

Please **HONOR** the copyright of
these documents by not
retransmitting or making any
additional copies in any form

(Except for private personal use).

We appreciate your respectful
cooperation.

Theological Research Exchange Network
(TREN)

P.O. Box 30183
Portland, Oregon 97294
USA

Website: www.tren.com

E-mail: rwjones@tren.com

Phone# 1-800-334-8736

ATTENTION CATALOGING LIBRARIANS

TREN ID#

Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)

MARC Record #

Digital Object Identification

DOI #

Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

CAPTURING THE POWER OF MID-SIZED, MISSION-FOCUSED GROUPS:
MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES AT OPEN DOOR CHURCH

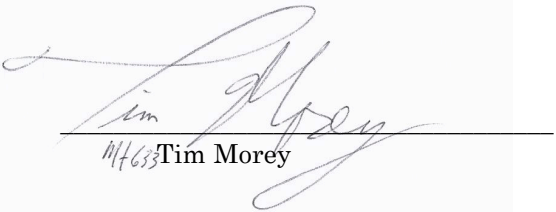
Written by

SCOTT S. PALMBUSH

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:



Tim Morey
Mt 653



Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: November 29, 2014

CAPTURING THE POWER OF MID-SIZED, MISSION-FOCUSED GROUPS:
MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES AT OPEN DOOR CHURCH

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

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

BY

SCOTT S. PALMBUSH
JUNE 2014

ABSTRACT

Capturing the Power of Mid-Sized, Mission-Focused Groups: Missional Communities at Open Door Church

Scott S. Palmbush

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2014

This project focuses on helping Open Door Church, in Mountain View, California, engage passionately in relationship building, local missions, and evangelism by creating mid-sized, mission-focused community groups. Open Door Church is located in the center of Silicon Valley, which draws entrepreneurial people from all over the world. The resultant diversity creates challenges for evangelism: traditional strategies often fail to connect with people unfamiliar with the North American Christian narrative and church culture. Rather than using attractional methods of church growth, this project seeks to grow a church that is integrated into everyday life and centered on mission.

This study first analyzes the impact of Silicon Valley's community dynamics on Christian witness and evangelism. It also examines Open Door Church's own culture, including its unique characteristics as a recently birthed multi-site church housed on another church's campus. These factors affect leadership, decision-making, and resource management and allocation.

The second part of the study engages the biblical and theological literature on group life and mission. It discusses the varying experiences of different-sized gatherings of Jesus' followers. It also explores the foundational issue of leadership development in terms of Jesus' discipleship model.

Finally, this study analyzes how mid-sized, mission-focused groups encourage people to learn about and follow Jesus Christ. A proposed pilot project is outlined that will assess the potential of these groups for sustaining relational connection among participants and maintaining a mission focus. The project entails selecting and training leaders, fostering a culture of discipleship and mission, and launching two new groups. A summary of relevant insights concludes the project.

Content Reader: Tim Morey, D.Min.

Word Count: 258

To my family: Rachel, Kyra, Luke, Cole, and Shane, who present me with a daily reminder that I am blessed beyond measure

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped to make this project happen. Emily Moberg Robinson, my editor, provided accountability and encouragement that enabled me to stay on track. Her thoughtful comments enhanced the precision of my writing but also reminded me of the value of honest feedback. It was a gift to work with her and learn from her on this project.

I also want to say thank you to the staff of Open Door Church and Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, especially Zack, Angelyn, Scotty, Grace, Becky, and Sue, who encouraged me to keep going when I felt stuck. They also provided the learning laboratory for many of the thoughts presented here, and have been fellow travelers on this road to missional community. Thanks also to John Ortberg, who taught me to keep ministry focused on the main thing: reaching people with the hope of the Gospel.

I would like to express thanks to Rob Schulze, Dave Arnone, and Brian Person, who share my passion for community and mission and who have helped me flesh out ideas and run missional experiments. Mike McCoy, my huddle leader, has faithfully modeled great leadership and helped me to understand what life in a new paradigm could look like.

Finally, I want to say thank you to my family, especially my wife Rachel, who shouldered the extra load that gave me the space and time to read about, study for, and write this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: MISSIONAL CHALLENGE/CONTEXT	
Chapter 1. ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS IMPACTING COMMUNITY AND EVANGELISM	14
Chapter 2. HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF MPPC	24
PART TWO: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS	
Chapter 3. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE IN THE AREA OF MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY	38
Chapter 4. THE PURPOSE AND NATURE OF THE CHURCH	59
Chapter 5. A THEOLOGY OF COVENANT COMMUNITY AND MISSION	73
PART THREE: THE PLAN	
Chapter 6. A PLAN TO LAUNCH MID-SIZED, MISSION-FOCUSED GROUPS	91
Chapter 7. THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS AND PLAN	104
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	118
BIBLIOGRAPHY	124

INTRODUCTION

This project is a call to missions and evangelism. In my own life, I have struggled to be faithful to the Great Commission when using the personal evangelism strategies often promoted by churches and Christian organizations. These strategies take many forms, but they generally involve confronting people (acquaintances or strangers) with the basic facts of the Gospel, attempting to convince them to turn their lives over to Jesus, and inviting them to a church service. I have read Scriptures and heard messages on the virtues of this approach. In the end, however, the best I can come up with is asking friends to Christmas Eve services. While this can be a nice experience, as an evangelistic strategy I have not found it to be particularly effective.

Moreover, the unintended consequence of traditional personal evangelism strategies often is an aversion to evangelism itself. The mind must reconcile message and reality. For me, this means I have largely surrendered evangelism to the same theoretical realm as the twenty-five pounds I need to lose—it is a great concept, but it is not likely to happen. Furthermore, I do not think I am alone. Most evangelical Christians speak passionately about the mission of the Church. Few, however, have had the experience of seeing friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This truth is reflected in church attendance with the majority of mainline

denominations experiencing numerical decline.¹ In my own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), there are six deaths for every baptism.²

This thirty-year decrease in the number of members and adherents has left many pastors and church professionals at a loss. Moreover, most of their explanations do not address the root cause of the decline. No longer restrained by mainstream social expectations people are exercising greater freedom and experiencing more profound challenges outside the Church. The Church, once a leader in the community, is struggling to remain relevant, and increasingly finds itself excluded from important conversations. Furthermore, many churchgoers are experiencing faith simply as a lecture on Sunday morning, rather than as a robust life lived in community and mission. Unfortunately, more and more people are discovering that they can live without this weekly lecture.

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (MPPC) is a large, west coast, evangelical Presbyterian church that shares roots with other congregations like Hollywood Presbyterian, Bel Air Presbyterian, University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, and First Presbyterian Church in Boulder, Colorado. MPPC's historic and continuing concern for growth and evangelism sets it apart from the general attitudes found in its mainline denominational home. The influence of evangelists

¹ Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, "'Nones' on the Rise," (Pew Research Center, 2012) accessed May 25, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. According to a Pew Research Center study, in 2007, 53 percent of the population identified as Protestant; by 2012, the number had dropped to 48 percent.

² Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Stated Clerk Releases PC(U.S.A.) 2012 Statistics," (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013), accessed May 25, 2014, <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2013/5/30/stated-clerk-releases-pcusa-2012-statistics/>.

such as Henrietta Mears, Billy Graham, and Bill Bright is felt strongly.³ The majority of MPPC's pastors have trained at Fuller Theological Seminary, and former MPPC elders and pastors hold various posts at Fuller today.

Five years ago, MPPC founded Open Door Church, a multi-site campus church, in Mountain View, California.⁴ Open Door Church, which is the focus of this study, is one component of a strategy to move past a variety of barriers that had stalled attendance and participation in MPPC for the previous ten years. In general, this strategy has worked. While growth (measured by attendance) did not climb as high as projected, the additional campuses have seen a modest numerical increase over the past five years. However, although this is good news, the nature and origins of the increase must be considered. A closer look has shown that most of the growth has resulted from Christians transferring to MPPC from other churches or re-engaging a dormant faith.

This growth is healthy for MPPC, of course, but it fails to ignite the passion of Jesus' challenge to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).⁵ According to simple demographics, the mission field continues to grow along with the population.⁶ In order

³ *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen, David W. Bebbington, and Mark A. Noll, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). As the Christian Education Director at Hollywood Presbyterian Church, Henrietta Mears influenced some of the most well-known evangelical pastors of the era. She also started a publishing company, Gospel Light, and founded Forest Home Christian Camp. Bill Bright is the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ.

⁴ An additional campus was established in San Mateo, California in 2007.

⁵ All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version Bible, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Paul Mackun and Steven Wilson, "Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010," (United States Census Bureau, 2011), accessed May 25, 2014.

for the Church to have an impact beyond the ever-shrinking number of people who grew up in a Christian context, fresh thinking and new approaches are required. At the same time, the Church must take into account the reality of how people change, grow, and live. In today's world, change is happening at an unprecedented rate; yet, the deepest needs of humanity and the truth of Gospel remain the same. Christians are called and challenged to play a role in God's plan within our current context. No matter how numb Christians have become to the word "evangelism," they are still commanded to reach out to people and share the hope of the Gospel (Matt 28:18-20).

Christians must recapture the early Church's passion and urgency for living out and sharing the Gospel, taking into account today's context and cultural reality. While exploring this question, a few key conversations have offered me some hope and have helped me to consider a different, nontraditional approach to evangelism. I have considered three concepts in particular: the emergence of a missional paradigm, the recovery of extended family and community relationships, and the development of a discipling culture within the Church. I have reflected briefly on some entrepreneurial, innovative methods of evangelism; however, my primary focus has been on the recovering and repurposing of older examples and models of community life.

The word "missional" was popularized when Darrell L. Guder edited and published a series of articles by authors belonging to the Gospel and Our Culture

<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-01.pdf>. According to US census data, the population of the United States increased from 9.7 percent to 308.7 million between 2000 and 2010.

Network (GOCN).⁷ Heavily influenced by missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin, the GOCN was formed to discuss the rapid changes occurring in Western society and the growing unease faced by the Church as it experienced dislocation from its former place in the culture.⁸ In their conversations, the GOCN became convinced that the Church should locate itself in a different place, both within its larger cultural context and within its mission of ushering in the Kingdom of God. According to the GOCN:

Mission is not just church extension. It is something more costly and more revolutionary. It is the action of the Holy Spirit, who in his sovereign freedom both convicts the world (Jn 16:18-21) and leads the church toward the fullness of the truth that it has not yet grasped (Jn 16:12-15). Mission is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is, rather, an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to its completion.⁹

This understanding of mission and evangelism places God at the center, and calls everyone to participate in the work that God is doing in the world. Christians do not fulfill their call to missions merely by supporting other missionaries; and rather than being an end in itself, the growing Church is part of a strategy to achieve the mission of God (*missio Dei*). In other words, instead of the Church having a mission, the mission has a Church. Christopher Wright, a protégé of John Stott, defines “biblically informed and validated” mission as “our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation

⁷ *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

⁸ “About the Network,” *The Gospel and Our Culture Network*, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.gocn.org/network/about>.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: an Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 60.

and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation."¹⁰ In other words, mission is the central feature of the Gospel—and it means more than simply getting people to a church building on Sunday.

However, while not formally stated as such, up until recently this has been the operative goal of the Church. Assuming enough attractive elements are present (a compelling sermon, children's programs, maple donuts, friendly people, welcoming ushers, self-help groups), these visitors might stay on and even contribute, both with their time and with their money. Alan Roxburgh writes: "Church systems have shaped themselves around these cultural values, self-consciously devising marketing strategies to meet the needs of seekers, rather than engaging holy imagination to discern God's plans and purposes."¹¹ Too often, Christians expect God to follow the plans they devise. Instead, they need to discern His will and purpose before engaging in new skills and strategies. This is how Christians can be a better part of God's mission.

Missional thinking has shifted my pastoral focus away from church programs and toward the larger mission of God's redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. It allows me to consider in a fresh way the role and purpose of the Church. This new perspective also makes me aware of my own assumptions regarding evangelism and sensitizes me to the deleterious effect consumer mentality methods have on evangelism.

¹⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22.

¹¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 160.

This thesis also examines how Christians can better understand the way community operates in the life of faith. Entering into most church communities requires some level of acceptance of a set of beliefs to be considered a member. This can create a barrier for people. As a contrast, George Hunter points to St. Patrick's highly successful approach in which he and his team entered into the cultural world of a potential convert and built a personal relationship first.¹² The monastic communities that Patrick started followed his approach welcoming people into the community, even before they became believers in Christ.¹³ This demonstrates the powerful role that community and connection play in facilitating the task of evangelism and sharing the Gospel.

Increasingly, while people are becoming less concerned with abstract proofs of the existence of God, they continue to be interested in the life that Jesus describes in the Gospels. In today's world, seekers want to know if religion and faith really work. Hunter's research, conducted through interviews with "secular people," focuses on "the prominence of the 'credibility theme' in inquiries about Christianity." Hunter writes: "First, some people wonder whether we really believe what we say we believe. Second, some people do not doubt that we believe it; they wonder whether we live by it. Third, some people do no doubt that we believe it or live by it; they wonder whether it makes a difference!"¹⁴ People look for answers to these questions by observing those who claim

¹² George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2000) 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

to follow the Gospel. They want to know if this community reflects the hope and promise of Jesus, and if it extends forgiveness and love.

Acquiring this information requires access to the lives of Christian people—which, in turn, requires Christians to be in community with nonbelievers in a way that allows them to see their faith lived out in everyday life. The ever-widening gulf between American secular and church culture makes this highly unlikely. Church often feels far too alien to those who have no familiarity with its longstanding rituals, language, and culture. Furthermore, attending a service may not be enough to answer these important questions, since visitors only see a small, Sunday-morning snapshot of Christians' lives, rather than a holistic view of their journeys. Unchurched people can get more information on what it means to be a Christian if they are willing to join a small group or class, but it still takes a long time to get a full picture. They may know an individual Christian—someone from school or work, perhaps, or a neighbor—but they do not see the Christian community in action. The lack of accessible and authentic Christian community means that for many people, questions about the effectiveness of faith (or, as Hunter calls it, the “credibility” of Christianity) simply go unanswered.¹⁵

People are hungry for meaningful connection and purpose. They long for a loving, gracious, and stable community. The Gospel life has an unmistakable attraction, and living in a Gospel community reveals the center: the person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus is discovered through a journey of community and shared life. Hunter

¹⁵ Ibid., 60.

observes: “The monastic communities produced a less individualistic and more community-oriented approach to the Christian life. This affected the way in which—in parish churches, communities, tribes, and families—the people supported one other, pulled together, prayed for one other, worked out their salvation together, and lived out the Christian life together.”¹⁶

A fundamental assumption of my paper is that authentic, accessible community has a unique power to facilitate the work of the Gospel message. People need to have the freedom to belong before they assent to a set of theological truths. This requires a different way of thinking about how Christians live out the Gospel in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, and in their relationships with others.

Finally, this project calls for a new emphasis on discipleship and the development of maturity and leadership within the body of believers. For centuries, professionals have guided the institutional Church, particularly in mainstream Presbyterianism, and leadership too often has been relegated to the realm of bureaucracy, institutional maintenance, and busy work. This has made it difficult for the laity to realize the importance and weight of their role in the mission of God. Most spiritual development in the Church today emphasizes teaching and acquiring knowledge about the Bible and faith. However, the Great Commission calls us to make disciples. Mike Breen makes the case that the Church has not always done a good job at this task:

The problem is that we don’t have a “missional” problem or a leadership problem in the Western church. We have a discipleship problem. If you know how to

¹⁶ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 30.

disciple people well, you will always get mission. . . . Jesus has not called you to *build* his church. In fact, in all the Gospels he mentions the church only two times. One time he mentions it, it's about conflict resolution. The other time? To say that *he will build his church*. Our job, our only job and the last instructions he gave us was to make disciples. And our out of this we will get the church. Out of this, the future will emerge, and out of this, there will be a missional wave the likes of which we have never seen.¹⁷

One of the things that I had to admit as I started this project was that I knew very little about how to make disciples. I have two seminary degrees and twenty years of ministry experience, but these only reinforced an academic approach to faith development. Even when people attended faithfully and participate in worship and small groups and other church programs, I wondered if they truly were living the adventure of faith in Jesus. I also wondered if there was a bigger role that I, as a pastor, could play. The Church needs a vision of mission that involves new ways of thinking about following Jesus and being His disciple. This requires a vision of discipleship embedded in community, responsive to God's leading, reproducible in others, and focused on mission.

These three conversations about missional paradigms, community relationships, and a discipling culture have led me to think about community and mission in new ways. Christians need to recapture the power of community by living out the Gospel in the context of people's everyday lives and neighborhoods. Mid-sized groups that operate like extended family can provide avenues for people to belong before they believe and to see the Gospel truth being lived out in the gritty context of real life. These smaller communities provide space for people to explore the question, "Does the Gospel really

¹⁷ Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2009), 13.

work?” Seeing the answer in the lives of Jesus’ followers will lead seekers to embrace a life with Him as well.

This goal of this project is to help Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and more specifically, the congregation of Open Door Church, to engage passionately in local mission and evangelism. This will be accomplished through the development of medium-sized groups of twenty to fifty people that encourage relational connectedness and a common mission focus. I propose a two-year plan that includes vision casting for relational evangelism, extensive leader training and development, and phased group launches. The project will be evaluated by tracking statistics for each group and through scheduled self-reports that include group activity.

As the campus pastor for Open Door Church in Mountain View, California, I shepherd and oversee our congregation of over 800 adults and children. Our multi-site congregation has strong ties to the original campus in Menlo Park; however, the majority of people at Open Door Church live in the cities and neighborhoods close to the Mountain View location. Work on this project will be directed at my congregation in Mountain View, with the hope that success in this context will influence the other congregations that make up Menlo Park Presbyterian Church.

Part One of this thesis lays out the context for the experiment with missional community, including a discussion of the many factors influencing the ministry of Open Door Church. Chapter 1 analyzes Open Door Church’s unique cultural and sociological context. This shapes the congregation’s evangelism strategy and determines the effectiveness of its ministry in both expected and surprising ways. In Chapter 2, I

examine the internal factors unique to Open Door Church and its parent, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church.

In Part Two, I develop the theological and biblical groundwork for the project. First, I review the literature on Reformed theology, community, evangelism, and discipleship that has shaped my thoughts and influenced my congregation's experiment with mission-focused groups. In many ways, Open Door Church's work builds on important discussions that have been going on for some time. Next, I analyze the intersection of church life and community groups, paying particular attention to their impact on mission and evangelism. With these insights in mind, I make the case that mid-sized, mission-focused groups can have a large impact on the Church's ability to reach out with the Gospel.

Part Three lays out a plan for the implementation these mid-sized groups, mission-focused groups. In Chapter 6, I discuss the details of the plan, including a breakdown of the groups' goals and objectives and an outline of the strategy as it relates to the church as a whole. In the Chapter 7, I present a proposed timeline for a pilot project, including all the steps of implementation. Finally, I conclude the thesis with a summary of relevant insights and discoveries.

PART ONE
MISSIONAL CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS IMPACTING COMMUNITY AND EVANGELISM

Open Door Church is located in the city of Mountain View, in the middle of California's "Silicon Valley." Today, many people associate Mountain View with its largest employer, Google. Nearby cities are home to other companies like Apple, Facebook, Netflix, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, and Cisco Systems. Silicon Valley has many of the world's biggest technology companies, and this shapes the environment of the area in a number of significant ways.

The Influence of the Technology Industry

Since the days of the Gold Rush, people have come to California looking for opportunity. Today is no different. Silicon Valley attracts ambitious and inventive people who dream up new products funded by venture capital money. The heroes of Silicon

Valley are the entrepreneurs who start with nothing and create iconic companies. The message of the Gospel has to compete with their world-changing ideas and ambitions.

Like the nineteenth-century Gold Rush, the twenty-first century “technology rush” is bringing people from all over the world to the Bay Area. Skilled workers come from India, China, Japan, Europe, and the Middle East. On any given weekend, ten different languages can be heard in Mountain View’s Shoreline Park. These immigrants bring elements of their home culture with them, including their faith and their gods. Unlike many parts of the country, in Silicon Valley there is less residue of the Christian narrative. This presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Since it is novel to them, many people are open to hearing about the Gospel. However, it is challenging for Christians to know how to begin talking with people who lack any faith context. In addition, language and cultural barriers can make conversations even more difficult, and misunderstandings are common.

Technology draws people with particular skill sets. Computer programmers, engineers, scientists, and other highly educated people are needed in this industry. Educated people, especially those in the hard sciences, often bring different kinds of questions to matters of faith. They tend to be very rational in their approach, looking for solid proof and weighing the pros and cons of organized religion. Many have a skeptical, even hostile view of Christianity; this creates a credibility gap, which Christians must acknowledge and bridge by using a thoughtful and intelligent approach. These smart skeptics are not content with simplistic answers that lack nuance or humility.

Education and Skepticism

Education is held in high esteem in the Bay Area. The region is anchored by two world-class universities: Stanford University in Palo Alto, and the University of California–Berkeley on the east side of the Bay. The technology industry also drives the demand for highly educated workers, who arrive with degrees from places like Harvard, Princeton, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This results in high levels of perceived self-confidence and independence—and, at times, palpable cultural arrogance. Bay Area residents tend to assume a liberal/progressive outlook and can look down on others who are not as “enlightened.” All of these cultural assumptions result in an even higher burden of proof for the Gospel message, creating challenges for evangelism. People of faith, especially more conservative Christians, can find it risky to share their beliefs openly, particularly at work. Fear of being labeled “backwards” not only makes it difficult to share the Gospel message, it also creates a conflict around identity: can an educated, intellectual person also be a Christian?

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the label “evangelical.” Much of the media-driven perception of evangelicals has centered on certain political issues, including the legality of gay marriage. This is an especially sensitive topic in the Bay Area, which is home to a large lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. While self-identified evangelicals hold a variety of positions on issues like gay marriage, the general perception is that evangelical Christians are on the wrong side of an issue of justice. This perception, in turn, biases people against considering the Bible—a book appearing to

condone discrimination—as authoritative in communicating truth about God and the world. It is difficult to make a case for Christian belief in this skeptical atmosphere.

The Bay Area population is very diverse: there is a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities and immigration statuses, and levels of education and income. However, for many reasons, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church primarily reaches out to a highly educated demographic.¹ Convincing this educated and confident audience of its need for a Savior is challenging. Along with a disproportionate number of people holding graduate degrees, Silicon Valley also is home to many consultants and paid experts. These are the people who tell others how to do things better. They are used to being the ones with the information and knowledge. It is not easy to reconcile this attitude with a faith that requires surrender, submission, and obedience (Prv 3:5-6). While at Stanford University, I worked with Campus Crusade for Christ. In an attempt to get students into conversations about faith, we employed a variety of strategies, including passing out dorm surveys and asking direct questions. When we talked with students, they often agreed with many of the truths outlined in Bible. When it came down to making a commitment, however, many of the students said that their lives were going well—they were at Stanford, after all—and they did not want to disrupt the balance by adding God. In other words, belief in God might be nice, but it certainly was not necessary. Success makes it difficult for anyone, not just Bay Area residents, to surrender to Jesus. However,

¹ A recent internal survey of the MPPC congregation showed that over 50 percent of the adults had completed masters or doctoral degrees.

because the education and income levels in this locale are well above the national average, this challenge is more pronounced here.

Busy Families and Stressed Out Children

Challenging dynamics also affect family life in the Bay Area. High levels of wealth drive up the prices of nearly everything, especially housing. According to the Zillow home value index for July 2013, the cost of a house in Mountain View is \$999,500—compared to the national average of \$161,100.² Even though salaries are high, most families need two wage earners to survive financially. Furthermore, widespread anxiety about money and the constant pressure to achieve impacts Silicon Valley's children as much as their parents. Many area children not only go to school, they also take music lessons, play several sports, and study another language. Predictably, this causes family life complexity and scheduling challenges. Frantic parents run around trying to capture as much opportunity for themselves and their children as possible. At the same time, they wonder if they are giving their children enough experiences to succeed in the Bay Area. This competitive cycle puts enormous pressure on children to perform at the highest levels. The results can be tragic. In the past few years, several Palo Alto high school students, crushed under the burden of these expectations, have taken their own lives.³

² "Zillow Home Value Index," Zillow, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.zillow.com/local-info/>.

³ Sarah Nettner, "Teen Train Suicide Cluster Shakes Affluent California Town," *ABC News*, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/palo-alto-struggles-rash-teen-train-suicides/story?id=8881813>.

This widespread pressure to achieve creates challenges for ministry in several ways. First, people who are trying to maximize time can struggle to make church attendance a priority. This trend can be seen even among committed church members. When people work extra hours during the week, their weekend time becomes even more precious: this is their only rest, and it needs to count. This, in turn, means that churchgoers expect services to be meaningful, relevant, and helpful, so that they can justify their time spent there. In addition, Bay Area weekends, including Sunday mornings, tend to be filled with children's sports and enrichment opportunities. Thus, the church now competes with a whole host of alternative activities for the Sunday morning time slot.

Second, there are few hours left during the rest of the week in which to participate in church programs and service opportunities, the traditional ways for people to learn and grow in faith. This makes it hard for people to connect with other believers and encourage their faith journeys. It also contributes to the perception that Christian faith is a once a week event, rather than a life lived with Jesus. Christianity becomes something added on to real life, rather than the center where everything is connected. Church consultant Lyle Schaller points out that "the biggest challenge for the church at the opening of the twenty-first century is to develop a solution to the discontinuity and fragmentation of the American lifestyle."⁴ Lack of time to maintain and nurture relationships creates this sense of fragmentation and its accompanying loneliness.

⁴ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 27.

Again, this phenomenon is not unique to the Bay Area. However, it is exacerbated by the prevailing drive to succeed, the long hours spent in demanding jobs, and the overscheduled children. Fragmentation puts enormous pressure on families with few community resources. In the midst of this challenging environment, the Church has an opportunity to share a hopeful message encouraging families to connect with one other and to live differently.

The Search for Meaning

Underneath the emphasis on success and education lurks the question of meaning. Most people have aspirations beyond simply making money—they want to change the world and leave their mark. Stanford University recently completed a massive financial campaign that raised \$6.2 billion to find solutions to the world’s five biggest problems.⁵ This desire to do something bigger for the sake of others is laudable. In fact, humans are created to hunger after and strive for a world where things are made right, and hopefully, many will benefit from these secular efforts (Rom 8:22-23). However, all efforts at redemption and restoration in the world remain incomplete without God’s participation (1 Cor 3: 6-7). Sin cannot be escaped by human efforts alone. Deeper issues must be addressed.

This widespread search for meaning creates both challenges and opportunities for evangelism. The challenge is to create a big enough vision to capture Silicon Valley’s

⁵ Stanford University, “Stanford Concludes Transformative Campaign,” *Stanford News Services*, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/2012/pr-stanford-challenge-concludes-020812.html>.

attention. While Jesus' vision for the world is bigger than anyone can imagine, people do not often see this lived out by His followers. Churches tend to focus on internal issues and problems that seem largely irrelevant to seekers. However, when local churches begin to focus on blessing their communities, interest and participation from neighbors and the larger community grow dramatically. Every spring, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church sponsors an event called "Compassion Weekend." Church members work alongside local community members on a host of service projects within a thirty-mile radius of campus. In the past year, over four thousand people participated in Compassion Weekend; hundreds of them were not directly connected with the church.

This follows a larger trend: community service is becoming increasingly popular, and opportunities are everywhere. Stanford University holds a global day of service that challenges students and alumni from around the world to serve their local areas.⁶ The local Jewish Community Center recently sponsored a day of service for Mountain View and the surrounding area.⁷ Even Starbucks sponsors opportunities to do projects in the local community.⁸ Tapping into this urge to make a difference and do meaningful work creates natural opportunities to connect people to faith communities. Speaking for God, the prophet Jeremiah instructed the Jews exiled in Babylon to "seek the peace and

⁶ Stanford Alumni Association, "Beyond the Farm," accessed May 26, 2014, <https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/volunteering/beyondthefarm/>.

⁷ Ranjini Raghunath, "JCC to hold Mitzvah Day for community service," *Palo Alto Online*, January 9, 2013, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2013/01/09/community-notebook-jcc-to-hold-mitzvah-day-for-community-service>.

⁸ "Let's Help Our Communities Thrive," Starbucks Coffee Company, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://community.starbucks.com/index.jspa>.

prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer 29:7). Caring for our cities, towns, and villages is important work because it demonstrates the heart of God. Properly motivated community service can help people connect to a larger vision and purpose in their lives, and opens up opportunities for conversations about faith.

The Obstacle of Wealth

One of the key ways that the Church has grown over the centuries is by demonstrating Jesus’ love in tangible ways. Through self-sacrifice inspired by devotion to Christ, followers of Jesus provide love and care to people with all kinds of needs. This faith-inspired care has been a key element in the spread of the Gospel. In fact, fourth-century Emperor Julian the Apostate recognized the impact of Christians’ sacrificial love on his fellow Romans:

[Christianity] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar; and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.⁹

Christians can make a case for the love of God by helping people in need.

However, in an affluent community, riches and success tend to insulate people from their own needs and dull them to the condition of their souls. The combination of wealth and a strong drive toward individualism makes people reluctant to admit weakness or seek help; and when in distress, they go to professionals rather than to the Church. Admitting

⁹ Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 29.

powerlessness over a problem or sharing any kind of brokenness runs deeply against the grain of Silicon Valley's success-driven culture, and surrender, a difficult task for anyone, is even harder. Jesus experienced this struggle as he tried to convince the rich young ruler to leave his money and become a disciple: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God" (Lk 18:25).

Living in authentic community requires being known. To be truly known means letting others see the places of personal struggle and in pain. While opening up one's life like this can be difficult, it can also bring healing and freedom. People in Mountain View are hungry for this kind of community, even if their needs remain hidden or masked. Often, it takes a dramatic failure—when wealth, education, and status become irrelevant—for people to open themselves up. Over the years, some of the best sources of growth for MPPC have been the recovery ministries that provide a caring environment for personal surrender and community development. Here, the church has found an excellent opportunity for ministry and a setting where people discover Jesus in deep and profound ways.

Receiving the Gospel requires brokenness, humility, and surrender (Mt 16:24). For the Church to operate in this space, it must reach below the surface and speak to the deeper needs that rest in the hearts of all people. A caring and supportive community is essential for facilitating God's transforming work.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF MPPC

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church was organized by the Presbytery of San Francisco on November 30, 1873. As a 141-year-old church, it has a long and rich history intertwined with the prominent people, culture, and stories of its local context on the San Francisco Bay peninsula. This history has deeply impacted the character and development of the church, its mission, and its emphasis on community.

A former mayor of San Francisco, Dr. Henry P. Coon, was one of the founders of MPPC. Leland and Jane Stanford also invested heavily in the church, until they turned their attention to establishing a university in honor of their son who died tragically at a young age. However, although these and other famous figures have made their mark on MPPC, more important to the church's character has been the way it has weathered hard seasons. The church nearly closed its doors in the early years of the twentieth century due to dwindling numbers and finances. However, during World War I, the church began

ministering to the troops who were training nearby; this brought mission vitality and new members to MPPC. A few decades later, post-World War II growth brought the church out of another slump that resulted from the Great Depression. The turmoil of the 1960s also created challenges for the church as it faced a cultural shift in values and attitudes toward organized religion; and yet again, MPPC rebounded. This history of overcoming difficult circumstances prompted the Reverend Don Hall, who pastored the church in the late 1940s and early 1950s, to call MPPC “the church of the pioneers.” He admired the congregation’s faithfulness, tenacity, and innovative ways of organizing church life and activity.¹

MPPC met for seventy-six years at 700 Santa Cruz Avenue in downtown Menlo Park. In 1950, after outgrowing the original church building, the congregation built a new and larger facility down the street at 950 Santa Cruz Avenue, where it continues to meet today. Since 2005, as part of the multi-site expansion, services have also been held at the original 700 Santa Cruz Avenue location, which includes a worship space, a coffee shop, and a hardware store. The more casual setting and smaller venue allow for increased community participation and has been especially attractive to families. Currently, about 25 percent of the congregation also meets at leased facilities in the nearby cities of San Mateo and Mountain View.²

¹ “The History of Menlo Presbyterian: The First 125 Years,” *The Almanac*, November 18, 1998, accessed March 15, 2014, http://www.almanacnews.com/morgue/1998/1998_11_18.sidebar.html.

² This number is based on an average adult attendance of 3,637 through March 2014.

The challenges of growth also are an integral part of the story of MPPC, today as well as historically. As of 2012, the church was listed as the thirteenth largest in its denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), with 3,382 members.³ Its evolution from a typically sized church to a large church has shaped the identity and mission of MPPC in profound ways. As the congregation has grown numerically, its presence in the local community also has become more pronounced. Many of these members and attendees are notable people in the community—Stanford professors, business leaders and executives, politicians, professional athletes, and venture capital investors. A highly visible location at the end of the Menlo Park’s main street also bolsters MPPC’s identity as an important and influential church. A local reporter recently pointed out the church’s place in the town, saying, “You probably either know someone or someone who knows someone who attends MPPC: The church, a cornerstone of the city’s community, has about 3,400 members and a couple thousand more people who attend weekly services.”⁴

Presbyterian, Reformed and Evangelical

As a Presbyterian church, MPPC follows a “reformed” theological perspective, influenced heavily by John Calvin. Reformed theology emphasizes God’s sovereignty and authority over all things (Col 1:15-18). God’s grace in giving his own son over to

³ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “Fifteen Largest PC(U.S.A.) Congregations Based on Membership Size, 2012,” Table 6, accessed March 2014, <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/research/pdfs/2012-cs-table6.pdf>.

⁴ Sandy Brundage, “Changes Ahead for Menlo Park Presbyterian Church,” *The Almanac*, February 25, 2014, accessed March 2014, <http://www.almanacnews.com/news/2014/02/25/big-changes-ahead-for-menlo-park-presbyterian-church>.

death on the cross is humanity's only hope for salvation—the only way to escape divine judgment for sin (Col 1:21-23). Faith, symbolized in the practice of infant baptism, is a gift of God (Eph 2:8). Followers of Jesus live lives of gratitude in response to this grace, partaking in God's redemptive work in the world and sharing the good news of salvation with other people.

In accordance with Presbyterian polity, the church is governed democratically by elected elders who seek to follow Christ as they lead the congregation. This structure reflects a theological emphasis on God's covenant and promises. In practical terms, a group of ruling elders and pastors, called the Session, governs all aspects of local church life. The role of pastor (also known as teaching elder) is largely to organize worship services and preach. Ruling elders provide leadership and direction, and serve three-year terms on the Session board. Church sessions are connected and supported through a regional body, called the presbytery.⁵ Representatives from the Session act for the congregation when they attend Presbytery. Higher governing bodies include the Synod, which provides governance for groups of presbyteries over large geographic areas, and the General Assembly, which is the highest governing authority in the PC(U.S.A.). Made up of delegates from every presbytery in the United States, the General Assembly has the authority to decide on policy and vote on changes to the denomination's constitution. Major changes are then brought back to the Presbytery level for ratification.

⁵ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order, 2013-2015* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013), 50-53.

As MPPC has grown, the importance of leadership, management, and governance have increased with it. The roles of church staff have become more complex and specialized. In many ways, the role of leadership has become tied to the success of the church. In the last few years, the increasing complexity and challenge of leadership has led to tension with MPPC's denominational home. The slow bureaucracy of the PC(U.S.A.), exacerbated by systems that failed to encourage bold entrepreneurial leaders, had created increasing dissonance between the denomination and the congregation. After careful study and deliberation, the Session of MPPC voted to recommend dismissal from the PC(U.S.A.), and to join a new denomination, the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO).⁶ On March 2, 2014, the congregation overwhelmingly supported this recommendation.⁷ MPPC will officially transition to the new denomination on June 11, 2014.

MPPC is an evangelical church, emphasizing the Bible as the Word of God, the importance of personal salvation, and an urgency toward mission and evangelism. This evangelical ethos was instilled in the congregation during the leadership of pastor Cary Weisiger, a graduate of Philadelphia's conservative Westminster Theological Seminary, as he led the church through the tumultuous cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. Weisiger's successor, the Reverend Walter Gerber, a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, built on the church's evangelical identity by emphasizing the role

⁶ ECO was founded in January, 2012 by former PC(U.S.A.) leaders who sought to create a denominational structure focused on growth and evangelism.

⁷ 93 percent of the members who voted supported the session's decision.

of Scripture, the importance of prayer, and the need for witness and evangelism. Gerber guided the church during the period of its most profound growth, when its membership more than doubled. He retired in 2002, after twenty-five years of ministry. Gerber was followed by another evangelical graduate of Fuller Seminary, John Ortberg. A gifted preacher who came to MPPC from Chicago's Willow Creek Community Church, Ortberg continues to lead the congregation towards deeper commitment to the mission of God and evangelism.

The Blessing and Challenge of Resources

While in its early years the church experienced frequent financial and numerical struggles, its recent history tells a different story. Growth in church membership since 1980 has led to increased giving, and the church's current abundance of resources reflects the affluence attained by people in the Peninsula. This season of abundance has raised different questions for MPPC; its focus has shifted from survival to stewardship, an important challenge for the church. Decisions about how much money to invest in new staff, buildings, local and global missions, and other worthy ministry efforts have required careful thought and prayer. Leaders must navigate the tension between providing for church members while at the same time investing in the community outside the church, locally and globally. Concern for evangelism and mission is reflected in both the church budget and in programs to help people learn the Bible and grow in faith.

Over the years MPPC has become a savvy investor. However, while financial resources can facilitate the mission of the church, they also can prove detrimental to

Christian development. Overly abundant resources often function as a disincentive to the kinds of stretching and growing that deeper faith requires. In my experience people sometimes “outsource” their spirituality to the professionals, without doing their own work. They attend a class on prayer rather than actually pray. They depend on the church to set up retreats, manage serving opportunities, and offer spiritual care. They see no need to sacrifice their own time and money, because the church is covering all aspects of ministry. These services offered by churches all are good things, but they also can create spiritual dependency instead of encouraging and fostering robust personal faith.

MPPC’s most painful lesson in stewardship came in the form of a \$21 million gift received in 2002. At the time, the leadership saw this enormous gift as a blessing and a mandate to grow. Operating on the assumption that a larger staff would accelerate membership growth and the ministry reach of the church, the church invested heavily in paid positions, including pastors, interns, missionaries, and administrative staff. However, while many excellent ministry initiatives were begun, ultimately the assumption proved false. The church grew slightly between 2002 and 2007, but it failed to meet the explosive growth predictions. Moreover, once the gift money was spent, the church’s income returned to its pre-2002 levels.⁸ In order to make the budget, years of layoffs ensued. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in low staff morale, decreased trust in leadership, and volunteer discouragement. Yet, it also brought clarity. The “staff equals

⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Comparative Statistics, Annual Editions 2002-2012* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013), accessed March 2014, http://apps.pcusa.org/tenyeartrends/report/771/all_statistics.pdf.

growth” equation was debunked and replaced with a new understanding of the need for congregational engagement. MPPC learned that while resources and programs provide invaluable help for people in their spiritual journeys, Christians also need to be personally—and sacrificially—invested in their own walk.

The leadership also developed a new appreciation for the value of scarcity. Limited resources can help focus an organization and keep it on track with the things that are most important; too many resources can lead to mission drift. These lessons continue to inform direction and ministry strategy as the church moves forward.

Moving Away from Fellowship Groups

Another development that has shaped some of MPPC’s recent history is in the area of group ministry. The idea that people should meet together in groups outside of Sunday morning worship is not new. Over the years, however, it has taken different forms and served different purposes. At a large church, these groups function like mini communities, allowing people to develop deeper relationships and friendships. Groups also can be a place for Bible study and learning, accountability, coaching, and even evangelism.

In 1927, the renowned Presbyterian pastor, Louie Evans, saw the need for increased community in the church, especially among families. Evans, together with his wife, invited small group fellowships into his home. Eventually called “Mariners,” their mission was to “nurture marriages and families in spiritual growth and service through

organized groups in Presbyterian congregations.”⁹ The Mariners gathered for dinner, recreation, teaching, and service. Some Mariners groups still meet regularly, although they tend to be comprised of older members who are continuing the tradition established years ago. Even if they no longer have Mariners, however, many churches have some type of fellowship groups that help people to connect and build relationships.

Fellowship groups can take many forms and have many different goals, although they share the common thread of building relational community. In recent years, however, some churches, including MPPC, have raised concerns about the collective focus of these groups. Although they were fostering a sense of community, they were not necessarily supporting the Church’s fundamental mission of making disciples. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger encapsulate this concern in their book *The Simple Church*: “Simple churches abandon all that is outside of the simple [disciple making] process because it threatens to steal attention and energy from what has been determined as necessary. Events, activities, and programs outside the process cause people to move in multiple directions. A lack of focus leads to scattering.”¹⁰ According to Rainer and Geiger’s philosophy of “the simple church,” large fellowship groups without clear purpose and direction actually distract from the overall mission of the Church. Success

⁹ Biographical Note, Louis H. Evans, Sr. Papers, 1915-1981, Archives and Special Collections of Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, accessed March 2014, <http://archon.wheaton.edu/?p=collections/findingaid&id=20&q= &rootcontentid=42349#id42349>.

¹⁰ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 77.

and growth requires a clear mission that is aligned with and supported by all programs in the church.

MPPC took this advice to heart and began to question the value of its larger groups, especially since their contribution to the evangelistic mission of the church was unclear. There was a sense that they had become “cul-de-sacs” where people would get stuck, lost, or comfortable, losing sight of the larger mission of reaching others with the hope of the Gospel. In response, some groups were dismantled, while others were retooled. Accompanying this process was a renewed emphasis on smaller groups of twelve or less that were not as likely to have their own agendas and could more easily be aligned with the purpose and emphasis of the church. While the logic and rationale of these decisions made sense to most people, actual implementation proved difficult. The decision to disband one group in particular, a thriving fellowship known as “Growing Families,” was enormously unpopular and met with significant resistance. In fact, even today some members still refer to Growing Families as a great personal loss and lobby for its return.

Today, while a few fellowship groups still meet, MPPC’s emphasis is solidly on the small group. Although the majority of the congregation supports this shift and finds small groups helpful and life giving, a desire for larger groups still remains, especially given the scale and scope of a church of MPPC’s size. While the organizational structure is arguably simpler, it can feel like a piece is missing. Therefore, it is important to consider whether a larger group offers something unique to the mission and ministry of the church that cannot be found in smaller gatherings.

Joseph Myers explores this question in terms of “proxemics,” the study of how physical space influences culture and communication. Myers explains that people interact in four spaces: public, social, personal, and intimate.¹¹ Since people connect differently in various types of spaces (i.e. group sizes), it is wise to have all of these types present in ministry. Corporate worship services allow people to experience connection in the “public” space, while small groups move people towards a more “personal” space. In between these two spaces is “social space,” small enough for light conversation and relational connection but large enough to provide a buffer allowing people the freedom to enter. This intermediate space is largely occupied by fellowship groups—the very ones that have fallen out of favor. A lack of social space means that people find it difficult to connect. This thesis, therefore, is driven by a renewed understanding of the need for these larger groups, both to provide social space and to connect people deeply with the church in mission and ministry.

Multi-site: One Church, Many Locations

The physical constraints of the church campus in Menlo Park triggered another strategic decision for MPPC in the early 2000s. The sanctuary on Santa Cruz Avenue was not built to accommodate a church of four thousand members. Moreover, as membership grew over the years, the size of the congregation began to strain the basic infrastructure of the church. People struggled to locate parking spots, hurried to get their children

¹¹ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 36.

checked into crowded Sunday school rooms, jockeyed to find seating in the sanctuary, and competed for space in the adult small groups and classes. Relationships with the local Menlo Park community also were strained, due to parking issues and noise complaints. Moreover, while a majority of church members called Menlo Park home, a significant number of people commuted from adjacent towns for Sunday services. This made it difficult for them to participate in church life and hindered their efforts to invite others to visit or join MPPC.

As the church wrestled these growth issues, a number of alternatives were proposed. These included completely renovating the campus in Menlo Park, and moving the church to a bigger location with room to build a larger facility. All of these options came with significant challenges and there was no clear best choice. This dilemma led the church to consider a new strategy: creating multiple campus locations nearby, which would allow the commuters to worship and serve with MPPC in their own communities. This innovative multi-site approach held the most promise, despite the lack of precedence in the PC(U.S.A.). In 2005, after studying the experiences of large nondenominational churches around the country that had successfully implemented the model, MPPC formally adopted the multi-site strategy.

Several years of prototyping followed, including experiments using a live video feed in worship, enabling people to experience the service in a room other than the sanctuary. While some were skeptical, the more relaxed, family-friendly venue soon became a huge draw. Emboldened by this success, MPPC launched two multi-site congregations between 2007 and 2008, in San Mateo and in Mountain View, cities

directly north and south of Menlo Park. Resources like preaching, administration, and curricula were leveraged in needed ways. New organizational systems and processes were developed, job descriptions were adjusted, and language was adopted to support a church spread across different geographical locations. This increased capacity enabled the church's attendance to grow after several years of plateauing, and widened its sphere of influence in the larger Bay Area.

As a result of the model's success, MPPC has committed to launch up to ten more campuses in the next five years, reaching into areas at the edge of its geographic boundaries. In this way, the church is living out its legacy: for more than a century, talented and faithful pastors and lay leaders have found many innovative ways to foster the congregation's growth and vitality. Today, people no longer think of MPPC as a single church in Menlo Park, but rather as a network of congregations with the same ethos, focus on mission, and connected leadership. This, in turn, has raised fundamental questions about the nature of fellowship groups. While the need for community is universal, the geographical and size diversity of MPPC has led to a new analysis and re-evaluation of groups, programs, relationship building, and connection.

PART TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE IN THE AREA OF MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY

This chapter reviews five influential books that have catalyzed and informed the philosophy of mission in the context of community. The authors examine the philosophical scaffolding for mission and evangelism; they also consider the nature and purpose of biblical community and its role in evangelism. Some analyze the relatively new concept of a “missional” church, and speak to the value of an incarnational approach to evangelism and mission. One author in particular, Mike Breen, presents a practical model for building evangelistic communities.

Donald K. McKim, ed., *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*

While significantly influenced by the historic scholars Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, Reformed theology is continuously developing. Successive

confessions the Church has adopted throughout the centuries demonstrate this evolution. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Order* “affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, ‘The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God’ in the power of the Spirit.”¹ Therefore, rather than analyzing the work of a single theologian, I have chosen a collection of essays, Donald McKim’s *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, that provides a broad overview of the key themes shaping contemporary understanding of what it means to be “Reformed.” For the sake of this project, I focus on those essays that present a Reformed perspective on evangelism and community.

Over the years, differing views on the role of evangelism have been a source of conflict within the Reformed Church. The Church has had to balance multiple perspectives on the most effective and culturally relevant ways to witness for the Gospel. However, too often the Church has drifted toward one pole or the other, creating opposing camps and division. Several essays in McKim’s collection explore the theological tensions related to the necessity and urgency of evangelism.

The Tension Between God’s Sovereignty and Human Involvement

The majesty and sovereignty of God is a central tenet of Reformed theology. The Book of Psalms describes God as perfect, loving, powerful, and wise—the creator and sustainer of all that exists. God is worthy of praise, love, and allegiance, and nothing can happen apart from His will. This emphasis on God’s sovereignty and providence,

¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order*, 2013-2015, 9.

however, has the potential to minimize the value and purpose of His creation. According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “the chief end of man is to glorify God.”² This foundational claim highlights the theological tension between God’s sovereignty and the Christian’s mandate to act on the behalf of other humans.

In his essay “The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition,” John Leith argues that for Calvin, “the glory of God and God’s purposes in the world [were] more important than the salvation of one’s own soul.”³ Moreover, Leith claims that when worshipping and glorifying God is prioritized over salvation, the urgency to share the Gospel is lessened. This is compounded by an emphasis on the theology of God’s electing grace—that God draws people to Himself as He wills, and humans can do nothing to either help or hinder Him. Under this theological framework, the role of the Church is to be a gathering place for the chosen. However, bringing glory to God also requires obedience and service, and the chosen have a role in God’s redemptive work in the world. This tension is inherent to Calvinism, which, Leith argues, teaches that “human beings are religious... not to satisfy their needs or to give meaning to their lives but because God has created them and called them to God’s service.”⁴ In God’s gracious providence, humanity has a role in bringing about His Kingdom.

² Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “The Shorter Catechism,” in *Book of Order, 2013-2015*, 175.

³ John H. Leith, “The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

Benjamin Wirt Farley also acknowledges this tension inherent in Reformed theology. In “The Providence of God in the Reformed Perspective,” he writes, “The mystery of our human existence is a function of the gracious decree of God. The true peace and wisdom of God is the grace and courage to accept the world as we find it (the courage to be) and to live boldly in it, in obedience to God’s redemptive love in Christ Jesus.”⁵ In other words, although God is firmly in control, this world is far from where He wants it to be. Farley resolves this tension by encouraging Christians to accept that God has placed His followers on this fallen earth for a reason. Christians gain courage from knowing they are loved and have purpose. Their obedient response is to make disciples and share the Gospel with those who are not yet believers.

This tension between God’s sovereignty and human action was further accentuated by the historical assumption of a fully converted society, sometimes referred to as Christendom. This was translated into the rubric of culturally reinforced faith, under which there was little felt need to make new converts or even share the Gospel. In his essay on the historical background of the Reformed Church, Robert S. Paul points out that Calvin, “like most of his contemporaries... believed that practically all the world that was to be saved had already been evangelized.”⁶ This assumption led reformers to elevate teaching and pastoring as the most important roles in the Church. They believed that the

⁵ Benjamin Wirt Farley, “The Providence of God in the Reformed Perspective,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, 92.

⁶ Robert S. Paul, “Reformed Churches and Evangelism: Historical Background,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, 354.

other spiritual gifts that Paul mentions in Ephesians (apostle, evangelist, and prophet) were reserved for another place and time (Eph 4: 11-13).

The Tension Between the Sacred and Secular

Philosophically dividing life into distinct sacred and secular spheres generated a second theological tension, which in turn affected the Church's sense of urgency about evangelism. In his seminal work, *The City of God*, completed in 426, Augustine developed the concept of the two separate cities (or kingdoms).⁷ The Kingdom of God is the place of His primary activity and work. The kingdom of the world eventually will be destroyed, when God's rule is consummated upon His return. In this framework, the sacred Kingdom of God—where He is worshipped and followed—becomes the focus of Christian activity. The secular kingdom, on the other hand, is filled with the everyday experience of imperfection, pain, sin, death, and ultimate destruction. Augustine's dualism created a wall between the Church and the world. Well-intentioned believers were afraid of being corrupted by the secular world, and interested potential converts found little common ground from where they could understand the life of the Christian.

Although Calvin undoubtedly was influenced by Augustine's dualism, he also believed that Jesus Christ has dominion over all things, including history.⁸ In this vein, Abraham Kuyper, the early twentieth-century Calvinist writer and Dutch statesman,

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. R.W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸ Donald McKim, "A Reformed Perspective on the Mission of the Church in Society," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, 364.

asserted, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”⁹ Life is not divided up into separate spheres; rather, everything belongs to Christ. McKim points out that “this view of Christ as Lord of history means that Reformed Christians have envisioned no areas of human endeavor or thought as exempt from the reign of Christ. All are valid fields of mission and ministry.”¹⁰

Still, even with this understanding, a form of dualism continues to exert practical influence on the way many Christians live today. Often, those who follow Jesus insulate themselves so that they only encounter other believers: they limit relationships to church friends, they homeschool their children or send them to Christian schools, they read only Christian books, and they listen only to Christian music. The isolating effects of this retreat have been documented by missiologist Todd M. Johnson, who recently found that twenty percent of non-Christians in North America do not "personally know" any Christians.¹¹ In the absence of relational interaction, it is difficult to imagine how these people will be exposed to the Gospel. This relational divide, stemming as it does from a dualistic tension between the sacred and the secular, has a profoundly negative impact on the ability of committed Christians to evangelize.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 488.

¹⁰ McKim, "A Reformed Perspective," 364.

¹¹ Center for the Study of Global Christianity, *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970-2020: Society, Religion, and Mission* (South Hamilton, MA: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2013), 63, accessed April 20134, <http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>.

In this collection of essays, McKim presents a Reformed perspective on important areas of faith and practice. Reformed theology, especially due to its emphasis on the sovereignty of God, helps the Church keep a grounded perspective on its role in the world. It also helps to name some of the challenges found in ministering in a world created good by God and at the same time deeply flawed by sin.

**Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret:*
*An introduction to the Theology of Mission***

Lesslie Newbigin, an influential writer and missionary, has significantly shaped current views of ecclesiology. While serving in the mission field, he discovered that many of the assumptions about the nature of the church and its strategy for evangelism and mission actually were proving to be false. In response, Newbigin wrote *The Open Secret*, developing a practical theology of mission and the church born out of his own experience as a missionary.

The Open Secret challenges both the western world's assumption of power and the "Christendom" ecclesiology that focuses on traditional forms. Newbigin places God—not the western Church—at the center of mission. The Church bears witness to God's redemptive work in the world, which includes fallible people living changed lives through the power of the Spirit. This interaction is crucial, according to Newbigin: for a seeker to seriously evaluate Christianity's claims, he or she must first see faith in action. When the work of the Holy Spirit is evident in the world, people take notice. They ask questions and engage. "Mission," claims Newbigin, "is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is,

rather, an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to its completion.”¹² To the extent that the Church walks in humility and reflects life in the power of the Spirit, it becomes a vehicle for the Gospel. “The real triumphs of the Gospel have not been won when the church is strong in a worldly sense; they have been won when the church is faithful in the midst of weakness, contempt, and rejection.”¹³

While proclamation will always be an important part of the life of the Church, mission must also include the witness of faith lived in real time. The authority of the Bible cannot be an evangelistic presupposition when the Church is trying to reach a biblically illiterate population. Instead of interrogating the Bible, people evaluate the claims of Christian faith based on a more basic, practical question: does it work? Seekers wonder if greater love, hope, joy, healing, and purpose can be attributed to something outside of human capability and strength. Christians need to recognize this, and demonstrate in tangible ways how Jesus accomplishes His redemptive work in and through their lives.

Newbigin also addresses the perils of converting people to church rather than to Jesus. He cites the work of Fuller Seminary missiologist, the late Donald McGavran, who decried the ineffectiveness of “mission stations” in furthering church growth on the

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 61.

¹³ *Ibid*, 62.

mission field.¹⁴ Under this model, new converts essentially were detached from their natural local community, and were required to live within the confines of the cultural and ethical world of the local missionary who led them to Christ. Newbigin explains that this policy has two negative effects:

On the one hand, the convert, having been transplanted into an alien culture, is no longer in a position to influence non-Christian relatives and neighbors; on the other hand the energies of the mission are exhausted in the effort to bring the converts, or more often their children, into conformity with the standards supposed by the missionaries to be required by the Gospel.¹⁵

Forcing people choose between their home community and the Gospel places an unnecessary—and unbiblical—barrier to the message.

While cultural evangelism was a deliberate strategy of nineteenth and twentieth century missions work, its legacy remains evident in most modern western churches. As part of an invitational culture, the Church's main evangelism strategy has been to encourage members to invite people to a weekly service. In order to fit in, invitees must adapt to the Church's unique language, customs, and behaviors that most regular attendees do not even notice. However, applying Newbigin's practical evangelism philosophy provides a broader and exciting range of options. Congregations can enter into the life of the wider community, instead of just inviting people in to their space. Christians can share the truth of the Gospel with their neighbors and disciple others from

¹⁴ Donald A. McGavran, *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 33.

¹⁵ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 122.

within in their own community setting, instead of only from the confines of the church. This new freedom is a major theme of the “missional” church.

Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*

Missional Church, edited by Darrell L. Guder, is a collection of essays responding to Lesslie Newbigin’s work. Newbigin challenged traditional paradigms, encouraging churches to adopt a missionary outlook rather than retaining a traditional self-contained, insular perspective. The authors of *Missional Church* seek to apply this new paradigm to the contemporary cultural milieu of the North American Church. The book casts a vision for a Church that understands itself to be a community on mission, rather than a vendor of religious goods and services.¹⁶ While some of its authors discuss practical considerations, *Missional Church* primarily raises questions about current practices and models, and suggests how they might be transformed by employing a “missional” or “sending” paradigm. The word “missional” entered the common Christian lexicon largely due to Guder’s book and the conversations it sparked.

A foundational premise of the book is that the Church is not “a place where” but “a people who.” While this has not been stated formally in a creed or as an official theological position, most modern churches have drifted into a Christendom understanding of themselves as the place where certain things happen. According to Guder, “Popular grammar captures it well: you ‘go to church’ much the same way you

¹⁶ Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, 84.

might go to a store. You ‘attend’ a church, the way you attend a school or theater. You ‘belong to a church’ as you would a service club with its programs and activities.” Guder decries this sensibility, instead calling the Church to be the “bearer of the missional responsibility throughout the world both near and far away.”¹⁷ In other words, the Church’s responsibility is to proclaim the Gospel in an accessible manner for all people. The Church cannot only be concerned for those who walk in the door; it must also share a concern for those on the outside. According to *Missional Church*, Christians must live as a “sent” people going out and living their faith among those in their community.

Accepting the idea that God is a missionary God and Christians are a sent people creates a new challenge for the Church. In order for the Church to live out this calling in the communities and cultures where it finds itself today, a renewed understanding of the Gospel itself is required. People discover the good news by looking carefully at the Gospel that Jesus Himself preached: “It was this message that Jesus placed on the lips of disciples whom he sent out to share in the fulfillment of his mission. ‘As you go, proclaim the good news, The Kingdom of heaven has come near.’”¹⁸ This coming Kingdom, or reign, of God was the center of Jesus’ message: God has come near through Jesus Christ and He is reclaiming and renewing His creation.

A Christendom perspective places the Church at the center of God’s Kingdom. However, according to *Missional Church*, “the divine reign expresses itself in a unique,

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸ Ibid., 89.

though not exhaustive or exclusive, fashion in the church.”¹⁹ God’s concern for His creation extends beyond the Church and its own understanding of mission. In fact, the Church must witness to and represent the reality of the reign of God in the world beyond its own walls.

Christian community is one of places where the reality of the Kingdom is represented. Missional communities are to be “a source of radical hope, to witness to the new identity and vision, the new way of life that has become a social reality in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ It is in the context of a loving and sacrificial community that the Church makes Jesus Christ visible to the world. Christian community demonstrates an alternative way of life, centered on the person of Jesus. Practices that cultivate truth, peace, wholeness, and holiness are worked out and tested in these community relationships. This is the apologetic that gives credibility to the power of Jesus and His coming Kingdom.

Guder and his coauthors shed new light on the purpose of both the Church and community relationships. Followers of Jesus bear the message of the coming reign of God. They must live this out in a manner that opens up access to people in the larger community. There is no one prescribed way to do this, no single form such a community must take. The imperative, according to *Missional Church*, is to discover new ways of being the Church.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in *Missional Church*, 153.

**George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism:
How Christianity Can Reach the West... Again***

In *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George G. Hunter reacquaints readers with the model of evangelism successfully employed by Saint Patrick as he ministered to the Irish Celts. Patrick's evangelistic techniques fit with the Celtic culture and way of life. He began with a relational focus and invited people into the Christian community, allowing them to see faith lived out. As they became more comfortable in the community, they were able to engage in meaningful conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship. Over time, they became increasingly convinced of the truth of the Gospel. At this point, they were encouraged to make a commitment of faith. Patrick's Celtic model stood in contrast to the contemporary Roman evangelistic model, which required a "civilized" society that could read and understand theological propositions. The Roman strategy for evangelism followed the logical progression of presentation, decision, and assimilation.²¹ Many churches today, including MPPC, still employ the Roman model in their approach to evangelism.

Hunter highlights the communal nature of Celtic evangelism. Rather than using individualistic forms, like one-on-one conversations, Celtic Christians approached evangelism as a team. This ensured that Christians "supported each other, pulled together, prayed for each other, worked out their salvation together, and lived out the

²¹ George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2000), 53.

Christian life together.”²² In many ways, the life of the community became a vehicle for engendering trust among pilgrims and seekers. Celtic monasteries (unlike Roman ones) were built in the middle of existing towns and villages, and offered practical goods and services. However, although the monasteries were deliberately integrated into the towns, these industrious, welcoming, and thoughtful communities also represented a distinct lifestyle. Their very architecture set the monasteries apart: visitors entered through a gate into a circular space enclosed with a wall, which “signified the ‘alternative’ way of life, free of aggression and violence and devoted to God’s purposes which the community modeled for the world.”²³ In this sacred space, interested seekers had a chance to see faith in action and experience a different way of living. They could evaluate whether the words of the Gospel and the actions of the community lined up. In so doing, they were captured by the sense of purpose and mission that defined and motivated Christian communal life.

Hunter’s analysis of fifth-century Celtic evangelism offers many lessons for the twenty-first-century Church. The Celtic approach makes evangelism a community responsibility, taking the burden off of the individual. Every person has a role to play in spreading the Gospel; while the thoughtful articulation of the Gospel message is important, apologetics and theology degrees are not prerequisites for evangelism. Rather, it is the actions of the faith community that make the Gospel credible to seekers. No one listens to people they do not trust.

²² Ibid., 30.

²³ Ibid., 29.

Moreover, following the “belong before you believe” strategy means that welcoming people into the community is the first step of evangelism; this then leads to belief and commitment.²⁴ Creating a sense of belonging, by giving people a role and ensuring they fit in, should be the fundamental task of church groups. Hunter does not explicitly address group size, but it is clear that the size must allow new people to feel welcomed and gain a sense of belonging.

Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*

Jean Vanier is known for his work with mentally handicapped people. As one who finds deep value and worth in those whom society often ignores, Vanier is passionate about the way community can bring Christ’s healing and freeing presence into every individual’s life. Vanier’s 1989 book, *Community and Growth*, is a comprehensive study of community and the Christian life. In this discussion, I focus on Vanier’s analysis of how mission informs and feeds the life of a community.

According to Vanier, the Church’s primary mission should be sharing the life-giving message of Jesus that enables everyone to live as God intended: fully and abundantly. This is not always easy. Following the example of the Jesus means that for a community to offer life to others, a kind of death is required. New life comes from deeply trusting in Jesus; “this can only be done if communities and people are poor and humble, letting the life of God flow through them.”²⁵ The good news—that the power of the Spirit

²⁴ Hunter, *The Celtic Way*, 55.

²⁵ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 87.

gives life—must be demonstrated by people who are actually living in the power of the Spirit, who are relinquishing control and experiencing the freedom of trusting the God who loves and cares for them. This is what brings hope to those who are struggling or in pain, and the mission of a community is to demonstrate this kind of surrendered life, both in word and deed.

Vanier cites the different ways that Christian communities have demonstrated God’s life-giving presence in the world, explaining that the mission of a community is rooted in the issues found in the community itself. Passion is ignited from personal pain and the need to experience freedom and grace; once finding that “inner freedom” in the context of community, people then are able “to give it to others; to radiate it, to offer good news to others.”²⁶ When people share a sense of urgency coming from their own passion and healing, they form a different kind of community: one characterized by a new sense of urgency and a stronger bond.

This sense of mission must extend beyond the group’s own need for healing and freedom. Vanier includes a quote from psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim: “Community is viable if it is the outgrowth of a deep involvement in a purpose which is other than, or above, that of being a community.”²⁷ Community for its own sake does not produce life change or the freedom that comes from living in Christ. In fact, without a sense of mission, communities can devolve into groups that simply share circumstances, personal

²⁶ Ibid., 88.

²⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, *Home for the Heart* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), as quoted in *Community and Growth*, 90.

preferences, or geography. These factors do not provide the kind of glue or stamina that lead to change and growth; instead, they result in boredom, apathy, and disillusionment.

Vanier acknowledges that communal missional living is hard work. The journey of self-sacrifice and dying to personal needs and wants is not easy. Furthermore, it does not necessarily get easier with time or in the company of different people. Staying connected, humbly loving others with Christ's love, and tenaciously remaining focused on God's call always will be challenging, regardless of the circumstances. These challenges can be a barrier for people, since "many want community and a feeling of being together, but... refuse the demands of community life."²⁸ It can be tempting to promote community without acknowledging the real costs. These challenges, however, provide the path for growth in character by requiring an increasing dependence on the power of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns of "wish dreams" that make community into an idol or tool for self-fulfillment; these "must be banished if genuine community is to survive."²⁹

**Mike Breen, *Leading Missional Communities:
Rediscovering the Power of Living on Mission Together***

Mike Breen's *Leading Missional Communities* is a practical guide to living as a community on mission. *Leading Misisonal Communities* provides instruction and advice on community establishment, leadership development, discipleship, growth strategies,

²⁸ Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 111.

²⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 7.

structuring gatherings, dealing with children, and evangelism. Breen distills these principles from his many years of experience and experimentation with various parish groups in England. He and his team were able to recreate the success of these mission-focused groups in the American church setting, when they moved to the United States to expand their ministry and share their experience with other church leaders.

Breen uses the popular term for mission-focused, mid-sized groups, calling them “missional communities.” These communities have their roots in *oikos*, a Greek word meaning “household.” In the New Testament, the *oikos*, or extended family, worked together to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19). According to Breen, modern missional communities are meant to conform to this earliest picture of biblical community: the goal for the Church is to live as a community of extended families on mission together with God. The group leader is commissioned “to compassionately reach out to those around [the community], invite them to join... in community, share the story of the Gospel, make disciples, and gather them into families to follow Jesus together.”³⁰ The programmatic missional community strategy becomes a structured way to develop the more organic *oikos*.

In Breen’s model, missional communities have five defining characteristics. First, in order to work as an extended family, the communities have between twenty and forty members. The size of a group impacts both the way it operates and the way it is experienced. If the group is too small (six to twelve people), it can feel too intimate or

³⁰ Mike Breen, *Leading Missional Communities: Rediscovering the Power of Living on Mission Together* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2013), 5.

intense for a visitor. Most people like to have some degree of anonymity before entering into a close-knit community. In addition, a larger group has more people to share in the responsibility for its mission and ministry. This keeps the work from becoming overwhelming for any one person, and helps to maintain a true team approach. In contrast, if the group is too large (more than fifty people), it is difficult for members to be known and loved, to feel they belong, and to contribute meaningfully to the community. Breen describes this mid-sized group as “small enough to care but big enough to dare.”³¹

Second, missional communities are established with a clear vision. In fact, the glue and motivation for these groups comes precisely from their mission focus: to share the good news and make disciples in a specific neighborhood or network of relationships. Accomplishing this vision requires time and the patience to live intentionally with the people God puts in one’s life. This is a form of incarnational ministry. Without a passion for mission, community groups drift into becoming social clubs or Bible studies, rather than vehicles for making new disciples.

Third, missional communities have lightweight and low-maintenance structures. Too much programmed activity creates a burden for both leaders and members. This detracts from incarnational ministry opportunities and relationship building. It also leads to burnout and discouragement. The community needs to work within the lived reality of its members’ lives. This means that the schedule and program must follow a sustainable

³¹ Ibid., 7-11, 8.

path that is not dependent on one person's heroic efforts. Every person in the group needs to participate, so the group's structure must reflect its members' abilities and resources.

Fourth, multifaceted leadership is a key component of missional communities. Community leaders help gather and inspire members, while keeping the group focused on the mission and vision. However, leaders also need to be collaborative, able to work with the larger church as well as with their own group members. While there is room for freedom and creativity, missional communities do not have the same levels of autonomy and self-direction as church plants (although they could be the seeds of one). They must be connected closely with the church leadership for accountability and support.

Finally, these groups follow consistent rhythms of communal worship, fellowship, and mission. This requires community members to intentionally create opportunities to spend time with one other and their neighbors. Group members must develop rhythms of communion with God in worship. They need to find times and places to play together and build their own friendships and relationships. They also need to weave missional practice and hospitality into their lives, so that there is space for new people to be invited into the community.

The strength of Breen's book lies in the concrete picture it provides. While it can seem mechanical in its approach, *Leading Missional Community's* detail and specifics make it possible for readers to move from theory to actual practice. Breen's model has been applied successfully across different denominations, theologies, church sizes, and structures. I expect it will have a very positive impact within MPPC's large multi-site church context.

The books reviewed in this chapter employ a variety of lenses through which to analyze the place of community in God's redemptive work. Community plays a unique role in evangelism by modeling new life in the present and coming Kingdom of God. When Christians view themselves as a sent people, mission becomes centered on living life intentionally in the world, rather than on the successful implementation of a church-centric program. More specifically, mid-sized groups are optimal for capturing the strengths of community in ways that make it both effective and sustainable.

CHAPTER 4

THE PURPOSE AND NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The Church is a gift of God. The creator of all things has provided the Church for His people and the world He loves. The Christian faith is to be lived in the context of a loving community, where people are taught, shaped, challenged, and sent out into the world. The Church's organization, priorities, and theology, however, have evolved—sometimes contentiously—ever since it was founded. Not long after Pentecost, arguments arose about membership, practices, and mission focus, and different forms of the Church continue to proliferate to this day. Various cultural, political, and theological assumptions and realities have required the gathering of believers to adapt and reform. This means that a universal definition of the Church is elusive. Even the most familiar and widely accepted wording, like the Nicene Creed's "one holy catholic and apostolic church," will be interpreted in diverse ways, both by individuals and by denominations.

Presbyterians look to the great confessions of the Church to provide guidance and direction. According to “The Scots Confession,” written by John Knox in 1560, “where Christ is, there is the true Church.” Following along these lines, Reformed Christians have defined the true Church as located wherever the Word of God is truly preached and heard, the Sacraments are rightly administered, and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.¹ The meanings of the words “truly,” “rightly,” and “uprightly” have been debated hotly since the Scottish Reformation. However, this broad definition starts in the right place: with the presence of Christ. The nature and purpose of the true Church center on the person and presence of Christ. When a church drifts away from this focus, it becomes more of a human institution and less of a divinely empowered community. In the same way, the more a church reflects the life, presence, and purpose of Jesus, the more it becomes part of “the Body of Christ” (Col 1:24). Theologian Daniel Migliore says, “The Gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is always greater than our theologies, including our theologies of the church. When the church keeps its eyes on Christ, it is in touch with the one necessary power of continuous reform and renewal of ecclesial life.”² Presupposing that Christ is at the center of any true Church, this chapter outlines a theology of the Church that emphasizes relational community and evangelism. It explores the incarnational, relational, and missional nature of the Church.

¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “The Scots Confession,” in *The Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013), 20.

² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 199.

The Incarnational Nature of the Church

The Gospel of John begins with the famous description of the incarnation: “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). The profound mystery of God becoming a human and yet still being in nature God is a constant comfort to Christians. God is no longer out in the void, but right here with us.

God had heard the cries of His people. He knew the reality of pain, injustice, and fear, and He would defeat the sin lying underneath it all. Moreover, He would not do this from afar; He Himself would enter the world, in the form of His son. Jesus made this clear, saying, “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and you have seen Him” (Jn 14:7). Jesus lived with His people, experiencing every aspect of their lives. He entered into the gritty reality of human existence; therefore, He truly understands and knows us as humans: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin” (Heb 4:15).

God entered into life with His creatures in a way that demonstrated His love, concern, and solidarity. “He bears, not merely cures, our sins” (Mt 8:17, Is 54:3, 1 Pet 2:24). He is a God who can be trusted, because He has walked in our shoes. Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the Word, promised that God loves us and that we are worth saving. He also demonstrated the amazing extent and scope of that love. As God incarnate, Jesus

“[effected] in His vicarious humanity our reconciliation.”³ The incarnation shows us the truth about God, and in some way starts healing our estrangement from Him.

As the Body of Christ, the Church should be a place where divinity and humanity meet through the power of the Spirit. The world should see Christ reflected in the lives of His followers, as they enter into broken places. As Todd Speidell claims: “Our participation in the ministry of the incarnate one, who lived his life concretely in a particular place for others, lays a priority on localized love.”⁴ In other words, the Church should be an agent of proclamation by its very presence in the local community and the world. Through sacrificial love and generous service, the Church demonstrates a God who is engaged and caring. In addition, through these very acts empowered by the Spirit, the Church becomes an agent of healing and restoration in its community.

Unlike Jesus, who was fully divine as well as fully human, the Church can never perfectly present a picture of God. Sin is still at work in the lives of believers, and consequently, sin is still at work in the Church. The Church is made up of people trying to take off the old self and put on the new self that delights in the ways of God (Rom 7:21). Jesus’ incarnation meant that the Kingdom of God had come near (Mk 1:15), and His death and resurrection ushered in a new reality of this Kingdom. However, the Kingdom will not be fully realized until Jesus returns in glory. In the meantime, the

³ Todd H. Speidell, “Incarnational Social Ethics,” in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family*, eds. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990), 140, 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

Church must live an incarnational life in this already/not yet Kingdom. Stanley Grenz, in *Theology for the Community of God*, asserts: “God’s rule is his ultimate intervention in human affairs. The coming Kingdom, consequently, creates a new way of life in the present.”⁵

The purpose of the Christian life is not to suffer through the present evil days in the hopes of some amorphous future reward. On the contrary, God’s redemptive work in the world is happening right now, in real time. In fact, according to Richard Niebuhr, Christ is “the converter of man *in* his culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning of men from self and idols to God *save in society*.”⁶ Through the power of the Spirit, Christians see glimpses of God’s Kingdom in the middle of their messy lives: people are receiving salvation and living changed lives, all in the context of the Church community. As seekers and new believers enter into this community, this picture of redemptive living inspires them to faith and surrender. There is hope that life can be different and better, even on this side of heaven. Living redemptively in the present moment is an entirely Christian concept: “Eternal life is a quality of existence in the here and now.” This incarnational understanding of the Church is “less concerned with conservation of what has been given in creation, less with

⁵ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 619.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 45. Emphases mine.

preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the divine possibility of a present renewal.”⁷

The Church’s incarnational nature allows it to point to a reality beyond itself, thereby bringing hope and encouragement to the world. God loves His people, and His people can experience this love in the midst of an imperfect community. The Church is not without sin and yet, sustained by God’s incarnate power and love, the Church can still point to the coming Kingdom through the lives and experiences of its members. This is the witness that leads people to a saving faith.

The Relational Nature of the Church

The Church also is a community of people connected to one other by relational bonds, not merely a collection of individuals who attend the same event every week. These connections must be intentional and meaningful—but at the same time, and most importantly, this community is brought together not by careful selectivity or good judgment, but through the work of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Church operates much like a family, with Jesus as its head.

The Scriptures frequently use the family model to describe the relationships within the community of faith. Israel, in fact, originated as a single family; it grew into a nation distinguished by a common lineage and the worship of a persistent God. Born into the family of Israel, Jesus lived, worshipped, and taught in a close-knit, relational community. Following His death and resurrection, a small group of Jesus’ followers

⁷ Ibid., 195.

gathered and grew into the Church—which, in the Book of Acts, is often described as a family. Believers met in one other’s homes, shared meals, helped one other financially, and worshipped together (Acts 2:42-47). Fellow believers were referred to in family terms: brother, sister, son, daughter, grandparent (Acts 12:17, Rom 7:4, 1 Cor 4:17).

Relational, interdependent community mirrors the very nature of God, who Himself exists as a community of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Daniel Migliore says, “God’s will for community with and among the creatures is an expression of God’s faithfulness to God’s own eternal life, which is essentially communal.”⁸ Reflecting the nature of God, the Church exists communally in its life and purpose. For this reason, the Body of Christ cannot be represented adequately by any one individual. It is the community of believers, working together, who form the body, and every member has a crucial role to play. God has made His people to be interdependent. From Him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph 4:16). Christians cannot grow in faith absent from community; and the world cannot see the full Body of Christ in the absence of community, either.

The Missional Nature of the Church

Jesus not only loved, encouraged, and trained His disciples, He also sent them out. From the moment that Jesus told Peter he would become “a fisher of men,” Jesus

⁸ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 69. Migliore discusses the work of the Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa, on the idea of a social Trinity.

made it clear that there was a mission to accomplish. Christians are to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19). The Church carries out this directive by living in the midst of the world, as a sent community.

The New Testament Greek word for “church,” *ekklesia*, means “called out ones.” In its original usage, *ekklesia* referred to a political group called together to work on city business. Early Christians appropriated the word, adapting it to mean the group that has been called out to attend to the mission of Jesus Christ.⁹ *Ekklesia* defines the Church not as an edifice or as an organization, but as a community of people gathered together for a divine purpose—carrying out the Great Commission (Mt 28:19).

How to accomplish the Great Commission has been a matter of contention, however, both historically and today. Grenz describes an early Calvinist conception of “the church in the world (the visible church)” whose mission was to bring “within its boundaries all the elect, all those who were chosen by God in eternity past”—thus making them a part of “the true, invisible church.”¹⁰ Neo-Orthodox theologians like Karl Barth were critical of this view, claiming it lacked a missionary orientation. Barth believed that “the main task of the church is to be a witnessing community rather than a

⁹ Wesley J. Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: 1990), 127.

¹⁰ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 623.

means of grace.”¹¹ In other words, a missional Church should focus outward rather than inward.

Clearly, mission is not a novel concept for the Church. In fact, many congregations have mission departments or committees. However, all too often mission is not prioritized sufficiently and instead gets treated as a subset of church ministry. By definition, living as a sent people means that mission is not a subset of the work of the Church, but its whole purpose. Mission should be at the heart of the Church because it lies at the center of God’s nature. Because God is the author of mission, Christians must discern what He is already doing in the world and join in His work.¹² This requires prayerful listening, deep study, and humility.

God has always worked in the neighborhoods, towns, and cities where His people live. When Jesus sent the disciples out into the world, He instructed them to “extend peace” to every house to determine where they should invest time and energy (Lk 10:5). God was already at work; the disciples’ job was to learn where and how to extend His ministry. Today, the missional Church must remember that God still takes the lead in mission. This can raise anxiety: God does not often take the Church to safe and easy places. Yet, the same God who sends out His disciples like lambs among wolves (Lk

¹¹ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 58.

¹² Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 23.

10:3) is also the one who promises that He will be with them to the end of the age (Mt 28:20). Mission is never something done alone.

Challenges Facing the Church

The Church faces a number of trials that can undermine its communal, relational, and missional character. First, and particularly in the West, individualism is creating challenges for both evangelism and growth.¹³ People are hungry for connection, but they want it on their own terms. The needs and goals of the individual often take precedence over all else. Moving the focus to God and others is difficult and countercultural: the claims of Christ are well received until they require personal accommodation and substantial change. It is difficult to escape individualism, embedded as it is in Western culture, but it goes against the very nature of the Church.

Second, as Christianity continues to lose its dominant place in mainstream society, people increasingly are compartmentalizing their faith. They attend church and Bible study, but their faith no longer comes into play in other areas of their lives. Instead, it is relegated to a “private” domain; it can be talked about only in certain company. Faith becomes an add-on that is not important in day-to-day life. Unfortunately, rich conversation and meaningful dialogue get lost when faith is consigned to the private sphere. People see faith as increasingly irrelevant and even anachronistic. Outside of a larger community faith loses vibrancy and power and urgency for mission is lost.

Furthermore, the mission of the Church often gets lost amidst organizational

¹³ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 187.

concerns, especially in mainline denominational churches. Church bureaucracy and ingrained patterns of operating discourage new ideas and the implementation of needed changes. This causes many leaders to begin to equate the mission with organizational survival instead of with reaching out with the Gospel message. In order to avoid making necessary (but painful) changes, pastors, elders, and other church leaders find themselves concentrating on following—or even creating—excessive structures, rules, and processes, rather than focusing their energy on evangelism and community development.

Finally, as a community, the Church too often fails to live up to its prophetic role. In many cases, members do not exhibit the kinds of behavior or make the kinds of choices that people expect from Christians. Leaders who fail (or fall) publically compound the confusion about the nature of redemption and God's work in the world. It can be difficult to speak against flawed policy and sinful practice when the Church itself is complicit. Of course, the Church and the believers who are a part of it will always fail to live up to God's standard. The Church points to a hope that it also must embrace: all people are sinners saved by grace. Unfortunately, this message can get lost in the effort follow Jesus obediently. While Christians seek to follow the ways of God, they must recognize and own their failures and sin, and offer repentance. By taking a humble stance, Christians witness to their own need for forgiveness and grace, which mitigates against the picture of Christians as judgmental hypocrites. In order to have a voice in the larger community, the Church must consider the way behavior and messages are perceived by the outside world.

All these factors impact the ability of the Christian community to witness for Christ. Since Pentecost, the Church has faced challenges to live out its mission. Above all, the Church belongs to Jesus and must be dependent on His strength and power. The purpose of the Church is to live out the mission Jesus gave it, sometimes at great cost, knowing that He will provide everything needed for the task.

The Church as a Centered Set

Thinking of the Church as a centered set incorporates the key ideas outlined to this point. A centered set model brings together the incarnational, relational, and missional characteristics of the Church, and enables it to face the challenges levied by cultural attitudes and Christian responses. This new paradigm allows the Church to ask different questions and reframe faith in a way that opens the message of the Gospel to people.

The Church is the gathered community of believers—and people need to know whether or not they belong to this community. Criteria for belonging varies from church to church and denomination to denomination; it can include anything from the acceptance of specific doctrinal tenets to the adherence to specific standards of behavior. Paul Hiebert takes set theory (which comes from the mathematical study of how objects are grouped) and applies it to a missional setting. In considering the different ways people can be grouped, he seeks both to understand the different ways the Church defines its boundaries and identity, and to analyze the effects of these various definitions.

Bounded sets provide clear and defined boundaries. Every person knows if they are a member of the group. At the same time, bounded sets tend to exclude people and sap motivation for further growth. When the Church operates like a bounded set, people are either in or out. Once they are in (often through a profession of faith in Christ), there is little incentive to grow or do more. At the same time, people outside the boundary view the cost as too high and give up. It becomes an all or nothing proposition; there is no way to ease into it. Fuzzy sets, on the other hand, operate on a continuum and lack clear criteria for inclusion or exclusion. When the Church functions as a fuzzy set, it is difficult to mark those discrete moments of real commitment and progress. In fact, a person may never truly know if he or she has become a follower of Jesus.

In contrast to bounded and fuzzy sets, extrinsic and well-formed (or centered) sets have clear boundaries that are created by “defining a center or reference point and the relationship of things to that center.”¹⁴ There are some distinct advantages to using a centered set model when defining the community of the Church. Boundaries are not needed to maintain the set. Everyone can be a member and there are no outsiders or insiders. The variable is the distance from the center, and the goal is for everyone to move closer to that center. This is the one place that requires clarity. In the Church, the center is Jesus Christ—not just the title or idea, but Jesus Himself. According to Hiebert, “We need to know Jesus personally, in the biblical sense of knowing another person. This is what Martin Buber means when he differentiates between an “I-it” relationship and an

¹⁴ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 123.

“I-Thou” relationship. It is a covenant commitment to the other as a person, not a contract to join forces to accomplish a task.”¹⁵ In a centered set church, members are included due to their love for and submission to Jesus. People will be on different stages of this journey, but as long as they are oriented toward the center—and correspondingly, as long as the Church sees “discipling new believers to be as essential as conversion” and prioritizes “helping new believers grow and mature in their spiritual lives”—the community will remain cohesive and purposeful.¹⁶ The primary tasks of the Church are to uphold Christ as the center, build a community of faith that incorporates new believers, and invite people to follow Christ and to join in His mission. This changes the conversation around faith from crossing a boundary line to moving in the right direction.

Jesus told Peter that He was going to build His Church, and that the gates of Hell would not stand against it (Mt 16:8). This is good news. Regardless of the challenges facing the Church today, or the historical deficiencies in church models, Jesus will still see His mission accomplished. As the Church learns to listen and follow, it will be formed into the Body of Christ in the world, and become a useful partner in bringing forth the coming Kingdom.

¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁶ Ibid., 129.

CHAPTER 5

A THEOLOGY OF COVENANT COMMUNITY AND MISSION

This chapter analyzes how biblical community is formed by a covenant promise, and how mission becomes the focal point holding biblical communities together. It explores the intersection between fellowship and evangelism through the lens of relevant scriptural texts. In particular, it examines the close and extended family relationships laid out in the Book of Acts, and shows how these relationships illustrate a new model of biblical community that has a unique ability to express the Gospel message.

Images of Covenant Community in Genesis, the Gospels, and Paul's Letters

In choosing Abraham to be the father of the nation of Israel, God selected a unique group from His creation. Out of one family, a new family emerged. This process began with a covenant between God and Abraham:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Gen 17:1-11)

In this covenant, God promised to make Abram the father of many nations through his offspring; and in turn, Abram—now Abraham—agreed to walk faithfully with God and live a blameless life. In the first sentence of the passage from Genesis, as Victor Hamilton points out, “the expression *walk [before me]*” is well chosen. This phrase usually expresses the service or devotion of a faithful servant to his king.”¹ A special community of people was created, set apart by their devotion to God their Sovereign. The sign of this promise was male circumcision. Circumcision reminds Abraham’s descendants of their own covenant with God; it simultaneously identifies their community to outsiders as God’s followers. It is both an internal and an external sign. This was a family born from God’s promise and marked by a physical act.

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 461.

In this passage, God renames Abram. In the context of Genesis 17, his new name, “Abraham,” can be understood as “the father of many nations.” Abraham became not only the “father” of the nation of Israel, whose males bore the mark of circumcision, but of all the “nations” or people-groups that covenant to serve God faithfully and live blamelessly before Him. In effect, this universalized Abraham’s covenant with God from an individual experience to an experience available to all who claim God as their king.²

Jesus also gathered people with a promise. Matthew 4 describes how Jesus called His disciples with an invitation. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people” (Mt 4:19). In rabbinic speech, “follow me” means “become my students, be apprenticed to me, join my school, live with me.”³ Among other things, Jesus was inviting His disciples into a new community with Himself and one other, into a place where they would learn and grow together as they listened to Jesus’ words and watched His example. This also meant that the disciples had to make sacrifices. They would be identified primarily by their relationship to Jesus: this would be more important than livelihood or even family. Matthew 4:22 says they “immediately... left the boat and their father and followed Him.” When asked about His own family, Jesus pointed to His disciples and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:49-50).

² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 464.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 143.

The new community was not created according to the well-thought-out plans of Peter, Andrew, James, or John. Rather, Jesus was the initiator—He called the disciples. Nothing in Matthew’s narrative suggests that the disciples were selected due to their superior abilities. In fact, it is likely that these particular men had failed to advance in their religious training.⁴ This unlikely group of rabbinical students came together because Jesus brought them together. This principle holds today, as well: Jesus is always at the center of any true Christian community. As Bonhoeffer writes: “Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.”⁵ In Matthew’s account, Jesus added a command to His “come and follow” invitation. He told his disciples, “I will send you out to fish for people” (Mt 4:19). Jesus linked the call to community with a mission outcome. He was calling His disciples “not to an experience of their own personal salvation but to a ministry with others.”⁶ From the beginning, these first disciples understood that their time with Jesus and one other had a purpose beyond personal growth: it was focused outward.

After Jesus was raised to life and ascended into to heaven, His disciples began to live out this mission in powerful ways. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, new churches and worshipping communities were founded all over the Mediterranean region. After his dramatic conversion, the apostle Paul spent his life nurturing these young faith

⁴ M.J. Wilkins, “Discipleship,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 187.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 21.

⁶ Bruner, *Matthew*, 143.

communities, challenging them to live the Gospel message boldly. Like Jesus, Paul dwelled among the people as he taught them. His letters to the churches contain references to specific people and relationships that reveal his concern and care. This is particularly evident in his missive to the Thessalonian church, when he writes, “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thes 2:8). Paul’s deep sense of connection to this community was clear, and in turn, through the Thessalonians’ vibrant witness, the Gospel was proclaimed even in the midst of anguish and trial. As people saw the Thessalonians’ joy, they were moved and changed:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. (1 Thes 1:6-8)

Community enables people to see faith in action and gives them something to imitate. It is one thing to talk about love. It is another thing to do the hard work of actually loving other people. Paul knew that a significant part of his ministry was modeling a life lived in Christ. He did not tell Christians merely to listen to his words; he said, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Therefore, following Jesus works best in the context of community. It is here that Christians can see the examples of other believers, experience the truth of the Gospel, and undergo testing as they live in the reality of the everyday. Christians are called into this community by the power of God and for the sake of the world He loves.

Mission: Covenant Community in Action

Three different communities provide biblical illustrations of covenant groups: Jesus' disciples, personally commissioned to spread the Gospel; the early Christians, whose emphasis on communal meals, in particular, modeled radical Gospel truths; and the ancient Israelites, who lived and labored in foreign lands. Each of these three groups illustrates important aspects of Gospel work that remain highly relevant for churches today.

At the end of Matthew, Jesus gave His final instructions and encouragement to His disciples. He left them with an important challenge: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28: 18-20). Their mission, originally stated in Matthew 4 as "fish for people," had expanded to become "make disciples of all nations" twenty-four chapters later.

The call for all disciples of Jesus, even today, is to make more disciples. Appropriately, this has been a priority of the Church since its foundation. However, the methods by which the Church makes disciples have not always been clearly understood or formulated or rationalized. Perhaps unconsciously, cultural realities and societal norms have influenced evangelism. In North America, for example, where individualism is a prominent cultural value, Jesus' call to make disciples often is translated into an "individual decision" to receive Christ, followed by a "personal relationship" with God.

According to this model, community operates as a support group for individual faith, and Jesus' mission is limited to personal evangelistic efforts rather than communal labor. This contrasts starkly with the biblical model of community, where members are connected together in shared lives and mutual discipleship. Jesus delivered His charge not to an individual disciple, but to the entire group of people living and laboring with Him, studying under Him, and struggling together to put His teachings into practice (Mt 28:16). While Jesus did not state this explicitly in the Great Commission, a community approach to making disciples more accurately reflects the experience of the disciples themselves—and is more sustainable in the longer term.

Another model of mission-focused community can be found in the early Christian church. Early chapters in the Book of Acts provide a very detailed picture of the way the first community of Christ followers lived:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Jesus influenced this group of early believers to orient their lives differently—and that involved sacrifice. They needed to leave an old way of living and embrace a new one. This new way of life became an example for all their contemporaries to see, showing as it did the effects of the Gospel in the lives of Jesus' followers. These first Christians devoted themselves to new rhythms of living: listening and applying the teaching of the

apostles, hungering for learning and growth, and committing to living together and sharing their lives on a regular basis. They spent time in prayer, lifting one other up and witnessing the power of God at work. They also demonstrated a palpable sense of humility as they depended on the Holy Spirit and one other to meet their material needs.

Their fellowship included taking meals together. For early Christians, these meals signified even more than sharing in their elemental humanity; other more sacred aspects added to their richness. First, they pointed back to Jesus' words in His last supper: each meal served as a tangible reminder of what Jesus had done for the disciples when He gave up His life. Second, the meals illustrated the revolutionary inclusivity found in the Kingdom of God. Here, "meals and table fellowship [constituted] the starting mechanism of a new group, an eschatological society based upon radically novel criteria of acceptability and therefore open to Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor."⁷ By eating with diverse people in deep celebration and reverence, the Christian community pointed to the God who was at the center of their joyful fellowship.

The early believers lived out their mission in a gathered community that demonstrated the coming Kingdom. God blessed them by adding more people to their community as they lived lives of dependence and faith. This, in turn, was even more attractive to others, who saw the power of God at work in real and tangible ways.

⁷ S. C. Barton, "The Social Setting of Early Non-Pauline Christianity," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1104.

The experience of the Israelites during their exile in Babylon provides a third illustration of mission-driven community. God’s people were looking for words of hope and direction after being carried off to a pagan land. Instead of instructing them to create their own subculture and eschew all things Babylonian, God, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, told the Israelites:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jer 29:4-7)

The people of God were called to become agents of peace and prosperity, not to actively—or even passively—resist the culture. This was a powerful and perhaps counterintuitive directive of how to live in a foreign land, and it would have been an incredibly difficult command for Israel to follow. As J.A. Thompson points out, “Jeremiah by these words cast the people completely adrift from all those things on which they depended and which they regarded as essential to their own well-being, a nation-state, kingship, an army, national borders, the temple.” However, by removing all of these things, “Yahweh [gave] the nation new perspectives and a new understanding of their calling.”⁸

Moreover, the prophet’s words remain relevant today, particularly as the Church in North America finds itself in an increasingly hostile environment. Being a light for the

⁸ J. A. Thompson, “The Book of Jeremiah,” in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 546.

Gospel requires both sacrifice and living in a new way. It is easy for followers of Jesus to confuse the trappings of church culture for the Gospel. Churches will cling to styles of worship and insider language that no longer resonates with people outside the Church. Elements of church life, including the way people pray, what instruments are used in worship, the potluck, the date for the annual meeting, the choir, and the style of preaching can take on a sacramental reverence that exaggerates their importance relative to the greater mission.

It can take a lot of courage and usually some kind of crisis (anything from a new pastor to membership decline or financial problems) for a church to confront its own cultural trappings. When those trappings are stripped away, however, the mission and purpose become clearer. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and pray for them (Mt 5:44). This is radical and speaks to the heart of His Father. When a community of Jesus' followers lives in this way—seeking to bring blessing to the places where they live—they bring the reality of God's Kingdom into their larger community in tangible ways. Here again, the covenant community becomes a beacon for the hope and promise of the Gospel.

The mission of extending peace and prosperity, or blessing, provides every Christian community with a sense of purpose and mission. This is essential: more and more, the larger North American cultural majority is dismissing Christ followers who do not engage with the local community in meaningful and positive ways. Researcher David Kinnaman reported on the views of young adults (ages sixteen to twenty nine) who identified as outsiders to the Christian faith. Respondents in this young cohort saw

Christians as hypocritical, antihomosexual, sheltered, overly political, too focused on getting conversions, and judgmental.⁹ Regardless of whether these perceptions represent a fair picture of Christ followers today, the Church must accept their reality. The best way to change this perception is to offer an alternative story. It will be more difficult label a church hypocritical and sheltered when it exists for the benefit of others and sacrifices for their good. God’s people are called to make disciples and bring the hope of the Gospel wherever they are located. This is their mission. For twenty-first century American Christians, this means applying God’s words to exiled Israel to their own contemporary context.

The Kingdom of God and Neighborhoods, Schools, and Workplaces

Mark describes Jesus’ travels throughout Galilee, where He began His ministry with a Gospel proclamation: “The time has come. . . . The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe!” (Mk 1:14-15). God’s Kingdom is a theme running throughout the Gospels; and theologians have long debated both its nature and its immanence. Some theologians, such as Albert Schweitzer, emphasize an eschatological focus, pointing to the day of final judgment when the present era is swept away and the reign of God begins anew. Others including Charles H. Dodd, claim that in some way, the Kingdom of God is already here: it was begun by Jesus and demonstrated in His miracles and ministry.¹⁰ A

⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 29.

¹⁰ C. C. Caragounis, “Kingdom of God/Heaven,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 422.

third interpretation posits the Kingdom of God as being in some sense both present and future. George Eldon Ladd, for example, resolves this tension by claiming, “Jesus’ message is that in his own person and mission God has invaded human history and has triumphed over evil, even though the final deliverance will occur only at the end of the age.”¹¹ There is good news on both sides of this equation. In the end, God will triumph over evil and sin. He is coming again; He will make everything right. There is reason for hope. At the same time, this work has already begun. Jesus’ miracles reveal healing, redemption, truth, and grace—pictures both of what God is doing right now, and what He will complete in the future. Sin was defeated at the cross, and in Jesus’ resurrection, death lost its sting and the power of God was revealed. This is the current reality in the Kingdom of God, and in light of this reality, the Church has some things it still has to do.

After His resurrection and ascension, Jesus’ ministry continued to be carried out through the power of the Spirit in the creation of His Church. When Jesus sent seventy-two disciples out into the local villages, He instructed them to proclaim His message and perform His signs: “Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The Kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Lk 10:9). Then He said to them, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (Jn 14:12). The disciples went on to perform miracles, cast out demons, preach the good news, and endure persecution through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ words still apply to modern day disciples.

¹¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 56, 65.

Followers of Jesus continue to carry on His redemptive ministry through selfless service, constant prayer, and meaningful actions that demonstrate the coming Kingdom. This is an amazing responsibility.

It follows that the community of gathered disciples—the Church—must also continue Jesus’ ministry by proclaiming the Kingdom of God and demonstrating signs of its presence. Ladd writes, “While the church in this age will never attain perfection, it must nevertheless display the life of the perfect order, the eschatological Kingdom of God.”¹² The Church will never be perfect, but it can make an effort through the power of the Spirit to be agents of God’s work in the world. The people of God are experiencing their own transformations into new creations. There is no pretense that sin is not a problem, but hope comes from living in a community that celebrates and upholds communal forgiveness and redemption, through worship, community, and service.

All this, in turn, has implications for the way the Church interacts with the individuals and groups in its cultural locale. The Church must discern and speak to the pain, injustice, and despair in its surrounding neighborhoods. As an extension of Jesus’ ministry, the Church can bring healing and restoration through its resources, relationships, prayers, and ministry programs. As a formal institution, the Church can impact the local community in important ways. However, taking a reactive stance—waiting for people to enter the Church by attending programs, services, or events—significantly reduces its potential for impact. In order to understand and respond to the

¹² Ibid., 113.

real needs in its community, the Church needs to live out its message of hope in the midst of everyday living. For those who follow Jesus, this means taking the message of the coming Kingdom into the places where they spend their time—their schools, streets, neighborhoods, workplaces, coffee shops.

Demonstrating God’s redemption and healing requires Christians to refrain from jumping to conclusions and instead assume a posture of humility. Jesus Himself looked beyond simple answers to offer what was most deeply needed. When He encountered the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, she simply requested water. Jesus saw the deep spiritual brokenness underlying her immediate physical needs, however. He knew she needed “the water that [would] become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). The Church must act similarly, listening carefully and taking the time to discern through prayer what actions best further the Gospel mission.

One example of how to do this comes from a church nearby to MPPC. A few years ago, the congregation was creating an expansion plan. Instead of building the perfect facility to suit their own needs, however, the members solicited input from the local community, asking what kind of space would be the most beneficial to the most people. In the end, the church constructed a building that would be a blessing to the wider community, and adapted their own programs and services to accommodate the nontraditional site.¹³ Humble listening and prayer-filled discernment are critical skills for followers of Jesus and the institutional Church. They enable Christians to bring the

¹³ “About Us,” Gateway Neighborhood Center, accessed May 27, 2014, <http://www.gatewaysv.org/about.html>.

message and the ministry of the Kingdom of God into the places where people live out their everyday lives.

Oikos Communities

Along with encouraging its members to live a mission-focused life in their own neighborhoods, the Church needs to foster a vibrant sense of community within its own walls. This is done most effectively by establishing mid-size groups that can foster mission and evangelism. The size and type of these communities both are important factors impacting their ability to carry out their mission.¹⁴ Certain types of groups will be better suited to certain tasks. While many followed Jesus and listened to His teaching, He chose to limit the number of disciples in His primary group; He then could offer more time and attention to each one.

One of the most common groupings found in the New Testament is the family household, or *oikos*. The *oikos* included “not only blood relatives of the head of the house but also other dependents—slaves, employees, and ‘clients’ (i.e., freedmen, friends, and others who looked to the head of the house for patronage, protection, or advancement).” The social nature of early Christianity centered on these household units, and in fact, one of their most important functions was creating a sense of inclusion and “a strong obligation to one’s kin in the faith.”¹⁵ Being part of an *oikos* provided a deep sense of

¹⁴ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 64.

¹⁵ Christopher J.H. Wright, “Family,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 2*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 768.

belonging to a community of care and support. These groups were places of welcome and refuge, where the message of the Gospel was shared and the Scriptures were taught. In these family-based communities, the presence of the Kingdom was lived out through generosity, care, and acts of love. In addition, members of the group looked out for and shared resources with one other. This often meant real sacrifice and costly demonstrations of love and concern, and it provided a safety net in times of trouble.

It is difficult to determine how large an *oikos* could be; however, certain limits on the size of contemporary households may prove illustrative. Physical space was one such limit. Wealthy families had larger homes that could accommodate a bigger extended family group and more dependents. It is likely, however, that most extended households were made up of fewer than fifty people. This model of an extended family-sized group has many advantages when applied to ministry. Because these groups are smaller, members feel connected and known. The needs and concerns of those who are struggling are apparent to all. Every person in the group has a crucial role. There is room for everyone to participate in significant ways. Decisions can be made more easily and with greater adaptability. Members are more likely to have similar mission passions, and thus be able to determine a mission focus.

At the same time, an extended family-sized group is large enough that its work and responsibilities can be shared amongst members. This mitigates against burnout and discouragement. A larger group also creates a more inviting atmosphere for people to join: smaller groups can feel too intimate and intimidating, creating a barrier for newer people. Finally, a larger group can step out and take more risks because there will be help

and support. The unique attributes of the *oikos* made them key players in the spread of the early Church. While the American Church is situated in a different culture, the mid-sized group still has a role in sharing the Gospel message and demonstrating the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.¹⁶

The power and importance of covenant community is seen clearly throughout the history of God's people. God acts in and through His people in the midst of their lives lived together. God also gives His community a mission and task. Christians are to show evidence of God's presence and the hope of the Gospel through their words and actions; in this way, they bear witness to the coming Kingdom. This is done most effectively in the context of *oikos*-sized groups, which provide an inviting and caring atmosphere while still enabling their members to take bigger and more faith-filled risks for the sake of mission.

¹⁶ Breen, *Leading Missional Communities*, 8.

PART THREE
PLANS AND STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

A PLAN TO LAUNCH MID-SIZED, MISSION-FOCUSED GROUPS

Part Three of this project presents a practical discussion about how to launch ministry groups of twenty to fifty people with a common goal of community building and evangelism. Chapter 6 describes the objectives, strategic elements, and assumptions that structure the groups. Chapter 7 lays out how the plan will be implemented at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, including the details of how the groups will be structured, formed, and evaluated.

The goal of this project is to harness the unique ability of mid-sized, mission-focused groups to promote church outreach. Social dynamics change with groups of different sizes. Most churches use small groups (usually up to twelve members) as a way to promote interpersonal relationships and in-depth engagement with the Bible. However, these types of groups have not been as effective at reaching out to non-Christians. Rather, the task of evangelism has fallen largely on individual believers: they are responsible for

sharing the Gospel one-on-one with non-Christians they encounter, or for inviting non-believing friends to services where the professionals deliver the message. In these individualistic approaches, there is no opportunity for a Christian community to demonstrate a lived-out picture of the Gospel—whereas in a properly led mid-sized group, potential converts are able to see faith in action and participate readily in the life of the community.

The size of the group adds an important dynamic. Even more fundamentally, however, these groups need to be united around a common mission. For the purposes of this thesis, “mission” should be understood in terms of evangelism and outreach rather than social justice or community service. While the latter are important activities and certainly may be practiced by these groups, the primary goal is to “add to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). “Mission” means people experiencing the Gospel, embracing it as their own, and confessing a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

The plan for launching these missional groups arises from a variety of theological and biblical principles, established in previous sections of this thesis. First, these groups reflect the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the risen Christ, the Kingdom of God is active and available—even if not yet complete. A group of people intentionally living in this reality gives witness to life in the Kingdom of God. The group’s role, therefore, is to “open the eyes of the blind” to this new way of life, not just through proclamation, but also through direct actions and modeled behaviors (Is 35:5). Ultimately, seeing lives centered on the person of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit is more convincing than a theological argument or proof text.

Second, these groups are places where people's innate hunger for relationships can be satisfied. One of God's first creative actions was to address Adam's loneliness and need for connection: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper for him" (Gen 2:18). But while humanity was created to live in community, in our modern context, this typically does not extend past the nuclear family. This is unfortunate. Larger, extended family-sized groups provide more resources and support for living. Furthermore, a wider community provides more voices into people's lives and increased opportunities for nurture, development, encouragement, and accountability.

Third, a clear and Gospel-centered sense of purpose is necessary for a group to be able to provide these blessings. Without vision and purpose, a group remains together only as long as it is mutually beneficial to every individual. When they are committed to the mission of the Gospel, however, people are willing to surrender personal comfort and preference in order to see the group accomplish its end. Jesus challenged His disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20). This also must be the mission of these mid-sized groups. Communities living out a Christ-centered life that includes relevant teaching, loving relationships, and meaningful activity will be a blessing to all who participate, and will attract others who seek a life of meaning and hope. These communities will become the place where the Christian life comes together—teaching and growth, connection, and outward action and response.

The Goals of Mission-Focused, Mid-Sized Groups

There are a number of expected outcomes for mission-focused, mid-sized groups. Driven by a sense of evangelistic purpose, members of these groups will renew their passion for following Jesus. Through covenants and group rhythms, members will begin to live more intentionally for the sake of the Gospel in all of their activities. Local engagement will increase as the focus turns to the needs of the surrounding neighborhoods and community. Finally, numeric growth will occur as new people enter into the life of the group, hear and experience the Gospel, and enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Renewed Passion

As part of their mission strategy, many churches offer opportunities to join short-term mission teams working locally or abroad. The teams come together to serve in a specific place and for a specific time, usually about one week. These trips frequently engage the faith of the participants, renewing their passion for following Jesus. Working closely with others committed to a common goal is a powerful experience. This is enhanced by intentional times of prayer and teaching, both inherent components of the trips. Moreover, when unexpected things happen, participants are required to rely on God's protection, provision, and leading. This means that team members are acutely aware of the movement of the Spirit, as they pray, listen, and respond on a daily basis.

After an intense time of service, team members come home excited about the adventure of following Jesus. Unfortunately, this passion often fades once they enter back

into “normal life.” Mid-sized, mission-focused groups attempt to capture some of the elements of a short-term mission trip that stir passion and enliven faith. The joy of working toward a common mission focus keeps the group expectant and unified. Communal spiritual practices and encouragement keep group members’ eyes open to the movement of the Spirit. Finally, each person has the opportunity to step out in trust when unexpected challenges or opportunities confront the group.

Intentional Living

The life of these missional groups is structured both by covenants and intentional rhythms of gathering and activity. To participate, group members must agree to a mutually developed plan for living in community. Inevitably, this will challenge the current rhythms and commitments that currently occupy their attention and time. Reorienting life around a mission focus will change the way people schedule activities, plan vacations, spend money, engage in hospitality, and parent their children. To live this way, group members need to develop a faith practice that includes intentional consideration of mission.

This challenges the compartmentalized way most people currently live. Rather than relegating faith practice and activity to church-sponsored programs, members increasingly take responsibility for their own spiritual growth in the context of the group. This provides opportunities for innovation and creativity as people discover what works within their own lives and the lives of their friends and neighbors. Greater ownership and

involvement leads to more intentional choices, giving members the chance to live different, Gospel-filled lives.

Local Engagement

People often decide not to attend a church in their local neighborhood, instead driving miles away to find the “right” church experience. Searching for a place to worship is euphemistically called “church shopping,” and criteria might include a certain style of music, a specific denomination, a precise theological alignment, or a particular preaching emphasis. For people steeped in a consumer culture these reasons make sense. However, this also creates a problem. While relational connections and involvement may be encouraged and fostered within a commuting church, there is little relational connection fostered with the community around the church. Faith relationships increasingly comprise a completely separate sphere from those relationships that make up day-to-day living, making it difficult to build a community with a common life.

It may not be practical for everyone to attend the church that is most geographically central to his or her home. However, it is important to consider proximity when trying to build lasting community. To be effective, a mid-sized, mission-focused community needs to gather people from the same geographic location. Even if people attend worship services at a church outside of their neighborhood, a mid-sized group can offer relational connection near their home. A church can sponsor a number of these mid-sized groups, expanding its geographical reach while keeping people relationally connected in their neighborhoods.

Today's frantic pace and impacted schedules contribute to this relational challenge. Lack of time makes it difficult for people to build meaningful relationships. One way to create alignment is to increase the number of places where lives and schedules overlap. Members of a neighborhood-based mission group see people they know at the grocery store, the soccer field, their children's school, the bank, and the local restaurants. All of these interactions are touch points for unbelieving neighbors: each conversation is an opportunity to deepen a relationship, offer encouragement, and provide support. When a group of people does this in concert, it has a multiplying effect. Through genuine relationships and tangible acts of love, members of a neighborhood-based mid-sized community give witness to the truth and power of the Gospel.

Numerical Growth

Numerical growth is an expected outcome of establishing these mission-focused groups. A spiritually and emotionally healthy group with capable leaders should see an increase in membership. This growth does not depend on specific evangelistic techniques or special marketing gimmicks; it comes from the power of the Gospel lived out in community. Nature's biotic principle says that when the conditions are right, growth will occur.¹ The apostle Paul explained it like this: "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" (1 Cor 3:6-7). As members of the group

¹ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 11.

seek to live out their lives of faith in community, some will plant seeds, some will water, and some will harvest. Growth results when everyone in the group is living faithfully according to his or her call and purpose. A community of people faithfully praying for God to move, living in the power and strength of Christ, and welcoming people into their lives should see fruit.

Even more importantly, a thriving group should result in people turning their lives over to Jesus and becoming His followers. As people enter into the group and live in its rhythms, it is expected that some will become Christians. God will use the words, actions, and life of the group to bring people to faith in Him. Welcoming new believers is the ultimate goal of these mid-sized, mission-focused groups.

Strategic Considerations

In order to launch mid-sized, mission-focused groups, several steps are required. Key components of the strategy include casting vision, identifying leaders, training leaders, developing the group structure, and promoting the groups. In addition, adjustments need to be made to existing church programs in order to create room for these groups and to avoid collision with pre-existing programming.

The first important task is to communicate the vision and instill it in the congregation. In a large church, this begins with the professional staff and elders. All leaders should understand the value of these groups, support their vision and potential, and use common language to describe them. To accomplish this, church leaders should study a selected body of reading material and attend a conference on mission-focused

groups where opportunities for discussion and questions are provided. Introduce themes and language to the congregation through classes, sermons, and informal conversations. Prayer teams should begin praying for neighborhoods and leaders.

Through prayer and discernment, leaders will be identified or emerge. Some will come from existing small groups or ministry groups. Other potential leaders will self-identify, or will be identified by someone familiar with the vision and purpose of the missional groups. This initial group of leaders should be invited into a training group and meet weekly for four months. Training will involve instruction, mentoring, actual missional community practice, and coaching. By the end of the session, the leaders will not only understand the theory and vision of a mid-sized, mission-based community, they also will have experienced elements of a group for themselves. After four months, these leaders will be invited to start their own group, or, if appropriate, convert an existing ministry group into a mid-sized group. The training group will continue to meet at least once a month for support and accountability.

Groups will be established using a few different methods. Some will be converted from pre-existing ministry groups. These groups will need to reorient themselves around a mission focus and a geographic area. Members may need to commit to more time and greater engagement with one another as well. Other groups will be formed by combining smaller groups together, creating a critical mass. The smaller groups may already be located in a common geographic area and have a common mission focus, but the members will need to find ways to connect as a larger group. All of the original leaders must understand the vision of the new group and be willing to share leadership.

Finally, some groups will start from the beginning. Once a leader is identified, he or she can begin to gather a group using personal contacts and relationships; then, other people can be invited. Alternatively, a group can be established in a certain geographic location, and then nominate a leader who will begin training. These types of groups have a mission focus right from the beginning; they need to work on coming together to form a community or “family on mission”—*oikos*.

Each of these groups needs to develop a covenant, or agreement, that governs their life together. Elements of this community agreement will cover scheduled meeting rhythms, participation expectations, and goals. Each group must consider what are the optimal times and places to meet. Single adults and families with children will need a different rhythm of meeting. They also will need to delineate times for study, outreach, service, and fellowship. Expectations for participation should be known and accepted: every person has a role and responsibilities, and people should wait to join until they have the time to take ownership in the group. Covenants should be simple, lightweight, and low maintenance, not burdensome. Focus should stay on the mission and goals of the group rather than on rules and logistics.

Groups should be encouraged to be entrepreneurial and experiment with different ways to live out their missional life. As long as they remain focused on mission and living together in the power of the Spirit, there is ample room for creativity in the practical details of how groups function. Each group will need to work out things like how often they meet, when they serve, how they structure meetings, what they study, and individual roles and responsibilities. New members of the group will add ideas and

energy, and new seasons of life will require different approaches. For example, groups with children will need to consider how details like meeting frequency, time of day, and type of activity affect family life. A group has to work for the people in it.

Once the initial cohort of leaders has established their groups, subsequent leaders will be identified and invited into two-month-long training sessions, where they will learn the theology that grounds the mission and be connected with a coach. They also will be encouraged to join an existing group for four to six months, in order to be able to experience a working model.

Finally, the church itself must emphasize these groups, integrating them into its core mission and promoting them to its congregants. Existing church programs, communications, and marketing should support these groups and highlight their importance. The church calendar should accommodate mid-sized group gatherings and make room for their mission activity. Keeping church programming simple can free up more leaders time to focus on mid-sized group leadership. Communication vehicles within the church (announcements, bulletins, emails, etc.) should promote the vision of missional groups and allocate space for them to share stories and reports. To be successful, these groups will need the support of the local church.

Target Population and Leadership

The entire congregation is the target population for this ministry. Realistically, however, only a subset of the congregation will desire to live this more comprehensive life of faith. These are the people who are convicted by the Spirit of God to engage

missionally in their neighborhoods. Early adopters will have a clear and strong sense of mission and the maturity to align their lives with ministry priorities. Although the personal and spiritual benefits are great, joining a community like this requires sacrifice and commitment. Some will not yet be ready or willing to relinquish personal freedom. However, the mission-focused groups will include people of all ages and on different stages in their spiritual journeys—the only requirement for participation is a willingness to abide by the group’s covenant.

Unchurched people living in the areas where these groups are situated are a second and highly significant target population. The intention is to make a space for these people to enter into the community, learn more about Jesus, and eventually turn their lives over to Him. To this end, it is crucial to implement mechanisms for new people to enter into and participate in the life of the group. Possibilities include inviting the neighborhood to barbeques or meals; group activities, service projects, or events open to all; or a weekly “open house” time built into the rhythm of group life that makes it easy for others to join in and participate. Regardless of what options a group pursues, it will be important for the group to discover and own their mission-focused activities together.

Finally, the entrepreneurial nature of this program requires qualified leaders to make the groups succeed. Without the right investment of skills and time these groups will fail. Leaders must have strong character, spiritual discernment, emotional intelligence, and healthy relationships. Along with these skills and characteristics, they also need to be able to invest the time and energy to make the groups function. Capacity is an important consideration and may limit people in certain seasons of life.

Leadership development is the biggest challenge in this model. Good leaders are in demand everywhere, including in other areas of the church. Developing leaders takes time and effort, and it is relationally intensive. Prospective leaders must be able to take risks, fail, learn, and grow. To do this, the church must provide significant leadership roles along with thoughtful and extensive feedback. In every sense, leadership development is more individual and customized than a standard universal process.

Finding these leaders will require elders and other church staff to search out laypeople with leadership potential. Short-term missions trips, launch groups, and ministry groups are all places to locate potential leaders. In addition, existing mid-sized groups themselves should be spaces where leaders emerge and receive training. Prospective leaders also can be nominated by friends in the congregation who may have witnessed their potential in other settings. Finding and developing leaders will be crucial for these groups to not just exist, but to thrive and grow.

Mid-sized, mission-focused groups have the potential to impact people in our neighborhoods in places where the Church does not traditionally reach. With proper leadership, they can become sites of deep connection, discipleship, and passionate mission. As these groups live together through the power of the Spirit and through the pull of magnetic community, God will use them to draw people into a saving relationship with Him.

CHAPTER 7

THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS AND PLAN

The previous chapter discusses how to launch mid-sized, mission-focused groups and identify and train their leaders. This chapter outlines the process Menlo Park Presbyterian Church is implementing to establish these groups and help them thrive, focusing on the central tasks of vision casting, leadership preparation, and group organization. Although the process is described in detail, care has been taken to include flexibility for innovation and adjustment—in other words, to leave space for the people who are at the heart of each ministry endeavor.

MPPC has seen several ad hoc attempts to create larger groups with a mission focus. Because these attempts were not centrally coordinated, they reflected different visions and expectations. However, they did share a common understanding that a larger group with a mission focus could impact the community in a fresh way. In addition to laying out the proposed implementation process, I also explore some of these early

attempts at launching ministry groups, contrasting these experiments with the proposed structure outlined in this chapter.

Implementation Timeline

As the first step in the process of creating these mid-sized, mission-focused groups, key church leaders, including staff members, elders, and ministry team leaders, formulate a strategy. In order to do this, they need a cohesive articulation of the missional groups' objectives: how they will work, what they will do, when they will meet, and how they will be led. A common language that uses the same terms, metaphors, and illustrations facilitates the leaders' and group members' ability to move toward the same goals. Moreover, a common vision gives each group the freedom to develop and grow while maintaining a clear mission and purpose. They are able to innovate and attend to the leading of the Spirit while still remaining connected to a larger body.

A common strategy can be adopted via a collaborative process in which vision, goals, language, and expectations are developed over time. This method creates ownership and engagement, although it can take a long time to complete. Alternatively, leaders can adopt a language and strategy from an outside source (if one exists). This requires very little development time, but it requires more effort to get team members to accept the strategy as their own. MPPC will pursue the second alternative for two reasons. First, well-developed plans for harnessing the unique power of community groups are available today. Second, adapting an existing model saves time and energy that in turn can be focused on other elements in the implementation process.

MPPC will use the model developed by Mike Breen of 3 Dimensional Ministries (3DM) after he successfully launched mid-sized community groups during his tenure at St. Thomas' Church in Sheffield, United Kingdom. 3DM has developed a specific language and strategy, based on years of practice and experimentation, for establishing "missional communities" (a more generic term for mid-sized, mission-focused groups).¹ An integral part of the 3DM strategy is to offer experiential leader training that models the kinds of activity and rhythms found in a functioning missional community. To accomplish this, 3DM holds week-long "learning communities" that include training in different relational spaces (intimate, social, and public), modeling and role playing, and coaching and hands-on development.²

Six key staff leaders from MPPC, including the campus pastors and the MPPC small group leader (known as the small group champion), will participate in a 3DM learning community in the fall of 2014, and then again every six months for the next two years. Immediately following this initial learning community, each of these six leaders will be invited into a 3DM-led training group, called a huddle. These training huddles will meet weekly; they will include teaching, modeling, and active participation in the leadership of the huddle.³ The leaders will be exposed to a common language and methodology via the learning communities and the huddles.

¹ Mike Breen and Alex Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide* (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2010), 24.

² "Learning Community," 3DM, accessed May 16, 2014, <http://3dmovements.com/lcs/>.

³ These meetings generally will be conducted via electronic communication and video conferencing.

In the spring of 2015, after the second 3DM learning community experience is completed, these six leaders will form three training huddles (two leaders per huddle) hosting a second wave of prospective ministry group leaders. Every huddle will contain between eight and twelve people, resulting in a pool of twenty-four to thirty-six potential leaders; they will meet for six additional months. The two key leaders who are guiding each group will cascade their learning from the 3DM communities and their coaching from the 3DM huddles down to the training huddles. In turn, the second-wave participants will comprise the core leadership group who will launch the mid-sized, mission-focused groups.

These second-wave leaders will be carefully selected based on their character, competency, and capacity. Each must have demonstrated a strong faith and a passion for the mission of the Church. They must possess the skills to manage and lead a larger group of people. Finally, they must have the time in their schedule to make the group a priority in their life. They will learn basic discipling techniques and language based on the 3DM model. They also will plan out the important steps necessary for launching a mid-sized community. These include membership and recruiting, setting up group expectations, building sustainable meeting rhythms, and keeping a mission focus. The new leaders will remain in a learning posture even as they begin to plan the launches of their missional communities. In effect, they will be putting their training into practice on the spot. This emphasis on the practice rather than the mastery of knowledge ensures that learning is continuous and fresh.

Each of these three huddles will become the nucleus of a mid-sized, mission-focused community. In the fall of 2015, after six months in the training huddle, the second-wave groups will expand. The new leaders will be challenged to invite three or four people into their group, using the same criteria listed above. These additional participants, as they move through the established culture, mission focus, and meeting rhythm of the huddle, will create new mid-size groups of twenty to fifty people. As the missional communities continue to meet, pray, worship, celebrate, and serve, together these patterns of living will give them both stability and momentum.

For each of these three new missional groups, the next six months will be a time to solidify relationships and group commitment. The goal is to become less of an organized group and more of an *oikos*, or extended family.⁴ In the spring of 2016, each community will pause to consider possible adjustments in their life together, renew the group call to ministry and mission, and transition leaders into new roles as needed. In the final six months of the pilot program, the focus will be on achieving the mission of the group. One of the goals for the groups in this season is to stretch and grow through new challenges and risks. Innovation and experimentation will be encouraged, and each group will decide corporately how they want to pursue new ideas.

In the fall of 2016, groups and leaders will evaluate the strength of their communities, their effectiveness at achieving their mission, and their ability to include

⁴ Breen, *Leading Missional Communities*, 4.

new participants. Group members also will assess the performance of their leadership and reflect on what is needed to move forward. This will be a time of prayer and discernment for next steps.

Leadership Development

The most important factor for the success of these groups is effective leadership. Leaders with the right skills, temperament, and spiritual maturity are essential. They need to be good at working with teams, building consensus, and deploying people in appropriate areas. They also must be able to keep the group focused on its mission and purpose. Finally, they need the maturity to help both individuals in the group and the group as a whole to grow spiritually.

Initially, leaders can be pulled from existing pools and deployed for the purpose of leading these groups—assuming they are interested. These will be people who already have demonstrated effectiveness in the above areas while leading other church ministry programs. Identified leaders will be invited into a conversation with an established leader (usually a staff person at first) who will share the vision for the ministry. As they embrace the vision, they will be invited into a training experience. This begins with a training huddle, where potential leaders are offered deeper discipleship training and practice. Training huddles are launched every six months, and each one is the potential origin for new mid-sized groups.

Training includes participation in either a learning community or an already existing missional community. Active participation is crucial for developing these

leaders. While head knowledge is important, knowing how and when to apply strategies and techniques is essential. A leader must evaluate and weigh various factors when considering a course of action. This requires spiritual discernment. Seeing appropriate leadership modeled by others is especially valuable in this regard, and is central to the plan for developing group leaders.

There is a limit to how many existing leaders can be redeployed from other ministries, however, and for this particular ministry to grow and multiply, new leaders will need to be identified and developed. It follows that the best place to find leaders for new groups is in already existing, successful missional communities, perhaps ones that have grown too large and are ready to branch out. Therefore, once the initial three mid-sized groups are formed and thriving, they will become the primary training ground for developing new leaders. People who have already experienced one of these ministry groups, who are in command of the nuances of leadership, and who understand that part of the mission involves identifying and training new leaders can easily move into a primary leadership role in a new group.

Resources

Launching, running, and sustaining mid-sized groups require a variety of resources both from the groups themselves and from the church. These include meeting space, financial contributions, leader training, and materials. While none of these requirements represent a barrier for implementation at MPPC, it is important to consider the various needs as part of the plan.

A practical requirement for launching mid-sized, mission-focused groups is adequate meeting space. Ideally, a group will gather together in the home of the leader or a member. Meeting and event locations may be rotated so that everyone shares hosting responsibility. While opening one's home to other people like this can feel vulnerable, it builds intimacy and connection. One challenge for meeting in homes, however, is accommodating the number of participants in each group. By definition, mid-sized groups are larger than traditional Bible study groups, and thus require more space. People with smaller homes may find it difficult to host, especially in the winter months when activity is restricted to the interior. Some groups may need to find alternative locales, like a local community facility or the church building. Renting space will incur additional costs for the group to cover. The church facility is free, but might be more difficult to schedule. Space constraints may dictate part the group's meeting strategy; for example, they may choose to save bigger events for the warmer months.

Specialized program opportunities require additional resources as well. The group may decide to organize a retreat, adding lodging, transportation, and a speaker honorarium or program fee to their normal operating budget. Another group may host a neighborhood block party, and will have to cover food and entertainment. Each group is responsible for bearing these costs.

Leadership training also requires resources. There should be an ongoing conversation in the groups about mission and outreach; this is supported by book discussions, the cost of which can be shared by group members. Complementing this general education is specialized training for prospective leaders. This requires meeting

space, although since huddle groups are smaller, they are easier to accommodate. Huddle groups can meet in homes, coffee shops, conference rooms, or church facilities, and there should be little or no financial impact on the missional community. Specialized training materials for group leaders should be supplied by the church. For the initial pilot project, this includes four books associated with each of the four learning community experiences. At \$20 per book, the total cost for six people is \$480. The initial learning community training and coaching experience will cost the church \$770 per month for two years, for a total of \$18,480.⁵ Depending on the location of the learning community, there will be additional expenses for transportation, food, and lodging.

After this initial investment in 3DM's courses, the expectation is that these leaders will conduct training and coaching sessions for others in the church. However, there may be additional costs for ongoing coaching and consulting, depending on the needs of individual leaders. Moreover, specific retreats or training events likely will supplement leader training over the next few years. Churches should budget for conference fees, transportation, and some meals.

Overall, the largest investment of resources is in the initial training of leaders. Once trained, their knowledge should cascade to the next level. In addition, groups will largely be self-sustaining. Once the missional communities are firmly established, members will bear the majority of the ongoing group maintenance costs. In certain

⁵ 3DM, accessed May 16, 2014, <http://3dmovements.com/lcs/>.

instances, the church will need to help with meeting rooms and facilities; it can also provide some seed money for community experiments.

Assessment Plan

The primary goal of this project is to enable mid-sized groups—with their unique ability to reach out to non-Christians while building relationships and helping people grow—to further the mission of the Church. An effective missional community will increase in numbers by attracting and welcoming new people into its activities and shared life. These people will hear and experience the Gospel, and some will make a faith commitment.

“Effectiveness” can be measured by the number of new people who attend a group on a regular basis (at least three times in three months) and by the number who make a faith commitment. In addition, other diagnostics can be helpful to assess what makes some groups more successful than others. This includes the actual size of the group, member growth in the past six months, frequency of meetings, type of mission focus (neighborhood evangelism, serving a local school, etc.), and the number of people in a training huddle.

The primary tool for assessment will be a simple eight-question survey distributed on a quarterly basis to the leaders of each group. The majority of the questions are quantitative, making for easier analysis. The eight questions on the survey are as follows:

1. What is the current average attendance at group meetings?
2. How often did your group meet this quarter?
3. How many of your group meetings/activities in the past quarter *focused* on welcoming new people into your community?

4. How many people who *joined* the group since your initial launch (or since the last survey) still attend?
5. How many people made a new faith commitment (or recommitment) in the past quarter?
6. Which word best describes the focus of your group? (**Please choose only one word**) Evangelism | Service | Community | Discipleship | Unknown
7. Our mid-sized, mission-focused group has been most successful at: (**please rank these four items**)
 - a. Developing close-knit relationships
 - b. Embracing and incorporating unchurched people
 - c. Serving the needs of our surrounding community
 - d. Helping people follow Jesus more fully
8. How many members of the group currently participate in a training huddle?

The basic assumption is that effective groups will see measurable growth in members, connections, faith commitments, and leaders. The mission focus of every group should be clear and consistent and contain an evangelistic element. Intentional leadership helps keep groups on track and moving forward.

In addition to the survey, a designated staff member will visit every community group meeting or event on a quarterly basis. These visits will provide an opportunity to gather qualitative data through direct observation and informal interviewing.⁶ Qualitative measures include demographics, group rhythms, leadership style, and general tone. Staff members also will assess where support is needed for the group to thrive.

Once the data is received, each group will be put into one of three categories: green, yellow, or red. Groups that are growing and making good progress are green. Groups that have done well in the past but have lost their mission focus and have turned inward and begun to stagnate are designated yellow. Finally, groups that never

⁶ Nancy T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

demonstrated forward momentum and are presently in decline are considered red. Green groups will be encouraged and resourced. Yellow groups will receive a new infusion of leadership and vision. Red groups will need to make radical changes, either joining another existing group or disbanding and moving into other ministry opportunities.

Report on Ad hoc Experiments

While the plan outlined in this chapter has not yet been implemented, over the past two years there have been a number of attempts to start some form of mid-sized, mission-focused groups at MPPC. The church developed five groups, mostly by redeploying existing affinity groups. One of these was a group of young families that had connected around issues of raising children. Another group helped care for visiting scholars at the local university. A few groups loosely linked by geography also were included.

Armed with the basic principles of missional community, two members of the church's pastoral staff met with the leaders of these existing groups to cast the vision for a different kind of community: one that was larger and focused on mission. In general, the ideas presented were compelling and all of these groups agreed to follow the mid-sized format. Beyond a few first meetings, however, there was very little leadership training or development. The staff leaders had never actually participated in or led this kind of group previously. The directions and expectations for outcomes were vague, and follow-up was weak. Predictably, these groups have not met the expectations outlined in

this model. Currently, only one out of the five continues to meet regularly, has a clear and compelling mission focus, and is seeing some growth.

Another attempt to create mid-sized, mission-focused groups came from within the young, single adults ministry. Here, larger groups were created from geographically connected small groups that met as part of the ministry's strategy to build community. Interested members were invited to join together around a common mission focus. Leaders with demonstrated skills emerged from these groups, nominated by their members. An in-depth, one-session training meeting certified leaders in their role with a mid-sized group. The young adult ministry staff manages these groups and group leaders.

These groups met more consistently and stayed more connected due to the way they had formed initially; they were able to capitalize on their existing relationships. Unfortunately, maintaining a specific mission focus has proved challenging. Today, many have simply become larger-sized groups primarily focused on Bible study and building insular community. Even those groups that began with a strong mission orientation and evangelistic passion have struggled to remain open and welcoming to new people. However, at least one of these groups continues to emphasize inviting in new people, and it continues to grow. This particular group has strong leaders who have kept the members focused on the group's mission.

These early attempts have brought the importance of proper leadership development and training into sharp relief. The commitment to training must go beyond a few hours of teaching theory. Active participation, experience, modeling, and hands-on training are crucial to the ongoing success of these missional communities. All groups

share the tendency to devolve into a safe and easy “club” mentality. Leaders need consistent support and development to keep their groups focused on the mission.

This chapter outlines the process to establish mid-sized, mission-focused groups that will be effective at bringing new people to a place of faith commitment. Well-led groups will intentionally develop new leaders, and will multiply as numerical growth requires. Achieving this outcome requires a new way of thinking about ministry groups, which must be reinforced through teaching, modeling, and coaching. Church leader and pastor Andy Stanley has found that “vision leaks.”⁷ No matter how clearly a church presents its vision, it does not endure without reminders and reinforcement. For this reason, most of the implementation process for mid-sized, mission-focused groups centers on training and equipping leaders in a way that sustains vision and ignites continued passion for making new disciples of Jesus Christ.

⁷ Andy Stanley, “Vision Leaks,” *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2004), accessed May 16, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2004/winter/19.68.html>.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A central tenet of this paper is that there is something unique and powerful about the ways people group themselves. Different group sizes allow for different kinds of conversations and activities, attract people in different ways, and are more effective at accomplishing certain things. While this is true in general, this principle also maps onto important tasks given to the Church. Larger groups work well for proclamation and worship. Smaller groups work well for discipleship and accountability. My goal in writing this thesis was to show that mid-sized groups (twenty to fifty people) have an advantage in the important task of evangelism. However, size alone does not automatically lead to evangelistic growth. Capturing the advantage of a mid-sized group requires strong leadership and mission focus.

In practice, many churches only offer two kinds of spaces for groups to occupy: the large group gathering, or public space, and the small group, which inhabits a more personal or intimate space.¹ This means that people often feel either unconnected or overly connected, making evangelism difficult. Church members can invite someone to the larger public gathering, hoping that they make a connection or hear something in the message that motivates them to come back.² Alternatively, members can invite someone

¹ Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

² Breen and Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, 46.

to a smaller group, hoping that they will not be intimidated by the insider language and already existing relational connections. Worship services and small groups have their place and are important—but they are not as well suited for the task of evangelism as mid-sized groups, which allow people to connect socially in a more organic way.

I gained numerous insights while diving deeper into this topic. First, evangelism is relational. Rather than perfecting verbal methods of sharing the truth of the Gospel, time is better spent creating inviting relational spaces where people can connect, observe, and enter into the life of a believing community. As Jerry Doherty claims in *A Celtic Model of Ministry*, “people need to belong before they believe.”³ In order for a church to reach people with the Gospel, there first must be places for them to connect relationally and organically. While it is possible for this to happen in traditional programs, the distance between church culture and the prevailing culture makes this challenging.

Second, the model of extended family groups is applicable to evangelism. Understanding mid-sized groups as extended families brings a sense of organic relational connection into the picture. Joining a church group can seem intimidating, but joining the family down the street can seem natural. Moreover, an extended family encompasses a range of ages and sets of relationships. This creates different entry points and places to connect, making it easier to feel welcomed.

³ Jerry C. Doherty, *A Celtic Model of Ministry: The Reawakening of Community Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 64. Doherty is describing George Hunter’s work in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*.

Third, geographic proximity adds to relational accessibility. An extended family group living in the same general area or neighborhood is able to experience more daily interactions. Seeing friends and acquaintances at the local grocery store, school, clinic, park, or restaurant contributes to a sense of family and builds relational connections. The concerns that an extended family addresses and the activities it pursues will be connected to its neighborhood location.

While the implementation of this project is still in process, I also have gained much insight from the preliminary experiments. While a missional group's medium size creates the opportunity for it to operate like an extended family, size alone is not a guarantee. Mike Breen warns that without strong leadership and shared vision, a mid-sized group can effectively operate like a "large small group" rather than an extended family on mission.⁴ Without leaders who continue to keep the group focused on reaching out to new people, missional groups easily devolve into traditional, inward-focused small groups.

My initial experiments in piloting mid-sized groups confirmed the research analyzed in the literature review: proper leadership is essential for groups to stay on mission. While they began with a strong mission emphasis, these groups are now focused on growing in faith and deepening their existing relationships. In fact, in a recent short survey where group leaders were asked to rank the purpose of their groups, most listed "embracing and incorporating unchurched people" as their last priority. Their failure to

⁴ Breen and Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, 47.

stay on mission can be traced back to the leadership. The leaders for our initial group experiments received very minimal training and development. While they were excited about the concept, none of these potential leaders had ever participated in a mid-sized, mission-focused group. Furthermore, most of them were not in a discipling relationship with a more mature leader, which hindered their own capacity to lead spiritually. It was tempting to rush the leadership development process in an effort to launch the groups quickly. Ultimately, however, this dramatically reduced the chances that these missional groups would be effective at their primary purpose. For this reason, the pilot program proposed in Chapter 7 includes leadership preparation as a prominent feature.

I gained another important insight when confronted with the challenges of time and schedule. Just as personal relationships require time to develop, groups also require some kind of regular rhythm—which presupposes a time commitment on the part of their members—in order to coalesce. The biggest obstacle in our initial experiments proved to be the scarcity of time. People first began to feel the cost of commitment to the group in their calendars. This became a gauge of the group’s relative importance. While some people liked the idea of participating, they wanted the group to fit into their existing schedules.

We learned that it was crucial to avoid underselling the commitment to the group. It is tempting to lower the expectations for group participation in an effort to get people to participate. However, this only serves to weaken the group and the overall commitment. The issue of scheduling confronts priorities and lifestyles in important ways, and a larger group with more people and more schedules adds to the complexity of

this challenge. The calendar remains one of the biggest obstacles to success, even in geographically based groups that have more opportunities for lives and schedules to overlap.

One potential way the local church can help in this area is to consider adapting its own calendar. This requires a re-evaluation and prioritization of church gatherings and activities around the area of mission. Some churches are organized around the ministry of mid-sized groups; they actually incorporate the groups into the church's meeting rhythm.⁵ While this may not be possible for every congregation, any centralized effort to help people manage the schedule challenge will make mid-sized groups more accessible.

For Menlo Park Presbyterian Church and Open Door Church, the next step is implementing the plan outlined in Chapter 7, with a particular emphasis on identifying and developing potential leaders. A component of this leadership development plan will be formulating a stronger and more relationally based discipleship process. For myself personally, the plan also will involve *oikos* experiments in my own neighborhood, in partnership with church members who live nearby. The goal of this season is to develop a community that can be the nucleus of a future missional group.

Mid-sized, mission-focused groups are part of the thread of missional thinking started by Newbigin and now popular in mainstream church circles.⁶ Like other missional initiatives, the primary purpose of these groups is for their members to take the Gospel

⁵ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

⁶ *Missional Church*, ed. Guder.

outside the church walls and live as missionaries in their own neighborhoods. In this sense, Open Door Church's groups are an extension of a movement that is already well underway. However, while other missional attempts have value, my interest is in helping congregations move toward a holistic model that preserves the best of traditional Church life while utilizing the power of mid-sized groups to reach people with the Gospel. My interest in this topic comes from a heart to see the Church become more effective at evangelism. The changing culture calls for the Church to innovate and adapt its strategies and methods. A mid-sized group strategy is one more vehicle that can bring the life-saving message of Jesus to the lost.

The message of the Gospel is powerful for all generations and cultures. Hebrews 13:8 reminds us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." God will accomplish His purposes and build His Church, "and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18). As His followers, Christians play a role in bringing about the fullness of His Kingdom here on earth. In this spirit, I pray that mid-sized groups will further the work on the Gospel in this time and place.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Augustine. *The City of God Against the Pagans*, edited by R.W. Dyson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Ammerman, Nancy T., Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley and William McKinney. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Barrett, Lois Y. ed. *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.
- Barton, S. C. "The Social Setting of Early Non-Pauline Christianity." In *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, 1102-1106. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.
- _____. *Life Together: A Discussion on Christian Fellowship*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.
- Boren, Scott M. *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community that Makes a Difference in the World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010.
- Bratt, James, ed. *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.
- Breen, Mike. *Covenant and Kingdom: The DNA of the Bible*. Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2010.
- _____. *Leading Missional Communities: Rediscovering the Power of Living on Mission Together*. Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2013.
- Breen, Mike, and Alex Absalom. *Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide*. Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2010.
- Breen, Mike, and Steve Cockram. *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People Like Jesus Did*. Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2009.

- Breen, Mike, and Walt Kallestad. *The Passionate Church: The Art of Life-Changing Discipleship*. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2005.
- Bruner, Frederick Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.
- Caragounis, C.C. "Kingdom of God/Heaven." In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, 417-430. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992.
- Cloud, Henry, and John Townsend. *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals about Personal Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
- Doherty, Jerry C. *A Celtic Model of Ministry: The Reawakening of Community Spirituality*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003.
- Farley, Benjamin Wirt. "The Providence of God in the Reformed Perspective." In *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 87-93. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998.
- Gibbs, Eddie. *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Greene, Colin, and Martin Robinson. *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*. Colorado Springs: Authentic Media, 2008.
- Grenz, Stanley. *Theology for the Community of God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994.
- Guder, Darrell L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.
- Hamilton, Victor P. *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990.
- Hauerwas, Stanley, and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.
- Henderson, James K. *Evangelism Without Additives*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2005.
- Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994.

- Hirsch, Allan. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.
- Hunter, George G. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2000.
- Karkkainen, Veli-Matti. *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.
- Kettler, Christian D. and Todd H. Speidell. *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family*. Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990.
- Kinnaman, David and Gabe Lyons. *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974.
- Leith, John H. "The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition." In *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 5-18. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998.
- McGavran, Donald A. *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005.
- McKim, Donald K. "A Reformed Perspective on the Mission of the Church in Society." In *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 361-371. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998.
- McNeal, Reggie. *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- _____. *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.
- Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An introduction to Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991.
- Myers, Joseph R. *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007.

- _____. *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Open Secret: an Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951.
- Paul, Robert S. "Reformed Churches and Evangelism: Historical Background." In *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, edited by Donald K. McKim, 354-360. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998.
- Perschbacher, Wesley, J. *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1990.
- Peterson, Eugene. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005.
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order, 2013-2015*. Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013.
- _____. "The Scots Confession" in *The Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* 11-26. Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013.
- Rainer, Thom S. and Geiger, Eric. *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006.
- Roxburgh, Alan J. *Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it Matters, How to Become One*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009.
- _____. *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.
- _____. *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition*. Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006.
- Roxburgh, Alan J. and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.

- Schwarz, Christian A. *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*. Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998.
- Speidell, Todd H. "Incarnational Social Ethics." In *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family*, edited by Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell, 140-152. Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1990.
- Thompson, J. A. "The Book of Jeremiah." In *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, edited by Gordon Fee. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980.
- Van Engen, Charles. *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991.
- Van Gelder, Craig. *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007.
- _____. *The Missional Church & Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009.
- Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989.
- Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1998.
- _____. *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1998.
- _____. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1998.
- Wright, Christopher J.H. "Family." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 2*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 761-769. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- _____. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Wright, N. T. *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997.
- Yamamori, Tetsunao, and Rene Padilla. *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission*. Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2004.

Websites

3DM. "Learning Community." Accessed May 16, 2014. <http://3dmovements.com/lcs/>.

Center for the Study of Global Christianity. *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970-2020: Society, Religion, and Mission*. South Hamilton, MA: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2013. Accessed April 2014. <http://gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>.

The Gospel and our Culture Network. "About the Network." Accessed July 30, 2013. <http://www.gocn.org/network/about>.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Comparative Statistics, Annual Editions 2002-2012*. Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2013. Accessed March 2014. http://apps.pcusa.org/tenyeartrends/report/771/all_statistics.pdf.

_____. "Fifteen Largest PC(U.S.A.) Congregations Based on Membership Size, 2012," Table 6. Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2012. Accessed March 2014. <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/research/pdfs/2012-cs-table6.pdf>.

Stanley, Andy. "Vision Leaks." *Leadership Journal* 25:1 (Winter 2004), 68-70. Accessed May 16, 2014. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2004/winter/19.68.html>.

Louis H. Evans, Sr. Papers, 1915-1981. Wheaton College Archives and Special Collections, Wheaton, IL. Accessed March 2014. <http://archon.wheaton.edu/?p=collections/findingaid&id=20&q=&rootcontentid=42349#id42349>.