in the Inn, a homeless ministry. Room in the Inn coordinates the hosting of homeless men in local churches November through March. In addition, they have a day facility providing showers, lockers, social services, educational support, and food. In their first year volunteering with Room in the Inn, a couple of families led the way and did the majority of volunteering. Because of the flood though, they had to take a year off. Once back in the building, the decision was made to rotate the four small groups in hosting every Sunday night. At times, those not in a group would take a Sunday night or help a group.

This organizational model seemed to work well, which increased interest in pursuing additional community service through small groups.

Third, Acklen has renewed its commitment to a strong relationship with Lawrence Avenue, the closest Church of Christ to Acklen. Since Lawrence Avenue is predominately African American and Acklen is primarily Caucasian, both churches believe it is more than just the average inter-congregational relationship. For both the neighborhood and each other, it is an imperative relationship to heal the past and move towards the future of race relations. In the years that African American and Caucasian Churches of Christ have worshipped separately, they have grown apart somewhat. Normally, the former are more traditional in theology and practices than the latter. This has led many to say the widespread informal practice of voluntary segregation is more cultural than racial, which appears to be too simplistic an understanding. Moreover, to the community and younger generations children, the voluntary separation comes across as race based. Members of both congregations have stated it hurts our collective witness in the neighborhood to not do more together. A few years ago, an annual picnic in the fall and an annual joint worship service in the winter began. The latter began with a joint sponsorship of a Guatemalan missionary team. In addition, members from each congregation often show up at big events of the other congregation.

Besides these three community connections, much of the congregation's resources are tied up in children's ministry. During class time on Sunday mornings, with the exception of one tiny classroom, the entire basement is devoted to children and babies. About 25% of the adults are needed to staff these classes. When families meet for small groups, the kids are often equal to the adults in number. When the adults meet for social,

spiritual, or service events, babysitting is always the main consideration. At the same time, normally, the Acklen adults prefer to have their children with them.

### **Theology and Values**

At this point, it is helpful to understand the theology and values of the congregation. As previously stated, the Churches of Christ trace their roots to the Restoration Movement (other times known as Stone-Campbell Movement) of the nineteenth century. The movement began on the American frontier during the Second Great Awakening in an age of rivalry and divisiveness among Protestant denominations. Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and others wanted to simply be known as Christians. They believed they could start a unity movement by basing their theology on the simplicity of New Testament patterns, in contrast to creeds and confessions. While much good was done, over time, this unity movement ironically splintered into three main groups-Independent Christian Churches, Churches of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ.

Mainly based in the south, especially Texas and Tennessee, Churches of Christ continue to seek a restoration of first century ideals or patterns. Simplicity is emphasized. Worship services are centered on weekly communion and preaching, and Acapella singing is normally practiced. Acklen takes the simplicity further with plain white walls, wooden unpadded pews, and hardback hymnals. At Acklen, there is no projection or congregational wide use of technology during service, despite the fact that many bring their iPads to read their Bibles. In Churches of Christ, there is no central denominational office, and every congregation is autonomous. However, as can be seen in Acklen's relationship to Lipscomb, the movement's universities play a large role. In line with Protestantism as a whole, Churches of Christ strongly emphasize the priesthood

of all believers. On Sunday mornings, I preach the sermon, but other members lead prayer, read Scripture, extend an invitation for prayer and repentance, and preside over the Lord's Supper. In terms of polity, leadership is centrally located in a plurality of elders, and the minister is rarely an elder.

Acklen continues to hold to these beliefs and practices. There is a high level of biblical literacy among the members. Most grew up in Churches of Christ or another conservative tradition. The congregation easily recognizes biblical themes and stories. Because of this, members casually make theological references and assume everyone understands. Congregational preaching and teaching spend little time on telling the stories, and instead, jump quickly into theology and application. Alongside this, there is a strong respect for the authority of the Bible. In conversations on contemporary issues, the Bible is appealed to as a pattern and model.

In a few ways though, Acklen is unique among Churches of Christ. First, Acklen is less sectarian than most other congregations. Both in and outside of worship, members refer to writers and thinkers from all Christian traditions. Catholic, as well as mainline and evangelical Protestant, thinkers are quoted inclusively. Second, halfway through his preaching tenure, Paul began preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary. Most of the congregation came to Acklen during this time and has embraced the Advent to Pentecost rhythm. Alongside this point, everyone expects a textual sermon on the lectionary in contrast to topical sermons. Third, Acklen has a high percentage of academics and intellectuals. The majority of adults have a masters or doctorate degree. Because of this, many are well read and love new ideas. Cultural changes and divergent biblical interpretations are exciting conversations, not points of fear. Fourth, Acklen

manifests a high level of social consciousness. One of Paul's main concerns is poverty, and this significantly shaped the congregation over thirty years of preaching. They are living proof that churches can be theologically conservative and socially conscious. Under this category, it is noteworthy that Acklen has become a haven for many Democrats. Over the last thirty years, the Republican Party has dominated the Bible belt south, but in contrast to this wave, Acklen has an equal number who vote for each party, as well as a sizeable group that abstains from voting.

### **Demographics**

Beyond Acklen's theology and ecclesial tradition, other demographic indicators are significant for the project. While not monolithic, a brief snapshot reveals a church mostly made up of young families living in south Nashville who graduated from Lipscomb University. As of January 2013, Acklen is made up of 112 people. There are currently thirty-seven family units. The following four neighborhoods all have more than ten Acklen members: Crieve Hall, Nipper's Corner, Green Hills, and Cane Ridge. All of these are in south Nashville. With the exception of Cane Ridge, all these neighborhoods are a ten-minute drive from the Acklen building. Also, 93% of the congregation lives in Metro Nashville Davidson County.

The majority of the adults are between the ages of twenty-eight and forty-five. Over 95% of the adults are white and college educated. Adults make up 58% of the body, and the remaining 42% are children ages eleven and younger. However, there are key exceptions to the demographics. There are some members who live within a mile or so from the church building. While it sometimes feels "everybody went to Lipscomb", in

reality, 41% of adults did not. Also, many in the congregation are not young families, whether they are elderly or single.

The demographics of the small groups are interesting. Of the thirty-seven family units of the congregation, seventeen are in groups. While 57% of the congregation is in a small group, only 46% of the family units are in groups. Therefore, small groups are disproportionately made up of young families. The four small groups meet respectively in Crieve Hall, Nippers Corner, Cane Ridge, and north Williamson County.

In 2012, the average attendance was ninety-one, or 83% of the total membership. Compared with other congregations this is an extremely high number. When put together with Sunday morning class, small group, and Room in the Inn participation, the numbers reflect that members have a high level of commitment to the congregation. Moreover, the demographics suggest Acklen has a high level of commitment to the city of Nashville.

### **Obstacles to Community Engagement**

However, in the midst of a love for the city and desire to serve it, there are several obstacles to community engagement. First, while most members live in the city of Nashville, only three members live in the neighborhood around the building. Most members live in single use, middle class neighborhoods. While they are technically in the city, their neighborhoods are more suburban than urban. Still, most members do not live far from 12South and Edgehill. Many work close by and find themselves in these neighborhoods other than Acklen related events. More specifically, out of forty-one respondents on a recent congregational survey, twelve said they frequently spend time in 12South and Edgehill, while twenty-eight said they occasionally did. Only one

respondent stated they only come into the neighborhood for worship. Still, because most members live elsewhere, a big part of the discernment will be this question, “Should members focus on the neighborhood where they live or the neighborhood around the building?”

Second, the high number of kids makes some opportunities difficult. Many potential ministries in the city are not conducive for the whole family’s participation. Likewise, babysitting is expensive. Of course, it is possible to watch each other’s kids while some serve in the community, but it is complicated to organize. More likely, one spouse goes out to serve while the other watches the kids. This participation model for Room in the Inn is the main paradigm. The entire family sets up and has dinner with the unhoused gentlemen. Then, mom takes the kids home, while dad spends the night at the building with the men.

Admittedly, while this works for Room in the Inn, it will not work for all ministries. In addition, it does not enable the women to serve relationally as the men do when they stay overnight. Acklen members like having their kids with them. While positive in many ways, it limits what Acklen can engage. For example, as the first chapter indicates, the neighborhoods in the city are increasingly young and single. Acklen, a group of loud children and minivans, must discern how it ministers to that demographic.

Third, members are extraordinarily busy. To foreshadow the implementation of the project, this was the number one obstacle. Most everyone has enormous family obligations ranging from changing diapers to soccer practice to aging parents to early bedtimes. At the same time, many members say they find themselves at a crucial point in

their still young careers. They feel they need to work long hours to set themselves up for financial stability later. Also, a slight majority of the families are dual income, even though some spouses work part-time. Busyness is a huge stress, and the scheduling and time commitment aspects of community engagement are intimidating.

An odd layer of this busyness though is congregational busyness. Acklen maintains a tight but full congregational life. In addition to Sunday morning worship, around two thirds of members participate in either small groups or the Wednesday night Bible study. Nearly half participate in all three. Kids classes are offered Wednesday nights as well, so teacher preparation is a large responsibility. In addition, weekly coffee gatherings, monthly book clubs, and quarterly camping trips fill the church calendar. In some ways, this tight ecclesial life presents a challenge for community engagement.

In summary, Acklen's history mirrors the neighborhood in many ways. Both are experiencing revitalization and growth. However, for fifty years, Acklen has not maintained a strong connection with its neighborhood. The post flood move back to 900 Acklen Avenue is honorable, but without a plan, one wonders if it will amount to anything in the face of present challenges. Currently, Acklen remains a socially conscious congregation that collectively does little social action other than Room in the Inn. Many believe that partnership can serve as a model for multiple community partnerships, which would go a long way towards forming a greater connection with the neighborhood and city. Going forward, Acklen must explore and construct congregational understandings of neighborhood, church, and kingdom, as well as learning from other churches. Finally, they must build on the post flood momentum and the potential of small groups to empower community engagement.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Many works and resources critically shaped the development of this project. This chapter seeks to overview these key theological resources. The works break down into three categories or sequences. First, three books deal with the nature of the church and kingdom. They are *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* by Everett Ferguson, *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard, and *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* by Lesslie Newbigin. As the chapter will detail, the author's ecclesiology centers on the church as a community of kingdom exiles. Second, the next two works, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* by James Smith and *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry* by Gareth Icenogle, discuss the essential nature of worship and small groups. These books reflect on the ways that worship and small groups affect and inform cultural engagement. A vital aspect of the project is for groups to serve as a spiritual conduit for spiritual rhythm and the flow of worship to action. Worship forms disciples into their kingdom identity and sends them out to witness in their exilic reality. Finally, two works, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* by Timothy Keller and *Churches that Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* by Ron Sider, Philip

Olson, and Heidi Unruhoffer, offer foundational frameworks for churches engaging their cities through service. Their theological depth along with their many examples and paradigms make these incredible resources.

### **The Nature of the Kingdom and the Church**

First, since actions flow from identity, an understanding of the church's identity should precede conversations on methodology and activity. The church, as the body of Christ, is both the communal expression of the kingdom of God and an exilic community making sense of a cultural residence often in conflict with its kingdom citizenship. It is an identity fraught with tension, yet it is an identity that is both formed and discovered through cultural engagement. Since Ferguson is a leading scholar in the author's movement, Churches of Christ, his ecclesiological work deserves analysis.

To begin, Ferguson's discussion of the kingdom and the church proves insightful. Too often, conversations place them as identical realities or focus on one to the exclusion of the other. Specifically in Churches of Christ, many congregations have been caught up in the former. While the absorption of "church" and "kingdom" into one category leads to a robust ecclesiology, it remains flawed. For example, it fails to address the imperfect, non-kingdom like elements of the church, while also failing to make complete sense of the future. If the kingdom has already come, the relevance of the second coming of Jesus becomes murky. For these reasons and more, Ferguson's ecclesiology offers great assistance. While affirming many values of the Churches of Christ, he does not see the "church" and the "kingdom" as synonymous. To him, they are similar but different.<sup>1</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 28-29.

states, “the kingdom of God refers to his majesty and activity, more often than to his people.”<sup>2</sup> Ferguson sees the kingdom as more about the “reign” of God than the “realm” of God.<sup>3</sup> It is more about the king’s authority than the king’s territory. However, he goes on to explain that “God’s rule does involve a people.”<sup>4</sup> This is where his understanding of the church will come in later, as the people of the kingdom reign.

In Ferguson’s thought, the essence of the kingdom involves movement. He advocates a kingdom that “breaking in,”<sup>5</sup> and therefore, it is “active, not static.”<sup>6</sup> The kingdom represents the ways heaven moves into earth.

Even as the kingdom was both present and future for Israel and then for Jesus, so it remains for Christians living in the age of the church. The church exists between the “already” and the “not yet” of God’s eschatological fulfillment. That duality is inherent in the meaning of kingdom as kingship. God is king in the present, but until all acknowledge and submit to his rule there is a future dimension to his kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

It is vitally significant that an “in house” scholar of his reputation embraces the “already, not yet” dimension of the kingdom. While this may not register with those in other traditions, the “already, not yet” is not agreed upon or even understood by many in Churches of Christ. It offers the foundation for a continuation of robust ecclesiology while enabling the tradition to discover and connect with God’s activity outside the church.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 30.

Concerning the nature of the church, Ferguson centers on the term “body of Christ.” Insightfully, he points out “there was a ‘people of God’ from the call of Abraham; there is a ‘body of Christ’ only after the resurrection.”<sup>8</sup> Because of the resurrection, the people of God find union in the resurrected body of Christ. There is a connection that was not there prior. Ferguson elaborates, “The ‘body of Christ’ is more than simply a figure of speech or image, but expresses a real relationship. It is a ‘root metaphor,’ that is, it describes the basic character and nature of the church. The body finds its wholeness in Christ, and Christ has his fullness in his people. Members of the body are all interrelated.”<sup>9</sup> While “body” is the foundational description, Ferguson also sees the church as the “community of the Spirit”<sup>10</sup> and “temple of God.”<sup>11</sup> In all this, Ferguson demonstrates how the life of the church impacts union with Jesus. A disciple’s relationship with fellow believers serves as an essential aspect of our relationship with Christ. Traditionally, Churches of Christ have high expectations for involvement in the body life. When dealing with the meaning of ekklesia, Ferguson understands its basic ancient meaning, “assembly”, as theologically significant: “It is the people who meet together on a regular basis. The world ekklesia identifies the people of God as assembled.”<sup>12</sup> To Ferguson, participation in the body and attendance at the meanings are essential for a biblical connection with Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 133.

Ferguson intends to offer a systematic and holistic ecclesiology. For these reasons, one can get a good sense of the tradition's priorities by his priorities. Based on his basic understanding of church as assembly, the majority of the work details what should happen in the assembly-worship, leadership, and organization. It may not be his intent, but the work centers on what occurs at the church building. There is little conversation on what the church does when she is not assembled. The life of congregants outside the church does not appear to have much to do with ecclesiology. Evangelism receives two pages of attention, while benevolence receives one page.<sup>13</sup> The topic of "Church and Society" receives a mere three pages.<sup>14</sup> In this section, his thoughts represent the Anabaptist roots of our tradition. The church should focus on being an "alternative society" rather than seeking to use the politics of the state for transforming society.<sup>15</sup> While the author agrees with this, he believes Ferguson goes too far in saying, "the church is not called to enter the secular arena in order to make a sick world well."<sup>16</sup> Comments like this demonstrate the traditional uneasiness in cooperating with nonprofits, which the project seeks to implement.

In addition to Ferguson, Dallas Willard's thoughts in *The Divine Conspiracy* enormously impacted the project. He offers an incredible understanding of the kingdom, specifically its current accessibility and description of why so many often miss it. Often, understandings of the kingdom of God remain elusive or abstract. In contrast, Willard offers a clear, concise definition of the kingdom: "The kingdom of God is the range of his

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 284-285, 289.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 397-399.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 397-398.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 398.

effective will: that is, it is the domain where what he prefers is actually what happens.”<sup>17</sup>

As Willard carefully wades through Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, he describes how God works in us to expand and realize the kingdom. When the Spirit moves in disciples to obey God’s will, they experience the kingdom. In this way, Christians can have tangible experiences with the kingdom of God through obedience to and union with Jesus.

Moreover, Willard links an understanding of the kingdom to the gospel; another often referenced but misunderstood term. In Willard’s words, “the gospel is the good news of the presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever, through reliance on Jesus the Anointed.”<sup>18</sup> Many times, the gospel is associated with a conversion experience and the hope of a future kingdom experience. While including this understanding, Willard, explaining Jesus, demonstrates that the gospel proclamation includes the hope of a present kingdom experience.

In this, one should see a slight difference in emphasis between Willard and Ferguson. While Ferguson emphasizes reign over realm, Willard appears to merge them. In doing so, Willard’s descriptions of the kingdom invoke a more concrete and tangible experience. In his work, Ferguson quickly explains the kingdom, and then enters his main topic, ecclesiology. While he readily admits “church” and “kingdom” are not synonymous, one’s experience of the kingdom seems to be predominately church focused. While not discounting the importance of a church community, Willard paints a far more accessible and pervasive picture of the kingdom. Personally, the author affirms

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<sup>17</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998), 259.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

both a kingdom experience that is predominantly ecclesiological as well as an available experience outside the church. The embrace of these complementary views contributes to the foundation of the project.

With the nature of the kingdom established in the first section, Willard goes on to explain how one can find and participate in this available kingdom. In his excellent treatment on the Sermon on the Mount, he writes, “Remarkably, almost one sixth of the entire Discourse (fifteen of ninety-two verses) is devoted to emphasizing the importance of actually doing what it says.”<sup>19</sup> He rightly deconstructs the manner in which contemporary discipleship focuses on the intellect and beliefs without including actions. Alluding to the familiar bumper sticker, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven”, he rips the modern day scandal that Christian behavior rarely differentiates from the world.<sup>20</sup>

In Willard’s view, the kingdom experience is available primarily, not through intellectual assent, but through the actual practice of Jesus’ teachings. He asserts, “We must recognize, first of all, that the aim of the popular teacher in Jesus’ time was not to impart information, but to make a significant change in the lives of the hearers.”<sup>21</sup> But of course, so much of the contemporary church experience (sermons, bible classes, small groups) centers on sharing information. However, learning new information, absent of putting it into practice, does not lead to an experience of the kingdom. Therefore, Willard contends, “how to combine faith with obedience is surely the essential task of the church as it enters the twenty-first century.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, conversations on obedience are

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 140.

often seen as legalistic, even heretical. Sarcastically, Willard states, “we know that no one is saved by keeping the law and can think of no other reason why one should try to do it.”<sup>23</sup>

Part of the problem lies in the widely held view of Jesus solely as Lord. Willard speaks of Jesus as the “unrivaled master of human life”<sup>24</sup> and writes at length on the need for Christians to see Jesus as teacher, in addition to Lord. In congregational life, Christians must seek to spurn each other on towards obedience in anticipation that a kingdom experience is available. In this light, small groups, a vital aspect of the project, are not just about learning the Bible but experiencing the kingdom together. Jesus’ use of groups signifies more than just a cultural expression. A theological belief lies beneath it. While the kingdom can be experienced alone, far more often, it is encountered and pursued communally. As Willard contends, “we should try to find groups of his apprentices and become deeply involved with them.”<sup>25</sup> This group involvement does not remain inside the church walls. Just as God is omnipresent, the kingdom can be experienced in any realm when God’s will is done there. To quote one of the great summations of Willard: “It must be our conscious objective, consciously implement, to bring others to the point where they are daily learning from Jesus how to live their actual lives as he would live them if he were they.”<sup>26</sup> The continued focus on one’s daily, actual life opens alerts one to the kingdom availability in one’s daily life out and about in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 302.

city. When groups of questions study Jesus' teachings and seek to obey them communally, they will find themselves experiencing the kingdom out in their community, far beyond the church walls.

Last among the first section of works, Lesslie Newbigin, in his *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, puts this understanding of the church and kingdom into practice. Newbigin was a British born theologian and minister who spent nearly forty years as a missionary in India. When he returned to Europe to live in the 1970s, he quickly realized how secular the culture had become since the 1930s when he left. With his missionary background and instincts, he sought to convince the Western Church to take on a missionary mindset in its own neighborhood. Many in the contemporary "missional" movement draw inspiration from his writings.

In a powerful way, Newbigin describes the alternative, exiled, and witnessing aspects of the kingdom community. In his mind, a misunderstanding of the uniqueness of the kingdom led to an embrace, immersion, and ultimately absorption into Western society. Put simply, Christians forgot they are different. Newbigin believes the church is a "foretaste of a different social order."<sup>27</sup> The reality and availability of the kingdom calls for a radical reorientation or a continuation in "the wrong direction."<sup>28</sup> Discipleship ultimately moves past the cognitive to the behavioral, but too often, Christians stop at beliefs without moving onto to practices. However, Newbigin contends, "the intention of Jesus was not to leave behind a disembodied teaching."<sup>29</sup> Adding to this, he explains,

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<sup>27</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 231.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-4.

“Jesus did not write a book but formed a community.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, an understanding and implementation of the gospel leads to an alternative community in this world. In one of his most well known quotes, he states, “the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”<sup>31</sup>

With this established, it is crucial to note that this alternative identity leads to an exilic experience. In Chapters 2 and 3, Newbigin talks at length about the ways that modern pluralistic society privatizes faith. It distinguishes between facts and values, knowledge and beliefs, with faith finding itself in the latter categories. In this regard, faith becomes a personal attribute for one’s inner and private life, not a systematic or universal history. While not persecuted violently, disciples in Western Culture find themselves intellectually exiled from the public square. Seemingly, they can only enter if they check vital parts of themselves at the door. Newbigin believes faithful congregations “will be a challenge by word and behavior to the ruling powers” and should expect “conflict and suffering.”<sup>32</sup> True, biblical discipleship cannot be private. He contends, “It cannot mean that one accepts the lordship of Christ as governing personal and domestic life, and the life of the Church, while another sovereignty is acknowledged for the public life of society.”<sup>33</sup>

Of course, this causes one to wonder about the church’s relationship with the public life of society. Newbigin relies on the biblical category of witness to avoid the pitfalls of privatization or a power-hungry takeover. The church witnesses to the present

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 220.

reality and future culmination of the kingdom. While “the church is not the kingdom of God,”<sup>34</sup> the “central responsibility of the church” is the pursuit and fulfillment of the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>35</sup> God forms disciples into a people that can then bless all peoples. The church represents a vital aspect of God’s missional strategy for bringing about his kingdom. The alternate society does not just work for their own welfare but the good of all. Newbigin states, “It will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the church for those who wish to be members of it, or rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be for the wider community.”<sup>36</sup>

Through this witness, the church serves as a “sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.”<sup>37</sup> In all of this, Newbigin does justice to the alternative, exilic, and witnessing identities of the church. He carefully and biblically lays out a way in which Christians are set apart yet concerned for all. In doing so, he fuses the reality check of the exilic status with the optimism and hope of the kingdom, a delicate yet needed balancing act. All of this incredibly impacts the author’s view on the local church within its community. Finally, the quote that resonates the most in regard to the author’s hope for Acklen is the following. Concerning the local church, he explains it should be “perceived in its own neighborhood as the place from which good news overflows in good action.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 229.

## Worship and Small Groups

The second section of works deals with the role of worship and small groups in cultural engagement. If the church truly captures its identity and calling, as an exilic community witnessing to the kingdom, then surely worship and small groups will reflect that emphasis. The first of two works in this section is *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* by James K.A. Smith. In the opening pages, he sets out his goal: “Instead of focusing on what Christians think, distilling Christian faith into an intellectual summary formula (a “worldview”), this book focuses on what Christians do, articulating the shape of a Christian “social imaginary” as it is embedded in the practices of Christian worship.”<sup>39</sup> Smith seeks to convince the reader that too much has been made of the cognitive and too little of the affective nature of humanity. Therefore, he outlines a model of “I am what I love.”<sup>40</sup> He articulates “an alternative to the person-as-thinker and person-as-believer models in the person-as-lover model.”<sup>41</sup> In many ways, love precedes thinking and believing, as great loves shape one’s thoughts. In summary, Smith contends, “Our love is always aimed at a telos, a picture of the good life that pulls us toward it, thus shaping our actions and behavior.”<sup>42</sup>

A key move in his argument lies in his emphasis on liturgies. For Smith, liturgies represent “rituals of ultimate concern”<sup>43</sup> which “shape our identity by shaping our desire

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<sup>39</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

for what we envision as the kingdom-the ideal of human flourishing.”<sup>44</sup> Smith carefully describes the way that cultural liturgies and individual habits do not only reflect but also in many ways shape our loves and therefore our idea of the good life. In poetic fashion, he writes at length concerning the liturgical function of the contemporary shopping mall, “one of the most important religious sites in a our metropolitan area.”<sup>45</sup> In this example, the act of shopping does not just reflect our materialistic nature but radically forms, shapes, and perpetuates us into greater consumers. Liturgies are far from neutral.

An embrace of this view results in a heightening of the importance of Christian liturgy and worship. Smith devotes careful attention to liturgical time, call to worship, greetings, songs, confession, baptism, creeds, prayers, Scripture, sermons, offering, Eucharist, and the sending out from worship as witnesses. With this in mind, the author wonders how Acklen’s worship traditions and practices shape the congregation. The following quote from Smith proves compelling:

We begin to emulate, mimic, and mirror the particular vision that we desire. Attracted by it and moved toward it, we begin to live into this vision of the good life and start to look like citizens who inhabit the world we picture as the good life. We become little microcosms of that envisioned world as we try to embody it in the here and now. So many of the penultimate decisions, actions, and paths we undertake are implicitly and ultimately aimed at trying to live out the vision of the good life that we love and thus want to pursue.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, one of the main purposes of worship is the formation of Christians into citizens and microcosms of the kingdom of God. Honestly though, it would seem rare that disciples approach worship in this manner. Too often, Christians attend a worship

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 54.

assembly out of legalistic notions of checking a religious box, a desire to receive an emotional rush or spiritual feeling, or the need for practical wisdom and information on how to live. While the author will pick this up later, Acklen loves the idea of the “intellectual Christian” in contrast to their view of shallow, cliché southern Christianity. While social action represents a dimension of the “intellectual Christian”, the author wonders if their liturgy shapes them into a “Christian smarty-pants” more than a community of kingdom exiles. In this respect, the “sending out as witnesses”<sup>47</sup> dimension represents a crucial dimension of the liturgy. A congregation must be formed into kingdom witnesses and not just those who believe in or understand kingdom witness.

Before moving on to the work on small groups, Smith offers some helpful words. He constructs a powerful systematic way of looking at all of church life as radiating out from the Sunday assembly:

I suggest that the range of Christian practices beyond Sunday are best understood as extensions of liturgical practices of gathered worship; they are important and formative because (and insofar as) they draw on the formative power of specifically liturgical practices. Or, to put it conversely, the formative force of such extra-Sunday practices is diminished if they are unhooked from the liturgical practices of the ecclesial community, particularly if they become ersatz substitutes for gathered worship.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, Smith has radically shaped the author’s understanding on the connection between worship, groups, and the project goal. The small group is not an internal clique but an externally focused manifestation of the large assembly. The small group is the time for each member of the body to consider and assess their witness. Moreover, the small group serves as a collective witness.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 205-207.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 212.

*Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* by Gareth Icenogle represents the second work in this second section on cultural engagement. This twenty-year-old work is one of the seminal treatments on groups in evangelical circles. Icenogle addresses the biblical foundation for groups as well as offering advice on training, organizing, leading, and empowering small groups. For the project's purposes, his treatment of a group's mission proves most relevant. Too often, groups become solely inward focused, even cliquish. Icenogle asserts, "Ministry and mission should be goals of every group gathered in Christ. This ministry should be directed both inwardly and outwardly. Eventually, every group needs to consider the outward implication of its life in Christ. This should be asserted and stated over and over again."<sup>49</sup>

Icenogle's section on the biblical foundation for groups serves as an essential foundation. In his treatment on Jesus and the disciples, he points out that the sending out of two by two demonstrated Jesus expectation that they "minister in teams (very small groups)."<sup>50</sup> Thinking back on Ferguson and Willard's definitions of the kingdom of God, the author finds it significant that Icenogle states the disciples "together were the realm in action"<sup>51</sup> and "the small group meeting 'in Christ' is the visible realm of God."<sup>52</sup> Moreover, he refers to the church as an "immediate eschatological reality."<sup>53</sup> When

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<sup>49</sup> Gareth Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 239.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

small groups come together, they are an extension of the kingdom witness of the whole congregation, as formed by the worship.

Therefore, missional witness must be an essential aspect of every small group. In referencing the early church (a powerful motivating factor for Acklen's tradition), Icenogle contends, "Their ministry emerged out of their gathering to share their common life...their life together became their ministry."<sup>54</sup> One should notice the missional rhythm of inward reflection and care and outward ministry in his statement on group life of early church: "The daily meetings provided daily support for their ventures into the marketplace and courts as well as to distant cities. The daily meetings also provided space for theological reflection and feedback, visioning and strategic planning to risk greater mission and ministry. The daily meeting of the ecclesia was both the arena of ministry and the center for mission."<sup>55</sup> Too often, contemporary small groups stop at relational support and social cohesion without stating and acting towards mission. The project seeks to add and enhance the missional nature of small groups. Icenogle believes groups should see themselves as "ministry bases"<sup>56</sup> and "ministry teams,"<sup>57</sup> which the project seeks to advocate.

In doing so, perhaps small groups can be a vital aspect of Acklen's witness and cultural engagement in the city of Nashville. Icenogle captures the imagination with the following description, once again of the early church: "These ecclesia, as microcosms of a new world view, began to transform the dynamics of the city's macroculture, its power

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 336.

structures and its political balance, at the grassroots level. Through the small and local gatherings of real people who experienced transformed character and relationships, larger societies and structures were redirected, reformed and restructured.”<sup>58</sup> A missional renewal in worship and group life by the Acklen church will radically bless the city of Nashville.

### **Churches Engaging the City through Service**

Finally, to make up the third section of the literature review, two works offer foundational frameworks for churches engaging their cities through service. First, the recent work by Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, demonstrates accessible depth into understanding mission to the contemporary city. Keller carefully constructs a biblical theology of the city. His Part Four on “City Vision” alone makes the cost of the book worthwhile. Often in contemporary circles, those outside urban areas have fear, distrust, or antipathy towards the city. Many of the popular resources on church ministry over the last decade or so have focused on suburban congregations. In contrast to that trend, Keller demonstrates the importance of the city, as a social grouping and theological category, throughout Scripture. At times, it is hard to nail down an exact definition of a city, especially in modern day situations of booming towns and suburbs. Keller states the Biblical usage of city refers to a “a social form in which people physically live in close proximity to one another.”<sup>59</sup> This proximity leads to great opportunity for mission.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 135.

Keller traces the good and bad of cities in the Bible, from Babel to Sodom and Gomorrah to Jerusalem. His survey shows how often God's mission involves the city and how often God calls his people to the city. The following quote represents the central role the city plays in the over arching narrative of Scripture:

Since the Bible reveals to us that a city is the final result of the work of the second Adam on our behalf, it seems fair to assume this was what God had intended when he gave the cultural mandate to the first Adam. In other words, God called Adam and Eve to expand the borders of the garden, and when God's will is finally done and Jesus fulfills the cultural mandate on our behalf, the Garden of Eden becomes a garden city.<sup>60</sup>

Intentionally and biblically, Keller connects the mission of God to Christian activity in the city. In doing so, he redeems negative stereotypes of the city, held by some, and unleashes one's spiritual imagination. As the author thinks towards the telos that Smith refers to as the aim of our love, he senses a similar notion in Keller words on the future New Jerusalem: "This time, of course, we will not just be tending a garden; we will be sustaining the life of a city, a harmonious human society that has developed all the potentialities hidden in the original creation to their fullest. Culture-redeemed, transformed, and permeated by the presence of God-will be the activity of eternity."<sup>61</sup> Put simply, if the disciple's future residence will be a city, the Christian should embrace a positive view of the city now. As Keller offers succinctly, "the city is an intrinsically positive social form with a checkered past and a beautiful future."<sup>62</sup> This positive, futuristic outlook has the potential to radically shape a congregation caught up in a cycle of urban flight and renewal.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 151.

Beyond his theology of the city, Keller presents compelling thoughts on cultural engagement. He spends considerable time addressing different paradigms of cultural engagement (Two Kingdoms, Relevance, Counterculturalist, and Transformationist).<sup>63</sup> The latter three views all show up at Acklen, and while it is not necessary for everyone to ascribe to one framework, the diversity makes communal cultural engagement complex. Specifically, Acklen often manifests a tension between the pull to change the culture and the pull to be separate from the culture. This tension shows up when Acklen tries to maintain ministries to both children and homeless sex offenders or when it tries to have open conversations on American politics during election season. Keller presents a thoughtful, theological take on that tension that could prove to be helpful: “The “already but not yet” of the kingdom keeps us from utopian, triumphalistic visions of cultural takeover on the one hand, and from pessimism or withdrawal from society on the other.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps, a church can be an alternate witness and seek the common good of the city at the same time. At least both Newbiggin and Keller would say so.

Finally, Keller alludes to the traditional tension between evangelism and social action. Churches rarely, so it seems, succeed at both, and too often, those categories are pitted against each other. Sider’s work will address this further, but two quotes by Keller deserve mention. First, he elevates evangelism as an integral part of the mission to the city: “Churches that lose their commitment and skill for vigorous evangelism will not only neglect their primary calling, but will inevitably fail to reproduce themselves. It takes new converts and changed lives for churches to truly be of service to the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 47.

community.”<sup>65</sup> However, this does not mean that social action takes a back seat. In fact, he believes churches should band together with other ministries and non-profits, which is a significant reflection of healthy cultural engagement. He contends, “We need today an urban “benevolent empire” of Christians banding together in various nonprofits and other voluntary organizations to address the needs of the city. Christians of the city must become renowned for their care for their neighbors, for this is one of the keys that Jesus will be renowned.”<sup>66</sup> This last part segues perfectly to the next work. As churches seek to join God’s mission in the world and bless all peoples, they must be willing to join what is already going on in the city.

In this regard, *Churches that Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* by Ron Sider, Philip Olson, and Heidi Unruh offers theological depth and abundance of examples and paradigms for community service. As alluded to earlier, some gravitate towards giving cups of cold water while others are more drawn to preaching Jesus as the living water. Sadly, a divide between evangelism and service often results. In contrast, a holistic soteriology desires all people, places, and things conformed to God’s will, resulting in both individual conversion and widespread social renewal. As the three authors state, “we must work toward creating the kind of society that pleases God.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, they assert, “Community develop ministries

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>67</sup> Ron Sider, Philip Olson, and Heidi Unruh, *Churches that Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 61.

work to shape the community to be more consistent with God’s design for shalom” and “serve as a tangible expression of the Good News the church proclaims in evangelism.”<sup>68</sup>

Both service and evangelism represent vital aspects of God’s mission, and the two emphases are meant to belong together. The following quote demonstrates this:

The ultimate desire in holistic social ministries is to see people brought into the fullness of life in Christ. But this does not mean that social compassion is pointless unless someone becomes a Christian because of it. When Jesus healed a group of ten lepers, only one returned to thank him for his mercy. Yet this did not discourage Jesus from continuing his ministry of healing. The church similarly bears a responsibility to meet people’s needs regardless of how they respond to Christ. Otherwise social ministry is reduced to a means to an end, a utilitarian evangelistic tool. Compassion must never be used as a bribe.<sup>69</sup>

Service is not a carrot for conversion, and it is not church marketing. But that should not discourage churches from continuing to embrace evangelism. Therefore, both service and evangelism are worthy ends in themselves, and yet they suffer when pursued individually.

In addition, the authors present frameworks and options for processing the relationship between service and evangelism. They detail “five ways of incorporating a religious dimension into social service” and list the options as passive, invitational, relational, integrated-optional, and integrated-mandatory.<sup>70</sup> Most everyone gives lip service to the need for both, but the process of going through the chart allows for dialogue and practical implementation. Likewise, they present four basic church types in the relationships between evangelism and social ministry.<sup>71</sup> The options include “explicit

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 109.

evangelism is not part of the church's outreach mission," "evangelism is valued and practiced but not in the context of social ministry," "evangelism and social ministry are integrated in various ways," and "little conventional social ministry is present." Once again these charts serve as great tools for congregational vision casting and processing. Throughout the work, the authors give many real life examples of how churches pursue mission.

Finally, the authors do a tremendous job of discussing evangelism and social action in way that brings people together. The following insightful quote will resonate powerfully at Acklen and in many ways describes the preferred future the project seeks to accomplish:

Individuals need to experience the Spirit's transforming grace that changes liars and adulterers into truthful neighbors and faithful spouses. Without that inner divine healing of broken persons, no amount of good legislation to correct social injustice will be adequate. At the same time, because sin has been institutionalized in our customs and laws, simply converting individuals without also correcting unjust institutions is inadequate-like converting slave owners without challenging slavery. Only the biblical combination of evangelism and social action can redeem the devastation of sin in our communities. Salvation involves the whole person, body and soul.<sup>72</sup>

Together, these seven works weave a cohesive sequence (from congregational identity and worship to the mission of daily witness), which the project seeks to emulate.

Moreover, the conversations in Chapter 4 and 5 assume the backdrop and foundation of these works.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 51.

## CHAPTER 4

### THEOLOGY OF CHURCH

In this chapter, the author lays out the ecclesiological framework behind the project. To connect with his personal journey as well as the Acklen Church of Christ, the author will explore the strengths and weaknesses of the unique characteristics of the Churches of Christ. Also, he will look at the impact of ecclesiological trends, from the missional movement to consumerism, individualism, and commuting to worship. Finally, within all of that, he will describe his fundamental belief that the church, as the body of Christ, identifies itself as a community of kingdom exiles.

Throughout, frequent references will be made to the faith tradition of the author, Churches of Christ, as well as influential thinkers in the movement. This serves to connect the ecclesiology both to the author's particular faith journey as well as the congregation. While Acklen is atypical, for Churches of Christ, in its intellectual environment and strong social consciousness, it still reflects the majority of the movement's theology. Since the author ministers as a product of a particular heritage, an honest look at the strengths and weaknesses of unique ecclesiological trends of Churches of Christ is in order. However, when the author describes them as unique, he does not mean to imply their isolation in this particular tradition.

## The Body of Christ

Like many in Churches of Christ, the author's theology of church centers on the concept "body of Christ." Everett Ferguson's insistence that "body of Christ" is a "root metaphor"<sup>1</sup> greatly impacts the author and served as a consistent emphasis in his upbringing. Lee Camp, a professor at Lipscomb University and a major influence on many in Acklen, asserts "body of Christ" is "Paul's favored analogy for church."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Camp believes the phrase emphasizes the "ongoing nature of the incarnation", and therefore "being church means embodying God's intentions for the world as revealed in Christ."<sup>3</sup> Camp studied under John Howard Yoder, the well-known Anabaptist theologian, and has sought to recover much of the Anabaptist roots of Churches of Christ. Finally, Randy Harris, a professor of the author at Abilene Christian University (affiliated with Churches of Christ), emphasizes the body metaphor as well. Citing Ephesians 1:22-23, he writes that the description of the church as "his body" is the "greatest compliment in Scripture."<sup>4</sup> In addition, he asserts, "There is at least some sense in which we may call Christ's church a second incarnation."<sup>5</sup> By emphasizing the body metaphor, these authors embrace the concept of incarnation to understand both Christ and his church.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 94.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), location 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Randall J. Harris and Rubel Shelly, *The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church* (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard, 1992), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 48.

The richness of the body metaphor lies in its ability to explain several aspects of the church. First, it helps explain the literal definition of the church. The word ἐκκλησία literally means assembly or gathering.<sup>6</sup> In the classical period, ἐκκλησία signified “one of the main institutions of the divinely given polis and its order.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, the biblical embrace of this secular phrase reflects the hope of a new order. Despite the frequent erroneous usages and assumptions, the church is not a building. Too often, Christians approach the church building as the Hebrews approached the temple. However, Paul makes it clear that God “does not live in temples made by humans” (Acts 17:24). But, Paul does tell the Corinthians “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19). God indwells the bodies of disciples instead of buildings. When these disciples gather together, the Bible calls it ἐκκλησία. Incredibly though, since the Holy Spirit is in each body, as the gatherers scatter out, they are still the body of Christ. Church defines more than just the Sunday morning gathering. Church defines the people who gather even when they are not gathered. Therefore, the church forms its identity in gathering but implements its identity in mission as it scatters out. The body metaphor conveys this organic fluidity in contrast to a fixed location.

Second, the body metaphor demonstrates the essential family quality of church. Each part of the body functions differently, and yet they are all related. They share the same DNA. Paul describes this to Timothy: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tm 5:1-2). Simply put, disciples should treat the

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “ἐκκλησία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:502.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

church like family. The church is not an unfamiliar, strange body, but a related body. This has dramatic ramifications for the call to unity and the challenges of individualism. Churches should act and feel like healthy families.

Third, the body metaphor richly describes the complexity of the church. The body of Jesus has been raised. Death could not hold the body. Jesus, in the flesh, returned to the Father's right hand. However, the church, his body on earth, has not yet followed. The church has not yet experienced the complete realization of the resurrection. The church on earth experiences effects of the fall, in terms of brokenness, imperfection, and even death. The church finds itself in a complex reality of both crucifixion and resurrection. This is the heart of Paul's words:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor 4:7-10).

Put another way, alluded to already, the church finds itself in exile. It experiences the promise in part but finds itself separated from a complete face-to-face relationship with the Father. As the history of Churches of Christ is explored, along with recent trends, the exiled nature of the body shows up often. Specifically, one sees good chapters and bad chapters, signs of hope alongside despair, examples of strength beside weakness. Like the first incarnation, the church is both human and divine, and yet unlike Jesus, the second incarnation falls short of perfection. The church lives as both an exiled community on earth and residents of the kingdom. The body strives to be like the head, but because of sin, it will not get there on its own. All churches and congregations have

flaws. The church exists as an imperfect part of a perfect body. One should expect to find God in the church, and yet one should also expect sin to rear its face as well.

### **Strengths of Churches of Christ**

So with an understanding that the church aspires to imitate Christ but inevitably falls short, the strengths and weaknesses of the unique aspects of Churches of Christ deserves explanation. This movement, centered on restoration, dates back to the Second Great Awakening of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Hughes, a noted scholar in the tradition, clearly defines the founding principle as “the attempt to recover in the modern age the Christian faith as it was believed and practiced in the first century.”<sup>8</sup> The two main initiators of the movement were Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, who had both Anabaptist and Presbyterian roots. Both were dismayed by the lack of Christian unity on the American frontier, and they placed the blame on the inherent divisiveness of human traditions. Stone brought to the movement an “insistence on freedom from human traditions in religion.”<sup>9</sup> In similar fashion, Campbell preached “Christian unity through a return to the clear and unambiguous teachings of the New Testament” and “regularly assaulted creeds, clerics, and denominational systems.”<sup>10</sup> Within this idealistic critique, one finds a high view of Scripture alongside a high view of humanity’s ability to understand it. The emphasis on freedom and the common man has Reformation roots with the idea that every person should be free to interpret the Scriptures. Moreover, one major characteristic of the movement has always been simplicity. According to the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

mindset of the movement, when things get complicated and humans make rules and write creeds, division will surely follow. Of course, many find difficulty in distinguishing between ambiguous and unambiguous teachings in the Bible. Campbell and Stone had a simple list though, which included among other things “congregational autonomy, a plurality of elders in each congregation, weekly communion, and immersion for the remission of sins.”<sup>11</sup> Two hundred years later, these are still found in Churches of Christ.

Within all of this lies a foundational assumption. The church is a big deal. As the body of Christ, the church exists as a necessary aspect of the walking with Jesus in the Spirit. Among Churches of Christ, one finds a deep love of the church. In some respects, it is a romanticized ideal. The closer one comes to experiencing Christ’s intention of the church the closer one comes to the body of Jesus. Because of this, those in Churches of Christ long for the restoration of the New Testament church. In many ways, to experience the church is to experience the body of Jesus.

The author’s beliefs on the foundational characteristics of the church are similar to Stone and Campbell. Moreover, each foundational characteristic shows its vitality by its connection to the body metaphor. The two bedrock practices of the church are baptism and communion. They fundamentally shape how disciples come to experience and participate in the body. In addition, the author’s theology of the church includes the authoritative voice of Scripture, congregational autonomy, the priesthood of all believers, plural leadership, high expectations for body life, and unity. The body submits to the

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<sup>11</sup> Allen, C. Leonard and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), 106.

authoritative voice of the head, celebrates the contribution of every body part, and acts organically to fulfill its mission.

In baptism, God submerges an individual into his communal body. In Romans 6:4, Paul connects baptism to the body metaphor in saying, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” In Colossians 2:9-10, Paul speaks of Christ saying, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him.” In the ensuing verses, he once again connects baptism to entry into the body of Jesus. John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, another two voices in Churches of Christ, state it this way: “When we submit to baptism we are initiated into the triune community-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are making God’s redemptive story our own story.”<sup>12</sup> Connecting to the incarnational theme, they call baptism an “embodiment of faith.”<sup>13</sup> To make someone part of the second incarnation, baptism accomplishes at least two things. As Peter describes in Acts 2:38, God forgives sins and equips with the Holy Spirit. A cleansed disciple follows the head as enabled by the Spirit. In Churches of Christ, baptism is, as Hicks and Taylor point out, a “cornerstone doctrine.”<sup>14</sup> Baptism is a frequent theme of teaching and conversations in my tradition. Through baptism, a Christian understands and identifies their past, present, and future, as linked in the body of Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God’s Transforming Work* (Siloam Springs, Arkansas: Leafwood, 2004), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Alongside baptism, the church celebrates the Lord's Supper as its other bedrock practice. Like baptism, its significance comes from its meaning for the body. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul calls the Lord's Supper "participation in the body of Christ." The eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood connect one to the reality of Jesus, just as baptism connects one to the sacred rhythm of death, burial, and resurrection. Along with Churches of Christ, the author views the Lord's Supper as the apex of one's experience on earth with God because of what it foreshadows. John Mark Hicks, speaking of the eschatological goal of the messianic banquet contends, "God intends to commune with a people he calls his own. At the center of that intent is the experience of communion at table."<sup>15</sup> However, the Lord's Supper is not just communion between the individual and Jesus but among the entire body. Along these lines, the following from Dietrich Bonhoeffer comes to mind: "The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship."<sup>16</sup> Hicks strongly advocates that the Lord's Supper was an actual meal and that "breaking bread" in Scripture refers to the Lord's Supper.<sup>17</sup> Because it was an actual meal, the theology of the table spills over into the practice of unity, mutuality, and sharing, as seen in passages like Acts 2:42-47. Churches of Christ celebrate communion every Sunday. In fact, Churches of Christ view communion as the main reason for the assembly. Although the sermon and singing draw more attention, the author has yet to find a member of Churches of Christ who does not believe the table is the central, most important aspect of worship.

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<sup>15</sup> John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* (Orange, California: New Leaf Books, 2002), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* Translated by John W. Doberstein. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954), 122.

<sup>17</sup> Hicks, *Come to the Table*, 92.

On a secondary level, vital aspects of the author's ecclesiology include the authoritative voice of Scripture, congregational autonomy, the priesthood of all believers, plural leadership, high expectations for body life, and unity. The vitality of these attributes rest in the way they reflect the body metaphor. Scripture is the primary way the body hears the voice of the head. In Churches of Christ, the Bible contains the patterns, practices, and stories of Jesus and the Church, which they seek to restore. The Bible is not just a list of principles or positions but a narrative to embody. Once again, the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's demonstrate a vital truth. When Christians commit themselves to reading Scripture, "we become a part of what once took place for our salvation."<sup>18</sup> While this reputation may be faltering somewhat, for years those in Church of Christ were known as people that knew their Bible. As a child, the author remembers well the sound of turning pages during worship. Even now, anyone will listen to the argument of anyone if that argument is based on Scripture. Acklen demonstrates this love of the Bible. During Sunday morning services, there are four public readings of Scripture. Because the Churches of Christ have no creeds or written doctrinal statements, it is sometimes difficult to know what they believe. Although confusion exists at time, believers celebrate great freedom when they discuss by simply pointing to the Bible. Congregations possess an amazing adaptability because of this. If a new or deeper interpretation of Scripture is found, a congregation moves on it without having to change a creed or seek denominational approval.

Of course, that fact segues to a discussion on another trait of Churches of Christ, congregational autonomy. The Churches of Christ have no denominational headquarters or authoritative structure. Every congregation interprets the bible for themselves. While

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<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 53.

many core practices are shared by Churches of Christ, it is extremely common to find diversity of interpretation and practices among congregations. Once again, the body metaphor proves key, as congregational autonomy allows the body to adapt and contextualize. An incarnation is the decision to translate the message in cultural skin. If the church mimics Jesus use of incarnation, each congregation must have freedom to autonomously decide what that means in their location. While unified in the pursuit of the first century ideal, each congregation has the freedom to translate that to their context. This freedom and flexibility enables mission, a key aspect of the church's function.

In turn, this mission, to be explored in Chapter 5, involves every part of the body. The church represents an "all hands on deck" enterprise. The body of Christ metaphor, as seen places like Ephesians 1:22-23, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12, focuses on the group, not the individual. The church together is the body of Christ, and every member of the body is vital and necessary. In Churches of Christ, there is little distinction between laity and clergy. Each week, a member of the laity presides over the communion table, and they often perform baptisms and even weddings. All in all, members of Churches of Christ have a high level of ownership. While the author has felt respected in the four Churches of Christ in which he has served, he has rarely felt like a hired hand or separated clergy. At Acklen, seven to eight people speak in every service, and while his voice is appreciated, it is far from the only voice. Together, one sees a robust implementation of the Reformation emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers."

Moreover, this communal emphasis morphs over into leadership style. A plurality of elders leads each congregation, to which every member, including clergy, submit. The emphasis on Scripture as an authoritative example leads Churches of Christ

to literally implement Paul and Barnabas' example of appointing elders in each church. The qualities of leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 serve as portraits. On several occasions, the author has overheard church leaders say, "in church, no one person gets his or her way." This communal leadership style models itself after the body. Accompanied with the high view of Scripture, it becomes, "in the body, only the head gets his way."

To extend the communal emphasis one step further, one should note that Churches of Christ maintain high expectations for body life. Church participation is far more than worship. As Halter and Smay advocate in *The Tangible Kingdom*, "Our gathering-or what people used to call 'church'-is an aspect of what we do, but not the only thing."<sup>19</sup> While this call does not always find realization, it represents the ideal. There is a push for every member to have a role, with a belief that strength correlates to the proportion of those who have definitive roles. As Bonhoeffer contends, "In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable."<sup>20</sup>

With a flat hierarchy and emphasis on every member, unity is an imperative. This is where Churches of Christ have a well-intentioned but flawed history. As stated, the initiators of the movement were deeply troubled by the divisiveness between faith traditions. Even now, the author regularly hears discontent over the plethora of denominations. Since the Churches of Christ embrace the body metaphor so strongly, they long for the unity Paul advocates when he says there should be "no division in the body" (1 Cor 12:25). While denominations are not inherently divisive, too often, the

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<sup>19</sup> Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 116.

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 94.

fragmentation of the Christian faith hinders witness and mission. Unity, both between and within congregations is a constant aspiration. Often, Churches of Christ aim for unity through a reliance on simplicity and plural leadership. Behind the practices, people fear that complicating matters, through programs or even theology, will lead to discord. At times, simplicity is refreshing, but it can lead to shallowness. Also, the plural leadership style intends to prevent one personality from taking over. However, by involving many in leadership, gridlock often occurs. Finally, by solidifying the grounds for unity in the elusive agreement on what the Bible teaches without the help of creeds, the outcome has been further divisiveness.

### **Weaknesses of Churches of Christ**

At this point, this Chapter transitions from the strengths to the weaknesses of the Churches of Christ's uniqueness. By elevating church forms to the basis for truly experiencing Jesus, the Churches of Christ almost care too much about the church, or at least their idea of the church. Bonhoeffer is once again helpful: "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial."<sup>21</sup> Congregations and individuals must humbly welcome the Spirit and generously allow others latitude on church forms. Too often, the letter of the "law" or Bible is emphasized more than the Spirit. Also, people exaggerate what is unambiguous and leave little room for compromise. In this regard, recently, the author saw congregations experience great divisiveness over instruments in worship (Churches of

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<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

Christ traditionally practice Acapella singing) and women speaking in the assembly.

While these issues are meaningful, they should not distract from mission as they often do.

Moreover, besides divisiveness within the movement, the Churches of Christ often do not work well with other traditions. While this image has thawed in many respects, the author is continually asked if Churches of Christ still “believe they are the only ones going to heaven.” Often in their history, Churches of Christ have sought to proclaim “Christians only, not the only Christians”, and yet sectarianism has often been present. As Hughes and Allen assert, “Their presumed lack of tradition became itself a tradition, their rejection of theology became a fundamental theological maxim, and their zeal to escape the constraints of history became the substance and core of the particular history of this particular people.”<sup>22</sup> In another work, Hughes proclaims, “Churches of Christ began as a sect and evolved into a denomination but denied they were either.”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, this not only violates the origination of the movement. It violates what they have historically proclaimed to be the centrality of worship-the table of Jesus. In this regard, Bonhoeffer presents a needed reminder on unity: “Life together under the Word will remain sound and healthy only where it does not form itself into a movement, an order, a society, a collegium pietatis, but rather where it understands itself as being a part of the one, holy, catholic, Christian Church, where it shares actively and passively in the sufferings and struggles and promise of the whole Church.”<sup>24</sup> Churches of Christ must regain their original vision for resting labels and living in unity with all believers.

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<sup>22</sup> Allen and Hughes, *Discovering our Roots*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 37.

Now, most at Acklen bemoan this lack of unity and seek union with the larger body of Christ in Nashville. However, the legacy of this sectarian spirit continues to show up. In Churches of Christ at large, an outworking of this divisiveness takes form in a suspicion of cooperation among churches. Specifically, many churches refuse to give tithed funds to non churches-whether non-profits or individuals themselves. At a previous congregation in which the author served, the elders refused to officially join and donate to a local church conference, despite the fact that the executive director of the church conference was a member of the congregation. Even though the congregation participated in homeless ministry through the conference, there was always a veil of suspicion. As previously mentioned, Acklen participates in Room in the Inn, as do many Churches of Christ. But few Churches of Christ donate funds to Room in the Inn (Acklen does), and the ministry does not involve joint worship services or concrete proclamations of unity.

Since the project centers on community partnerships, this suspicion proves relevant. Therefore, the suspicion must be explained further, as it has deeper roots than just the unity plea gone amuck. There is a theological reason behind it. As stated prior, many in Churches of Christ have viewed the church and kingdom as synonymous. Some of this results from the healthy focus on the church, which over time became an obsessive focus, as all unique qualities threaten to do. Some of this results from the emphasis on Acts, which mentions the church far more than the kingdom. Over time, conversations on the kingdom and conversations on the church absorbed into one conversation. Combined with an emphasis on baptism as an entry into the church, and many ultimately

arrived with the belief that the church is the kingdom, and the kingdom only grows through baptism or evangelism.

Therefore, many see community service as helpful only if resulting in conversion. For example, several years ago with another congregation, the author took a group of teens to West Virginia to participate in a Work Camp. Together, 350 teens painted thirty-three houses over the course of one week. At the end of the week, the author talked with a local minister whose congregation was involved with the camp. He said, “this is great, but who is going to do the follow-up. Someone must follow up with these families.” In his mind, the purpose of painting someone’s house is to ultimately convert him or her. It seemed there was little room for God to be glorified in a painted house apart from a baptized person. Often times, Churches of Christ push too hard to for an explicit evangelistic element of community service. Ultimately, the service comes with strings attached. As one can imagine, recipients sense this, which often negatively affects conversion. This problem centers on the need for an evangelistic program or strategy. If the body metaphor is embraced, service and evangelism organically flow from union with and imitation of the head. In the words of Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, “The church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy.”<sup>25</sup> When the church acts as the body, social change, both converted communities and individuals, occurs.

In addition, Churches of Christ have often so enthusiastically embraced the counter cultural nature of the church that the world serves as a source of great fear. Churches of Christ have a long history of separating out from the world. In many ways,

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<sup>25</sup> 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, 1989), 43.

the longing for the first century ideal has hindered involvement in the twenty-first century. Often, the words “world” and “culture” are used in ways that reflect a negative stigma. Many believe community involvement and social activism will water down, neutralize, and even lead Christians astray. Much of this connects with the modernist-fundamentalist discord and the eventual split between conservative evangelicals and mainline liberals in the first half of the twentieth century. To a degree, the evangelicals focused on evangelism, while the mainline focused on service. Of course, this overstates the case but does describe their proclivity. While not considering themselves either evangelical or mainline, the Churches of Christ resembled the evangelicals on this issue. At times, social action has been dismissed as progressive secularism or political correctness. While not affiliated with Churches of Christ, McNeal describes what many in the movement believe: “Anything that takes place outside of ‘church as congregation’ has seemed suspicious to some. Even terms like para-church—a word that makes no sense biblically (one is either in the church or not)—is an organizational term invented to affirm the supremacy of church as a congregation.”<sup>26</sup> Often, parachurch ministries are often included in the suspicion of the secular. Much of ecclesiological practice reflects fear of the world and commitment to extraction from the world instead of mission to the world. In *The Tangible Kingdom*, Hugh Halter and Matt Smay state, “Many churches we work with have an alarming theology of ‘extraction’ that creates a Christian peer pressure to move away from the world in all its forms.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), location 426.

<sup>27</sup> Halter and Smay, *Tangible Kingdom*, 136.

## The Missional Movement

Over the last twenty years, many grew uncomfortable with this divide. Many desired a tighter embrace of evangelism and service, both in the name of holistic mission. For these reasons, many in Churches of Christ welcome the recent missional movement with open arms. In the previous chapter, the thoughts of Lesslie Newbigin, a front leading figure in the missional movement, were explored. Newbigin's disenchantment with the secular status of the United Kingdom upon his return from India led him to confront and ultimately reject Constantinian assumptions. Over the years, as the modern combination of enlightenment reason and church-state unions led to the privatization of faith. The result was a "Christian Europe" that was no longer publically Christian in thought or deed. Craig Carter, in his work *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, explores the Constantinian dilemma and explains that Constantine saw the church as an opportunity, or "constituency."<sup>28</sup> During his reign, Constantine sought to combine Christianity with pagan religions to create a nebulous "civil religion,"<sup>29</sup> which served to unify and support the empire.

This Constantinian framework is what Newbigin and others in the missional movement sought to name and reject. Newbigin realized that Christian Europe was in need of mission work, not just India. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile summarize the missional movement in *The Missional Church in Perspective* and give specific treatment to Newbigin: "His approach integrated a high Christology into a larger framework of the *missio Dei* in relation to the reign of God. Newbigin understand the

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<sup>28</sup> Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 81.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

work of the Triune God as calling and sending the church through the Spirit into the world to participate fully in God's mission within all creation."<sup>30</sup>

The sending nature of God serves as the foundational principle of the missional movement. Van Gelder and Zscheile explain that disciples "embody"<sup>31</sup> what they believe, and the movement rejects the embodiment of comfortable cultural civil religion in exchange for counter cultural discipleship. Reggie McNeal offers a working definition of the missional concept as "the people of God in partnership with him in his redemptive mission in the world."<sup>32</sup> Constantinianism lulls disciples to sleep, and they miss the kingdom partnership, which God calls them to. Lee Camp refers to the mislead belief in Christian America or Europe this as the "Constantinian Cataract." "Triumph actually inhibits discipleship, for the masses already too easily believe themselves to be Christian."<sup>33</sup> The civil religion of Constantinianism uses the terminology of faith to motivate actions with a future "carrot" of heaven but inevitably portrays this world as secular. Camp describes this well: "Christianity increasingly loses the biblical emphasis upon discipleship and replaces it with an emphasis upon religious ritual. 'Church,' rather than denoting the New Testament concept of disciples living as the 'body of Christ,' begins to denote a hierarchy that protects 'orthodoxy.' 'Salvation,' instead of being construed as the gift of a transformed, abundant life in the now-present kingdom of God,

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<sup>30</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 38.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> McNeal, *Missional Communities*, location 578.

<sup>33</sup> Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, location 305

begins to be equated with an otherworldly reward. In Christendom, the ‘whole world’ may be dubbed ‘Christian,’ and yet it is un-Christlike.”<sup>34</sup>

Once upon a time, Churches of Christ understood this well. David Lipscomb, a nineteenth century leader in Churches of Christ, radically spoke out often about the absorption of the church into the state. The Civil War was the defining even of his life and many of his views should be seen in relation to it. It is noteworthy that he was opposed both to slavery and to war. Lipscomb advocated abstinence from voting, military service, and government employment. He agonized over public school teachers before saying that was permissible. Lipscomb believed government was a “rebellion of man against his maker.”<sup>35</sup> He believed voting and “civil power” were “carnal weapons” and their implementation were “to do evil that good may come.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, he believed the kingdom solely spread through the church being the church, not political activism. Lipscomb stated that the church’s purpose was to “reinstate the authority and rule of God on earth through this own kingdom.”<sup>37</sup> In the late nineteenth century, Lipscomb began a preaching school, which later became a liberal arts university. Today, Lipscomb University, affiliated with Churches of Christ, is two miles from the Acklen church building and many members have a connection with the school. Once, his thoughts on pacifism and government avoidance were embarrassing to many. Lately, there has been among leading thinkers in Churches of Christ to reclaim his position.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., location 316.

<sup>35</sup> David Lipscomb, *On Civil Government: Its Origin, Mission and Destiny and the Christian's Relation to It* (Indianapolis: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 110.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 145-6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,16.

Overall, in Nashville, the buckle of the Bible belt, there is an increasing awareness that the cultural civil religion of the American south is not biblical, orthodox faith. As a teenager, the author remembers hearing about a group of college students that came to Nashville for a weeklong mission trip. An older mentor laughed out loud when he heard this. “Why would you come to Nashville on a mission trip?” The insinuation was that Nashville was already Christianized. Surely, mission trips were reserved for Central America or Africa. And yet, as more and more Christians are realizing the lack of discipleship in Nashville, revealed by pervasive community needs, no one is laughing. Weekly, both in and out of Acklen, disciples talk about missions in the city of Nashville. As McNeal states, “A church that thinks it is doing well in a city that is doing poorly is fooling itself.”<sup>38</sup> Many voice discontent with disconnect between the plethora of well-attended, elaborate church buildings and the social needs of the city, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Increasingly, Churches of Christ view the Constantinian features of cultural Christianity and the cozy identification with American political narrative as contrary to the first century ideal. Ironically, this is a recovery of the movement’s early roots, not a new trend. Moreover, some in the Bible belt wonder about the wisdom of the flight phenomenon with its desire of a parallel sub culture-Christian schools, Contemporary Christian Music, etc. A restored, back to its roots expression of church merges nicely with the missional movement.

### **Contemporary Challenges for Churches**

In fact, one might wonder why the missional movement was even needed. Perhaps, it should have been obvious all along. Besides the “Constantinian cataract,” one

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<sup>38</sup> McNeal, *Missional Communities*, location 663.

might wonder why the American church struggled so much to get this. The greatest challenge to Churches of Christ in particular and all churches in general is the rampant individualism of American culture. In gross violation of the body metaphor, many Christians pursue a “personal relationship with God” while ignoring communal aspects of faith. The value of individualism shows up most in the default identity of the contemporary American—that of the shopper. In *The Divine Commodity*, Sky Jethani explores this topic: “Shopping occupies a role in society that once belonged only to religion—the power to give meaning and construct identity.”<sup>39</sup> If Jethani is right, the consumer mentality bleeds over into how people approach faith. The past thirty years seem to back up his premise. Church leaders have relied on business models to grow their congregations by treating attendees as shoppers and disciples as consumers. Christians have responded by carefully selecting the best deal, which normally defines itself as “having my spiritual needs met.” Instead of a body, too many churches consist of separated, passive individuals having their needs met simultaneously in the same room. Once again, Jethani explains the trend: “In Consumer Christianity, our concern is not primarily whether people are transformed to reflect the countercultural values of God’s kingdom, but whether they are satisfied—often measured by attendance and giving.”<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, this consumer model of church pushes towards celebrity infatuation and the embrace of “bigger is better.” As Jethani states, “In Consumer Christianity, the

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<sup>39</sup> Sky Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

shepherd becomes a showman.”<sup>41</sup> Customers seek a charismatic hero they can relate to in the ways fans relate to celebrities. Nowadays, many talk about their mega church pastor in the same way they talk about a movie star or professional athlete. In this manner, the hands and feet seek to have the authority of the head, or Jesus. A close connection lies between the celebrity pastor and business models of marketing and branding. The social commentator James Twitchell sees what many mega church leaders seem to miss: “In the beginning of Christianity was the Word, and as I’m sure you’ve already guessed, the Word was the Brand.”<sup>42</sup>

The blending of consumer choice and church has resulted in a boom of mega churches. The number of mega churches (defined as 2000 plus) has grown from fifty in 1980 to 1210 in 2005, and every eight days, it is estimated that another small church closes its doors.<sup>43</sup> In this manner, the mega church effects the small, local congregation in the same manner Wal-Mart and Home Depot effect small, neighborhood family owned stores. When it comes to faith, Christians seemingly are choosier and choosier. Twitchell cynically explains, “Certain churches get to be megas because they know how to sell what people want to buy.”<sup>44</sup> In Nashville, when the author asks friends where they are currently worshipping, he regularly hears, “We are not committed to any one place. We are still shopping around.” The advent of consumer choice in congregational engagement has brought disastrous results. As Jethani asserts, “This philosophy of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>42</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 47.

<sup>43</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity went from in your Heart to in your Face* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 48.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 283.

spiritual formation through the consumption of external experiences creates worship junkies-Christians who leap from one mountaintop to another, one spiritual high to another, in search of a glory that does not fade.”<sup>45</sup>

The individualistic spirit expressed in the consumer identity is not isolated to Christians or faith communities. It permeates society and has drastically reduced contemporary social capital. In his seminal work *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam observed that commitment to social structures has declined over the last couple of generations. From civic clubs to churches to sports leagues to political parties, adults are far less committed to involvement and volunteerism. In his research, he concluded the main contributing factors to be pressures of time and money (exacerbated by single parent homes or both parents working), suburban sprawl and commuting patterns, effects of electronic entertainment, and generational change, which he says connects closely with the previous category.<sup>46</sup>

In Chapter 1, the story of south Nashville’s suburbanization received attention. Transportation patterns, facilitated by the construction of interstates, gave rise to the concept of commuting. For the first time, work and home were separated by mile. As William Leach says in *Country of Exiles*, “The dream of defeating time and space through transport and communication, in fact, has had more followers in America than in any other country.”<sup>47</sup> Of course, “defeating time and space” is an illusion for a real cost lies beneath the surface-the loss of social capital. Putnam suggests “in round numbers the

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<sup>45</sup> Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, 78.

<sup>46</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2001), 283.

<sup>47</sup> William Leach, *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 33.

evidence suggests that each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by ten percent.”<sup>48</sup> This trend extended to church patterns. Emboldened by choice and empowered by commuting, people thought little of driving great distances to church-thus separating work, church, and home into three distinct worlds. Of course, as one struggles to focus and live in three places, a thinning of relationships results.

Technological advances, for the most part, increase this trend. Put plainly, Putnam describes TV watching as “most lethal to community involvement.”<sup>49</sup> In *Geography of Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler adds, “The American house has been TV-centered for three generations. It is the focus of family life, and the life of the house correspondingly turns inward, away from whatever occurs beyond its four walls.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, in recent years this technology has expanded to include the Internet, personal computers, smart phones, and tablets of all sorts. In crowded public spaces, individuals are physically with others. But as everyone stares at his or her iPhones, in that moment no one is truly available. As Craig Detweiler explains in *iGods*, “we train our kids to look down rather than up.”<sup>51</sup> As screens have drawn individuals in, there is a marked decrease in civic and community participation. Instead of engaging in real life, individuals too often live vicariously through the stories on flat screens. This represents more than just habit or amusement. Detweiler sees something deeper: “Technology as become a new

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<sup>48</sup> Putman, *Bowling Alone*, 213.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>50</sup> James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 167.

<sup>51</sup> Craig Detweiler, *iGods: How Technology Shapes our Spiritual and Social Lives* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), location 116.

religion, a way to make sense of the world.”<sup>52</sup> While some of this technology contributes to connectedness (awareness of social issues, using Skype or Facetime to talk to those at a great distance), for the most part, the effects of screens have diminished social cohesion. In many ways, while connected with more people and information, the level of connectedness is often thinner. Of course, recent trends await further social analysis. For now, one does well to hear this admonition from Detweiler: “Texting can be the next best thing to being there, but only if I recognize the enduring power of presence.”<sup>53</sup>

However, an increase in time constraints limits the time for the practicing of presence. Besides the time taken up by commuting and entertainment technology, another trend has emerged over the last few decades. Single parent homes have increased dramatically. At the same time, the number of two parent homes where both work full time has increased dramatically. Honestly, the time crunch reflects the most widely held social complaint of suburbia. Everyone claims to be busy. At times, one wonders if this is mere whining. However, Putnam documents its reality: “For the segment of society—well-educated middle-class parents—whose energies historically provided a disproportionate share of the community infrastructure, the time bind is real.”<sup>54</sup>

From an ecclesiological perspective, this all adds up to a reality far inferior to the body of Christ. Contemporary Christians struggle with community commitment and neighborhood identity. Those ideals seem like a lost art. Christians struggle to know

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., location 587.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., location 3088.

<sup>54</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 191.

both the neighbor across the street and the worshipper across the pew. The realization and experience of the second incarnation must reject this rampant individualism expressed in church consumerism, enabled by commuting, distracted by technology, and burdened by time constraints. In his research, the author constantly found amazement that some secular social commentators understand the nature of community and problems of modern life better than some Christians. One should notice the body image associated with Kunstler's analysis: "A community is not something you have, like a pizza. Nor is it something you can buy, as visitors to Disneyland and Williamsburg discover. It is a living organism based on a web of interdependences-which is to say, a local economy."<sup>55</sup> Leach writes about the "weakening of place as a centering presence in the lives of ordinary people. It is animated by the premise that the well-being of most Americans rests on a healthy connectedness to place, and that a wearing away of such a relationship is dangerous."<sup>56</sup> Amazingly, they describe what the Christian experiences in the body of Christ.

A healthy ecclesiology must understand the challenges of Constantinian blends of church and state/culture as well as the staggering impact of individualism. To be the body of Jesus, Christians must maintain a connected attentiveness to God and neighbor, both those in their church and those on their street. These words from Hugh Halter deserve attention: "Someday soon, people won't just load up the family in a minivan for a twenty-minute drive across town to hear the preacher encourage them for a week. Someday soon, people are going to be desperate for a few friends in their own

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<sup>55</sup> Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, 185-6.

<sup>56</sup> Leach, *Country of Exiles*, 6-7.

neighborhood to huddle around scripture, mission, and life.”<sup>57</sup> Faith is not something to buy or consume. Faith is something to practice and embody. As Detweiler explains, “An embodied faith rooted in the real world will enable us to resist a gnostic ascent into virtual kingdoms.”<sup>58</sup> To add on, an embodied faith helps us resist all that would weaken the reality of our calling.

### **The Church as a Community of Kingdom Exiles**

Summarizing thus far, the author clings to both a high Christology and a high ecclesiology. Because Jesus is a big deal, the church is a big deal. The vitality of the second incarnation lies in the foundational importance of the first incarnation. The church has a high calling. Unfortunately, the church falls short of this calling. Some of the best ideas of the Churches of Christ tradition, like unity on a simple reading of the Bible, have resulted in the very things it sought to prevent, discord over interpretation and lack of cooperation. Moreover, the church has historic problems, such as Constantinian patterns, and recent problems, in church consumerism. One might wonder where to go from here. Well to begin, cynicism and pessimism are not an option. For example, while the author rejects the consumerist tendencies found in many mega churches, he realizes many good things happen in them. The road of negativity appears tempting but ultimately proves undesirable. At the same time, naïve idealism is not the answer either. The contemporary experience of the church does not live up to its calling. Healthy ecclesiological practice must thread the needle between the church’s calling and current reality.

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<sup>57</sup> Hugh Halter in forward of McNeal, *Missional Communities*, location 257.

<sup>58</sup> Detweiler, *iGods*, location 297.

For these reasons, the author concludes that a healthy ecclesiological identity must account for this complexity and tension. The following identity is therefore proposed: The church is a community of kingdom exiles. The kingdom aspect reflects the calling and the exiles aspect reflects the reality. As John Howard Yoder states, the church is a “social manifestation of the kingdom.”<sup>59</sup> However, the words of Ferguson deserve repeat mention: “The church exists between the “already” and the “not yet” of God’s eschatological fulfillment.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the church is a social manifestation of the “already, not yet” kingdom. Each day, the church seeks to experience the vision of its secured, promised future, but a gap remains. Both the kingdom and exilic qualities of the church represent vital strands of understanding.

The kingdom calling of the church community reflects positive hope and vision. The exilic reality frames expectations and daily life. Several passages demonstrate tension of the “already, not yet” community of kingdom exiles. The archetype of exilic passages surely lies in Jeremiah 29. When the Hebrews find themselves in exile, they wonder about their options. Most likely, they wrestled with the options of withdrawal from Babylon versus take over of Babylon. Jeremiah calls them to a third option.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.  
(Jer 29:5-7)

However, the reality of exile will not last forever. The exiles seek the welfare of Babylon while living in expectation of another kingdom. “I know the plans I have for you,

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<sup>59</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 30.

declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer 29:11).

Paul embraces this tension in his letter to Philippi. While Paul was a Roman citizen, most Christians did not have citizenship of any nation. Incredibly, while the world does not find them worthy of citizenship, heaven bestows that honor upon them. However, the end of Paul’s statement is significant. “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20). Once again, the church looks towards the future with anticipation when its reality and calling become one.

Likewise, Peter offers this complex identity. Similar to Jeremiah and Paul, he reminds them of their calling. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pt 2:9). However, he leverages the concept of exile as a way to understand their situation.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pt 2:11-12).

For the early church in Rome, the Babylonian exile was a paradigm for understanding their minority status while living in anticipation of the complete kingdom.

A final text is worthy of mention. While Saul travels to Damascus to persecute the church, Jesus confronts him. “And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:4-5). Amazingly, Jesus says Paul wages persecution against him. Despite the reality of ascension, the persecution incredibly continues to center on Jesus, even though he seems to physically exist elsewhere. Of course, the body metaphor once again shows up. Even though the head of

the body sits at the father's right hand, the hands and feet, the second incarnation, still lives on earth. Therefore, Paul's persecution against the church is persecution against Jesus himself. The church participates in an identity that is both resurrected and crucified, both kingdom and exilic.

Over the last few decades, the exilic understanding has drawn a resurgence of interest. As society enters a Post-Constantinian era, many are embracing the language of exile. In his work, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, Michael Frost asserts, "The experience that faced the Jewish exiles mirrors the church's experience today. In fact, the biblical metaphor that best suits our current times and faith situation is that of exile."<sup>61</sup> While many still claim faith, the world appears to grow more secular. The fusion between church and state in the West has significantly diminished, in favor of the state. Faith has become a private matter for personal lives, and thus, it has in large part been exiled from the public square. To be clear, Frost does not mourn this, but instead sees it as a "beginning of a new flowering of Christianity."<sup>62</sup> Much of the Western Culture strays from biblical callings. Much of the Constantinian marriage of church and state waters down discipleship. As stated previously, the Western values of individualism and consumerism have radically affected our ecclesiology. Too many dedicate themselves solely to consuming church activity and perpetuating the institution. There is promise in the downfall of this system. As Frost explains, "Exiles have freed themselves from the busyness of church activity precisely so that they can share food

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally In a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

with their friends, neighbors, and work colleagues in a more mutual fashion.”<sup>63</sup> When disciples no longer depend on Western systems and nationalistic spirit to prop up religious life, they find great freedom to recapture the vitality and organic nature of church. Frost sums it up this way: “In all our talk about exiles in a post-Christendom empire, we must not lose sight of the fact that we indeed have found our way home, led there by our trusted guide and Savior, Jesus.”<sup>64</sup>

When one recaptures the identity of the church as a community of kingdom exiles, mission will flow out naturally. To preview Chapter 5, by definition, exiles seek to promote the healing and flourishing of the city. Simply put, the church concerns itself with how everyone in the city is doing, not just their tribe. In this mission, they resist the dichotomies of service/evangelism and sacred/secular. They concern themselves with both converted hearts and converted communities. Moreover, exiles seek the growth of the kingdom, not just their institutions. This growth begins within each disciple, and then moves outward. Exiles seek participation and transformation, not consumerism. Finally, exiles believe the church exists to witness to the kingdom. If the church is the body of Christ, and Christ’s mission was the kingdom, then the church’s mission is the kingdom. Instead of kingdom exiles, Hauerwas and Willimon use the language of resident aliens who form a colony of the kingdom: “A colony is a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 326.

passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced.”<sup>65</sup>

In conclusion, before launching into mission, one should acknowledge that the flow between identity and mission is not a one-time move. Rather, a constant rhythm exists between the church claiming its identity and acting out on it. The church must never lose sight of the two bedrock practices of baptism and table. For in these practices, the church finds its identity, calling, reality, and mission. In baptism, Christians connect to the body of Jesus, the reality of his crucifixion, and the calling of his resurrection. The baptized does not stay in the water. Baptism launches one out into kingdom hope and Spirit led action. Moreover, as the church sits at a common table and eat the body of Jesus, they find union with Christ and each other. Joined to the head, the family morphs out into mission. Like the Hebrews at Passover, the meal offers sustenance for the journey. They may come to the table as individuals, but they leave as family. If baptism is the wedding, then communion is the regular anniversary celebration. Both these practices enact a future calling, and in doing so, God transforms the reality of exiles. In those sacred moments, God shows up and gives one a full taste of kingdom citizenship and experience. In these divine moments, the author often thinks, “This is what it means to be the body of Christ. This is what it means to be the family of God.”

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<sup>65</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.

## CHAPTER 5

### THEOLOGY FOR MISSIONAL COMMUNITY MINISTRY IN THE CITY

Growing up, the author remembers missionaries coming to visit his church in the summer. Usually, this involved an old slide projector with pictures from Africa or Central America. As he got older, his congregation invited teens to go on mission trips, normally for one week, to countries in Central America or Mexico. Throughout the year, the church promoted service projects in the city, but the magic word “mission” was reserved for international trips. When he arrived at Abilene Christian University, the Bible/Religion department was basically broken down into two majors, ministry and missions. Ministry was code for working with domestic congregations, and mission was code for international efforts. Likewise, this dichotomy shows up in many church budgets. The “mission” category normally refers to evangelism, almost always happening overseas. The “benevolence” or “service” category usually implies domestic and local efforts. The implication is clear. In this way of thinking, mission remains an aspect of what the church does. It is not central but remains on the periphery. Also, mission seems removed from daily life. It normally happens in a far off place, and only people who travel there supported by the American church really do missions. Missions is something disciples support, not something in which they regularly participate.

At its core, this dichotomy presents itself as a theological issue. One's way of doing or ordering theology leads one to land at different emphases. For example, this dichotomy reflects the theological hierarchy-God, church, and then missions. In other words, theology flows into ecclesiology, which then flows into missiology. There is a better, more biblical, way. Van Gelder and Zscheile concisely state, "Ecclesiology should be understood as derived from missiology."<sup>1</sup> Of course, one must determine where missiology lies in the hierarchy of theology. In this section, the author seeks to outline the following hierarchy. Of first importance lies theology. Questions concerning the nature of God deserve preeminence. In Christian Trinitarian theology, Christology and pneumatology find themselves alongside theology in the primary position. Moreover, when God in three persons is truly studied, the nature of God is one of mission. God is a sending God. God created humanity and seeks relationship with his creation. The image of the kingdom is closely associated to this. For, once the original kingdom of Eden experienced fracture, God embarks on the mission to redeem and restore it all through Jesus and the Spirit. Therefore, mission is a secondary category flowing out of Christology and pneumatology. By definition, eschatology is alongside missiology, for God sends and seeks in order to accomplish a redeemed future. Of tertiary importance, ecclesiology finally comes into view. As established, ecclesiology is connected to Christology (body of Christ), and yet they are obviously of a different order. Moreover, when ecclesiology becomes a subset of missiology, the aforementioned unbiblical dichotomy disappears.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 32.

Therefore, mission is not a line item of the church budget. Incredibly, the church is a line item of missions. It is not part of the church but the reason for the church. The church most clearly relates to the head of the body when it participates in the mission of God. As will be explained, the mission of God is the kingdom. God is on a sending mission to bring the kingdom, and the church is part of the sending. Most clearly, the church does not first send but rather realizes first that it is already sent.

With this said, Chapter 5 will explore three specific questions. What is the kingdom? How does the church relate to the kingdom? How does the church relate to the world? Moving towards the conclusion, if Jesus' main passion was the kingdom, then the church's main passion must be the kingdom. If Jesus loves the world, then the church must love the world. More specifically, if God loves the city, the church must love the city. Perhaps, mission is not something that happens overseas. Perhaps, mission happens next door in the city.

### **The Kingdom of God**

First, to truly understand mission, it is essential to have an in depth understanding of the kingdom, the goal of mission. Jesus said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Lk 4:43). Intentionally, Jesus highlights kingdom proclamation, even accomplishment, as the reason for his incarnation. Clearly, the usage of kingdom assumes a king. Therefore, the language used for the anticipated anointed one, Christ and Messiah, infers the kingdom. According to Karl Ludwig Schmidt, regarding, βασιλεία, "the essential meaning is reign

rather than realm.”<sup>2</sup> The conversation on reign versus realm has interesting consequences. Moreover, in New Testament usage, the kingdom “comes down by divine intervention.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, this discussion has consequences concerning the church’s ability to expand, bring, or participate in the kingdom of God.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, two important voices for this project have been Everett Ferguson and Dallas Willard. To recap, Ferguson states, “The kingdom of God refers to his majesty and activity, more often than to his people,”<sup>4</sup> but he does add, “God’s rule does involve a people.”<sup>5</sup> Willard states, “The kingdom of God is the range of his effective will: that is, it is the domain where what he prefers is actually what happens.”<sup>6</sup> Both affirm the idea of reign, but clearly, Willard appears more comfortable alluding to the concept of realm through his reference to “range” and “domain.” Willard emphasizes this to show the tangible nature of the kingdom. It is not an elusive, ethereal reign, but rather, it becomes manifest in people and places. While seemingly comfortable with Willard’s point, Ferguson and others play their cards closer to the vest on the meaning of kingdom. Besides issues of definition and usage, many are weary of the kingdom becoming overly associated with people or places. The disappointments and abuses of Christendom, as well as contemporary hypocrisy, lay in the background. This danger should be addressed, but the opportunity to experience and engage the kingdom

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *βασιλεία*, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Editors G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 582.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 582.

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 259.

should not be missed. Willard consistently proclaims the “presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Ferguson embraces the understanding that the kingdom is “breaking in,”<sup>8</sup> suggesting availability and opportunity.

Perhaps, it is helpful to hear other scholars weigh in. Hans Kung, the well-known Catholic theologian, states, “This basileia of God is the ruling, central concept of Jesus’ preaching.”<sup>9</sup> This is yet another example of scholars almost uniformly agreeing on the centrality of the kingdom for Jesus. Moreover, Kung explains, “In his reign the coming completed reign of God is proclaimed and in his reign it is already effective.”<sup>10</sup> Both Kung and Willard choose to highlight the “effective” nature of the kingdom in Jesus. Moreover, Kung emphasizes the “already”, or available, element of the kingdom. In addition, George Eldon Ladd, former New Testament Professor at Fuller Seminary, wrote heavily concerning the kingdom. In his *The Gospel and the Kingdom*, he cites the abundance of New Testament references where “the kingdom is not a realm or a people but God’s reign.”<sup>11</sup> While reign remains the heart of the meaning, a realm is still involved. He explains, “A reign without a realm in which it is exercised is meaningless. Thus we find that the Kingdom of God is also the realm in which God’s reign may be

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Kung, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 71.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>11</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Popular Expositions on the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 21.

experienced.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, while the kingdom is first and foremost an intangible concept, it will show up in concrete ways.

The former Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright weighs in on the issue. Wright’s helpfulness lies in his commitment to interpret Jesus within his context. Specifically, he delves into the understanding of kingdom for first century Jews. Jesus embraces, yet reframes much of Jewish expectations on the kingdom, or Messianic hopes. In addressing the “reign of God,” Wright states, “It spoke of covenant renewed, of creation restored, of Israel liberated, of YHWH returning.”<sup>13</sup> Wright demonstrates that an understanding of the kingdom must take into account the entire, sweeping narrative of Scripture from creation to Israel to the church to Revelation. Like those cited above, Wright believes Jesus proclaimed an accessible kingdom. He explains, ““his public ministry was itself the true inauguration of the kingdom which would shortly be established.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, “the kingdom was already present where Jesus was.”<sup>15</sup> This “inaugurated” or “already, not yet” perspective seems to fit best what Jesus actually said and how Hebrews actually understood kingdom.

Wright discusses Messianic types and pretenders and how they initiated a new reign or order even though it was far from accomplished. Jesus follows a similar script. He assembles a group of followers around a new way of living before moving towards the climax at Jerusalem. In Wright’s words, “An obvious first-century option for a would-be Messiah would run: go to Jerusalem, fight the battle against the forces of evil,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 172.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 472.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

and get yourself enthroned as the rightful king. Jesus, in fact, adopted precisely this strategy.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus talks and acts authoritatively about the temple, one of the “central symbols or royal vocation.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout, he fits the Messianic (king) motif. However, does change and shape the expectation, namely the rejection of violence, embrace of peace, and the belief that Satan, not Rome, was the greatest enemy. Moreover, Jesus reframes expectations with the gap between his victory (death and resurrection) and complete fulfillment of the kingdom. This gap is significant, for the church continues to live in it. Jews expected that the Messiah would bring the end of exile. Seemingly, Jesus ends their exile and brings them into a kingdom, and yet Caesar still sits on his throne. These scholars interpret Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom in a way that supports my understanding of kingdom exiles.

In addition, Scot McKnight, professor at North Park University, offers valuable insight on the kingdom. In his work, *The King Jesus Gospel*, McKnight bemoans how gospel is used to reference getting saved more than the kingdom. He shows how an erroneous shortsighted definition of the gospel elevates evangelism over community service or cultural engagement. He states, “The word gospel in the first century context was an announcement,”<sup>18</sup> and that announcement focused on the identity and actions of the king. Therefore, when someone proclaimed, “Jesus is Lord,” or “Jesus Christ,” they were announcing that Jesus was the bringer of a kingdom. He uses the terms “gospel culture” and “salvation culture” to denote and separate the concepts of the reign of God

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 539.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>18</sup> Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 58.

and how one comes to be a part of the reign. He demonstrates how “salvation culture” has swallowed up “gospel culture,” instead of flowing out of the gospel. Also, he offers this excellent understanding of kingdom, which reflects Jewish beliefs: “Kingdom is not just a state of affairs, like justice and peace and love and holiness. Kingdom is a community made up of four features that shape the entire Story of Israel: God, king, citizens, and land. The king is Jesus, the citizens are those who follow Jesus, and the land is the place where they will embody the kingdom of God.”<sup>19</sup> As one can see, he focuses less on the denotation of kingdom than the connotation of all it entails. Like the other cited scholars, he believes realm, including people and space, flows out of reign. Of course, in the contemporary context, the idea of land and space becomes elusive, even problematic. This will be addressed shortly, but at this point, one should note that the kingdom manifests itself in both people and space.

Now, with the meaning of kingdom established, it is time to look more in depth at Jesus’ usage of the term. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom involved both word and deed. Matthew says, “He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (Mt 4:23). He did not just announce it. His acts of healing were tangible demonstrations of a new order. Moreover, Jesus says, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17, Mk 1:15). The Sermon on the Mount offers an abundance of kingdom language. The opening blessing alludes to it, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus prays, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Lk 6:10).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 94.

Likewise, Jesus tells them to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Mt 6:33). For Jesus, the kingdom of God is accessible, available, urgent, and primary.

Beyond this, the kingdom presents a surprising, otherworldly quality. This world does not see it as a threat. Jesus describes it both as leaven and as a mustard seed (Lk 13:18-21). It begins small but it slowly permeates the whole, as well as growing to great heights. Moreover, Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (Jn 18:36). To be clear, this does not imply that his kingdom only demonstrates itself immaterially. Instead, his kingdom is just not like the kingdoms of this world, specifically in terms of violence. Once again, he embraces, yet reframes expectations.

Along these lines, one particular exchange deserves special attention. Luke writes, “Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17:20-21). Even though the Pharisees already see signs of the kingdom, they want to know when the fulfillment will come. In their understanding, they expect a military battle, the vanquishing of Rome, and the establishment of a national government. They desire an institutionalized kingdom. Clearly, Jesus reframes these expectations by saying it is beyond observance. However, this appears problematic. One expects a reign to lead to a realm. One might wonder if Jesus negates this realm by distancing it from observation. The context suggests Jesus does affirm a realm, just the not the type of realm they would expect and stand up saying, “here it is!”

So, in Luke 17:20-21, one wonders about the type of realm to which Jesus speaks. It is popular to translate “in the midst of you” as “in your heart.” At first glance, this sounds good, and it can be connected to the idea of spiritual indwelling. However, Wright repudiates this understanding for it leads to the idea that the kingdom is an “inward, not an outward reality.”<sup>20</sup> He proves convincing, for obviously, Jesus’ word and deed proclamation demonstrated an outward reality. The better understanding of “in the midst of you” seems to be “among you.” So, the kingdom of God will not come with a military or government. It was already among them as disciples practiced the new life of Jesus. The context certainly seems to suggest this. In the verses leading up to this, Jesus healed the ten lepers, and in the succeeding verses, Jesus talks about people who miss the kingdom. Despite the signs of healing, the Pharisees do not see the kingdom, so they are the ones who miss it. The kingdom had come in Jesus, so it was among them. Wright interprets “in the midst of you” as “an opportunity to be seized while there is still time.”<sup>21</sup> The kingdom was present in Jesus, and therefore, Jesus cautioned them to follow him while there was still time. In summary, Jesus presents a kingdom confounding expectations and discovered through the power of Jesus and the practice of his teachings.

Before delving into contemporary discovery of the kingdom, one should note that the kingdom was not just primary for Jesus but for the entire biblical narrative. In the opening chapters of Genesis, God reigns over all. The whole world is the kingdom of God, and it is good. The Garden of Eden, a place of complete shalom, represents a direct allusion to all biblical descriptions of the kingdom. But, when the humans rebelled, the kingdom on earth experienced fracture. God closes the path to the tree of life, but he has

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<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 469.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

not given up on his kingdom project. God selects Abraham saying, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gn 12:3). The kingdom concept continually shows up in the story of Israel, and throughout, the mission is for all to experience kingdom blessing.

A frequent metaphor throughout Scripture demonstrates the vitality of the kingdom theme. One of the most quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1: “The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.” Plainly, the royal description elicits the image of the king. The New Testament writers wrote often of God placing all things at Jesus’ feet (Eph 1:22, Heb 2:8, 1 Cor 15 ). Jesus belongs on the throne at the right hand of the Father, and the mission is for all things to be under their feet, conformed to their will. Jesus kingdom mission to earth was aimed at this subjection, and Peter clearly locates Jesus back at the right hand at Pentecost (Acts 2:33).<sup>22</sup> Later, Paul picks up this theme, comparing Jesus to Adam as the fracture kingdom is rediscovered.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:22-26).

As Jesus sits on the throne working on earth through the Spirit, disciples join him as part of the first fruits of the kingdom. Paul presents this mission as in process until even the enemy of death is under his feet. All of this represents classic kingdom terminology and coincides with the ideas previously discussed of “inauguration” and “already, not yet.”

To complete the demonstration that the kingdom is the primary concept of the biblical narrative, John’s Revelation must be addressed. Kingdom language abounds in

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen does as well in Acts 7:56.

John's apocalyptic vision. The twenty-four elders worship the Lamb saying, "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rv 5:10). Later, the seventh angel declares, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rv 11:15). Then as the story climaxes in the last two chapters, John describes the throne of God. A renewed Eden merges with the New Jerusalem, and finally, the tree of life returns. The curse is no more, and "they will reign for ever and ever" (Rv 22:5). As the biblical narrative moves from the Eden of Genesis to the New Jerusalem of Revelation, the mission of the kingdom remains a constant thread.

With this in mind, the importance of eschatology for an understanding of the kingdom comes into view. Specifically, if the kingdom is inaugurated in Jesus, one must wrestle with implications concerning the nature of its complete realization. Namely, one must understand the relevance on current kingdom experience. Once again, the kingdom of God reflects not an abstract spiritual concept but a tangible reality involving the experience of a physical realm. Sadly, many have a dualistic, disembodied eschatology, and therefore, this warps their expectations for current kingdom experience. If God will someday destroy the material world as we float into a spiritual world, one might wonder about the potential to discover the kingdom in the material world now. A negative answer to this question leads to the pursuit of the kingdom through a retreat into spiritual disciplines to become the type of person to experience the kingdom someday. A positive answer embraces the former while seeking the kingdom in the material world through service, social action, and even creation care as one seeks to live in the kingdom now.

Biblical eschatology offers a picture of an ever-expanding kingdom that achieves complete realization at the second coming of Christ. However, despite much thought to the contrary, this realization does not involve the discontinuation of everything on this earth. In *Creator Spirit*, Steven Guthrie offers this:

The Christian tradition, however, turns the contrast of “heaven above” and “earth below” on its side, speaking much more naturally of “this present age” and “the age to come.” The Christian hope, strictly speaking, is not “going to heaven,” but for a new creation and a New Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God.” God’s people, then, do not desire to ascend (to what is above) but long for God’s reality to arrive (from the future). They do not aspire; they hope.<sup>23</sup>

Refreshingly, this enables us to read John 14:1-3, the descending New Jerusalem of Revelation 21:2, and even the “meet the Lord in the air” of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in harmonized form. Currently, Jesus is preparing the New Jerusalem. Some day, he will descend with the city as he brings it to earth. Incredibly, his followers will enthusiastically meet him in the air and join him on his way down. In *Surprised by Hope*, Wright offers a similar interpretation:

God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21-22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace.<sup>24</sup>

Still, a sequential understanding does not eliminate the present tension nor should it. There is both continuity and discontinuity between the present and future kingdom experience. Evil will be destroyed, and imperfections will be purified. This should cause disciples to invest now. The kingdom can be discovered now.

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<sup>23</sup> Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 66.

<sup>24</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 19.

To complete this first section, one must seek to understand how to experience the realm of the kingdom. Simply put, the kingdom can be found in any person and in any situation that conforms to the reign of God. It is not associated with military victory, institutional buildings, or national governments. Those were the places the Pharisees looked. They missed the kingdom in the healing of the lepers. The kingdom is the new Eden; the eternal city; the state of shalom; the way things are supposed to be. Jesus reigns in worship, communion, and baptism, but he also reigns in clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and visiting those in prison. Jesus reigns in the common life of the body of Christ, but Jesus also reigns in homeless outreach, cancer research, and GED training. Jesus reigns when one prays. Jesus reigns when families laugh and play together without anger or discord. Jesus reigns in the pursuit and experience of shalom-life as God created it to be. Someday, everything will conform to his will in the New Eden/New Jerusalem. Till then, everything that conforms now can be celebrated as the kingdom.

As an aside, some might object to the notion of associating, for example, a secular homeless program with the kingdom. If the king is not honored or named, one might wonder if it can be the kingdom. Certainly, God is glorified when honored or named, and yet God's will is done even when people are not acting out of faith. For example, in Matthew 25:40, one finds, "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'." In this scenario, the king was honored even though they were unaware of his presence or activity. Moreover, one can experience the kingdom without becoming a kingdom citizen. Throughout Jesus teaching, one sees healed and fed individuals that did not become

disciples. But those kingdom experiences are temporary, not eternal. Clearly, a life fully converted to the king experiences the kingdom with more depth and consistency in this life as well as the life beyond.

### **The Church Participates in the Kingdom through Witness**

Second, with a more in depth understanding of the kingdom established, one can seek answer to the question of how the church relates to the kingdom. To summarize, while the church is not identical to the kingdom, the church participates in the kingdom through its witness. The mission of the church is to witness to the kingdom. In other words, the cultivation of kingdom witness becomes the primary role of the church in the world.

Too often, Christians view the kingdom and the church as two sides of the same coin. From this perspective, the kingdom is the reign of God, and the church is the realm of God. Instead, the author embraces the position that the church is often a realm of the kingdom, with an emphasis on both “often” and “a.” Due to the fractured human element of the second incarnation, sadly, the church does not always give a glimpse of the kingdom. Hypocrisy and scandal prove this point. Personally, the author remembers living in the predominantly Catholic northeast as the priest abuse scandals broke in the early 2000s. Obviously, those tragedies did not conform to the reign of God, and they negatively affected the reputation on the church as realm of God. A student in his ministry was warned by his father what to do if the author “tried anything on him.” While he affirms the father’s vigilance, the cloud of suspicion over all ministers and churches distracted from the kingdom.

Moreover, the church is a realm, but not the only realm of God. The church does not own the kingdom. Perhaps the following story helps. Some years ago, the author was talking to a friend with in his church named Josh. He was incredibly involved in the life of the congregation. He served as a deacon. He taught Bible classes. He drove the church bus and chaperoned trips. He served as a board member with the preschool associated with the church. He and his wife led a small group. He was at the church building every time the doors were open. In the conversation, he was talking about Aaron, a mutual friend. Josh was frustrated that Aaron was not more involved in the life of the church, despite the fact that Aaron and his family attended the worship assembly and participated in a small group. Aaron enjoyed being involved in the local community. He was on the board for the local Boys and Girls Club as well as being a member of several civic organizations. He knew many people in town and felt a strong connection to the community. In the conversation, Josh revealed that he recently sat Aaron down and said, “That is all good stuff, but you need to be more involved with the church. You need to do less community stuff and more church stuff.” Two views are in play here. Josh believes the church is the realm of God’s will, while Aaron believes the church is a realm of God’s will. Therefore, Aaron sees a God out there working in the community often through nonreligious institutions, and he desired to join God there.

Another personal story deserves mention. Awhile back, the author was talking with an older mentor in another state who he greatly respects. For years, the mentor has served and led in local churches, Christian colleges, Boy Scouts, United Way, and similar other endeavors. In this conversation, he said, “As I near retirement, I only want to focus on kingdom things. I’m going to resign from all the community organizations I serve, so

I can focus on the kingdom. I am going to limit my involvement to churches and Christian colleges.” Clearly, he did not see community organizations as kingdom work, only churches and Christian colleges.

While the church remains the assembly of kingdom residents, it does not have universal claim on the kingdom. Once again, Kung and Ladd offer assistance. Kung warns, “To apply to the Church what is said in the New Testament about the reign of God will inevitably lead to an intolerable glorification of the Church.”<sup>25</sup> Since the kingdom currently finds itself in the “already, not yet” phase, the declaration of church as kingdom ultimately disappoints and weakens understanding of the kingdom. Still, Kung affirms a strong connection between the church and the kingdom. Kung states, “The Church is directed towards and belongs to the coming reign of God.”<sup>26</sup> The church finds itself a part of the kingdom, while not representing the totality. Still, the mission of the church centers on the kingdom, just as Christ’s mission centered on it. Once again, Kung explains, “The reign of God, fulfilled, realized, and personified in Christ, remains the horizon of the Church, and the focal point of its own life and which it strives to bring to the world.”<sup>27</sup> The church represents a vital aspect of the kingdom and has a role in bringing its expansion. However, Kung seeks to downplay the “bring” notion of that by focusing more on the concept of “herald.”<sup>28</sup> Ladd shares this hesitant embrace of the church’s role. After affirming that God “works through the Church in the world,”<sup>29</sup> Ladd

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<sup>25</sup> Kung, *The Church*, 130.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>29</sup> Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 115.

states, “Men cannot therefore build the Kingdom of God, but they can preach it and proclaim it; they can receive it or reject it.”<sup>30</sup> This type of relationship between the kingdom and church offers several benefits. It affirms a positive, influential role for the church, while at the same time calling for humility. It creates distance from the sinful, hypocritical aspects of the church, while positively embracing aspects of God’s reign outside the church.

With this said, the role of the church is not sole control but rather participation in the kingdom of God. The helpful biblical metaphor for this concept is the temple of God. While I have chosen to mainly focus on the church as the body of Christ, the temple metaphor significantly addresses participation. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3:5-11 and 16-17 combines temple metaphor with agricultural themes:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

This passage illustrates several things. First, to a church struggling with divisiveness over spiritual heroes, humility is necessary. True growth comes from God, and Jesus is the only true foundation. Second though, incredibly, humans maintain an important role in planting, watering, and building on the foundation. The church is not passive, but

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 117.

actively involved in the process of growing the realm of God's reign. Third, both the individual and collective aspects of the church are affirmed. The NIV rightly interprets verse seventeen as "you together are that temple." The church assumes a collective emphasis that elevates unity and rejects rampant, destructive individualism. At the same time, individuals have roles. It is not just about the group, for obviously, groups are made up of individuals. Apollos and Paul each play meaningful roles. Therefore, both individual actions and collective activities have a kingdom impact. One negative of the total merger of kingdom and church was the negation of individuals experiencing the kingdom of God during the week away from the assembly. By definition, the church finds its identity in the assembly, and yet individuals express his or her identity through participation in the kingdom when it is away from the assembly.

Therefore, while the kingdom is first and foremost the action of God, disciples do meaningfully and actively participate in the kingdom. The church participates in an inaugurated kingdom that moves from the "already, not yet" to final completion, with the humble expectation that the coming of Christ is necessary for the climax. In the words of Harris and Shelly, while "the church is unable to bring the kingdom to consummation," the church still views "participation in the kingdom is the theological foundation for all of the church's activities."<sup>31</sup> Camp ably summarizes the sentiment of this chapter: "Jesus called his disciples to participate in a kingdom that was invading human history, a kingdom so present you could reach out and touch it, a new order in their very midst."<sup>32</sup> To understand more what this participation looks like, Scripture gives the theological

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<sup>31</sup> Harris and Shelly, *The Second Incarnation*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, location 1003.

category of witness.

Similar to ἐκκλησία, the early church's usage of μάρτυς (witness) represents the embrace of a secular term that takes on additional meaning in spiritual usage. In its secular form, the term refers most explicitly to courtroom testimony. Jesus himself uses μάρτυς in this way when he tells the disciples their coming imprisonment will be "your opportunity to bear witness" (Lk 21:13). However, it comes to connote actions beyond the courtroom. At the ascension in Acts 1:6-8, Jesus responds to a key question:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

While the disciples will show up in courtrooms throughout Acts, Luke's narrative demonstrates a witness of word and deed that permeates all of society. This passage is a crucial bridge between Genesis and Revelation. In Genesis, male and female reigned over a creation in which God ultimately reigned. In Revelation, one reads that they will reign in the restored kingdom. Acts 1:6-8 shows they participate within God's reign, through witness.

In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Strathmann explains that μάρτυς can imply a legal context "in the sense of witness to ascertainable facts" but can also imply "witness to truths, i.e., the making known and confessing of convictions."<sup>33</sup> However, he points out the apologetic ramifications of this: "The witness to facts and the witness to truth are one and the same-the unavoidable result of the fact that the Gospel

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<sup>33</sup> Hermann Strathmann, "μάρτυς," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. ed. Gerhard Kittel and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:489.

presents a historical revelation.”<sup>34</sup> The veracity of the gospel proclamation of Jesus as King can be affirmed through witnesses. In his *The Mission of God’s People*, Christopher Wright picks up on this. He states, “Witnesses were most important to establish the truth of statements or claims, so that such claims could never be called into dispute.”<sup>35</sup> This demonstrates the power of the phrase for discipleship. The life of the disciples becomes validation of the truth claims of the gospel.

Of course, one might wonder what type of discipleship would prove it. Well, surely, it would not be the consumerist mentality of the previous chapter. A persuasive witness is lived out in the flesh. It is incarnational. As Camp states, disciples “continue to embody the reign of God, that we too might bear witness to the new aeon even now in our midst.”<sup>36</sup> The concepts of second incarnation and kingdom witness merge together. The church embodies Jesus by witnessing to the very thing he was most concerned about, the kingdom. This embodiment is not just words, but deeds, which lays the groundwork for social action in the city. Camp explains, “Mere ‘ideas’-even ‘mere Christianity’-do nothing unless embodied in a community of people, and so Jesus, from the start of his ministry, called disciples to bear the news of the kingdom.”<sup>37</sup> This is the story of Acts, as the disciples present themselves as authentic, holistic witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 168.

<sup>36</sup> Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, location 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., location 1985.

Of course, a further test of witness is the willingness to suffer. In Acts, persecution rises as one of the great tests for the new movement. Over time, to be a witness for Christ is tantamount to suffering, even death. One sees this in the case of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Eventually, μάρτυς comes to denote martyrdom. However, Strathmann notes that the true sequence should not be missed: “Stephen is not called a witness because he dies; he dies because he is a witness.”<sup>38</sup> A disciple does not become a μάρτυς in death. A disciple becomes a μάρτυς through a life that embodies the gospel.

Moreover, a witness does not just testify to what they have seen. A witness testifies to truth, whether they have seen it or not. Strathmann points out this fact when noting that the term is used for both Paul and Stephen, who were not eyewitnesses to his ministry, crucifixion, or resurrection.<sup>39</sup> (Of course, they both saw him in visions.) Moreover, Christopher Wright, throughout his chapter on witness, points out that the term is used not just for original eyewitnesses but for all those who come to faith.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, disciples participate in the kingdom today through embodied witness. In word and deed, Christians offer an authentic, holistic testimony through a kingdom lifestyle. Witnesses live like the kingdom is near. Disciples talk and act as if heaven were immanent. Ethically, this becomes, how would I live if I were in the kingdom? Witnesses act as if they already are in the kingdom. They plunge themselves into the “already, not yet” with optimistic kingdom living. At the same time, they embrace realistic, humility understanding that full utopia prior to the second coming. In

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<sup>38</sup> Strathman, μάρτυς, 494.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 163-178.

all of this though, witnesses believe the kingdom can be accessed now. They believe it begins with individuals invaded by the Spirit as well as assemblies of kingdom residents. They do not see mission as overseas, but they believe it begins in their community before radiating out to the world. In this way, “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth” serves as a playbook for kingdom witness. Specifically, for the Acklen Avenue Church of Christ, kingdom witness begins in Nashville. In this way, the church participates in the restoration of the kingdom, which the disciples asked Jesus about. His answer was not avoidance but an explanation of how they would participate.

When the church locates itself within the redemptive narrative from Genesis to Revelation, they discover how to participate in the kingdom through witness. N.T. Wright, in *After You Believe*, encourages Christians to see scripture as “a way of locating ourselves as actors within an ongoing drama.”<sup>41</sup> When the church comes together to read and reflect on scripture, they will “find themselves drawn in as characters on stage.”<sup>42</sup> In the same work, Wright calls worship and mission “conjoined twins” and the “church’s two primary tasks.”<sup>43</sup> This connects to Smith’s belief that liturgical practices “shape our identity by shaping our desire for what we envision as the kingdom—the ideal of human flourishing.”<sup>44</sup> Worship (reading and proclaiming scripture, communion, singing, etc.) invites us to plunge into the “already, not yet” kingdom and to go out from worship committed to participation through witness.

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<sup>41</sup> N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 261.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 87.

## Exiles Love and Serve the World

This understanding leads to the next question relating to the relationship between the church and world. The primary objective for the church is to be the church. Worship is central for it celebrates the kingdom and offers us our life script. Flowing out of that, by definition, the church, as the body of Christ, will have the same passion as Jesus, the mission of the kingdom. The church locates its definition in its assembly and its nature in the sacraments. If the church seeks to engage the world without first being the church, its connection to and participation with the mission of Jesus weakens. The church's relationship to the world is based on the flow and rhythm of gathering and scattering. As previously mentioned, the word church defines the people who gather even when they are not gathered. Therefore, the church forms its identity in gathering but implements its identity in mission as it scatters out.

Before looking at paradigms, it should once again be acknowledged that the church does not take God out into the world but seeks to participate in what God is already doing in the world. Throughout redemptive history, God has been known to use pagan nations, such as Babylon and Persia, and even animals, such as Balaam's donkey, to accomplish his purposes. In Acts, much of the disciples witness is a response to God's initiative, such as the Gentile inclusion or the first missionary trip of Acts 13. Moreover, the psalmist declares, "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:1). In his act of redemption, Jesus has "overcome the world" (Jn 16:33) and kingdom witness involves participation in God's act of overcoming.

Many have sought to outline paradigms to articulate the posture of the church to the world. Over the last one hundred years, Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, has

been the most influential work.<sup>45</sup> He outlines the perspectives of Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture. While Niebuhr elevated the conversation through his framing, he also boxed it in. Surely, there is not one biblical paradigm. Through the various contexts of a persecuted minority or a ruling majority or the current state of pluralism, Christians must be equipped to embrace the good of each paradigm and apply accordingly. Moreover, the church must be able to distinguish between its collective voice and individual actions. This flexibility is the nature of incarnation.

Recent history in Churches of Christ has revealed fascination with the paradigms of Christ against Culture and Christ Transforming Culture. For over a century, Churches of Christ held to their Anabaptist roots by holding a separatist posture towards the world. This was often expressed in pacifism and suspicion towards government. With the advent of World War II, this position appeared no longer tenable. Many in Churches of Christ began to morph towards a broader evangelicalism and the transformist model it has often embraced. Harris and Shelly explain, “It is this balance between transforming engagement with the world and yet a spiritual distinction from it that the church must seek to achieve.”<sup>46</sup> By definition, the church is “not of the world,” (Jn 15:19) and yet Jesus sends it out into the world (Jn 17:18). The embrace of both of those truths is the paradoxical embrace of both the separatist and transformist paradigms.

In his work *A Public Faith*, Miroslav Volf elaborates on this tension. Volf deftly analyzes and summarizes the prevailing views and trends on faith in the public square:

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<sup>45</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harpercollins, 1951).

<sup>46</sup> Harris and Shelly, *The Second Incarnation*, 164.

“The fear of imposition of religious views often elicits demands for the suppression of religious voices from the public square.”<sup>47</sup> Socially active Christians need to understand why others fear this “imposition.” Later, Volf argues that this suppression leads to a “new polytheism” where “we follow the voice of one god at work, another at home, and maybe yet another at church. Each sphere resists the claims of the one God to shape all of life.”<sup>48</sup> Of course, this type of faith falls short of the available kingdom of Jesus.

Volf advocates an “internal” cultural involvement that avoids the silencing retreat of Christianity’s prophetic voice and coercively making the world they way they desire.<sup>49</sup> In doing so, he believes Christians can maintain their faith and still engage the world. The key to this “internal” engagement is maintaining clearly defined yet permeable boundaries. To Volf, Jesus is the “center that defines the identity of Christian churches—their internal character, their difference from surrounding cultures, and the proper mode of boundary maintenance.”<sup>50</sup> Maintaining boundaries is tense, hard work. It is this very tension that causes Christians to either retreat in anxiety or coercively react in fear. “Internal” engagement follows Jesus into cultural engagement while resisting power plays. Volf explains it in the following manner:

Christian identity in a culture is always a complex and flexible network of small and large refusals, divergences, subversions, and more or less radical and encompassing alternative proposals and enactments, surrounded by the acceptances of many cultural givens. There is no single way to relate to a given culture as a whole or even to its dominant thrust; there are only numerous ways of

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<sup>47</sup> Miroslav Volf. *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), x.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

accepting, transforming, or replacing various aspects of a given culture from within.<sup>51</sup>

For the most part, churches do not equip Christians for this level of complexity and tension. Too often, churches offer a “single way to relate to a given culture”, which Volf says does not exist. Inevitably, Christians will differ concerning the “small and large refusals”, which means Christians must be trained and equipped for unity, diversity, and peace making. Simply put, the relationship between the church and the world is far more complicated than just choosing the right paradigm from Niebuhr. There are times to withdraw from sin and there are times to engage in cultural renewal or transformation. An incarnational model, which is really what Volf advocates, grants the flexibility to avoid the perils of pervasive separation or coercive control. Keller demonstrates how one’s understanding of the kingdom offers this flexibility: “The “already but not yet” of the kingdom keeps us from utopian, triumphalistic visions of cultural takeover on the one hand, and from pessimism or withdrawal from society on the other.”<sup>52</sup>

Still, one wonders what this flexible, internal cultural engagement looks like. Two more voices deserve to be heard. In his work, *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter suggests that many Christians do not really understand how cultural change and renewal really works: “World changing is most concentrated when the networks of elites and the institutions they lead overlap.”<sup>53</sup> Cultural change is often more top down than many like to imagine. In his estimation, many Christians have deliberately withdrawn

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>52</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford Press, 2010), 43.

from those centers or have set up their own parallel centers. After discussing the approaches of the Christian Right and Left, as well as the neo-Anabaptists, he says they all “operate with an understanding of the good society through the prism of politics.”<sup>54</sup> They either seek to defeat their enemies through elections and legislation or set up their own political alternative, the Anabaptist view of the church. All three positions end up with a position of antagonism and negation and therefore, they rarely achieve the results for which they aspire.

Personally, Hunter demonstrated two vitals things for the author’s theology of mission. First, he demonstrated both the lure and problem of the Anabaptist position. While the Anabaptist view offers a pure alternative and refuses to waver, he powerfully contends, “Theirs is a world hating theology.”<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, the author continues to be drawn to the Anabaptist position, but he wrestles with what it truly offers the world. Hunter asserts, “Its silence toward every affirmation except doxology and Eucharist means that the neo-Anabaptists have little to say to those outside of their own particular (and very small) community besides judgment.”<sup>56</sup> He convincingly demonstrates how the strengths of its position should be affirmed while the weaknesses prevent it from being the sole paradigm. Second, his embrace of the exilic category hints towards the direction he advocates. In writing about Jeremiah’s words to the exiles, he says his prophetic message was “that God was present to them and at work with them *in the context of exile*

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 175.

and in this context, faithfulness meant being a blessing to the world in which they were placed.”<sup>57</sup>

With the exilic identity in mind he states, “Over against the ‘Defense Against,’ ‘Relevance To’ and ‘Purity From’ paradigms, I would offer an alternative: ‘Faithful Presence Within’.”<sup>58</sup> One should notice the incarnational foundation of his alternative in contrast with the first three. He defines his position in the following way: “A theology of faithful presence means a recognition that the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God.”<sup>59</sup> His summation skillfully validates so many of the categories the author believes to be necessary: exile, incarnational embodiment, accessible Kingdom, witness, and the vitality of church. Specifically, he calls Christians to committedly concentrate on “their spheres of social influence, whatever they may be: their families, neighborhoods, voluntary activities, and places of work.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, he advocates the holistic, witness of the scattered church. His writing celebrates the incarnational foundation of cultural renewal and gives the church a flexible paradigm to celebrate both their identity out of and mission to the world.

After Hunter, Andy Crouch deserves mention on the topic of church and culture. In his work, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*, Crouch demonstrates the reactiveness of most paradigms and calls disciples to proactive creation. After stating,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 247.

““culture is what we make of the world,”<sup>61</sup> he contends, “The only way to change culture is to create more of it.”<sup>62</sup> He connects the creative calling to humanity’s fundamental identity, going back to creation: “Like our first parents, we are to be creators and cultivators.”<sup>63</sup> Crouch calls disciples to reclaim their creative spirit as they find themselves caught up in the redemptive narrative that culminates in the New Jerusalem. Cultural goods represent a vital aspect of the kingdom, which once again is not just an abstract, ethereal ideal. Crouch calls the church to move beyond positions and policies towards culture, but to reclaim their destiny as a “culture-making enterprise.”<sup>64</sup>

With these thoughts established, the following summary demonstrates a flexible, incarnational paradigm, which reflects the author’s understanding of the relationship between the church and the world. Once again, he believes the church’s relationship to the world is based on the flow and rhythm of gathering and scattering. Collectively, especially when they are gathered, Christians reflect a separatist, new society. The gathered church leans towards the historic Anabaptist position. Before seeking to change the world, the church must be the church. The church must collectively demonstrate the kingdom in their gathered, communal life. One should consider how Newbigin phrases this:

The most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order. More fundamental than any of the things which the Church can say or do is the reality of a new society, which allows itself

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<sup>61</sup> Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

to be shaped by the Christian faith. The basic unit of that new society is the local congregation.<sup>65</sup>

However, as Christians scatter out from their gathering, both individually and collectively, they seek to bring transformation. They seek to make the world more in conformity with the intentions and design of the King. They reject coercion in favor of persuasive, holistic witness. This paradigm reflects the understanding of the church as a community of kingdom exiles. The gathered church celebrates and rejoices in the kingdom, and then scatters out as exiles, often in the minority, who must witness to the kingdom while being in the world. The rhythm from gathered to scattered is very much the rhythm of kingdom to exile. In the following quote, Richard Mouw demonstrates several themes already alluded to in a powerful way:

When I hear people equate “church” and “kingdom” I inwardly (and sometimes visibly) cringe. You don’t have to go into a church to do something related to the Kingdom. What we need to be reminded of in church is that the world in which we live out our daily interactions—at work, on the tennis court, in our family lives, entering voting booths, sitting in front of television sets—all that is the Kingdom. To be sure, the church is also a Kingdom place. Christ also rules there—and in a special way. In that worshipping space we encounter through our worship the King who sends us every week, when we leave the four walls of the church building, into his larger Kingdom.<sup>66</sup>

This flexible posture rejects extremes and omissions. Worship matters for it forms one for witness. The gathered church matters for it is a foretaste and sign of the kingdom. Piety matters, for transformed hearts and lives lead to transformed communities. Social action is a necessary aspect of witness, and yet scattered witness must be formed through an immersion in the gathered church. In addition, this posture

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<sup>65</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 85.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 96.

rejects the extreme separatist notion, which sees the church as a fortress from the walls. Too often, elaborate church buildings are seen as necessary for polished programming. While good things no doubt often happen from these programs, many times the buildings become more of a fortress from the world than a training center for the world. The embrace of the gathered-scattered sequence rejects church as fortress and congregation as exclusive location of the kingdom. This type of church culture, scattered out as witness, finds a helpful description in the words of missional church advocate Reggie McNeal:

A post-congregational culture requires a strategy of engaging people right where they already live, work, play, go to school, and pursue their hobbies and passions. It's incarnational. It lets them live more intentionally, learning to love God and their neighbors more, making a contribution to their community, all with people they know and are known by.<sup>67</sup>

To summarize the three main questions of the chapter, the church participates in the kingdom, the reign of God, through the act of witness, formed in the gathered community and scattered out into the world where God already works. To connect Chapter 4 and 5, the church, as a community of kingdom exiles, witnesses to the kingdom by loving the city. After all, Acts 1:6-8 demonstrates that witness begins in one's present location and flows out. Therefore, the Acklen church, as exiles in Nashville, must seek to love the city in which they reside, just as the Hebrew exiles loved Babylon. In word and deed, the Acklen church must seek to cultivate the healed, peaceful city of Revelation 21-22 in the city of Nashville.

More specifically, as exiles seek to witness to the kingdom by loving the city, they will love the city through service, work, and evangelism. These three categories reflect three related streams within a church's kingdom witness. While the project of the

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<sup>67</sup> McNeal, *Missional Communities*, location 538.

next chapter will focus mainly on service, it hopes to encompass all three. Once again, exiles “seek the welfare of the city” (Jer 29:7). Serving the city is an essential aspect of seeking its welfare. If the church embraces the mission of Jesus, it should embrace his willingness “not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). In many ways, Matthew 25:40 shows how this plays out. Jesus says, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Those actions included quenching hunger and thirst, hospitality to the stranger, clothing for the poor, and visitation to the sick and imprisoned. When the church participates in these acts of service, the welfare of the city increases. At that time and in that way, the kingdom comes just a little more on this earth. Service is a worthy end in itself because it testifies to the kingdom. Disciples house the unhoused because in the kingdom, everyone has a roof over his or her head. Disciples feed the hungry and clothe the naked because everyone has food and clothes in the kingdom. Disciples visit the sick and imprisoned, because in the kingdom, no one is alone.

The selected authors of Chapter 3 continue to frame the project. Sider, Olson, and Unruh demonstrate the connectedness of the kingdom and service: “Community development ministries work to shape the community to be more consistent with God’s design for shalom.”<sup>68</sup> The church witnesses to the kingdom by participating in God’s expansion of the kingdom. While this may include changing the world, it is more about growing the kingdom than control over the world. Likewise, just as faith without works makes on question the reality of that faith, a church without service begs the question if it is really the second incarnation of Christ. Newbigin’s words deserve to be repeated: “The only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it

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<sup>68</sup> Sider, Olson, and Unruh, *Churches that Make a Difference*, 41.

and live by it.”<sup>69</sup> Just as mission is not a line item of the budget but the reason for its existence, service is not an optional event but an essential default posture of witness.

When compared to service and evangelism, work seems a neglected, even curious category. However, many spend the majority of their waking hours at work. Moreover, one’s job often presents greater opportunities for service than trying to carve out a volunteer hour or two in one’s free time. One’s entire lifestyle is witness, and much of one’s lifestyle is work. Therefore, work becomes witness. In the beginning, God reveals himself through work. In six days, he works to create the heavens and the earth. On the seventh day, he rests, demonstrating the rhythm of work and rest. Just as service takes on enormous importance if it is actually service for God, work takes on added meaning if we find God’s nature within it.

In *Every Good Endeavor*, Timothy Keller succinctly points out the centrality of work in God’s identity: “In Genesis we see God as a gardener, and in the New Testament we see him as a carpenter.”<sup>70</sup> In the discussion on participation in mission, as well as Crouch’s words on culture making, God’s design for humans to contribute and work received focus. Keller elaborates on this: “Work is also one of the ways we discover who we are, because it is through work that we come to understand our distinct abilities and gifts, a major component of our identities.”<sup>71</sup> This elevates without deifying the role of work. Christians are called to more than a “living for the weekend” mentality. Moreover, Christians do not work solely for money or ego. Christians work to use their

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<sup>69</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 227.

<sup>70</sup> Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2012), 49.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

gifts and make the world more in line with God's intentions. The identity Christians find in work is an identity rooted in Christ, not hubris. Keller says it well: "You will not have a meaningful life without work, but you cannot say that your work is the meaning of your life."<sup>72</sup>

Because of this, the integration of faith and work is not simply a subset of faith and culture. It is the practice of faith and culture. Therefore, the Spirit can be found and followed in most all jobs. Too often, churches continue to promote the medieval notion that clergy are the only ones truly doing kingdom work. Ministers must vocally reject this view and equip congregants to work with a kingdom perspective. Working with a kingdom perspective is more than working ethically or being evangelistic in the workplace. It is the pursuit of excellence in a way that blesses others and makes this world more in tune with God's will. A gospel shaped approach to work does not just see the fruits of work as far off (ethical people go to heaven) but as intimately related to daily tasks. Every Christians must assess the capacity for their work to "make the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

Finally, alongside service and work, evangelism must be included as a way exiles love the city and witness to the kingdom. For many, evangelism creates a feeling of anxiety. Some feel awkward about the idea of proselytizing, and wonder who they are to try to convert someone else. Others might feel embarrassed about some traditions or practices of their tradition or congregation. Some are not entirely sure what they believe, so they feel unworthy or ill equipped to share their faith. Many have anxiety over what they would say, and many have had bad experiences with evangelism. They know how

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 39.

they do not want to do evangelism, but they are unsure how they do want to participate in evangelism. Ultimately, some have anxiety about drawing firm lines and categories of “In” and “Out.”

Besides this list of anxieties, there is a further hurdle in Nashville. In the Bible belt south, there is often an assumption that everyone has heard the gospel. As disciples drive around and see a church on every corner, many figure everyone has already made their decision on Jesus. If they have rejected faith already, disciples doubt they could do anything to affect their decision. Recently, people have begun to describe these individuals not as unchurched but dechurched. They have rejected the faith of their youth to embrace nominalism, secularism, agnosticism, or atheism.

For these reasons, once again, the exilic theme presents great opportunity and understanding. In exile, evangelism flows out of lifestyle. As a minority people, words mean nothing for there is no power, control, or influence behind it. In exile, all one has is their lifestyle. For these reasons, Peter does not give endless advice on how to preach and teach. Instead, he says, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pt 2:12). Of course, preaching and teaching are important. They just do not mean anything without good deeds. However, the deeds will lead to opportunities for word. Ultimately, in the next chapter Peter calls them to this description, “always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15). The Great Commission of Matthew 28 focuses on word, which is vital and necessary. When Luke offers his Great Commission, he invokes the idea of witness, which includes word and deed (Lk 24:48, Acts 1:6-8).

Like the mission of Jesus, the mission of the church must include both service and evangelism. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and preached about the kingdom. Often though, he preached once they were healed and fed. The sequence is vital. Once again, Sider and Newbigin assist in understanding. Sider states that service is “a tangible expression of the Good News the church proclaims in evangelism.”<sup>73</sup> Service helps people to see the kingdom and want to be a part of it. Similarly, as mentioned before, Newbigin contends the church should be “perceived in its own neighborhood as the place from which good news overflows in good action.”<sup>74</sup> This project seeks to implement that last line from Newbigin.

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<sup>73</sup> Sider, Olson, and Unruh, *Churches that Make a Difference*, 41.

<sup>74</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in Pluralistic Society*, 229.

PART THREE  
MINISTRY STRATEGY

## CHAPTER 6

### GOALS, PLANS, AND EXECUTION

#### **Goals for the Project**

This chapter charts the story of the desire to put the preceding theology into practice. With Newbigin's quote still ringing, the process of pursuit will be detailed, which began in the fall of 2012 and continues till now. As discussed in chapter two, the Acklen church seeks to have a greater connection to the surrounding neighborhoods of 12South and Edgehill as well as the city of Nashville. Because of the 2010 flood and ensuing displacement, Acklen experienced a time of deep soul searching. In many ways, it served as an exilic or wilderness experience. With a limited budget, needed repairs, and offers to sell the facility, they spent months discerning the need for a church building at 900 Acklen Avenue. Ultimately, while they lived throughout Nashville, they discerned God leading them to return to that spot that bridges the neighborhoods of 12South and Edgehill. When they returned, they brought with them a renewed sense of calling. However, with this calling came a recognizable problem. Many wondered if a church with so many kids recapture a community connection, which had in many ways lapsed for fifty years while few lived in the neighborhood around the building.

As mentioned, the author joined them shortly after their return to the building. For over a year, before beginning this project, he observed the congregation's implementation of their call to return, as well as their values and personality. As discussed in Chapter 2, Acklen manifests two values that rarely coexist easily. First, they desire to be a socially active church. In worship, class, and conversations, they frequently discuss social issues and the need to address them from a kingdom perspective. Many volunteer in the community or have chosen helping professions such as healthcare, education, and nonprofits. Second, they have a disproportionate number of children and seek to involve them integrally in congregational life. Practicing hospitality to homeless gentlemen on the sex offender registry while children run around brings up many complications. Regularly, the congregation wrestles with how to involve their children in social actions, which present potential safety issues to children. To be clear, Acklen sees this as not a problem to be solved, but an embraced strategy for raising children. They believe children raised in the context of kingdom social action will bear significant, long term fruit. The author agrees with them, which is one of the main reasons he came to Acklen. In fact, in multiple conversations, they have told him they brought him in to lead in these two issues, community involvement and spiritual formation of children.

However, in those conversations, they have continually reminded him that they did not bring him in to do everything. Acklen manifests a strong independent, even libertarian, streak. They make it very clear they favor an empowered flat hierarchy over a top down pastor driven model. Therefore, very quickly, the author realized any project void of their initiative and ownership was a non-starter. Instead, he interpreted his role as

that of vision caster and promoter of awareness and discernment, not decision maker.

While much of this matches his stated ecclesiology, it is tough to navigate. Moreover, weaknesses arise from it, as will be demonstrated.

With these values and personality in mind, one can clearly see how the Room in the Inn program has been a perfect fit. Small groups sign up for a night to practice hospitality. Acklen always chooses Sunday nights. At 5:30 PM, families arrive to set up, with the kids helping make the beds and set the table of prepared food. At 6:15 PM, men drive one mile from the Acklen building to the Room in the Inn facility to pick up six men. At 6:30 PM, the six unhoused guests join the three to five families in the small group for dinner. After a prayer, children sit at a common table with those just off the streets. Around 7:15 PM, the small group leaves, save for two guys who spend the night with the guests. Often, they stay up playing cards and talking. In the morning, they enjoy breakfast together before returning them to the Room in Inn facility at 6 AM. It is the perfect embrace of social action and kids participation, does not depend on a pastor figure, and yet offers a very user-friendly paradigm for involvement.

For these reasons, the author sought to use Room in the Inn as a model to create additional partnerships in the neighborhood and city. More than once, members wondered aloud if Acklen was called to more than homeless ministry. Specifically, while embracing homeless ministry, some of the elders voiced a concern that “you can not build a church on the homeless.” While one might react negatively to that comment, the elders who said that are often the first to greet the homeless as they enter. To their point, they saw a connection between social action and evangelism. They saw community involvement as a way of growing the church, and they wondered if the homeless would

become members, much less members that would grow into leadership. Their comment speaks to the variety of perspectives on kingdom, church, service, and evangelism. More than that though, their comment demonstrates the growing sense that Acklen should engage the city in more than just the one need of homelessness. Moreover, many of the ladies expressed that they felt left out of much of the Room in the Inn ministry. Often, their husbands returned with amazing stories of late night conversations about faith and Jesus, while they put the kids to bed alone. By the fall of 2012, comments about the need for Acklen to diversify its community involvement and partnerships became more frequent.

Based on the success of small group participation in Room in the Inn, it seemed to be the ideal model for expanding congregational community involvement. Acklen has four small groups, and each group signs up for one Sunday night a month, November through March. Already, the paradigm of small groups as congregational organization has been proven effective. Moreover, in previous ministry, the author had experienced the effectiveness of service through small groups. Too often, groups can concentrate solely on social cohesion or bible study. While these are great goals, the action of ministry becomes a way to increase cohesion and apply the truths of Scripture.

Therefore, the author began to develop the idea of small groups forming partnerships with community ministries and non-profits. Based on personal experience and conversations with social workers, he advocated regular, ongoing service as opposed to episodic. Because Acklen has partnered with Room in the Inn for several years, they are on a first name basis with many of their leaders. They call Acklen when special needs arise outside of normal programming. In the spring of 2012, he met with them offering

increased relational investment. They responded by asking Acklen to sponsor a weekly game night for their thirty plus facility residents. Acklen began that game night in the summer of 2012, and it continues to this day every Tuesday night. Those increased levels of partnerships occur only through regular, ongoing involvement, as opposed to episodic involvement.

Early on in ministry, the author confesses he had a shortsighted view on service in the community. He knew it was something Christians should do, but he had very little training on how it should be done. A few times a year, he would schedule service days or service projects. He would call up a service organization like Meals on Wheels or Habitat for Humanity. The conversation would go like this, “I am a minister from the church down the street. We have planned a service day for April 24. Do you have anything we can do on that day?” “Well how many are you bringing?” “I will probably have anywhere from five to twenty-five teens.” “Uh well, will there be any adults with them?” “Yes.” “How many?” “I am not entirely sure, but they are good kids. Do you have anything we can do on that day?” “Uh, I will try to find something.” Then, on the service day, there were times he showed up with thirty, and there were times he showed up with three.

As the author has talked with social workers and community leaders over the years, they have attested that this is the normal interaction between churches and non-profits. One should notice that the conversation is based on what the church needs, in this case something to do on a day that has already been scheduled. Also, one should notice that the organization seems to have little to no prior relationship with the church. From the organizations perspective, one can imagine how hard it would be to plan not

knowing if one would have five or twenty-five teens, chaperoned by one or ten adults. Therefore, often, the organization makes very limited plans, not wanting to get burned, which can then lead to volunteers feeling they were not used effectively.

Social workers often describe this as episodic volunteerism. In contrast, many non-profits express a desire for partnerships. Episodic involvement is random. Partnerships involve planning and commitment. Episodic involvement does not build on progress, whereas partnerships create momentum. A partnership involves regular touches, anywhere from quarterly to weekly, although annual events can be an aspect as well. A partnership involves dialogue and investment. In Nashville, it seems churches are on every corner. In middle Tennessee, there are approximately 1000 non-profits. Tennessee calls itself the “Volunteer State,” yet many non-profits continue to cite a volunteer shortage. Too often, there is a distant relationship between community ministries/non-profits and churches.

Obviously, non-profits are not churches. Community ministries provide needed services, not the sacraments. Churches are people who gather for worship. Non-profits are organizations. Churches are organisms. Still, these groups should be close siblings, not distant relatives. As the author has worked with community ministries and non-profits, he has experienced at least five reasons for partnerships. Churches can refrain from “reinventing the wheel,” prevent duplication of resources, provide relational resources which non-profits need, meet new people from demographics they often miss, and discover new things about their city. All five reasons represent vital categories for Acklen to explore through the project.

Previously, the author mentioned teen small groups at a previous ministry that formed around common ministry interests. Most every group chose to work with a community ministry or non-profit. He encouraged them to serve three to four times a year. By the third year and twelfth time of service, both the volunteers and the non-profit knew each other well. The expectations were clear for all. As the liaison of many of these projects, he and volunteer coordinators were on a first name basis. They would talk about the future of the ministry. It felt like a team effort. They would ask his input on future planning, and his congregation was able to plan ahead on both relational and financial involvement. The service was no longer episodic and focused on the church's needs. The service had become a partnership as the church and nonprofit focused on the needs of others.

For a partnership to thrive over the long run, it is important for the church and non-profit to be on the same page. Clear expectations are key. Churches need to be upfront about what they can offer. New opportunities are exciting, but churches must be realistic about their commitment capability. Also, churches need to understand the non-profits' situation. Government agencies have a much different set of parameters than Christian based nonprofits. Moreover, some Christian groups accept federal grants and therefore have some additional guidelines. Churches should ask lots of questions to make sure both the church and organization are comfortable, especially as this relates to evangelism.

As the author talked to more and more people, in Acklen and Nashville, he began to envision the following preferred future. He began to see Acklen expand to multiple community partnerships in the city. In his mind, the author saw a second incarnation

passionately gathering around kingdom celebration and then scattering out into the city. Organizationally, he did not see a random scattering but the growth of intentional partnerships above and beyond Acklen's current partnership with Room in the Inn. In the fall of 2012, he developed this concept for a project—"Kingdom Witness in Nashville: Connecting the Small Groups of the Acklen Church to Community Ministry." The project has the following thesis:

To prepare families of the Acklen Church to heal brokenness and promote human flourishing in Nashville, this project seeks to help missional action flow out of the church's four existing weekly Bible study groups, by leading them through a ten-week teaching series entitled Kingdom Witness in the City which will include opportunities to participate in local ministry, with the outcome of an ongoing partnership between each group and a community ministry.

Before explaining the planning and implementation of this project, four main goals need explanation. First, the author hopes to create a deeper theological understanding of the kingdom of God. While many feel drawn to social action, much of their desire comes from a basic level to do good or a progressive notion of activism. While those are helpful, the author wants to go deeper, so Acklen can see together the underlying foundation of the kingdom for all societal service and cultural engagement. Second, he seeks to raise awareness of the needs of Nashville. Sadly, within fragmented lifestyles, many seem unaware of the pervasive societal brokenness around them. On a practical level, he simply wants to expose members to the variety of ministries in the city, along with accompanying volunteer opportunities. Third, due to both his personal ecclesiology and Acklen's personality, the author wants the groups to decide for themselves what partnerships they might form. Therefore, their understanding and awareness can lead organically to communal discernment. Based on their gifts and availability, they will discern which community ministry would offer the best partnership

as well as the parameters of that partnership. Of course, the groups will have the option to simply decline the opportunity to form a partnership. Fourth, he hopes the project will result in firm commitments that last multiple years. Like any ministry initiative, long-term fruit serves as a tangible desire.

### **Plans for the Project**

In the fall of 2012, the author decided the project would center on a ten-week series in March, April, and May of 2013 entitled “Kingdom Witness in the City.” The series was to have three major components. First, the author would teach a Sunday morning class entitled “Kingdom Witness in the City” to accomplish the goal of understanding. To enhance the class, he planned to write a small booklet, which would be put on the church website to those teaching kids or out of town could follow the series. Second, on Wednesday nights, he planned to host a speaker series comprised of social workers, ministers, and leaders of community ministries and non-profits. This was designed to create awareness. Third, on Sunday nights, the four small groups would discuss the Sunday morning and Wednesday night presentations as an act of discernment towards a partnership decision. Alongside these times, he hoped to create some service experiences so groups could “try out” ministries. While the project was to focus on small groups, it was designed to include the entire congregation. Members not in groups would be invited to serve in any partnerships. Since those not in groups often join groups to help with Room in the Inn, the paradigm for this was already established.

Now, the following pages will describe the details of the project’s preparation and implementation. Throughout the fall and into the winter, the author began meeting with community leaders. His purpose was twofold. First and foremost, he wanted to know

everything he could find out about what was going on in the city. Beyond understanding and awareness, he scoped out potential ministry partnerships, as well as potential speakers for the Wednesday night series. These meetings fell under three categories.

First, the author sought out individuals with expertise on connecting churches to non-profits in the city. He met with Scot Sager, Vice President of Church Relations at Lipscomb University. Before moving to Nashville, Scot ministered in the Highland Park neighborhood of Dallas, Texas. While there, he was instrumental in the initiation of a non-profit medical clinic to the marginalized. The clinic was housed in one church facility, but many neighborhood congregations played a role. Scot offered many helpful resources and assisted greatly in the understanding of partnerships. In addition, the author met with Christin Shatzer, director of the Serving and Learning Together program at Lipscomb University. She was instrumental in deepening his understanding of episodic volunteering as opposed to partnerships. Moreover, as she pairs students to serving opportunities in the community, she helped him think through the types of ministries with which to connect. Specifically, as mentioned earlier, she offered a simple overview of Nashville needs. Next, the author spent time with Nathan Bills, a professor at Lipscomb University, who specializes in poverty issues. He significantly shaped understandings of assessing congregational assets. In addition, the author attended a neighborhood meeting to meet Councilwoman Sandra Moore, who represents the district where the church building is located. Also, the author met with the Andrew, the associate pastor at Edgehill United Methodist, a neighboring congregation. He spoke at length about their Free Store, which promotes the sharing of community possessions and resources. Finally, he dialogued with David Koellein, a teacher at nearby O'More School

of Design who specializes in urban planning. David assisted in his understanding of urban trends, neighborhood patterns, and the impacts of gentrification.

Second, based on Christin Shatzer's assessment of Nashville's three greatest needs (mentoring of children and youth, assistance and empowerment for refugees and immigrants, and chronic homelessness and lack of affordable housing), the author met with the following non-profits. He spent time with Rob McRay, president of Youth Encouragement Services, a Christian urban after school program. In thinking of educational support for single moms, he met with Maeven Mendoza, a volunteer coordinator with Christian Women's Job Corps. While thinking of homeless families, the author set up a meeting with Stefanie Tinnell, volunteer coordinator with Safe Haven Family Shelter. In connection with the needs of refugees, he had breakfast with Chad Yates, church mobilizer with World Relief. Lastly, in thinking about student mentoring and Acklen's connection with Lipscomb University, he had coffee with Josh Willis, who served in campus ministry with the Joshua Project, a student mentoring initiative. When the author met with these individuals, he focused the conversation on understanding their goals and needs along with clearly communicating Acklen's gifts, limitations, and capacity for involvement. Clearly put, he looked for ways that families could serve together safely with their children. Admittedly, it was really tough to find this. As he met with these non-profits, he noticed a few things. Quickly, the author realized how overworked they were. They all wore multiple hats for their organization, and few returned calls quickly. In addition, they all exhibited almost a desperate desire for additional volunteers. Every single person acknowledged that they regularly limited services due to a volunteer shortage. Lastly, non-profits and community ministries

present an extremely transient atmosphere for workers. A year later, Rob McRay represents the only individual still with the same organization.

Third, as the author began to explore non-profits and community ministries, he became more aware of connections and resources within Acklen. As he spoke with more and more people within Acklen, the realization surfaced that many of them were intricately involved in non-profits and community ministries, either full time or as volunteers. In conversations, it appeared that many saw their community involvement as separate from their church involvement. It never occurred to them to mention their ministry to their church family. The following demonstrates those within Acklen whose conversation affected the project. Robbie and Randy Spivey teach regularly with the LIFE program, which offers college courses at the women's prison through Lipscomb University. Jennifer Sternberg works as a nurse practitioner with St. Thomas Family Health South Clinic, which mostly serves the immigrant population. Susan Porter serves on the board of Riders for Reading, which provides books to children. Sarah Perkins volunteers on the board of the Crieve Hall Elementary School Parent Teacher Association, where her children attend school. Kelly Moore serves on the board of Siloam Family Health Center, which provides care to the uninsured about a mile from the Acklen church building. Hannah Cotten actively works with her neighborhood association in East Nashville. Beth Conway, the author's wife, regularly takes her cancer students from Lipscomb University to serve at the Hope Lodge, a service run by the American Cancer Society. From these meetings and conversations, awareness of the city grew, and he began to schedule speakers for the Wednesday night series in the spring.

Throughout the fall and winter, the author sought three objectives to prepare the congregation for the project. First, he taught a Wednesday night class on the book, *When Helping Hurts*, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Acklen looked at the difference between relief, rehabilitation, and development. They discussed the downfall of providing relief when rehabilitation or development is needed. In their location, Acklen frequently has individuals walking through our doors asking for food or money. While well intentioned, many actions hurt more than help. Moreover, they looked at the different types of poverty and sought to consider implications for local and international involvement.

Second, the author met with the leaders of all four of our small groups. Over a series of lunches and coffees, he outlined the sequence of the project. Namely, he discussed the potential for success in Room in the Inn to serve as a model to expand Acklen partnerships. They were cautiously enthusiastic. While they appreciated the open-ended nature of the project, they wondered about busyness and getting their group on the same page. Over and over, he sought to define partnerships broadly. He reminded them that partnerships did not have to be weekly, like Room in the Inn. They could be monthly, quarterly, or annually. They all seemed to see the weakness of episodic involvement and shared the vision for an increase in Acklen's collective community partnerships. Several wondered what this meant for the future of Room in the Inn. They wondered if Room in the Inn involvement would continue at the same rate. In addition, they wondered if the proposed project would serve as an additional commitment or

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012).

merely something to do when Room in the Inn was not in season. To answer, the author continued to affirm that all possibilities were open. As part of the group preparation, he visited all of the groups in January to get a feel for each groups' dynamic. In addition, he presented the project to all three elders. They affirmed the vision for greater, more diversified community involvement, as well as the embrace of ownership and initiative for groups. Finally, in terms of meeting with key people, he sat down with the deacon who serves as the congregational liaison with Room in the Inn. The author did not want him to feel the project would weaken Acklen's commitment to homeless ministry. This deacon understood and was on board.

Third, the author spent several months writing the curriculum for the Sunday morning class, "Kingdom Witness in the City." The forty-six-page curriculum follows a ten-week plan and includes discussion questions for small groups. In many ways, it follows the sequence of this paper, including sections on the church's history, the neighborhood around the Acklen building, demographic trends, a theology of mission and witness, an ecclesiology section emphasizing the church as a community of kingdom exiles, and discussions on evangelism and service.

In January of 2013, the author emailed all the group leaders and spouses to further discuss the project.<sup>2</sup> Having already met with all the leaders, conversations were already under way. He sought to alleviate concerns and identify a date for all to go out to dinner. On Saturday evening February 23, the group leaders and spouses went out to dinner. They arranged babysitters at one family's home, so they could eat free from distraction. A total of twelve adults met for dinner, with only one couple missing. One group had two leaders, and the author included the Room in the Inn liaison and his wife as well as

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<sup>2</sup> The email can be found in Appendix A.

him and his wife. They reserved a room at a restaurant where they could take our time to discuss the implications of the project. While he had emailed them the entire “Kingdom Witness in the City” curriculum, he could tell that only a couple had read it. While no one was against the idea, the inclusion of the spouses brought about far more hesitancy than before. Specifically, several of the wives were suspicious of the potential time commitment. Already, two had mixed feelings about Room in the Inn. They felt their husbands had been called on a disproportionate amount of times. This left them alone with the children on those nights, and they were worried about increasing this. The author sought to validate their concerns. He assured them that their group should discern and make their own decision. A decision of “no” was permissible. He only wanted them to go through the process. Moreover, the author continually reminded them of their freedom to withdrawal from Room in the Inn or minimize it if need be. While a huge advocate of Room in the Inn, he felt like everything had to be on the table to go through a true discernment process. Everyone appeared to agree, but he went home that night realizing the potential challenges more than ever before. The fear of busyness hung like a cloud. Every family at the table had young children, and many of them had three children. For the first time, he began to wonder if Acklen was simply too busy to be a socially active church that engages children regularly in service. The only way to find out was to continue on.

### **Execution of the Project**

On Sunday March 3, 2013, the “Kingdom Witness in the City” series officially began. The curriculum, including small group questions and discernment tools, was online for everyone to download. On the first Sunday, the author gave a survey, which

he repeated in March of 2014. Those details will be discussed in Chapter 7. On Sunday nights, groups discussed both the Sunday morning class and the Wednesday night speakers.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the process, the author stayed in regular contact with the group leaders. During April, he had lunch with each small group leader. At the quarterly elders meeting in April, the project came up, and the elders again affirmed the process. Enthusiasm increased throughout the process. The Sunday morning class, which the author taught, received positive feedback, but the Wednesday night speaker series was the true highlight. Each week, several rushed up to the speaker and expressed interest. As the author mingled among the congregation, it seemed like it was more a matter of narrowing down the options rather than struggling to find a potential partner. As he continued to follow up with the small group leaders, he prodded and asked questions. “What has the conversation in your group been like? What are people interested in? How could that play out? How would your children fit? It could look like this or maybe even like this.” In both the Sunday morning class and conversations, he continued to offer examples of how churches had partnered with non-profits and community ministries. These conversations were frequent throughout March, April, and May.

One key conversation deserves mention. As the author discussed in Chapter 2, most of Acklen lives in the city of Nashville, yet few live in the neighborhood around the building. Therefore, the following question has continually risen over the years: “What is Acklen’s neighborhood? Is it the neighborhood around the church building or the neighborhoods where people live?” Based on the author’s theological understanding of spiritual indwelling and the gathered/scattered church, he sought to advocate the importance of both. Throughout, he dialogued with others about their perspective. Early

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix B contains the series sequence.

on in the Sunday morning class, he offered this definition: “Acklen’s neighborhood begins with the area directly around 900 Acklen Avenue but radiates out to all the places where members live and breathe during the week.” This definition found widespread acceptance. Acklen agreed on the need to be involved in the 12South and Edgehill neighborhoods, but they also agreed they should not fixate exclusively on these areas to the detriment of where members live and work.

Purposefully, the author did not write the tenth lesson of “Kingdom Witness in the City” over the winter. He left it open to be a reflection on the process and thoughts on the future. However, as the project wore on, he wrote the tenth lesson in in May of 2013.<sup>4</sup> In it, he referenced several new opportunities that rose up during the process. Years ago, an assisted living facility operated across the street from the building. It was affiliated with Churches of Christ, and Acklen exercised a close relationship with them, from visitation to providing a shuttle to worship. Eventually, the facility closed and lay dormant. However, throughout 2012, construction was underway as a new healthcare company sought to remodel the facility. In January of 2013, the chaplain, Tim Hill, from the new Signature Health Care facility visited one of Acklen’s Bible studies. Many, especially the older members, expressed enthusiasm over the hope of a partnership. Tim and the author met several times to discuss, and in April, he hosted an open house for the entire congregation. As of May 2013, Acklen as still in discussion on what that might look like. Also, the father of one of Acken’s members, Ana Church, serves as the Spanish-speaking minister with the Crieve Hall Church of Christ. Ana and others began a Friday evening Bible class twice a month with ladies from Crieve Hall, mostly Latino, and Acklen, mostly Anglo. Finally, Robbie and Randy Spivey had offered the

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<sup>4</sup> An excerpt of this tenth lesson can be found in Appendix C.

opportunity to visit the LIFE program at the prison, and many had expressed interest. The first two of these, Signature and Crieve Hall, were outside the planned nature of the project, yet it appeared the project affected awareness and receptivity towards them.

During the second half of May, the author again touched base with all of the leaders. By this point, it seemed enthusiasm had waned. Looking back, it appeared that enthusiasm peaked near the end of April. By May, several expressed fatigue and wondered if the conversation had become redundant. Perhaps, it is simply more exciting to consider opportunities than to commit. Still, for the most part, everyone was still upbeat. Specifically, the following comment from one member encouraged the author: “I have heard more about the kingdom of God over the last couple of months than in my entire life.” At this point, the group decisions were as follows. All four groups reaffirmed their desire to participate in Room in the Inn. None wanted to give it up, but they also did not want to participate more than one a month, November through March. Some had done this and felt slightly burned. One group decided to partner with Safe Haven Family Shelter. On a couple of occasions doing Room in the Inn, they had hosted a family, which raised their awareness of unhoused families. They expressed a desire to take dinner up to Safe Haven a few times a year when Room in the Inn was not in season. Another group decided to partner with St. Thomas Family Health South Clinic. Since Jennifer Sternberg was a part of this group, this was a natural fit. Over the last few years, she has planned an annual Christmas party for patients as well as other initiatives. In addition, with her fluency in Spanish, she had committed to help Ana with the Bible class with the Latino ladies from Crieve Hall Church of Christ. With those commitments, she

informed her group that exhausted her commitment potential, so they committed to helping her with the clinic.

The other two groups never seemed to get beyond the cloud of busyness. One group talked a lot about helping with Second Harvest or helping local elementary students with school supplies. However, despite several conversations, it never seemed concrete. In this group, it seemed the decision making fell disproportionately on one couple. This highly committed family served as integral part in many of the congregation's ministries, and the author got the impression from Bryan, the husband, that this initiative ultimately just seemed like "one more thing." Lastly, the final group never really got to the discernment level of the process. The lead couple in this group was unable to attend the February 23 dinner, due to a prior commitment. Moreover, the husband, Spencer, went through a job change during the process, and he admitted that their group met sporadically during the spring, for a variety of reasons. This group consisted of four families, who all seemed to already have a favorite non-profit niche. In conversations, it appeared that they already felt like the purpose of the project was already being achieved among them. After all, they participated together in Room in the Inn five times a year, and separately were involved in additional things throughout the year. He told the author they would probably try to be more involved in each other's ministries.

As the final part of my project, the author had committed to helping group solidify the details of their project with their chosen partner. Therefore, while he had anticipated spending the summer serving as liaison between non-profits and each of the groups, he ended up only needing to do that for one group. The Safe Haven group

committed to several dates over the summer and fall, and together, they participated in a volunteer orientation and tour over the summer. Also, during the summer, he and Robbie Spivey coordinated the visits of six to eight members to visit the Tennessee Prison for Women. As part of the LIFE program, Robbie taught an English class over the summer, and members of Acklen were welcome to sit in and visit with the students. In addition, in June, the author coordinated a week of field trip/VBS type experiences for the children. It included a service project at the Ronald McDonald house, a prayer over the city, a learning scavenger hunt in an area of town prominent among immigrant, a nature hike, and worship. The author desired to demonstrate the ways kids could connect to the community through service. The majority of the Acklen kids participated in the week, and the families were very enthusiastic.

With the close of summer, the project officially ended. In many ways, the project seemed successful. Two of the four groups identified a niche with which to partner. All of the classes, speakers, and activities were warmly received. Enthusiasm for community service and cultural engagement appeared to be at an all time high. Still, two of the four groups did not identify a partnership. Moreover, key members of the church never seemed to connect with the project. The cloud of busyness seemed to be everywhere. The author could not tell if this was a legitimate reason or an excuse revealing unwillingness to commit, be organized in this way, or serve in general. Admittedly, he finished the project relieved and slightly frustrated. He felt good about many things, but he was kicking myself about other lapses. Like any initiative, the fruit or lack thereof lay in the future.

## CHAPTER 7

### EVALUATION

At the time of this writing, April of 2014, it has been one year since the implementation of the project, “Kingdom Witness in the City.” Much has happened over the last year. Like any type of reflection or sociological analysis, the author seeks to tread lightly concerning the connection between the project and ministry activity with Acklen. For the stories and stats to come, the degree to which the project served as a causal force could be debated. Perhaps, some of these activities would have happened anyway. However, the project appears to have contributed to the overall trajectory of God’s work in Acklen, and the author presents this analysis in humility and dependence on God’s continued work. Along these lines, this process has served as a humbling, even vulnerable experience. A project of this level pushed him to put himself out there. Moreover, the reflection and analysis required of the project raised the stakes on questions concerning the meaning, success, and fulfillment of his ministry. In recent months, this reflection has felt deeply personal, and God has used it for further formation and dependence on Christ. A year removed, his theology and ministry practices have an added layer of clarity. With this in mind, Chapter 7 seeks to address the results of the project, new understandings learned along the way, and situations that should have been

handled differently.

### **Results of the Project**

In looking at the results of the last year, four categories deserve attention—small groups, other ministries, statistics, and surveys. In August of 2013, all of the group leaders and spouses came over to the author's house for dinner. As Acklen went into a fall of implementation, he wanted to refocus everyone. To crystalize the focus of the spring series, he offered them this ongoing paradigm for groups—core, care, and community. The core includes the congregational commitment that small groups exist as an extension of the morning worship assembly. Groups form around the word and worship, and reflection on the morning assembly, specifically the Scriptures of the day, is the core of groups. Moreover, groups demonstrate one of the primary ways the congregation practices pastoral care. From job losses to miscarriages to cancer treatment, people share, listen, and care for each other in their groups. Finally, connecting with the thoughts of Incenogle, they discussed the vitality of groups flowing out into community service and engagement. In this way, the author sought to relieve them of anxiety that Bible study or pastoral care might be ignored in the pursuit of the community partnerships.

As discussed in Chapter 6, two of the four groups committed to partnerships. The biggest success seemed to be the group that committed to greater involvement with the St. Thomas Clinic, where Jennifer, one of their members worked as a nurse practitioner. In conversations on possibilities for involvement, Jennifer discussed the need for fitness classes. Lacey, a group member, teaches yoga classes at the YMCA and offered to start a regular class at the clinic. Jennifer served as a liaison with the clinic to make that

happen. Every year, Jennifer organizes a Christmas party at the clinic for patients. She normally gets volunteers from Acklen, and this past year, the author attended the party to help out and observe. Several of her group members helped with the Christmas party, as well. Recently, the author interviewed Lacey and her husband Brian, the leader of that small group. Specifically, Lacey discussed the excitement of knowing more and more new people through the consistency of teaching the yoga class and helping with the Christmas party. Moreover, she has learned more about high levels of anxiety among Latino immigrants, and she sees the relaxation of her yoga classes as a grate ministry.

In addition, back in August, Lacey emailed the author for a list of ideas of ways to do service projects with the kids during their group time. In response, he sent her a list of ten ideas, ranging from baking cookies for the elderly to buying school supplies for refugee families. Lacey and Brian implemented this list August through October, up to the start of their monthly involvement with Room in the Inn. On top of that, Lacey and Carla, another group member, recently initiated a clothing drive for the men who stay in our building through Room in the Inn. Both Brian and Lacey reported that the emphasis on service has helped their group connect. However, they both believe have reached their limit on service. They love what they are doing, but they are unable to do anymore.

Likewise, one group committed to partner with Safe Haven Family Shelter. On three different occasions, the group took dinner to the thirty plus individuals at the shelter. The last of these occasions was Halloween night. Therefore, they hosted a Trunk or Treat for the families in the parking lot and distributed candy. The Trunk or Treat was well received, and they have verbally committed to hosting one again next year. During the November through March Room in the Inn season, they ceased working with Safe

Haven and worked monthly with Room in the Inn. Now, they have plans to connect with Safe Haven a few times over the summer and fall.

In March of 2014, the author interviewed the group leaders from the groups that did not make a formal commitment. First, he talked to Bryan, whose group talked about making a commitment but never pulled the trigger. A year later, the author asked him what he took away from the project. Bryan believes Acklen failed to realize what people in the church were already doing. Personally, he enjoyed hearing about ministries people participated in which he had never been aware of prior. Moreover, he feels good about Acklen's ministry in the community over the last year, even if it did not all occur through groups. In a non-critical manner, the author shared his belief that the group never committed to a partnership because of overwhelming busyness. Bryan agreed with this assessment. Moreover, he wondered aloud if the small groups are too small (his group has four families) to take on a partnership. This served as a key insight.

Second, the author interviewed Spencer. As mentioned, he underwent a job change during the project and his family was unable to attend both the February and August group leader gatherings. The author voiced his recognition that the project came at a really bad time for Spencer, and he quickly agreed. Moreover, he said the four families of his group already had a volunteer niche prior to the project. While he personally enjoyed all the guest speakers and conversations, he shared that it came across in a guilty manner to his wife. As a reading specialist in the public school system, she sees her teaching as ministry. In addition, she serves on the board for the non-profit Riders for Reading, which distributes free books to children. Her children attend the school where she teaches, and she serves on the Parent Teacher Association. He told me

he deeply appreciated the emphasis, but they were simply unable to commit to any more ministries. These served as key insights, as well.

Besides the small group partnerships, several other ministries continued and sprung up during the year. As mentioned in Chapter 6, Jennifer and Ana began a monthly Bible study with Latino women at the Crieve Hall Church of Christ. This continued through the year, along with Tuesday night spades at Room in the Inn. Moreover, Acklen continued its involvement with the Lawrence Avenue congregation through our annual picnic, annual combined worship service, and attending Lawrence Avenue's summer revival. At the Signature Health Facility across the street, Acklen continued to dialogue with the chaplain, Tim Hill. He expressed a need for help in their Sunday worship service for residents. In September and October, Acklen led the service each Sunday during the Bible class time after worship. In December, Acklen went Christmas caroling one Wednesday night. In January, Acklen began a long-term commitment to lead the service the first Sunday of each month. Moreover, one of Acklen's members, Matt Sullivan, became involved with the Siloam Family Health Center. In the spring series, Kelly Moore, another member, spoke about the Siloam Family Health Center, where she is a board member. Matt works in fundraising, and Kelly has served as a liaison for him to volunteer for Siloam in fundraising research. Besides this, Kelly was able to get an unhoused member of Acklen into the clinic as a regular patient. Likewise, the congregation has continued to support those who teach at the Tennessee Prison for Women through the LIFE program.

One additional ministry deserves a more detailed discussion. Prior to the project, through Acklen's involvement with Room in the Inn, the congregation gained three

members who did not have housing. Often, they lived in tent encampments or run down buildings. While not part of the project, last April, Acklen began to help them in a more formalized way. Previously, they simply asked for rides to worship and maybe an occasional tarp, box of Band-Aids, or used tools. However, having seen how time consuming camping could be, Acklen made a six-month commitment to put two of them up in motel rooms. Acklen hoped this would allow them to dedicate themselves to finding a job. The one member whom Acklen did not financially support had by this time found a motel, which his monthly government check covered. While the author and others knew this level of involvement could be time consuming, they honestly went into this pretty naïve. About six members, including the author, became greatly involved in their lives from giving rides to helping them find a job to meeting for coffee to moving them to a new motel after a lice infestation. A year later, one gradually moved on after Acklen kindly warned him about getting involved in a relationship which many feared would ultimately lead to a parole violation on his part. Another moved to West Virginia. However, one found a job over the summer and has maintained it ever since. In fact, at the time of this writing, he will soon receive his Section Eight voucher, and Acklen's financial assistance will cease. While this was not part of the project, the author believes the conversations of the project led to the decision to partner with them in their quest to leave homelessness behind. Moreover, because of enhanced exposure to homeless ministry, Acklen began to financially support a local street chaplain through the non-profit Open Table. In summary, over the past year, a ministry list which originally began with just Room in the Inn, and to a lesser extent Lipscomb University and Lawrence

Avenue, now includes greater continued involvement with the LIFE program, Siloam, Crieve Hall, Saint Thomas, Signature, Safe Haven, and Open Table.

The second aspect of the results includes the following statistics. Over the last six years, average attendance has steadily increased: seventy-nine in 2010, eighty-two in 2011, ninety-one in 2012, 105 in 2013, and 118 as of March 9, 2014. In addition the total number of people in the congregation increased. As of January 2013, Acklen consisted of 111 people (sixty-four adults and forty-seven children). As of March 2014, the congregation had grown to 133 people (eighty-one adults and fifty-two children). Approximately speaking, in the year since the project, the total number of people in the congregation has grown by 20% and attendance has grown by 12%. Several of the new families expressed they had been looking for a small, urban, socially active congregation with lots of children. Moreover, attendance is at 89% of the total number, which reflects a high level of participation. However, the number of family units in groups barely changed. Prior to the project, seventeen family units were in groups, and only two more families joined groups in the months surrounding the project.

To further reflect on results, the congregational survey deserves analysis.<sup>1</sup> In March of 2013, the author gave the congregation a survey, which he then repeated in March of 2014. Forty-two adults participated. In the survey, he sought to measure changes in volunteering, attitudes, and perceptions. He measured the number of times the volunteered in the community over the course of a year, with Acklen and without Acklen. In 2013, 38% stated that they only volunteered with Acklen two times or fewer. But in 2014, this had gone down to 25%. In 2013, 43% stated they had only volunteered without Acklen two times or fewer. In 2014, this had gone down to 34%. In addition, he

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<sup>1</sup> The survey is included in Appendix D.

sought to measure people's awareness of their neighbors. In 2013, 40% knew the names of eight or more people on their street. However, in 2014, 56% knew the names of eight or more people on their street.

Next, the author studied the change on the answers to the following statements. In response to "I have friends who are poor," those marking true or mostly true went up from 36% to 41%. In response to "I have friends of a different ethnicity," those marking true or mostly true went up from 40% to 59%. In response to "I think we need to be careful how much time we invest in helping others," those marking rarely true or not true of me went up from 55% to 66%. In response to "I enjoy sharing my faith," those marking true or mostly true went up from 42% to 53%. In response to "I give money to non-profits that are not churches," those marking quite often or very often went up from 33% to 43%. In response to "I eat out or shop within two miles of 900 Acklen Avenue other than Sunday," those marking quite often or very often went up from 17% to 31%. In response to "I talk to friends about faith," those marking never went down from 31% to 9%. In response to "I think about those who do not know Jesus," those marking quite often or very often went up from 40% to 63%. In response to "I leave worship on Sundays with a passion to help others," those marking quite often or very often went up from 38% to 47%. In response to "I leave worship on Sundays feeling socially fed," those marking quite often or very often went up from 57% to 81%. In response to "I leave worship on Sundays feeling spiritually fed," those marking quite often or very often went down from 69% to 63%. This last stat does not fit the overall pattern. While 6% is not a huge difference, the author wonders if the focus on service or external priorities ended up minimizing the impact people experienced on the internal.

Finally, on the survey, he asked people to circle the words they associated with Jesus, most churches, and Acklen. The associations and changes in association offer interesting feedback. Respondents saw Jesus and Acklen similar when it comes to concern for the poor, generous, kingdom focused, authentic, warm and accepting, relevant, and positive. However, they saw Jesus as much more evangelistic and spirit filled. But, they associated smart far more often with Acklen than Jesus. It is difficult to know if they viewed smart positively or negatively, but due to the intellectual nature of Acklen and the high percentage of academics, this stood out as interesting.

Compared to other churches, respondents saw Acklen as more kingdom focused, authentic, smart, externally focused, relevant. At the same time, they saw Acklen as less judgmental and less busy, while other churches are more evangelistic. Not one single respondent saw Acklen as judgmental, and no one saw other churches as authentic. Only 25% of respondents marked that other churches are concerned with the poor. Clearly, the majority of people at Acklen see themselves as significantly different from most churches.

Over the course of a year, Acklen began to see itself in a different light. Those seeing Acklen as concerned with the poor went up from 86% to 94%. Also, those who believe Acklen is relevant went up from 40% to 50%. Several indicators were surprising, though. Despite a project on community involvement, those who saw Acklen as internally focused went up from 31% to 53%. Those who saw Acklen as externally focused went down from 45% to 40%. Perhaps, the project succeeded in changing perspective, so people more critically saw the need for community engagement. Moreover, despite the frequent complaint of busyness, fewer respondents marked Acklen

as busy in 2014, down from 52% to 44%. Lastly, while more people marked that they like to share their faith, it did not seem to move the needle on the characteristic of evangelistic. That quality remains relatively unchanged (26% in 2013, 28% in 2014).

### **New Understandings**

After reflecting and sorting through the results seen in small groups and other congregational ministries, along with statistics and surveys, new understandings come to light. Over the past year, six clear reflections have surfaced. First, with Acklen's current congregational size, it is incredibly difficult to have another congregational initiative at the level of Room in the Inn. If Acklen continues to host unhoused gentlemen twenty-two nights a year mainly through the monthly rotation of four small groups, it will be difficult to have another partnership on that level. After Room in the Inn is over, many feel fatigue and desire a short break. Before long, summer has set in. This leaves a couple of autumn months before Room in the Inn begins again. Of course, Acklen can have more partnerships, but expectations need to be realistic. Moreover, almost universally, the congregation does not want to diminish its commitment to Room in the Inn.

Second, the voice of women must be sought out more at Acklen. As the author began to work towards the project, he brought women in too late in the process. Throughout the autumn of 2012, his conversations centered on other men. The first time he spoke directly to women about the project was at the group leaders dinner in late February of 2013. This was way too late. Admittedly, some of this lies in the fact that he more naturally has conversations with other men. Moreover, Acklen's current polity only includes males in formal leadership, perhaps a topic for a future project. However, even

with this polity, women serve as informal leaders, and previous chapters demonstrate the leadership roles women take in community ministry. Moreover, these reasons are no excuse, and his inability to engage and listen to women hampered the project. Like any person, it is difficult to get excited and commit to something in which you do not have ownership. More than that though, he burdened his male friends because he inadvertently left them a huge task of convincing their wives of something he shared with them over lunch or coffee. Clearly though, the greatest reason for engaging women earlier is that they had wise things to say, which he has since heard. At least in Acklen's congregational culture, the wives seem to manage the family schedules. Therefore, more clearly than their husbands, they saw the problem of time constraints. Moreover, many of the wives are more sensitive to the needs of the children and expressed concern that their spiritual formation could be diminished at the expense of community service. They acknowledge service as a component of spiritual formation, but they wondered if the kids would truly get hands on service opportunities or be left in a room to play quietly while adults served. The author hopes to never repeat this mistake again.

Third, the cloud of busyness constantly hovers over people and represents an enormous obstacle that cannot be ignored. While families of young kids and teens seem to experience this the most, it appears in singles and empty nest couples, as well. Increasingly, people are pulled in multiple directions. Specifically, work and childcare take up almost all of Monday through Friday. Scheduling volunteer opportunities during the week is almost impossible. Moreover, people set aside Saturday for domestic duties and recreation. Sunday afternoon and evening represent the times Acklen appears most receptive to service, and yet many non-profits do not need volunteers on Sunday. Of

course, this demonstrates one reason why Room in the Inn works so well for Acklen. Alongside busyness, the author often witnesses considerable guilt. One husband talked to me at length concerning how the project made his wife feel guilty. Every week, she went home wanting to serve more, but due to work and family responsibilities, she saw no way that she could. Guilt overwhelmed her. He did not blame the author for this, but he wanted him to understand the paralyzing, even depressing, effects of busyness and guilt.

To the cloud of busyness, two reflections surface. First, Acklen must be much more realistic about expectations. Recently, a friend shared his experience with a church plant that never made it. He cited his inability to understand people's busyness as a key aspect of the plant's demise. Unrealistic expectations led to guilt, and since people did not like to feel guilty, they ultimately gravitated away from it. This insight demands attention, and yet, it contrasts with another truth. Recently, the author drove by a fitness club with this sign, "busier people than you are in here now." The truth of that loomed large. People make time for the things most important to them. Therefore, while expectations need to be realistic, the church should gently push against cultural norms that promote children's activities such as ballet or soccer and entertainment options like television and eating out more than worship and service. The balance of compassionate understanding and patient calling form the foundation of a healthy approach.

Fourth, the church does not need to organize the totality of member's ministry and service. As previously discussed, many have volunteer niches on their own or see their jobs as ministry. Moreover, many, especially at Acklen, do not have the expectation that the church organize service for them. They see the purpose of the church more centered on worshipping together and offering spiritual encouragement and social capital. In

addition, many gradually resent the expectation that they need to be involved in an Acklen organized ministry when they already minister in another initiative. The church should send out but does not have to define or organize all aspects of the mission.

Fifth, related to the previous realization, while the church does not have to organize the totality of member's ministry, the church should organize some ministry. Much of the success of Room in the Inn lies in its organization. It serves as a user-friendly volunteer opportunity. People show up clearly knowing what to expect, and while it takes time, it has clear boundaries and requires little initiation. Likewise, while the ministry outside of Acklen remains important, serving together as a church family remains essential. When a church serves together, they connect and bond in ways that go beyond Bible studies and prayer times. Several spoke to this in conversations and interviews. Moreover, some do not have a volunteer niche and appreciate the church organizing one for them. In addition, new members of a church often connect through service, which has occurred at Acklen on multiple occasions. Finally, part of the difficulty in groups forming partnerships lies in the time that organization takes. The author is quite confident that every group would have formed a partnership if he had organized it for them. Often, people are too busy to take the initiative of finding and thinking through a partnership, but they could make the time to serve if someone organized it and gave them options. Going forward, the author needs to take more initiative in the organization of Acklen's community ministry without dominating it.

Sixth, members of Acklen consider themselves Nashvillians first and do not get hung up on specific neighborhoods. As folks discussed community engagement, the author realized they rarely distinguished between the neighborhood around the building

and the neighborhoods where they work and live. Since they all live commuter lifestyles, they were more interested in the type of ministry than the location of the ministry, as long as the ministry was in Nashville. Over and over, members of Acklen declared they were more concerned with doing ministry that makes a difference and uses their gifts than finding a specific ministry within walking distance of the building. While they value 900 Acklen Avenue's proximity to the poor and unhoused, they do not feel the need to totally focus on the neighborhood around the building. Therefore, the author realized the ongoing vitality of the collective definition of Acklen's neighborhood: "Acklen's neighborhood begins with the area directly around 900 Acklen Avenue but radiates out to all the places where members live and breathe during the week."

### **Regrets**

Lastly, after looking at the results and processing deeper understandings, the author can now determine at least five things he should have done differently. First, having seen the power of the concept of preferred future, he would have probed more in the autumn of 2012 on what the congregation saw as its preferred future. Instead, he attempted to read the congregation and process what he heard indirectly. A better introduction into the project would have been congregational discernment over the question, "how would you describe the Acklen you desire in the future?" More intentional conversations should have occurred with women and men, young and old, small group leaders, elders, and the church as a whole. This added input and ownership at the beginning would have added a dimension and momentum to the project.

Second, he should have more quickly and directly addressed questions concerning Room in the Inn. Several never got passed the question of how they could do more

besides the winter monthly commitment to Room in the Inn. Also, several wondered how vital it was to try to do something the other seven months when those months included summer and the initial post Room in the Inn fatigue. He tried to leave those questions open ended to give them options, but they ended up serving as hurdles. Moreover, while he told groups they should have the freedom to take a break from Room in the Inn, none truly felt this freedom or even wanted to take a break. At the very beginning, he should have spent time looking at how additional ministries effected Room in the Inn and asked for direct feedback on that issue.

Third, while the project included a curriculum, Sunday morning class, Sunday night small group discussion, and a Wednesday night speaker series, it never included a time when everyone met together. Many adults teach children's classes on Sunday morning, and less than half of the congregation comes on Wednesday nights. Therefore, the project never became the dominant narrative of that spring. While the project focused on the groups, the author wanted it to bless everyone and perhaps even increase involvement in small groups or in the ministries coming out of groups. In hindsight, he should have included a sermon element to the project. He feared there might be resentment if everything was about the project, so his sermons did not intentionally address it. This represented a huge mistake. A series of sermons, even just two or three leading up to the project, would have greatly enhanced the conversation. Moreover, it would have been wise to hold one or two congregational meetings during the process, in lieu of Sunday morning class with only a handful of adults absent with the young children. His inability to take it before the entire congregation at once kept it from ultimately shaping the entire congregation.

Fourth, the author should have scheduled more service opportunities as part of the project. Opportunities existed to connect with Signature Health, the Ronald McDonald House, and the LIFE program in the spring and summer, but this was too little. During the March-May project, he had to compete with spring breaks, the last month of Room in the Inn, Easter, Mother's Day, and the end of school. In putting together the other elements, he neglected this aspect, and the busyness of the time contributed to his ultimate neglect. Still, the difficulty of scheduling a practice service opportunity in the midst of busyness demonstrates the challenge of a partnership in the midst of busyness. Moreover, it should not have been surprising that a failure to practice together minimized groups' ability to visualize a partnership.

Last, looking back, the author should have heavily considered the idea of reshuffling groups based on ministry interests. Instead, he focused on each group discerning together towards a collective commitment. If the small group leaders would have been willing to allow the discernment process to end in a reshuffling, different outcomes might have emerged. Acklen could have identified the four greatest community ministry interests and then coalesced groups around those. That new birth would have cemented the fundamental nature of the service aspect of small groups.

Looking back, the past eighteen months of ministry have produced blessings and excitement, for which the author is immensely grateful. Overall, he believes the project contributed to kingdom witness, and he personally grew deeply as a Christian and minister. With the evaluation completed, the paper now concludes with consider as to where Acklen, both the small groups and church as a whole, goes from here in pursuit of its preferred future.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To summarize, in 2011, my family joined the nearly eighty-year-old story of a small, urban church. While it began as a neighborhood church, it lost that connection fifty years ago and has struggled since then to define and embrace its relationship to the city. For years, the preaching and teaching could be described as socially conscious, and yet, the church could not point to a collective social action in the community. Over time, especially since the revitalization of the last ten years, many became more aware of this disconnect, and some even viewed it as a problem. However, with limited resources in a neighborhood where few members lived, the question of where to start hovered in a paralyzing way. Moreover, as the baby boom hit, many wondered how to be socially active with so many kids. All of these questions came to a head in the flood of 2010. Suddenly, the congregation literally experienced exile from its building and neighborhood. This time served as a time of soul searching and ultimately galvanization. In their time of literal exile, they realized they been spiritually and relationally exiled from their neighborhood for quite some time, and they bore some responsibility for that. Believing they were called back to 900 Acklen Avenue to serve their neighborhood and city, they returned back in April of 2011, and my family joined a few months later.

As previously discussed, their recommitment manifested itself in weekly participation with Room in the Inn November through March. However, many wondered if this was the totality of Acklen's relationship to the city. My project sought to answer that question. Using the small group led involvement with Room in the Inn as a paradigm, I sought to expand the number of Acklen partnerships in the city. The project led to successes, failures, and deeper understandings. Most importantly, the project

served as a bridge into the next chapter of Acklen. Specifically, three main directions and emphases flow out of this experience and shape Acklen's future.

First, the project revealed that some see their job as ministry and more long for that perspective. I heard this over and over again during the project. Unknowingly, I burdened some in my congregation by asking them to do something above and beyond their work and domestic responsibilities. But, if work could be viewed as service, even ministry, then a whole new way of thinking opens up. The push back I received on this topic led me to take David Kim and Richard Mouw's "Gospel and Cultural Renewal" class last summer in New York City, which met at Redeemer Church's Center for Faith and Work. When I returned home invigorated and formed by that course, I planned a fall 2013 series on Faith and Work. This series culminated with breaking the Acklen adults up into four vocational groups (Business, Education/Childcare, Computers/Engineering, and Healthcare). Currently, these groups meet once a quarter on a Wednesday night, and they have been greeted with tremendous enthusiasm. Celebrating work as ministry and sending people out from worship to see all of life as a response have become enormous priorities for Acklen.

Second, the project revealed pervasive busyness in the congregation. At first, I interpreted much of this response as whining and complaining. Then, I began to wonder if the busyness response simply revealed priorities. We cannot do everything, so we just claim busyness when we do not want to do something. Eventually, though I realized something greater was going on. When some talked about busyness, they seemed powerless. Their lives appeared to be out of control. At this point, I began to realize the cloud of busyness bordered on a spiritual crisis, and I began to pursue theological

responses. Over time, busyness became a consistent conversation topic at Acklen. Ultimately, we decided to have our annual retreat on the following theme, “Sabbath: the divine rhythm of work and rest.” In April of 2014, seventy-five people participated in the retreat, as we talked openly about unsustainable busyness through the lens of the Sabbath. Taken together, we have elevated the way we theologically process work, rest, and busyness and provided frequent avenues for dialogue on these topics.

Third, the project revealed partnerships already occurring and encouraged the growth of some new ones. Once again, partnerships are demonstrated through continual, regular service in contrast to episodic involvement. Many of our members serve on the boards of non-profits or work full time with community ministries. More and more members, often through small groups, are volunteering in the community. Acklen has increasingly experienced the blessing of partnerships-consistent relationships, opportunity to meet neighbors, celebrating previously ignored ministry of Acklenites, connecting members to each other, and providing and empowering the exercise of spiritual gifts. Therefore, I can now identify the following partnerships Acklen experiences individually and collectively: Siloam Family Health Center, St. Thomas Family Health South Clinic, Lipscomb University, Safe Haven Family Shelter, Room in the Inn, Riders for Reading, Nations Ministry, Ronald McDonald House, Open Table, LIFE program, Vanderbilt Heart Walk, Signature Health Care, Healthy Life Healthy Families, Vanderbilt Heart Walk, and two other congregations-Crieve Hall Church Christ (ladies Bible study) and Lawrence Avenue Church of Christ (less than a mile away).

Going forward, to celebrate, continue, and connect others to these partnerships, I believe I will need to take a greater role in organization. Recently, as I interviewed the group leaders, I proposed the idea of systematically highlighting the different partnerships in worship on a monthly basis. By embracing these ministries in the worship service, I hope to bring the idea of mission more clearly into worship. Some months, we will simply have a prayer for a community ministry. Other months, I hope to organize ways for groups and individuals to serve that community partner. As always, they will have the choice to participate or refrain. In this way, I believe I can serve as a point person and organizer without dominating and controlling Acklen's entire community ministry. All the group leaders were receptive to this idea, and in the coming months, I plan on presenting this to more in the congregation.

As I conclude this paper, I continue to come alive when I read the following texts. When the Hebrew exiles wrestled with their relationship to Babylon, Jeremiah told them, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:7). Years later, when the disciples asked Jesus when he would restore the kingdom, he replied, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Taken together, I believe God has called Acklen, as an exiled people in a fractured world, to witness to the kingdom in the city of Nashville. In this way, changing Newbigin's words slightly, I pray Acklen can be the *people* "from which good news overflows in good action."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 229.

## APPENDIX A

### January 13 Email to Small Group Leaders and Spouses

I wanted to offer this as further explanation for the idea of each small group partnering with a community ministry: Room in the Inn is one of the most exciting ministries in our church. I often hear people wonder if God has more in store for us. Specifically, the men experience Riti (Room in the Inn) more than the women and children. Also, some are called to ministries besides the homeless. While I do not believe we can do six to eight things on the level we do Riti, we might be able to do three to four things at or near that level.

During March, April, and May, I would like the Acklen family to experience a holistic series entitled Kingdom Witness in the City. This will involve a Sunday morning class on the kingdom of Jesus, a biblical concept of the city, and cultural engagement. On Wednesday nights, we will host guest speakers from different community ministries, ranging from tutoring at risk youth to assisting single moms. In groups, we will discuss and discern what God might have in store for us. At the end, each group will consider making a lasting partnership with a community ministry, similar to what we have now with Riti. A lasting partnership could be a weekly, monthly, or quarterly commitment. Most likely, one group will continue with Riti, and we will all continue to help some with it. Some groups may decide not to do anything different, and that is fine.

Some have asked why groups are a good organizational means to funnel acts of service. First, worship, Bible study, and fellowship should flow into service and action. That is a biblical trajectory. Second, it is just simple. We are really busy and groups are a structure we already have in place. As already happens with Riti, those not in groups can still serve in community ministry. Frequently, I hear conversations about the importance of spiritual forming our children. This idea is not a competition to youth ministry but a way to do youth ministry. Also, this does not add to our busy schedules, but simply streamlines and focuses our activity. Similar to how we do Riti, when we do serve, we just do not have “group” that week.

Already in recent months, we have served with the Ronald McDonald house, the St. Thomas Clinic, the LIFE program with the Women’s Prison, and Warm Coats Warm Hearts. This is simply a way to do that more consistently and give more members the opportunity to serve the community with others. Currently, we are discerning how to use our financial resources in kingdom ways. Many have said we should help ministries with whom we are involved. This is a way to do that, to combine our ministry involvement and financial stewardship. We will talk more about this idea and the series. The conversation is just beginning. It is open ended and malleable. Everyone will have input and shape the process.

## APPENDIX B

### *Kingdom Witness in the City Series*

#### Sunday Morning Class Topics

1. Acklen, Nashville, and “Neighborhood”
2. Theology of the City
3. Church as a Community of Kingdom Exiles
4. The Mission of the Church is to Witness to the Kingdom
5. Witnessing through Service
6. Witnessing through Evangelism
7. Witnessing through Small Groups
8. Strategy: Partnering with Community Ministries and Non profits
9. Discerning a Partnership
10. The future of Acklen and Nashville

#### Wednesday Night Speaker Series

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| March 6  | Scot Sager-Lipscomb University   |
| March 13 | Christin Shatzer-Lipscomb University   |
| March 20 | JP Conway-I presented on the Joshua Project  |
| March 27 | Jennifer Sternberg-St. Thomas Family Health South Clinic                           |
| April 3  | Rob McRay-Youth Encouragement Services   |
| April 10 | Stefanie Tinnell-Safe Haven Family Shelter   |
| April 17 | Chad Yates-World Relief  |
| April 24 | Maeven Mendoza-Christian Women’s Job Corps   |
| May 1    | Robbie Spivey-LIFE Program at the Women’s Prison                                   |
| May 8    | Open Forum among members on local school involvement and neighborhood associations |
| May 15   | Nathan Bills-Lipscomb University   |
| May 22   | David Koellein-O’More School of Design   |
| May 29   | Kelly Moore-Siloam Family Health Center  |

## APPENDIX C

So, after nine weeks of conversation, here is something that you guys have taught me. One of our main conversation topics has been the church's role in community service. I have sensed that, within Acklen, there are three main approaches to this. Admittedly, there is overlap within the three. First, some come to worship to be spiritually fed by communion with the Lord and church. Once fed, they go out into the city to volunteer and be present to neighbors and strangers. They are not looking to the church for assistance in those tasks. They are not looking to the church to create and discover areas of service, whether for the individual or group. They spend more time volunteering apart from Acklen than with Acklen. During this process, we have discovered so many good kingdom things people are doing, many of which we were previously unawares.

Second, another group of people finds their primary niche of volunteerism within the congregation. Like the first group, they depend on the spiritual sustenance of worship to empower them for service. But in contrast to the first group, they concentrate on service within Acklen, which in the last several years has focused mainly but not completely on Room in the Inn. Many in this category look to the church for opportunities to serve.

Third, another group finds their primary service niche in their job or career. Like the two previous groups, they depend on the spiritual sustenance of worship. For them, it sets the context for their day job and empowers them to work in the name of Christ. This does not mean they do not value volunteerism. Instead, they have either found a career that is service oriented or have found a way to approach their job as service.

Once again, there is considerable overlap between the three positions. Clearly, all three are vital for our congregation, and all three are biblical options. Still, which one would you say you lean towards? Over the last nine weeks, we have focused on the first two. It would seem a more detailed conversation on the nature of vocation would be a fruitful pursuit for us in the future.

As an aside, the survey taken at the beginning seems to support this hunch. The congregation was asked two questions: How many times have you volunteered for community ministries or nonprofits with fellow Acklen members in the last year? How many times have you volunteered outside of Acklen associated projects? A third volunteer more with Acklen associated projects. A third volunteer more outside of Acklen. Among these two groups, most had a wide disparity between the two. Many had something like twelve plus times with Acklen and zero to two without, or vice versa. It would seem many chose to volunteer with or without Acklen. There is not a lot of bleed over. However, a third volunteer equally the same, but within this group, 75% checked the zero to two times box on both. My hunch is that these individuals either see their ministry in either their job or in internal activities of Acklen.

In addition, this conversation has reminded me of the familiar external-internal tension in churches. Should we focus internally on educating our children and encouraging the body or should we focus externally on helping those outside the walls and proclaiming the name of Jesus? Obviously, we should do both, but few churches achieve a fifty-fifty balance. In fact, it would seem most churches focus internally and get around to the external if they have time. These churches end up being somewhat self-absorbed, even if they are well intentioned. Honestly, I have only seen one congregation in my whole life that was more externally focused than internal. Their community service began to bog down over time as people burned out due to spiritual hunger and thirst. We should regularly assess where we are at and avoid both spiritual narcissism and starvation.

Currently, our four small groups are discerning the potential of partnering with a community ministry. In addition, other opportunities are gaining momentum from Spanish speaking ministry with Crieve Hall to Signature to the Women's Prison. As we have consistently said, Room in the Inn and Lawrence Avenue will continue to be priorities. In two weeks, we will wrap up this conversation, for now, and we will see where we are. We hope to have four to six areas of ongoing, collective community ministry where we can serve, develop relationships, and give our money-all in the name of Jesus.

APPENDIX D

Acklen Avenue Church of Christ Survey

1. Are you currently in a small group?

2. If yes, which *best* describes your reason? (Please choose just one)

Good interaction for kids

Desire closer friendships

Desire conversations on the Bible

I like to participate in congregational life

Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. If not, which *best* describes your reason? (Please choose just one)

I'm too busy

I can't commit to another weekly thing

I'm just not a "small group" person

I would rather be at the building

That need is met elsewhere in my life

Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you work for a faith-based organization?

5. How many times have you volunteered for community ministries or nonprofits with fellow Acklen members in the last year?

0-2

3-4

5-7

8-11

12+

6. How many times have you volunteered outside of Acklen associated projects?

0-2

3-4

5-7

8-11

12+

7. How many names do you know of people who live on your street?

0

1-3

4-7

8-11

12+

**THINGS YOU DO**  
**Never, Occasionally, Quite Often, Very Often**

|  |   |   |    |    |
|--|---|---|----|----|
| I interact with co-workers outside of work.                              | N | O | QO | VO |
| I invite people to Acklen.   | N | O | QO | VO |
| I tell co-workers I am praying for them.                                 | N | O | QO | VO |
| I talk to friends about faith.   | N | O | QO | VO |
| I talk to friends about current events.                                  | N | O | QO | VO |
| I talk to friends about politics.  | N | O | QO | VO |
| I talk to friends about helping the poor.                                | N | O | QO | VO |
| I wonder how I will get everything done.                                 | N | O | QO | VO |
| I give money to non-profits that are not churches.                       | N | O | QO | VO |
| I eat out or shop within 2 miles of 900 Acklen Avenue other than Sunday. | N | O | QO | VO |
| I drive through 12 South/Edge Hill other than Sunday.                    | N | O | QO | VO |
| I spend time with Acklenites outside the building.                       | N | O | QO | VO |
| I think about joining another congregation.                              | N | O | QO | VO |
| I read the Bible at home.  | N | O | QO | VO |
| I pray other than Sunday.  | N | O | QO | VO |
| I buy the Contributor.   | N | O | QO | VO |
| I think about those who don not know Jesus.                              | N | O | QO | VO |
| I think about the spiritual formation of the Acklen kids.                | N | O | QO | VO |
| I leave worship on Sundays with a passion to help others.                | N | O | QO | VO |
| I leave worship on Sunday feeling spiritually fed.                       | N | O | QO | VO |
| I leave worship on Sunday feeling socially fed.                          | N | O | QO | VO |

| <b>PERSONAL REFLECTION</b>   | <b>True of me (T)</b>   | <b>Mostly True (MT)</b>    |    |    |    |
|--|-------------------------|----------------------------|----|----|----|
| <b>Sometimes True (ST)</b>   | <b>Rarely True (RT)</b> | <b>Not True of Me (NT)</b> |    |    |    |
| I enjoy sharing my faith.  | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I enjoy meeting new people.  | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| Worship is an important scheduling priority.                                       | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| Church Fellowship is an important scheduling priority.                             | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| Serving others is an important scheduling priority.                                | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I have good friends who are poor.  | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I have good friends of a different ethnicity.                                      | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I have good friends of a different religion.                                       | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I have good friends who are not religious.   | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I wish we had fewer church activities and helped people more.                      | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I believe small groups have been good for Acklen.                                  | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I know the people who live around me.  | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I think we need to be careful how much time we invest in helping others.           | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I want to live long term in Nashville.   | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I hope people we serve come to follow Jesus.                                       | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I believe Acklen needs to concentrate more on the neighborhood around the building | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |
| I believe Acklen needs to concentrate more on the neighborhoods where people live. | T                       | MT                         | ST | RT | NT |

**Circle words or phrases that describe Jesus.**

|                 |                         |                    |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Relevant        | Evangelistic            | Warm and accepting |
| Positive        | Concerned with the poor | Socially active    |
| Kingdom focused | Internally focused      | Externally focused |
| Busy            | Spirit filled           | Authentic          |
| Thoughtful      | Smart                   | Sheltered          |
| Judgmental      | Generous                | Kind               |

**Circle words or phrases that describe most churches.**

|                 |                         |                    |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Relevant        | Evangelistic            | Warm and accepting |
| Positive        | Concerned with the poor | Socially active    |
| Kingdom focused | Internally focused      | Externally focused |
| Busy            | Spirit filled           | Authentic          |
| Thoughtful      | Smart                   | Sheltered          |
| Judgmental      | Generous                | Kind               |

**Circle words or phrases that describe Acklen.**

|                 |                         |                    |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Relevant        | Evangelistic            | Warm and accepting |
| Positive        | Concerned with the poor | Socially active    |
| Kingdom focused | Internally focused      | Externally focused |
| Busy            | Spirit filled           | Authentic          |
| Thoughtful      | Smart                   | Sheltered          |
| Judgmental      | Generous                | Kind               |

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