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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

LEARNING FROM NEIGHBORS: REIMAGINING MISSION  
AND PASTORAL VOCATION

Written by

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

Doctor of Ministry

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



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Alan Roxburgh



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Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: February 27, 2016

LEARNING FROM NEIGHBORS: REIMAGINING MISSION  
AND PASTORAL VOCATION

DOCTORAL PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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

BY

LLOYD WICKER  
FEBRUARY 26, 2016



## ABSTRACT

### **Learning from Neighbors: Reimagining Mission and Pastoral Vocation**

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2016

Desiring to differentiate itself from the other two Christian Reformed congregations in Ripon, California, Almond Valley Christian Reformed Church's (hereafter, AVCRC) desire from its beginning in 1978 was to be a church with doors open to the entire Ripon community. With many Christian Reformed Church (hereafter, CRC) congregations experiencing diminishing denominational loyalty, there is a strong desire for church leaders to imagine new ways of being connected to their communities. With previous pastoral training focused on serving the congregation, pastors are now in a position of needing to learn the skills of how to meaningfully engage the community. One significant initiative in AVCRC was a three-month commitment by a small group who devoted themselves to learning from community leaders and reimagining mission and pastoral vocation from the perspective of their neighbors.

This doctoral project reports and reflects on that experience. It has four sections. Part One names my adaptive challenge and addresses the theological heritage of the CRC with special emphasis on what Dutch immigrants held most important in establishing themselves in North America. Part Two presents an experiment to facilitate reimagining mission and pastoral vocation by utilizing hospitality, listening, and reflection to understand our neighbors and gain new insights about the broader community as seen from key leaders within the community. Part Three consists of reflections on the new learning coming out of this work integrating theoretical and experiential insights in areas including theology, vocation, context, and leadership. Finally, Part Four presents recommendations for acting on how this project changed the understanding of mission and pastoral vocation. Specifically, it identifies the importance of trust throughout the congregational system, especially as it relates to the role of the pastor and his leadership in and outside the walls of the church.

Content Reader: Alan Roxburgh, DMin

Words: 290

To Heidi

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to recognize and give thanks to Almond Valley Christian Reformed Church. Inspired by your desire to learn how to be the church beyond the walls of a building, you have challenged my own conventional thinking about ministry and mission. Our learning together demanded much of your time, energy, and a willingness to be vulnerable—none of which are small gifts you have graciously given through this journey.

I would also like to thank a small group of leaders who are serving the greater community of Ripon in a variety of ways. Our local city leaders, emergency services agencies, chamber of commerce, school administrators, and a handful of business leaders in this community have all meaningfully contributed to a new understanding of what mission and pastoral vocation can look like. Your generous gift of your time has cultivated new learning for me but also for the churches in Ripon who also wish to love and bless our community.

Many others have demonstrated unwavering commitment to reimagining the mission of the church and so inspired new vision for our church and for each of our lives. Thank you to those who listened to my ideas, proofed my work, and many others who remembered to pray for me throughout this journey of learning.

A final thank you goes to my family. Anika, Andrew, and Kathryn, you bring joy to my life in ways you will never fully understand. As meaningful and important this journey of learning has been for me, I cannot wait to make up for some lost time that you have given so that I could keep learning and growing as a pastor, as a follower of Jesus, and as your dad who wants desperately for you to live deeply into the *missio Dei*. To that end, I keep praying that you will continue to embrace your part in that community and live into the imagination that you are God's missionary people called to live as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all creation in Jesus Christ. Finally, to Heidi, words cannot adequately express my gratitude to you. You keep living into our wedding vows seventeen years ago in continuing encouraging me to develop the gifts that God has given me. I could not have done this with you. I dedicate this to you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Scott Cormode asserts that the mandate for missional leaders is rooted in contradictions and tensions within ministry. “Our ministry is to equip the people of God to engage in the mission of God outside the church, but we are to do it by using the time that we have with those people when they are at church or are engaged in churchly activities.”<sup>1</sup> Talking about the “ecology of vocation,” he asserts that leadership formation within an organization is comparable to the way in which “an upstream ecosystem affects what happens downstream.”<sup>2</sup> This project explores one missional leader’s journey within those contradictions and tensions. The ecology of my formative years has almost exclusively been within churchly places. It has included growing up in two different CRC congregations, receiving an education in a Christian day school from kindergarten through high school, attending a Christian college, beginning my first job as a youth pastor in another CRC congregation, and attending the denomination’s exclusive seminary whereby pastors are educated and formed for ministry in the CRC. For the last decade, I have served two CRC congregations—the first as an associate pastor for four years in Washington and now the last seven years as the solo pastor in California. I have been living into the mental models of my upbringing and striving to satisfy the constituents with the religious goods and services they are accustomed to receiving from

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Cormode, “Cultivating Missional Leaders: Mental Models and the Ecology of Vocation,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Cormode continues to develop *ecology of vocation* maintaining that there is “interdependence [that] makes the learning environment into an ecology. Anything that affects one part of the ecosystem affects everything else in the system.” *Ibid.*, 111.

clergy. These institutions and principles frame my own basic Christian constructs of leadership and ecclesiology and permeate the tradition of the CRC from my earliest memories to the present.<sup>3</sup>

Entering into this course of study, I believed I was pursuing new tools to help move a congregation from an inward focus toward a more external focus.<sup>4</sup> What I soon discovered was that it was not just the church that needed to discern its missional identity—its new pastor was every bit as much in need of discovering the breadth of the *missio Dei*. I am a product of the colony—the Dutch CRC subculture with all of its strengths and all of its liabilities. As critical as I am of my denomination’s missional ineptitude, I have grown exponentially in realizing that my own formal and functional missiology were packaged in old paradigms. Leading in a culture of discontinuous change requires new capacities and new leadership frameworks that challenge my own missional leader capacities and reframe how I engage my calling as a pastor and leader.<sup>5</sup>

This project is a journey of reimagining mission and pastoral vocation from a new place, namely, from beyond the ecosystem that has shaped the majority of clergy serving the CRC. Like many other pastors and churches, the journey began out of a realization

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<sup>3</sup> Cormode introduces this language in presenting the concept of mental models that we carry in our heads and assimilate into our understanding of our surroundings regularly and without a lot of reflection. Cormode, “Cultivating Missional Leaders,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation*, 107-108.

<sup>4</sup> This language was percolating in the congregation well before they called me to be their fifth pastor in 2008. A specialized interim pastor served between the former pastor and my eventual coming as AVCRC’s new pastor. The church was collectively studying Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson’s, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> More will be said about leadership frameworks and missional leader in Chapter 6 and Chapter 8, but the Pastor 360 survey discussed in Roxburgh and Romanuk’s *The Missional Leader* was instrumental in giving language and understanding into my own leadership challenges. Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 3-14.

that change is required if the Church is going to have a future. Entering into the program, the new buzzword was missional, so the church's desire was to search for a way to join the latest fad and be missional, though no one knew what that looked like.<sup>6</sup> Early in the journey, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk gave me a helpful description of mission:

Mission is . . . not a program or project some people in the church do from time to time; the church's very nature is to be God's missionary people. We use the word *missional* to mark this big difference. Mission is not about a project or a budget, or a one-off event somewhere; it's not even about sending missionaries. A missional church is a community of God's people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God's missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of living together into this new mental model received support and cautious enthusiasm from the church board (hereafter, council). They loved the idea of participating in what God was doing in this local community and learning together about living into God's future at AVCRC. What soon became evident was a significant personal adaptive challenge; I had no idea how to lead within a colony that overvalues power and defaults to suspicion.<sup>8</sup> Focused so much on the challenge to help the congregation become missional, I discovered an even greater need, as a product of the CRC ecosystem, which required me to recognize my own addiction to power, control, and suspicion. With a small group of others, this project seeks to imagine a new paradigm

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<sup>6</sup> Like many churches fearful of the decrease in active membership within the congregation, the term *missional* was initially thought of as synonymous with *emerging*, *attractional*, and *externally focused*. Enthusiasm for *missional* eventually became the latest attempt to fill our empty pews with new people and contextualize Christianity for a postmodern generation.

<sup>7</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, xv.

<sup>8</sup> More will be said about this adaptive challenge in Chapter 2.

of pastoral leadership by entering into and dwelling in neighborhood(s) with practices of hospitality, listening, and reflection in order to nurture my missional vocation.

There are four sections. Chapters one and two name my adaptive challenge in context. It begins by addressing the theological heritage of the CRC with special focus on what Dutch immigrants held most important as they established themselves in North America. This lasting impact remains part of the values of the CRC in Ripon, California today. Out of this historical context, this part provides an overview of the journey toward a project that considers the adaptive challenge facing both church and pastor.

Chapters three and four present a blueprint aimed at reimagining mission and pastoral vocation by utilizing hospitality, listening, and reflection to understand our neighbors. After outlining theological implications and goals for the project, this section presents an experiment by which this new learning extends beyond the organized church into the context of the neighborhood. It identifies a timeline and resources that facilitate this learning with a small team comprised of those inside and outside the congregation. Assessment of this project comes out of the stories and experiences learned from neighbors.

Chapters five through eight consist of reflections on the new learning coming out of this work. Specifically, it integrates theoretical and experiential insights in areas including theology, vocation, context, and leadership. Finally, Part Four presents recommendations for acting on how this project changed the understanding of mission and pastoral vocation for both the congregation and pastor.

PART ONE

THE ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE IN CONTEXT

## CHAPTER 1

### THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Mark Lau Branson writes, “We are constructed by and live our lives in and through language; not language as we have come to understand it as a tool, as positivism or as propaganda, but more like a ‘house of language.’”<sup>1</sup> Reformed churches and other Protestant denominations share a common house of language expressed in a variety of dialects that have both strengthened and restricted them. One of these dialects is characterized by a distinct accent on power. It dates back to the start of the Reformed tradition with John Calvin who fled Paris for Strasbourg in 1536 hoping to find a more hospitable place for the advent of the Protestant Reformation. His journey brought him to Geneva where we met William Farel who insisted Calvin remain so that the Reformation would take root there. David Steinmetz writes, “Farel forced [Calvin] to stay in Geneva not so much by advice or urging as by command, which had the power of God’s hand laid violently upon [him] from heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Lau Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church,” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 95.

<sup>2</sup> David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10-11.

Yet for Calvin, helping the Reformation take root in Geneva was about more than leading the local congregation. Calvin was deeply involved in organizing the life of the city.<sup>3</sup> He was eager to partner with those in authority.<sup>4</sup> Within a year, he was working with city leaders on a “plan of discipline” to include matters related to sacraments, worship, education, marriage laws, and excommunication.<sup>5</sup> With increasing influence in the life of Geneva, Calvin was not hesitant to use the power he had acquired. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen writes:

One of the most distinctive and controversial aspects of the Reformed view of the church, especially in the Calvinistic form, is the integral relationship between the state and church. During Calvin’s early years in Geneva, church and state were parallel, giving mutual support and collaboration. The two powers shared a common goal. Later, however, Calvin drew a clearer line between the two: church and state became two aspects of a single reality, though they cannot be identified. According to Calvin, even earthly rulers should “advance the kingdom of Christ and maintain purity of doctrine.”<sup>6</sup>

Calvin was not entirely clear as to the proper function of church and state. “Advancing the kingdom of Christ” justified Calvin’s exercise of power in the development of Geneva.

Much of Calvin’s writing emphasized the laudable values of God’s power, majesty, and immortality. This is illustrated in his first catechism where Calvin writes about what we must know of God:

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<sup>3</sup> Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> This is evident in various letters from Calvin to the king of England and other prominent and powerful leaders. John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 51.

Now since the majesty of God in itself goes beyond the capacity of human understanding and cannot be comprehended by it, we must adore its loftiness rather than investigate it, so that we do not remain overwhelmed by so great a splendor . . . . We contemplate, therefore, in the universality of things, the immortality of our God . . . his power . . . his wisdom which has composed and rules with such a distinct order such a great and complex variety of beings and things; his goodness . . . his justice . . . in the protection of good people and in the retribution of the bad; his mercy which endures iniquities with such great kindness in order to call us to amendment.<sup>7</sup>

The descriptive words Calvin uses in speaking of God share a common theme highlighting the power of God, particularly his justice. He emphasizes God's power exercised in protecting and punishing as well as enduring the sinfulness of his people, rather than the love of God motivating the forgiveness of our sin. Furthermore, when Calvin expounds on the first article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth," he further proclaims attributes of power, providence, rules, and might:

With these words we are taught not only to believe that God exists, but rather to know what kind of God he is, and to trust that we of the number of those to whom he promises that he will be their God and whom he receives as his people. All power is attributed to him. It is meant thereby that he administers all things by his providence, rules them by his will and guides them by his virtue and might. When God is called creator of heaven and earth, it must be understood thereby that he perpetually upholds, maintains, and gives life to all that which he has once created.<sup>8</sup>

It would appear, according to John Leith that "popular estimates of the Reformed tradition have always identified it with the sovereignty of God and with predestination."<sup>9</sup> Leith continues, "This popular estimate has good basis in fact. While efforts to identify

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, ed. And trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 70.

Calvinism with a central doctrine from which others are deduced have all failed, a case can be made that the central theme of Calvinist theology, which holds it all together, is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the living God.”<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on the sovereignty of God contributes to the conviction of the Reformed tradition, namely, that Christian service spans any and every vocation and that God’s will be accomplished not only in, but through, the lives of humanity.

Calvin’s first catechism illustrates how this is lived commending not only those who hold powerful positions but also those who pursue them. In the final section titled, “The Magistrate or Civic Officer,” Calvin writes:

The Lord has not only testified that the status of magistrate or civic officer was approved by him and was pleasing to him but also he has moreover greatly recommended it to us, having honored its dignity with very honorable titles. For the Lord affirms that the fact that kings rule, that counselors order just things, and that the great of the earth are judges, is a work of his wisdom. And elsewhere, he calls them good, because they do his work.<sup>11</sup>

Having established God’s power as one of his most defining characteristics, Calvin communicates consistently that power is a worthy pursuit in doing God’s work. Furthermore, obedience is to be rendered insofar as it does not command us to do something against God whereby Calvin calls not for resistance but for non-cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin goes so far as to assert that even those who tyrannically abuse their power are to be obeyed until such rulers can rightfully be relieved of their authority. He writes, “For, just as a good prince is a testimony of the divine beneficence for maintaining the salvation of men, so a bad prince is a plague of God for chastising the sins of people. Yet, let this generally be held as certain that to both the power is given by God, and we cannot resist them without resisting the ordinance of God.” *Ibid.*, 74.

Calvin's influence extended to subsequent Reformers. Heinrich Bullinger, a highly influential Swiss Reformer and author of the Second Helvetic Confession introduces God as "one in essence or nature, subsiding by himself, all sufficient in himself, invisible, without a body, infinite, eternal, Creator of all things both visible and invisible, the chief good, living, quickening and preserving all things, almighty and supremely wise, gentle or merciful, just and true."<sup>13</sup> Like Calvin, Bullinger later concludes that God himself appoints those in authority.<sup>14</sup>

Guido de Bres, primary author of the Belgic Confession, introduces God as "eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty, completely wise, just and good, and the overflowing source of all good."<sup>15</sup> Article Thirteen continues, "We believe that this good God, after he created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will in such a way that nothing happens in this world without his orderly arrangement."<sup>16</sup> Article Thirty-six further addresses the role of civil government as ordained by God "so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order" with authority to "punish evil people" and "protect the good."<sup>17</sup> It concludes, "Moreover, everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government . . . and hold its

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<sup>13</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translation*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 835.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 907.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Reformed Church, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1987), 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

representatives in honor and respect, and obey them in all things that are not in conflict with God's Word."<sup>18</sup>

Since the Protestant Reformation, few theologians have gained greater acclaim in the Reformed tradition than Abraham Kuyper. Elected to Parliament in the Netherlands in 1880, Kuyper became Prime Minister in 1901 and founded the Free University of Amsterdam. He was an insightful commentator of his day, knowing his context well enough that "he could identify where it was misdirected and corrupted and needed to be redirected to Christ."<sup>19</sup> A skilled interpreter of scripture as well as his culture, Kuyper is credited with founding a university, a church, a political party, and a newspaper. He authored numerous books and articles and he is most known and loved within the CRC colony for writing, "[Calvinism's] dominating principle was not, soteriologically, justification by faith, but, in the widest sense cosmologically, *the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos*, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible."<sup>20</sup> Still more familiar is a phrase from Kuyper's inaugural address at the Free University in 1880, "No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"<sup>21</sup> Kuyper echoes the chorus of God's sovereignty over every part of creation which has become an important

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<sup>18</sup> Christian Reformed Church, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 117-118.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford, *Every Square Inch: An Introduction to Cultural Engagement for Christians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 52-53.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 79.

<sup>21</sup> James D. Bratt, ed. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 461.

part of the CRC ethos. This is deeply embedded in the biblical imagination of the denomination in which the movement of all creation is in the confession of God in Jesus Christ as Lord and King. It is both part of the theological backdrop and the shared experience of the CRC as Dutch immigrants left the Netherlands for a better life in America.

### **Coming to America: The Colony Relocates**

Because secession from the state church in the Netherlands was considered an act of treason that included political, economic, and religious ramifications, the opportunity to get a fresh start elsewhere was highly attractive. James Schaap, author and CRC historian, writes,

To some—especially the poor and disenfranchised—immigration promises miracles. It offers the promise of starting the whole business of life over again with the prospect of better fortunes—an idea most of us find appealing at some point in our lives. Immigration promises that almost all of life's stains—the stigma of a lesser social class, the curse of hopeless poverty or discrimination, even our old sins and sorry reputations—can be washed away in one radical relocation.<sup>22</sup>

Schaap continues, “To be an immigrant is to be a minority in a world that belongs to someone else. It is ironic that roots in the old world become more, not less, important for many who immigrate.”<sup>23</sup> The wave of immigrants fleeing to America came excited about the possibility of something new; yet at the same time, there remained a strong desire not to completely let go of who they were.

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<sup>22</sup> James C. Schaap, *Our Family Album: The Unfinished Story of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1998), 106.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

This was not the first wave of Dutch immigrants to America. Those coming in the mid-1800s were eager to connect to the Dutch who arrived before them but were part of another denomination, the Dutch Reformed Church. These new immigrants were not here long before they had increased suspicion about these more assimilated immigrants. Secession is what drove them to leave the Netherlands and secession continued to be part of their story in America. As they sought to be free from the persecution they were enduring in the Netherlands while trying very hard to establish a new life in America, they held one element of their life consistent—church. They set out to separate from the Dutch Reformed Church; secession was part of their identity.

Schaap writes, “The history of the Christian church, from its earliest day till the present, is saturated with division and strife.”<sup>24</sup> This secessionist tendency began already in the Protestant Reformation of 1517. Secession can be legitimate at times such as when “true believers are persecuted by autocratic religious powers” or when a church has all but abandoned the gospel.<sup>25</sup> Two options remain—stay and stand for what is true and right, or secede to preserve the church and the “true gospel.” Secessionist tendencies continued for those who left the Netherlands in 1834 on justifiable means. However, the Secession of 1857—the formation of the CRC out of the Dutch Reformed Church (today, the Reformed Church in America) is more difficult to justify on account that most of the reasons for secession emanated not on doctrinal differences but the difficulty to acclimate to the more Americanized Reformed Church in America. The story of the immigrants

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<sup>24</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

included fear of any alliance that might rob them of familiar religious practice and freedom; however, the ongoing battle for purity had become an even more powerful force than the need for unity. “Years of bickering, most all of it lugged along in old personality clashes and theological rifts from the Netherlands, ate away at unity and cohesion in the new colonies.”<sup>26</sup> Beneath the surface of secession were all-too-familiar memories of enduring persecution in the Netherlands thereby driving fear of any alliance that might diminish religious freedom hard-earned through immigration. They claimed “our legacy is battle scarred in the name of righteous truth”<sup>27</sup> and they saw this secession as a continued battle for the purity of the church.

Knowing the story of the CRC helps give understanding to who we are today. There is a strong independence in CRC communities such as Ripon where multiple CRC congregations coexist. A well-known quip in the Ripon community: where three Hollanders are gathered together there must be at least two churches. This is part of our history and contributes to our difficulty, not just in working together within the Reformed community, but our ability to engage those who are outside it. It is a poor reflection of a biblical portrayal of the Body of Christ.

Division happens today for far lesser causes. Schaap illustrates some of the contemporary issues CRC colonies, and arguably the entire church of Christ today, have faced,

[There are the] other churches down the block with better youth programs, more entertainment, a more exciting way of worshiping God, or more charismatic pastors. Keep adding to the column—put up the number who left so they could

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<sup>26</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 152.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

raise their hands in worship or do what they very well pleased on Sunday. That's not all—throw in the people who left not because of some bellyache about the church, but because they had a falling out within their own families. Add the adulterers who found coming back to the church they'd worshiped in far too difficult and simply immigrated to a new church world. Throw in the young couples who wanted more kids in church school, or the singles who wanted a fellowship with others like themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Beneath the surface is a deeper need—perhaps a longing to find a place more accommodating or more loving. Such a need is not just within a congregational context but penetrates deeply into other communities as well—a challenge for those inside the church and also into the neighborhood.

Existing as a community unto ourselves has never been the purpose of the church. Kuyper's vision of reforming every segment of creation presents an important part of the story of the CRC. "He wanted Christians to be alive and kicking in every area of life—from farrowing hogs to framing pictures, from running track to running for office. He wanted Christian servants in every profession, and he wanted them rebuilding a world he saw had turned its back on its Savior and King."<sup>29</sup> So emerged a Reformed worldview that encouraged Christians to see every vocation as holy. In order to disseminate this worldview, enthusiastic immigrants formed Christian schools living out Kuyper's "every square inch of creation" from English to science to mathematics to history belonging to the Lord. By building and maintaining these institutions, the church instilled this worldview in the lives of their children at a young age. Yet for some today, the Christian day school has become less about instilling a worldview and more of an alternative for

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<sup>28</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

the disenchantment with existing public schools.<sup>30</sup> The danger in such cases is a church community that pays lip service to being involved in all areas of life and culture, but in reality, they are suspicious of the world and value protection more than Reformation. While this narrative is not universal across the CRC, certain colonies where multiple CRC congregations coexist have struggled more than others—the community of Ripon being one example where this pattern is more pervasive.

### **Distinguishing Accents of the Colony**

Then and now, there are at least three different “parties” that have shaped the North American experience in many Reformed communities. Various CRC historians have used different language in delineating these three accents.<sup>31</sup> Like Schaap, this project favors the language from James Bratt in his book, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, namely, the Confessionalists, Positive Calvinists, and Antitheticals. Bratt writes, “The Confessionalist mind put critical emphasis in worship and piety upon correct doctrine, on orthodoxy, often on a commitment to the three forms of unity.”<sup>32</sup> Any deviations from tradition toward new and uncharted areas are suspect. Orthodoxy and doctrinal integrity are non-negotiable and of greatest importance. Confessionalists are “stubbornly firm in their views, often rigid in their appraisals of contemporary culture,

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<sup>30</sup> One would rightly question whether this is the primary purpose of Christian day school which is strongly encouraged in the CRC. Today, it seems to be more of a disenchantment with existing public schools. James K. A. Smith, “The Case for Christian Education,” *The Banner*, August 2010, 20-21.

<sup>31</sup> Chapter 5 of this project builds on these themes utilizing contemporary categories with implications for the present-day CRC to include the local context of Ripon, California.

<sup>32</sup> The three forms of unity include the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism. Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 199.

[and] have played a vital role in continuing to honor a theological definition or confessional identity.”<sup>33</sup>

A second party is the “Positive Calvinists” or “American Calvinists.”<sup>34</sup> They strongly desire to be part of society in every way possible. They desire to be “salt and light” in the world around them even if it requires doctrinal compromise. Schaap notes, “The Reformed Church in America has . . . been more accommodating to American culture itself than we have (witness the RCA’s longtime distrust of ‘Christian’ schools because of the manner in which they separate ‘Christian’ children from the mainstream).”<sup>35</sup> Today they are those who gravitate toward ecumenisms and minimize doctrinal differences with other denominations. They are “outgoing pietists who hoped to lift individuals to a higher moral plane and thereby lead society toward broadly defined virtues.”<sup>36</sup>

Bratt’s third mindset is the antitheticals—“a name borrowed directly from Kuyperian ideas . . . [who] felt strongly that Christians were compelled to counter the reigning ideologies of the day.”<sup>37</sup> Out of this was birthed the distinctively Christian alternatives to society at large including Christian schools, Christian newspapers, Christian political parties, and Christian labor unions.<sup>38</sup> Separate youth organizations

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<sup>33</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 200.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 46.

<sup>37</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 202.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

emerged out of this which are still part of the CRC today including the Calvinist Cadet Corp (a boys club much like the Boy Scouts of America), Calvinettes (a girls club much like the Girl Scouts of America now called GEMS, an acronym for Girls Everywhere Meeting the Savior), and the Young Calvinists Federation (an adolescent youth ministries organization now called Youth Unlimited). CRC historian Henry Zwaanstra once called the Antitheticals, “‘Separatist Calvinists’ because of their devotion to separating all society via its religious communities.”<sup>39</sup> Even the advent of CRC Chaplaincy ministries in the military was not for preaching the gospel to soldiers, “but rather to protect CRC service men away from home.”<sup>40</sup> These three CRC accents are as clear today as the Friesian brogue dripping off the tongues in many CRC pews.

### **The Christian Reformed Church in Ripon, California**

In 1916, the first immigrants settled in the rich farmlands of Ripon, where AVCRC is located. They soon wrote to friends and family in the Netherlands encouraging them to immigrate too. Within two years, these immigrants established for themselves a church where they could worship. Three sermons were delivered at First Christian Reformed Church each Sunday—two in Dutch and one in English. In 1924, they established the Society for Christian Instruction, which organized four years later as Ripon Christian School. Because of the miles some of these immigrants had to travel, they started the Modesto Christian Reformed Church in 1937, Immanuel Christian

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<sup>39</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

Reformed Church (Ripon) in 1946, and the Escalon Christian Reformed Church in 1949.<sup>41</sup>

Overcrowded conditions in the Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in 1978 prompted four families to explore the possibility of starting a third congregation in Ripon. Encouraged by the elders to survey the level of interest, the initial four families identified approximately forty families who pledged to support the start of what later became AVCRC. They began worshipping together in June 1978, gathering at “our local Christian school” as described in a brief history of AVCRC.<sup>42</sup> In March 1983, they walked down the streets of Ripon from their previously rented facility to their new dwelling place. The pastor leading them, Rev. Jack Van Dyken, said, “They are a persistent group when they once make up their minds to do something. It was raining (not just a drizzle) when the congregation walked into church.” Smiling, laughing, talking, and singing, they stepped to the front door of their new church building and paused as Pastor Van Dyken led them in prayer,

May we enter with humility, thankfulness, and joy. . . . May these doors always be open with the Word of God to the whole community. With humility, because we could and would not have erected this church if it [was] not for the grace of our merciful God. With thankfulness, because we know what the love of God has done for us and we desire the same love for our whole community. With joy, because we are redeemed from the sin that held us in bondage to fear, and we know the thrill of praising God in our sanctuary and in our work.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Informal and unpublished hand-written notes obtained from a member of the AVCRC historical committee.

<sup>42</sup> Members of the newly formed AVCRC published their first church newsletter once they moved into their new church building. This historical committee of AVCRC shared a copy of their first issue of the newsletter titled, *The Ambassador*. The March 1983 issue celebrated the events leading up to and including the first day that they worshipped at their present location.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

At the dedication worship service that followed, Van Dyken emphasized keeping the doors open to the “whole” community. He continued, “It is easy to call it *our church*, but let’s not forget that our prayer was that the doors remain open to all. It is *God’s church*, not *ours*.”

Unlike much of the CRC’s story, AVCRC’s start in Ripon comes not out of secession but growth. Rather than having multiple morning worship services, Immanuel CRC saw starting a new church as a preferable solution to the numerical growth within the congregation. Aware of the reputation of the Central Valley of Classis Central California as being both staunchly conservative and less than welcoming of outsiders, other clergy in the region had hopes that this new church would be the place that would attract those not yet part of a church. Indeed, this was a shared value among many who agreed to secede from Immanuel CRC and start a third CRC in Ripon.

Almost thirty-three years later, with a renewed desire to embrace the initial vision and mission of AVCRC, the congregation embarked on a journey of remembering and celebrating their past. Leading up to this project, during the summer months in 2011, sixteen members of the church collectively interviewed eighty-one of AVCRC’s 143 families in a process of appreciative inquiry<sup>44</sup> and heard undercurrents reminiscent of Pastor Van Dyken’s exhortation. The fondest memories of AVCRC included experiences serving beyond the church community. Church members celebrated the opportunities

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<sup>44</sup> Appreciative inquiry utilized in a congregational context is addressed by several authors including Mark Lau Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church,” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 95; and Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004).

to engage in mission into the community. Relationships with co-workers and neighbors were opportunities to share Christ. Even with the common language and shared convictions articulated by its first pastor before walking through the doors of the building in 1984, AVCRC must embrace the challenge of reaching beyond ethnic identity as well as theological heritage.

Charles Taylor uses the term *social imaginary* as that which enables (and limits) the collective imagination of a group to make sense of its practices thereby making it very difficult for a group to see itself beyond what it has previously done.<sup>45</sup> Like the immigrant separatists of their history, the CRC footprint in Ripon remains distrustful of the world around them and protects themselves by controlling their environment and the environment of their children. Having confused Reformed practice with Dutch ethnicity, there is fear that becoming more culturally relevant will cause them to abandon Reformed theological distinctives. Smith calls for a different paradigm.

We need to refuse the tendency to reduce Reformed identity to mere Dutch heritage. We need to resist accounts that confuse theological distinctives with ethnic habits... On the one hand, we can't let merely ethnic preferences masquerade as theological distinctives; that is, we can't allow Dutch *traditionalism* to parade under a "Reformed" banner. But I don't think this is our biggest problem today. . . . While we cannot allow mere Dutchness to mask itself as "Reformed," neither can we jettison the riches of a Reformed theological heritage under the pretense that it is merely an ethnic inheritance. We can't confuse Reformed babies with Dutch bathwater.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> While Taylor uses this term referring to a much larger context, I am using it to refer to the shared imagination of a much smaller group. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 1-2, 63, 185.

<sup>46</sup> James K. A. Smith, "A Peculiar People," *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* (November 2011): accessed September 17, 2015.

Smith calls for the CRC to be peculiar for the right reasons. Many of the practices immigrants carried to North America were not just for the purpose of clinging to an ethnic identity; they were ways to be rooted in Reformed theological practices as expressions of holiness. The enabling and limiting dynamics of Taylor's social imaginary are significant in AVCRC's desire to be peculiar for the right reasons. Primarily composed of members from other CRC congregations, AVCRC first set out to be different—to be a church with doors open to the community. Interviews with many congregation members today express the same desire. Yet being peculiar for the right reasons is not easy. There are unique strengths and gifts of Reformed heritage that AVCRC has to offer to the community that must not be confused with ethnic inheritance. They must not limit their involvement with only those who look and talk like they do.

The varieties of Christian Reformed accents reflect some of the challenges of the more ethnocentric congregations and communities of the CRC. This is particularly evident where larger groups of Dutch immigrants settled in North America. In spite of the originating vision to be a church with doors open to the community, the missional conversation is threatening to some leaders within the congregation. It evokes fear and suspicion as the broader community continues to grow and looks less like it used to when they first settled here. Part of the adaptive challenge AVCRC faces is her commitment to be that church for the community even as the community grows more diverse ethnically, religiously, politically, and culturally. In reflecting on this theological and sociological background of the CRC, it is clear that here, too, are cultural and contextual clues in addressing the adaptive challenge and missional commitment that AVCRC and its pastor must address. It is to that this doctoral project now turns.

## CHAPTER 2

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

During 18-months of pastoral vacancy, under the leadership of a specialized transitional pastor, the Elders were engaged in a congregation-wide conversation of learning how to be a more externally focused church. Shortly after accepting a call to AVCRC, the Elders of AVCRC agreed that a structured program would be useful in cultivating a deeper understanding of missional theology and praxis and help accomplish the shared vision of becoming a missional church. At the time, the church's understanding of missional was to imagine a church that would attract people to attend, and the hope was a program would help the pastor and congregation learn new ways that would both attract and retain people. Aware that "we have entered a world for which the churches of North America are woefully unprepared,"<sup>1</sup> the Elders had been seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 11.

solve our problems with imported ideas that were successful in other churches.<sup>2</sup> Great energy, effort, and financial resources were invested into programs that would inspire congregational members to invite friends to join a small group and participate in other church-centric events as part of a short-term church-wide campaign with hope that this would attract new members to join the church. Early in our reading and conversations as leaders emerged our inadequate understanding of missional when it was discovered that “a missional imagination is not about the church; it’s not about how to make the church better, how to get more people to come to church, or how to turn a dying church around.”<sup>3</sup> The default question asked among the Elders was how to gain insight into what missional looks like by seeing what other congregations have done and how such efforts have produced numerical growth in the congregation. A number of adaptive challenges became increasingly evident—though both took time to effectively name and embrace. The journey toward missional would have to start with a great deal of patience, listening beneath these defaults and discovering new ways to hear what the Spirit was up to in our congregation and community.

## **Two Ministry Challenges**

In making the case for a Spirit-led, mission community that participates fully in God’s mission where it is planted, Craig Van Gelder says, “the church must change and

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<sup>2</sup> Over the past decade, AVCRC has participated in a variety of church-wide campaigns with hope that each would energize the congregation and attract new people. Such programs include *40 Days of Purpose*, *40 Days of Community*, a church-wide study of *The Externally Focused Church*, and other similar programs mass marketed to church leaders. While delivering the initial enthusiasm while studying and walking together as a congregation for a prescribed period, the lasting impact has not been sustainable.

<sup>3</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What it Is, Why it Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 20.

adapt cultural patterns in order to be relevant.”<sup>4</sup> Knowing the need to change and adapt, AVCRC established an adaptive challenge team (hereafter, ACT) to engage the congregation in discerning and naming the primary adaptive challenge that we were facing as a congregation. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky help give both language and direction that shaped the work of the ACT:

Leadership would be a safe undertaking if your organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions. Every day, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures. We call these technical problems. But there is a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.<sup>5</sup>

The ACT met from October 2012 through January 2013 utilizing data from work done in the congregation including a Church 360 and a church-wide appreciative inquiry process. The theme they continually returned to was that "AVCRC must rediscover how to connect with each other and experience community across generations (attentive to diverse backgrounds, lifestyles and life-stages) so that every person feels needed,

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<sup>4</sup> The challenge of the church today is “one of living into all that the Triune God intends the church to be in light of its creation by the Spirit. The church created by the Spirit is missionary by nature—it is called, gathered, and sent into the world to participate fully in God’s mission. It is crucial for a congregation to understand its missionary nature if it is to live into all that God intends.” Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 182.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive throughout the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.

appreciated and loved in order that we might be a magnet to the community.”<sup>6</sup> They never moved beyond the technical challenge that if they could strengthen the health of community inside the church, others would want to become part of the congregation. They believed that hospitality would facilitate growth within the congregation and draw in the community, yet most of the reflecting coming out of these meetings resulted in technical solutions intended to mitigate fears of losing members and not attracting new people. Struggling to adequately identify the church’s adaptive challenge, the subsequent work of the Action Learning Team (hereafter, ALT) was very reactive and attractional in purpose.<sup>7</sup> The journey has nevertheless been valuable in identifying that the leadership and congregation are not yet ready to embark on this missional journey. Like many in our ethnocentric denomination, Schaap asks an overarching question that applies to this local context, “So where are we?”

For a half century at least, Inward-looking CRC folks (the Confessionalists), those who are most conservative doctrinally, have been going to war with the more progressive forces—those we’ve labeled Outward-looking believers (the Kuyperians). Since the Protestant Reformed split, those two forces have been battling. . . . Even though I certainly believe that there is a city of God and a city of man, I believe the antithesis strikes most traumatically over the human heart. It

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the ACT instinctively defaulted to “first fix us, then others will want to be part of us.” Roxburgh writes, “As the cultural and social context goes through massive change, the skills and habits of a leader. . . are insufficient to navigate in the new environment. The result is an experience of diffuse confusion, conflict, and anxiety in the face of unrelenting episodes of crisis without end.” He continues, “In the reactive zone, leaders work harder, for longer hours, and with fewer resources at what they have been doing all along. They find the must address ever more crisis with little time to imagine alternatives. . . . As the financial base of the system erodes, with resultant cutbacks in personnel and budgets, more pressure is placed on fewer people. Productivity declines, creativity disappears, and stress grows. As the congregation. . . moves deeper into crisis, leaders face demands to put out fires, manage dysfunction, and furnish solutions. These demands leave them with neither time nor energy to do the job for which they were hired. Feeling they have no answers, the leaders struggle or leave a situation they never signed on for. This is the reactive zone.” Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 48-49.

<sup>7</sup> A field guide titled *Action Learning Teams* was provided by The Missional Network to facilitate guiding a team through biblical and theological frameworks and action learning basics.

is important to remember that such differences create sometimes unscalable walls.<sup>8</sup>

Ripon remains a Confessionalist stronghold in the CRC. While they are not opposed to welcoming the neighbors who walk through the doors of their church, the primary focus remains on caring for those within the colony. Being a pastor with a moderate Kuyperian focus<sup>9</sup> serving a church with a Confessionalist accent has given language to the struggle of missional leadership in this context. The struggle is not only helping a congregation embark on a missional journey but also effectively leading that congregation and its leaders toward new ways of imagining ministry within the communities where they live and work. Consequently, the focus of this project shifted from a congregational journey to a missional leader's journey.

While the missional church was the impetus for pursuing this program of study, pressing into the missional leader has included crucial learning about mission, identity, and pastoral vocation. Working with leaders in the congregation and struggling to name a congregational adaptive challenge, I gained awareness of one of my own adaptive leadership liabilities. As I struggled to lead in this context, I realized that I am a product of this institution that “overvalues power and defaults to suspicion.” Consequently, I possess my own leadership liabilities learned within this context of the CRC. I must step

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<sup>8</sup> Schaap, *Our Family Album*, 396.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Mouw reflects a more moderate “Kuyperian Calvinist” which reflects more of my own understanding of Kuyper’s theology, “Kuyper could come across as quite triumphalist. When he talked about Christ ruling over every square inch of the creation, it is easy to imagine him thinking that he and his followers could quite legitimately go out and conquer many of those square inches in the name of Christ. I do not entertain thoughts of that sort. In fact, I don’t think it was healthy for Calvinists *ever* to have entertained those thoughts.” *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 81.

out of these leadership defaults and address my own leadership challenges both within and without the CRC.

### **Stumbling Across a Project**

Clemens Sedmak calls for reappropriating our tradition utilizing questions like, “What is the key message of our tradition?” and “How do we understand this message today?”<sup>10</sup> He continues, “Jesus respected his local tradition but also challenged the context of his time. He was rooted in his village but did not consider his village the ultimate norm.”<sup>11</sup> This missional journey has taught me much about the mission of the church but even more about the vocation of the pastor. “As theologians we are members of a community and accountable to this community. That is why we make an effort to appropriate the theological tradition of our community. It gives guidelines and norms on how to do theology.”<sup>12</sup> While the focus of this project is my own learning as a missional leader, this is lived within a specific context.

A significant challenge facing churches and their pastors is the reality that while the communities around them have been changing for more than two decades, the churches have become more isolated from their community, suspicious of those outside their walls, and determined to maintain control of those inside their walls. The structures we have built to serve church-people have intensified this isolation from the broader community. As denominational loyalty fades, a significant crisis emerges that will be

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<sup>10</sup> Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

either danger or opportunity for the church. Since the Reformation, churches have become more “a place where things happen” and less a body of people sent on a mission as God’s missionary people.<sup>13</sup> While its people seek more safety, the church’s pastor seeks more context. Robert Schreiter captures the role of theologian, “The theologian cannot create a theology in isolation from the community’s experience; but the community has need of the theologian’s knowledge to ground its own experience within the Christian traditions of faith. In so doing, the theologian helps to create the bonds of mutual accountability between local and world church.”<sup>14</sup> If the church needs both prophets and poets in theology, how can outsiders shape local theology? “Without the presence of outside experience, a local church runs the risk of turning in on itself, becoming self-satisfied with its own achievements.”<sup>15</sup> AVCRC needs both insiders and outsiders in order to navigate through this crisis of danger and opportunity. Schreiter writes, “Without sensitivity to the cultural context, a church and its theology either become a vehicle for outside domination or lapses into docetism, as though its Lord never became flesh. It takes the dynamic interaction of all three of these roots—gospel, church,

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to the Chinese character for signifying the idea of “crisis,” Hunsberger writes, “Crisis is made up of both, and so too is the current situation of the church. Dangers lurk on all sides for churches, but probably the greatest dangers lie within. Long-established routines and long-held notions have a strong hold on any community, and a church is no exception. These routines and notions constitute a way of seeing what the church is and what it is for and in turn inform how a church operates from day to day. Such assumed patterns are brought into question, however, when the church recognizes that it has been demoted from its prior social importance and may have accommodated away something of its soul.” George R. Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 78-81.

<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

culture—with all they entail about identity and change, to have the makings of local theology.”<sup>16</sup>

The project emerging out of this learning has required shifting from working with the ACT and ALT to a smaller, organic group of people who have connections into the broader community and a desire to deepen and expand those relationships. To be able to discern what God might be up to in the community, his people must be engaged in the community. As a product of the colony, I have set out with a few others to reimagine mission and pastoral vocation from another angle, namely, the neighborhood. This small group of leaders was formed out of those who had been part of the ACT and ALT, and were committed to more meaningful engagement in the community. They were individuals who were presently serving in a leadership capacity within the congregation—two of whom recently completed a three-year term serving as Elder. They had been part of AVCRC from its earliest years. Together we sought to discover how the Spirit was already present and working in the community beyond the boundaries of the colony. While not a formal church-wide project, the hopeful outcome of this experience is cultivation of new relationships and opportunities to see with fresh eyes what the Spirit is already doing and how we can participate in that work.

Living into Luke 10:1-12 has been a significant part of this missional journey. It has given new shape to my own development as a leader and is forming the foundation of what a small group of leaders has committed to engage in as we enter into the neighborhood together. The objective is not to ask more “church questions” for the sole

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<sup>16</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 21.

purpose of mining for data from the community in hope of making the church more successful. Avoiding ecclesiocentric preoccupation, this group set out for deep incarnational engagement within the neighborhood expecting God to speak to us through them. The challenge is significant. Roxburgh writes, “Church questions are at the forefront of our thinking, so we default to questions about what the church should be doing and what the church should look like. This is a huge impediment to the development of a missionary people of God. This is not something that can be “fixed” with programs or discussions on church health or by appending the world *missional* to old habits.”<sup>17</sup> Knowing our DNA, we are aware that we must resist defaulting to suspicion and attempting to control our environment. We set out with new language committed to dropping our baggage as we enter into the neighborhood. The project included walking with others, engaging in local contexts, and committing to learn from *the other*.<sup>18</sup> Out of these specific experiences, we met in order to be “poets of the ordinary,”<sup>19</sup> reflecting on what we were hearing beneath the stories and experiences we encountered. Out of these conversations, the project revealed what we were learning as a group and the implications for ministry in an ethnocentric congregation planted in a changing community. It also revealed implications for an alternative kind of leadership

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<sup>17</sup> Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 54.

<sup>18</sup> Parker Palmer writes, “The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing *is* an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing, we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community’s bonds. Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 8.

<sup>19</sup> Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, 173.

that will continue to give shape to my own understanding of mission and pastoral vocation.

The group identified three segments of the community to enter including school, business, and government. As some organic connections already exist, the small group developed appreciative inquiry questions that facilitated listening and learning from the community about ministry, leadership, and missional vocation. Part Two will detail the plan and implementation of this project.

PART TWO  
THE PROJECT

## CHAPTER 3

### PLAN

This project is about learning to listen differently. It is an invitation beyond traditional roles and expectations and into a space of being able to hear in another what God is doing in the community. Scott Boren writes, “In order to gain a different perspective on the way we actually experience community, it is often helpful to imagine you are listening to how we live life today with the ears of someone outside our modern culture.”<sup>1</sup> Listening differently as a pastor begins with seeking to understand how regular people live in the neighborhood. Related to this challenge is to address my own leadership assets and liabilities as they relate to my adaptive challenge of learning to lead differently. Am I becoming more hospitable? Am I learning to be more trusting? Am I learning to be more vulnerable?

Few pastoral leaders would deny that their passion is to connect with God’s heart for the community. Yet it is often easier to articulate this passion than to live it. Creating intimacy in our communities today is hard. Speaking about the mysteries of intimacy

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<sup>1</sup> M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community that Makes a Difference in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 28.

characteristic of a commuter society lacking rootedness, Paul Wadell observes, “We work outside our neighborhoods, shop outside our neighborhoods, play outside our neighborhoods. Our neighbors are strangers who happen to live next door.”<sup>2</sup> Seeing the consequences of such haughty individualism in our culture and the self-centeredness it breeds leads the church to a variety of response. Some pastoral leaders approach ministry in the neighborhood with programs and services intended to attract people to buildings. However, such an approach is motivated solely on building their average church attendance and budget. This programmatic approach assumes that the church people know what the community needs but comes from minimal awareness of the real needs of the community. The programs are church-centered, short-term events.

Other pastoral leaders approach the community with ministries they bring *to* the community. This approach differs from the first example only in the location where said programs and services take place. Again, it takes in little consideration of the actual needs of a community. Many successful commercial programs are marketed heavily to pastors who wish to import and impose a program on a community. Neither of these two approaches captures mission and pastoral vocation that is needed in the church today.

To listen differently implies an approach to ministry that involves entering into communities, asking important questions, watching for visual cues, and listening deeply to what God is up to in the neighborhood. Roxburgh captures the reason this approach is so needed today:

Today’s church is in crisis. Its renewal requires far more than liturgical change or doctrinal correction. Focusing on new structures... is not an adequate response.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 43.

The tectonic plates of Western culture are shifting. As modernity's questioned and parts rejected, the church is also questioned and marginalized... Despite all our protestations the church in North America remains focused on itself. Until this is changed, evangelization will continue to look like forays into the world in order to recruit members for our clubs.<sup>3</sup>

To discover what God is up to in the neighborhood, churches and leaders must recognize that God is already at work in those places. The task for church leaders is to learn to recognize what God is up to, which requires a different approach that cannot be imported from mass marketed programs or books about what other churches are doing. Ministry with the community begins by entering into the local—those places where God is already working—and participating with what the Spirit is up to in those places.

Years before I became the fifth senior pastor at AVCRC, the congregation utilized a variety of consultants and assessment tools which revealed significant internal concerns related to declining membership and diminishing denominational loyalty. Younger members were choosing to be part of larger churches in the area that offered more programs and a variety of styles of worship. The pressing question before congregational leaders was “How do we fix our church and make it alive again?” Initially, being an “externally focused church”<sup>4</sup> was shared language that was widely accepted by the congregation as a solution to their problem. Soon after accepting their call, the Elders of AVCRC were quick to support any proposal that would help them put traction on their desire to grow in number. Words like externally focused and missional were initially thought to be synonymous. But a new question was being asked that was much more

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<sup>3</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Moving Back into the Neighborhood* (West Vancouver, BC: Roxburgh Missional Network, 2010), vii.

<sup>4</sup> The church was collectively studying Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson's, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004).

difficult to answer with a program, namely, “How do we discern what God is doing in our church and in our community?” and “How do we join God in that place?”

One year into this cohort, church-wide conversations informed by a Church 360 and appreciative inquiry interviews offered an initial portrait of the congregation and launched them into new kinds of questions regarding their origins, as a third CRC in Ripon. A smaller ACT and ALT composed of council members and a variety of key lay leaders within the congregation deepened the dialogue, offering additional detail to our church portrait and the challenges before the congregation. But the group that would continue this missional journey into the neighborhood would be even smaller. The substance of this doctoral project captures a segment of the missional journey that begins with the creation of that small group and their process of listening, discerning, testing, reflecting, and sharing back the lessons learned and a way forward. Not unrelated to the work of this group is still another challenge of what pastoral leadership looks like in leading an ethnocentric immigrant congregation through reorientation in a changing community.

### **Listening for and Discerning where God is at Work**

The small group engaged in this missional action-learning process was formed out of the ACT and ALT—three key leaders who were enthusiastically willing and able to continue our work together into a missional experiment that would include listening together to one another and our community. With valuable insights gleaned in previous work within the congregation, our objective was to experience growth together through

relationships that drew us out of ourselves, gave us life, and taught us how to live and lead together as a small group of people within the congregation.<sup>5</sup>

Though a much neglected discipline in the Christian Church, hospitality was our first task as a small group—both to study and practice together. Christine Pohl writes, “We become proficient in a skill by performing it regularly, and by learning from persons who are masters of it. Hospitality is a skill and a gift, but it is also a practice which flourishes as multiple skills are developed, as particular commitments and values are nurtured, and as certain settings are cultivated.”<sup>6</sup> To begin to experience this as a small group, we utilized parts of Pohl’s book and study guide, *Making Room: Rediscovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. This process helped to root us in Scripture, provided opportunity for us to talk about where we saw and experienced hospitality practiced each day, and challenged us to learn new ways to be attentive to those around us. It served as a helpful way to begin to practice hospitality as a small group, anticipating the opportunities we would have to reach beyond the comfort and security of relationships with those closest to us. Recognizing hospitality as both skill and gift, we were given the opportunity to learn, nurture, and practice together both as givers and receivers of this gift. This served as an essential starting point for our group as we considered next steps toward reimagining ministry, leadership, and missional vocation.

One of the practices we cultivated as a group is the art of listening. We had spent time listening to fellow congregational members leading up to this point. Sharing stories

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<sup>5</sup> Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 9.

about the life of AVCRC were highlights along the journey. Our study of hospitality brought even greater depth to our storytelling and story-listening. The practice of listening to one another extended into our listening to scripture together. Luke 10 continued to serve as a primary text centering our conversations by listening to God's activity in this text.<sup>7</sup> Whereas much of church has been about listening to the pastor explain scripture from the pulpit, this practice of dwelling with the text without commentary or study notes served an important part of our learning how to travel lightly and listen to what God was saying to us. Reading the text several times aloud followed by quietly reflecting on places where our thoughts would stop, we shared together how these words were speaking into the present. This further served in helping us learn to listen to one another, seeing and naming where God was already going before us and discerning both how we engage our neighborhood as well as learning how the church relates to the neighborhood. How do we respond to those within our church family asking for help? How do we respond to the needs of the community residents asking for help? What partnerships are currently established with other community organizations? What is the primary motivation of churches in our community when considering new ministries? Though not far removed from the ministry of the institutional church, these questions are more about current practices and collaboration within the community.

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<sup>7</sup> Additional texts we utilized in our small group meetings included John 2:1-11, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 19:1-10, and Jeremiah 29:1-14. One person would read the text aloud to the group followed by a period of silence. Another person would read the text a second time followed by another few minutes of silence. We then shared together about where our mind would stop as the text was read, what insights we gained, and what additional questions we had about the text. Additional familiar stories we reflected on included the story of Exodus, Moses' burning bush encounter, and several of the disruptive encounters with the Spirit of God found in Acts. This time of reflecting on scripture and sharing about new insights challenged us to do something we do not do very often, namely, to listen to one another as we encounter God in scripture. It inspired new stories of the places where we could see God at work in our everyday lives by simply sitting before and living with scripture apart from a sermon or study aid.

Out of these questions came awareness that we have challenges not just on an organizational level, but also on a leadership level. Our congregational reach into the community is primarily to those closest to us—those with whom we share theological affinity and parachurch partnerships that are directly associated with the congregation. Ways in which we offer help to others results in only short-term solutions focused more on moving people down the road. This relieves our feelings of guilt as church members who then return to a largely affluent life. Overall, we are not well equipped to begin to meet the needs of people outside the local congregation in meaningful ways. While the need for missional engagement is recognized, our institutional success leaves much to be desired.

Moving from an institutional-focused conversation, the group began inquiry into their own community engagement. Beginning with the conviction that everything in this world belongs to God, we proceeded to reflect on resources within the community. Walking through the neighborhood unearthed new awareness of the very people and places we are accustomed to driving by without a thought. Utilizing tools of asset-based community development, we created a map of our community including individuals, formal and informal grouping of people, institutions, businesses, government, and organizations. We supplemented our map with areas where we could identify unique gifts of knowledge, skills, abilities, and facilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A helpful resource to facilitate this process of mapping can be found in John R. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Our purpose was not to create an extensive asset map of the community but rather to stir our own imagination helping us see our community with new eyes.

Another important part of our work together was exploring more deeply the neighborhoods in which we work and live. This step in our small group's work together would facilitate conversation and new imagination about the community we call home. Recognizing our own tendency to gravitate only into certain areas of the neighborhood, this gave us perspective beyond the familiar. Being a small community, we chose not to limit our tour exclusively to our immediate neighborhood but to visit places we most often spend time albeit home, workplace, or other places within the community we regularly visit. The objective was to spend some focused time and make observations around nine questions.<sup>9</sup> First, standing in a familiar place, look around in all directions. What do you hear? What do you smell? What activity do you notice? Second, what do you notice about the buildings and structures in the area? Are they inviting? Well used? Well cared for? Third, what public spaces are provided for children, teenagers or adults? Are they used? Fourth, do you pass any churches or religious buildings? What does their design or appearance communicate? Fifth, are there any places for people to sit, relax, or relate? Sixth, are there places in the neighborhood you would not want to go? Why? Seventh, are there places of life, hope, beauty or community in this neighborhood? Eighth, what evidence of struggle, despair, neglect and alienation do you see? Ninth, in what ways do you sense God's presence there? This exercise facilitated seeing with new eyes the things that are most frequently taken for granted. Observations made would be part of the small group's conversations and serve to help direct us to a project that would facilitate learning about vocation, identity, and leadership.

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<sup>9</sup> These questions were adapted from Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Missions in the Neighborhood* (Brunswick: Acorn Press, 2007), 103-104.

As we shared observations about what we saw, we recognized some areas where our small group was already engaged in meaningful relationships apart from the organized endeavors of our respective congregations. Three primary sectors of the community were quickly identified as places where organic relationships already exist from which we would seek to learn about vocation, identity, and leadership. One group member had connections within the schools of Ripon including both public and private schools. Another group member was indirectly connected to the local business community through a network of relationships with those who are part of the local Chamber of Commerce. Another group member was connected to local government with a network of relationships including city government and emergency services. With these three primary areas of focus, the group committed to enter into these sectors where we had existing relationships. We brought questions to help us reimagine ministry, leadership, and missional vocation.

With each of three sectors of the community as our primary focus, the small group crafted five questions that could be used in each sector to yield information that would help the group initiate conversations. First, how would you describe the community of Ripon today? The intent of this first question is to gain insight into the interviewee's perspective on the broader community of Ripon. The assumption is that each interviewee will respond from their specific area of influence (school, business, government). It will help gain insights from the neighborhood about the identity of the community. Second, based on your experiences in Ripon, what is our community's greatest asset? Based on the interviewee's primary sphere of influence, this question seeks to understand what is perceived as Ripon's greatest gifts. While responses may

include other aspects of community, the study seeks answers specific to the unique position the interviewee has within the community. Third, what would make Ripon a better/stronger community? Based on your experiences in Ripon, what do you see as our community's greatest challenge? Seeking more of an appreciative inquire approach, this question begins to address the primary concern of the interviewee as it relates to their primary sphere of influence in the Ripon community. Fourth, describe the kind of leadership that works most effectively in Ripon. This question makes an intentional shift in discerning the interviewee's perspective on effective leadership in the community. In each of the three sectors of education, business, and government, there is a wealth of experience in leadership that is effective as well as leadership that is ineffective. While not specifically a church question, responses about leadership can offer insights into how missional engagement may best work in Ripon. Finally, if you had one wish for Ripon as a community, what would it be? This final question encourages the interviewee to imagine a preferable future. It is not about fixing problems or discussing what things need to be changed in the community.

With these questions, we initiated conversations within educational institutions, businesses, and local government. None of the questions dealt explicitly with pastoral vocation so that these conversations did not immediately gravitate to church issues. Knowing the majority of those in leadership roles in the broader community of Ripon are involved in their faith community and knowing that it will be difficult to interview people in this small community apart from their identifying each of us as part of our own faith community, we believed more general questions would produce qualitative data that will make us more aware of how significant our presence and participation was within the

community. Beneath these questions are additional questions our group must consider together, namely, “What might God be doing in the midst of all these things ongoing in the community?” and “Where might the Spirit be inviting us to join with God in the neighborhood?” In our listening, are there new insights we can glean into mission and pastoral vocation based on these conversations? These are important questions as we listen to one another’s stories, pray, and dwell together in scripture considering how and where the Spirit is prompting our participation with what God is up to in the everydayness of life.

### **Learning to Walk, Watch, and Listen**

Parker Palmer writes about the moment when a person reaches a critical decision to live “divided no more.”<sup>10</sup> It is the decision to no longer act on the outside in ways that contradict truths one holds deeply on the inside. He calls it the “Rosa Parks” decision recalling the story of a black woman sitting in the front of the bus refusing to conspire any longer with the racist system of her day. The battle facing the church today is different, but the universal element of her story is familiar for missional leaders discerning their place in the institutional church today. Parks reached a point where she had to embrace her true vocation and live out her full self in the world. She decided to no longer act on the outside in ways that contradicted a truth that was deeper inside.

Many of our missionary endeavors exist in the form of a congregation providing generous resources for work in faraway places that will not threaten the local context;

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<sup>10</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Baas, 2000), 33-34.

however, that misses the missionary calling of the local church within a local community. This project challenges the systemic focus of the colony and moves it toward cultivating missional vocation in the local community context. It is fueled by deeply held, internal truths that call for a new way of acting as missional leaders planted in a local community. Frederick Buechner defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”<sup>11</sup> He starts with self and moves to the needs of others, making the case that what brings fulfillment to vocation is more than meeting the needs of self but knowing that we are here “to be the gifts that God created.”<sup>12</sup>

Sedmak defines a good theologian as “a person who is close to people, who has a creative imagination and the gift of listening, who shows a commitment to hard work, who accepts the risk of making a mistake, who is a person of self-renewal: a person dedicated to overcoming routine and considering theology as an ongoing task and responsibility.”<sup>13</sup> The initial work leading up to this project has prepared a small group to engage their community relationships with questions that will help answer the question, “What can the neighborhood teach us about mission and pastoral vocation at AVCRC?” Our initial work together served a crucial purpose of teaching us how to listen and reflect in anticipation of doing the same thing with our neighbors and then circling back to the congregation and deciding together what new experiments will come out of this experience.

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 119.

<sup>12</sup> Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 2.

The first goal of this project echoes one of Sedmak's thesis statements, "Theology is always done from a certain perspective within a particular context."<sup>14</sup> The history and tradition of the CRC has been to bring theology into various communities through immigration. Ripon is a community that existed before Dutch Christian Reformed immigrants settled, so theology must apply outside CRC circles if we are to participate within Sedmak's "particular context." Furthermore, the broader community continues to grow and change. In order to articulate a contextual theology of mission and pastoral vocation, one must explore the landscape beyond the Christian Reformed colony. Penetrating the boundaries of the CRC community will give new insights into a community that is established and active throughout the city. The group sought to enter into those conversations and learn from those who are outside of the Christian Reformed colony with the working presupposition that there is a plethora of examples of missional innovation taking place in the broader community from which some of the Reformed colony in Ripon has isolated itself.

The second goal of this project involves experiencing hospitality together and with those whom we will engage in conversation. The small group has made hospitality a foundational aspect of our meeting together. Meeting together around the Word, supplemental study materials on the lost discipline of hospitality, food and conversations were for the sake of our own experience together and the values that are brought into the broader community interactions. Experiencing community together in this way helped frame the conversations we have with others in the community. This was an essential

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<sup>14</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 15.

component of our regular gatherings both for the purpose of our group growing together and for the purpose of sharing what we are learning from neighbors in the community.

Gathering again as a core group was not the end-goal of this project. While the group did continue to meet throughout a period of weeks as conversations took place throughout the community, the group needed to discern the implications of these new discoveries as well as how to share what we learned about hospitality and learned from neighbors as it related to mission and pastoral vocation. The presupposition was that there was much taking place in the community and new discoveries through conversations would reveal not only what God was up to in the neighborhood, but also how a pastor could reimagine vocation from the perspective of those outside the congregation. Recognizing that each of us is part of the community and therefore accountable to the community, we wanted to reappropriate the theological tradition of our community.<sup>15</sup>

Connecting all of this back to the congregation for the purpose of its own learning-reflection is a critical portion of this project in helping to engage the colony in reimagining its life together and in relationship with neighbors. The challenge for the congregation is not a small one in reframing an imagination that is primarily ecclesiocentric to a God-centered framework. Based on the work of a small group involving listening, discerning, and reflecting, this final step calls the congregation to consider what follow-up actions are necessary in moving back into the neighborhood. Past leadership models would make pastoral leadership and supporting church staff members the primary actors going forward. One significant challenge is placing

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<sup>15</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 52.

ownership of further actions across the congregation in order that they can own and invest in the process going forward. While we believe the entire congregation must be included in sharing stories of our experience, the goal of this experiment is to see another small group decide to engage in its own experiment of listening, discerning, experimenting, and reflecting while the first group continues their journey building on the new relationships cultivated in our entering in the neighborhood.

Recognizing the leadership structure of the congregation, our first work of communicating back to the congregation was with the Council. Because of the annual cycle of turning over one-third of the elder and deacon board, we chose to report our work as part of the annual training and orientation of the council. This multi-day training event includes outgoing council members as well as those newly ordained to office. As a small group, we believed this would be the most opportune time to share and transfer the missional vision to the next group of leaders allowing questions to be asked by incoming council members while those who have been part of the journey are present to share their own experiences and provide a voice into the conversation. Appendix A outlines the conversation the small group followed with the leadership of the church at the council training event. Additional reflection on lessons learned are integrated into the reflection portion of this project found in Part Three and Part Four further addresses recommendations and actions to be taken.

### **Transformation and the Missional Leader**

Learning to listen differently motivated a small group to see and experience a community with fresh eyes. To discover what a neighborhood can reveal about ministry

and pastoral vocation required the missional leader to understand this was also a journey of personal transformation. The final portion of this project, and arguably the most important learning, was about the transformation of the missional leader. Lessons learned in personal transformation impacted the missional leader beyond one specific context. Often church leaders busy themselves with numerous responsibilities. Institutional demands are often more focused on the organization than the mission. If that which is upstream indeed impacts what flows downstream, leaders must be attentive not just to the tasks of ministry and missional vocation but also to the cultivation of their soul. A leader's life can be filled with going through the motions of ministry at the expense of cultivating a connection with the God whose mission he is furthering. Leaders burn out into a state of emptiness "which does not result from giving all I have [but] merely reveals the nothingness from which I was trying to give in the first place."<sup>16</sup> We, then, confuse being active with being effective, getting caught up in pursuing the wrong goals. Leaders can succumb to looking for meaning in the externals and neglect dealing with what is really going on inside. This happens when leaders use metrics of church size or how well they are liked within the church or community. Such pursuits drive leaders to workshops, books, or imported programs that promise to make them successful if they will try harder and follow a curriculum.

Jesus' ministry, however, exemplifies the importance of leaders who are sensitive to the needs of others while never letting these needs dictate the bigger mission. He regularly separated himself from the demands of public life to realign himself with the

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<sup>16</sup> Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 49.

purpose of his Father. Jesus engaged in prayer, fasting, and reading Scriptures. He engaged in community, but also found time for solitude. He worshipped, participated in celebrations, served others, and lived simply. These spiritual disciplines—individual and corporate—are prescriptive for the life of every believer, but remain difficult to practice when leaders fill their lives with the busyness of ministry. “Our focus on numbers, bigness, and large institutions is . . . rooted in two of America’s sacred cows: the autonomy of the individual and the necessity to organize for economic efficiency. They are two sacred cows closely aligned to modernity.”<sup>17</sup> Fixing our attention on these sacred cows distracts us from seeing what God is up to and turns our attention toward personal success by our own ingenious plans. Jesus’ life models the importance of leaders remaining focused on God’s mission.

An essential component of this project is cultivating spiritual disciplines as a small group of leaders, and as individuals, in order that we remain open to what the Holy Spirit is revealing throughout this missional journey. Yet cultivating these habits must be more than just another compartmentalized part of one’s life. Focusing on these disciplines is part of training ourselves to practice the presence of God in all aspects of life and ministry. Mark Buchanan writes, “The problem is not that God is distant and needs to be wooed or badgered into coming near; the problem is that God is ever present, ever near, and that some of us seek ways of escape . . . God does not need to be invoked, we do. We need to be called to our senses, to be as present to God as God is to us.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Buchanan, *Your God Is Too Safe* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2001), 139.

Living these habits will help as we seek to relinquish our addiction to control and be attentive to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within our lives. Some of these disciplines will be cultivated in solitude; however, much will be gained by traveling with companions as we discover what lies ahead.

Shifting our thinking and living when it comes to church, leadership, and discipleship comes with great risk of failure. Dallas Willard says that we should “at least consider the possibility that this poor result is not in spite of what we teach and how we teach, but precisely because of it.”<sup>19</sup> Having the right information is not the same thing as inducing behavioral change. In other words, knowing the right answer is not the same as doing the right thing. During Jesus’ ministry, we find examples of him teaching the crowds (Matthew 5-7), sending them out to practice what they had been learning (Luke 10:1-16), and returning to reflect on what they learned (Luke 10:17-24). There is an action-learning cycle that this small group engaged in that includes acquiring information, engaging in practices, and reflecting on what is being learned. Our work together as a group was not only to learn about the community but also to cultivate habits that shaped our everyday living. Peter Senge illustrates the problem of taking the individualistic approach:

Our traditional views of leaders—as special people who set the direction, make the key decisions, and energize the troops—are deeply rooted in an individualistic and nonsystemic worldview. Especially in the West, leaders are *heroes*—great men (and occasionally women) who “rise to the fore” in times of crisis. Our prevailing leadership myths are still captured by the image of the captain of the cavalry leading the charge to rescue the settlers from attacking Indians. So long as such myths prevail, they reinforce a focus on short-term events and charismatic heroes rather than on systemic forces and collective learning. At its heart, the traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people’s powerlessness,

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<sup>19</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 40-41.

their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders.<sup>20</sup>

Although countercultural, the Christian faith invites us into community. To begin to understand what the Spirit of God is up to in a community, it requires the efforts of the community of faith—not just one leader. This is where transformation can take root and elicit the change leaders and communities need today.

What lessons about mission and vocation can a leader learn from the community? This question lay at the core of this project. Recognizing that God was already at work in the community, this project sought to facilitate a process whereby a small group of leaders practiced hospitality, discovered with fresh eyes what God was up to the neighborhood, and thereby reimagined a new paradigm of leadership and vocation. The goal was not to redefine the role of professional clergy within a community or to create the latest church-wide campaign marketed to clergy and congregations that are fearful of their decreasing attendance and balance sheet. Similarly, this project did not call for new committees with the church organization to specialize in local missions. Rather, this project sought to understand mission and vocation as the responsibility of every Christian. A mission-shaped God calls the community of God's people to this task. It is not the task of a committee; it is not limited only to those who scored high on a spiritual gifts inventory; it is not a budget line item or a once-in-a-lifetime trip to a foreign country. "The church's very nature is to be God's missionary people."<sup>21</sup> Chapter Four addresses the implementation of this plan coming out of the small group's hospitality

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), 319.

<sup>21</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, xv.

experiment. The focus of the chapter is on insights gained from questions crafted by the group that each person took into three segments of the community—schools, businesses, and local government.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMPLEMENTATION

Having experienced opportunities to share hospitality together as a small group, and having established questions that would guide our conversations in each of three segments of the community including school, business, and government, the group identified those we wanted to engage in conversation. The criterion was simple. The small group wanted to engage individuals who were well established in their respective segment of the community. These conversations would help us learn about mission and pastoral leadership giving us another vantage point of how and where God is at work in our community. Conversations took place in a variety of settings including offices, coffee shops, and homes from November 2013 through January 2014.

#### **Learning from the Education Community**

Learning from the education community came primarily from teachers and support staff serving the Ripon Unified School District. It was a conscious choice to omit the private, charter, and home school communities from the project in order that we would gain insights about mission and leadership from the members of the broader community who are substantively engaged in the city. In describing the community of

Ripon, interviewees identified it as a great place for kids and young families, citing the small town dynamic in close proximity to larger city amenities. The school district has five elementary school campuses totaling approximately 2,100 students and one high school campus totaling approximately 900 students. Also mentioned as a great thing about Ripon was Ripon Christian School with approximately 700 students and California Connections Academy with approximately 250 students. While boasting of the quality education available through the public school system, interviewees also mentioned the options for parents to provide a variety of educational opportunities as a positive aspect of living in Ripon.

The most consistently mentioned asset of the community was the excellent citywide support for the school district. Parent participation in the district and volunteerism is meaningful. Additionally, school staff identified great appreciation for a cooperative local law enforcement whose presence on campus and around the respective campuses before and after school is appreciated. Campus safety is a big priority for the school district. Technology is also a priority throughout the curriculum and across all campuses available to students at school and at home. Interviewees noted a high percentage of traditional two-parent households residing in Ripon, which is not only a strength of the community, but also an important factor contributing to academic excellence of students.

When asked about the greatest challenges facing our community, answers were more about fear of things changing for the worse than what is the present reality. For example, one concern mentioned was an increase in gangs in the community. While gang problems are not characteristic of Ripon, they are abundant in neighboring communities.

Consequently, one of the greatest challenges facing Ripon is preventing gangs from penetrating our community. Similarly, another common concern had to do with preserving the school district's reputation of providing excellence in education in a context where funding is increasingly cut from schools. Because this is a reason so many families with school age children choose to reside in Ripon, this was seen as a high priority. A third concern that was mentioned by some interviewees had to do with helping parents gain the necessary skills to be great parents. This was particularly important to educators in the middle and high school level. Overall, the common theme mentioned regarding the greatest challenge facing Ripon was about preserving what we have in the community.

When asked about the kinds of leadership that is most effective and well received by the broader community, interviewees consistently introduced me to “the FISH! Philosophy”<sup>1</sup> as common practice throughout the district. Each elaborated on the four Fish principles. First, choose your attitude. While there are many things in life that you cannot control, one thing you can control is how you respond to challenges. Second, be there. Whether you are the student or the teacher, focus on what you are doing and the kind of student/teacher you are being. Be kind in your words, deeds, and gestures. Third, make their day. Think of others first. See it as your responsibility to make everyone else's day positive. Fourth, play. Be creative and make learning fun by being part of it.

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<sup>1</sup> “The FISH! Philosophy” comes from the Pike's Place Fish Market in Seattle, WA. Known for its energy and commitment to service, these four simply practices that form the culture of the Fish Market are taught to businesses, schools, and organizations to help bring energy and commitment to work. There is a curriculum adaptation specifically designed for schools wishing to implement these principles into their schools. Additional information about the FISH! Philosophy can be found at <http://www.charthouse.com/> or experienced at Seattle's, Pike's Place Fish Market.

These principles form the framework for creating a culture that strengthens the entire district, right down to the individual classrooms. It creates an environment that anyone would want to be part of—a culture of flexibility and sensitivity conducive to helping everyone learn and grow.

Finally, each interviewee was asked to identify one wish they had for the community. The consistent theme in each response had to do with strong families at home. Educators indicated the obvious impact healthy families have not only on a child's academic abilities but the whole person. Other wishes mentioned included state funding so that school programs could be restored and community preservation concerns; however, strong families captured their greatest wish for the Ripon community. Educators were generally very positive about the community and cited how a high percentage of educators have served in the Ripon Unified School District for many years. The general outlook on the community and school is positive and optimistic about the future.

### **Learning from the Business Community**

Learning from the business community came primarily from local business owners in the service industry affiliated with the Ripon Chamber of Commerce. Interviewees in the service industry primarily earn revenue in providing products and services including food service, retail, financial services, and insurance. Each has a local storefront whereby customers and clients interface daily. The connection to the Chamber of Commerce is an important criterion for selection due to the commitment to be an intentional part of the broader business community in Ripon. Networking is arguably the

most important reason given by business owners to affiliate with the Chamber.

Additionally, membership is valuable to the business community for referrals, promotion, training opportunities, and advocacy to city, county, and state government.

When asked to describe the community of Ripon today, interviewees consistently referred to the unique benefits of being a small, safe, family-friendly community.

Comparing Ripon to neighboring communities, the business segment of Ripon expressed appreciation to proactive local law enforcement as one of the key reasons why Ripon is what it is today. One interviewee mentioned Ripon as having the highest percentage of residents working in law enforcement per capita. Many Ripon residents serve local and nearby law enforcement agencies including city, county, state, and federal. The majority of residents in Ripon are white-collar professionals; however, agriculture and ag-business occupy much of the local business landscape. The business community recognizes two dominant groups: the middle-upper class community with many dual-income households and the expanding retirement community primarily residing in Bethany Home. Bethany Home offers various levels of care from independent living to skilled nursing care.

When asked about the community's greatest asset, the business community named the residents of Ripon. One interviewee attributed the high percentage of homeowners in the community as being a possible reason for citizen's high level of commitment to maintaining the quality of life in Ripon. Furthermore, many who reside in Ripon choose to do so because of the quality of life the community has to offer including schools, low crime statistics, and recreational opportunities. Home prices are higher than neighboring communities; however, the benefits that come with living here continue to drive the housing market and homes rarely remain on the market for very long.

Another asset mentioned by the business community is Ripon's retirement community. Some residents of Ripon have grown up here as children and have no plans to leave in the future. A safe community for children with excellent and growing service for the elderly makes Ripon a place people can settle long-term. Many of Bethany's residents have relocated to the community for this reason. Additionally, younger family members of those at Bethany choose to relocate here to be able to be near elderly family members. The business community is aware of this important segment of the community and continues to seek creative ways to serve them.

The greatest challenge mentioned by most of the interviewees in the business community has to do with encouraging local residents to keep their business transactions in town. Other than a local restaurateur who has had great success serving local residents of Ripon, many of the other businesses struggle to keep business here. Surrounded by two larger cities with exponentially more shopping options, local business owners continue to struggle to find way to keep business near. Even so, one interviewee (formerly a restaurant owner in Ripon) added that in spite of the tough economic times that many communities have endured, there are opportunities to discover new and creative ways of doing business in Ripon that remain largely untapped. With roughly half of the local business community networked together, those interviewed felt that growing and strengthening that network would help make Ripon an even stronger community. The Chamber of Commerce continues to develop creative citywide events to help bring residents into their storefronts.

The leadership style most frequently referred to by the business community is collaborative leadership. When asked to explain the use of this language, interviewees

talked about the importance of a network of relationships that is highly interactive. This is one of the values of the Chamber of Commerce so it was not surprising that it ranks of such importance to those who are part of the business community. This network of relationships serves the purpose of achieving a common outcome, namely, to encourage local residents to patronize local businesses. There is a shared commitment within the business community to work together and decide together the best way to move forward.

The final question asked of the business community interviewees had to do with their single wish for the Ripon community as a whole. While some expressed this wish in terms of their fears (that from which they want to protect Ripon), most talked about strengthening commitment to one another in the community both as business leaders and as consumers. The overwhelming desire of this group of community leaders is a close network, being well associated with the Chamber of Commerce. The desire is not merely for personal financial gain but also for the benefit of strengthening a community that they spoke of with great affection. This desire to keep Ripon close extends to local government, churches, schools, businesses, and residents alike.

### **Learning from the Local Government Community**

The local government community conversations took place with city leaders from the Ripon City Council, the City Planning Commission, the Ripon Police Department, and the Ripon Consolidated Fire District. The groups we wanted to talk with were chosen because of their unique angle on the Ripon community from both a future planning perspective as well as a present view from those who are civil servants. Additionally, each group consisted of interviewees who have had years of experience living in and

serving the Ripon community in a variety of capacities. Utilizing both individual and small cluster interviews, the insights into the City of Ripon from those who are elected officials as well as senior leaders of departments provide unique insights into leadership and mission.

Those interviewed described Ripon as a city known for its small town charm and boasting a quality of life that is unparalleled in the Central Valley. There is great pride among city leaders for the historical downtown section of the City. It has undergone extensive redevelopment intended to be attractive to small local businesses and consumers, both locally and regionally. Ripon is well known as being tied mostly to agriculture and related businesses with gradual expansion into other industries. Local city government operates under a council-administrator form of government. The Council consists of five elected members, who annually elect a Mayor from within the council on a rotation. The community has doubled in population from 1990 to present and is projected to grow an additional 10 percent or more by 2017. Ripon is a bedroom community for many who work in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is approximately 80 miles from Ripon.

Asking about Ripon's greatest asset produced the greatest amount of conversation among those interviewed. There is much pride among local government related to the city's assets. Local law enforcement officials mentioned the low crime rate in Ripon when compared to other communities just a few miles away. In spite of the economic struggles of the last several years, officers have remained proactive in crime prevention. Additionally, an extensive network of video surveillance throughout the city has aided

the department's ability to prosecute offenders and earned the regional the reputation of not being a place where criminals want to come and create problems.

Those serving the local fire district find Ripon to be a community that is attentive to what is taking place around them and genuinely caring of one another. Neighbors are quick to come to the aid of others when a crisis is ongoing. When comparing this to experiences in other communities, firefighters note that this neighborhood response is more than curiosity about why the fire department is at their neighbor's house. They also mentioned appreciation for the small town dynamic characteristic of Ripon. More often than not, someone working on any shift has some kind of personal connection to those for whom they are providing emergency services. Overall, the fire department believes Ripon's greatest asset is the shared commitment among citizens to caring for and supporting one another.

The greatest challenge facing the community from the perspective of local government is multifaceted, but all related to growth. Leaders mentioned the challenge of protecting and preserving the quality of life that makes people want to live here. As the community grows, this becomes increasingly challenging. With the numbers of people moving into Ripon from other communities, this concern is shared among local government and their constituents as well. While a growing community comes with the benefits of expansion of services that Ripon can offer, it also involves expanding the city infrastructure including public works, police and fire services, schools, local business, recreational offerings, and roads. There is the need to provide a framework for orderly development that promotes a balanced residential growth, maintains property value, and provides adequate sites for commercial and industrial uses, economic growth, public

services, and resource conservation. There is also the desire to protect local small business from big box stores that tend to squeeze small companies out of business. Overall, the greatest challenge expressed by all those interviewed has to do with controlling and managing growth while maintaining the quality of life that has characterized Ripon for decades.

When asked about the kinds of leadership that is most effective and well received by the broader community, interviewees expressed a clear preference for partnership. There is a desire by administrators for supportive rather than directive involvement. Each interviewee specifically mentioned the importance of having relationships with those whom they serve in the community. Their ability to lead is dependent on knowing the desires and concerns of the broader community. Being accessible is a priority across the system of local government. While leaders cannot make everyone happy with the decisions that must be made, there is a clear desire to make certain that everyone has opportunity to express concerns. Some of the ways the City Council implements this kind of leadership is through a Citizen Advisory Committee composed of members of the community representing a variety of interests. They also have created a public outreach effort making use of local newspapers, community-wide special events, presentations to local civic clubs and business organizations, and sponsoring awareness meetings throughout the community for the purpose of soliciting input from those interested in being part of an ongoing conversation.

When asking local government leaders about their one wish for Ripon, responses varied greatly according to their unique role of leadership in the community. The Police Department wished that the people who make up the community would continue to help

law enforcement protect and preserve the quality of life that many have come to know in Ripon. The Fire Department wished that the Ripon community would continue to be compassionate and caring of one another as well as supportive of their efforts to care for citizens in their time of crisis. City Council members wished for Ripon to continue to be a safe community with a quality of life that continues to set it apart from other cities in the region. A consistent undercurrent heard in each response is the desire to keep Ripon small, safe, and a highly desirable place to call home.

### **Learning from Local Clergy**

Though not initially part of this project, spending time with those serving in education, business, and government prompted interest in consulting local clergy leaders and their response to the questions we had asked of other leaders in the community. Conversations up to this point led us to wonder if pastors outside of the local Christian Reformed Church community had a perspective on pastoral leadership and missional vocation that differed from local Reformed clergy. Relationships cultivated through the Ripon Ministerial Association provided many opportunities to learn from colleagues in the community. Several local pastors had served in their respective churches for more than fifteen years. This longevity among some clergy offered insights into the community that Reformed clergy presently residing in Ripon had not been able to experience. Interviewees came from a variety of denominations including the Grace Brethren, Evangelical Covenant, Free Methodist, and Church of God.

Ripon was described as a close community. While the population of Ripon has seen dramatic growth over the past two decades, there remains a smallness that allows for

rich relationships throughout the community. Ripon is a community known to be very religious. In the aftermath of significant national crisis, one can expect that a community prayer gathering will draw many local residents from a variety of congregations. With a population of approximately 17,000, Ripon has seventeen churches. While the five churches from a Reformed tradition are the largest congregations, the other twelve congregations are very engaged in the community of Ripon. In spite of the population growth that Ripon has experienced, much of the growth has come in commuters who leave early and return late during the week. Consequently, those who are invested in the local community largely come from the small core that has called Ripon home before the population growth.

As clergy described Ripon, they noted some of the changes they had seen over the last 20 years had to do with the changing dynamics of the broader faith community. These observations not only help provide a description of the community but also present challenges facing the local churches in discovering new ways to engage their neighbors. One noted change is the increase of households that are not involved in the faith community. This is largely attributed to Ripon's population growth as opposed to households disengaging from their faith. There is a new mission field within the community filled with people who do not affiliate with a faith community. This is a dramatic change from the community of twenty-five years ago when Sunday saw closed businesses and traffic problems as everyone traveled to church. Church is less important and relevant to the population moving into the community. Those who have grown up in the church are increasingly not engaging with a local congregation. These are challenges the church must address if it is to remain relevant for the next 20 years.

Like all the other interviewees, clergy noted the closeness of the community as Ripon's greatest asset. This is seen most obviously in how local residents invest in the community through service organizations, volunteerism, and local community festivals. Additionally, Ripon is recognized as a great place to raise children. Surrounded by larger communities with increasing crime problems, many choose to call Ripon home for the safety and security of their family. Great schools and proactive local law enforcement are mentioned as specific contributing factors to Ripon's attractiveness and quality of life the city offers. When things look out of place, it does not go unnoticed and local residents are quick to respond. Residents enjoy the closeness of a small town while enjoying all the amenities of larger cities just a short distance away.

When asked what would make Ripon a stronger and better community, local clergy noted significant strengthening of community within the Ministerial Association. For many years, local clergy would gather only when driven by crisis on a local or national scale. However, in recent years great effort has been made to be proactive and meet regularly. This has strengthened relationships between churches; however, there is need for this to increase in coming years. Local community events such as *Love Ripon*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Love Ripon* is part of a regional initiative whereby organizers plan a Saturday in the fall and spring for residents to volunteer in the community. Past projects have included beautification of bike trails, gardening and painting at local schools, cleaning up parks, and a variety of other local needs as identified by City officials, churches, and attentive citizens. Past events have mobilized congregations and individuals serving on teams with others. While work teams may consist of people who already know one another, each team has had people participate with those for whom no previous relationship existed. That has continued to strengthen the closeness of the Ripon community with shared acts of service within the community.

and *National Night Out*<sup>3</sup> have provided opportunities for the community to gather. These events will continue to help strengthen community both between congregations and within the community at large. Yet there is still great need for churches to work together in the community. All too often there has been a focus on the issues that divide congregations and not enough emphasis on what can and should be done together. Clergy see this challenge as not just a struggle for local pastors but also for congregations. Several noted that there continues to be a struggle with churches of Reformed tradition working alongside churches from other traditions. The Reformed churches are some of the largest congregations in Ripon, but they often plan things on their own or within their own theological tradition. This has caused some dissention with other congregations. While progress is ongoing, there remains more work to do in bringing the Church together in the Ripon community.

The question about the kind of leadership that works most effectively in Ripon produced the greatest variety of responses. While other segments—education, business, and local government—all had very similar responses within each group, local clergy responses ranged from “the pastor has the vision and the people follow” to a more “servant leader” approach. There are a variety of considerations for the diversity of

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<sup>3</sup> *National Night Out* is a nation-wide event that traditionally is hosted by local law enforcement that encourages neighborhood block parties late August (before the school year begins). Law enforcement agencies use this program to help neighbors get to know one another and also have opportunity to engage with officers who travel around to each block party to promote safety and awareness of what takes place in the community. Because of recent budget cuts, Ripon, like many other communities was forced to terminate this program. As part of this program of study, I asked the Police Chief if local churches could partner with the Ripon Police Department to help keep this annual tradition. This resulted in the community gathering at the local Community Center Park in Ripon. The change from neighborhood block parties to a single community gathering came at the request of the Police Department for budgetary purposes. Though the local neighborhood engagement was a loss, it brought greater participation from other agencies, city leaders, and local churches.

responses. For some, a leadership style comes out of the theological tradition from which each pastor serves. Some have cultivated a leadership style based on the desires of the local congregation. Still others utilized a style of leadership that is based on personal preference. It was difficult to find any agreement on what works most effectively in Ripon from local clergy. All could agree that leadership in the community has often been assumed by those who are also part of the local church and this was seen as yet another strength about Ripon that local clergy hope will continue to characterize the community.

One wish that local clergy had for Ripon was that the strengths that have characterized life in this community would continue be an important value of those who lead throughout the city. Like many others interviewed, clergy expressed fear and suspicion about Ripon's continued population growth. While it is not surprising to clergy why others would wish to live here, there is concern about how that will change the culture of Ripon. Clergy noted that the 17 churches within the Ripon city limits have mostly been in existence even when Ripon's population was closer to 2,000. Even with such growth in population, the local churches have remained the same size. The wish of local pastors is that the churches in Ripon will learn new ways of engaging their middle-class American, young suburban neighbors and see growth in congregations proportionate to the population growth. There was also the expressed hope that Ripon will continue to be a community where Christianity matters not just in the homes of local residents but also at a city-wide leadership level. Some of the greatest needs local clergy noted for the future have to do with connecting to the younger middle-class families. With so many dual-income career minded parents, there is greater need for Day Care, marriage enrichment, help for parents needing to learn parenting skills, and counseling.

Many clergymen feel the church can and should meet this need in the community. It will help keep the church relevant in a changing context.

### **Lessons about Leadership, Discipleship, and Vocation**

The complex relationship between living a holy life and welcoming the stranger begins in the early pages of Scripture. Israel understood her identity as God’s chosen people with specific requirements regarding how to maintain their loyalty to God. At the same time, Israel was called to love the stranger and meet various obligations to them as part of their obedience to God’s law. Pohl offers this important insight with implications for our theology of covenant today:

Within much of the biblical tradition there are tensions between living a distinctive life, holy to the Lord, and the command to welcome strangers. Their relationship is best understood through the theological framework of covenant—bonds of responsibility and faithfulness connecting guests, hosts, and God. Only in this context can we adequately understand the simultaneous practices of inclusion and separation. Faithful believers who practice hospitality understand themselves to be in relationship with God whose worship requires holiness, a distinct identity, and attention to the needs of others.<sup>4</sup>

Reformed theology champions this theme of covenant insofar as it relates to those within the covenant community. The community is stretched in how it interacts with and relates to others remembering that we are called to be distinct while also being connected into the surrounding community. The church is called to be light recognizing that the light was meant to illumine the darker places. “In order to gain a different perspective on the

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<sup>4</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, 136.

way we actually experience community, it is often helpful to imagine you are listening to how we live life today with ears of someone outside our modern culture.”<sup>5</sup>

This missional experiment has cultivated opportunities for a small group to enter into familiar places and reimagine ministry, leadership, and missional vocation through building relationships and engaging conversations. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity for the small group to return to the congregation through a process enabled by the elders and deacons to share about our experience and new learning which will shape our missional learning as a church going into the future—even if only for a new small group formed out of this experience.<sup>6</sup> Outside the institutional church, these conversations have revealed some rhythms about life and community. Our tendency within the church is to hear only that which we have learned from parents, family, church, and friends. We accept these customs because they have been instilled by those closest to us. They are “the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another.”<sup>7</sup> The focus of this project has been to hear what God could be saying to us through the stranger in our midst, not by seeing the other as a project for the church to engage but cultivating new relationships and investing in the broader community. Our mission has been to “live the rhythms of God’s love with

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<sup>5</sup> Boren, *Missional Small Groups*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> The final part of this doctoral project titled, “Recommendations and Actions to be Taken” I report on the conversation coming out of the church council and its desire going forward as a congregation. There are also reflections in Part Three related to theology (chapter 5), church and vocation (chapter 6), context (chapter 7) and leadership (chapter 8).

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions from the Churches* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1983), 5.

those who don't have it.”<sup>8</sup> It has been less about performing some kind of act and more about embodying love through investing in relationship. There are three overarching questions that have most shaped the ways in which this project has elicited growth: who are we; how are we relating to one another; and how are we engaging the community around us?

Missional language has come to mean many things within the church community. This proved to be true within the group conducting this experiment as well. Starting this experiment with a small group immersed in study was integral to remembering who we are apart from what we do. Some of the most important conversations within the various areas of the community started by simply taking interest in what each do. Asking people to talk about what they know created a non-threatening environment for them to share about the joys and challenges of their work. While there was no explicit connection to the church, several of those interviewed shared on their own initiative about ways they appreciate involvement with the church community. Out of these conversations came new awareness to the group of needs and opportunities not only to engage the community in tangible ways but also a new awareness of how to pray.

Scott Boren writes, “Relating to God is basic and foundational to anything we do missionally, but for some reason, we don't often talk about this.”<sup>9</sup> He distinguishes between small groups who focus on tactical methodologies in community engagement verses focusing on encountering Jesus on a regular basis. Recall the stories in the

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<sup>8</sup> Boren, *Missional Small Groups*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Scriptures of how the presence of God is a significant indicator of those who belong to him. An important reminder in this process is remembering that our missional vocation calls us not just to do but also to be as God's distinctive people. Our small group time practiced being in the presence of God with the simplicity of the Scriptures, quiet space to reflect, and time to share what we heard the Spirit speaking to us. This changed how we saw and heard our community. Furthermore, it inspired a renewed commitment as individuals to make this a daily practice with a similar outcome of inspiring new insights into life. Devotional life changed from a cerebral pursuit of answering questions to the art of listening to what God was saying through his Spirit and sharing those insights as we gathered. Our meetings changed from being yet another item on the calendar to becoming part of engaging in relationship with one another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Only as we stand within the community can we be alone, and only those who are alone can live in the community. Both belong together. Only in the community do we learn to be properly alone; and only in being alone do we learn to live properly in community."<sup>10</sup> Even between gatherings, our small group experience revealed that we were never truly alone. In our listening between meetings, a connection transformed our relationships and our scheduled time together. In all of this, the group experience flowing out of this experiment has helped expand our understanding of who we are as individuals.

The second transformational question this group experience addressed is how we relate to one another. American philosopher Josiah Royce writes, "My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (1954; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 82.

Boren rightly states that being part of community is not an option one can choose only if it benefits me as an individual without missing a great opportunity to be on mission in this world.<sup>12</sup> Missional vocation is inherently relational and demonstrated in showing love to others. This group experience provided an opportunity to commit to walking together not just to accomplish a project within the broader community but to experience community together that went beyond spiritual formation and community engagement. It cultivated a community of trust that had room for other shared aspects of life together to include marriage, parenting, school, work, and play. Time spent with one another's families further developed community that was mutually life giving.

Out of this foundation, the third transformational question this group experience addressed is how we relate to the broader community. While the substance of this project is what we learned from walking with leaders in the broader community, the journey to get there gave the sustaining power to enable meaningful community engagement. What started as project intended for the institutional church to learn how to engage the community evolved into a small group within the church first experiencing biblical community and then extending that into the city. Boren writes, “[t]he call to do Missional Engagement together requires that we actually do life together.”<sup>13</sup> The experience of learning to listen to one another and doing life together sent us into the community with genuine interest to listen and learn from those serving in leadership roles within the city. What we learned out of those conversations was in many ways secondary. The greater

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<sup>11</sup> Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 313.

<sup>12</sup> Boren, *Missional Small Groups*, 101.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

outcome of those conversations was the relationships cultivated with those leaders with theological and contextual implications further explored in Part 3.

Arguably, the most important lessons learned about leadership, discipleship, and vocation emerged within the group experience leading up to community engagement. Rooted in the biblical story and experiencing community together created a foundation that strengthened the experience of entering into the community. “Evangelistic activity must be legitimated first and foremost by a community experiencing the life-transforming power of the gospel.”<sup>14</sup> This foundational experience of community drove us into the neighborhood with the mission to listen deeply to the opportunities and concerns from leaders in education, business, and local government. The values, strengths, and needs of the broader community are not widely known by the church community whose reputation is distant and unwelcoming. C. J. Miller uses the term “opportunity blindness” to describe unfamiliarity.<sup>15</sup> The initial data gained in our conversations was less significant than the opportunity to initiate new relationships deeper into the community. This delving deeper occurred more naturally than a boxed evangelism campaign.

Michael Goheen captures the need for this more organic approach to living the gospel in an all-embracing and holistic way. “It is not a gospel about a future, otherworldly place that has little relevance for much of life other than personal ethics. Rather, if we see good news as it relates to our lives...then the gospel will not be an uncomfortable intrusion but rather woven into the very fabric of our daily walk.”<sup>16</sup> This drives the faith community to

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<sup>14</sup> Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 217.

<sup>15</sup> C. J. Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 151-52.

reimagine mission and the method by which gospel is transmitted into a growing and changing community. The need for good news has never been greater and the opportunities never more abundant. Deep involvement in the needs of the neighborhood will change both the church and local community rooting God's people in a place with the responsibility of being the good news of the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

While the majority of this project represents the work of a small group, there remains a critical step of reframing the imagination of the congregation through this experience. Our reporting as a small group was to the council at their annual training and transition retreat. This gathering is for those completing their term of service, those newly elected to office, and those in the middle of their 3-year term.<sup>18</sup> One benefit we saw to reporting back to this group was the outgoing office-bearers knew some of the motivation behind the work of this group and could bring that perspective to the conversation. Additionally, our hope was that some would see the conclusion of their responsibility in office as an opportunity to consider engaging in whatever ongoing work may come out of this experience. Each small group member chose one story coming out of the respective areas of the community to which they entered—the education community, the business community, those serving in local government, and community of churches in Ripon.

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<sup>16</sup> Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 216.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Appendix A outlines the general format of conversations the small group used in reporting our learning which gave opportunity for questions and group reflection with church leaders and later to the congregation. I deal more with process at this point in the project and spend more time reflecting in Part Three of this paper.

Pressing more deeply beyond the “what” question, the group explained the process we followed and implications coming out of listening, discerning, experimenting, and reflecting throughout this experiment. Two questions primarily guiding our conversation were about how we experienced God at work in this and how our assumptions about being the church were being shaped. We shared with the council about how we were seeing God at work before us in the city and the significance of simply being present with enthusiastic community leaders armed with nothing more than some questions focused on areas where they were on the forefront and a willingness to listen to their perspectives, stories and dreams for the city. Our conversation with the council continued as we shared some of our own new questions about what this all means to be the church in our city. How can we as a congregation integrate some of these practices into our everyday life beyond creating a new program of the church? Having been on a journey together as a congregation over the course of three years, there was agreement that sharing this experience with the congregation is of great importance. Following a similar format of inviting the congregation to participate in this missional journey, the Elders will host an evening town hall meeting with plans for the small group to share about their experience. Convinced that such a gathering will inspire similarly interested church members, the Elders and small group members will solicit and encourage a new small group to consider a new experiment.

As the council continued to engage in conversation, a variety of peripheral concerns were expressed. Even with great enthusiasm about our group experience, the transition to talk about “what next” was met with a variety of additional concerns. The most consistent refrain had to do with how we are going to fix our church on the inside.

There is a conviction by some that once we fix things on the inside, then others will want to be part of our congregation. Our early small group experience was seen as part of what our church needs, namely, to build stronger relationships within the church as things once were when the church was first established. There remains a default conviction that the primary place where God works is within the church walls, and therefore great concern that we strengthen community within the congregation. One lesson from this is that whatever steps comes next, it will continue to be a slow and small stride forward while a concurrent effort will continue toward addressing the need for stronger community within the church. Continued stories of what God is up to in the neighborhood may help bring hope and excitement in new ways that are yet to be discovered. While focus on fixing the church on the inside was discouraging to some, we are reminded of the need to start from the place where the people are at and continue to draw them into these new uncharted places to see what the Sprit continues to do beyond our walls as well.

PART THREE  
REFLECTIONS

## CHAPTER 5

### THEOLOGY

The CRC has been part of my upbringing from my earliest memories. It was reinforced in Christian day school from kindergarten through high school. My college years were also spent in an institution that was unapologetically Reformed with close ties to the CRC. My first years of working as a youth pastor were within this theological tradition leading me to the CRC seminary and subsequent ordination as a minister. Each community in which I have lived has had a strong CRC presence that has always felt like home. The homogenous community of which I have been part from my earliest years through my formal education rarely gave opportunity to challenge the things I was taught. In this chapter I reflect on my own theological tradition and the social imaginary derived from this tradition out of which I was raised and theologically trained as a pastor. Additionally, I reflect on new insights and implications both for congregational and for personal theological understanding of mission and vocation that have evolved as a result of new learning in this project.

## **Theological Themes Foundational to the CRC**

Churches often focus too much time and energy on matters that divide. The CRC is no exception. From their earliest years in America, Dutch immigrants sought to preserve and maintain their distinctiveness. Yet in Ephesians 4:13, Paul calls Christians to “come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> The enemy of the Christian church is not other Christians. What has sometimes been characterized as a “distinctively Reformed theological accent” as taught in Reformed churches and parachurch educational institutions is larger than the CRC. Reformed Christianity is grounded in a broad Christian orthodoxy that goes back to the New Testament church and includes a common faith in the triune God who created the heavens and earth, whose second person became incarnate in Jesus, and whose third person is an active agent in the church as the Holy Spirit. Reformed Christians affirm with a multitude of other Christians the saving purposes of God to unite all things in Christ, to engage in mission both in proclamation of the good news, and to hold on to the hope of Christ’s return when he will usher in the new heaven and the new earth. Within the United States, one can travel to different regions and hear a variety of accents all utilizing the English language. For example, when a native from New York City visits New Orleans, there is a distinctively different sound in a common English language. Similarly, Reformed theology has its own accent; and even within the CRC as a denomination, one can find a variety of brogues.

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical references are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984) unless otherwise noted.

There are three observable accents the CRC has identified within a North American context.<sup>2</sup> Although they overlap, they represent distinctive historical and conceptual approaches to the denominational vernacular. The first emphasis is the doctrinalist accent. Those speaking with this accent possess a strong adherence to certain Christian doctrines taught in Scripture and reflected in the creeds and confessions of the church. Doctrinalists champion high view of Scripture and embrace deeply our being image-bearers of God with implications that reach into nearly every ethical position the church takes including abortion, sexuality, marriage, abuse, capital punishment, war, and race. The mission of the church is exercised primarily through diaconal benevolence, hospice care, and pastoral counseling—all with the hopeful outcome that every beneficiary of such ministry would come to faith in Christ. Mindful that each accent is not mutually exclusive of the others, one might see this first accent related more to the head and the Christian's intellectual capacities.

The second emphasis is the pietist accent with a focus on theological and spiritual vitality and the holy Christian walk. This accent places greater emphasis on the heart and an intimate relationship with Jesus expressed in worshiping and living the convictions of faith out of gratitude for what God has done in Christ. Closely connected to belonging to Christ is belonging to the church as God's gathered covenant community. Consequently, pietists can gravitate toward one of two extremes. One extreme is being too church-centric and focusing more on church functions and the Sunday worship event. The

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 1 of this project addressed similar themes, looking at the historical and theological foundations of the CRC. This chapter builds on those, utilizing contemporary categories with implications for the present-day CRC to include the local context of Ripon, California.

opposite extreme is being inward, subjective, and unconnected to the church. Such extremes are not unique to the CRC but are observable trends within other denominations as well.

The third emphasis is the transformationalist accent with a focus on how faith and culture interact and are engaged in a world-and-life view. The question first asked is: How do Christians relate to and promote the Lordship of Christ in culture and society? Such questions come out of a conviction that there is no segregation of sacred and secular; that God is ruler over all things; that word and deed go together in the Christian's life and in the church's ministry; and that Christian vocation is an all-of-life obligation regardless of occupation. Consequently, God's call upon one's life spans vocation, education, family life—everything.

In each of these three accents—doctrinalists, pietist, and transformationalist—there exists the temptation to see them functioning as distinctive from one another. Yet a well-balanced theology necessitates an integrated emphasis. To live exclusively with a doctrinalist accent may lead to isolation and inaction. A pietist living apart from the other accents leads to individualism and ignorance of the broader dimensions of Christianity. The transformationalist life exclusive of the other accents can lead to inclusivity that disregards the need for justification and sanctification. In each of these accents, there is danger to focus exclusively toward one at the expense of valuing the other, which leads to pride and devaluation of the other dimensions of Christianity. A healthy theology of mission and vocation demands an integrated approach. This project of reimagining mission and pastoral vocation through the lenses of neighbors has revealed, among other

things, a failure to appreciate and value an integrated approach both from a leadership and congregational perspective.

Defining local theology is complex. Beyond denominational dynamics, the local church develops its own unique identity informed by a variety of sources including the local community, congregational community, and pastoral leadership. Long-time stakeholders and those who transplant into the community also play a role in shaping the character of the community. Schreiter affirms, “Obviously it is a complex process, aware of contexts, of histories, of the role of experience, of the need to encounter the traditions of faith in other believing communities. It is also obvious that contexts are complex, that histories can be variously read, that experience can be ambiguous, that the encounter in faith is often dimly understood.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, much learning coming out of this project both for the pastor and small group has come out of learning and listening to scripture and stories.<sup>4</sup> Within the congregation, those stories unearth why AVCRC was established. Those stories and the continuing narrative also reveal the deeply held traditions of the faith community. Together, they illuminate how challenging and disruptive it is to change our imagination about who we are and what God may be doing in the midst of what feels like a crisis within the church. Preoccupied with the church, our defaults continue to seek technical ways to fix our problems by reusing what has worked in the past. It is difficult to see what could be an opportunity to see with fresh eyes what the Spirit is up to in our church and community.

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<sup>3</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 3, footnote 7 reflects specific texts and methodology employed for time we spent dwelling in the Word.

One aspect of our local theological growing pains has to do with dominant Reformed accents within the local CRC community. Our doctrinalist accent focuses much on embracing “right” beliefs in our thinking. Our pietist accent embraces a greater commitment to talk about and express the emotional side of faith development. As far as the local community is concerned, the church has been very comfortable with these two accents. As a congregation surrounded by many other Reformed churches, we have seen little need for a transformational accent because most of our church community life together has been isolated from a rapidly growing and changing broader community. Transformation has been more about what we do as a church in faraway places and less about our investment into the lives of people who live across the street. Yet each of these theological accents is important to our tradition and present ministry context. As both the church community and the broader community change, the need is even greater for each of these theological accents to be recognized and celebrated in unison.

Schreiter asserts there is a dialectal interaction of three factors that serve as roots feeding the development and growth of a local theology: gospel, church, and culture.<sup>5</sup> Gospel refers to the Good News of Jesus Christ and includes worship and the praxis of the community in announcing the Good News. It is faith heard from and cultivated into the fabric of our being from others.

[T]here is no local theology without the larger church, that concrete community of Christians, united through word and sacrament in the one Lord. The gospel without church does not come to its full realization; the church without gospel is a dead letter. Without church there is no integral incarnation of gospel. Culture is the concrete context in which this happens. It represents a way of life for a given time and place, replete with values, symbols, and meanings reaching out with hopes and dreams, often struggling for a better world... It takes a dynamic

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<sup>5</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20-21.

interaction of all three of these roots—gospel, church, culture—with all they entail about identity and change, to have the markings of local theology.<sup>6</sup>

With so much focus on religion, our theology of mission and vocation calls for a renewed understanding of gospel where people are motivated not out of fear or insecurity but gratitude and joy. These themes are clearly present in the doctrines of the church but not evident enough in our care for others. If indeed, we are what our culture makes us and our faith is part of our culture, then it is imperative that the core of our theology is rooted in communicating and embodying a contextualized gospel not just within the church ecosystem but also within the local community. Gospel is the foundation to our theology and gives shape to who we are and what we do in all of life.

As a result of engaging the community, it is clear that the community, too, needs new ways of participating with the other. Like the church, the broader Ripon community loves their traditions, fears outsiders, and laments change. Yet unlike the church, they have to be thrust into the reality of changes taking place all around them. On Sunday morning, the church gathers to rejoice in the change that Christ has made in us, to welcome the stranger, and to celebrate the long-standing traditions that bind us to those who have gone before us. Our theology must reflect that as we leave the sanctuary and engage the community.

What we experienced as a small group and challenged the church council to consider is a theology of mission reminiscent of Newbigin and Schreiter, namely, one that points us toward developing patterns of life, word and deed that are attentive to culture, gospel and one another. First, with regard to culture, assumptions of our

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<sup>6</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 21.

understanding of the ethos of the community are costly. Mission that is contextual needs to be sensitive to history, sociological patterns and cultural trends and understand that these are dynamic. Secondly, gospel needs to be defined not just within our theological frameworks but also in more culturally particular ways. As we cultivated the habit of “indwelling” the gospel story, it deeply shaped our life of common discipleship. It gave renewed meaning to vocation and our embrace of the priesthood of all believers within an increasingly pluralistic context.<sup>7</sup> Finally, we discovered in this experiment the need to pay greater attention to each other. There is no shortage of places where simply listening would give new insights to where God is and has been at work among us. While widely accepted within the walls of the church, the Spirit is obviously also at work in the broader community.

This experience continues to teach the small group and council that there is a shared value of meaningful relationships expressed by those serving in schools, business, government, and clergy. This is true of AVCRC as well. Even as the broader community continues to become increasingly diverse ethnically, religiously, politically, and culturally, that desire for strong relationships is unchanged. This continues to give new shape to local theologies as we listen and learn from our neighbors and see first-hand what the Spirit is doing in our neighborhood making us increasingly aware that “understanding itself is deeply colored by cultural context.”<sup>8</sup> Consistent with our theology, we are reminded of our own theology that the Lordship of Christ is not

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<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 232.

<sup>8</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 75.

confined to the church and that mission is not a program we can simply import from another place and impose upon our context. Franke challenges readers to hold both theology and context as unique from one community to the next asserting,

a missional community varies from place to place in accordance with particular social contexts and traditions of theological reflection. The purpose of theology, then, is not simply to determine the one correct model for missional engagement but to assist the church in its vocation to be a missional community through ongoing critical and constructive reflection on its beliefs and practices.<sup>9</sup>

This must lead a faith community to reflect on how theology is lived out in the church and whether it promotes the concerns of community and mission. Taking the rich insights gained by the small group and returning to the council with stories of what we had seen and heard allowed us to reflect on how our theology is lived inside and outside the congregational context. Continued informal conversations as elders further assisted us in not reacting emotionally to a crisis of declining membership but allow theology to keep us rooted in the fact that God is doing something in all of this both within the congregation and community.

Ripon is a unique community with a rich history cherished by generations of residents who remember the small town where most could be found in church on Sunday morning. A theology of mission has primarily been focused on raising children within family units who would grow up in this nurturing environment and carry forward the family values, traditions and legacy. Today, not only has population growth changed the community, but as children are graduating from school and going to college, they are choosing to relocate in other places. The generations of those who have remained

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<sup>9</sup> John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2005), 187.

continue to live an unchanged theological tradition within a community that is rapidly changing. Living among neighbors that have not felt warmly received by the Reformed community, we will need to learn new ways of engaging in and participating with the community.

### **New Theological Insights Related to Mission and Vocation**

Lesslie Newbigin asks, “Where do I find the stance from which I can look at myself from the point of view of the Bible when my reading of the Bible is itself so much shaped by the person that I am, formed by my culture?”<sup>10</sup> He asserts we are what our culture makes us and our faith is part of our culture. From the earliest roots of the CRC as Dutch immigrants came to America, maintaining a faith community was at least in part to preserve something familiar. Like many other denominations, fragmentation over cultural and theological differences has birthed new congregations and sometimes denominations. This is part of the story of the CRC. Like so many other faith traditions, our default response to conflict is to protect and preserve what is familiar or to birth a new community that will sustain what is believed to be most important. In the past, denominational loyalty would help be the glue in keeping a community together. As communities change and as the missional conversation evolves, new questions arise about the mission of God and the role of the church in participating in that mission. Denominational conversations about mission in traditional CRC congregations have been about receiving an offering and supporting missionaries in distant places. For others, it has involved assembling a small group of church members being sent away to be

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<sup>10</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 196.

missionaries elsewhere. These have been safe ways to be involved in mission. Today the conversation is changing as awareness of the mission field surrounding the church building is increasingly relevant.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHURCH AND VOCATION

Allan Boesak wrote that the pinnacle of lovelessness is not our unwillingness to be a neighbor to someone, but our unwillingness to allow them to be a neighbor to us.”<sup>1</sup> To act neighborly toward someone is a decision that I can make and initiate at any time. I remain in control of that decision as well as when and how it takes place. Receiving that gift of hospitality from another is different. This program of study started out of a desire to gain ministry skills that would facilitate leading a church to engage their community and loving them as their primary mission. To be “an externally focused church” was shared language pervasive throughout the congregation during my calling process and excited me as a pastor as I have found great joy in being part of the broader community. As I met with significant resistance early in this program of study, it became evident that the focus of this program would not be as much for the church to learn new things, but for me, their pastor. This capstone project was supposed to be about the church’s journey, but it ended up being about a small group’s journey toward gaining new insights about mission and vocation—lessons to be learned through the lenses of the community. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977), 5.

learning is not just for a pastor and small group. There must be some level of engagement and reflection with the congregation. Newbigin writes,

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society . . . it will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter reflects on three areas of vocational formation developed through this experience: pastoral formation, spiritual formation, and missional formation—not just in relationship to the community but also as it relates to pastoral leadership in the context of a local congregation learning how to exist for the sake of those outside the walls of the church.

### **Pastoral Formation**

Personal qualification for ministry prescribed for pastors in the CRC are part of the journey toward ordination. The standards established were 24 years old when I entered into Calvin Theological Seminary in 2000. Small groups met weekly for the purpose of assessing and cultivating nine personal qualifications for the ministry. Among these qualifications included a demonstrable commitment to Christ and to the Word of God evidenced by regular Bible study and prayer, humility about personal failures, and confidence in God's grace in the face of those struggles. Other standards included discipline and self-control; affirmation of others; showing love toward others; honesty;

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<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 232-233.

and service without regard for gain. A variety of other leadership capacities included confidence, initiative, flexibility, independence, courage, persistence, decisiveness, creativity, wisdom, and emotional health. These pastoral leadership capacities capture role expectations for pastors from congregational leaders. The pastor is the figurehead who provides religious goods and services to the constituents. It is a pastoral model of leadership whereby the pastor attends meetings, takes care of the people of the church, responds to needs, fixes problems, preaches, teaches, marries, buries, mediates conflict, and manages the ministries of the church. He is to be present in people's homes while also readily available in the office for the drop-in visitor. In most established traditional Christian Reformed congregations, pastoral leaders manage ministry and keep people happy so that pews are full on Sunday and funds are abundant in the offering plate.

Roxburgh paints a very different picture of the missional leader.<sup>3</sup> Missional leaders coach and mentor within the congregation in a way that ministry is not clergy-dependent or clergy-centric. The church is equipped and released to do ministry. Pastors ask questions and stimulate imagination and creativity inspire people to put their spiritual gifts to work. Traditional pastor roles are part of the work of clergy but not the sum total. They know and remind the people that "God's future is among the regular, ordinary people of God. It's not primarily in great leaders or experts but among the people."<sup>4</sup> This paradigmatic shift in the role of pastoral leadership is one of the most important lessons learned and one of the most difficult for the traditional CRC congregation to embrace.

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<sup>3</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Much of the expectation of the AVCRC congregation comes from a pastor-centric model of leadership and an attractional model of church growth. The congregational tendency is to hire people to take care of getting the job done. Their hope was hiring a younger charismatic pastor who had been successful in another community would bring the same results to their church. This program of study has cultivated within me tools that rightly include the people of God in this journey of discovering and embracing the mission of God. Entering a focused time of giving and receiving hospitality taught me about humility. This process of interviews was an intentional time of putting someone else in the center and taking myself out of the center where I learned to listen rather than be the community spokesperson leading from the front. This was an opportunity to invest in relationships into the community. I entered into their space rather than attracting them to mine. This has been transformative in my pastoral formation.

### **Spiritual Formation**

The personal adaptive challenge I identified as part of this program of study has to do with my inability to know how to lead in an environment that overvalues power and defaults to suspicion. As a product of this institution, part of my spiritual formation coming out of this experience is recognizing these liabilities are not just the church's but woven into my own leadership DNA. A significant outcome of this project is changing my leadership practices by learning to receive hospitality from others. Christine Pohl writes, "Gracious hosts are open to the gifts of others and allow themselves to accept and enjoy their expressions of generosity."<sup>5</sup> To allow another to host is relinquishing power to

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<sup>5</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, 119.

the other. This was a profoundly spiritual component of this project. Zacchaeus's encounter with Jesus in Luke 19 serves as a biblical example. Jesus calls out to a tax collector telling him he must stay at his house. Of all the people Jesus might have chosen, he chooses Zacchaeus who welcomes him joyfully. It is a life transforming experience.

Anthony Gittins offers additional insight into the role of receiving the hospitality of another. "Unless the person who sometimes extends hospitality is also able sometimes to be a gracious recipient, and unless the one who receives the other as stranger is also able to become the stranger received by another, then, far from 'relationships,' we are merely creating unidirectional lines of power flow, however unintended this may be."<sup>6</sup> The experience began with a small group of leaders connecting around food and Scripture about hospitality and the mission of God. The group had the opportunity to give and receive hospitality leading us into conversations in the community that started as "our questions" but quickly evolved into an experience of receiving hospitality from the other by entering into their space and being hosted by another. In this experience, we could see how well-meaning church members easily forget others have much to offer. Entering into the community helps illuminate the gifts, passions and abilities that exist in abundance by those outside the congregation. Allowing the other to share their passions was a gift to us, cultivating relationships extending well beyond this project.

Reflecting on church and vocation, my spiritual formation coming out of this experience is discovering the joy of asking provocative questions and stimulating the exchange of memories, hopes, and ideas. It is a rediscovery of who we are, whose we are,

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony J. Gittins, *Beyond Hospitality? The Missionary Status and Role Revisited* (International Review of Mission 83/330, July 1994), 399.

and what we are to be in our life and witness.<sup>7</sup> In writing about hope, Thomas Aquinas said hope is the virtue by which we believe something difficult is nevertheless possible to attain.<sup>8</sup> He later adds that we are “much more inclined to be hopeful when we have friends to rely on.”<sup>9</sup> To this, Wadell writes, “hope is not a solitary virtue because we never hope alone, we always hope together. Hope is not something we can achieve for ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> This project has certainly inspired hope in me as a leader but also inspired the small group as it sought to enter into different places in the community. It has inspired hope within some council members burdened by fear in the midst of changing church and community dynamics. It has inspired hope with the small group who set out on this journey. As a group, we hope to see a new group formed out of our sharing our stories as well as our plans to build upon the new relationships that this work has procured. We are learning how to hope together seeing with new eyes the invitations to be part of the work that God is already doing in our community.

### **Missional Formation**

Lesslie Newbigin has strong words for those who divide word from deed. He writes, “Deeds of mercy and justice that are divorced from words are betrayal, and gospel

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<sup>7</sup> This is foundational to the process of appreciative inquiry that Mark Lau Branson outlines in *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Reflecting on the various steps in this Missional Leadership cohort, the process of A.I. was one of the most enjoyed part of the congregational experience affording opportunities to exchange hopes and memories in the context of hospitality throughout the congregation far surpassing the project purposes of the experience.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), II-II.17.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II-11.17.8.

<sup>10</sup> Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 136.

words void of deeds are false.”<sup>11</sup> Faith and deeds go hand-in-hand. While the word evangelism stirs anxiety in the lives of some Christians, Goheen calls for a type of evangelism that is organic to daily life thereby communicating the gospel in such a way that it “touches the deepest religious longings of the heart.”<sup>12</sup> Part of what made this missional journey so difficult for some in the congregation was that it felt so much like simply talking with neighbors. It lacked a defined evangelistic and programmatic structure. For some, it felt like ignoring our problems and just talking with people. Yet for the small group that committed to “just talking with people,” it was a far more meaningful encounter—both for us within the group but also into the community. Out of our experience of being together as a small group, the questions we armed ourselves with were for the sake of listening and learning from our neighbors about our neighborhood. Walking alongside neighbors with no explicitly evangelistic agenda resulted in a willing transparency in the exchange of hopes and dreams for the community. The goal was not about right answers or crusade-like gospel presentations. Rather, by engaging in a process, we could learn from the community and be changed.

This process benefited the community as well in several ways based on feedback we received since the initial conversations. First, in coming alongside people in the community with a variety of faith stories, our interest in their respective areas of influence inspired hope. It was a gift to several community leaders to share their thoughts and insights about how busy their lives were and how lonely they feel in their work.

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<sup>11</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, “Crosscurrents in Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 4 (1982): 148.

<sup>12</sup> Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 216.

Second, by taking genuine interest and asking questions, we became participants in parts of the neighborhood that before were held at a distance. Third, in hearing the hopes and dreams from various community leaders, we had opportunities to be a catalyst for change connecting resources to needs. Finally, the invitation to come alongside neighbors was an opportunity to cast recognition on those serving in vital sectors of the community.

Engaging neighborhood leaders, we could reflect any and every cause for celebration back to the community. Walking and talking with neighbors is cultivated in us a new awareness of how God sees and cares for the community. Goheen captures the sentiment that many clergy members of Ripon have heard regarding the community's perception of the church, "When unbelieving neighbors in the vicinity of a local church are asked why they think that church exists, they often answer, 'It exists for itself.' This is the precise opposite of the answer we would want to hear."<sup>13</sup> The missional formation that is taking place in a small group experience has incredible power to change a community. It will require a fresh approach to community engagement that is less about filling a sanctuary and more about investing in the quality of life in the city.

Reflecting on the variety of Reformed accents present within the local church, there are opportunities to engage in a missional journey without compromising the local theological vernacular. Walter Hobbs identifies twelve indicators of a missional church with a snapshot of what that looks like when it is lived in a particular community. These indicators include the following: the church proclaims the gospel; the church is a community in which all members are involved in learning to become disciples of Jesus;

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<sup>13</sup> Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 217.

the Bible is normative; the church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord; the church seeks to discern God's specific missional vocation for the entire community and for all its members; a missional community is indicated by how Christians behave toward one another; the church practices reconciliation; people within the church hold themselves accountable to one another in love; the church practices hospitality; worship is the central act by which the church celebrates with joy and thanksgiving both God's presence and God's promised future; the church has a vital public witness; and there is recognition that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God.<sup>14</sup> While many items on this list apply directly to the quality of life within the church, there is no shortage of direct implications for the church's ability to connect to the community. Similarly, there is strength when multiple congregations with varying theological traditions are able to make room for differences while cooperating in community engagement.

Timothy Keller asserts, "The gospel does more than connect Christians to one another; it also connects us to those in our cities who do not yet know God and who have needs we can help meet through ministries of justice and mercy."<sup>15</sup> He lists three biblical concepts serving as foundational to this: neighbor, service, and justice. Missional formation emerging out of this experience is rooted in these themes. To love our neighbor, it is implicit that we know who they are. Serving our neighbors came in one of the simplest forms: the gift of time, listening, and action. Living justly is an everyday

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<sup>14</sup> Walter C. Hobbs, "Method," in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Barrett, Lois Y. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 160-161.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 322.

activity in constant recognition of the claims of community and being willing to go beyond what is required of us.<sup>16</sup> Missional formation coming out of this experience is distinguishing between attractional ministry and incarnational ministry. This experiment was not about the community coming to us but our going out to them. Additionally, incarnational involvement led to community engagement extending well beyond asking questions. Listening and learning about what God is up to in the neighborhood must result in participation. More than the message of getting right with God, our engagement has helped facilitate collaborating with God in redeeming social structures and facilitating healing in the community.<sup>17</sup>

Some ways that God is working became clear in the work of the small group. After listening to the law enforcement in Ripon, one small group member committed to riding with the local police officers every Friday night. His consistent presence led to trust with those officers and expressed desire by others that he also ride along with them. Several officers now turn to him in times of need and ask for his help. Within the school, there are new opportunities to support teachers as tutoring and reading aides developed. Through this small group, an opportunity arose to utilize volunteers to bring music appreciation back to one of the schools, which had been cut due to state budget restrictions. Renewed efforts to encourage connections among business owners

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<sup>16</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 323.

<sup>17</sup> In Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile's, *Missional Church in Perspective*, they criticize those who do not embrace the implications of the *mission Dei* of what he calls "the social Trinity." Remembering that God is a community of mutual love who is redeeming all of creation will keep us from seeing "individual Christians as the focus of God's redemptive work" and will strengthen "the communal nature of the church as well as the corporate nature of discipleship" Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 84.

developed out of one small group member's work with the Chamber of Commerce. This helped to heal some wounds and confusion left when a thirty-year veteran on the Chamber was relieved of her work. Each of these opportunities come out of the group walking into the community and meeting people in their place of work. We believe we are only scratching the surface of the opportunities that exist by simply walking, listening, and watching for the places where presence matters. As we have opportunity to share these experiences with others in the congregation, we hope that these stories will encourage and lead others to discover their own incarnational ministry opportunities in the community.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONTEXT

Sedmak asserts, “Theology is done locally. In order to be honest to the local circumstances theology has to be as local theology, as theology that takes the particular situation seriously. Local theology...can be done by the people, and it is done with the people.”<sup>1</sup> He calls for theologians to “wake up” and learn how to listen, how to see, how to discover, and how to speak.<sup>2</sup> A great public speaker prepares his remarks attentive to his audience. This requires not only speaking to people but listening to them as well. In listening we gain insights to their questions, their objections, their hopes and their dreams. Too often, well-meaning Christians enter into a context assuming they already know the needs of a community and how best to respond to the need. This project made no such assumptions. Rather, we came with questions that invited dialogue without arrogant presuppositions. In this chapter, I reflect on the broader context of this missional journey. First, I focus on how listening to cultural narratives of the neighborhood refines our imagination and identity within the community. Second, I reflect on the formation of

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<sup>1</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

theology out of the context of the neighborhood experiences and portray an alternative narrative whereby loving neighbor and welcoming the stranger is central to the imagination of God’s work within the community.

### **Listening and Learning from Culture**

Reflecting on the missional congregation in context, Scott Frederickson writes, “[T]he congregation is to be influenced by its context in order to make inroads in reaching that context with a message that the context has not previously responded to.”<sup>3</sup> In order to impact a community, one must be engaged in that community. This is necessary in order to live in mutually beneficial ways—sometimes supporting the status quo and other times confronting it. This requires a faith community willing to live in, with, and sometimes against a specific context. Active contextualization requires becoming fluent in the social and cultural reality of society. The most important way we learn is spending time with people in the community whether that is at local business establishments, in schools, or in city centers. It is in those places we see, hear, and experience the verbal and non-verbal communication; it is in those places where relationships are built—all resulting in valuable insights into the community context. Refining my own pastoral imagination and identity has grown deeper in being present with the community—not in my capacity as a pastor but as a part of the community. After learning about church dynamics, this project steered away from being a church project and evolved into a leadership journey challenging traditional paradigms of

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Frederickson, “The Missional Congregation in Context,” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 63.

pastoral ministry in the local context. As members of a small community and holding positions of leadership, the broader community leaders knew most of us in the small group. My pastoral identity was well known in the community before the advent of this project. Nevertheless, the motivation for showing up and engaging the community was unlike what the community had come to expect from Reformed clergy. Involvement in community events was a demonstration of our commitment to the city beyond the faith community.

Cultural romanticism tends to see only the good in a culture and believes that the ideal state of the culture would be reached if there were no outside influence.<sup>4</sup> The more acquainted one becomes with culture and its delicate balancing of forces, the more mesmerizing it becomes. Yet the underlying assumption behind this kind of romanticism is that there is no sin in the world and that people are not cruel toward one another.<sup>5</sup> This sentiment present within much of the church community plays a significant role in the intentional disconnect by the Reformed community toward the broader community. We hide our brokenness and choose to deal with it internally. On the outside, we project our rationale as being able to do things better; on the inside, there is a deep insecurity that we are terrified to face.

The story of the CRC's birth in North America was for the purpose of creating something safe and familiar. From the language they spoke to the practices of life and worship, they brought their faith with them. For decades, Reformed churches in the

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<sup>4</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Central Valley of California have chosen to create a community within themselves and therefore decline to participate in larger community events.<sup>6</sup> This is not just a church problem. A similar dynamic is present within the city as it sees its own connections with neighboring cities. Ripon can do things better and will not need outside help from anyone. It is one of the ways the community protects itself from becoming like the cities around them; it is one of the ways we keep our problems close. There is a prideful affluence in Ripon that is pervasive in the community. One powerful motivation is independence from anyone. The city nurtures a context where walls are high and visitors seen as threats until proven otherwise. Citizens are encouraged to report the presence of strangers. One challenge of this project was finding the balance between respect of the culture and a need to change. For the faith community, the challenge is figuring out what Jesus meant when he said in Matthew 25:35, “I was a stranger, and you invited me in.”

### **Developing a Local Contextualized Theology**

According to Lewis Smedes, genuine hope combines imagination, faith and desire. A hopeful person imagines a good state of affairs, he believes that it is possible, and he desires the good state of affairs that he imagines and believes.<sup>7</sup> In listening and

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<sup>6</sup> A local pastor recalled the events following September 11, 2001 when many churches across the country were gathering and praying for the victims of the terrorist attacks. Local pastors and city government officials agreed to coordinate a community-wide prayer service at the Ripon Community Center (a neutral location). One attendee recalled how people stood around, inside and outside the community center, talking and just being together. No one wanted to go home. I asked one of the pastors coordinating this event about how the Reformed churches participated. He responded, “As for the CRC churches, my secretary said the basic response [to her calls and personal delivery of flyers] was that they already had their own programs on Wednesday nights. They chose not to participate in the community prayer meeting.”

<sup>7</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Standing on the Promises: Keeping Hope Alive for a Tomorrow We Cannot Control* (Nashville: Thomson Nelson, 1998), 11-25.

learning from culture, there is good reason to be hopeful about what the Spirit of God is up to in the community. There are four observations coming out of the experience of walking with neighbors that are of vital importance if the faith community will have the meaningful impact on the neighborhood that they desire. First, the ability for the faith community to engage the neighborhood requires confronting idols—first within the church and then within the community. The classic doctrine of substitutionary atonement that is celebrated weekly in worship must penetrate our independence, self-sufficiency, and greed, reminding us in our brokenness of our need for God’s grace and mercy, and inspiring us to live more simply and do justice. Ripon is an affluent middle-upper class community and prides itself in its wealth and independence. Yet the individuals living in the community have layers to their lives that go deep beneath the surface. If there were safer places to address the multilayered parts of our life together, opportunities to cultivate deeper relationships would be abundant. This requires vulnerability but it is also living the gospel with greater authenticity.

Related to the first, a second observation coming out of this experience of walking with neighbors is the need to understand alternative ways of sharing the gospel. Placing Bibles in hotel rooms, distributing religious tracts, or leading Bible studies at a truck stop are not bad things to do but they will increasingly be unsuccessful. There is a need to develop new skills in contextualizing Christianity through relationships within a community that is unfamiliar with the biblical story. The message remains of vital importance; but to communicate that today, the messenger must enter, challenge, and

retell the culture's stories with the gospel.<sup>8</sup> This requires the faith community to know their neighbors beyond seeing them as a project.

A third observation coming out of this experience of walking with neighbors is the need to reaffirm what many in the Reformed tradition have deeply imbedded in their being, namely, that Christian mission enters into every sphere of life. Richard Mouw blends this Kuyperian manifesto of Christ's claim upon "every square inch of the entire creation" with the influence of Mother Teresa,

Mother Teresa does not see the square inches Jesus has redeemed as territory that we must now triumphantly claim as our prize. She knows that many of those square inches are presently occupied by people with stinking, rotting flesh, by grieving parents, by frightened children—the abused, the abandoned, the persecuted and the desperately poor. And she is convinced that our 'claiming' those places in the name of Christ means that we must go out to join him 'in the distressing disguise' as he makes the agony of the suffering ones his very own. The square inches for which Christ died are still often very lonely and desolate places. And we must be willing to take our place in those situations.<sup>9</sup>

Reclaiming the priesthood of all believers, the faith community must remember they are missionaries in whatever they do which includes proclaiming the message of the gospel with words, with love for one another and neighbors, and in their daily work of integrating faith in all they do. They live the message inside and outside the church community. This calls for a commitment to serving the community beyond the explicitly religious concerns of the community. The church is more than an alternative society of shared morals and values. While it is to be distinctive, it is not separate from its surroundings. It is a gathering that must pour into the community for the good of the city.

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Keller talks about this need to contextualize the gospel in Part 3 of *Center Church* arguing for contextualization that must be intentional, balanced, biblical, and active.

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 154-155.

As Bonhoeffer says, “The Christian community should not be governed by self-justification, which violates others, but by justification by grace, which serves others. Once individuals have experienced the mercy of God in their lives, from then on they desire only to serve.”<sup>10</sup>

A final observation coming out of this experience of walking with neighbors is the need for unity. This call to unity is to those worshiping together within the local congregation, those who worship down the street in other congregations, and it is a call to unity in our relationships to the community. Within the local congregation, there are fractured relationships that motivate people to sit on opposite ends of the sanctuary on Sunday. Additionally, the contempt between Christians worshiping in different churches is no secret. There are family dynamics within the worshipping community that harms our witness to the neighbors. This has been part of the community DNA for a long time. Reflecting on relationships into the community, the perception expressed by many inside the church community is that the city does not offer enough quality in their institutions; therefore, the Reformed community has created their own. This includes educational institutions, business networks and community service groups. Real or not, these perceptions create contempt that will be difficult to bridge apart from a commitment to walk together whenever possible.

This experiment was an opportunity to experience hospitality together. Through time spent together in a variety of ways both formal and informal, we entered into our community eager to learn more by engaging leaders in a variety of roles within the city.

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<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 96.

This was more than simply conducting interviews and reporting data but it was also an opportunity to see and experience what is taking place in our education community, our business community, and within our local government community. Each of us found ourselves wanting to see and experience more of what we were learning. Walking within the community gave opportunities to meet neighbors. Participating alongside people with shared interests in existing structures was a way to join in what the community has already been doing. Opportunities to network helped us become more aware of what is happening as well as inviting others to be part of walking with neighbors. In many ways, this project was very simple. It involved slowing down and paying attention to things that had been happening around us all along. Engaging the community, we learned much about what God is up to in the community and could see for ourselves the opportunities for his people to be part of that work.

Sharing hospitality with one another was a chance to practice what we are comfortable with, namely, being the host. The unexpected gift we received a group was getting to be the guest. This movement was replicated in our entering into the community; first asking community leaders for time to ask questions followed by invitations to be the recipient of their hospitality. The invitations extended to us as guests felt very different from what we have experienced before when trying to impose our programs and plans upon the community. Perhaps the greatest observation we walk away with is the feeling of genuine welcome that was free from suspicion about our motivation for being present.

There are two significant lessons learned coming out of this project as it relates to the broader context of this missional journey. First, by slowing down and paying

attention to the people closest to us, we were given opportunity to see things God cares deeply about that have been part of our community long before we could see anything of it. For each of us, the fast paced, myopic perspective of our own world impaired our ability to see opportunities. As needs were perceived within our church community, our first response was to create our own solution by keeping things within our faith community. This allowed us to retain control of our environment but prevented us from engaging opportunities to know our neighbors and participate with them as they faced similar issues. Our defaults are changing from trying to replicate our own churchly programs to inquiring into and seeing ways to collaborate with the broader community with shared values and concerns for the overall health of the city. Over time, it may help establish a level of relevancy for the church that extends beyond our own interests to the betterment of the community.

A second lesson coming out of this project comes out of the experience of being the stranger who is invited into a community from which we have largely isolated ourselves. It is an entirely different experience when invited into a community as opposed to imposing ourselves into something. This should not be a surprise to the faith community. Our first response to those bringing programs and services to us is that of suspicion followed by considering options from within the community of faith.<sup>11</sup> What we learned in this experience is being the invited guest includes a kind of hospitality that

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<sup>11</sup> For example, when a local funeral home approached the church about offering a workshop for church members on end-of-life planning, the first response was that of suspicion about their motives. After establishing there was no product they were selling but rather a workshop they created seeing the stress such decisions are on family without such plans, the faith community chose to develop their own program led from within the church community. They were unable to see this opportunity to both benefit church members and opportunity it would have been to invite neighbors who would benefit from such a workshop.

is welcoming and appreciated from which relationships of trust are more naturally cultivated. Heifetz and Linsky capture the benefit of such an approach well, “People find meaning by connecting with others in a way that makes life better.”<sup>12</sup> An important lesson learned is connecting with others is not just to take place within the confines of the church. Rather, when the ministry of the church extends into the community, both church and community are stronger.

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<sup>12</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 208.

## CHAPTER 8

### LEADERSHIP

What started as a program of study to help a congregation embrace a missional identity has become an opportunity to help me learn much about leadership. Growing up in the CRC colony from early childhood through seminary, one of the most important lessons learned in this program has been by standing on the balcony. Heifetz and Linsky present a common tendency that takes place within organizations and communities. They write, “Most people instinctively follow a dominant trend in an organization or community, without critical evaluation of its merits. The herd instinct is strong. And a stampede not only tramples those who don’t keep pace, it also makes it hard to see another direction—until the dust settles.”<sup>1</sup> I have been deeply ingrained in the Dutch CRC narrative for most of my formative years. New lessons in leadership are arguably the most important developments in my ministry capacities coming out of this cohort. In this chapter, I reflect on new learning gained by joining a small group of people in listening to our neighbors. First, I reflect on the importance of the balcony and insights gained from that perspective with direct implications for how I practice ministry today. In

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<sup>1</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 51.

the second section I focus on how the experiment of shared hospitality, listening, and reflecting has facilitated new insights into mission not otherwise recognized in my own conventional social imaginary. Finally, I reflect on how missional leadership frameworks prompt an alternative approach to pastoral leadership and missional vocation.

### **Leadership—A Balcony Perspective**

Heifetz and Linsky use the metaphor of a balcony in helping leaders get perspective in the midst of action. This helps leaders in self-reflection. They explain, “Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray.”<sup>2</sup> The perspective from the dance floor is limited to one’s immediate surroundings. There are valuable insights to gain; however, it is a lot like looking a portrait with a strong zoom lens—great detail but not a lot of perspective.

The view of the dancefloor from an elevated vantage point offers a very different picture. The balcony is a safe place to gain important insights about what is going on; however, in order to affect change, you cannot remain there. Heifetz and Linsky assert the need for leaders to cultivate the skill of moving back and forth to have fuller picture of what is taking place. They take it one step further suggesting, “The goal is to come as close as you can in both places simultaneously, as if you had one eye looking from the

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<sup>2</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 53.

dance floor and one eye looking down from the balcony, watching all the action, including your own.”<sup>3</sup>

The missional journey of the past few years has included joys and struggles. As a congregation, there is evidence that we like the idea more than the reality. Heifetz and Linsky write, “All too often, ‘mission’ is something we do to outsiders, not something that drives the work inside the community itself.”<sup>4</sup> Inside our narrative of power, this works itself out well. As long as mission is what we bring to the community, we can feel good about ourselves based on what we brought to them. However, at various points through this program of study, the introspective work required of the congregation challenged our plans to have a more controlled external focus. To look at ourselves and take the posture of guest in the community was threatening. It shed light in some of the darker places within the congregation that needed to be address—internal problems related to our history and the quality of relationships within the congregation.

Much of the way leaders responded to their discomfort was in raising suspicion about the process. A narrative of distrust that had characterized past relationships between pastor and council quickly became part of my relationship with the council consequently compromising leadership support of a church-wide missional journey. Without support of the council, this project was “the pastor’s project” as opposed to a journey of learning together. What I saw on the balcony was need for an alternative

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<sup>3</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 53-54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

approach on a smaller scale knowing that there were some within the congregation very committed to this journey.

While congregational lessons in leadership were important, this process had much to teach me about my own leadership capacities and liabilities. The leadership lessons are ongoing. With a narrative of distrust coming from the council that I did not understand, I felt my leadership capital greatly diminished. Heifetz and Linsky give expression to it well when they say, “Exercising leadership is an expression of your aliveness. But your life juice—your creativity and caring, your curiosity and eagerness to question, your compassion and love for people—can seep away daily as you get beat up, put down, or silenced.”<sup>5</sup> This is precisely what was happening within me. While I could not see it at the time, I dressed up my own defenses with the virtuous names they write about: innocence becomes cynicism dressed up as realism; curiosity becomes arrogance dressed up as authoritative knowledge; and compassion become callousness dressed up as the thick skin of experience.<sup>6</sup>

There is no shortage of powerful lessons coming out of this cohort experience and gratitude for the people invested into walking with me. While some of the growing pains were painful, the lessons I walk away with are priceless. Roxburgh and Romanuk write, “The primary element in cultivating a missional congregation is the personal character of the leader, those traits and habits that must be present if anyone is to lead an organization through adaptive, discontinuous change.”<sup>7</sup> They continue, “Self-identity refers to the

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<sup>5</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-236.

<sup>7</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 114.

nature, character, and behavior of a leader in relationship to the congregation and its developing life.”<sup>8</sup> This character is what engenders confidence and credibility. It takes time to take root. It is “the place where one’s deep hunger, personal identity, and calling merge to generate the confidence that allows people to trust a leader and agree to journey together in a new direction.”<sup>9</sup> Trust is imperative when walking a road that feels risky and unknown. Within the evolving small group, mutual trust was gaining strength quickly—trust capital that was not on deposit with the council whose leadership changed annually. Trust is an issue throughout the congregational system where there exists much room to grow. The small group proved a much more effective venue to cultivate trust as we owned the steps forward on a journey of listening and learning in the neighborhood.

Standing on the balcony, the primary lesson I take away from this journey with the congregation is the importance both of having time to build a healthy connection with the congregation and the trust from them to enter into this new space. The absence of both was costly and a painful concession early in the process. Yet the journey was not for nothing. Many of the missing identity and character components on a congregational level that compromised the opportunity to enter into this journey as a congregation were present within the small group that became the essence of this project. Hospitality became a critical component for the group as well as what we would experience together in the community. Sharing these experiences as a small group back to a council and congregation allowed for more meaningful reception by both. From the balcony, it is

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<sup>8</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

clear that important leadership lessons will carry forward in life and in ministry for the small group, the pastor, the council, and the congregation.

### **Hospitality—A Counter Narrative to Power and Suspicion**

According to Charles Taylor, a social imaginary refers to “ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>10</sup> Our social imaginary as a faith community is inadequate primarily because it is impairing our ability to make room for new thinking and practices. If our thinking cannot change, neither will our practice. Calling this a profoundly biblical idea, Richard Mouw writes, “We cannot hope to bring about effective change unless we are willing to be changed.”<sup>11</sup> His hunch about those who worry about being “compromised” by involvement outside of explicitly Christian settings is that they are being influenced in some good ways and do not know how to interpret that experience. Yet when we enter into these places where God is at work, we should not expect to stay the same, nor should we want to. “We cannot hope to transform others without a commitment to be transformed ourselves.”<sup>12</sup>

Shared hospitality, listening, and reflecting bring forth important insights into mission and they are transforming us in God-blessed ways. Henri Nouwen writes, “In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 111-113.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.”<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt such longing exists with the church structures; however, in an environment where power dictates, safety within that context is not a common experience. Within the church community, there remains the painful search for hospitality. That need is not unique to the church; it exists within the community as well. We heard this from educators longing for stronger families and community cooperation; we heard this from entrepreneurs and civil servants yearning for stronger networks to include government, church, school, business, and residents; we heard it from clergymen to see great opportunities for a community that can come together for the sake of building relationships. Elizabeth Newman echoes the important role hospitality plays saying, “[H]ospitality draws us into a richer context where we must make sense of ourselves as ‘guests’ and ‘hosts,’ acknowledge our dependence on others, and learn to live with gratitude.”<sup>14</sup> Hospitality confronts our pervasive self-sufficient individualism with another story that has profound biblical undercurrents that speak directly into our human need. Hospitality answers to our defaults of control and power with the gift of space to be human. Nouwen asserts that the Christian community is best suited to lead by example to this end. “Although many . . . strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open

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<sup>13</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 65.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 38.

and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Nouwen says,

Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude, and do harm. But still—that is our vocation: to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.<sup>16</sup>

The community gave this gift generously as we were welcomed into their space.

### **Reimagining Leadership**

In a small community like Ripon, California, bringing an outsider into any leadership capacity is threatening to the institution. From city government to schools, from businesses to the church, this is a palpable experience throughout the community. The memories of the congregation of previous pastoral leaders also inform the posture of the church as new leaders assume responsibilities. Yet, “without the presence of outside experience, a local church runs the risk of turning in on itself, becoming self-satisfied with its own achievements.”<sup>17</sup> Missional leadership frameworks provide an alternative approach to pastoral leadership and missional vocation.

One such approach is to discern and reimagine the role of leaders who cultivate an environment that allow the missional imagination of the people of God to flourish. Effective Christian leadership is a process of helping a congregation embody into its corporate life the practices that shape who they are and what they are as they discover

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<sup>15</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 19.

what God is up to both in the congregation and in the community. Leadership is particular to time and place occupied by people with unique histories. Pastors enter into those spaces with their own unique identity and history. From changes in congregational composition, changes in pastoral leadership, annual changes among council leadership, and changes in congregational membership, the composition of congregational and institutional life is always fluid. What works in one place or during one year will not necessarily work in another. While the pastor's role is often a common variable from one year to the next, there are many other dynamics at work. A better leadership approach would be to empower the congregation to live out of their collective missional imagination with a leadership board that is willing to equip and empower their faithful living out of those places. That is what this experiment enabled a small group to do, listen and learn from the neighborhood and tells its own story to leaders and congregational members with a challenge to continue the practice. It is an organic approach that allows the congregation to participate in an experience and encourage others to join in the journey. It is a slow journey that includes many stops along the way to reflect what God is remaking if we are able to surrender our need to control outcomes—no books, no programs, no outside experts—just traveling lightly with the Spirit into the neighborhood and joining God in the places where he is already at work.

Within the CRC, there are two polarities in considering the function of pastoral leaders. One extreme sees the pastor as the primary leader—the CEO. The focus is on the charismatic pastor with a big vision and church leaders who follow his lead. Heifetz speaks of “the myth of leadership . . . the solitary individual whose heroism and brilliance

enable him to lead the way.”<sup>18</sup> With this model, success or failure fall to its leader and the congregation has no responsibility. Another extreme is the minimized role of the pastor in congregational leadership. In this limited capacity, the pastor becomes passive and some CRC congregations gravitating to this extreme have seen congregations deteriorated and confused over questions about who they are and what they do. Adaptive leadership transcends these extreme polarities by asking good questions and helping wrestle with the congregation on questions of values and discerning mission together. Van Gelder talks about visionary leadership involving “a large number of persons in both formal and informal roles who help shape a congregation’s ministry.”<sup>19</sup> This model of leadership places the people of God in their rightful place releasing them to carry out the purposes for which God created them. It “takes seriously the biblical understanding of the people of God as the place where God’s Spirit is most specifically at work. It is in and through God’s people that God’s future emerges.”<sup>20</sup>

Out of this small group experience, inspired by texts such as Luke 10 and the call to dwell with the stranger, I have been challenged to rethink how I fit in the traditional role of pastor in the CRC. Having had past experience working with both extremes of leadership models previously mentioned, I have tried each of these polarized approaches to leadership and found both have been detrimental to community development. This experience has been different. My leadership as pastor has been to set up and facilitate a

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<sup>18</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 1994), 251.

<sup>19</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling* (Eagle, ID: ACI Publishing, 2005), 145.

process whereby the pastor is not the decision-maker for congregation but rather a guide helping the congregation own what next steps ought to include. I have intentionally led by making space for interaction, listening, and sharing experiences leading to a point where the congregation can own and invest in implementing further action.

Out of this experience, there was one decision we made as a family in our commitment to walk more meaningfully into the community. Living into these new challenges of trust and vulnerability, hospitality and community engagement, we decided to enroll our children in the public school. This decision allows us to more fully engage our community, to connect with other parents who have made the same decision, to be more true to our convictions, and hopefully challenge some of the views people in the church have about secular institutions and how Christians operate within them. Many conversations have resulted from this change. It has allowed for new meaningful connections into the broader community as we are invested in their success. It has stimulated new opportunities for our family to have a connection in both communities and help build some bridges between them. And is commencing generative dialogue in the church that is learning to see value to increased diversity of presence in the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

Last year I took my first sailing class. There was reading assigned before the class began, worksheets to be completed, and hours of classroom instruction leading finally to the opportunity to sit in a sailboat and practice what we had learned. We started sailing small boats in the basin and then into the harbor. Hours of practice and learning from both success and failure, I have learned much about reading the wind, setting sails, and discovering the joy of sailing the deep blue waters of the Pacific Ocean. None of this would have come about if not for actually pushing off from the dock into the water, studying how the sails interact with the wind, and trying to sail. Roxburgh and Romanuk use the metaphor of sailing in presenting the missional change model. Talking about the tacking of a sailboat into the wind in order to arrive at the desired location, they write, “Change rarely happens in a straight line.”<sup>1</sup> Sailing requires moving back and forth, reading the wind, adapting to waves, currents, and wind along the way. There are few better metaphors for church leaders today.

Together as a small group of leaders who joyfully walked together on this journey, there has been much gain. The quality of our time together built a community within a small group that extended beyond a missional experiment. It stimulated curiosity that continues to teach us as we discern what it means to be God’s people wherever we call home. It challenged the church council to consider another way of thinking about community—both inside and outside the walls of the church. As a congregation, there are areas of learning that have taken place. The appreciative inquiry helped some

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<sup>1</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 79.

parishioners rediscover and celebrate the story of AVCRC. It inspired some to rekindle relationships that were life-giving in the past and have more to offer today. The adaptive challenge team gave new language for the present that extends to a larger context as well. The action learning team was a generative experience that remains to shape how the church thinks about ministry. The council continues to learn about the importance of remembering what it means to be leaders in the church both within the faith community and into the city. Overall, during these years of journeying into the missional church, the congregation lost about twenty percent of its membership for a variety of reasons. In a congregation filled with interrelated family units, this was painful. Welcoming new people into the congregation is changing the congregation in new ways—some celebrate the diversity and others lament the loss of what used to be.

Perhaps the most important shift in the church is a movement away from the *sola pastora* model moving toward more of a congregational participatory model—from pastor-driven to pastor-coached ministry. The initial small group formed to inaugurate a missional experiment took on a unique character that was not driven by any one individual. Their reporting back to the council and congregation was a collective effort. Within that group are coaches that are well-equipped for walking with another group that will emerge out of this experience. There exists a new openness to a fresh approach. It is clear to the church leadership that they are in uncharted space. While some still default to importing programs marketed by mega churches with hope for an attractional event that will bring people back, there now exists a growing interest in traveling lightly with a few others to watch for ways to participate in what God is already up to in the neighborhood. Looking forward from this point on the journey, the council has asked the elders to

schedule a congregational town hall meeting. Such gatherings have been used for years at AVCRC as a venue to engage in dialogue with the congregation in smaller gatherings that foster greater conversation around tables. The small group will share with the congregation in a similar format that was used in presenting to the council.<sup>2</sup> This is intended to be a time to tell the stories and share sightings of how God is at work among us. There is no desire to create new programs or hire additional staff. Rather, the church desires to learn to look and listen differently and include greater emphasis on reflecting on what we are experiencing with this renewed perspective. Elders will convene these town hall gatherings as the delegated decision-making body of the church.

Thus far, I have spoken more of where the church is at on this journey; yet this project focuses also on the new missional leadership insights gained by a small group of leaders engaging our neighborhood in a missional experiment. When I accepted a call to AVCRC in November 2007, I was excited about the challenge ahead. Shortly into that new call I found myself discouraged as I realized their hopes for being missional looked very different than what I had assumed—several articulated their desire for the pastor to bring more people to the pews and more money in the plate. Within the first year of ministry together at AVCRC, one deacon said in council, “Pastor, I thought by now you would have grown the church a lot more than this but we are smaller today than when you came with a budget that is more in trouble than it has been before.” Pastors can become scapegoats for demographic shifts and generational change. The old denominational loyalty is challenged today by consumer preferences. This sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> This is referenced in Chapter 4 and outlined in Appendix A.

motivates disgruntled parishioners to leverage their wishes with their wallets and their feet. The church has suffered much from these trends in a community that has plenty of alternative options. While I could not see it at the time, God would redeem these difficult leadership challenges, clarifying a few things about my calling in the process. Though there was no wind in my sails for a season, time spent waiting was critical to my discerning what God was doing. There are two areas of greatest learning coming out of this missional experiment that continue to shape my leadership as a pastor: reflections on the role of trust in leadership and embracing an alternative leadership typology. While there are implications for both congregations and leaders, I focus now on what this experiment has taught me about missional leadership.

### **Learning About Trust**

In the Introduction, I stated my adaptive challenge as not knowing how to lead in an environment that overvalues power and defaults to suspicion. When one distrusts people, one is suspicious of them. Whether it is their character, their integrity, their agenda, or their capabilities, distrust is a lack of confidence in another person. There is a long history of distrust within many CRC congregations. From their first years as immigrants in America, there was distrust that prompted a separation from the Reformed Church in America in favor of starting what is now the CRC. Decades later, distrust remains pervasive in congregations and among clergy. AVCRC is no exception to this as more former pastors have left under a cloud of suspicion than otherwise.

Having grown up in this denominational context, there has been no shortage of examples of distrust. My first recruiting experience with Calvin Theological Seminary

involved extensive reference checking on my commitment to the denomination. A illuminating statement made to me in considering Calvin Seminary was this, “You first need to decide if you want to be a CRC pastor; if the answer is yes, you need to choose Calvin Seminary.” At the time, Calvin was the exclusive seminary for training clergy to serve in the CRC. Anyone who pursued another route to ordination would be required to spend an additional year or more at Calvin Seminary after completing his or her degree at another institution.

During my first year at Calvin Seminary, recorded interviews were conducted by the seminary of all first-year students to further explore the extent of our commitment to the CRC. Less than a decade before my attending Calvin Seminary, the CRC suffered a painful split as a denomination over two primary issues: homosexuality and the role of women as office-bearers in the church. This bred greater levels of distrust within the CRC community about the agenda of those pursuing leadership in the church. As a result, the aforementioned interviews became standard practice prior to becoming eligible for candidacy. Furthermore, the classroom environment was generally perceived as unsafe space to ask questions that challenged our most sacred of doctrines. As such, students like myself who had grown up in the CRC found the classroom was not a place we could ask the kinds of questions about doctrines we had blindly accepted in our youngest years.

Trust issues are part of the church culture and issues pastors carry with them from one place to another. Steven Covey writes, “While we tend to judge ourselves by our intent, we tend to judge others by their behavior. We also tend to judge others’ intent by

our own paradigms and experience.”<sup>3</sup> Clergy inherit trust and distrust from the former pastors’ leadership when they step into a new church environment. Coming into AVCRC, this inheritance included stepping into a story of clergy separated from leadership positions in a cloud of suspicion. While none left on formal separation grounds through denominational church order, stories circulating of former pastors included allegations of inappropriate sexual relationships, clergy more involved in personal investments than church work, clergy fabricating anonymous hostile letters between church leaders and members, and clergy plagiarizing sermons from online sources. There is a pattern of distrust between congregation and clergy. If Covey is correct in our tendency to judge others’ intent by our own paradigms and experience, there is undoubtedly a toxic metanarrative within the congregational system. Symptoms of distrust in the institution include leadership holding secret meetings, micromanagement, redundant hierarchy, unhappy staff, experienced office-bearer nominees refusing to serve subsequent terms citing traumatic past experiences in office, disunity among office-bearers, and hidden agendas.

This is not just a congregational problem. Pastors bring their own metanarrative of distrust into the church based on their own experiences. Naming my own adaptive challenge, I was one-sided and wrong in placing the primary offense on the congregation neglecting to recognize my own inability to trust others. More accurate, the adaptive challenge I have faced is that I do not know how to be a leader in an environment where mutual trust is not a shared non-negotiable value. Again, as Covey asserts, we judge

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 76.

ourselves by our intent but we judge others by their behavior. There are numerous trust problems within this story—the church’s and my own. Symptoms of my own distrust of leaders include defensive posturing, animated conversations, guarded communication, doubting others reliability and commitment, and communication colored by fear, doubt, and worry. While concealing this from much of the congregation was easy to do, evidence of distrust with leaders was paralyzing to my ability to lead.

Attempting a missional journey in such an environment cannot be successful. Roxburgh and Romanuk write, “Without trust, missional transformation can never occur because it is the glue that enables a community to move forward in difficult times.”<sup>4</sup> More than a missional journey, the need to establish trust, grow trust, restore trust, and extend trust within the organization is great. To restore trust requires multiple parties to change their feelings and place confidence in you—something beyond any one person’s control. Trust cannot be mandated. To trust another is to be willing to be vulnerable. Brené Brown writes, “Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it’s understanding the necessity of both; it’s engaging. It’s being all in.”<sup>5</sup> We shared this commitment within a smaller group of leaders out of which came tremendous learning through the experience of community together. It would serve the church leadership well to focus great effort on continuing to cultivate trust through opportunities to be together beyond the agenda of church work. Cultivating such an environment will improve the ministry and mission of the church as well as the working relationship between church council and staff.

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<sup>4</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leadership*, 139.

<sup>5</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 1-2.

## **An Alternative Leadership Typology**

Without a bi-directional flow of trust, our congregational missional journey was never able to begin outside of one small group experience. The discontinuous change within the church required taking risks and stepping into uncharted territory, but without trust that could never happen. With more than thirty years of broken trust between church leaders and clergy, reestablishing trust is an extremely difficult, but worthwhile, pursuit. In addition to exploring ways to inject trust within the leadership structure of the church, there is a need to redistribute power. The Church Order outlines a system of delegated authority whereby the congregation elects office-bearers to make the majority of leadership decisions within the church. Consequently, there are a few in elected decision-making positions. A common lament from the congregation is that they do not know what is going on in the church. Parishioners disengage; elected leaders come in for 3-year terms and cycle out of office; some leave the church once their term expires. The short 3-year term makes trust, unity, community, and forward momentum very difficult when one-third of the church leadership turns over every year. This dynamic was detrimental to our church missional journey.

There was a transition in this capstone doctoral project from a church project to a pastoral leader project as the composition of the council changed and support for the missional journey changed. Though disappointing at the time, this dynamic is likely to be the case in other Christian Reformed congregations in similar ethnocentric communities like Ripon. The project emerging out of this transition will serve other congregations well when facing similar leadership dynamics. By engaging a few traveling companions for this missional journey with whom trust was able to be cultivated, we lowered our

defensive posture and entered into the community with less baggage than what we had in the larger church context. Here we were able to see the advantage of a foundation of trust in engaging the needs and opportunities within the community. Each group member had a part in leading. My part was drawing together the energies and skills of the group. As they each went out in their respective areas of influence, they did the same—drawing out the energies and passions of community leaders and “cultivating an environment that will give voice and meaning to the events that seem to be determining people’s lives.”<sup>6</sup>

Within the church are plenty of stories and passions that are untapped opportunities to participate with what God is doing around us. They need not be formalized ministries of the church; yet, they are worth celebrating as a community of faith. Church leaders must reimagine their work celebrating that God’s Spirit is at work among God’s people, acknowledging that God’s future is among God’s people and not exclusively among the elected office-bearers, and cultivating an environment that empowers the missional imagination of God’s people as they live out God’s plan in their local context.<sup>7</sup>

On a much smaller scale, the small group in this project experienced these things together. The gifts we received out of this experiment were in spending time together in Scripture, enjoying one another’s hospitality, and listening together to where God was at work within the group and into the neighborhood. Out of this experience, the recommendation is to approach this missional journey organically on a much smaller scale. The benefits coming out of this approach include a slow organic strengthening of

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<sup>6</sup> Roxburgh, *The Sky Is Falling*, 163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

community within the church, building trust, sharing passions, and participating in what God is up to in the community. Boren writes, “To love means being in relationship with others who do not have that love. We are investing in them not just through projects but through continued, often very costly interaction.”<sup>8</sup> Extending this love within the church will help strengthen relationships and build trust. Out of that experience, there are endless opportunities to engage the neighborhood that is ready to welcome others into the life of the community. It is an exciting place where God has been at work and invites us to join him in that work.

This experiment revealed the depth of hospitality the community is ready to extend to the church. There is a desire for community engagement and the need is great. The community taught us about receiving hospitality and extending trust in their willingness to be vulnerable about strengths and weaknesses—victory and defeat. In a speech delivered on April 23, 1910 at the Sorbonne in Paris, Theodore Roosevelt captures the importance of being willing to risk being vulnerable with profound implications for how trust strengthens community:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is not effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the word, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Boren, *Missional Small Groups*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Wisdom of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Donald J. Davidson (New York: Citadel Press, 2003), 48.

This experiment enabled me to embrace my leadership challenge giving me the experience of being welcomed and trusted by the community. Each of us experienced greater trust by our neighbors than from within the church as we set out on this journey together. Receiving their hospitality, we got a glimpse of what God has been doing in our city, in our schools, and in the business community. If indeed God’s Spirit is at work among God’s people, and God’s future is among God’s people, then the church must empower the missional imagination of God’s people with their unique gifts, abilities, and connections in the community. Meeting together is not the purpose of the small group; it is about sharing life together—missional communion with God, missional relating with one another, and missional engagement into the neighborhood.<sup>10</sup> It is an invitation to “practice being God’s people in the midst of a world that treats people nonrelationally.”<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, there are two recommendations coming out of this project. First, the need to cultivate an environment of trust is a non-negotiable characteristic of any missional journey. This requires greater levels of collaboration and partnership, increased communication, and transparent relationships throughout the system. The second recommendation flows out of the first, namely, that leaders must release and empower the people of God to service within the church and into the community. From a pastoral leadership perspective, this requires facilitating a process and guiding others to make and own their decisions. It involves creating space for listening, discerning, testing, and reflecting on those places where God is at work and deciding how we will join the Spirit

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<sup>10</sup> Boren, *Missional Small Groups*, 62-63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

in that work. One of the more difficult parts of that process is slowing down to listen. AVCRC has yet to decide as a church how they will embrace this. For now, the journey remains a slow one of one group commissioned to engage the process coached by those who have done the same, report back to the leadership and congregation, and invite a new group to join in a similar process. In an environment where people feel the burden of their very busy lives, that can be as simple as reimagining the areas in which people are already engaged in the community and looking through fresh lenses at what God is up to in that place—then joining God in that work.

## APPENDIX A

### **Lessons from the Neighborhood Format of the Report to Council Council Retreat 2014**

#### **NEW CONVERSATIONS (what we have done)**

What have we done? Use a story to capture your experience.

What did you enjoy most about the experience?

#### **NEW LEARNING (what happened and why does it matter)**

##### **Listening → Discerning → Experimenting → Reflecting**

How are we experiencing God at work in all of this?

How are our assumptions about being church being challenged?

What are we learning about listening to God?

What are we learning about ministry of *presence* in the community?

#### **NEW QUESTIONS**

What is being church in our neighborhood?

Are there ways to integrate these practices into the everyday practices of the congregation's life (NOT another program)?

What do we do now? How do we encourage others to join in this exercise?

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