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This ministry focus paper entitled

ENJOYING GOD AND NEIGHBOR:
CULTIVATING DESIRE FOR THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHER

Written by

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

Doctor of Ministry

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upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:



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ENJOYING GOD AND NEIGHBOR:
CULTIVATING DESIRE FOR THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHER

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
JOSEPH STANLEY WILSON
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ABSTRACT

Enjoying God and Neighbor: Cultivating Desire for the Presence of the Other

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2015

The goal of this study is to explore the cultivation and diffusion of new habits of engagement with neighbors through experimental actions and the introduction of four bodily practices: *Lectio Divina*, daily prayer, weekly Eucharist, and inhabiting a third place. It is argued that the introduction of bodily practices within a praxis form of theological reflection can alter the habitual engagement of a church with its neighbors. The thesis was tested at Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi.

Through an examination of ecclesial formation, the study identifies desire as central to spiritual, congregational, and missional formation, and it argues that in order to cultivate or transform desire, a congregation needs new bodily practices coupled with receptive presence in their neighborhood. In order to test this hypothesis a missional action team was formed at Northside Baptist Church and led through an examination of their congregational praxis of neighborly engagement. The team took up the four bodily practices and met to explore neighborly engagement in light of Scripture and theological resources. The team was then led to create four short experiments of receptive engagement with neighbors and finally gathered back to reflect on their findings. The entire process was framed within the liturgical seasons from Epiphany to Pentecost.

The study concludes that habits of paternalistic engagement can restrict the capacity of a church to recognize its neighbors as ends unto themselves to be enjoyed for their own sake and that congregational formation cannot be separated from receptive missional presence among neighbors. It commends an experiment aimed at neighborly presence. It recommends further work in spiritual formation through a process of Appreciative Inquiry, participation in a broad-based community organizing effort, and partnership with a neighboring church in its exploration of missional praxis.

Content Reader: Alan Roxburgh, DMin

Words: 288

To my father, Roland Wilson, who knew the Church must change,
and allowed himself to be changed

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: DISCOVERING DESIRE AS A MINISTRY CHALLENGE	
Chapter 1. FRUSTRATED INNOVATION AND THE PROMISE OF CHANGE	5
Chapter 2. TOWARD THE TRANSFORMATION OF DESIRE	18
PART TWO: EXPERIMENTING WITH NEIGHBORLY PRESENCE	
Chapter 3. DESIRE IN LENT AND JOY IN EASTER	34
Chapter 4. RESULTS OF THE PROJECT	48
PART THREE: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
Chapter 5. TOWARD A LOCAL THEOLOGY OF DESIRE	78
Chapter 6. DIFFUSING DESIRE AND THE VIRTUES OF LEADERSHIP	107
Chapter 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	124
APPENDICES	138
BIBLIOGRAPHY	148

INTRODUCTION

Northside Baptist Church (hereafter, Northside) has a history of servant ministry, but has often engaged its community as a benefactor working for the good of others less fortunate.¹ Its members have not fully recognized their neighbors as ends unto themselves, to be enjoyed for their own sake. As a result they suffer from an “impoverished social imagination,” and it is not clear what they want for or from their neighbors, or that they see themselves in need of anything from them.²

In this study a missional action team will be formed and led to create experiments in neighborly presence among families involved in three different Northside ministries. The experiments will attempt to shift missional practice from primarily “working for” to “being with” neighbors³ and to help a liberal Baptist church break out of habits of internal reflection into a praxis model of action and learning.⁴ The objective is to learn whether and how a congregation can come to recognize and cultivate desire for its neighbors.

This project is vitally important because Northside is a predominantly white church in an increasingly diverse community, and church members do not know how to break out of historic patterns of engagement into new ways of thinking, feeling, and

¹ For a discussion of the implications of engaging our community by “working for” those in need see Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen, *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 20-47.

² Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

³ Wells and Owen, *Living Without Enemies*, 23-26.

⁴ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 135-145.

acting among their neighbors. The church has an important history of progressive social ministry and advocacy, but it does not recognize the deep challenge and opportunity to join with what God is doing in its very own neighborhoods.

The project is interesting to me because I have been pastor of Northside for twelve years, but I have not been able to lead the congregation into a new awareness of racial division, much less into new commitments of engaging neighbors as ends unto themselves. Through this project I hope to grow in my own capacity to lead my congregation, and I hope to diffuse a new way of missional action that springs from a desire for the presence of neighbors.

Part One of this doctoral project will describe previous attempts at missional innovation. It will explain why the failure of these attempts points to a lack of desire for the presence of the other. It will then describe how experiments in neighborly presence might expose this lack of desire and cultivate a new desire within the congregation.

Part Two of the paper will follow the project in full. The project embedded the “Missional Change Model”⁵ within the liturgical seasons from Advent to Pentecost. Participants met weekly for Eucharist and established a daily practice of prayer, thus intentionally creating opportunities to explore bodily desire in both worship and mission. They were also introduced to the practice of indwelling a “third place.”⁶ The experiment in enjoying the presence of neighbors took place in the fifty days of Eastertide.

Part Three of the paper will suggest the contours of a local theology of bodily desire. Examining theological and cultural challenges and pointing to new social

⁵ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 79-108.

⁶ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of Community* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999), 14-19.

imagination in light of the experiments, this section will consider how bodily desire for God and neighbor can be locally embodied in Clinton, Mississippi. This section will show how missional, congregational, and spiritual formation are finally inseparable, and it will focus on the importance of receptive engagement with neighbors to missional formation.

Part Four will conclude with recommendations for further missional innovation in light of the project. It will offer practical suggestions for a project of Appreciative Inquiry aimed at spiritual formation. It will propose that Northside join in a local effort of broad-based political organizing in order to unlearn habits of paternalism. Finally, the doctoral project will conclude with an argument for the importance of acting and reflecting within a multi-cultural congregation, and it will recommend a project in historical memory in partnership with a local black congregation.

PART ONE

DISCOVERING DESIRE AS A MINISTRY CHALLENGE

CHAPTER 1

FRUSTRATED INNOVATION AND THE PROMISE OF CHANGE

Northside is a predominantly white church in an increasingly diverse neighborhood, and its members have indicated a desire to know and be known by their neighbors. This opening chapter will compare the racial homogeneity of Northside to the racial diversity of its neighborhood, the schools, and the city of Clinton at large. It will then describe signs of awareness among the membership that Northside has become estranged from its neighborhood as well as signs of a shared desire for the presence of neighbors. After identifying signs of desire for neighbors, it will describe halting progress made in the congregational formation of desire and in missional innovation among Northside's neighbors. All this will prepare for an analysis in Chapter 2 of the need for an experiment in the formation of desire for the presence of neighbors.

Homogeneity in a Diverse Community

Northside is composed of approximately three hundred active and prospective members. Only two members are African American, and one prospective member is a foreign exchange student from South Africa. The rest of the membership is white.

Northside has been officially welcoming of all people regardless of race since its founding in 1969, when the decision to be open to all was considered bold, but the church has remained racially homogenous with only a few exceptions since that time.¹

In vivid contrast to the homogeneity of Northside, the surrounding neighborhoods, community schools, and the city at large are racially diverse. Northside sits on a plot of land between three neighborhood developments comprised of single-family homes and adjacent to one small apartment complex. Clinton Park was the original neighborhood of many founding members. It was once entirely white, but in the past two decades many black families have moved into the neighborhood.² The Briars was developed after the founding of Northside, and it has become a racially and economically mixed neighborhood, with a combination of modest single-family homes and inexpensive rental properties. A third neighborhood, The Cascades, is noticeably less diverse. It is a quiet neighborhood with lots maintained by an association, and it includes a private neighborhood swim and tennis club. Immediately west of the church is an apartment complex with approximately forty units. The residents are racially mixed.³

The neighborhoods surrounding Northside reflect the racial diversity across the entire city of Clinton. In the 2010 census Clinton was 60 percent white alone, 34 percent

¹ Northside briefly attempted what Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, following Manuel Ortiz, call a “multicongregational” model of intercultural church life in the 1980s by allowing a black church to meet in its facilities. Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), quoted in Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 91.

² This information is based upon my own knowledge of the Clinton Park area as a resident of Clinton for thirteen years.

³ None of the residents of the apartment complex is present in the life of Northside Baptist Church.

African-American or black alone, 4 percent Asian, 1.5 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent two or more races.⁴ The Clinton school system is also one of the most racially integrated systems in Mississippi. Just over 50 percent of the students in Clinton public schools are black, 44 percent are white, while almost 4 percent are Asian and a little over 1 percent are Hispanic.⁵ There is regular speculation across the community about the possibility of maintaining an integrated system without white people fleeing.

Signs of Awareness of Estrangement from Neighbors

Northside was founded in 1969 as a mission of two established Southern Baptist churches in Clinton. The church was located deliberately in an area of new population growth, and one of the first decisions of the new church was to adopt an open membership policy regarding race.⁶ In the 1960s many white Mississippi Baptist churches publically opposed the integration of churches, but the new membership of Northside chose deliberately to be open to integration.

⁴ Clinton, Mississippi Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://censusviewer.com/city/MS/Clinton>.

⁵ "Clinton Public School District," Public School Review, accessed December 3, 2014, http://www.publicschoolreview.com/agency_schools/leaid/2801090. The demographics for white and African-American students in Clinton almost exactly mirror the demographics for public school students in the state of Mississippi as a whole.

⁶ It is difficult to establish why Clinton was slated to grow in the seventies, but the standard account is white flight from the city of Jackson. Black migration followed in the nineties. If this is true, then Northside was first founded as a mission to primarily white residents fleeing integration in schools and neighborhoods, but soon found itself in a mixed neighborhood. The desires, fears, revulsions, and attractions behind these patterns of migration are impossible to identify with any precision, but it is important to recognize from the beginning that Northside was sent into a community that was in migration, drawn by desires and driven by fears. In 1970 the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 was finally implemented, and segregation in schools was officially ended. They were founded in a tumultuous period of racial unrest in the South.

Northside was placed in a neighborhood that was projected to grow, and a wave of population growth began in Clinton in the 1970s, with the population doubling from 7289 to 14,660.⁷ The racial mix of the city began to change dramatically after 1990: Clinton was 82 percent white and 16.8 percent black in 1990, 74.4 percent white and 22.5 percent black in 2000, and 60 percent white and 34 percent black in 2010.⁸

Signs of awareness that Northside had become estranged from its diverse neighborhoods emerged in a deacons retreat in 2008. As the church prepared to celebrate its fortieth anniversary, the deacons took a retreat aimed at envisioning the next chapter of their story. The retreat leader invited participants to imagine Clinton and Northside in twenty years and then to share what they had imagined. A common theme was the diversity of the city beginning to be reflected in the diversity of the church. Every participant imagined Clinton as an increasingly diverse community, and everyone imagined Northside as a church that was at least becoming more diverse. The conversations among these leaders indicated at least an inchoate desire to become a church more integrated with its community.

Following the retreat deacons met to consider how to begin to fulfill their goals of increased diversity. After much discussion they landed upon the idea of diffusing a single question throughout the congregation: “What is one small gospel ministry of healing and wholeness that Northside can offer our neighborhood?” The deacons then led a series of

⁷ Joseph Lusteck and Associates, *Clinton Municipal Annexation Study* (Clinton City Hall: Clinton, MS, September 1982), 35.

⁸ Maybelle G. Cagle, “City Growth Less Than Predicted,” *The Clinton News*, April 5, 2001.

Wednesday night prayer meetings in which they each reflected on their own responses to the question and continued to invite congregational members to respond to the question.

After many months the Missions Committee finally stepped forward to announce four answers to the question. First, there was an emerging after-school program. Second, there was a new partnership with the Opportunity Center in Jackson, a ministry to the homeless led by a woman who had joined Northside during the period the congregation was asking the question. Third, there was a garden project, led by three members, who were trying to make an existing garden on church property into a site of outreach and sharing with neighbors. Fourth, there was a new mission imagined by a much revered but recently deceased member, who wanted Northside to serve as a site of the recovery of neighborly relations.⁹ This last mission resulted in the repair of a house in the midst of a historically black neighborhood.

Signs of Desire for the Presence of Neighbors

The deacons' retreat, resulting in the "one gospel ministry" question, indicates a desire, however small and inchoate, for the presence of neighbors. The four answers to the quest for one small gospel ministry reveal awareness across the congregation that they have become estranged from our neighbors, but they also represent a sign of widespread desire for the presence of our neighbors. A broad diversity of members from every sector of church life began four different projects or ministries aimed at neighborly outreach.

⁹ Dick Brogan died in April of 2011 shortly after taking the initial steps to build a relationship with a family in a historically black neighborhood in Clinton. Brogan had been a pioneer in Baptist efforts at black-white relations in the sixties, and he had been a longtime spiritual leader in the church.

As a result of answering the question Northside now has a six-person After-School Committee, supervising a year-round program of after-school and summertime care for twenty-five children. The committee has recently hired a permanent coordinator. The program and the staff are racially mixed, and a number of Northside members and others in the community now offer their time weekly to tutor, make snacks, and “hang out” with a diverse group of children.¹⁰

In addition to the after-school program the congregation has increased its awareness of its relationship to the city of Jackson through increasing involvement with the Opportunity Center. Historically, Northside has limited its local outreach to the city limits of Clinton, but it now has a presence in the city of Jackson. Each week church members take donations to the center, and the church has ordained the director of the center as a deacon in the church.

The final two answers to the question have also born fruit. Through the garden project Northside has produced vegetables to share with neighbors at two senior adult living centers, and they have gained members from both of those communities. In response to the call to organize neighbors in memory of their beloved member, over a dozen Northside volunteers pitched in to repair a home, and the church gladly donated thousands of dollars to the project.

¹⁰ The program is intentionally racially open, and the leaders of the program openly acknowledge the importance of the program being racially integrated, but race remains a difficult subject for conversation at Northside, and the committee has not deliberately framed the project around racial reconciliation, nor has it worked on intercultural understanding at the staff or committee level.

Previous Attempts at Formation

Even as the church was becoming aware of estrangement from neighbors and expressing a desire to know them, Northside was engaging in a powerful initiative to develop awareness of the centrality of congregational formation to its calling, and this initiative is worthy of closer examination because it introduced Northside to the centrality of desire in the formation of Christian community.¹¹ From 2006-2010 Northside was part of two movements of the Congregational Formation Initiative (hereafter, CFI) of the Ekklesia Project. Northside was paired with a pastor and a scholar, and the church formed two small groups, which met regularly to study over the course of two years each. The groups studied the dynamics of formation itself, the specifics of formation in Christian community, and then went on to more in-depth studies of particular documents, including a commentary on *Philippians*, Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*,¹² and Lesslie Newbigin's *Mission in Christ's Way*.¹³

Although the work of the CFI touched specifically on the formation of desire, and the project itself was important and enlightening for those two small groups, the impact of CFI in terms of diffusing new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting throughout the congregation was limited. The work remained largely enclosed within an internal circle of reflection. One criticism of the work is that it aimed to form new ways of acting, but it

¹¹ Philip D. Kenneson et al., *The Shape of our Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 21-29.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1954).

¹³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: a Gift, a Command, an Assurance* (New York: Friendship Press, 1988).

proceeded primarily by creating new ways of thinking.¹⁴ So, even as the work led into the missional imagination of Lesslie Newbigin, the groups were engaging this new imagination from within a closed circle of conversation. They were not yet experimenting with new ways of being on mission in their community.

Three Technical Challenges and Halting Missional Progress

The first section established that Northside is a homogenous congregation located in an increasingly diverse context. Even in their current homogenous condition genuine desires for the presence of neighbors were identified, and a powerful process for recognizing and understanding the formative power of desire is available. With those challenges and opportunities in mind this section will describe halting progress made in an intentional process aimed at missional innovation. By attempting to show how previous attempts at missional innovation have come up short, it will lay the groundwork for an experiment on the formation of desire for the presence of neighbors.

In the spring of 2012 after examining the reports of six congregational listening teams, the Northside deacons identified three adaptive ministry challenges and began the work of selecting members to three corresponding missional action teams. Those three challenges were named identity, structure, and training.¹⁵ The deacons then called a separate meeting devoted to naming three missional action teams of six to eight members

¹⁴ Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2010), 46-49. See also Bryant L. Myers, *Walking With the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2011), 265.

¹⁵ See Appendix A.

per team. A congregational meeting was called in June of 2012 for the purpose of sanctioning the three chosen teams.

The work of the three missional action teams was halting at best. One of the three missional action teams (identity) failed even to meet and begin its task. A second team (structure) failed to complete its task, and a third team (training) met faithfully, reconsidered and reframed its original charge in terms of a more appropriate adaptive challenge, but no further action was taken.

There are many reasons for the limited success of the three missional action teams: the balance of gifts in each team's make up was not carefully considered; there was inadequate lay leadership in the notification process of team meetings (in other words, the work was perceived as "the pastor's project"); and perhaps most damaging—each mandate invited criticism and blame for some perceived failure.¹⁶ For the purposes of this project it is important to highlight the ways that each challenge was "technical" rather than "adaptive," and how each challenge was focused away from missional engagement with our neighbors and toward internal aspects of the church's life together.¹⁷

¹⁶ Chapter 7 will explore a need to learn how to identify and appreciate strengths rather than "fix problems." What Mark Lau Branson calls a "deficit model" focuses on illnesses rather than on identifying larger, holistic, life-giving resources already within the congregation and strengthening them. See *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 21-24.

¹⁷ A technical challenge is any challenge a group can address by employing skills or knowledge the group already possesses. An adaptive challenge is any challenge requiring the acquisition of new skills or knowledge or the development of new habits or practices. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1994), 73-88.

The first challenge, issued by the deacons to the Identity Team, asked the group to “define who we are.”¹⁸ The deacons wanted the team to name the church’s mission and values based on a current assessment of congregational activities. The Structure Team was challenged “to evaluate our current organizations and activities to determine if they are ideal for our mission.”¹⁹ The third challenge called only for an improvement in some practice the church already does: The deacons asked the Training Team to “improve how we train our membership.”²⁰

These challenges are all technical in that they contain the answer to the challenge within the challenge itself. The deacons seem to know the solution to a problem, and they call for the group to employ knowledge and skills they already possess to address a challenge they already know how to meet.²¹ By consistently falling into the same pattern of identifying problems the church needs to fix with resources already found within the church, the deacons indicate a lack of awareness of need for the gifts and presence of anyone outside or beyond the church.

The technical nature of these problems is closely related to a consistent pattern of turning questions about missional readiness into challenges aimed at “inner functions and processes.”²² In the name of increasing their capacity to be a missional church the

¹⁸ See Appendix A.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The deacons did indicate some awareness of a need to develop new values in the identity challenge, but they expected the team to identify those values ahead of acquiring them.

²² Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 44.

deacons recommended what would surely be long and complex internally focused processes. Ironically, their missional challenges only promised months of inward work that would delay any encounter with neighbors.²³

Three Promising Ministries: After-School, Football, and Girl Scouts

The deacons ultimately failed to articulate an adaptive challenge that, if addressed, would help Northside realize the desire of knowing neighbors and seeing the congregation integrated into the diversity of its neighborhood. This final section will describe three promising ministries that indicate the presence of desire, however inchoate, for the presence of neighbors: an after-school program, a ministry of presence with the Clinton High School football team, and a brownie troop that uses Northside's facility for meetings. It will show that the possibilities for transformation reside already within the culture of Northside, and it will lead to Chapter 2, where a new challenge will be taken up: the transformation of desire for the presence of neighbors.

The after-school program is a promising ministry because it began with a combination of desire for an increased exposure to neighbors and healthy self-interest on the part of parents. The program began with two families whose children were participants in a preschool operated by nearby Mississippi College. When the families learned that the preschool was closing, they began to talk together about their desire for their own children to learn and grow in an integrated and challenging environment.

²³ The Training Team did eventually identify an adaptive challenge, which they focused on the difficulty of living as the body of Christ in Clinton. Unfortunately, a slow response from the deacons stifled the group's energy, and they ultimately disbanded.

Another church family was brought into the conversation when they learned that their after-school program would also be closing. The after-school program launched after months of dreaming, but only began to materialize when a few began to take action. It had its beginnings in healthy self-interest (quality child-care for members' children) and missional desire for Northside children to grow up in an integrated community.

The after-school ministry has now grown to accommodate twenty-five children of both members and neighbors. The program is diverse in students and staff, and dedicated volunteers and employees operate it. One hope of this project is to learn from the participants in this ministry that already so obviously show a desire for its neighbors. Another hope is to help the ministry examine those desires, asking why they are reaching out to these families and fostering friendships among their children and the children of their neighbors.

The football ministry emerged after the church completed a new youth building in 2011. Two church members with a desire that the new building be used as a blessing to their community invited members of the football team to come to the youth building after practice each Tuesday during the season for snacks and fellowship. Most of the thirty football players who began spending their Tuesday nights at Northside were black. They enjoyed simple snacks, table tennis, and foosball, but most of all they enjoyed being among people who wanted to be with them. For the most part there have been no devotions or services offered to the players; the emphasis has been on encouraging them by giving them a place to "hang out."

There are some aspects of the football team ministry that are a cause of concern for missional readiness: the ministry is on Northside's "turf," it is led by white

benefactors, and the ministry leaders have even begun to offer scholarships to players. One goal of the project is to help the ministry leaders recognize and cultivate the kernel of desire for the simple presence of neighbors that lies at the heart of this ministry. By recognizing the gospel kernel at the core of their ministry, they might also become more aware of the anti-gospel dangers of paternalistic relationships.

The brownie troop represents a group of neighbors who have shown a willingness to be in Northside's presence. Most of the troop members are black, but at least one member is a white member of Northside. The troop began meeting at Northside from the beginning of their charter, and they have consistently thanked the church by attending worship together once a year and inviting church members to their celebrations. One goal of this project is to help members recognize that they live in a community of mutual recognition and respect and to learn from the dynamics of engagement with these neighbors.

This chapter has compared the racial homogeneity of Northside to the racial diversity of its neighborhoods. It has described signs of awareness that Northside is estranged from its neighbors and also signs of genuine desire for the presence of neighbors. It has described halting progress in missional innovation and ecclesial formation, and all of this description lays the groundwork for an analysis in Chapter 2 of the need for an experiment in the formation of desire for the presence of neighbors.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARD THE TRANSFORMATION OF DESIRE

Chapter 1 described Northside as a church becoming aware of its isolation from neighbors and also frustrated by halting attempts at missional change. At the same time it identified evidence of genuine desire for the presence of neighbors. This chapter will reflect theologically on the need to form desire in a way that will allow church members to enjoy the presence of neighbors. It will begin with an exploration of four ways of neighborly engagement, proceed to a reflection on the missional significance of the formation of desire, and conclude with the contours of a project aimed at helping the congregation discover and liberate their desires for God and neighbor.

From “Working For” to “Being With”

In order to describe theologically Northside’s relationship with neighbors, this section will present a framework of four ways of congregational engagement with neighbors. It will reveal paternalistic habits of engagement that have isolated Northside from its neighbors. Citing an example of one recent missional effort it will show how

paternalistic habits have corroded Northside’s capacity to enjoy the presence of its neighbors.

In their book, *Living Without Enemies*, Sam Wells and Marcia Owen describe these four ways of engaging neighbors as “working for, working with, being for, and being with.”¹ “Working for” is the conventional model: when we have “skills, availability, and resources to help” someone in need, our first response is to work for those who are in need.² Wells and Owen suggest that it “is hard to overestimate the hold that this conventional model has on our imaginations.”³ “Working for” is how most of us conceive of our vocational training: we acquire skills and knowledge so that we can later employ them for others.

As a way of missional engagement “working for” is a spiritually precarious habit because it can be a manifestation of what Jayakumar Christian calls “the god-complexes of the non-poor.”⁴ “The non-poor understand themselves as superior, essential, and anointed to rule. They succumb to the temptation to play god in the lives of the poor, using religious systems . . . as tools.”⁵ When we always tend to “work for” our neighbors, we may be subtly participating in a vast “web of lies and deceit” that appears to be benevolent, but really masks the mediation of power.⁶

¹ Wells and Owen, *Living Without Enemies*, 23-26.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 124-126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶ *Ibid.*

“Working for” another is appropriate for some professionals, but as a regular and conventional approach to neighbors, it leads to isolation and estrangement. It can strip people of their dignity, fostering a sense of superiority in some and inferiority in others.⁷ It can lead to division, distrust and resentment. From a pragmatic perspective “working for” frequently fails because change is not taken up unless it is owned and developed by the actual members of any given system.⁸

Interpreting the Current Situation through the Lens of “Working For”

A recent missional effort at Northside illustrates the potentially destructive dynamics of paternalism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a revered leader challenged the church to develop a ministry of friendship in the community. He envisioned Northside becoming a church that fostered neighborly relations in Clinton, and to prod them into action he found a family in need of emergency work on its home.

The revered leader visited in the home of the family in crisis and began to get a sense of its needs, but tragically, the leader died of a massive heart attack before any work could begin. Wanting to repair the home in memory of their friend, the members of the church got busy and used their best talents coming up with a plan to overhaul the house. They raised money, recruited volunteers, worked for months, and then they began to grow weary.

⁷ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 27.

⁸ For example Jerry Sternin advocated for development workers to listen to as many people in a community as possible, even when they already thought they knew the answers. The listening itself “engenders the broadest ownership.” Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance*, 32. When we simply work for others, we truncate the deep listening and participatory learning that allows for God’s gifts in all to be recognized.

Some members began to complain that the family being helped was not participating in the work. Volunteers began to drift away as the work stretched into the hot summer. To make matters even worse, near the end of the project they discovered the recipient was already a member of a local black church. When they called the church to solicit help in the project, they were rebuffed. The leaders of the black church recounted their own history of working for this family in crisis, and were understandably reluctant to enter into another church's charity work in "their" neighborhood. "Working for" its neighbor left Northside exhausted, frustrated, and at odds with other churches in the neighborhood. The work resulted in increased distrust and division across racial boundaries, and it deepened the divide between churches in the community.

Working With, Being For, and Being With

Recognizing the limitations of "working for" others, many institutions dedicated to addressing human need are discovering the importance of "working with."⁹ Working with others, rather than for them, is a way of sharing power with neighbors. It recognizes the dignity of those in need and their desire and ability to solve their own problems.

Wells and Owen give only limited attention to the third approach of "being for."¹⁰ "Being for" is a posture of advocacy for and interest in the issues and circumstances that affect our neighbors, but for some advocacy can become an excuse never to engage on the ground, in the actual company of those in need. Short of a genuine relationship with

⁹ Wells and Owen, *Living Without Enemies*, 34-36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

those in need “being for” is an inadequate mode of engagement, although there is an important prophetic role in advocacy for those who lack political power.

The approach of “being with” others is not finally about solving problems; it is about being present. Being with another, especially in (but not limited to) a situation of need springs from and communicates a desire for the presence of another. Wells and Owen write that sometimes “the obsession with finding solutions can get in the way of forming profound relationships of mutual understanding, and sometimes those relationships are more significant than the solutions.”¹¹ Wells and Owens cite Jean Vanier’s work with L’Arche as a primary example of the profound significance of “being with.” They write, “L’Arche communities are family-like homes where people with and without disabilities share their lives together, giving witness to the reality that persons with disabilities possess inherent qualities of welcome, wonderment, spirituality and friendship.”¹²

Being with others is a crucial approach to missional engagement because it recognizes the dignity, worth, and desirability of all. As Wells and Owen point out, until we can say to someone that we value their person above their achievements, standing, or wealth, then there is no reason for them to trust us. Until we value someone intrinsically for their own sake, any efforts to “work for” or even “work with” another only reveal that we may be using someone in need “as a means toward some further end.”¹³

¹¹ Wells and Owen, *Living without Enemies*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

The lively hope of learning new habits of “being with” neighbors, and discovering them as ends unto themselves within God’s triune love animates this project. Likewise, the project is compelled by the danger of succumbing to the temptations of the god-complexes of the non-poor, using neighbors as means toward the achievement of hidden “further ends.” The project seeks to help church members recognize their own patterns of engagement, so that they can begin to recognize their neighbors as proper ends to be enjoyed.¹⁴

The Full Bodily Transformation of Desire

“Being with” is a crucial mode of engagement that recognizes the dignity and worth of neighbors, but it is only possible as we come to desire and enjoy their presence as proper ends unto themselves. This section will lay the theological groundwork for a project aimed at the formation of desire within a missional Christian community. It begins by reflecting on the importance of intentional ecclesial formation, specifically on the formation of desire, and it highlights the necessity of full bodily formation.¹⁵ It will explain why the right formation of desire is critical to missional formation and especially important for a white liberal Baptist church in an increasingly diverse community.

Finally, the section will clarify that any experiment in the formation of desire must be

¹⁴ Wells and Owen cite Augustine from *On Christian Doctrine* who writes, “There are some things, then, which are to be enjoyed, others which are to be used, others still which we enjoy and use. Those things which are objects of enjoyment make us happy . . . For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake.” Wells and Owen, *Living without Enemies*, 44.

¹⁵ The term “ecclesial formation” is here used to refer to the same activities that Branson and Martinez call “church formation.” In describing missional ecclesiology they emphasize that church formation is a broad array of activities and practices including congregational, spiritual, and missional formation. They emphasize that a missional church must devote serious attention to God, each other, and the world into which we are sent. See Branson and Martinez, *Churches Cultures, and Leadership*, 60-64.

embedded in practices of action and reflection. This section will lead to the description of the contours of a project in ecclesial formation aimed at helping Northside discover neighbors as ends to be enjoyed for their own sake within God's triune love.

Why Formation Matters

Intentional ecclesial formation is a new practice for Northside, but it is a vital aspect of ecclesial life. Ecclesial formation may be defined as the intentional process through which in worship, mission, and shared common life we submit our bodies together to be transformed by God's grace (Romans 12:1-2). Formation is not only about learning the cognitive aspects of Christian faith; rather it is a way of intentionally nurturing those bodily habits that foster lives of discipleship and help the church become, in Gerhard Lohfink's terms, a "contrast society . . . an alternative community. It is not the violent structures of the powers of this world which are to rule within it, but rather reconciliation and brotherhood."¹⁶

It is important for this study to pause and reflect on the importance of bodily, rather than merely cognitive, ecclesial formation. G. Simon Harak, S.J. has written a study of the formation of Christian character in which he asks how it is that Christians might be formed to respond bodily to the approach of others.¹⁷ He studies how

¹⁶ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 56

¹⁷ G. Simon Harak, S.J., *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993).

communities of faith can become properly disposed to “being moved” with compassion and desire rather than disposed to fear and revulsion of others.¹⁸

Harak begins with the observation that we are in fact morally responsible to cultivate certain visceral reactions and to avoid others. He writes, “It is somehow wrong not to feel revulsion at rape, or to stay forever angry with imperfect parents. It is somehow right to rejoice at a friend’s success, or to be moved by the plight of an abused child.”¹⁹ It follows that we are responsible for the way we feel about others and their presence. Emotional reactions and deep internal drives and dispositions are not neutral but morally fraught with meaning.²⁰

Harak goes on to explore the ways that bodily reactions are formed in us through our earliest interactions with caregivers. Later, through prolonged interactions with others our very bodies become physically reconfigured to recognize some people as a threat and others as desirable. We become physically disposed either to approach or avoid certain others.²¹ Harak goes further to explore how affective reactions such as fear or desire are formed only within complex organic systems and are likely to remain with us “unless intentionally changed.”²²

¹⁸ Harak writes, “I want to concentrate on the ethical significance of the agent’s being moved.” Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁰ Harak praises contemporary virtue ethicists who recognize that individuals are not autonomous decision-makers, but are formed by many outside influences in their actions, but he finds missing any systematic treatment of how we are formed to feel about the physical approach of others. Northside’s previous attempts at formation have remained closed in internal circles of reflections. What are missing have been practical experiments in bodily formation in the presence of others. Ibid., 3-4

²¹ Ibid., 19.

²² Ibid., 23-25.

Harak's study is vitally important in order to learn whether and how deep bodily affectivity can be changed faithfully through ecclesial formation. With such a question in mind it is important to remember that ecclesial formation aims at bodily transformation, and it is not just a mental game. Neither is formation an individualistic quest: we are changed at the visceral level only within trusting communities who help us learn new ways of perceiving the presence of others.

Intentional ecclesial formation is finally essential because it allows us to willfully participate with God's transforming grace by revealing the myriad ways we are already being formed, often without our awareness, by the many institutions and practices in which we participate.²³ Phillip Kenneson writes, "Human beings are social creatures. As such, they are always being formed and shaped by structures and powers outside themselves, as well as participating in those structures and powers that form and shape others."²⁴

The Centrality of Desire

If ecclesial formation is an essential practice of any church, desire is at the heart of any practice of ecclesial formation. In brief, ecclesial formation rests on the formation of desire for one crucial theological reason: the love of God cannot be coerced; it must be willingly received as gift, or it is not love at all. Kenneson writes, "To coerce love is to

²³ Kenneson writes, "Whether we know it or not, or whether we acknowledge it or not, we are always being formed." Kenneson et al., *The Shape of Our Lives*, 11.

²⁴ Philip Kenneson, "Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 55.

violate its very nature.”²⁵ The journey of Christian faithfulness begins with openness to our very desires being transformed by God’s grace.²⁶

The right formation of desire is especially crucial to missional formation. God’s mission of salvation depends on the transformation of desire for it to be embraced and received as gift. Gerhard Lohfink argues that God wills a radical change for the world, but that God has determined to change the world without “taking away our freedom.”²⁷ The change God desires for us must be willfully received; it cannot be imposed upon us. “Everyone must have the chance to come and see. All must have the chance to behold and test this new thing. Then, if they want to, they can allow themselves to be drawn into the history of salvation that God is creating.”²⁸

The transformation of desire is crucial to missional formation also because, in the words of Willie James Jennings, transformed desire across cultural boundaries is “inherent to the gospel itself.”²⁹ What Jennings means is that the gospel is not an abstraction, a word that can be dropped into a culture and enjoyed in isolation from neighbors. Instead as he says, the Spirit of God is creating a “new cultural politic,” a new people living in communion across cultural divides.³⁰ Jennings writes, “The new people

²⁵ Kenneson, et al., *The Shape of Our Lives*, 12.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 27. See also Kenneson: “God could have created us as already finished sculptures. But God did not do this, presumably because God desires that *we desire* to be so conformed and to open ourselves up to that transformation.” Ibid., emphasis original.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 271.

³⁰ Ibid., 271.

formed in this space imagine the world differently, beyond the agonistic vision of nations and toward the possibility of love and kinship. Aesthetics preceding ethics, these disciples of Jesus love and desire one another and that desire for each other is the basis of their ethical actions in the worlds of allegiances and kinships.”³¹

One theological clarification is in order for any discussion of the right formation of desire. We must be able to clarify the difference between the right formation of desire and the manipulation of desire. People are especially subject to manipulation and stimulation through their desires, but ecclesial formation is about the liberation of desires toward the love of God and neighbor. As Dan Bell reminds us, Christian freedom is not the ability to get whatever one wants, but rather “to be free is to be released from the bondage of sin and to be Spirit-enabled to follow the good that is God.”³²

The ecclesial formation of desire, then, is not about squelching or manipulating desire; it is about liberating desire. As we participate in ecclesial formation through worship, mission, and shared common life “our desire is being drawn out of its self absorption so that it may flow as it was created to flow—toward God and neighbor in the love that desires communion.”³³ Thus ecclesial formation is about the liberation of desire from bondage to sinful conformation to the structures of the world.

³¹ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 274. It is important to acknowledge that this vision of the gospel is new theological territory, even in the theological guild. It is still largely a foreign concept to the people of Northside. It is not within the scope of this project to convince a congregation of this new way of thinking about the gospel; rather, the project attempts to help a congregation reach new ways of understanding the gospel through an experiment in the formation of desire for neighbors.

³² Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 164.

³³ *Ibid.*, 165.

Formation as a Practice of Action-Reflection

Having identified desire as a primary focus for the practice of missional formation, it now becomes clearer that such formation cannot occur through another cognitive event focused on convincing or persuading people to change their behavior.³⁴ If we want to cultivate or transform desire, we must try new practices and habits in the hope that “changing our practice can change how we think and feel about something.”³⁵ In other words, we do not merely think our way into new ways of feeling; we must “act our way into new ways” of feeling.³⁶

A project on the transformation of desire creates a unique opportunity and a unique challenge for a liberal Baptist church that is caught inside long habits of internal reflection. First, the opportunity: because desire cannot be accessed by cognitive reflection, Northside will be required to try something new. A project aimed at the transformation of desire will offer Northside a fresh opportunity to step out of closed circles of internal reflection. If desire could be changed simply through internal reflection, we would all have a much easier time changing habits of eating, but it is not changed through thinking. In this project Northside will be invited out of its habits of internal reflection into bodily experimental action.

Now the project exposes a deep challenge: exactly because Northside has been shaped and formed in Cartesian habits of perception, church members will likely face deep internal resistance to any project that requires them to engage God, themselves, one

³⁴ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 265.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin, *Power of Positive Deviance*, 46.

another, or their neighbors through intimate, bodily interaction. Northside is “Cartesian” in that members have inherited a tradition of seeing the great “moral projects” of their lives as “a struggle for control of the passions by reason.”³⁷ Even though Cartesian philosophy has been vigorously challenged in the academy, these habits of perception are deeply ingrained in the Western subject, and it is especially evident in white liberal Baptist churches.

Northside is a white church in an increasingly diverse neighborhood, and it is also a liberal church that has framed its identity through decades of struggle against fundamentalist theology. It places a high value on academic achievement, and its members have visceral reactions to emotional appeals to faith.³⁸ Their attempts at congregational formation have remained enclosed within internal circles of reflection, but these tendencies spring from long habits of primarily cognitive engagement with scriptural texts. As a liberal, academic church they are likely to resist a challenge that calls for them to engage God and neighbor (or biblical texts, for that matter) with their whole bodies.

This brief examination of the centrality of desire to Christian formation points to a new challenge for Northside: although members show signs of desire for the presence of their neighbors, they remain enclosed within internal circles of reflection, and they have inherited a tradition of engaging the world primarily through cognitive control of passions. In order to cultivate inchoate desires for their neighbor, they face a classic

³⁷ Harak, S.J., *Virtuous Passions*, 30.

³⁸We must recognize the irony of a church that values cognitive reflection being led around by visceral reaction.

adaptive challenge: they will need to change “values, attitudes, [and] habits of behavior.”³⁹

Contours of the Project

When faced with an adaptive ministry challenge, Alan Roxburgh proposes that a congregation move deliberately through five phases that include awareness, understanding, evaluation, experiments, and commitment.⁴⁰ In order to address the adaptive challenge of cultivating desire for the presence of its neighbors, this project led members of Northside through each of those five phases. Because Northside had already been led through the framing of adaptive ministry challenges and faced failures and frustrations, members needed to regain trust and confidence in the process through a relatively short project aimed at small, attainable experimental action. One hope is that new commitments formed during these experiments will lead to more extended experimental action and reflection.

In order to create a project aimed at cultivating desire for the presence of neighbors, the project is framed around the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.⁴¹ Advent and Christmas were seasons of preparation and recruitment. Epiphany was a time of awareness and understanding. In

³⁹Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 73-88.

⁴⁰Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 79-104.

⁴¹Northside has a strong tradition of observing the liturgical seasons. Framing the project in this way takes advantage of gifts the church already possesses, and it builds confidence just when members are beginning to show signs of frustration and doubt about their ability to move through any project to completion. The clear boundaries on the project will also be important to give participants confidence that they are not going to be endlessly talking and never acting.

Lent the group began to articulate new challenges by confessing their own congregational tendencies of engagement, and it began to plan small experiments aimed at enjoying the presence of neighbors during the season of Eastertide. In Eastertide, the group finalized its plans for a series of experiments and began to implement them. At Pentecost it returned to evaluate what team members had learned and what new commitments to neighborly presence they were ready to make.

A key feature of the project involved offering new practices for each member to “try on” during the process. Each participant was invited to begin or deepen a regular practice of daily prayer. Also each was introduced to the practice of inhabiting a “third place” in order to begin to develop new skills of perception of what God is doing in their neighborhoods.⁴² Finally, the team agreed to join together each week in the practice of sharing communion. With these new practices of prayer, presence, and sharing in communion the project was entitled, “Enjoying God and Enjoying Neighbor.”

⁴² Ray Oldenberg, *The Great Good Place*, 14-19.

PART TWO

EXPERIMENTING WITH NEIGHBORLY PRESENCE

CHAPTER 3

DESIRE IN LENT AND JOY IN EASTER

The first two chapters made the case that in order for Northside to learn a new way of engaging its neighbors as ends to be enjoyed for their own sake, the church needs an experiment in the formation of desire for the presence of neighbors. This chapter will describe the project in detail as it was planned beginning in Advent with preparation for the project and ending with Pentecost. It will explain the rationale and hopes behind each aspect of the project and prepare the way for the following chapter that will describe how the project actually unfolded.

Preparation in Advent

For this project a missional action team will be formed from volunteers across the congregation, but specific leaders will be invited representing the after-school program,

the football ministry and the brownie troop. In addition the Missions and Outreach Committees will be encouraged to send at least one representative to participate in the work. The deacons will be informed and notified that the “Enjoying Neighbor” mission action team will report back to them after the completion of their work.

The project begins intentionally in Advent, a season of preparation and expectation. Linking the project in Advent embeds it in a practice that represents the best of Northside’s tradition.¹ Three Northside members wrote a book about Northside’s practices of Advent in 1999, and every year members from across the congregation contribute to the seasonal observances.²

Advent prepares the congregation for the Feast of the Incarnation, so it is a fitting season to begin a project aimed at “being with” neighbors. It is also a season in which Northside members are encouraged to begin new habits of worship and prayer. The season of Advent also brings a dramatic change to Northside. When the congregation arrives to worship on the first Sunday, members discover the sanctuary full of banners from previous Advent seasons, hanging like championship pennants in a stadium.

Specific plans call for written invitations to the congregation in the December edition of the church newsletter and a presentation to the deacons at their December meeting about this new project in missional innovation.³ Throughout Advent specific appeals will be made to members of the designated ministries and committees. A one-

¹ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004).

² John Hendrix, Susan Meadors, and David Miller, *Celebrate Advent: Worship and Learning Resources* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1999).

³ See Appendix B.

page letter will be sent to individual members of these important groups asking these members to consider participating in a “short term Sunday evening group meeting from February 16 – June 15.”⁴ They will be informed that the purpose will be to learn new ways of engaging and enjoying God and neighbors.

Coming to Awareness and Understanding in Epiphany

If Advent is a season appropriate for preparation and for introducing the subject of incarnation, Epiphany is an especially rich season for coming to awareness and understanding of our relationship in Christ to neighbors. Epiphany itself is the last day of the season of Christmas, and it is “the festival of the manifestation of God’s Word made flesh, honored by the gifts from all nations and peoples.”⁵ The season after Epiphany is ordinary time, but the readings are marked by opportunities for “witnessing to the concrete way in which God reveals Jesus and the way Jesus as Messiah reveals God to all humanity.”⁶

The season after Epiphany lasts from four to nine Sundays depending on the time of Easter, and it offers Northside an opportunity for a thorough but quick-paced review of recent congregational work on missional readiness. Team members will be encouraged to remember the work of the previous years and to begin developing their own awareness of ministry challenges the congregation still faced.

⁴ Appendix C.

⁵ Hoyt L. Hickman et al., *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

The primary goal of the Epiphany meetings will be to help the team articulate some of the challenges they face to engaging their neighbors as ends to be enjoyed. To that end team members will be given two important readings and time to read and discuss them. The first reading is a short pamphlet by Phillip D. Kenneson about the dimensions of “real human presence.”⁷ That reading will allow the team members to reflect on the moral significance of human presence. The second reading is “The Nazareth Manifesto,” an online pamphlet in which Samuel Wells lays out “working for, working with, and being with” as three ways of engaging neighbors.⁸ Material about “being for” will be added from Wells and Owen’s book, *Living Without Enemies*.⁹

In order to help the team reflect on the readings participants will be given a four-quadrant chart, with each quadrant representing one of the ways of engaging neighbors. They can then identify various aspects of our congregational life and place them into one of the four categories. Finally, they will examine scriptural and theological examples of each of the ways of engaging their neighbors.¹⁰

⁷ Phillip D. Kenneson, *Practicing Ecclesial: Patient Practice Makes Perfect*, vol. 20 *The Renewing Radical Discipleship Series of Ekklesia Pamphlets*, ed. Joel Shuman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 5. Kenneson identifies three aspects of real human presence to be “abiding, devotion, and attention.”

⁸ Samuel Wells, “The Nazareth Manifesto,” *The Occasional Paper Series of The Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University*, 2008, Accessed July 29, 2014, https://web.duke.edu/kenanethics/NazarethManifesto_SamWells.pdf.

⁹ Wells and Owen, *Living Without Enemies*, 23-26.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 40-46. Wells and Owen provide biblical examples of each of the four ways of engagement.

Four New Practices

A key feature of the project is the introduction of four practices: *Lectio Divina*, daily prayer, weekly Eucharist, and inhabiting a third place. The practices are vital to the project because through them the team members will be offered an opportunity to step out of Northside's usual patterns of internal reflection and into the possibilities of full-bodied formation. James K.A. Smith writes, "Over time, rituals and practices—often in tandem with aesthetic phenomena like pictures and stories—mold and shape our precognitive disposition to the world by training our desires."¹¹ Of course, practices take longer to shape desires than the time allotted for this project, but the hope is to shift from practices of internal reflection into more material, full-bodied practices in order to introduce the team members to a new way of engaging with their neighbors.

Much of the first meeting is allotted to an introduction to the four practices. Team members need time to ask questions and talk about practical ways of entering the practices. The team also needs to be introduced to the rationale for each practice and invited to consider their significance for learning a new way of engaging neighbors.

Weekly Eucharist

Northside shares communion monthly, and it has gradually become a practice through which church members recognize their membership with one another in the body of Christ. In this project team members will be encouraged to reflect on their own growing appreciation for the importance of monthly Eucharist and invited to consider

¹¹ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 59.

whether weekly participation would heighten awareness of Christ's bodily presence in the church as it shares the meal. They will be encouraged to make connections between this central practice and the importance of bodily presence in the church and neighborhood. A short Eucharistic liturgy will be used at every gathering.¹²

Baptists have tended to de-emphasize the real presence of Jesus in what they generally call the Lord's Supper, but there is a growing recognition in Baptist life of the role of the Lord's Supper in building and maintaining solidarity in Christian community, and that the risen Christ is present with us, uniting us and making us whole.¹³ Eucharist is also one primary activity in which Cartesian habits of thinking are subverted. Its regular observance shifts the focus of the Christian life away from a private gnostic experience that isolates members from encounter with other selves. As a "public action" it incorporates them into a visible public body.¹⁴ One hope of the project is that team members may reflect on the practice of weekly Eucharist and actually gain new awareness of what is happening in their ongoing practice of monthly Eucharist.¹⁵

¹² Appendix D.

¹³ See especially James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 400-402.

¹⁴ Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 226.

¹⁵ Branson and Martinez quote theologian Pat Keifert: "No one learns from experience. One learns only from experience one reflects upon and articulates." Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 42.

Daily Prayer

Many Northside members confess that daily prayer is not part of their spiritual practice, and there may be connections between an inability to pray and an inability to enjoy the presence of God and neighbor. Regular prayer helps develop in us the capacity to be alone in the presence of God. In prayer we nurture three vital aspects of presence: “abiding, devotion, and attention.”¹⁶

No doubt there are many reasons that members have difficulty praying, not the least being the frantic pace of life in late modern capitalist society or simply theological confusion about the ends and means of praying. Both of these factors also influence an inability to abide in the presence of neighbors, so encouraging the development of habits of daily prayer is one important step toward opening up new pathways of being with neighbors. As team members begin to devote a small amount of time to prayer, they will be opening their bodies to formation into God’s triune community of love.¹⁷

To introduce the practice of daily prayer the team will be given three resources available online.¹⁸ They will discuss the place of prayer in God’s mission in the world. In all likelihood the group will encounter challenges and even failure in their effort to start

¹⁶ Kenneson, *Practicing Ecclesial Patience*, 5.

¹⁷ Sarah Coakley makes the act of prayerful contemplation crucial to “reordering of the passions” even as it teaches us vulnerability and receptivity. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 342-343. Brian Bantum writes extensively of prayer as the shape of a life of discipleship that resists “the processes of formation, the habitations of desire that are slowly built upon logics of race and power. . . . The formation of desire becomes reoriented within the life of prayer in such a way as to resist the formation of racial desire within contemporary society.” Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 178.

¹⁸ “Join Us in Our Daily Prayer,” The Northumbria Community, 2014, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/how-to-use-daily-office/>. “Common Prayer,” Zondervan, 2010, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://commonprayer.net>. “Ignatian Spirituality: Daily Examen,” Loyola Press, 2014, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com>.

this demanding new habit, but the project is designed to learn from experiments, even when they fail, so the team will be encouraged to be patient as they take on a new habit.

Inhabiting a Third Place

The practice of inhabiting a “third place” is new to Northside. Ray Oldenburg coined the term to indicate any place beyond home and work where informal social gatherings can be hosted.¹⁹ As the team members will be looking for opportunities to enjoy the presence of neighbors, a search for third places in the community will help them recognize the ways that their very landscape and language form them into people for whom cultural intimacy is a challenge.

To inhabit a third place each member will be asked to think of one place where people gather outside of home or work and make plans to inhabit those places regularly, if only for a very short periods of time. Team members will need to get in the habit of observing informal social gatherings wherever they occurred in our community. They will also be encouraged to drink coffee, sit on park benches, or participate in other local informal gatherings when possible.²⁰

¹⁹ Oldenburg, *Great Good Place*, 16.

²⁰ Team members were cautioned that the quest for a third place might be frustrating or difficult. Oldenburg writes that in most “American communities ... third places are neither prominent nor prolific. They are largely prohibited.” *Ibid.*, 17-18. As an example he reflects on our tendency to make laws against loitering whenever teenagers begin to gather in parking lots. It was important to look for third places, even if they were elusive, so that team members might realize all the cultural and societal obstacles to enjoying the presence of neighbors.

Lectio Divina

A *Lectio Divina* reading of some passage will be a regular feature of every meeting. *Lectio Divina* is a practice of communal reading of scripture that is uniquely suited for a congregation locked in Cartesian habits of internal reflection. *Lectio Divina* mirrors the praxis models of engagement. It is a way of praying and reading scripture that breaks out of the individualistic, purely cognitive spiral of interiorized patterns that have plagued most modern western churches. The final movement in the *Lectio Divina* cycle is *tentatio*, or “trying out.” It is an attempt to “put into practice what we have discerned” in prayer and reading.²¹ *Tentatio* suggests tentative experiments, and the movement reinforces the experimental focus of the entire project.²²

Lectio Divina is by now a familiar practice to most of the participants in the group, but the church as a whole finds it a challenging practice, so it will be important to emphasize the rationale for the practice. Team members need to be reminded that *Lectio Divina* is not an academic way of reading scripture to determine the meaning of the text. Rather, it is a communal way of listening for and discerning the movement of the Spirit through reading scripture. Also, *Lectio Divina* could help the team practice the art of listening to others. Team members will have to pay close attention to the words and expressions of others. *Lectio Divina* is crucial practice in dwelling appreciatively and receptively in the presence of others. These skills of listening will help the team enlarge

²¹ Nancy E. Bedford, “The Theology of Integral Mission and Communal Discernment,” in *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission*, ed. Tetsunao Yamamori and C. Rene Padilla, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, 2004), 120-121.

²² “An experiment is a course of action that a group *tentatively* adopts without knowing what the experiment will produce.” Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How To Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 181, emphasis mine.

their capacity to enjoy the presence of our neighbors. Jeremiah 29:4-7 is the *Lectio Divina* passage for Epiphany.²³

Evaluating in Lent

If Advent was about preparation and Epiphany about understanding and awareness, then Lent is an especially appropriate season for evaluation of the church in terms of its readiness and ability to live into God's mission of love in the world. Lent is traditionally a season of confession and repentance in which the Christians name disordered desires that lead them away from God's intentions for communion. Lent is a time to name those bodily desires, repulsions, and fears that drive us away from our neighbors. Lent is "not giving up something but rather taking upon ourselves the intention and the *receptivity* to God's grace so that we may worthily participate in the mystery of God-with-us."²⁴

In the season of Lent the first project goal will be to examine those forces that are acting upon church members, shaping desires and forming them into people who are unable to receive neighbors and God as ends to be enjoyed for their own sake. A second goal will be to examine the ways the church tends to approach or avoid certain neighbors.²⁵ The third goal will be to take those reflections and craft several small

²³ See Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 35-37. Jeremiah 29 is an appropriate passage for a season devoted to awareness and understanding because it invites the team to recognize the exilic status of the Church in post-modern society and encourages them to see God at work in the cities to which the Church is sent.

²⁴ Hickman et al., *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 106, emphasis mine.

²⁵ The language of "approach" and "avoidance" are biological terms used by Harak. They refer to deeply embodied habits of engagement with others. One is formed to fear or desire others by long-held patterns of engagement. Harak, *Virtuous Passions*, x.

experiments in which team members can begin to recognize their neighbors as worthy of their attention and devotion.²⁶

The team will continue to practice *Lectio Divina*, but the reading will shift to Luke 10:1-11 in each gathering.²⁷ Luke 10 offers the opportunity to dig into the reasons why their societal context might be considered threatening. It also encourages the team to reflect on the vital importance of receptive hospitality.²⁸ Through continued reflection on the way that Jesus' disciples were commanded to go vulnerably, receiving hospitality and recognizing the peace that is already ahead of them, the hope is to stimulate the team's imagination as it crafts experiments in neighborly presence. Rather than working for neighbors, Jesus sent the disciples to be with neighbors.

The team will be encouraged to create a variety of experiments and to keep them small. The team needs to recognize that experiments are opportunities to learn, and thus failure is acceptable as long as the group can learn from that failure.²⁹ The group will be asked consistently, "What is the smallest possible experiment you can craft that will let you experience the joy of being in the presence of our neighbors?"

Representatives from the after-school, football, and brownie troop ministries will be encouraged to create opportunities to get into the various neighborhoods of Northside's missional recipients, and begin engaging people as neighbors rather than

²⁶See Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 183.

²⁷Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 72-73. The reading stops at verse eleven because in previous readings of this passage church members were distracted by what they took to be a severe threat of judgment in verse twelve. Several *Lectio Divina* discussions of Luke 10 had been essentially stifled because of congregational aversion to judgmental language

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 183.

helpers.³⁰ They will be especially encouraged to imagine ways of receiving hospitality from others. “At-large” members of the team can join with one of the experiments or craft their own.

Enjoying Neighbors in Eastertide

Lent and Eastertide constitute the heart of the project of enjoying God and neighbor. If Lent is a season for naming the powerful forces that diminish desire to receive neighbors as ends to be enjoyed, Eastertide will be a time to experiment with enjoying those neighbors. Eastertide is the season in which the Church is invited to experience the joyful end for which we were created: “The Great Fifty Days should be the greatest, most festive season of the Christian year . . . These Sundays are not only the Lord’s Day, they are the season that is to rest of the Christian year what the Lord’s Day is to the week.”³¹

During Eastertide the group will continue to practice a *Lectio Divina* reading of Luke 10, and the focus will be directed to reports of encounters with neighbors. Those who are visiting in homes will share their experiences of receiving hospitality with others who may be enjoying conversation on porches or in third places. The intent is for this season to be enjoyable. Northside members do not frequently take the opportunity to relax and enjoy the community they have served so diligently for so long, and they need the experience of resting in joy.

³⁰ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 187.

³¹ Hickman et al., *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 219.

Pentecost: New Commitments

The project will conclude formally with a meeting on Pentecost Sunday in which the team articulates what they have learned from their encounters with neighbors and from any failed experiments. A written evaluation will invite each member to reflect on each new practice and attempt to articulate desires, commitments, and new understandings that were gained. The group will inquire into the life-giving aspects of each experiment, and break into triads to articulate desires and small new commitments for ongoing encounters with others.

One primary feature of the Pentecost gathering will be celebration. Northside needs to celebrate the completion of a project and celebrate the fact that it has honored commitments. It also needs to celebrate the ways it has discovered God to be already present and at work among its neighbors. Because of a history of remaining locked within cycles of internal reflection, there is fatigue and despair that Northside endlessly talks but rarely follows through on ideas. A time of celebration will help members realize that God is at work among them and their neighbors and encourage them to take the next small steps of engagement.

Pentecost is a season appropriate to celebration. Pentecost is the great culmination of the Easter-Pentecost Season.

On this day we remember and celebrate the fullness of God's promises in Jesus Christ. Before us this day is the whole sweep of Christ's death and resurrection, his ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit with all God's gifts and commission power for our ministries. This great occasion should be marked with special gatherings and a festive common meal. It is especially fitting to celebrate the Lord's Supper with great joy.³²

³² Hickman et al., *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 235.

Northside needs an opportunity to step out of the closed loops of internal reflection. Members need help examining all the forces at work on them, prohibiting them from enjoying the presence of their neighbors. They need to step out into the neighborhood and experiment with ways of enjoying those neighbors and then follow up and reflect on what worked and what didn't. They need to celebrate their achievements, and celebrate the discovery of neighbors who can be enjoyed. The next chapter will describe what happened as the project hit the ground and took shape from Advent to Pentecost.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

Chapter 3 described in detail a project aimed at cultivating desire for the presence of neighbors at Northside. This chapter reports on the project as it unfolded from Advent 2013 through Pentecost 2014, describing in detail the results, responses, interventions, and improvisations along the way. It reports especially on the details of the project that give access and insight into the emergence of new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in team members. This chapter will pave the way for three chapters that analyze the project, and offer constructive theological proposals and practical suggestions in light of the findings.

Preparation: Forming the Team in Advent

The project began as planned, with invitations across the congregation and a presentation to the deacons. Early responses from the membership indicated that most members did not know how to frame the project in advance of it. They were largely unfamiliar with action-learning processes, and many seemed to assume that it would be another study group. One said, “I am tired of talking but never acting.” Some responses

indicated an expectation that the purpose was to learn more about the needs of neighbors so that Northside could design more projects to help them. Other responses indicate that Northside is a busy church, caught up in the pursuits of suburban life. For instance, the After-school Committee wanted to divide attendance at project meetings between members, so that no one would have to attend all the meetings.

Even though the broad responses indicated a lack of understanding or interest, there were notable individual exceptions. One husband and wife who helped found the after-school ministry was especially supportive. He is a chaplain by training, and she is a language teacher with experience in the Peace Corps. Other supportive members include one deacon who directs the an urban ministry Jackson and lives in that neighborhood. Another deacon is a seminary graduate who has lived in Jackson for decades.

The deacons' response was difficult to read, but there was little interest expressed and no questions were asked during the meeting. They did not grant approval so much as they failed to raise any objections to the project. Only after the meeting did some deacons come individually to volunteer to join in the project.

By the end of Advent and Christmas there were sixteen participants. They were drawn by a wide variety of concerns and desires. Some wanted to find more ways to work for neighbors. Some wanted to find a new way for Northside to engage neighbors. Some came out of a sense of duty. Some came because they were glad to be asked.

Interventions and Innovations

In my role as pastor and leader of the project, I responded to the concerns and questions of invitees by reminding them that this project was about formation: the group

would be trying to learn new habits and practices. I also challenged them that although the project was short term, it was not a quick fix. I tried to indicate my concern as a leader that this project was important to our ability to learn new ways of engaging neighbors and that if it worked as intended it would set the church on a course of acting and reflecting over the next decade. I met with some indifference from committee chairs and finally had to ask permission to contact their committees directly.

Initial contacts indicated three potential challenges that would affect the success of this project. First, Northside is a very busy suburban church, and members seemed to want to fit this project into their ordinary lives. Understandably, they were not prepared for a project aimed at disrupting the culture of the church. Second, Northside is in deeply paternalistic habits of engagement with its neighbors. Even a project specifically focused on enjoying rather than helping neighbors was framed in terms of finding new ways to help neighbors. Third, deacon indifference indicated that the leadership needed to recognize the opportunities of missional change, as well as the dangers of doing nothing.

Coming to Awareness and Understanding in Epiphany

In Epiphany the project began in earnest. This section will give a detailed description of the first meeting, then of the attempt throughout Epiphany to frame awareness and understanding through the four ways of engagement. It will describe the response of the group to beginning the new practices of *Lectio Divina*, daily prayer, weekly Eucharist, and inhabiting “third places.” Finally, it will conclude with balcony work of insight gained into the ways the team was addressing or avoiding the challenge before them.

The Opening Meeting

Given the failure of some of Northside's previous adaptive challenge teams, it was important that the team not be led astray at the beginning. In order to get off on the right foot the meeting was carefully planned. A slide show was prepared with a very clear outline of the purposes and work before the team. Each participant was invited to determine his or her own willingness to participate. After the lengthy introduction, the group entered into a *Lectio Divina* reading of Jeremiah 29:4-7 and finally concluded with the first weekly Eucharist. Throughout the meeting it was reiterated that this project included both action and reflection. The group was told they would be moving through a cycle of learning, engagement, and reflection, and this cycle would only lead them into more learning and ultimately into experiments.

Three questions were introduced as central to the project. First, how do we cultivate a desire for the presence of our neighbors? Second, what is God doing in our neighborhoods, and how might we want to join in that work? Third, what is our current understanding of mission, and how might that understanding shift by the end of this project?

The team was invited to reflect on what they had done and learned in retreats, listening groups, appreciative interviews and in developing the three ministry challenges, but they had a difficult time articulating any findings. They primarily reflected on recent media reports concerning the rising number of people claiming no religious affiliation and the large numbers of young people purportedly leaving the church and not returning.

All the previous work of listening and reflecting on their own challenges seemed to have been lost on this group.

The team was encouraged to be willing to suspend any plans for fixing their various problems and especially for assigning any blame to any person or group. They needed “a safe space for conversations,” so that they could really begin to learn more about the challenges they were facing.¹ I set before them the goal of framing “meaningful explanations” for challenges we faced, but they needed to agree not to rush to fix problems before they could diagnose some of their deeper challenges.²

The group then considered the four new practices of weekly Eucharist, daily prayer, inhabiting a third place, and *Lectio Divina*. This conversation took longer than was allotted, but it was important to listen as the group reflected on the importance of each practice. The group had few questions or reflections on Eucharist or *Lectio Divina*, but there were considerable responses and questions concerning inhabiting a third place and daily prayer.

Several members of the group confessed that they had long ago given up on daily prayer, and they were concerned they might not be able to adopt this new practice. Some were very quiet during this discussion. I encouraged them to be patient, to start small, and to talk together about any obstacles they encountered.

The practice of inhabiting a third place was the most unfamiliar practice, and it elicited the most conversation. I described a third place as any place beyond home or work where informal social gatherings occurred. I described recent time devoted to

¹ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 142.

² *Ibid.*, 143.

drinking coffee at the YMCA, observing, and participating in informal conversations there. I also mentioned my own growing recognition, through a child's joining a soccer team, of the vital social gatherings taking place every Sunday at the soccer and softball fields, literally across the street from Northside.

The reaction to the call to adopt third places was mixed. Several people professed that they were introverts, and they thought engaging in social gatherings sounded dreadful. One person candidly admitted that he treasured time alone at home and doubted that he would be able to fulfill this requirement. The example of drinking coffee at the YMCA provoked some negative reactions in our group; several recoiled at the idea of talking to strangers. Finally, the group could not agree to adopt a third place because they could not understand the point of the practice. They did agree to try and pay attention to places in the community where people gather outside of work or home.

Lectio Divina and Eucharist

After a significant welcome and invitation to the project the team moved directly into a reading of Jeremiah 29:4-7 (abbreviated because of time constraints). The conversation was animated and important. One member talked about her troubled neighborhood and the importance of being there. Another with experience of being a missionary talked about the importance of "going native." Another member reflected on living in the presence of enemies. The team was not yet focused on listening to one another; they tended to jump in and share lengthy personal thoughts.

The group resonated with the reading from Kenneson and rolled their reflections into the *Lectio Divina* conversation. The group seemed to recognize how being present

with another was an important but often overlooked spiritual practice. The Kenneson reading provided familiar language and yet challenged the group to recognize how the practice of being present is neglected in their missional life.

The meeting concluded with Eucharist. The team spent considerable time passing the peace with everyone present. It was apparent that they were part of a close-knit congregation and that they valued any project that would allow them to get to know one another better. After being in strange territory, they seemed relieved to be back in familiar roles.

Examining the Four Ways of Engagement

A major feature of Epiphany was to be an analysis of the four ways of engagement. These four ways were to be the primary framework for gaining awareness and understanding in Epiphany, but the conversations wandered in many directions. By the end of Epiphany the team was still unable to complete a full examination of their tendencies of engaging neighbors.

In order to frame the four ways of engagement as a tool for gaining awareness and understanding two thirty minute sessions were planned for consecutive meetings (the second and third meetings). At the first meeting the group was able easily to list several examples of “working for”: lawyers, doctors, relief workers, philanthropists, and professional engineers. The group struggled for examples of “working with,” but was able to list Habitat for Humanity and the Grameen Bank. I reminded the group of a local grass roots organizing effort affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation called

Working Together Jackson. The team struggled to conceptualize “being for,” so I provided the examples of academics, social justice advocates, and monastic orders.

The team easily created a fuller list of compelling examples of “being with.” They mentioned L’Arche communities, hospice ministries, and chaplaincy. They also listed Virginia’s Playhouse, a local ministry begun by one of our team members in which at-risk senior adults gather in friendship at a nearby soup kitchen. Grace House, a residence created for AIDS patients, is another local ministry with many aspects of “being with” at the core of its ministry. The Mustard Seed is a nearby residence for adults with mental disabilities. Finally, the Northside deacons were held up for their emphasis on “showing up” and “being there,” rather than administration and leadership.

The group was asked to read “The Nazareth Manifesto,” in preparation for their second session. In the second session the primary goals were to help team members articulate their own sense of the dangers and opportunities of each of the four ways, and to begin reflecting on how Northside typically engages. It was important that they do their own work of reflection, so they were given a large sheet of paper with four quadrants and asked to list dangers and opportunities of each of the four ways of engagement.

The team was slow to engage the actual exercise, and individuals spent a great deal of time in personal anecdotes. Some of the anecdotes were defensive of the importance of working for others. They listed two advantages of working for others: it is efficient, and it is particularly helpful in emergency situations. The team vividly remembered the months of “working for” others after Hurricane Katrina. One member quipped that he knew working for others could be problematic, but he lacked the patience

for anything else. The group shared his assessment and commented that it is difficult for anything to be done right if someone is not in charge.

The group spent almost all the allotted time talking about the virtues of working for others, and they only briefly mentioned two dangers: working for others can create dependency, and it can be exhausting. They overlooked any danger that working for others may create distance, or insult the dignity of neighbors. When I brought up those dangers, they stiffened and changed the subject. After a very brief discussion, it was past time to begin the *Lectio Divina* reading. The group was unable at that meeting to devote any attention to analyzing Northside's typical ways of engaging (or to analyzing the other three ways).

Continuing the Practices throughout Epiphany

At every meeting the group checked in concerning their new practices of daily prayer and inhabiting a third place. They were silent about daily prayer, and they did not volunteer many responses. I encouraged them again to be gentle with themselves and to think about sharing at some point what makes the practice frustrating or difficult.

The team continued to have wide-ranging discussions about the third place. From their silence it appeared that many in the group had simply dismissed this practice, but others seemed to think it meant finding places for community service. One person had begun to tutor a child at an inner-city school, and another had begun to visit a nursing home as their attempts at inhabiting a third place. Without condemning those efforts, I reminded the group that finding a third place is about finding a place where people gather and entering it as a participant-observer.

The group continued to relax and enjoy weekly Eucharist. It appeared to be a familiar way of building up close-group affinity. The team continued to spend a great deal of time each week in passing the peace, and the gesture and service seemed very comforting to the members.

Lectio Divina was a rich source of reflection every week. Jeremiah 29 sparked many insights into the challenges of missional life in a changing North American context. Reflections from the group varied widely: one spoke of how all of life is about being in a type of exile; from the moment we are born, we are exiled from the womb to live in the risks of life. Another was able to begin reflecting on the changing culture. She recognized that one whole world had passed away, and then said, “We are all immigrants now.” Another reflected on the city. She asked, “What if the city actually means city? What if we are actually being called to seek the welfare of the city of Jackson?”

The reading from Jeremiah seemed also to be bearing fruit in neighborhood awareness. One member told an important story: She had recently been given an assignment to make phone calls for a charitable organization, but she decided to knock on doors rather than phone. She had to get in her car because she lives in a neighborhood of large lots, several miles out of the center of town, carved thirty years ago out of farmland.

As she rode from house to house in her neighborhood, she noticed Pugh Road, a historic black neighborhood that existed long before the new, majority white neighborhood. She said, “It’s right behind us, but we don’t think of it as ‘our neighborhood.’” The Northside member decided to drive down Pugh Road for the first time in many years, and she discovered a whole neighborhood full of signs of life. She confessed she wanted to clean some of it up, but she was most impressed with the fact

that there was a vibrant neighborhood in her own backyard, and she was only now discovering it through the project.

A second member reflected on her own troubled neighborhood in the city of Jackson. For many years she and her husband have been trying to get out of their neighborhood because they have become increasingly concerned with crime. They have stayed in the neighborhood because they work for very modest income at jobs they love. Because of the project she was wondering whether they were called to stay.

The *Lectio Divina* reading of Jeremiah was helping to connect the imaginations of various members. A third member, who had started Virginia's Playhouse in the soup kitchen in her own neighborhood, reflected on the importance of being present. She said, "We were just sitting around and someone wanted coffee, so we started drinking coffee. Before long they wanted something to do, so we started doing things together. It all came about because we were sitting there with each other."³

Finally, yet another member made a very honest but somewhat jolting observation: He was not interested in any of this talk of "seeking the peace of the city." Everything he was hearing made him want to retreat into the solitude of his house. He had once been very active in civic and missional affairs in the eighties and the nineties, but now he was enjoying his quiet household. All this talk of getting involved was raising personal resistance for him. It was clear that the readings in Jeremiah and the discussions about presence in the neighborhood were both stimulating imaginations and provoking strong personal reactions.

³ Her words invoked the beautiful postscript to Dorothy Day's memoir, *The Long Loneliness*, which begins, "We were just sitting there talking when Peter Maurin came in." Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 285.

At the Conclusion of Epiphany

By the end of Epiphany the team had lost three participants. The family most connected to the brownie troop resigned because they were too busy. Also, the youngest team member left without explanation. Another team member had to stop coming when his son was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The father is a key leader in the football ministry, and the whole church was affected by the son's illness. A major challenge to the project in Epiphany involved a cluttered church calendar, resulting in the group never being able to meet more than three weeks in a row.

Confessing and Evaluating in Lent

The season of Lent did not unfold as cleanly as planned. In Lent the group was to evaluate current practices against growing understandings of being with neighbors, and they were going to plan small experimental actions, but they were only able to practice *Lectio Divina* together and share Eucharist. Those *Lectio Divina* sessions were rich and revealing, but the season ended with a tense meeting, with the air full of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration. The planning of experiments would have to wait until Eastertide.

The project was already behind schedule in Lent, so the revised plan called for following up on the four ways of engagement, and trying to name Northside's current practice; however, even the revised plan was sidetracked, and the group was finally unable to complete the work of building awareness and understanding. The meetings began after a two-week hiatus following Spring Break, and there was a light turnout at the first meeting. In the absence of a full group, the remaining team members reverted

back to familiar habits of free-form discussion, and they failed to focus on questions at hand. Some in the group were intently focused on discussing persistent problems in the city of Jackson.

Lectio Divina in Lent

The *Lectio Divina* reading for Lent was Luke 10:1-11, and team members made important observations about missional life in their neighborhoods. Members noted that the primary task of the disciples was to “prepare the way,” like John the Baptist, not necessarily to fix problems. They noted the importance of sharing food to Jesus’ mission, and the importance of “staying put.” As one participant said, “Don’t shop around; stay where you’re planted.” Several team members recognized the significance of eating and drinking and thus sharing of the culture of the people to whom we are sent.

Through the course Lent some participants were beginning to inhabit their neighborhoods in new ways. One participant told a story about having to shop in a big box retail store on a recent Sunday. She ordinarily avoided the crowds on Sunday, but because of a need, she went grudgingly, as if prepared for battle. She reported a very frustrating encounter with an employee of the store, but in the middle of the encounter, she stopped and remembered Jesus’ words. She recounted,

Jesus said, ‘First say, ‘Peace to this house.’ I guess I’m just now seeing that these are ordinary people and their lives are tough. They probably shop on Sunday because they have to, every week. Who knows, they may be there because it’s the nicest place they have to go. ... This employee probably had to work that Sunday, and she faced the same crowds I was facing. Of course she was grumpy. ... But Jesus instructs us to say “peace” before we go into places like this. We need to prepare ourselves before we can greet others.

Three persistent themes emerged in conversation. Most notably, there was a regular emphasis on the perceived danger of the mission field. Team members consistently ruminated on Jesus' warnings that he is "sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves (Luke 10:3); and the instructions to "carry no purse" and to "greet no one on the road (10:4)."⁴ Frequently older team members interpreted Jesus' command to "carry no purse" as a safeguard, lest one's purse be stolen.

A second observation was that several members consistently expressed bewilderment with Jesus' pronouncement that, "kingdom of God has come near you (Luke 10:9)." Every week there were reports from some who were "stumped" by this phrase. "I have no idea what Jesus means when he says, 'kingdom of God,'" said one member. "I cannot imagine what he is talking about," said another.

Finally, many members consistently spoke as if Jesus had sent the disciples looking for converts even though those more evangelistic aspects are downplayed, if not missing entirely, from Luke 10. The passage itself speaks of receiving hospitality, healing, and invoking peace, but many members repeatedly spoke of the need for people to "accept the message" or "believe" as if disciples were sent to make converts. Praying for "the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" was reduced to recruiting others to go witness (10:2). People were engaging the scripture out of their default imagination of missional action.

One factor that limited the team's capacity to talk about their experience of life in their neighborhoods was a tendency to try and determine the "meaning" of the text and a habitual reluctance to engage the text on a more personal level. The team was

⁴ All Scripture quoted is from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

consistently instructed to pay attention to words or phrases calling for their attention so that they could have a conversation about how the Spirit was at work among them and in their neighborhoods. Still, there was a stubborn tendency to retreat to more objective, academic readings of the text, and conversations and imaginations were stifled by this Cartesian habit of reading.

The Final Meeting: Confusion, Frustration, and Uncertainty

By the last meeting in Lent there was pressure and tension because the group had not yet been able to plan experiments. Also, the *Lectio Divina* conversations had remained detached, academic searches for the meaning of the text, and the team members felt they had exhausted their search for meaning in that singular text. In this tense atmosphere, the group had a revealing exchange in the group reports to the *Lectio Divina* reading.

After the initial reading and silence one member jumped to speak first, and he indicated that he was tired of examining this passage. His voice rose, and he said, “I’ve about dissected this passage as much as I care to, and I’m getting kind of sick of it.” He seemed angry and almost ready to walk out of the project. It was an important moment full of pertinent conflict and language that needed further exploration, but just as the group was about to address the conflict, another member distracted them with a story. The story was unrelated, and appeared to be a device aimed at relieving tension and keeping everyone calm.⁵

⁵ Charles Reagan Wilson writes, “Manners [in the South] have been seen as one aspect of upper-class ideology and power. The southern elite used manners to soften tendencies toward social class conflict.

The group listened politely to the seemingly unrelated story, and then another member brought up another important question. She expressed exasperation that had seemed to be growing in her, and she finally blurted out, “I cannot figure out what these people are supposed to do!” She seemed agitated and bothered that Jesus would send workers into the field without a project, without some job to accomplish.

The group had reached a pivotal opportunity to explore important personal conflict that pushed into the very theme of the project. I asked the group to pause and listen to the concerns being raised, but once again someone told another tangential story. It was impossible to tell whether the teller did not understand that the group was trying to attend to serious conflict and confusion, or was uncomfortable with the tension and thus sought distraction. After listening politely to that other story, the group had lost its interest in the dramatic questions.

After that halting *Lectio Divina* session the group tried to articulate some ideas for experiments. One person suggested that the team call a local charitable institution and see if there were any service projects needed in our community. Another suggested they could go to a nearby neighborhood and pick up trash. Another member dreamed of a big project in which members begin opening their homes to the families of patients in the hospital for long-term treatment. One proposed adopting a local nursing home for visitation.

Finally, nothing was settled, and the hour grew late. Frustration seemed high as the group moved on to their weekly Eucharist. Team members were gentle with one

Manners were an aspect of a paternalistic style.” Charles Reagan Wilson, “Manners,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 4: Myths, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 100.

another in the passing of the peace and seemed to be communicating intentions to be reconciled with one another.

At the End of Lent

Three leadership observations help describe what happened in Lent. First, the group needed ample time set aside specifically for the creation of experiments. Instead, brainstorming time was lumped in with *Lectio Divina*. Brainstorming is hard work, and it is almost impossible to switch gears from *Lectio Divina* immediately into creative work.

Second, some of the halting progress may be explained by the various roles team members play at Northside. The team members who seemed most eager to engage in *Lectio Divina* and who were beginning to see their neighborhood in new ways were newer members of the church. The members who seemed most resistant to some aspects of the project were longtime members with responsibility for the maintenance of the institution.

Third, once again time constraints and busy church and personal schedules affected the project. The group had to skip one week because of church events (a youth banquet and a deacons meeting). They skipped another week because too many people could not come on the first Sunday of spring break. The meeting attendance went down throughout the season, and it would likely become even further reduced following Easter.

Seeking Joy in the Presence of our Neighbors in Easter

Because the team had been unable to craft experiments in Lent, I drew up four proposals, with consultation from individual team members, and presented them to the

group at the first Eastertide meeting.⁶ The team accepted the proposals, for the most part with enthusiasm, and began making plans to implement them; however, the progress was slower than expected, and no experiments began in the first four weeks. Each week the team continued meeting for *Lectio Divina* and Eucharist, while reporting on new awareness in their neighborhoods. By the end of Eastertide three of the four groups had performed some aspect of an experiment with their own adjustments. One group had failed to attempt any experiment.

The first proposed experiment was called “On Their Turf.” In order to discern the activities of the Spirit in the lives and neighborhoods of one Northside mission “recipient,” football ministry team members would invite members of the football team to meet at a local drive-in restaurant for a thirty-to sixty-minute conversation, once per week, for six weeks. By meeting at a popular local youth “hangout,” the football ministry members would step out of the role of host and into the role of guest. They would enjoy a cold drink and ask appreciative questions about life in Clinton from the perspective of the football players.

The second experiment was designed primarily for after-school ministry participants. In order to discern something of the movement of the Spirit in the lives of one group of Northside mission recipients, the group would seek opportunities to visit with one family who participates in the after-school program once per week for six

⁶ Appendix E. No experiment was created for the brownie troop ministry because the members associated with the brownie troops had dropped out of the project. These proposals were written with consultation from team members, but the team members did not write them. Instead, they were encouraged to adjust the experiments as necessary.

weeks.⁷ The team was challenged to find a way to get into the homes or onto the porches of families whose children come to the after-school program. By receiving hospitality and asking appreciative questions about the neighborhoods where these families lived, the after-school ministry participants might be exposed to a new way of relating to the families they served and gain an awareness of what God is already doing in the lives of neighbors.

The third proposal was entitled “Moving Into My Neighborhood.”⁸ In order to discover neighborhoods as the unique site of God’s presence, this team would meet together weekly to walk and pray in their various neighborhoods. They would seek interviews with residents and merchants and ask appreciative questions about the neighborhood. Three members who had been recounting important stories about their own neighborhoods would be the basis of this team. By walking, praying, and visiting in their neighborhoods these participants would get a taste of a new way of inhabiting their neighborhoods, and their experiment might cultivate a desire to go further into missional experiments in neighborly presence.

The final experiment was entitled “Extending Hospitality to Strangers.”⁹ In order to cultivate a desire for the presence of neighbors, learn about the biblical practice of

⁷ Visiting is a historic, but dying, Southern tradition of hospitality. Cita Cook writes, “The primary purposes of any visit have usually been to have fun and escape daily worries, to help solve problems, and/or to establish and reinforce personal ties.” Cita Cook, “Visiting,” in *Myths, Manners, and Memory*, vol. 4, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 188.

⁸ Based on Alan Roxburgh, *Moving Back Into the Neighborhood*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver, BC: The Missional Network, 2012).

⁹ See Alan Roxburgh, *Practicing Hospitality: A Study Guide* (North Vancouver, BC: The Missional Network, 2010).

hospitality, and help the church cultivate a new way of inhabiting neighborhoods, each team member would host one neighbor at a meal. They were encouraged to serve delicious food, carefully prepared and to invite one other member of the hospitality team. By learning about and practicing hospitality in their homes, team members would cultivate a desire to more deeply explore the Christian practice of hospitality and learn a new way of imagining relationship to neighbors.

Lectio Divina in Eastertide

The progress of *Lectio Divina* in Eastertide was halting at best. After the group had reached an impasse at the final Lenten meeting, and since the group was beginning to work in smaller missional teams, unique passages were chosen for each team, but this was a glaring mistake. The whole group could not communicate well with each other after reading their own particular Scriptures. In addition the attendance was again low on the first night, and this meant that some people had to meet with other groups.¹⁰ The team returned to a common text, Luke 4:16-31, for the remainder of Eastertide.¹¹

As the team settled into a reading of Luke 4 an important theological obstacle emerged. Team members articulated confusion and even suspicion of language about the Spirit. Several members balked when they read that Jesus, quoting Isaiah, said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4:18). One member said, “I’ve never felt the Spirit like that.” Many in the team nodded in affirmation. The group found talk of the Spirit

¹⁰ Attendance fluctuated wildly over the spring season.

¹¹ The conflict over Luke 10 at the end of Lent prompted the decision to choose a new text. In retrospect, returning to Luke 10 would have offered the group an opportunity finally to address and work through their confusion and frustrations over the assignment.

working on individuals to be inauthentic. They distrust those who use such language. One member told a lengthy, poignant story about spiritual manipulation in a childhood congregation.

At the same time that some team members were frustrated by the language of the Spirit, other team members were quietly trying to press into the text and gently inviting their troubled companions to join them, but the invitation was not accepted. One member offered, “I don’t take all of this so literally.” Another spoke about feelings of being “oppressed” and yearning for her own sense of liberation. Two members particularly seemed struck by the ways that Naaman the Syrian was an outsider, and they offered questions about what it must be like for the hometown synagogue to be challenged by the Spirit working among people outside their own ethnic group. Unfortunately the larger group did not hear their questions or follow their prompting.

Progress of Experiments in Eastertide

Even though the beginning of the work of experiments was sluggish, three of the four action teams were able to complete some aspect of their experiments. Even the fourth team, that failed to enact an experiment, was poised to learn from their failure to act and seemed willing to create an experiment in the near future. The following is an account of the four experiments as they unfolded in Eastertide.

The football ministry action team consisted of the two members from the football ministry and one other member from the larger project group. The action team was reluctant to follow their plan as given, and they decided to revise it. Rather than meeting in small groups for conversation around a table sharing in a cold soft drink, they chose to

host a “Senior Night” at a local restaurant. They invited twenty seniors to a meal and emphasized that there was “no speaker and no agenda.” The leaders and the players ate at separate tables, and they followed the meal with a large group question time.

The after-school ministry action team did not complete any experimental action, but they are well situated to learn from their failure to act. The team consisted of three members, two of whom were directly involved in the after-school ministry. The group met several times and talked intensely about the proposal to visit in the homes of ministry recipients, but they articulated reservations about entering into the privacy of someone’s home by a pre-arranged invitation. Important cultural assumptions about privacy were voiced. One said, “People like their privacy.” Another worried, “Some people might be embarrassed about their homes and not want us to see them.” Another said, “Some people will be suspicious of white people wanting to come visit.” Another concluded, “They might let us in, but it will be grudging.” After much discussion the team decided to attempt visits at a neutral site with some of the families that are already somewhat known.¹² Unfortunately, the team leader was not able to arrange the visits, and the team failed to participate in any experimental action.

Although the after-school action team did not participate in experiments, they seemed interested and willing to continue meeting after the project in order to press on in an experiment and to reflect on their failure to act. The team recognized that their cultural reservations about visiting were significant, and they also articulated a desire for the

¹² The action team also reflected on the question of who would pay for any food or drink at the meetings. They showed signs of awareness of social and cultural factors in any engagement with neighbors.

after-school ministry to learn new ways of relating to their ministry recipients—as neighbors.

The hospitality action team corresponded occasionally but reported no gathering of the action team outside of the larger team meeting. Only one participant found time to host a meal. She prepared an elaborate meal for everyone on her street, and she had also invited city officials to join. No reason was given for the decision to host a large neighborhood-wide meal rather than a single smaller gathering.

In written reflections the hospitality action team members reported a number of neighborly actions they were prompted to take as a result of their participation in this project. There were two visits in the homes of neighbors previously unvisited, a delivery of a plant to a sick neighbor, and a discovery of a neighbor who is home alone most of the time without a car. One member of the action team planned to invite the lonely neighbor to a church gathering. Another member has begun caring for a neighbor with an elderly parent in the house. One member reported a desire to overcome a personal preference to “not get out.” All of these gestures and discoveries are important and beautiful, and they may increase awareness of neighborly relations, but by the end of Eastertide the group had not yet reflected on the practice of hospitality as a new way of engaging neighbors as ends to be enjoyed.

Of the four experimental action teams the neighborhood awareness team reported the most consistent activity and the most important reflections and stories about neighborly presence. The group met weekly outside of the larger team meeting to pray and walk in each other’s neighborhoods. The members noted significant racial differences as they crossed certain streets; they seemed to become increasingly aware of

divisions within their neighborhoods, and the team seemed to be growing in their desire for the healing and wholeness of their various neighborhoods. Members also reported that their own daily prayer was becoming more meaningful as they experimented together.

At the End of Eastertide

The season of Eastertide can be summarized by attention to the various levels of action and reflection of each team. The members of the football ministry team were somewhat impatient of *Lectio Divina*, and they did not reflect biblically or theologically on their experiment. They did act, but they were reluctant to reflect on their action. The hospitality team reported limited action, but had difficulty reflecting upon the connections between the practice of hospitality and engaging neighbors as ends to be enjoyed. After-school action team members engaged in biblical, contextual, and theological reflection but they did not act on their reflections. The neighborhood team acted and reflected deeply, and they made significant discoveries and reported significant interest and growth in imagination.

Pentecost: Celebration and New Commitments

The last scheduled meeting was on Pentecost Sunday. On this day the team was to celebrate what God was doing in their neighborhoods, and celebrate the fact that Northside had overcome a tendency to “talk without doing” and actually accomplished a handful of small experimental actions. Unfortunately, the final meeting was poorly attended, and without key representatives from every action team the group was unable

effectively to reflect and talk about commitments. Some additional reflection was provided through a written reflection sent to each member.

The final meeting was planned to help team members reflect on what they were learning about Northside's patterns of engagement and about life in their neighborhoods. It was designed to help them articulate their own willingness and desire to engage more fully in further reflection and experiments. This section will relate findings from the final meeting and from the written evaluations.

The Final Meeting and Written Responses

The final meeting had the poorest attendance of any meeting. June 9 was Pentecost Sunday, but it was also at the beginning of vacation season, and several members were at the beach or with family. A couple of members simply forgot to show. The day that was planned as a celebration became instead an awkward ending.

After a final *Lectio Divina* on Luke 4 the conversations spilled into reflection about experiences in the project as a whole. Team members were presented with four questions at the beginning and told that the goal of the conversation was to touch on each of these questions: First, "Where do we see the Spirit of God at work in our community?" Second, "How will we share this experience with the larger church?" Third, "What was the greatest challenge or obstacle to completing this project?" Fourth, "Can you identify any newly kindled desire in light of your experiments?"

As frequently happened when attendance was small, the conversation was disorderly. It was as if a meeting did not have a quorum: the participants acted as if the gathering were unofficial. One participant spoke at great length, making some

provocative comments. There seemed to be a sense of urgency to say everything that still needed to be done in order to address serious problems in the city, the neighborhoods, and within the church. The group had a difficult time focusing on the questions asked.

Some significant stories were shared, but they tended to highlight urgent needs for repair in various places in the city. Members responded by offering ideas for fixing problems and cleaning up messes. When the time came for the group to talk about where they wanted to go from here, there were few concrete responses. One person wanted to talk about cleanup projects in one of the historic black neighborhoods. One person spoke at length about debris that was noticed in a section of a neighborhood visited: “I just wanted to go sweep it all up.” Another piped in, saying, “If we could just get in there and fix up some of those houses.”

Once again safety and security issues were raised. The conversation at one time veered into reflections on the importance of Clinton police who are known for being vigilant and responsive and tough on crime. One person said, “Security is key” in response to a conversation about what God is doing in their neighborhoods. Others talked about the importance of a recently elected mayor who has hired extra police. One person reported visiting a neighbor and asking the neighbor, “Do you feel safe here?” The neighbor had responded that the police regularly patrolled the neighborhood.

At the final meeting participants were given a written evaluation and asked to devote one hour to carefully reviewing the project and experiments.¹³ The praxis cycle was again noted, and the group was encouraged to remember “nothing is learned from

¹³ Appendix F.

experience, but only from experience reflected upon and articulated.”¹⁴ After emailing the entire group and sending two follow-up reminders, only five people returned evaluations. The following is an interpretation of findings from the evaluations.

Respondents largely agreed that Northside is in the habit of “working for” others, but they do not yet see “working for” as a missional challenge requiring the church to learn new habits of engagement. Only one person granted “being with” has a limited role in typical Northside engagements with neighbors. When asked about ongoing challenges, no respondent noted a need for the church to learn a new way of engaging neighbors. One indicated the church needs to spend more time in the community and less inside the church, but also recommended a cleanup in a historic black community. One recognized time as a challenge, but it was primarily a challenge to “getting the job done.”

The four practices were not fully embraced and appreciated, but they seem to have helped make the project something other than another Cartesian event. Respondents struggled with *Lectio Divina*, including one person who “missed the purpose,” but the group indicates the different way of reading and listening was important and they want to explore it further. They seemed to be learning a new way of listening to the Spirit and each other even if they could not yet explain what it is and how it works.

Inhabiting a third place was also a conceptual challenge, but the group wanted to learn more about it, and they indicated that their attempts at inhabiting a third place had begun to expand and change their social imaginaries. Daily prayer was commonly

¹⁴ Here I have paraphrased theologian Pat Keifert, from Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 42.

recognized as important but a struggle, and weekly Eucharist was seen as an important group-bonding event.

The project seems to have helped the group articulate individualism as a challenge to building up neighborhood life, but they continued to see their own role in the project individualistically. For the most part they entered the project with individual improvement goals, and they framed the impact of the project in terms of how it would change their individual habits and commitments to love neighbors. The responses to daily prayer and weekly Eucharist reveal individualistic tendencies: those practices are seen in terms of how they assist individual Christians in their private lives of discipleship.¹⁵

Finally, the respondents were largely unable to articulate specific desires for the presence of neighbors. When asked about desires that had been kindled in the project one wrote, “I desire that we all become friends in our neighborhood.” Another wrote, “I want to organize a team to pick up trash in the Rectangle (a nearby black neighborhood), so that we can get to know residents there.” One expressed a desire to live “more simply” in a neighborhood with porches and the time to enjoy visits. One member wanted to continue a tutoring project with one particular girl in an inner-city school. Desire for the presence of our neighbors remained elusive.

¹⁵ Emerson and Smith describe white evangelicals as “accountable freewill individualists,” who are largely blind to structural and institutional shaping. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76.

At the Conclusion of the Project

It is tempting to despair when a project ends in poor attendance and with limited response, but the project cannot be judged by one meeting. Four powerful new practices were introduced, and the team participants showed a wide variety of responses to the work. Many of the participants in this project came from “the broad middle” of Northside.¹⁶ These are the responsible, long-term members who are heavily invested in the current structures and are not likely to “lead a charge into adaptive change or mission-shaped life.”¹⁷ At the same time some of the participants seemed eager and energized by the conversations and the experiments. “Early adopters” represent a small percentage of any given church, and this team was probably more representative of the larger church.¹⁸

The anxiety about safety and the disorderly nature of the final meeting may also be related to the particular character of the few participants who gathered and responded. These were older members, who do not travel or go to the beach. They stayed behind and dutifully attended the meeting. They are the ones most confronting fearful realities, and as good, dutiful members of the church, they were anxious to provide closure and meaning to the project; therefore, they rushed their stories and were less patient to listen and learn in that final meeting.

¹⁶ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 185.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. Roxburgh and Boren estimate only 10 to 15 percent of the church will be early adopters.

PART THREE

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER 5

TOWARD A LOCAL THEOLOGY OF DESIRE

Building on discoveries and insights gained from a project in the transformation of desire this chapter will lay out the contours of a local theology of desire in the missional life of Northside. After defining “local theology” the chapter will offer a close examination of the ecclesial formation of desire at Northside. Analyzing spiritual, congregational, and missional aspects of ecclesial formation accessed in the course of the project, it will press into a dialogical encounter between gospel, church, and neighbors in Clinton, Mississippi.¹ Each section will offer theological and contextual reflection on the work of ecclesial formation at Northside. The chapter will prepare the way for an extended reflection on leadership and self-organization in Chapter 6.

¹ This account deliberately substitutes the word *neighbors* for the word *culture* in the triad (of gospel, church, and culture) that informs the local theology described by Robert J. Schreiter in *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 21. This is a tentative attempt at alleviating an abstraction in order to emphasize the human, bodily interactions between church members and neighbors. Of course, to recognize a neighbor must mean to understand, appreciate, and ultimately be open to change by the neighbor’s cultural habitation, but since this project presses toward bodily encounters, and since authentic dialogue only occurs between people (and not between people and structural realities), the chapter seeks a dialogical encounter between gospel, church, and neighbors. Thanks to Phil Kenneson for comments that helped clarify these matters.

Defining Local Theology

The term local theology generally refers to theology that begins by taking the local context into account.² It is a theology that is not “formulated elsewhere” and then imposed upon a local culture as an abstraction.³ Clemens Sedmak argues, “Local theologies recognize theology takes shape within a given context.”⁴ That is, there is no theology that is not contextual (even if there are theologies that are blind to their own contextual shaping).

Local theologies also recognize that the gospel message is inseparable from the medium. John Howard Yoder asks, “What does it mean for the way we communicate our message to take seriously the fact that when God wanted to communicate with us, God had to come among us?”⁵ Yoder’s profound question helps reveal that the gospel message is finally inseparable from the medium of incarnate, ecclesial presence.

For the purposes of this project a local theology will be defined as a gospel message that is formulated in place, as the church encounters its neighbors. Like other accounts of local theology, it recognizes the contextual shaping of the gospel message, but the emphasis is on the encounter between church and neighbor. The explorations of spiritual and congregational formation in this chapter lead to the conclusion that the

² Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 4.

³ John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, ed. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 316.

⁴ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2002), 95.

⁵ Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 315.

church is not yet truly the church short of a vulnerable and receptive encounter with neighbors.⁶

Of course, an encounter between church and neighbors cannot be merely receptive. In James McClendon's words, "the church is not the world," and thus congregational formation is essential to help the church discover its difference from the world, but this chapter emphasizes that formation cannot happen in isolation from neighbors.⁷ It leads to a tentative expansion of McClendon's formula: the church is not the world, but the church is also not the church until it exists receptively and vulnerably in the presence of its neighbors.

The results and findings of the project of cultivating desire show a critical need for Northside to learn how to engage its neighbors receptively, finding evidence of God's presence already at work in neighborhoods. Schreiter argues that a local theology "depends as much on finding Christ already active in the culture as it does on bringing Christ to the culture," and the analysis of the project will show repeatedly the need for Northside to learn how to recognize Christ's presence in the lives of their neighbors and neighborhoods.⁸ In many ways Northside appears to be unaware that it needs receptive encounters with neighbors in order to be the church.

⁶ The word *receptive* here indicates the necessity and hope of being changed by an encounter with another. It comes from the work of Romand Coles, a political theorist who advocates for and describes "local communities that maximize the practices of listening, receptivity, tabling, and generosity." Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 216, quoted in Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicities: A Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 39, n.52.

⁷ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, Rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 17.

⁸ Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 29.

Ecclesial Formation

This section will offer a close examination of the ecclesial formation of desire at Northside. In turn it will analyze spiritual, congregational, and missional aspects of ecclesial formation through observations and discoveries made in the course of the project. It will become clear that spiritual, congregational, and missional formation are inseparable. In fact, most of the bodily practices and issues examined here could be placed in any category, but they are listed in a way that highlights the distinct importance of each formational focus.

Spiritual formation will be examined first to highlight a challenge that became evident during the course of the study, and that is the challenge of attending to God and recognizing God's presence in the midst of busy suburban lives. Congregational formation will be given a central place in order to emphasize the central place of the church in God's missional work in the world, but the analysis of congregational formation will show how Northside's congregational life is stunted by an impoverished missional praxis. The section will then conclude with a more constructive proposal for a praxis of missional formation at Northside.

Spiritual Formation

In order to cultivate desire for the presence of God and neighbor Northside members will need to learn how to be local theologians. They must learn how to think theologically, in their context.⁹ Bryant Myers warns, "Most technical training, even in

⁹ Clemens Sedmak calls for the construction of "little theologies that "do justice to the gospel while gaining the community's confidence that a little theology illuminates a particular situation." Clemens

Christian institutions, is functionally atheistic. . . . Unless holistic practitioners can do theology, there is little chance that they can provide the explanation for their effectiveness . . . in a way that points to the activity and character of a loving and concerned God.”¹⁰ Myers urges all those who would “work for” others to become aware of the dangers of functional atheism and to “receive training in how to rejoin word and deed,” that is, in recognizing how God matters in all the work we do.¹¹

Branson and Martinez write, “Spiritual formation is about attending to God, learning about God’s activities and character, and participating in God’s life and initiatives.”¹² This section will show how attending to three issues of spiritual formation could deepen Northside’s capacity to enjoy God and neighbor. Those three issues are first, a reluctance to use language of the Spirit, second, a difficulty engaging in daily prayer, and third, reluctance to fully enter into the practice of *Lectio Divina*.

Language about the Spirit

Some team members showed reluctance to use language of the Holy Spirit. When the team was reading Luke 4 in *Lectio Divina*, members balked at Jesus’ proclamation: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” The members went on to recount stories in which such language was used deceptively to manipulate and to protest that they have never felt

Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2002), 121.

¹⁰ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 231.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 62.

the Spirit moving in their own lives, and they feel especially alienated when they encounter Christians who speak of the Spirit so comfortably.

If Northside members could press further into their inability to speak the language of the Spirit, they would find a profound opportunity for growth in their capacity to love God and neighbors. Theologically, it is through the Spirit that “we come into authentic relation with God as Trinity.”¹³ And it is in the Trinitarian relations that liberal “individuals” will find a vision of community that does not stifle individual particularity but elevates it. Colin Gunton argues that human life, being created in the image of God, is “perichoretic,” and he goes on to describe how this perichoretic shape of human life “envisages close relatedness [but] it never does so to the detriment of particularity. Rather, it teaches that, as made in the image of God, we are closely bound up, for good or ill, with other human beings.”¹⁴

A more practical but no less theological reason Northside needs to reflect on its language about God is that in their encounters with neighbors they are likely to discover language about the Spirit that challenges their worldviews.¹⁵ While Northside members who are deeply influenced by a modern worldview have no place in their imagination for spirits or unseen realities, many African cultures “believe much of nature is spirited.”¹⁶ If Northside is going to learn how to appreciate, honor, and receive gifts from its neighbors,

¹³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 321.

¹⁴ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 168-169.

¹⁵ Northside often thinks of itself as a haven of protection against irrational, superstitious beliefs, but this rejection of any belief in “spirits” is also a sign of deep formation by a “two-tiered” modern worldview that will render them unable to appreciate the spiritual realities of the poverty and oppression they so often want to work to alleviate. See Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 5-12.

¹⁶ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 111.

they will need to learn how to appreciate and understand other challenging cultural frameworks.¹⁷

All theology is culturally shaped, including Northside's current theology of the Spirit. As Northside struggles to recognize God and neighbor as proper ends to be enjoyed for their own sake, they would do well to acknowledge and explore their own pneumatology. A praxis model of theological reflection would help them dig deeply into the ways their own praxis has been culturally shaped and reveal new ways of praying through and speaking of the Spirit's action in their church.¹⁸

Learning to Pray

Throughout the project and in written evaluations participants indicated that daily prayer was a struggle. Several confessed to not even trying it, and others grew silent when the topic was discussed, but daily prayer is a central spiritual discipline that goes hand in hand with the posture of "being with." Bryant and Lisa Myers call for an "incarnational spirituality . . . that draws near and listen before it speaks, one that loves before it acts."¹⁹ They continue, "This kind of spirituality is based on being present—present to God, present to the poor, and present to ourselves."²⁰

In order for Northside to embrace the posture of "being with," they must develop the capacity to be present to God and to themselves in prayer. This capacity to pray is

¹⁷ See Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*, 39-40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39-48.

¹⁹ Myers, *Walking With the Poor*, 232.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

also essential to recognizing and exposing how tendencies to “work for” are often tied up in spiritual issues calling for our repentance. Reflecting on the dangers of the “god-complexes of the non-poor,” Bryant Myers writes,

Praying for the kingdom means asking God’s action in exposing the god complexes of the non-poor for the even more difficult challenge of repentance by the non-poor for having assumed roles that only God should play. Praying the kingdom means remembering that the kingdom is God’s business and recalling that, at the end of the day the kingdom comes from heaven to earth when Jesus comes. We must not assume the burden for something we cannot do.²¹

Finally, an inability to pray goes hand in hand with the signs of fatigue that many participants showed during the project. Learning to pray for the kingdom, rather than first trying to build it (especially when the group has already confessed that they do not know what Jesus even means by “kingdom”), is a way of recognizing that our calling is to join with work God is already doing. An inability to pray reveals a deep distrust in God’s prevenient presence in the world. Walter Wink wrote, “Unless protected by prayer, our social action runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works, as our inner resources atrophy, the wells of love run dry, and we are slowly changed in the likeness of the Beast.”²²

Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk write that the development of traditional Christian practices like daily prayer “help us discern how we are shaped by habits that deform Christian life.”²³ The very fact that the group tried daily prayer and failed needs to be confronted, not to drive the participants into guilt, but to help the group develop

²¹ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 232.

²² Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992): 312, quoted in Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 236.

²³ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 153.

awareness of the ways that their daily lives are being shaped. A crucial next step for this team is to reflect without shame on their inability to pray. After reflecting the team can press forward gently into further practical experimentation and deeper reflection.

The Challenge of *Lectio Divina* at Northside

Lectio Divina has always been a challenge at Northside, in part because Northside has inherited a tradition that has emphasized individualism as “*the Baptist distinctive*.”²⁴ In contrast, *Lectio Divina* is a communal model of reading scripture, and it mirrors the praxis models of engagement.²⁵ It is a way of praying and reading scripture in community that breaks out of individualistic, purely cognitive readings.

Although the group’s practice of *Lectio Divina* was rich and revealing, it was also in *Lectio Divina* that the group reached some of its most important moments of conflict and confusion. One member of the project tellingly complained at the end of Lent, “I’ve about dissected this passage as much as I care to, and I’m getting kind of sick of it.” His choice of the word dissected reveals that Northside typically reads the Bible like a biologist dissecting a dead animal. The text is typically read as a dead historical artifact whose meaning can be cut out and grasped by objective readers without any need for personal transformation. Even though the participants were able to discover rich imagery and language that stimulated their own imaginations, they were largely unable to answer the question, “what is the Spirit prompting in me as I read this text?” With almost no

²⁴ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicities*, 196, n. 17, emphasis original.

²⁵ Bedford, “Theology of Integral Mission and Communal Discernment,” 117.

exceptions throughout the project the members remained at an objective distance from the text.

This pattern of remaining at an objective distance while reading scripture in *Lectio Divina* is related to both the inability of speaking the language of the Spirit and the frustration with daily prayer: Northside has been deeply formed by Cartesian habits of engaging the world. These are dualistic habits that separate the mind and body as well as the spiritual and material realms.²⁶ In order to enter fully into a process of the transformation of desire, a bodily passion, Northside will need to overcome this dualism between body and mind. To overcome these habits will take long work over many years, but it can begin by learning a new way of “indwelling Scripture as a listening process.”²⁷ Myers writes that in addition to being biblically literate, disciples who wish to engage their neighbors as neighbors “need to be taught to let the Bible handle them and to avoid spending all their time trying to handle the text.”²⁸

Congregational Formation

Congregational formation concerns how we are socialized to foster lives of intentional discipleship through local congregations. Congregational formation helps to develop an “ecclesial social imagination,”²⁹ so that we begin to see ourselves as members

²⁶ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 6-12.

²⁷ See Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 34.

²⁸ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 230.

²⁹ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 17.

of the body of Christ, a household, or a new race.³⁰ Through congregational formation we begin to embed our “friendships . . . arguments, bonds, births and deaths . . . in a church’s relational life.”³¹ We begin to see the church as that social body in which the drama of God’s salvation is played out in the midst of the world.³²

Through the CFI Northside has been given a small introduction to intentional congregational formation, but Chapter 2 showed how that work was limited by habits of internal reflection. This section will show how employing a praxis model of theological exploration to attend to three issues of congregational formation could deepen Northside’s capacity to enjoy God and neighbor. Those three issues are entering into the liturgical seasons, recognizing economic conformity as a core challenge, and practicing weekly Eucharist.

Entering the Liturgical Seasons

The project was intentionally framed within the liturgical seasons of Advent (preparation), Epiphany (awareness and understanding), Lent (evaluation), Eastertide (experimentation), and Pentecost (new commitments). The unique focus of each season promised to ground the work of the team in the rhythms of ecclesial worship and prayer, but there was no recognizable connection made by participants between the seasons and

³⁰ See Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 63.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1992). Yoder writes, “Stated very formally, the pattern we shall discover is that the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called . . . The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately” (ix). This vision of congregational formation as a central function of the church is a profound theological achievement.

the work of the project; in fact, the project helped reveal a gap between the Sunday worship of the church and the weekly work of its members. For the most part at Northside the liturgical seasons may structure Sunday morning worship, but other calendars structure the rest of the week, and those other calendars often trump the liturgical calendar even on Sunday. Attendance dropped in Spring Break, even in the season of Lent, on Mothers' Day in Eastertide, and Pentecost Sunday was trumped by the second Sunday of beach season.

One of the most distinctive features of Northside is its liturgical worship, grounded in the keeping of the full liturgical year, and this study reveals that Northside needs to reflect on this powerful practice of keeping the seasons in light of cultural challenges and theological convictions. Nothing reveals the priorities and desires of a people as much as their calendar. We can learn what we really want by glancing at our calendar to see how we have organized our time.

Through the years Northside has sponsored many educational events aimed at understanding the liturgical calendar, but they have not yet entered into a praxis-shaped exploration of the liturgical ordering of time. As a result Northside seems to be stuck in a pattern of observing other calendars with their bodies even as they know much cognitive information about the liturgical calendar. Entering into a praxis-shaped exploration would allow Northside to confront powerful cultural influences that organize time for them. It would allow them to experiment with small practices of resistance to the dominant liturgical orderings of time, and then reflect further on new ground they had gained and new commitments they had made in the keeping of a gracious, worship-shaped calendar.

If Northside would enter into a praxis-shaped exploration of the keeping of the liturgical calendar, they could discover the ways that time is crucial to the Christian faith.³³ Christianity is not a mental concept to grasp, but it is a history in which God has revealed God's self to us, and it is an eschatological future for which the church prays. Northside needs to slow down in order to enjoy its neighbors as part of God's story.

A final reason why Northside must explore their own cultural formation regarding time is that many of their neighbors may come from cultures that have alternative views of time that will lead to profound difficulties in understanding and communication. Northside sometimes calls itself a "progressive" church, and this hints at deep cultural assumptions about what life is for and what makes life better. Cultural conflict over the understanding of time can cause some of the most serious ruptures in community.³⁴

Recognizing Economic Conformity as a Core Challenge

Closely related to the work of keeping liturgical time are core cultural challenges that Northside must recognize and address if they are to cultivate a desire for the presence of God and neighbors. These challenges are difficult to diagnose precisely, but the symptoms include ironically both general fatigue and restlessness. Here these challenges will be addressed first by describing the fatigue and restlessness and then by suggesting that Northside must learn to recognize and understand how broad economic conformity is threatening its mission. Finally, within that economic framework Northside will need to

³³ Hickman et al., *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 16.

³⁴ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 108.

develop practices and cultivate virtues that will enhance its capacity to recognize neighbors as ends to be enjoyed.

Over and over Northside's action team showed signs of restlessness and fatigue that are often associated with speed and stress. Church members are "tired of talking but never acting," and at the same time they are worn out from multiple projects. Some participants had difficulty engaging Jeremiah 29 with its call to "seek the welfare of the city" because they were exhausted from decades of working for the people of the city of Clinton. The after-school action team was unable to engage in their planned experiment because their leader was too busy to follow through with an experiment. The Outreach Committee could never meet even to consider the original invitation to the project because their schedules were too busy. Attendance at meetings was erratic because of various business trips, vacation trips, and other commitments. Some members forgot the meetings because they were distracted by many other activities.

Here Northside is confronting a broad cultural challenge that every church faces, and in order to confront it Northside members will need to develop the capacity to recognize and understand how their very desires are being shaped and formed by their participation in late modern capitalistic society. Here, it is important to note, capitalism does not describe one particular mode of production, as opposed to socialist or feudalistic modes of production.³⁵ Northside members would likely be distracted by any suggestion

³⁵ Bell, *Economy of Desire*, 64.

that they must “question capitalism;” instead they must learn to recognize the ways that the late modern economic order in which we all participate is formative of desire.³⁶

Within late modern capitalism human desires are shaped and conformed “for the sake of capitalist consumption.”³⁷ We find our desires shaped by our participation in the larger economy with the ironic result that what we often take to be our most liberated, free expressions of desire are not “spontaneous acts of freedom” at all, but carefully formed acts of consumption.³⁸ Only if Northside can draw upon its history of congregational formation and intentionally pay attention to the ways desire is shaped through participation in the market, can members begin to narrate the ways they have been led by broad economic conformity away from the presence of their neighbors.

It is instructive to note how in late modernity capitalism is “deterritorialized.”³⁹ That is, capitalism cuts loose our attachment and obligation to local places. Thus, Northside members are not likely to see the importance of their place in a neighborhood until they can begin to tell the story of their various neighborhood migrations as a story of their own desire, shaped by a capitalist economic order. “Going with the flow” of desire in a late modern capitalistic order, the original Northside members fled Jackson to move to Clinton in 1970s. Going with the same flow as they prospered, other Northside members unwittingly abandoned their place in the neighborhood and followed their

³⁶ Bell writes that a standard account of capitalism as a mode of production highlights the ways that capitalism is *responsive to* human desire. Bell is trying to highlight the much more subtle ways capitalism is *formative of* desire. Bell, *Economy of Desire*, 64-65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

market shaped desires out to isolated neighborhoods. They now find themselves estranged from neighbors and not even fully aware of their estrangement.

Once Northside enters into a process of congregational formation intentionally directed toward naming and understanding the ways that desire is (con)formed through participation in the larger economy, members can begin to develop alternative practices and cultivate virtues that will enhance their capacity to recognize their neighbors as ends to be enjoyed.⁴⁰ Specifically, they will need to recognize the ways that our wider culture highly espouses and encourages certain virtues that “run counter” to the virtues necessary to enjoy God and neighbor.⁴¹ Members will need to recognize a conflict between cultural expectations and gospel vision and intentionally begin to experiment with practices that will enable them to recognize God and neighbor as ends to be enjoyed.⁴²

Practicing Weekly Eucharist

The goals of practicing weekly Eucharist were to push against the Cartesian habits of Northside members by inviting the team into a corporate bodily action, to participate in the primary ritual act of “real presence,” and to cultivate an ecclesial imagination. The Eucharistic feast is one of the ways a church becomes more than a gathering of

⁴⁰ Of course, all this work is only finally possible within an ecclesiology that sees the church as a “contrast society.”

⁴¹ Kenneson, *Practicing Ecclesial Patience*, 5.

⁴² Phillip Kenneson identifies three practices that are constitutive of what he calls “real presence.” Those practices are “abiding, devotion, and attention.” Ibid., 4-5. Daniel Bell offers an intriguing description of the ancient counsels of perfection as “instruments for the healing of desire.” Bell, *Economy of Desire*, 191-196. Walter Brueggemann writes about the practice of keeping the Sabbath as “the most urgent of commandments in our society because it summons us to intent and conduct that defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity-propelled society.” Walter Brueggeman, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiv.

individuals: “they become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals—a whole greater than the sum of its parts.”⁴³ The Eucharistic feast is, of course, more than an experimental action designed to induce new awareness; it is a liturgical practice that serves as a “material point of entry of God’s apocalyptic regime into the day-to-day life of this world, gathering together a distinctive social order in the name of Christ.”⁴⁴ The Eucharist is a central practice by which the church becomes what it is called to be: “the ‘sacrament,’ the *epiphany*, of the new creation” for the sake of the world.⁴⁵

Given these exalted visions of the role of the Eucharist in the missional life of the church, it was disconcerting to observe throughout the project that weekly Eucharist seemed to be reduced in part to an occasion for “group bonding.” Indeed in written reflections team members cited Eucharist as important precisely for group bonding, and one respondent noted that being together as a group was the most important achievement of the project (specifically elevating togetherness above any of the practices). After an hour of struggling with *Lectio Divina* readings, the Eucharist also seemed like a time when the group could escape the tension of imagining a new kind of vulnerable engagement with the world, retreat to the familiar, and breathe a sigh of relief. Members embraced one another, lingering over the passing of the peace.

⁴³ Harvey, *Can These Bones Live*, 218.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979): 136-137, Schmemmann’s emphasis, quoted in Harvey, *Can These Bones Live*, 218.

Of course no one can say what is really happening in and through a liturgical action, but given the team's struggles with *Lectio Divina* and with accomplishing experiments, their relief and ease in the time devoted to Eucharist raised larger questions about the ways that Eucharist itself might be vulnerable to domestication. Comments about and posture during Eucharist raised a question whether even the Eucharist can become a means of estrangement from neighbors when it is shared as a group-bonding event within a body that is isolated from its neighborhood. As Michael Emerson and Christian Smith lament, "Part of the irony of religion's role is that in strengthening micro bonds between individuals, religion contributes to within-group homogeneity, heightens isolation from different groups, and reduces the opportunity for the formation of macro bonds—bonds between groups—that serve to integrate a society."⁴⁶

This question about the possible segregating effects of the Eucharist when taken within an isolated body is pertinent and pressing for Northside because for the last three decades Northside has been increasingly shaped by a movement of Baptists who seek to renew the church primarily "through sacramental reform."⁴⁷ Northside has moved to monthly communion, and has been experimenting with weekly communion during particular seasons. In addition the CFI is built upon a larger movement, largely influenced by the work of Stanley Hauerwas, that places worship and especially the Eucharist at the very center of Christian formation.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 55.

⁴⁷ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicities*, 20. Other sources of this Baptist sacramental theology include Harvey, *Can These Bones Live* and Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006).

⁴⁸ See all the essays in Hauerwas and Wells, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2004.

One who has raised critical concerns about the potential for the Eucharist and other acts of liturgical, congregational formation to isolate Christians from receptive engagement with neighbors is political theorist, Romand Coles. Writing specifically with the essays of *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* in view, Coles worries that those who emphasize congregational formation around the Eucharist never imagine the church being formed in vulnerable receptivity in the world. He worries that the authors have created an imaginary that

constitutes the borders between church and world in a way that *makes the border secondary to an interior volume* that is at the center and that *only prepares for* rather than *is itself partly constituted by the borders themselves*. This accents in turn the voice of the church, *its* service to the world that it ‘leavens and nourishes’⁴⁹: The church construes itself as the *footwasher* (but not also in need of being *foot-washed* by non-Christians), as Eucharistic *host* (but not also in need of following Jesus’ call to non-Christian tables and of sitting at the lowest spot), and as *server* more generally (but not also in need of being *served* by others beyond church walls in order to be able itself to serve).⁴⁹

Coles is concerned that by engaging in congregational formation prior to and apart from vulnerable engagement with the other, the church becomes essentially an invulnerable body, in need of no gift from strangers. Coles worries that such a body would finally be unable to love at all.⁵⁰

Coles’s concerns give added weight to the concerns of Alan Roxburgh who worries that what he calls an “ecclesiocentric” focus erodes a church’s capacity to see its

⁴⁹ Romand Coles, “Gentled Into Being,” in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, by Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 212, emphasis original.

⁵⁰ Coles writes, “Yet if this is so, I worry that the form will always have privilege in a manner that undermines the very *caritas* it would strive to incarnate.” *Ibid.*, 212.

place in the Spirit's work in neighborhoods and communities.⁵¹ Roxburgh argues that across all aspects of church life in North America there has been a misguided, persistent, and harmful focus on the nature and purposes of the church at the expense of a receptive, dialogical encounter between the church, the gospel, and the people of a local neighborhood. As a result most churches continue to focus on building up, enhancing, and improving their internal operations in the hopes of attracting neighbors, whom they do not yet know.

Coles warns that the Eucharist, when it is shared in isolation from the neighborhood, can corrupt the church's missional presence, but Craig Wong shows that when the Eucharist is accompanied by receptive neighborly presence, it can become transformative.⁵² Wong has written an important narrative analysis of a church's missional life being transformed just as the congregation was exploring and deepening their praxis of the Eucharist.⁵³ Grace Fellowship Church was a new church start from the largest Chinese congregation in San Francisco, and Wong tells their story so that it is almost impossible to disentangle Eucharistic praxis from missional praxis.

⁵¹ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 44, 48, 53-54, 71, 90, and 92.

⁵² It is scandalous for the Eucharist to become a source of division because the Eucharist "visibly unites the church with Christ as the one risen Christ's own body and blood." Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 164. To argue that the Eucharist can become an occasion for isolation raises theological questions that cannot be answered here about whether and how the Eucharist creates unity. It is sufficient to warn against the casual use of the Eucharist for group bonding within a segregated body.

⁵³ Craig Wong, *How the Lord's Supper Changes the Conversation on Immigration*, vol. 18, *The Renewing Radical Discipleship Series of Ekklesia Pamphlets*, ed. Joel Shuman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishing Co., 2012). As Wong narrates it the change in Eucharistic praxis was technically prior to the change in missional praxis, but the two changes are so entwined that it is difficult to tell whether one change led to the other, or whether each change reinforced the other. After all, the story is told in light of the changed missional praxis, so it is the missional praxis that enables the telling of the story.

Wong shows how regular Eucharistic sharing, coupled with receptive bodily presence helped the church recognize its isolation from and cultivate a desire for neighbors. Early in its life together the church began “to push ecclesial questions, including the nature of worship,” and to articulate a new understanding of liturgy itself as “reorientation rather than refilling.”⁵⁴ Also, early in its life together the church became committed to serving among its neighbors. Eventually the new congregation discerned a calling to move into the ethnically diverse Mission District at the same time it began to celebrate Eucharist weekly. It was in the Mission District that a few neighbors apparently found their way into membership and into shared communion, but some of them were unable to sustain their membership. Wong notes that one neighbor left when “she found the chasm between her experience and ours too difficult to bridge.”⁵⁵ Finally then, it was by recognizing the absence of neighbors from the Eucharistic feast that members began to cultivate a bodily desire for the presence of their neighbors.

The story of Grace Fellowship entering into the neighborhood and beginning to cultivate a bodily desire for the presence of their neighbors is agonizing, slow, and unfinished. Through occasional gifts of the presence of neighbors the members began to learn more about their own broken and sinful lives. Through the suffering and political vulnerability of their neighbors the members were given a new vision of the boundaries of the kingdom for which they prayed in the Eucharist. Around the table, in the presence of suffering and vulnerable neighbors, Grace Fellowship slowly began to cultivate a

⁵⁴ Wong, *How the Lord's Supper Changes the Conversation on Immigration*, 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

desire for the neighbors whose presence they desperately needed in order to be the church in that place.

The story of Grace Fellowship helps illumine a foreboding dilemma and a gracious opportunity for Northside as it seeks to cultivate a desire for God and neighbor in its own unique context. The dilemma is that Northside is a racially and economically homogenous congregation formed deeply by liberal individualism, and thus members will likely tend to reduce the Eucharist to a ritual that gives them meaning or that helps them feel emotionally closer to one another.⁵⁶ Such “trivializing” of the Eucharist puts Northside at risk of ritualizing and reproducing the very divisions and injustice against which it strives.⁵⁷

The story of Grace Fellowship also reveals that a humble praxis of Eucharist by a congregation as it practices receptive presence among its neighbors can be, as Gerald Schlabach argues, “the right way to stay hungry.”⁵⁸ That is, received in solidarity with neighbors as guests of a gracious Host, “the Eucharist whets [Christians’] hunger and thirst for justice.”⁵⁹ The story of Grace Fellowship shows how the Eucharist can help cultivate a bodily desire for the presence of God and neighbor as it shows us our proper place around the table together.

⁵⁶ See the discussion of Eucharist as more than a “mere ritual” in Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 150-172.

⁵⁷ Wong reports that Grace Fellowship has recently begun to recognize and reflect on the serious warnings in I Corinthians 11. Wong, *How the Lord’s Supper Changes the Immigration Conversation*, 9.

⁵⁸ Gerald W. Schlabach, “Breaking Bread: Peace and War” in Hauerwas and Wells, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 373. It should be noted that Coles’s concern about formation prior to receptive engagement was directed especially at Schlabach’s essay in the *Blackwell Companion*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Missional Formation

Missional formation concerns all those practices by which we are shaped to participate in God's mission to the world.⁶⁰ It is crucial to emphasize that mission is not an activity for some in the church but that the church itself is part of God's mission. Formally stated, in the broken body of Christ God has gathered and reconciled people into "one new humanity" that serves as a witness to God's wisdom before the powers and principalities (Ephesians 2-3), and by the risen body of Christ the church has been given the Spirit and sent vulnerably into the hostility and fear of the world as a sacrament of God's peace (John 20:19-23). So far, this account agrees with Bryan Stone who argues that all Christian mission is "fundamentally rooted in ecclesiology," but building on insights gained through Coles, Roxburgh, and Grace Fellowship this section will show how the missional witness of the church is only realized in receptive encounter in between church and neighbors.⁶¹

Missional Praxis at Northside

In the last book published before his death, John Howard Yoder wrote, "The theological understanding of the missionary enterprise of the church is an openly unfinished agenda in ecumenical theology today."⁶² A robust praxis of missional theology certainly seems barely begun at Northside, and missional formation may be the

⁶⁰ See Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 63. They write, "Missional formation refers to how God shapes a church to participate in God's love for the world."

⁶¹ Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 15. "The church does not really need an evangelistic strategy; the church *is* the evangelistic strategy."

⁶² Yoder, *Body Politics*, 36.

most challenging work Northside faces exactly because the rationale of mission has been so confused. For many Northside is a refuge where other faiths are not disparaged but honored and defended, where individual conscience is considered inviolable, and where religious doubt is often celebrated while communal confession is only tentatively spoken. All this makes missional formation a complex and necessarily patient practice at Northside, but one other feature of missional confusion makes evangelism an almost unspeakable word at Northside. That is, Northside is a church in many ways still recoiling from a form of evangelism by which many Northside members came to faith.

It is important to recognize that Northside members react viscerally to evangelical tactics. A primary example and ongoing source of pain and confusion that Northside feels over missional rationale and evangelism is the Southern Baptist practice of deliberately “targeting” the Jewish people for evangelism. At the 1996 meeting the annual convention messengers resolved, “Therefore, be it finally resolved that we direct our energies and resources toward the proclamation of the Gospel to the Jewish people.”⁶³ More recently the International Mission Board published a series of prayer guides and encouraged Southern Baptists to pray for the conversion of their Jewish neighbors specifically during the celebration of Rosh Hashanah.⁶⁴ These types of strategies are distressing and distracting for Northside members.

⁶³ “Resolution on Jewish Evangelism,” The Southern Baptist Convention, 1996, accessed December 20, 2014, www.sbc.net/resolutions/655.

⁶⁴ Albert Mohler, “Do Jews Really Need Christ? Controversy Over Christian Evangelism,” *The Blog of Albert Mohler*, July 16, 2009, accessed December 20, 2014, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/do-jews-really-need-christ-controversy-over-jewish-evangelism/>.

In terms of this project such evangelistic strategies are troublesome not only because they are disrespectful, but also for a central theological reason that speaks directly to Northside's contextual challenges. Those strategies see the gospel as an invulnerable word, formulated elsewhere and imposed upon a culture.⁶⁵ Attending to this theological concern will help illumine a way forward as Northside seeks to learn a new way of missional formation.⁶⁶

The Southern Baptist strategies would present the gospel to the Jews, as to anyone, as a word of truth abstracted from the vulnerability and receptivity of incarnate witness. For Southern Baptists evangelism has been and continues to be largely concerned with "the saving implications" of the death of Jesus abstracted from the historical context of his life or the ongoing embodied witness of the church.⁶⁷ In contrast, the story of Jesus reveals a God who, in order to reach us, became vulnerably present among us.⁶⁸ Thus, as Stanley Hauerwas argues, the Christian faith depends for its logical coherence on the vulnerable bodily presence of witnesses who are not armed with universally true, indubitable sentences.⁶⁹ Because God did not enter the world in a way

⁶⁵ Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 315.

⁶⁶ Another crucial theological concern is the place of the Jewish people in the economy of salvation. Attending to this concern is beyond the scope of this paper, but for an important analysis of this issue that provides a bodily account of salvation and links Christian theology with the formation of race, see Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 275-286. J.Kameron Carter links the failure of the Gentile Christian imagination to see itself within the Jewish story to historical racial formation. J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 79-121.

⁶⁷ See Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 75.

⁶⁸ Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 315.

⁶⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 212

that could not be resisted, but rather in the vulnerable flesh of Jesus, offering love that could be and was resisted and denied, the gospel must finally travel in fragile, vulnerable, dependent bodies.⁷⁰

In order for Northside to recover a missional vision, it will need to develop a new praxis of receptive missional engagement with neighbors. Members must learn to articulate their current praxis, examine the cultural influences on their praxis, hold their praxis up to Scripture and tradition and finally experiment with new ways of practicing missional engagement. Even still, Northside's development is likely to be stunted by one other factor, that is, the physical pain caused by the very mention of the word evangelism. For Northside evangelism evokes a word that has become, not flesh, but stone. That word, abstracted from incarnate witness, becomes compulsory and divisive: either accept it or be cut off. Many Northside members have been cut off from the full communion of families, friendships, and church because they could not embrace that invulnerable word, and they have watched people they love be cut off. For Northside a recovery of a renewed practice of mission will require corporate bodily healing. Northside will need to be healed into a new way of imagining its place in God's mission.

G. Simon Harak, S.J., tells a powerful story about the importance of receptivity, which he describes as "being moved."⁷¹ The story begins in Kingston, Jamaica at an orphanage where the Jesuits had begun a "big brother/little brother" program. One of the Jesuit big brothers named Fabian (eighteen-to-nineteen years old) reached out to give a

⁷⁰ Hauerwas puts it this way: "If there were a knock down argument capable of demonstrating the truth of what Christians believe about God and the world that made witness irrelevant, then we would have evidence that what we believe is not true." Ibid.

⁷¹ Harak, *Virtuous Passions*, 1-5.

congratulatory slap to his younger brother who had scored a soccer goal, but the young boy recoiled. Because of a history of abuse the young boy was physically configured to “be moved by others” in certain ways of avoidance.⁷² Fabian confessed later that he had also “felt moved” by the encounter with the boy. Only after much time and only within a community of trust did the two brothers gain a new way of “being moved by” each other, and as Harak tells it, that transformed relationship changed the entire community. Thus, the entire community had to become a receptive, vulnerable community of trust in order for anyone to learn a new way of being moved by others. Harak writes, “That physical touch of the other, which we are by nature disposed toward, which we desire more than food, became possible for Fabian and his little brother. And as for me, I began to learn a little more about hope, which Aquinas says is a passion caused by love.”⁷³

Like the young boy in Harak’s story Northside members bodily recoil at the very mention of evangelism. They are caught up in a missional system in which abstract propositions have been employed as weapons, threatening bodily punishment and physical expulsion. They are not likely to think their way into new ways of receiving the other or of imagining evangelism; instead, their recovery of mission will require participation in a community of trust that is itself learning new ways of receptivity and vulnerability to neighbors. Northside will likely need to be healed into a new praxis of receptive missional engagement with the other. The good news is that Northside already has the many gifts it will need: members care well for one another, they treasure each

⁷² Harak describes at length the biochemical and physiological processes through which we come to be disposed to avoidance or attraction. *Ibid.*, 7-21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 26.

other's conscience, and they will also passionately defend the conscience of unknown neighbors.

As Northside develops a healing praxis of missional engagement, it will need to be aware of the role of fear in its missional life. Gradually and somewhat reluctantly participants revealed that fear of crime and of dwindling resources makes it difficult to imagine a receptive missional engagement with neighbors, much less desire the presence of their neighbors. Here Northside's strong communal identity can become a source of courage.⁷⁴ Members might take the small risks of walking in their neighborhoods and practicing hospitality if they recognize they have the support and the friendship of a courageous church. If Northside is going to nurture the courage to enjoy their neighbors, they will need to learn how to talk about their fears with one another, as they take small risks into neighborly engagement.⁷⁵

Conclusion

By analyzing the results and findings of a project aimed at cultivating desire for the presence of neighbors, this chapter has described the contours of a local theology of desire at Northside. It focused on the importance of the encounter between church, gospel, and neighbor, and it argued that spiritual, congregational, and missional formation are finally inseparable. The church is truly church only as it encounters its neighbors in receptive vulnerability. The chapter also indicated a critical need for

⁷⁴ Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 69.

⁷⁵ Bader-Saye writes, "To give words to our fear, to name our fear, is to begin to dispel its power." *Ibid.*, 70.

Northside to develop a new way of encountering its neighbors, and it highlighted key ecclesial, theological, and cultural aspects of Northside's challenges. The following chapter will outline a process for Northside if it is to develop a new missional praxis, and it will highlight leadership aspects of Northside's challenges.

CHAPTER 6

DIFFUSING DESIRE

This chapter will continue to explore the challenge of cultivating desire for the presence of neighbors at Northside, focusing on the outlines of a process for Northside if it is to recognize and take up its own missional challenges. It is tempting to prescribe for Northside what it needs to do in order to reach a planned future of neighborly presence, but this chapter will take a different route. Rather than creating a master plan for Northside's missional change, it will describe a process of "emergence and self-organization" aimed at enabling and empowering Northside members to participate in their own social and personal transformation on the way to a new way of engaging neighbors.¹

In order to create an environment conducive to the emergence of a new way of engaging neighbors, Northside will need to begin by engaging and forming their own capacities for prayer and discernment. The project revealed an impoverished spirituality of change and missional outreach even though Northside has rich theological and

¹ See Richard T. Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New laws of Business* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 113-127; and Myers, *Walking With the Poor*, 244-248.

spiritual resources in its history. This chapter will address the formation of capacities of prayer and discernment by outlining a process of Appreciative Inquiry (hereafter AI) and describing why AI is an appropriate process for addressing spiritual challenges.

After first describing a process of AI by which Northside can begin to build capacities for prayer and discernment, the chapter then describes a process aimed at helping Northside name and address adaptive missional challenges. The chapter ends by describing a process aimed at deepening neighborly engagement. “Moving back into the neighborhood” is one bright opportunity for the emergence of new ways of engaging neighbors that arose during the project.

Beginning with Prayer and Discernment

The first step on the way to the emergence of new way of engaging neighbors at Northside must involve learning a new way of embedding missional change in corporate and individual prayer. The project revealed that Northside has challenges in the area of spiritual formation. Members had difficulty developing habits of daily prayer, entering into *Lectio Divina* reading of Scripture in an open and attentive manner, imagining the kingdom, and talking about the Spirit. Since Northside has a spiritual formation challenge, members will be well served by learning how to “pray their way into God’s future.”²

So far, much of Northside’s work has been pragmatic. Northside members have been trying to solve their problems by employing technical skills to make small

² This phrase borrows from Myers’ mantra that development practitioners must “learn their way into the future.” Myers, *Walking With the Poor*, 244.

adjustments to a missional system they think they understand. Because of time limitations very few meetings even took time to pray or read Scripture, except in perfunctory opening or closing. In part Northside's *modus operandi* reveals that members have conceived of their challenges as technical problems for which "they have the necessary know-how and procedures," but it is important to recognize that underneath Northside's patterns of technical management lies a deep spiritual challenge.³ Northside is a biblically and theologically literate church, but it often approaches the pressing challenges of poverty and injustice as if it has the resources to fix them, with or without the healing presence of God or the work of the Spirit.⁴ Members need to develop habits of prayer and discernment and embed their work of missional change within a theological trajectory.⁵

In order for Northside to develop its own capacity to face its missional challenges, members need to understand their own deep need to discover their true identity and vocation in God and neighbor.⁶ They also need to understand their own estrangement from neighbors as more than just a sociological challenge but instead as a theological scandal. Members must learn how to pray and search the Scriptures as people in need of

³ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.

⁴ Myers identifies "functional atheism" as a problem inherent in a worldview that separates the spiritual and physical realms. Myers, *Walking With the Poor*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248. It will be important for Northside to recognize that praying its way into the future is about discernment, and not about asking God to give us the future we desire. One of Northside's difficulties with prayer is a discomfort with asking for God's intervention. Prayerful discernment involves language Northside can more easily appreciate.

⁶ Myers describes the ultimate goals of any authentic transformational development as "the poor, the non-poor, and the development practitioner . . . [working] together in seeking their true identity and recovering their true vocation within the context of just and peaceful relationships." *Ibid.*, 22.

God's initiatives, rather than as a people who are fulfilling their noble obligations to the less fortunate. These are profound pastoral issues, but they need to be brought to the foreground lest Northside again set out to plan and fix its way into the future.

Shifting from Planning to Praying

Northside faces a serious spiritual challenge, but it is vitally important to recognize that before members can begin to address the brokenness and disorder they confront, they must begin with gratitude and blessing.⁷ In order to foster an environment in which Northside can begin to pray rather than plan its way into God's future, Northside members will need an opportunity to become aware of God's continual presence in the life of their church, and they will need to increase their confidence in and gratitude for their own spiritual gifts, already given. Northside is an extraordinary church with a unique gospel presence in the community, but members have struggled to see their own experiences in light of the biblical stories and to imagine the role of the Spirit and the shape of God's kingdom. They need to be given opportunities to recognize the "life-giving resources" already available "in their own practices and through their own narratives."⁸

Beginning with gratitude for and awareness of God's presence will also help Northside address the troubling issue of fatigue. Members have struggled to come to agreement on the issues that are troubling them, and they have been frustrated by recent

⁷ Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 45.

⁸ Ibid.

failures to follow through on efforts at missional change. They are unlikely to enter into another congregational effort aimed at fixing problems or addressing deficits.⁹

The following outline of a process for addressing the spiritual formation challenges Northside faces is based on the five basic processes of AI: “choose the positive as the focus of inquiry, inquire into life-giving forces, locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry, create share images for a preferred future, and find innovative ways to create the future.”¹⁰ AI is an appropriate beginning point for Northside because it is a process that allows for and encourages emergence and self-organization, but it uniquely meets Northside’s need to begin with developing new capacities for prayer and discernment. AI allows and encourages a congregation to build on the good news that grace undergirds all creation and precedes sin. It is by God’s grace that we can even begin to discern sin in all its destructive reality without that recognition crippling our hope for change. It is only by God’s grace that we can participate in God’s healing initiatives. AI allows a congregation to step into a future with the faith and hope in God’s ability to work through our very human and flawed nature to restore us.

AI is an appropriate beginning for a congregation facing social division and distrust that spring from tortured histories of racism. It would be tempting for Northside to begin with a theological analysis of the sin that divides neighbor from neighbor, but by beginning with an appreciative description of the ways God has already been at work in their lives, members will gain new perspectives that will help them better realize the

⁹ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

sinful realities that confront and challenge them. It is only in the light of God's grace that they can even begin to recognize the reality of their estrangement.

The AI process envisioned here begins with the formation of a core group of leaders who are specifically interested in helping the congregation address spiritual formation. The leaders will need to come from across the membership, and they will need to be willing to explore change and to take risks. The leaders should also be diverse in age and background and represent various ways of thinking and leading.¹¹ The deacons should sanction the work, and core group leaders should agree to keep the congregation informed of progress and conclusions.

The envisioned AI process would take at least five months to accomplish, and the process could be framed again within the liturgical year. One month would be spent initiating the core team in the practices of AI, practicing initial AI questions, crafting questions for interviews, and initiating the church leadership (led by core team members). Two months would be required to conduct interviews across the congregation. Another month would be required for the core team to analyze and prepare the results of the interview, and a final month would be required for identifying innovative initiatives.¹²

The first basic step of any appreciative inquiry movement is to "choose the positive as the focus of inquiry."¹³ Northside has tried some appreciative inquiry questions in the past, but because there was not full agreement at the beginning of the

¹¹ Roxburgh and Boren write, "The innovation of mission-shaped life has to involve a broad cross section of the church if it is to actually enter the congregation's DNA." Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 184.

¹² Branson, *Memories, Hope, and Conversations*, 113-124.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

process, those questions were easily hijacked by those who wanted to focus on the failures within the system. In order for Northside to begin properly developing a process of systemic change, the church will need basic agreement within a core group to adhere to the appreciative process, but this core group will need training to realize that they will likely encounter resistance within the congregation.¹⁴ This core group will need to rid themselves of the naïve presumption that appreciative inquiry is a neutral process or that Northside is a “nice” church where everyone will work together for the good. Heifetz and Linsky argue, “The deeper the change and the greater amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and, thus, the greater the danger to those who lead.”¹⁵

The second crucial step for Northside members as they seek to develop their capacity to pray and discern their way into God’s future will be for a core group to begin inquiring into stories concerning the members’ calling into the Christian life.¹⁶ The project members had a difficult time drawing upon their own feelings and desires when they read scripture, and this second step of inquiring into stories will help Northside members remember their own calling into the Christian life, the ways they have discovered good news in Christ and in congregational life, and the ways they were spiritually awakened and changed through the years. Stories of conversion would be especially helpful for Northside since members have struggled to articulate evangelical

¹⁴ Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 55.

¹⁵ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 14. In addition to being a church deeply informed by the liberal theological tradition, Northside is a moderate church in a highly partisan community. They seek to hold together members with quite differing political and theological convictions, and they have attempted to hold together a fragile community by avoiding conflict. Thus, the church can be slow to recognize and acknowledge serious differences and divisions.

¹⁶ The second movement of appreciative inquiry is “Inquire into stories of life-giving forces.” Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 28.

aspects of mission. By learning again how to tell the story of their own conversions the members can begin to imagine new ways of presence in the neighborhood beyond “working for.” This step of inquiring into life-giving stories is crucial to “widening the circle” of involvement from the core group.¹⁷ It is also an opportunity for Northside members to learn how to express their own desires for the future of the church.

The third phase of an AI process at Northside involves identifying themes that run through the stories of conversions, calling, and spiritual growth.¹⁸ In this phase of work the members will be encouraged to make connections between their own stories and larger biblical narratives and themes. This is a crucial stage for deepening their own learning about God’s presence and becoming more aware of their own rich resources for meeting the challenges before them.

The fourth step for Northside as members build their own capacity to pray, discern, and draw on spiritual gifts is to imagine new futures based on their memories, stories, and the biblical connections they are making.¹⁹ Only after gaining confidence in their own ability to make theological connections with their own stories will the members begin to expand their social imaginary. The kingdom of God had been a difficult concept and even a stumbling block for team members as they sought to engage biblical stories in *Lectio Divina*; now, they will need to be encouraged to begin imagining a new future for Northside and its neighborhoods and making connections between that imagination and biblical visions. Led by the core team, congregational members will articulate

¹⁷ Branson, *Memories Hopes, and Conversations*, 58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-61.

“provocative proposals” that focus the desires that were named in the interviews into imaginative but practical descriptions of a potential future for spiritual formation at Northside.²⁰

The final step of the AI process at Northside represents only the beginning of the work Northside would do in order to begin to see its missional and congregational life in spiritual terms. Over the final month the core team members will lead other congregational members in a process of identifying innovative practical initiatives for church members, small groups, and for committees and larger church structures.²¹ The process of emergence will be strengthened as the leadership is shared by many.

Getting to Awareness: Recognizing Adaptive Challenges

After Northside members develop and extend their capacity to pray and discern their way into the future, they will then need help identifying and engaging adaptive missional challenges. During the project the team never properly reached a stage of awareness of the adaptive missional challenges the church faces, and that failure to articulate awareness and understanding stifled any real progress made on the challenge. This section will address a process for helping Northside develop awareness and understanding in order to address adaptive missional challenges.

Even as Northside is gifted with committed, devoted, and service-minded members and has an exceptional history of leadership and involvement in the community, it faces serious adaptive missional challenges. Northside is a homogenous church in an

²⁰ Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

extraordinarily diverse community, but members do not yet recognize their own need for the presence of their neighbors. They seem largely content being a community of like-minded moderate and liberal Christians, and they hope to attract other Christians who will appreciate their liturgical “style” of worship. They hope to make a difference in the community through corporate and individual works of service, and through occasional prophetic statements of support for social justice. They would like to be helpers to the people in their neighborhood, but in large part they do not sense any urgency or need to know their neighbors or enjoy their neighbors’ presence.

The project aimed at cultivating a desire for the presence of neighbors stimulated some awareness of a different way of engaging neighbors, and most encouragingly seemed to create a genuine interest in further neighborhood exegesis by a few members; however, the team members were never able to articulate a true awareness of their isolation from neighbors, either those around the church or around the homes of members. Some individuals may have more of a sense of the challenges than others, but the group as a whole was never able to name a missional challenge. Team members failed to recognize their tendencies to “work for” neighbors or their reluctance to “be with” neighbors as a missional challenge. Northside will make no real progress on learning a new way of engaging their neighbors until members can do their own work of identifying and working to address the church’s challenges.

When any group is resistant to change, one key to helping the group address its adaptive challenges is to “appreciate the nature of [their] resistance,” and the beginning place for exploring the resistance of the congregation is by examining my own habits of

leadership.²² Leaders have to learn how to listen across the membership to all the varying factions, and eventually leaders have to avoid supplying the answers for the congregation so that the people can work out of their own interests. The first move in helping Northside address its own missional challenges will be for me to get out of my office, cease my own formulation of strategies for their transformation, and listen.

Over the past five years of attempts at missional change, one of the key elements of congregational resistance is that the members know that their work is part of the pastor's research. They politely oblige requests for participation, but they have often seemed to be looking for the answers the pastor wants them to give. Now that the project is completed, the first step will be for their pastor to reengage by listening across the congregation. It is doubtful that a congregation will learn new habits of receptive engagement from a pastor who has all the answers in advance. It is also doubtful that members will develop the capacity to articulate and meet their greatest missional challenges if their pastor does not show evidence of believing in them. One of the first steps toward helping Northside name its missional challenge will be for their pastor to learn a new way of receptive, appreciative listening with the honest recognition that he does not know the answer to its challenges.

An essential aspect of a new way of receptive and appreciative listening will be patience. As the project showed there are multiple factors affecting Northside's reluctance to embrace missional change: many older members (and the congregation has more older than young members) are afraid. They indicate physical fear of change within

²² Dean Williams, *Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc), 21.

their neighborhoods, but they are also likely overwhelmed with the changes around them. Their own congregation does not worship and sing like they once did. The institutions they have worked hard to sustain are crumbling, and their grandchildren are leaving the church. They do not need a pastoral leader to give them answers; they need a pastoral leader who will allow them to grieve and help them to find words to express their pain. Most of all they need help articulating their concerns from within a biblical narrative.²³

If the members can begin to trust that they are no longer part of the pastor's project, but they are instead key actors in a dramatic narrative unfolding in their own neighborhood, they might be more open to developing a scriptural imagination for their challenges. Especially appropriate for Northside's context would be stories of migrations. Northside was sent originally into the midst of a great migration of people fleeing Jackson. As those members became more financially secure, they joined another great migration away from the neighborhoods surrounding the church into larger homes on more secluded lots. Now a second massive wave of migrants has left Jackson and moved into the neighborhoods surrounding Northside, but these neighbors are strangers. If members can begin to trust that they are not part of a project but instead actors in a dramatic, unfolding, neighborhood story, they will be more likely to recognize their place in the larger scriptural narratives of wandering strangers, and be willing to experiment with new ways of hospitable engagement.

²³ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leader*, 91.

A second key to helping the congregation diagnose its own adaptive missional challenges is to recognize that the congregation is a system, not a machine.²⁴ There are multiple factions and individuals with their own interests. There are senior adults who admit fear of the neighborhood even as they worry about the future of the church. There are leaders who respond to the various pressures they receive from anxious members. There are young people eager to lead the church into progressive social positions, but not especially interested in the opinions of neighbors perceived to be conservative. There are scores of young parents overwhelmed by the demands of raising children in a constantly changing world. There are scarred ex-fundamentalists who are doing all they can to show up, sing the hymns, and listen to scripture without succumbing to cynicism or despair. There are stalwart and loyal believers, who do not understand the skepticism of their fellow congregants. If anyone is to lead Northside into diagnosing its own missional challenges, he or she will need to attend to all those factions, recognizing the interests and needs and especially the intelligence that each group brings to the conversation.²⁵

Since Northside is a complex adaptive system, there will be no progress without communication and buy-in across the system. It has been my tendency to appeal to all factions alike by appealing to theological visions, but innovation requires listening to all factions and seeking to understand their unique intelligence and interests. The church leadership will not respond to deep theological visions; their interest lies in safeguarding the wellbeing of the institution, so they will need help recognizing the unique opportunities and also threats to Northside's future relative to their ability to confront

²⁴ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leader*, 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

missional challenges. Young and old members need to be invited into conversation about their own values and visions. Those who are averse to evangelism will also need help examining and expanding their own praxis of missional life.

A New Opportunity: Moving Into the Neighborhood

In addition to working generally to create an environment conducive to the emergence and self-organization of a new way of engaging neighbors at Northside there is one concrete opportunity for engagement with neighbors related to the experiments in “moving back into the neighborhood” from the project. The neighborhood team created the most successful experiment, and it is important to follow up on their good work. This section will outline a process in which Northside can harness this opportunity toward emergence and self-organization of a new way of engaging neighbors.

One of the most promising aspects of the project was the energy and commitment generated around the work of the neighborhood experiment team. This one team seemed to appreciate the receptive quality of their work, and their work seemed to cultivate a genuine desire for “being with” and learning among their neighbors. Team members were walking their neighborhoods hoping to learn new ways of seeing, and they were struggling honestly with their own tendencies to work for rather than be with their neighbors. One member confessed that when she first walked onto Pugh Road, she was captivated by some of the well-kept houses, but at the same time she wanted to clean up the yards of others. This team was working on their own impulses to fix problems for others. In addition, these team members had been most comfortable in the *Lectio Divina*

process, allowing themselves to be engaged in the readings and allowing the readings to begin questioning and expanding their own default imaginations.²⁶

One immediate opportunity for Northside involves creating an environment for these quiet but respected members to lead their church into a new way of discerning the Spirit and receptively engaging its neighborhoods, but in order for their leadership to result in emergence and self-organization across the church, Northside as a whole church will need to sanction further exploration and experimentation. A crucial opportunity for change is in view, but it depends on these members gathering to articulate their findings and their own awareness of the challenges before their church in light of those findings. The members will need to address the deacons, communicating with them the things they learned from their brief experiments in their neighborhoods.²⁷ The members should prepare carefully in advance and try to communicate the missional opportunities of further experimentation as well as the risks of doing nothing.

If the members can lead the deacons into awareness of the opportunities of missional experimentation and the risks of doing nothing, there will be an occasion for genuine innovation to emerge. If the deacons hear and understand them, the next step would involve communicating with the whole church, but this must be more than a series of announcements in the newsletter. The members will need to have their own

²⁶ It is noteworthy that two of the three members were the only members who live in the city of Jackson, and these two currently serve as deacons.

²⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 181. At Northside the deacons are the only body that is elected by the whole church, and they often serve as a board, even though they are loathe to call themselves a board. Their primary self-understanding is of servants who share the care-giving ministry of the pastor. One of the key challenges before Northside is to help the deacons understand themselves as “instruments of power,” and to take responsibility for the ways that their power, even when not used, has a powerful effect on the ability of the church to organize and change. See Williams, *Real Leadership*, 244. If the deacons finally do not want to be a governing body, they need to act to give that governing function away.

conversations across the membership of the church. They will need to teach, share stories, and provide opportunities for other members truly to join the work.²⁸ In order for any new way of engaging neighbors to emerge, Northside needs a lay-led conversation across the whole church.

The process for developing a new way of engaging neighbors through “moving back into the neighborhood” will take time to unfold, as much as nine to eighteen months for the entirety of the work, and the leaders need to recognize the time commitment from the start.²⁹ It will take several months to have the conversations and invite participants into neighborhood experiment groups, and it will take longer months for these teams to go through a deliberate process of learning a new way to inhabit their neighborhoods. In addition, Alan Roxburgh emphasizes that these teams will need to take the time to “dwell in the word” at each gathering, patiently engaging Scripture through *Lectio Divina* readings.³⁰

Neighborhood teams will likely be impatient to get to work in projects in their neighborhoods, but they will need to be led through a process first of recognizing and acknowledging their own blindness to their neighborhoods. They need to take the time to tell their own stories of how they came to perceive their own neighborhoods. Then they need time to articulate ways of being neighbors that are faithful to Scripture and Christian tradition. Then they will need time to engage their own neighborhoods with receptivity, listening to stories and trying to learn from the structure of the neighborhood itself.

²⁸ Roxburgh, *Missional*, 182.

²⁹ The following outline for a process is taken from Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 179-190.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

Finally, before joining actions in the neighborhood, they will need to take time to practice discernment, even if their skills of discernment are still developing. They need to deliberately inquire into what God is at work doing in their neighborhoods. After this patient work, team members will be better able to work in their neighborhoods, joining in the work that God is already doing there.

Conclusion

This chapter has spelled out a process for the emergence and self-organization of a new missional praxis at Northside. It focused on the leadership aspects of missional challenge, but it also highlighted church, theological, and contextual challenges. It revealed that Northside is poised to learn and grow into an exciting change, and it showed how Northside members might allow the Spirit to work through them to lead them into God's mission in their neighborhoods. The next chapter will conclude the project and make concrete suggestions for next steps.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter will make practical recommendations for Northside as the church seeks to develop a new way of engaging its neighbors. It will begin with a brief summary of the next steps Northside will take in response to the specific work of the project, and then the paper will conclude with two further recommendations that will help Northside broaden and deepen its missional life while expanding and healing its “diseased social imagination.”¹ The first recommendation is to join with a larger work of community organizing in Jackson. The concluding recommendation is to begin a practical theological exploration of neighborly integrated worship and ecclesial life.²

Committing to Changes following the Project

This brief section will summarize the next steps Northside will take in response to the project. Those steps include a deliberate process of AI aimed at developing and deepening Northside’s capacity to pray and discern the Spirit’s movement, personal work

¹ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 6.

² The words *neighborly integrated* were chosen deliberately rather than *racially integrated* in order to limit the abstractions, but the final section will explore the role of race in neighborly integration.

done in the development of the pastor and associate pastor's missional leadership capacities, and finally the beginning of an experiment in moving into the neighborhood.

Chapter 6 outlined an AI process that would take at least five months to accomplish and would enhance Northside's capacity to ground the work of missional change in practices of spiritual discernment, but further work is also needed. Northside needs help recognizing and addressing adaptive missional challenges. This work of helping the church reach awareness and understanding will begin with personal leadership work on the part of the pastoral team.

Chapter 6 also described personal work that the pastor must do in order to help create an environment for the emergence and self-organization of a new way of engaging neighbors, but Northside has two key pastoral leaders, including a longtime associate pastor. The work of personal leadership development for missional emergence will need to include both pastors, and it must begin with helping the associate pastor do her own assessment of personal leadership capacities and challenges.

Helping the associate pastor assess her own leadership begins in conversation with the pastor and with other leaders across the church. As they begin to help bring the associate pastor into the leadership of change, they also will be enhancing her own gifts of leadership and simultaneously leading the church further into the process of missional innovation. Susan Meadors is a gifted and seasoned minister, but she has not yet worked intentionally on her own capacities for managing conflict or leading through change, and

bringing her into the work of missional leadership is an essential step for Northside's missional transformation.³

As the associate pastor is being enlisted into the work of missional leadership, she and the pastor will need to spend at least two months deliberately listening across all the factions of the congregation. In two months time the pastor and associate pastor could engage most of the congregation through individual meetings. In those meetings the pastors can learn from the wisdom of the various members, and identify potential leaders and interests around which leaders are ready to act.⁴

Personal leadership work by the pastors will be essential as the congregation is moving through an AI process. After the pastors have intentionally listened across the membership for two months, they can then engage the leadership of the congregation and help them develop the capacity to name adaptive missional challenges. Northside will not make real progress in missional transformation until the leadership of the congregation recognizes and articulates missional challenges and opportunities that require change, growth, or other adaptation.

The AI process and the deliberate work of pastoral leadership development will help build essential capacities for Northside as it seeks to develop a new way of engaging neighbors, but an action-learning project of moving into the neighborhood will be an important and promising opportunity for missional experimentation. The formation of neighborhood missional action teams builds on the development of new capacities in

³ See Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leader*, 126-141, for the identity and character of a missional leader.

⁴ See Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 34-44. Listening through individual meetings is a crucial first step of community organizing.

spiritual discernment. The moving into the neighborhood process will take nine to eighteen months, and it will end with a process of discernment in which teams seek to identify what God is doing in their neighborhood and ways they can join with God's work.

Community Organizing and the Hope of Healed Social Imagination

The AI work of building Northside's capacities of spiritual discernment, the pastoral leadership development, and the neighborhood missional action teams are hopeful next steps for Northside on their way to developing a new way of engaging neighbors, but these beginning steps will fall short of a fully robust missional transformation if Northside cannot address deep patterns of paternalism. In order to address issues of paternalism Northside will need to learn a new way of political engagement with neighbors. This section will explore the possibilities and limits of involvement in a grass roots political organizing movement known as Working Together Jackson (hereafter WTJ), and it will suggest ways that participation in WTJ would help Northside members recognize and unlearn paternalistic habits, relearn habits of embodied presence, learn to see their place among migrations to and from the city, and cultivate a new missional imagination.

WTJ is a broad-based community organizing effort under the auspices of the Industrial Areas Foundation (hereafter IAF). It is centered in the city of Jackson, and it is comprised of churches, synagogues, mosques, labor unions, neighborhood associations, and other institutions that are seeking to build political power together. Through scores of one-on-one meetings that lead to house meetings, the members of these institutions come

to identify their own concerns and articulate their own issues to address. WTJ deliberately seeks to resist patterns of paternalism by building power for individuals within institutions to address their own needs and interests, and they often repeat an anti-paternalistic slogan, sometimes referred to as the “Iron Rule: never do for others what they can do for themselves.”⁵

Broad-based community organizing is specifically designed to undercut paternalism by building power for people to work for their own interests, and it is thus a classic example of “working with.” One of the central features of IAF work is the one-on-one interview, in which organizers visit with neighbors in an effort to listen and discover the concerns of the neighbor. Only after dozens of one-on-one interviews do the organizers call a house meeting so that emerging local leaders can begin to identify their common interests and concerns and articulate issues they wish to address.⁶

If Northside members will participate in WTJ, they will be asked first to learn how to identify their own desires, concerns, and interests, and asking these questions is the first step toward addressing the problem of paternalism. When we work for others, we often veil or hide our own interests, but broad-based community organizing helps us lift the veil on our own interests. Working with others through community organizing, Northside can learn new habits of articulating desires. As members participate in house meetings, they will come to acknowledge the desires and aspirations of their neighbors, and this is a vital second step toward unlearning habits of paternalism.

⁵ Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 148-164. Community organizing can also reinforce the work of emergence and self-organization in that both refrain from approaching people with issues already defined; rather, they each want people to discover and articulate their own willingness to act.

Engaging in meetings with neighbors as they articulate desires, needs, aspirations, and concerns, Northside members will not only be unlearning habits of paternalism, they will also be forming positive habits of bodily interaction, and it is important to recognize the formative power of one-on-one meetings.⁷ Jeffrey Stout writes of the importance of emotional connections between an organizer and a neighbor as the neighbor tells a story of grief or concern. He argues that only by being in the presence of another as they tell us a story of grief can we fully engage the story they tell. We must see their “face, hands, posture, and [hear their] voice” if the story they tell is to “carry the entire communicative burden.”⁸ Stout goes on to describe physiologically how we take into our own bodies the emotions and actions of other people. “Our neurological systems are, so to speak, *plugged into* each other when we are meeting face to face.”⁹ Community organizing is a formative practice that Northside can use to develop a new way of engaging their neighbors as ends to be enjoyed for their own sake.

A second formative aspect of community organizing is its capacity to help Northside members recognize the ways their everyday lives have been privatized by their participation in suburban life. Northside members do not often recognize that they live in a suburb that exists in a parasitic relationship to the city of Jackson. They have not been able to tell the story of their own missional sending within the broader movement of

⁷ Luke Bretherton notes that for Saul Alinsky, the pioneer of broad-based community organizing “community organization involves a form of political *asceticism* or disciplined formation: it educates and apprentices people into the practices necessary for sustaining public or civic friendships and, through these friendships, forging a common world with those who are different or with whom they disagree.” Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 77, emphasis original.

⁸ Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 153, emphasis original.

white-flight migration. Broad-based community organizing aims at awakening the capacity of individuals and local institutions to act politically, and to draw people out of their private lives into public awareness and civic participation.¹⁰ Participating in WTJ would increase the capacity of Northside members to see their place in a city.

Finally, participation in WTJ would help Northside unlearn missionary habits associated with colonial domination and relearn mission as God's peaceable new creation in the midst of the world. Luke Bretherton has argued that broad-based community organizing is a promising way for the church to relearn its missional calling following the collapse of Christendom. He argues that by "forming a common life" with neighbors, including especially those outside the church, the church can undergo a kind of repentance that allows it gradually to recognize its own humble but privileged role in God's mission.¹¹ As the Israelites were called "to learn in exile what they failed to learn in Jerusalem," so the church is given a new calling beyond political domination, and that calling is to mission.¹² By learning to seek the peace of Clinton and Jackson alongside their various neighbors, Northside will be introduced to new ways of conceiving mission and God's involvement in the world.

Northside members were invited into the initial conversations at the founding of WTJ, but they failed to see the relevance of the work to the mission of the church. The lead organizers were especially interested in Northside's participation because they saw Northside as a key institution in Clinton, and they wanted to draw suburban institutions

¹⁰ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*

into the work of political organizing across the metropolitan area. The lead organizer initiated several one-on-one meetings with leaders in the church, several leaders attended house meetings, and church officers attended one of the first public meetings of the movement in South Jackson. The Missions Committee even sent an initial grant to the movement in its fledgling state, but finally Northside members failed to see any relevance of the work to their mission, and the Missions Committee decided against further involvement.

Several years later the situation of both WTJ and Northside have changed. WTJ is an established entity with a growing presence and a reputation for helping institutions increase their capacity to work together. They are helping neighbors recognize one another as neighbors, and they are helping individuals develop the skills and virtues of citizenship.¹³ At the same time Northside has continued its work and conversations about knowing neighbors, and has at least begun a conversation about how to shift from “working for” to “working with” and “being with” neighbors. It now may be clearer why WTJ could be a crucial partner as Northside seeks to develop a new way of engaging neighbors and to grow in its understanding of mission.

Acting and Reflecting Within an Integrating Church

At the conclusion of this project it is essential to recognize that all the work of missional experimentation and neighborly presence might still avoid Northside’s largest missional challenges inasmuch as theological action and reflection is only done within a

¹³ Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, 5.

homogenous church. This is not an argument about the platonic ideal of the church, or that Northside needs to spend more time in closed circles reflecting on what the church should look like as a racially integrated body.¹⁴ It is also not an argument that neighborly presence can be a strategy for Northside to increase its black membership.¹⁵ Indeed, no amount of friendliness or good intentions can overcome the genuine pain that makes it impossible for black people in the South to worship regularly in any church dominated by white structures and institutions. Rather, it is to say that Northside is in a bind because of its racial homogeneity. Inasmuch as all its theological reflection and action takes place within a homogenous social body, Northside will be unable even to recognize its true theological challenges.

Northside members do not typically recognize the lack of black membership as any sort of real loss and certainly not as a theological scandal. One interview with a church member captured well the typical attitude. He is a civil rights attorney who works for racial justice in prisons and for voting rights across the state, but when asked whether Northside's racial homogeneity was in any way problematic, he demurred:

I care about racial and ethnic diversity in every other sphere of life. When I walk into any public meeting (like the PTA or a city council meeting), I'm looking to see if the whole community is represented. If not, I know there's a problem. I'm committed to overturning racism in our society, and I think we must teach our children about the history of the church and civil rights. But at the church . . . I just don't see the problem.¹⁶

¹⁴ Alan Roxburgh rightly argues against "an idealism that believes we must frame the 'true' church in its 'intended' forms before we can function properly as the people of God." Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 78.

¹⁵ Roxburgh identifies "the church question" as "the deep concern of most churches in North America: getting others to come to them and be a part of their lives." *Ibid.*, 92. The real dangers of the church question are most clearly displayed in the case of white churches seeking to increase black membership.

¹⁶ Cliff Johnson, interview by the author, Jackson, MS, February 21, 2013.

This member's analysis helps clarify how Northside is generally for racial justice in the world but does not see its own ecclesial life as the site for the reordering of bodily desires for neighbors.¹⁷ Northside does have a desire to participate in the healing of a wounded society, and this project has indicated genuine desires for the presence of neighbors, but members do not yet see the church as the very body of Christ in which our desires for one another and for neighbors are being transformed. It is this failure of ecclesial imagination that Northside will need to address if they are to participate in God's mission in its neighborhoods. Northside will need to act and reflect within a more diverse social body.

There are three reasons that neighborly integration is vital for Northside as the church continues to seek a new way of missional engagement with its neighbors. The first reason is a matter of emergence and self-organization. Any church that remains homogenous while the environment around it becomes diverse and different will likely become unable to cope with the world around it as that world changes. When any organization fails to "cultivate (not just tolerate) variety in its internal structure," that organization begins to lose the capacity to deal with conflict and change.¹⁸ A homogenous church will not likely survive over the long haul if its surrounding environment becomes more racially diverse than its own membership. Northside's leadership in particular needs to come to understand its homogeneity as a threat to its long-term survival. This understanding will not in itself create the possibility of a diverse culture, but it could help Northside recognize its own adaptive missional challenges.

¹⁷ This is an example of "being for" racial justice but not yet "being with" neighbors.

¹⁸ Pascale, et al., *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, 20.

The second reason Northside needs to act and reflect within a racially integrated social body is that homogenous churches have been shown to have a corrosive effect on the health and healing of the cities to which they have been sent. In *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith describe how congregations, like Northside, with strong intra-group bonds, may serve unintentionally to dis-integrate society at-large.¹⁹ Emerson and Smith found that when congregational energy is focused on strengthening bonds within the congregation, they become “a disintegrative force” as they “fragment [society] into exclusive groupings.”²⁰ Emerson and Smith suggest that in order for the larger community to be racially integrated, strong “intergroup bonds are needed.”²¹ Congregations, and presumably other strong institutions within the community, must be “mobile,” or able to move back and forth between various social groups with understanding of the various cultural stories and struggles.

Emerson and Smith’s findings support the necessity of Northside’s involvement in movements like WTJ, but they also point to the ultimate need for Northside to reflect and act theologically within an integrated ecclesial body. Until the actual membership of Northside reflects the cultural diversity of its neighborhood, the church is contributing to the very social segregation it seeks to heal, so the work of integrating society and integrating the church really go hand in hand. One supports (or corrodes) the other.

The final reason Northside needs to act and reflect theologically within an integrated (or at least integrating) ecclesial body is because it is in the communion with

¹⁹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 155.

²⁰ Ibid., quoting Peter M. Blau and Joseph E. Schwartz, *Crosscutting Social Circles: Testing Macrostructural Theory of Intergroup Relations* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 12-13.

²¹ Ibid.

all those who gather around Jesus that we find our desires finally directed in concert with God's mission to reclaim and heal a divided world, "trapped in the chaos of [disordered] desire."²² As Willie Jennings writes, when Jesus came, he drew all manner of people to him to listen to his teachings. They came for many different reasons, bringing with them many different desires and aspirations, and "in the seeking, in the straining to hear and see him, they were forced to stand together. Those who under normal circumstances would never be together must be together to find Jesus of Nazareth, to hear him and gain from him their desires. Jesus, in forming a new Israel in the midst of Israel positioned himself as the new source of desire."²³

In order to act and reflect theologically within an integrating church, Northside members will need to "explore the narratives of their own ethnic heritages and those of the surrounding culture in order to understand their own identity and their own role in the world."²⁴ This is the practical beginning point for any congregation that wishes to explore intercultural life within its membership. In Northside's case those stories are complex and painful, and it faces an especially challenging reality because its neighborhoods are composed of what Michael Emerson calls two "indigenous U.S. cultures," white and black, that "believe they have, at the very least an equal right to practice their culture; have little interest in giving it up; have oppositional cultures, so that adopting one may be seen as denying the other; have cultures that have been institutionalized; [and] . . . have

²² Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 265.

²³ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁴ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, 93.

centuries of racial wounds.”²⁵ Still, as daunting as the challenges are, until Northside can begin to recognize and address these challenges, it cannot live into the fullness of its missional calling in Clinton.

One practical gift Northside already possesses to help in its process of exploring integrated life is a member who has recently completed a series of papers focused on a major historical event in Clinton that influenced the shape of ecclesial life there.²⁶ A race riot in 1875 at the close of the period known as Reconstruction, resulted in the death of fifty black citizens and led to the founding a prominent partner black church in the community.²⁷ Now, the land surrounding that same church has been purchased by a developer and cleared to make way for a new suburban development named “Windsor Plantation.”

One small concrete step toward learning the narratives of ethnic heritage in their own community would be to listen to their own history as told by one of their own members. A further step would be to listen to this story alongside neighbors in the black church, and to note the different ways the story has been remembered or forgotten in Clinton. An even more exciting opportunity would be to work alongside that black church as it begins to name and address its own missional challenges in proximity to that new neighborhood development, being built in either ignorance or denial of historical

²⁵ Michael Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 138. Branson and Martinez cite Emerson to argue that race is not a biological reality but a “folk taxonomy” and to show how race “complicates research and conversation.” Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, Leadership*, 85-87.

²⁶ Melissa Janczewski Jones, “Fraught Memory and the Clinton Riot of 1875” (The Annual Brian Bertoti Innovative Perspectives in History Graduate Conference, Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, Virginia, Spring 2014).

²⁷ Northside already has a history of shared worship and service with this neighboring church.

pain and memory. Working alongside another church in the community as each church continues to articulate missional challenges, Northside would find an important beginning place to recognize the full, expansive scope of its missional calling.

APPENDIX A

CHALLENGES FOR NORTHSIDE

(Created by the deacons and given as a charge to three missional action teams.)

Identity

We need to define who we are. This would include who we have historically been, who we are now and who we need to become. It would also mean defining clearly what our mission is, what our values are (based on how we spend our time, energy and money) and what they need to be, and how we want to relate to each other and to our neighbors.

Training

We need to improve how we train our membership. This would include assimilating and nurturing new members and teaching them about our identity, our programs, our opportunities for service and the many ways in which they can be involved in the church fellowship. It would also include mechanisms for assisting members in finding their calling for ministry and assisting them in learning the skills needed to perform these ministries effectively.

Structure

We need to evaluate our current organizations and activities to determine if they are ideal for our mission. If they are not, we need to change them or tweak them so that they become effective. This would include Sunday school, committees, deacons, and all other components of the church.

APPENDIX B
INVITATION SENT TO CONGREGATION

Enjoying God and Neighbor
A Lenten/Eastertide Project at Northside Baptist Church

Who:

- People who want to risk experimenting with new ways of missional life in our neighborhoods.
- People who want to explore the joy at the heart of the gospel: we were made to enjoy God's presence and receive our neighbors as gifts.
- People who want to find their own being affirmed as we join in mission.
- People who want to get in new habits of prayer and missional action.

When:

- Epiphany-Pentecost (specifically February 12-June 22) 2014

What:

- 12-14 total meetings, primarily on Wednesdays (last two on Sundays)
- Weekly Communion (on the weeks we do not share it in worship).
- Daily Prayer (We will share a common form of Morning Prayer.)
- Missional Experimenting. We will create a missional experiment to get to know our friends in the After-School, Football, and Girl Scout ministries.
- Biblical study and reflection. We will read scripture together, and reflect on it as we engage with our neighbors.

Why:

- God is at work in the midst of significant cultural change.
- The Spirit of God is at work in Northside in three significant ministries.
- We need to find new ways of being on mission in our neighborhoods.

Format:

- Epiphany: Coming to Awareness and Understanding
- Lent:
 - Reflecting on our resistance to enjoying God and Neighbor
 - Evaluating our current missional practices
 - Planning the experiment.
- Eastertide: Enjoying our neighbors.
- Pentecost: New Commitments and Reflections on New Learning

APPENDIX C
PERSONAL LETTER INVITATION TO PROJECT

January 15, 2014

Dear _____,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a short-term Sunday evening group meeting from February 16 – June 15, 2014. The project is entitled Enjoying God and Enjoying our Neighbors.

The purpose of this group will be to expand the incarnational aspects of our missional life. In other words, we will be trying to enjoy our neighbors. Along the way I also hope we will increase our awareness and understanding of what God is doing through us in our missional life.

Most of our time will be spent in Lent and Eastertide. In Lent we will examine the obstacles within us and around us that keep us from enjoying the presence of our neighbors. In Eastertide we will be finding ways to enjoy the presence of those people we are trying to “reach” or “serve” through the various missions and ministries of Northside.

After Easter (in Pentecost) we will meet to evaluate what we learned in Easter.

Each meeting will last one hour and fifteen minutes (6:00-7:15 p.m.). In that time we will read Scripture, pray, share communion, and reflect on our missional life at Northside. Together we will also develop our own set of agreed upon spiritual disciplines, such as a common pattern of morning prayer.

Would you consider participating in this group? In a few days I will contact you again via email or phone to see if you have any further questions or insight. I appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

Stan

APPENDIX D
COMMUNION SERVICE

Enjoying God and Enjoying Neighbor
A Weekly Service of Communion

We Gather

God has made us a people:

We have been shaped by God's will.

Jesus calls us together:

We meet in Jesus' name.

The Spirit binds us together:

And leads us into truth.

Words of Invitation

Look, here is the Lord's Table spread as for a feast. Bread for breaking, wine poured for drinking: signs of God's love and hospitality, symbols of Christ's body broken, his blood poured out.

He is not dead! He is risen and present among us, evidence of God's covenant grace and promise.

So we come to this table in faith, you and I, companions on the journey. We come because we want to love God. We come because God loves us and wants to enjoy our presence. We come aware of our failings.

Silent or Spoken Confession

Come now, do not hesitate! The feast is ready, and the Lord invites you.

Prayer for our Church and Mission

Creating and redeeming God we give you thanks and praise. Your covenant was made for our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. We come this day with companion disciples to watch over each other, to walk together before you in ways known and still to be made known. Pour your Spirit upon us. Help us to walk in your ways that the life we live together may become an offering of love, our duty and delight truly glorifying to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This day, we give ourselves again to the Lord and to each other, to be bound together in friendship, and to work together in the unity of the Spirit for the sake of God's mission.

In our neighborhood, across all of Clinton and Jackson, in our congregation, among the churches of this city, across the wideness of your people worldwide, may all your purposes of love and communion be fulfilled.

As a sign of our bond with you, we share the peace.

We Remember

It was the night of the Passover, and Jesus and his friends were sharing supper together. While they were eating he told them that one of them would betray him. They were appalled and protested saying, “**Not I Lord; I would never betray you.**”

Jesus took some bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying, “Take and eat. This is my body.”

He took the cup of wine and after giving thanks passed it among them, saying as they drank, “This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. I will not drink again until the day comes when I drink with you in the kingdom.”

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining God we give you thanks and praise for your steadfast love and presence among your people. By your sinners know forgiveness, the weary are refreshed, the hungry are nourished, the captives are set free, and strangers are made friends.

Thank you for Jesus Christ, who revealed your love in his death and resurrection and continues to share his life with us through bread and wine.

Thank you for sending the Holy Spirit who sustains us in our walk together, helping us as we watch over each other and work together for justice and truth.

As we eat this bread and drink this cup, signs of your hospitality, may we be empowered to serve you and witness your presence in the streets, the towns, the neighborhoods, and the homes of our community and all over your beloved world. Accept these prayers and our heartfelt thanksgiving in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

We Share the Bread and the Cup

We Journey Together

Holy God, we have been nourished and had our thirst quenched. Send us out in your grace that we might show through word and deed that he is not dead but risen and present among us.

Hallelujah! Amen.

APPENDIX E EXPERIMENT PROPOSALS

We are trying to learn how to cultivate a desire for the presence of our neighbors, and what the Spirit of God is doing among our neighbors, in our neighborhoods. We are trying to help our church cultivate new missional practices.

I. On Their Turf

In order to discern the activities of the Spirit in the lives and neighborhoods of one Northside mission “recipient,” we will invite members of the football team to meet us at Sonic for a 30-60 minute conversation, once per week, for six weeks (beginning the week of April 28).

Participants: Ricky, James, Buddy, and other interested

Key Scriptures: Luke 10:1-11; (and when you’ve totally exhausted the Holy Spirit) Luke 10:25-37 and Luke 10:38-42

Procedure:

- Dutch Treat?
- Make no mention of scholarships or other incentives for growth.
- Offer no advice or instruction.
- Ask appreciative questions about life in Clinton from their perspective.
- Go two at a time.
- Continue Daily Prayer and Weekly Eucharist.
- Meet together weekly to continue scriptural prayer and discernment.
- Meet together weekly to ask what you are hearing and noticing in the lives of these young people and the neighborhoods they inhabit.

Questions to Consider

- When did you move to Clinton?
- What brought you to Clinton?
- What are your best memories of Clinton?
- What do you like about living here?
- What would you love to see happen in this community?
- Do you have a “neighborhood?”
- When and why did you move to your neighborhood?
- Is your neighborhood a good place for young people? Old People? Diverse People?
- Is Clinton a good place to grow up?
- Tell me about your family.
- Tell me about what makes you happy.
- Tell me about when you feel most alive.
- Tell me about your friends.
- Report back to the larger group at Pentecost

II. Y'all Come Back Now

In order to discern something of the movement of the Spirit in the lives of one group of Northside mission “recipients,” we will seek to “visit” with one family who participates in the After-School Program once per week for six weeks (beginning April 28).

Participants: Cliff Johnson, Amy Williamson, Mary Etta Carner, and others interested
Focus Scripture: Luke 4:16-29 (Jesus Inaugural Sermon at Nazareth)

Procedure:

- A visit is a venerable Southern tradition that still occurs around potluck dinners, in the Narthex after church, and at weddings and funerals. It once occurred on porches or in parlors. Your task is to ask for a visit in a home.
- You will be asking for hospitality, time, and attention. It is not a sales pitch or an interview. The purpose is to enjoy one another's company. Hope for Iced Tea.
- You may ask informal, appreciative questions about Clinton and the neighborhood.
- When did you move to Clinton?
- What brought you to Clinton?
- What are your best memories of Clinton?
- What do you like about living here?
- What would you love to see happen in this community?
- Do you have a “neighborhood?”
- When and why did you move to your neighborhood?
- Is your neighborhood a good place for young people? Old People? Diverse People?
- Is Clinton a good place for kids to grow up?
- Tell me about your family.
- If you had three wishes for your neighborhood, what would they be?
- Make no mention of the After-school Program, tuition, or its benefits.
- If you are refused a visit, thank them for considering, and consider picking an appointed time to walk for thirty minutes, together, around the neighborhood where you were seeking an invitation. Try another visit for the following week.
- Continue Daily Prayer and Weekly Eucharist.
- Meet together weekly to continue scriptural prayer and discernment.
- Meet together weekly to ask what you are hearing and noticing in the lives of these families and the neighborhoods they inhabit.
- Report back to the larger group at Pentecost.

III. Moving Into My Neighborhood

In order to discern our neighborhoods as the unique site of God's presence (and more than an object of our work or a tactic for getting people into church), we will meet together weekly to walk and pray in our various neighborhoods. We will seek interviews with residents (long or short-term), or merchants. We will ask appreciative questions about the neighborhood.

Participants: Heather, Ruth, Landa, and any interested

Primary Scripture: Luke 10:25-37 (Good Samaritan)

A Key Question: What does my neighborhood have to do with my Christian life?

Procedure:

- Ask appreciative questions:
 - When did you move here?
 - What brought you here?
 - What are your best memories here?
 - What do you like about the area?
 - What three wishes do you have for this area/neighborhood?

- On your own analyze the neighborhood:
 - What are the primary organizations or services in this neighborhood?
 - Who are the people groups?
 - How are differences dealt with here?
 - Who is invisible in this neighborhood?
 - How would you get connected here?
 - What people make this neighborhood work?
 - What does this neighborhood have to offer?
 - What great goods might people be neglecting?

- Continue to meet and share stories about your neighborhoods, what you are learning, and how you might learn more.
- Continue Daily Prayer and Weekly Eucharist.
- Meet together weekly to continue scriptural prayer and discernment.
- Consider "mapping your neighborhood." Draw a literal map, indicating houses, special features, places that attract and places that repel you, any shopping, parks or gathering places, churches, business, landmarks or other natural features.
- Report back to the group at Pentecost.

IV. Extend Hospitality to Strangers

In order to cultivate a desire for the presence of my neighbor, learn about the biblical practice of hospitality, help my church cultivate a new way of inhabiting our neighborhoods, we will each host one neighbor (preferably unknown or little known) at a meal (breakfast, lunch, or supper). We will serve delicious food, carefully prepared. We will be joined by one member of our hospitality team. We will participate in one study on the biblical practices of hospitality. We will report back what we learned.

Participants: Any Interested

Scriptures to Study: Luke 10:38-42 (Martha and Hospitality) also Luke 19 (Zacchaeus)

Procedure

- Consult the workbook “Practicing Hospitality.”
- Agree upon a time to meet for 75 minutes to study biblical/theological hospitality.
- Consider reading further in the practice.
- Continue to meet and share stories about your neighborhoods, what you are learning, and how you might learn more.
- Continue Daily Prayer and Weekly Eucharist.
- Meet together weekly to continue scriptural prayer and discernment.
- Report back to the group at Pentecost.

APPENDIX F
WRITTEN EVALUATIONS

If possible please appoint one hour so that you can reflect carefully on these questions. Feel free to not answer any question that you do not feel strongly about, and please feel free to elaborate on any answer that does capture your interest. (Return by June 22 if possible to the office of jstanwilson@comcast.net.)

1. What (if any) new desires have been awakened or what old, simmering desires have been stimulated as a result of this project?
2. What new awareness have you gained?
3. What new understandings have you gained? In other words, what do you think you are learning?
4. What new commitments have you made?
5. Have you begun to see your neighborhood in new ways, and if so, how?
6. Which of the following best characterizes Northside's tendencies: Working For, Working With, Being With, or Being For? (Elaborate as necessary.)
7. Of the following practices which have been important in our quest to enjoy God and neighbor? (Please elaborate as necessary.)

Daily Prayer
Weekly Eucharist
Inhabiting a Third Place
Lectio Divina and Listening
Your Particular Experiment

8. Of the above practices, which (if any) represents a vital practice that, if adopted, would enhance Northside's capacity to enjoy our neighbors?
9. What did you hope to learn through your experiment? What new habits did you hope to pick up? What did you learn?
10. Where do you see the Spirit of God at work in our community (outside our walls)?
11. What is one small thing we (as a group) can do in response to this project?
12. What is one challenge that Northside must face if we are to enjoy our neighbors?

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