

Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

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LISTENING FOR CHRIST, PROCLAIMING CHRIST: SMALL GROUPS AS A
CATALYST OF TRANSFORMATION AT GRACE COVENANT

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ABSTRACT

Listening for Christ, Proclaiming Christ: Small Groups as a Catalyst of Transformation at
Grace Covenant

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The purpose of this paper is to develop a way for the membership of Grace Covenant to mature in Christ through a more participatory manner of discipleship. In particular, this paper seeks to move the church's discipleship process into the homes of members where Scripture is actively engaged and discussed by all present. The spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* will foster this kind of engagement with Scripture during each meeting.

The first portion of this paper explores Grace Covenant's unique context and opportunities for growth given its location. This portion also argues that the church's current discipleship model is deficient and unable to engage the next generation of Christians in the area. Finally, this section provides a few reasons that the church can be hopeful about fresh, participatory expressions of discipleship emerging in the homes of members.

Part two of this paper entails a theological reflection about the Trinitarian nature of Christian community and the implications for Christian formation unfolding in home-based small groups. The paper will further show the ways in which the Reformed tradition both hinders and undergirds this new paradigm for discipleship. Themes of community, vulnerability, and the power of the Holy Spirit are prominent in the argument that the membership will most fully be transformed in and through home-based small groups that employ the *lectio divina* process with Scripture.

Part two concludes by outlining a practical strategy for building a church-wide small group experience. A central aspect of this process involves taking the necessary time to train and build a strong group of small group leaders from within the congregation. Once the church-wide effort is underway, the paper highlights the importance of listening for testimonies as the key indicator of the Spirit's faithful work of transformation.

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PART ONE

CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The primary paradigm for discipleship at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church is a model that I have experienced at each of the Mainline Presbyterian churches I have attended or served. It is a paradigm that relies heavily on a trained teacher or minister who didactically teaches the content of a prepared lesson. Sunday schools and Bible studies alike are led by competent leaders who do a great deal of research and then impart their knowledge to a classroom of adults.

Most of the time, the focus of these lessons is a particular Scripture text or book of the Bible. The teacher explains the historical background of the text, quotes insights gleaned from a reliable commentary, and often the teacher ends by tying the text to some kind of relevant application. Sometimes the teacher provides a handout that the students can take home for further consideration on the topic. Critical throughout this process is that all doctrinal teaching needs to be correct. Grace Covenant is well trained in the theological foundation of the Reformed Tradition, and the church is keenly aware when teaching strays from a Reformed perspective. Thus, there is a definite affinity for teachers who faithfully employ confessions like *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, *The Second Helvetic Confession*, and *The Heidelberg Catechism*.

Grace Covenant operates with similar assumptions to many churches of the twentieth century. In describing those churches, Craig van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile write, “Ministry was primarily reserved for the clergy who taught, cared for, and administered settled flocks, often as a hierarchical class set apart from or above the rest of the congregation. These clergy were often understood to represent Christ to the congregation, rather than the whole congregation representing Christ to the world in the

power of the Spirit.”¹ They go on to explain that among Reformed churches, “pedagogue” became the dominant paradigm for understanding what a pastor is to be in these settings. This didactic, Scripture-first, Reformed theology-focused type of teaching certainly has its strengths as it allows disciples of Jesus to consider Scripture and Reformed theology in an intellectual, thoughtful manner. A good teacher ensures that the central content of the faith is passed to the next generation. It is, in fact, the paradigm that has been the conduit through which the Holy Spirit has strengthened and nurtured many of the Mainline Presbyterian congregations during the twentieth century, and as will be explored, it is a paradigm with merit as well as Reformed roots.

However, the late Christian philosopher and ethicist Dallas Willard was particularly attentive to discipleship trends in the Church during the latter portion of the twentieth century and the early-twenty-first century. His summary observation challenges some of the foundational Mainline assumptions about discipleship: “Let it be said once and for all that . . . doctrinally perfect profession (is not) to be taken as a major objective in an adequate curriculum for Christlikeness.”² If “Christlikeness” is the goal of discipleship, then any paradigm that places a central focus on ensuring perfectly professed doctrine is inadequate, if not lacking significantly. Lessons full of information do not necessarily lead to genuine transformation by the Holy Spirit over time.

Willard gives further illumination to the deficiencies of the pedagogue model. He states,

¹ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 155.

² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2002), 44.

We have counted on preaching, teaching, and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer, and have counted on faith to form the inner life and outward behavior of the Christian. But, for whatever reason, this strategy has not turned out well. The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others.³

While necessary to pass the theological content of the faith along to the next generation, it is most vital to introduce the next generation to the living Christ in ways that do not merely inform, but form and shape how they live and image God's Kingdom today. The Church may be doctrinally assured of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ, but Willard observes that such knowledge has not proven effective in shaping people who live like Jesus. Concurring with Willard, Greg Ogden states plainly that this conventional discipleship paradigm, "wrongly operate(s) on the assumption that if someone has information, having that information will automatically lead to transformation. In other words, right knowledge produces right living."⁴

Those outside reflecting on growth and formation outside of the Church also have made similar conclusions about the pedagogue paradigm. In his reflections on teaching in schools and universities, Parker Palmer asserts, "The conventional pedagogy pretends to give us mastery over the world, relieving us of the need for mutual vulnerability that the new epistemologies, and truth itself, imply."⁵ The teaching method does not require hearts to open toward one another and the Holy Spirit through one another, thereby

³ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 69.

⁴ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 43.

⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 39.

making the goal of teaching, formation, nearly out of reach. For Palmer, no real growth is possible unless the heart is vulnerable and open in the lesson itself.

Granted, the didactic paradigm for discipleship appears to take community seriously; after all, there are many people sharing the same space and learning the same lesson. In truth, however, “the gathered group of students (in the conventional classroom) is not a true community, but a mere pedagogical convenience.”⁶ Unless the community turns to face one another, open their hearts concerning the lesson and its real life implications, and engage in prayer with and for one another then the paradigm is deficient, and the hoped-for evangelism will continue to be elusive.

As Palmer continues, “Truth is personal, and all truth is known in personal relationships. Jesus is a paradigm, a model of this personal truth. In him, truth, once understood as abstract, principled, propositional, suddenly takes on a human face and a human frame.”⁷ Formation based in Truth comes through the human encounter. Indeed, leading brain researchers concur with Palmer when they observe that the most common mistake made when it comes to teaching for formation is, “relating too much information, with not enough time devoted to connecting the dots. Lots of force-feeding, very little digestion.”⁸ For the Church, the “digestion” occurs in the space where the Holy Spirit nourishes amid dialogue, listening, and prayer with the community of God.

⁶ Ibid, 37.

⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁸ John Medina, *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School* (Edmonds, WA: Pear Press, 2009), 88.

If the discipleship paradigm of the Church proves deficient, then so does the Church's witness. Indeed, evangelism "flows directly through every believer and every community of faith that adheres to Jesus."⁹ However, unless people are formed and transformed by the Holy Spirit, the congregation will not proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed in a robust and wholehearted way. This is of no little importance to the session of Grace Covenant as they recently named "evangelism" to be a top priority. They want the Good News to reach the significant un-churched and de-churched population in the surrounding neighborhood.

Currently, however, evangelism happens insofar as congregants invite neighbors to one of the three key events which take place on the church's property: Sunday school, worship, and the Wednesday night supper and program. In other words, the idea is to invite someone into a space where they, too, can benefit from the intellectual teaching offered. The fact that Grace Covenant has not had an adult baptism in over a decade testifies to the fact that this form of evangelism by itself is impoverished at best, particularly when "an average of five or more (baptized) adults a year over a three year period" is one, key indicator for vital, growing churches.¹⁰

Ironically, a major reason for the weakness of the intellectually-oriented discipleship paradigm of Grace Covenant's is itself rooted in theology: the paradigm does not take seriously the implications of professing a belief in the Trinity. Jurgen Moltmann helpfully explains the essence of the Trinity, which has profound implications for faithful

⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways, Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 284-285.

¹⁰ Martha Grace Reece, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2008), 30.

discipleship. He writes,

The three divine persons are not there simply for themselves. They are there in that they are there for one another. They are persons in social relationship. The Father can be called Father only in relationship with the Son; the Son can be called Son only in relationship with the Father. The Spirit is the breath of the one who speaks. The breath goes out from the Father in the eternal moment in which the Father speaks the Word, which in another relationship is called the Son.¹¹

As people made in the image of the triune God, humans most faithfully show forth the image of this God by living in the same kind of interdependent community.

My interest in addressing the issue of discipleship stems in part from my call to Grace Covenant where I am charged with leading the people in a faithful following of Jesus. As the pastor, I cannot help but look to the Apostle Paul who pastored so many churches and mentored many of the early church leaders. Time and again, his longing for the church is not that they understand more doctrine, learn interesting lessons about the ways of ancient Israel, or exegete Scripture just so. Rather, he prays that they be formed and even transformed by way of the power that raised Christ from the dead.¹²

While my call and Paul's prayers certainly inform my interest in the nature of formation, my interest also is largely rooted in my own formative experiences growing up in the Church. From sixth grade until my senior year of college I took part in a weekly Bible study.

¹¹ Jurgen Moltmann in Julie A. Gorman, *Community that is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 97.

¹² *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989). All Scripture quoted is from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. In Ephesians 1:18-19 he prays that the church would have "the eyes of (their) heart enlightened," and know "what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe." In Ephesians 3:16-19, Paul writes one of his most memorable prayers, saying, "He may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

In junior high and high school, this group was part of my local church. In college, it was part of a campus ministry and a local congregation.

In each setting, a leader guided the gathered small group of students weekly through a particular Scripture. Notably, each of the leaders managed both to teach and facilitate. They had a way of leaving plenty of space for input and questions. They also asked a lot of questions of the students even as they helped those gathered see how a particular passage challenged, informed, or framed something about living as followers of Jesus in the world. Finally, they wove helpful times of silence and prayer into these gatherings. In short, these leaders facilitated a kind of engagement with Scripture through which those gathered were truly shaped by God. This, then, changed how the students lived the other hours and days of the week. Indeed, my call to seminary and pastoral ministry and more fundamentally my desire to follow Jesus in every area of my life stems from leaders who facilitated the kind of communal space through which the Spirit could form a gathering of students seeking to grow in their faith.

Ultimately, then, much of my interest in the nature of discipleship stems from my experience. While I seek to lead Grace Covenant faithfully, I also am keen to learn more about the art of formation that my mentors so aptly practiced. Finally, I believe that Grace Covenant is hardly the only church dealing with a deficiency in their discipleship paradigm. I hope that my work on this topic will have a ripple effect through other churches—whether through my leadership in our local presbytery or via a call that God may have for me in another congregation at a later time.

This particular project seeks to grow the members of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church into mature disciples of Jesus Christ by involving them in house-

based small groups that are focused on reading Scripture through the practice of *lectio divina*. I am following the leadership paradigm set forth by van Gelder, who believes that the Church will not be people who proclaim Christ in word in deed until leaders have created a different kind of space for formation to occur. He states,

Leaders must intentionally cultivate authentic Christian community . . . create conditions under which people can come together in shared life to discover their participation in God’s mission. That means facilitating spaces of communal belonging, sharing, and practice . . . create spaces for this work, spaces of listening and dialogue, of engagement with Scripture and theological tradition, of encounter with the world.¹³

Not only does this project seek to create this kind of space in small group forums, but it includes an explanation of how to train others to do the same. Notably, I follow van Gelder’s lead in seeking to keep the space rooted faithfully in Scripture and a theological tradition. Thus, this project remains firmly grounded in two of the essential aspects of the Reformed Tradition that Grace Covenant so appreciates; namely, the high value placed upon God’s Word and a desire to take being “the priesthood of believers” seriously.¹⁴

Shifting the discipleship space to homes and using the *lectio divina* method, however, are new to Grace Covenant. As will be explored in this paper, these shifts are purposeful. *Lectio divina* shifts the listening from a lecturer to the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture and one another. The house setting offers a familial setting through which congregants more readily image the interdependent nature of the Triune God

¹³ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 156.

¹⁴ One of the distinct tenets of the Reformed Tradition is a belief in the “priesthood of all believers,” which means, “All believers are called as disciples to do this ministry of Jesus—to participate in his priestly work of reconciling the world to God by proclaiming the gospel, doing the works of Jesus, and manifesting the reality and power of the kingdom of God in the world. This ministry is not reserved exclusively for ordained clergy and officers, but is the vocational privilege and responsibility of every Christian.” Presbyterian Coalition, “Essential Tenets and the Examination of Candidates - Presbyterian Coalition,” June 8, 2003, http://www.presbycoalition.org/essential_tenets.cfm (accessed November 10, 2015).

through vulnerability and trust. In sum, these features are meant to create a different, more intimate kind of space where significant listening, dialogue, and prayer can happen—all conduits through which the Holy Spirit can and does shape followers of Christ.

Ultimately, this proposal will present a vision of what makes for a mature disciple who has, in fact, been formed by the Spirit. Foremost, a mature disciple is one who embodies what they have heard from God in the communal space. Indeed, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Mt 7:24). The hope is that once congregants begin to embody the faith in ways that proclaim the Gospel, those same congregants will share their testimonies among the broader Grace Covenant congregation and thereby serve as a catalyst for congregation-wide involvement in these house-based groups. This paper will outline a process to grow toward that congregation-wide small group effort.

At the same time, I remain mindful that formation does not happen quickly. Indeed, Ogden observes, “An effective builder of people looks ahead five to seven years for discipleship results. Yet our inability to delay instant gratification is a major contributing factor to our discipleship deficit.”¹⁵ This paper recognizes the importance of looking long-term to see real disciple results. Thus, the paper seeks not only to try a new discipleship paradigm, but ultimately to establish the formation infrastructure into which the church can live in the coming years.

This paper will conclude with an explanation of the implementation method. I will explain how this proposal will first be implemented in two house-based small groups

¹⁵ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 128.

that meet for eight consecutive weeks. In particular, I will discuss details such as how I will recruit and train leaders, choose resources, work with the Grace Covenant staff, and then ultimately recruit participants. Once the first three groups have completed eight weeks together, a detailed process will be outlined for how congregation-wide participation in the new paradigm will unfold. Finally, an assessment process will be used following the congregation-wide effort. The assessment process will be the tool through which I learn if and what changes need to be made to these groups as well as the best practices for engaging the wider congregation in home-based groups.

CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNITY AND MINISTRY CONTEXT

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church's geographic and historic context inform some of why the house-based small group paradigm for discipleship is being proposed. Likewise, the current theological and membership dynamics of the congregation inform the discipleship direction being proposed. Chapter one explores these contexts and concludes by offering reasons to be hopeful about a new direction for discipleship in the congregation.

Community Factors

Grace Covenant is located in the historic Fan District of Richmond, VA. Today, the Fan is one of Richmond's most popular areas to live, particularly for young singles and a growing number of younger families. According to the most recent information from the U.S. Census Bureau, the community is comprised of 13,533 people, 20 percent of whom are married and 9.2 percent of whom have children in the household. Over 5 percent of the neighborhood is comprised of college students ages 18 to 22 (20.9 percent) and twenty-somethings ages 22 to 29 (33.1 percent). Fourteen percent of the Fan is 60 years of age or older. Finally, the community is 79.7 percent White and 12.9 percent

Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Mixed comprise the remaining percentage.¹ Primarily, then, the community is comprised of White Millennials, most of whom are either de-churched or un-churched. Most in the Fan, are well-educated persons; nearly 66 percent have a college degree or higher. Those who are not students have full-time careers. Nearly all in the area enjoy the nearby restaurants, museums, and have an active lifestyle of hiking, biking, yoga, and being out on the nearby James River.

One of the reasons that the community is so popular is the charm of the historic row house homes that are located near many cultural attractions and a competitive elementary school. The community takes great pride in the upkeep of these homes. In fact, two weekends a year certain homes from the community are chosen by the Fan District Association to be opened to the public for tours. Each of these weekends is extremely well attended. However, while the neighborhood is excited to take a Sunday morning to visit unique homes in the area, most will not be found in worship from Sunday-to-Sunday.

Increasingly, adults with young children are moving into the area. Parents can be seen walking their children to and from school each weekday, involving themselves in the school tutoring program, garden club, and the PTA. Fox Elementary School in the Fan has become a key attraction for these young families in the past decade. However, since the public middle school in the neighborhood is not very strong, most families move a few miles west of the neighborhood once their children reach middle school. Thus, very few folks from Generation X live in the Fan.

¹ Statistical Atlas, "The Fan, Richmond, VA," April 22, 2015, <http://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Virginia/Richmond/The-Fan/Population> (accessed September 13, 2015).

This migration pattern has been the norm in Richmond since the contentious, desegregation days of the 1960s and 1970s. During that time, most from the White community left the city (to include the Fan area) and moved west where they established strong public and private schools. Their exodus left most of the city schools in disarray and subject to regular and unfortunate critiques by the local newspaper.² To this day, most city schools struggle on multiple fronts; hence, those who can afford to move west often do for the sake of their child's school.

This is an important dynamic of which to be aware not only because it raises significant justice concerns, but also because it reveals just how difficult it is for churches located in the city to establish any sort of long-term connection with the surrounding community. Typically a church only has a few years to create a lasting relationship with young families. Even so, a family that moves a few miles west of the city often finds it difficult to remain meaningfully engaged with a church located in the Fan since the locus of every other social and education activity has shifted to another part of town.

The fact that families frequently move for the school systems also points to the fact that the surrounding community greatly values formation. They will make great sacrifices to ensure their child is well educated. Sadly, the Church is almost entirely irrelevant to the formation discussion for most parents, Christian and non-Christian alike. This proposal is only the beginning of a much larger discussion about how the Church can prove relevant and even essential to the Christian formation of the next generation.

² Ben Campbell, *Richmond's Unhealed History* (Richmond: Bradyland Publishers, Inc, 2012), 178, 197, and 201.

Notably, those in the neighborhood without children also prioritize formation. As Willard observes, “Spiritual formation is a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admired of persons have a spiritual formation.”³ The question is not if one is being formed, but what is forming a person.

A primary outlet for many Fan residents comes in the form of yoga. There are numerous studios in the area, and they are regularly filled with locals. One of the more popular studios, Yoga Source, has a sign at their front door that reads: “We believe in possibility. We believe that lives can change. We believe the practice of yoga can transform how we see ourselves and the world around us. Discover the many benefits of yoga in your life. Come, and be inspired.” The studio does not see itself as a space for exercise or stretching but a space of transformation, and the folks who participate in this studio and other nearby studios are therefore highly committed.

James K. A. Smith affirms this observation when he remarks that companies like Starbucks and Hollister (both located in the Fan area) “have taken hold of our heart,” yet the Church too often responds by teaching theological ideas.¹ He contends that the Church’s “strategies are aimed at the head and thus miss the real target: our hearts, our loves, our desires. Christian education as formation needs to be a pedagogy of desire,” which is the pedagogy employed by the various endeavors enjoyed by Fan residents; in particular the aforementioned yoga studio.⁴

³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 19.

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 33.

Thus, even as the church laments that people are not disciplined about coming to church or Bible study regularly, it must admit that the problem does not reside entirely with lackadaisical congregants. Where the heart is engaged and meaningful formation happens, people prioritize it.

A Brief History of the Church

There was a time, however, when the Church and Grace Covenant specifically featured prominently in the lives of the surrounding community. Grace Covenant was founded in 1915 as a merger between the Grace Street and Covenant congregations. By the 1950s it was the largest church in Richmond with over 1,800 members. Like many churches in the United States, Grace Covenant benefitted from post-war re-settlement and growth. Many were particularly fond of joining Grace Covenant as it was one of the churches in the city where membership carried desirable social credibility.

During and even before this post-war period of marked growth, Grace Covenant maintained two core strengths: evangelism and discipleship. For example, as a passionate expression of proclaiming the Gospel beyond the walls of the church, Grace Covenant in 1923 was the first church in Virginia to broadcast services via radio. At the time, such a move was akin to being one of the first churches to have a website or live-streaming. A strong, well-attended Sunday school program also took root at that same time. Both the radio and the Sunday school ministry flourished during the post-war boom, and they continue to the present day. Though they are a shell of what they once were, they nevertheless reveal the deeply-held values that congregants have concerning discipleship and evangelism.

Following the trajectory of many Mainline congregations, Grace Covenant continued a slow decline in membership from the 1960s onward. In the late-1990s a significant decrease in the membership happened nearly overnight. A new pastor had been called in 1997, and by 1998 nearly one hundred members were so upset by his leadership style and conservative theology that they transferred to a nearby Presbyterian church. This had a significant effect on the theology and culture of the church. Before this pastor arrived, Grace Covenant was somewhere along the spectrum between theologically conservative and theologically moderate. The core group of moderate voices left, and conservative voices have led the way since.

Church Dynamics

The current leadership of the church strongly values Christian Education. By that, they usually mean Sunday school, and by “Sunday school” they mean a didactic approach to teaching with one person providing instruction to a classroom of people who passively listen and receive the content for forty-five minutes. The teaching begins in Scripture and draws heavily upon some of the classic confessions of the Reformed Tradition, particularly those written during and shortly after the Reformation.

As mentioned in the Introduction, there are strengths to this approach, and that can be seen among some of the members at Grace Covenant. Many who are over sixty years of age and have been at Grace Covenant for most or all of their life can recite large portions of the Shorter Catechism. They were formed in a discipleship paradigm in which such memorization was essential. Moreover, many take seriously salvation in Jesus Christ by grace and through faith alone, which offers profound assurance for eternal life.

Their minds are full of the Good News. As will be explored further in the paper, what is lacking is space for the heart to encounter the Risen Lord in Scripture and via one another.

Along with maintaining a more conservative orientation to theology and formation, the church also has kept a fairly standard structure and pattern for ministry. Currently, there are three primary outlets for involvement: Sunday school, Sunday worship, and the Wednesday night supper and program. This pattern has been in place for decades, and visitors and new members are not seen as mature disciples or potential leaders until they have begun regularly participating in at least two of these three, ideally all three.

Most of the visitors, however, find the didactic Sunday school model irrelevant to their lives. They choose to spend the early portion of their Sundays elsewhere, such as a yoga studio or running club. Occasionally visitors from the Fan will show up at the Wednesday night supper and program; however, the program remains short given that parents need to get children to bed and the choir needs to begin practicing. Friendly conversation happens, but it is not a space for vulnerable relationships and formation.

This leaves worship as the single place that most visitors and new members are equipped as disciples. This is a deficient model, in part because our way of worshiping places nearly the entire discipleship effort on the shoulders of only the pastor, but also because worship is about giving God glory. The Christian's soul nourishment is a secondary by-product of worship, but it is not the *raison d'être* for worship.

Nevertheless, the current structure of the church is so solidified in the minds of many leaders that there has been little creative energy (until very recently, as is explained below) put toward new or different outlets and approaches that might equip the congregation to follow Jesus and then witness to his Gospel.

Notably, there are also generational and theological differences concerning discipleship that have become visible in recent years. The older generation (Boomers and older) prefers the didactic, Scripture-first teaching that is done by a formally-trained teacher. Many from this generation hold formal and informal positions of leadership in the church, and thus their affinity forms the dominant discipleship *ethos*. The younger generation (Xers and younger) have some affinity for the didactic model, but they are much more readily engaged in the discipleship process when the class time is predominantly discussion-based and hits on themes relevant to the culture and their lives. They are not nearly as tied to having to teach directly from Scripture alone.

In many ways, these differences are to be expected. The older generation was schooled formally in the didactic, lecture format paradigm. The younger generations have grown up in an education system that values the full participation of students in the learning process. Both have value as well as important deficiencies. Where the older generation's paradigm can too readily err toward participants leaving the didactic lesson saying, "I learned some new information," the younger generation's paradigm can too readily err toward one leaving a rich discussion-based lesson saying, "That was interesting."

More information and more interesting insights are not the goal of discipleship--a transformational encounter with Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that overflows into lives that proclaim Jesus in word and deed is the goal. Facilitating such an encounter is the focus of this paper.

Opportunities for Change

While the challenges are significant, there are five solid reasons to believe that Grace Covenant is in a place where changing the discipleship paradigm can happen: the recent change in the mission of the church, the failure to recruit to Sunday school, the precarious budget and membership numbers, the Child Development Center, and the success of a recent home-based discipleship experiment. Pertaining to the mission statement, the session-adopted a GCPC 2012 Mission Study in which the mission statement reads: “To train grateful disciples of Jesus Christ who are doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.”⁵ In the fall of 2015 the session re-affirmed this mission. The mission places utmost priority on “training grateful disciples” and thereby opens the church to conversation about what makes for good training and what truly engenders people to have their lives transformed in such a way that justice, mercy, and humility might overflow from within. At least in word, the church maintains that, “Spiritual formation is the task of the church . . . the church was formed to form,” and so opens space for new formation outlets that take that seriously.⁶

⁵ Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, “Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church 2012 Mission Study” (adopted March 2012), 3.

⁶ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

The desire to take the mission statement of the Mission Study seriously was echoed earlier this year when the session voted on a specific goal for 2015: to ensure that every member is training formally and regularly as a disciple. For most of them this meant getting members to Sunday school. This proved nearly impossible, as most congregants did not have a sustained interest in attending. Congregants continually choose to spend that portion of Sunday morning elsewhere. Ironically, their lack of interest is actually a reason for hope. It has revealed plainly to the leadership a deep deficiency in the current model. They are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that no amount of advertisement or invitational effort matters if there is little formation happening. Indeed, the congregation has stumbled into an awareness of what Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuck named nearly a decade ago:

People are no longer willing to learn the internal language of the congregation. They are not shaped by loyalty to the institution and have little interest in joining groups or programs. No amount of rearranging of programs will change this. The reality is that the organizational cultures and the environments created in the congregations over several generations are no longer able to engage the changed context and its emerging generations.⁷

Aside from Sunday morning worship, Sunday school is a beloved program that the leadership is learning is of little interest to the next generations; and this painful truth is a freeing moment for change.

Along with the discipleship-focused mission statement, the church's mission study highlighted how precarious the church's budget and membership numbers are. The study explains how membership has steadily dwindled from 1,800 people in the 1950s to

⁷ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (Charlottesville, VA: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2006), 24.

Current membership is around 300, and average Sunday worship attendance is 140. . . . Currently about 42 percent of the 219 members who are actively involved in our community are over the age of 65. In addition, these members support nearly half of our annual budget, which is already austere and difficult to balance. This fiscal situation threatens the sustainability of current ministries and hinders the pursuit of new initiatives.⁸

The church is not called to maintain an institution; therefore, membership and budget numbers can never nearly tell the whole story of the congregation's heart and passion for Jesus. Nevertheless, the numbers do reveal the challenge with which the congregation is faced when it gathers in a nine hundred-seat sanctuary Sunday after Sunday, especially among those who remember an entirely different kind of vibrancy in that space. Moreover, because of the aging membership and precarious budget, the timeline is short for sustaining current ministries and endeavoring upon new directions.

Much like the lack of interest in Sunday school is actually a hopeful sign, so too these numbers are reason for hope. Being fully (and also newly) aware of the precarious situation in which the church is in has prompted the leadership to have a new openness to God's leading beyond the paradigms in which it typically has been entrenched. Indeed, leaders have taken time in recent session meetings to consider the big picture of the church and how and where they might be called to reimagine how to live as faithful disciples of Christ at this time.

Still another reason to be hopeful about change involves the church's Child Development Center (CDC). Founded in 2004, the CDC is an all-day pre-school for infants through pre-K. Currently, one hundred and two children are at the CDC. This means that there are many families who come in and out of Grace Covenant's doors on a

⁸ Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, "Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church 2012 Mission Study," 3..

regularly basis. These families greatly appreciate the love and formation their children are receiving from the CDC, and some have begun visiting Grace Covenant with the hope that their children can and will receive the same formation on Sundays, too. Their hopes may be realized or thwarted depending on how the church moves forward with its discipleship paradigm, but either way their presence is raising that point quite clearly to the leadership.

Importantly, those CDC families that do not visit on Sunday morning are nevertheless meeting congregants and staff on a regular basis. This has made the church far more visible in the surrounding community. Moreover, these interactions offer a prime space through which evangelism can happen. Nevertheless, evangelism is and will only be about inviting those parents to one of our three key events – Sunday school, worship, and the Wednesday night supper and program until hearts begin to be shaped differently.

A final reason for hope is the recent success of a discussion-based discipleship endeavor that began in my home in the spring of 2015. Sensing a need to try something new, I began inviting young adults in their twenties and thirties from the Fan area to my house (also located in the Fan) each Thursday night. Eight of those invited were newer visitors or members, but the other dozen invited were the children of longtime Grace Covenant members who no longer attended worship but have remained in the area.

To my genuine surprise, nearly every person invited began to come. Perhaps, however, this should not have been so surprising. Recently a resident in the Fan placed a community table in his front yard so that she could begin meeting her neighbors rather than continue in her private, largely isolated world. This has led to many informal meals

with whoever is available to join the front yard gathering. Most recently the gathering included a few visitors from Latvia, as a recent article in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* highlights.⁹ It is a small example that points to the fact that people in the area hunger for community. While they may not walk into a large church building, they readily share space in and around the unique homes of the area.

With regard to the group that I gathered from the area, we would spend forty-five minutes eating and drinking together, and then forty-five minutes looking at the Scripture on which I would be preaching that coming Sunday. The energy of the room each week was palpable, and I could see the young adults connecting God's word with their day-to-day lives. Since that spring, a group of ten to fourteen young adults has been meeting in my house, and many in the church have taken notice in gratitude that the next generation is finding a space to grow in their faith. Because this endeavor involves many of their children, it has opened some to begin considering discipleship paradigms beyond the Sunday morning classroom. Moreover, the Spirit's leading of this process has prompted me to think more deeply about the small-group process and how it can be a vehicle for formative discipleship for the entire congregation. This paper is the outlet through which I will explore this idea.

The Danger of Repeating the Past

Even with these reasons to be hopeful about change, it is important to recall, however, that discipleship long has been a value at Grace Covenant. This value is what

⁹ Mark Holmberg, "Fan Neighbors Open Their Home and Hearts to Latvian Cyclists," WTVR.com, September 25, 2015, <http://wtvr.com/2015/09/25/holmberg-fan-neighbors-open-their-home-and-hearts-to-latvian-cyclists/> (accessed September 26, 2015).

first gave birth to the current Sunday school model that is now deficient. Unless the process articulated in this paper unfolds with due focus and intentionality, the church risks valuing discipleship in name only to find nothing has changed.

This potential issue became quite clear at a recent session meeting in which the leaders did an exercise wherein they imagined that the church had a chance to start again from scratch. Specifically, they were asked, “What would be your first priority?” After all agreed that worship would be the priority, they then also unanimously named Christian education as the next priority. However, when they began to articulate what that means and what the goal of such education is, the primary response was that Christian education, “means Sunday school.” Immediately it became evident how powerful the current culture of Grace Covenant is. While the “training” language from the Mission Study can be leveraged to explore new avenues of discipleship, it is hardly sufficient since the old patterns and expectations remain deeply embedded in Grace Covenant’s culture. Within only a couple of minutes leaders had “planted” a new Grace Covenant that looked like the current version.

Not only did this re-planting of the current version of Grace Covenant reveal the strength of the present culture, it also made it clear that for a new paradigm to emerge it would have to be shown to the church rather than simply formed from current toolbox of ministry paradigms. As Steve Jobs remarked, “People don't know what they want until you show it to them.”¹⁰ Part of this proposal will involve showing Grace Covenant something the church may very well want but cannot imagine until it is finally seen.

¹⁰ Andy Reinhardt, “Steve Jobs: ‘There's Sanity Returning,’” *Business Week*, (May 25, 1998), <http://www.businessweek.com/1998/21/b3579165.htm> (accessed November 2015).

Indeed, the process of implementing a new discipleship paradigm will take seriously the need to have congregants see and experience the new paradigm before the paradigm is really understood or fully embraced.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Each of the books explored in this literature review assist in providing the theological undergirding for the house-based small group discipleship paradigm being proposed for Grace Covenant. *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian, Desiring the Kingdom*, and *From Information to Transformation* each provide a theological understanding of what truly transforms people into the likeness of Christ. *A Thicker Jesus* and *The Dangerous Act of Loving your Neighbor* illuminate the key, visible markers of a mature Christian faith. Finally, *To Know as We are Known* and *Life Together* argue for the central role of community in the formation of the Church.

Christian Formation: Reformed and Contemporary Perspectives

Tod Bolsinger and James K.A. Smith offer perspectives on Christian formation through the lens of Reformed theology, an essential lens to consider given the ministry context in which the small groups will take place. Tobin Hart reveals how contemporary research on formation echoes and supports the insights of those like Bolsinger and Smith. Ultimately, Bolsinger's focus on the Trinity, Smith's assertions concerning habits, and

Hart's insights concerning the centrality of relationships for transformation all prove essential for providing a theological foundation for the small group paradigm.

It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian by Tod Bolsinger

Drawing strongly from the Reformed tradition and John Calvin in particular, Bolsinger articulates a theology of the church through which followers of Jesus are transformed into the likeness of Christ. Indeed, he is clear that “the whole purpose of church work and life is that people’s lives will be transformed to reflect and reveal Jesus Christ.”¹ He is equally clear that the Church has, in many ways, failed to do this. A major reason is that the Church has mirrored today’s highly individualistic society. He asserts that today’s society is less inclined to sacrificial, covenantal relationships than in any other time in human history.² In short, the Church that is practiced today is rooted in “a weak ecclesiology” far more shaped by cultural forces than biblical theology—an observation that rings true for Grace Covenant.³

Bolsinger address the challenge by first drawing upon Calvin to critique two primary ways that transformation is attempted in our society and in the church. Bolsinger discusses how Calvin had disputes with two groups of teachers in his day: papists and sophists. A major critique of the papist was that they thought one could be like Jesus simply through rote emulation rather than through a transformational encounter via the power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin critiqued the sophists because they, like modern-day

¹ Tod Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 166.

self-help gurus, believed that by appealing to reason humans can change themselves.

Bolsinger sees parallels to the papists and sophists today (noting the WWJD movement and the self-help movement), and draws upon Calvin to remind the church that it takes a “mystical union” with Christ Jesus to see the Gospel transform us heart, mind, body, and soul.⁴

Experiencing this transformative union requires living “in God.” This is a loaded statement. As Bolsinger explains, to live in God as a Christian is to live in the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that God in God’s essence is unbreakably and thoroughly communal. “God is a covenant group,” Bolsinger summarily states about the Triune God.⁵ This has enormous implications for the church. If the church is made in the Triune God’s image, then to be faithful images of God in this world requires that it dwell in covenant community. “Since God, the Divine Person, is a communion, human personhood means ‘existing-in-relationship.’”⁶ Insofar as Christians live in faithful, interdependent covenant community, the church witnesses to the love and relationship of the Triune God. Indeed, only in a Trinitarian-based, covenant community can disciples be truly formed.

Importantly for a church like Grace Covenant, Bolsinger roots his thesis both in a Trinitarian theology as well as directly in Scripture, stating, “The Bible is primarily focused not on teaching the individual person how to live in a God-honoring way, but on how the community can be a faithful witness together. Therefore, spiritual transformation

⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁶ Ibid., 67.

always takes place, and spiritual experiences are always interpreted within the community as the distinctive place for forming believers.⁷” In light of this observation, Bolsinger argues for more “communal preaching,” rather than an event that individuals attend and leave in isolation.⁸ He offers a practice that his church does to help live into this communal preaching idea – they have all members participate in a small group at some point during the week. Emulating the early church of Acts 2:42-46 who gathered regularly around meals and considered the Scriptures, these groups gather around food and consider the Scripture from Sunday’s worship service. Importantly, Bolsinger commends *lectio divina* as the process through which groups consider Scripture because “in this practice, the Scriptures are understood to be the very presence of God directly addressing the readers. They are not read so much for information as for encounter, and the meditation takes place in a community where mutual accountability and correction coincide with personal direction.⁹” He contends that a *lectio divina* approach to Scripture helps overly intellectual Presbyterians “recover a shared spiritual life” that, by the faithful power of the Holy Spirit, transforms the church into a people who bear witness to Jesus in the world.¹⁰

Finally, Bolsinger emphasizes the importance of regularly participating in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. He challenges the many Reformed churches that practice the Supper any less than on a weekly basis. Drawing heavily upon Calvin, he

⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁹ Ibid., 135.

¹⁰ Ibid.

states that, “the Word is empowered by the Spirit in the sacraments.”¹¹ If the church is to be transformed and not merely informed, then the spiritual nourishment of the Lord’s Supper must be regularly feeding the souls of our congregation. Indeed, Bolsinger advises that the Supper be practiced beyond the weekly service of worship. It has a vital place in home groups that gather around Scripture.

Bolsinger’s theology of the Trinity undergirds the small group endeavor being put forth in this paper. The small groups that gather do so as image-bearers of our God who is fundamentally covenantal within God-self. Moreover, the small groups will gather around Scripture seeking not to be informed, but to encounter the living God through the regular practice of *lectio divina*. Finally, food and the Lord’s Supper will be essential for these gatherings, trusting that the Spirit is faithful to nourish and transform us – body and soul – when we receive the Sacrament. While this paper does not explore how transformation happens in the Sunday morning worship setting at Grace Covenant, Bolsinger’s observations about how transformation unfolds do fundamentally inform the direction of the proposed small group experience articulated in this paper.

Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation
by James K. A. Smith

In *Desiring the Kingdom* James K. A. Smith explores that nature of Christian education. He explains that the dominant understanding of Christian education involves the life the mind, and the goal of such an education is a Christian worldview which accounts for “a system of Christian beliefs, ideas, and doctrines.”¹² Smith wants to

¹¹ Ibid., 129.

¹² Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 17.

change the conversation about Christian education so that the goal is the formation of our hearts and our desires, provocatively asking at the outset of his work: “What if education wasn’t first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?”¹³

Smith believes that in recent decades the Protestant church and Christian institutions on the whole have taken their cues more from the Enlightenment and modernity than from the Bible when it comes to how we think about the person. Too often, the church has envisioned peoples as rational “thinking things” whose minds must be formed. The church has, by contrast, largely failed to see people as whole persons whose heart, passions, and desires must be shaped into a desire for the kingdom of God.¹⁴

Rooted in Reformed theology, Smith draws heavily upon an Augustinian anthropology which sees humans as “ultimately desiring animals...ultimately lovers” whose hearts must be formed such that our loves are rightly ordered, with the greatest love being for God and God’s Kingdom.¹⁵ Such shaping, Smith contends, happens primarily through our habits, which “constitute the fulcrum of our desire: they are the hinge that “turns our heart.”¹⁶ Notably, most of our habits take place unconsciously. Hence, it is through embodied practices only (in opposition to learning Christian information) that our desires begin to shift towards God’s Kingdom.

For Smith, unless the senses are fully engaged through Christian habits, the Kingdom of God will not be a priority in the church because so many other things in

¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

society so readily engage and shape our senses and passions. Indeed, Smith believes we must be keenly aware of just how many cultural practices and rituals are liturgies that shape for us a vision of the good life and “unwittingly make us disciples of rival kings and patriotic citizens of rival kingdoms.”¹⁷ In particular, Smith observes how marketers and nations have “secular liturgies” that thoroughly and often unconsciously shape our desire by way of our hearts and imagination.¹⁸ The church must recover this same awareness as it seeks to shape disciples who follow Jesus.

Ultimately, Smith believes these secular liturgies actual reveal that we have not lost our desire for God. Building on John Calvin, Smith explains that the longing which secular liturgies tap into and shape is most fundamentally a longing for God. We have an “awareness of divinity,” and this is something on which the church can build as it seeks to shape followers of Jesus.

In particular, Smith believes that the Church’s rhythms, rituals and sensory experiences in the liturgy of worship are essential for forming a people whose deepest allegiance is the Kingdom of God. Having established that humans are “creatures who love before (they) think, who imagine before (they) theorize,” Smith contends the Church must appreciate how each practice that unfolds in the worshipping community – from the call to worship to the benediction - can and does shape the hearts of the believers. These practices serve as an alterative liturgy to the many others that shape the Church each day.

This paper’s focus is not on the ways in which the service of worship shapes the hearts of Christians. Nevertheless, Smith’s basic point has wider application (as he

¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

himself notes when extending his thesis to consider the state of Christian higher education in his final chapter) – Christians are shaped most fundamentally by the Holy Spirit *through their practices* done in community with one another. The practice of listening vulnerably to Scripture and one another will be the key features in the home-based groups being proposed in this paper. Moreover, Smith’s contention that the church’s goal is not to provide more information but to form a people whose deepest desire is for God and God’s Kingdom undergirds the pedagogy of the home-based discipleship paradigm set forth by this paper.

*From Information to Transformation: Education for the Evolution of
Consciousness* by Tobin Hart

Tobin Hart contends that much of the education in our society today focuses on simply downloading information into our minds. If people memorize the right information and do well on the tests, then they will be prepared to serve in the work force and make money for livelihood and enjoyment. While many often skim the surface to know just enough information to get by, this does nothing to shape hearts and minds to pursue lives of fulfillment nor does it shape people who can wisely sustain a healthy democratic society.¹⁹

In response to this system, Hart explores the concepts of knowledge, intelligence, understanding, wisdom, and transformation and explains how they can come together in an integrated way to shape students with open hearts and minds who, with wisdom and insight, seek the well being of society. Fundamental to this approach is the idea that good

¹⁹ Tobin Hart, *From Information to Transformation: Education for the Evolution of Consciousness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 18.

education continually must invite students to inward reflection and something of a spiritual journey – the goal of education is not more information but transformation.

For Hart, there is a “trinity of education practice” through which students grow not simply in knowledge, but in empathy and wisdom – which leads to life justly lived. The first part of the trinity is relationship: “students require a relationship or sense of belonging before their engagement of the material becomes effective.”²⁰ The small group paradigm put forth in this paper gives space for relationships to form and develop over food. The groups are also twice the length as our normal Sunday school classes so that the relational element is nourished. Once nourished, the material becomes much more relevant. Indeed, engaging the emotions of the student must happen before engaging the material as “emotion drives attention, which drives learning and memory.”²¹

The second part of the trinity is the teacher him or herself. Fundamentally, “we teach who we are,” Hart states, which means that as I recruit leaders for these small groups I want to pay particular attention to the state of their soul. That will be a significant factor in ensuring a trusting, listening space is opened to where people hear from and are formed by the Holy Spirit. The final part of the trinity is the subject itself. For Hart, the subject is a living reality. He notes that sacred texts in particular are understood to be “living words requiring exploration and personal engagement. They need to be considered again and again so that new understanding may be discovered.”²²

Lectio divina is the process through which my small groups will allow God in Jesus

²⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹ Ibid., 22.

²² Ibid., 52.

Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit to be the “subject” in a way that is not abstract, but profoundly personal and formative.

Hart is particularly interested in developing wisdom in students. He believes too many educational curricula lack an appreciation for forming the heart in ways that can navigate this world with an ability to see beyond self-interest and act in just and virtuous ways. He believes wisdom is best gained by having teachers who keep asking questions (and prompting the students ask questions as well) when they come before material. Rather than seek answers immediately, “wisdom seeks questions, as if looking for the best fruit on the tree. It then bites into the question, living it, allowing it to fulfill its purpose as nourishment.”²³ While a desire for more information will seek to get to an answer quickly, a desire to be formed will “ride the question,” which is an art that will be important for small group facilitators to learn and practice as they bring groups around Scripture.²⁴

The Marks of Christian Maturity

Glen Stassen and Mark Labberton reflect on the visible marks of a mature Christian faith. Stassen underscores deficiencies in Reformed theology that can hinder a visibly mature Christian faith. He also underscores just how countercultural and imperative Christian community is in our highly individualistic society. Labberton unpacks how a truly transformed heart begins to see God and the world more faithfully, which prompts faithful action.

²³ Ibid., 115-16.

²⁴ Ibid., 116.

Together, the insights of Stassen and Labberton point to the maturation desired through the house-based small group discipleship paradigm.

A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age
by Glen Harold Stassen

Glen Stassen observes that the church exists in a time where the rapid amount of change in every facet of life along with the ever-increasing pluralism of our society have destabilized the church's sense of how to live as faithful Christians. The church's identity is confused and shaken, and discerning how to live the Christian faith is far from obvious. Stassen posits that what is necessary in the church is a thorough grounding in "the ethics of incarnational discipleship."²⁵ For Stassen, such discipleship has three interconnected, essential components: a belief first in the "holistic sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus through all of life," second a "thicker Jesus" that takes seriously Jesus's incarnation as a paradigm for how we are live faithfully, and third in the Holy Spirit's power, which is above and apart from all other powers and authorities.²⁶

The Reformed Tradition is particularly strong in taking seriously the first component – a belief in the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus. He cites the Barmen Confession, which is part of the PC(USA)'s *Book of Confessions*, as an example of such strength. However, he is critical of those in history who have, "claimed to be Christians and praised Jesus but they interpreted Jesus in terms of a vague ideal or principle; or as teaching ideals too high to actually be put into practice; or they limited

²⁵ Glen Harold Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

Jesus' teaching to internal church relations among individuals but not applicable in the rest of life."²⁷ His critique has resonance at Grace Covenant. Rightly, the church values the idea and ideal of Jesus as Lord. However, that value can limit the radical nature of that confession when it is valued more as doctrine to be debated rather than enlashed obedience that cuts against the grain of powers of this world other than Christ. Stassen's critique is helpful, too, for the small group endeavor. The goal of transformation is incomplete if what God speaks to humanity is not embodied and witnessed.

To ground his argument, Stassen maintains that these three components are the common denominator for some of the most faithful Christians of generations past. The stories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Andre Trocme, Martin Luther King, Clarence Jordan, Dorothy Day, and Muriel Lester are told because these are "heroes whose faith has been tested in history point us to solid ground."²⁸ While each of their stories is unique, they are nevertheless all similar in that they took seriously each component of Stassen's discipleship trinity. With regard to the Reformed Tradition, Stassen points to Karl Barth as one who not only proclaimed the Lordship of Jesus, but then affirmed human rights in ways that opposed Hitler's Nazi Germany, thereby risking his life. He also writes of the Bible studies that Muriel Lester used to lead in the slums of London: "they did not succumb to the temptation of some Bible study groups, leaving the biblical study hermeneutically sealed in the first century... They regularly discussed what practical action they could take that would be in line with Jesus' prophetic words."²⁹ The

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Ibid., 17

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

faithfulness of Barth and Lester offer paradigms for the small groups to emulate. They are not gathered around God's word to consider a history lesson or even to gain spiritual inspiration, but to enact the will and way of Christ.

Ultimately much of what Stassen is pushing against in the church is the Platonic ideal that unconsciously shapes much of the church's thinking and acting (or lack thereof). Too often in Christian education the Church seeks "a high ideal, eternal and unchanging – high above the struggles, contentions and contradictions of this real history where we live our lives."³⁰ Living in this abstraction cuts off the Church from real life obedience to which it is called. In contrast, "Incarnational discipleship wants a 'thicker Jesus.' It insists also that we pay attention to what the incarnate Jesus Christ did and said" so that as the Church learns to live "in Christ" it participates in his power in the same manner and with the same love that he showed on earth.³¹

The final portion of Stassen's book is devoted to considering what he considers are the seven major challenges of the secular age in which we live. Among those challenges are individualism and the way that it plagues contemporary discipleship. Citing neurologists and other contemporary brain researchers, he notes that, "the emotions, the 'gut reactions,' guide our decisions far more than we realize... These emotions are not simply about our own internal wishes and interests; they are deeply connected with loyalties that we have."³² Stassen makes this observation in his section on individualism as he contends that only in covenant community can our loyalties be

³⁰ Ibid., 42.

³¹ Ibid., 45.

³² Ibid., 116.

formed and reformed. In this way, the small group itself is a confrontation of one of the secular challenges of our age. Insofar as the groups are facilitated in ways that allow members to open their hearts and hear from God, they embody the first steps of lasting, covenant community.

The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor by Mark Labberton

Mark Labberton defines justice as “the right ordering of power.”³³ For the Church, “right ordering” happens when power is used to obey the first and second commandments – love God, and love neighbor. Labberton is concerned, however, because there exists “a crisis of the human heart” that is seen in the fact that rather than following these commandments and ensuring justice is done, the Church continually allows for vast amount of injustice to unfold with little concern or response.³⁴ While Labberton acknowledges that systemic realities larger than any one person contribute to the injustices of this world, he is convinced that “human hearts form the seedbed from which injustices thrive,” and thus his book focuses on redirecting the human heart to the priorities of God.³⁵

Labberton’s book unfolds in four parts, beginning with “where we live.” He observes that for many in the West, the main goal of life entails “doing everything necessary or possible to make life secure.”³⁶ Lives become smaller and smaller as

³³ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

humans seek to secure comfort, safety, and ease. Moreover, Christians become blind to the billions whose lives are drastically different from ours and who face profound injustices each day. Labberton believes that Christians must find their fundamental “address” not in their geographical location or socio-economic position but in the heart of God. He states, “if we enter into the heart of Jesus Christ who truly sees and rightly names – himself, his neighbor, and God – and leads us to do likewise, we will share in the life that is God’s life in this world,” and thereby do justice.³⁷

Situating ourselves in God’s heart begins with seeing rightly, which is the second theme Labberton explores in his book. He observes that often humans do see the injustices in our world, but our weakened hearts rarely do more than wish and hope that the situations would change. The sign that one is dwelling in the heart of God is that they not only see, but they have vision, “a change in perception.”³⁸ Part of having this transformation involves traveling to places near and far where injustice is blatantly evident. This kind of experience awakens the kind of empathy where a Christian stands in their neighbor’s place and begins to see “their problem” as “(his or her) problem.”³⁹ Corporate worship, in particular, is the space in which Christians can see their own broken hearts and God’s loving heart most clearly, and so have the eyes of their heart rightly perceiving.

The third portion of Labberton’s book explores “naming.” Drawing upon Genesis 1, he notes that when God said “Let there be light” God named reality into existence.

³⁷ Ibid., 57.

³⁸ Ibid., 76.

³⁹ Ibid., 102.

“Naming causes being,” and is therefore extraordinarily powerful. Labberton remarks that the New Testament powerfully changes our names. In Christ, the people of God are called friends, chosen, holy, and beloved.⁴⁰ Indeed, Labberton states that baptism “is the sacrament of right naming,” and that therefore “this book is simply an encouragement to live a baptized, rightly named life.”⁴¹ For Labberton believes that such naming changes hearts and has a “multiplying effect” that empowers the church to see and name as God does.⁴² Thus, in a world filled with the “isms” of racism, classism, and sexism that so readily name others wrongly and contribute to injustice, the Christian walks as one who names “the truth about the victim, the injustice, the perpetrator, the law, the consequences...(for instance) justice renames the forgotten as remembered, the widow as loved, and the oppressed as treasured.”⁴³ Rightly naming is essential to doing justice.

The final portion of Labberton’s book explores “acting.” He believes that how we perceive and name “defines our acting.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, then, his argument stretches from first rooting our fundamental location in Christ, then to perceiving rightly, naming rightly, and finally acting rightly such that our lives proclaim the justice and mercy of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

Labberton’s emphasis on seeing others through the eyes of Jesus is a crucial underpinning to the small group process. Through the *lectio divina* process participants

⁴⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁴² Ibid., 119.

⁴³ Ibid., 154-55.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 163.

will be listening for the Word of God who is Jesus. Rather than learn new information, they will be challenged to ground their hearts in Christ. The aim is to have congregants further centering their identity in Christ, thereby rightly perceiving, naming, and acting to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In particular, mature disciples are those who do justice.

The Arena for the Growth of Christian Maturity: Christian Community

Parker Palmer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer both underscore the central role of community in the formation of people. Palmer's insights are gleaned from contemporary epistemology studies that reveal the deficiency of didactic learning models. By contrast, his work also illumines the strength of learning models that are participatory and encourage group vulnerability and trust. Bonhoeffer's insights are rooted in his Lutheran theology and make clear the true gift and challenge of genuine community. Together, the works of these two authors provide a theological basis for the community-oriented discipleship paradigm set forth in this paper.

To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey by Parker J. Palmer

Though published in 1983, Parker Palmer's insights concerning education in this country remain thoroughly relevant, particularly for the Mainline, Reformed church and Grace Covenant specifically. Palmer is critical of the "standard education" unfolding throughout the mid and late-twentieth century that lacks any spirituality and deals instead "with abstract and impersonal facts and theories."⁴⁵ He believes this education relies far

⁴⁵ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 14, 47.

too heavily “an objectified system of empirical facts,” problematic because it does not take seriously the shaping of people’s passions and motivations; thus, it does not truly form people. In response, Palmer seeks to recapture what he calls, a “spiritual education” that forms the whole person.⁴⁶

Palmer is particularly critical of the mid-to-late twentieth century classroom experience where teachers teach “objective” truths via “boxed and tied” didactic lessons, and thereby thwart the formation of the whole person. He argues that, “the conventional pedagogy pretends to give us mastery over the world, relieving us of the need for mutual vulnerability,” wherein our hearts are truly shaped.⁴⁷ Palmer believes teachers and student alike are to blame for the situation. For instance, while teachers too readily default to passing along information, he also blames students for wanting the more conventional pedagogy “because it gives them security” and when a teachers tries to “to give the students more responsibility for their education, students get skittish and cynical.”⁴⁸ Students resist a more communal, interactive, and vulnerable approach because they “want to avoid a knowledge that calls for our own conversion.”⁴⁹ He adds that while students are very much interested in knowing “how to convert the world,” most do not want to know in ways that would change them as well.⁵⁰ Thus, preferring the conventional classroom method is a way to ensure nobody present has to change.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 40.

Nevertheless, as Palmer's book title makes clear, humans only truly know and are formed insofar as they are known. Community is fundamental to the formation of students.

Palmer not only challenges the conventional epistemology based on the deficiency he sees in students around him, he also makes his challenge based on Christian theology. He reminds the reader that in the Christian tradition, "truth is not a concept," nor is it "propositional." Rather Christians "understand truth to be embodied in personal terms, the terms of one who said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'"⁵¹ Truth is known when embodied and discovered in relationship with Jesus and "the whole community of the human and nonhuman world," which means many predominate models for education are lacking.⁵² Indeed, he states that Christianity's "richest insights" come by way of stories with and about people, not by way of theoretical, structured doctrine.⁵³

Ultimately, Palmer posits a definition of teaching that opens the way for formation. He states his foundational definition of teaching as follows: "to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced."⁵⁴ Thus, the end of any good teaching is obedience, by which Palmer means "to listen with a discerning ear and respond faithfully to the personal implications of what one has heard."⁵⁵ Palmer believes that for such obedience to be attained, a certain kind of space must be created within a learning community. Key to that space are, "openness, boundaries, and an air of

⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

⁵² Ibid., 47.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 89.

hospitality.”⁵⁶ Teachers must set a tone via the space and their personality that facilitates an openness in the class to talk, question, and be vulnerable. True openness only happens, however, when the teacher sets boundaries that allow the class to feel safe to learn. Finally, hospitality must permeate the entire process of learning so that the classroom becomes a space “where every stranger and every strange utterance is met with welcome,” the same way biblical hospitality often has God using the stranger to illumine the truth.⁵⁷

Palmer’s emphasis on space and obedience undergirds the small group paradigm in this paper. The fact that the groups meet in homes is a purposeful attempt to open the hearts and minds of people who strongly associate learning in the church building with the conventional paradigm. As well, a major part of recruiting small group leadership will entail discerning those whose personalities facilitate a welcoming and trusting atmosphere. Even the use of *lectio divina* in the small groups is meant to facilitate an openness to Scripture that culminates in the kind of hearing that leads to obedience, most particularly in a life that embodies and proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ.

Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores the nature of Christian community. This community is utterly dependent on the Word of God. Indeed, the faithful in community “daily hunger and thirst for righteousness, (they) daily desire the redeeming

⁵⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 74.

Word.”⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer then explains that this Word has been given to men and women (sic) to be the mouthpiece of that communication. Hence, it is only in community that one can truly hear the voice upon which one is utterly dependent – “The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s word to him.”⁵⁹ Since it is God’s word that forms and matures the Christian, then faithful Christians only grow insofar as they are rooted in the kind of community that hears God’s word from one another. Such “hearing” will unfold in the small endeavor being proposed.

Notably, Bonhoeffer declares that this kind of community is difficult to realize. Only by way of disappointment and disillusionment with one another can a community see clearly that it lives solely by the grace and Word of Jesus Christ. While the small groups may prove to be emerging to the congregation, Bonhoeffer reminds the Church of the truth that it is not until a covenant community faces great challenge and disappointment can they begin to truly stand on and be shaped by God.⁶⁰ It is only then that the community can be founded first on a love for Christ, the power alone through whom communities are then free to love one another.⁶¹ His reminder will be necessary for the small group facilitators to recognize. Insofar as they are able to have groups one to one another, they also are opening vulnerable space where hurt can (and over time, will) be felt. This is not just possible, it is necessary and good according to Bonhoeffer.

⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion on Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

Once genuine community begins to form, it has a certain shape and ethos. In particular, the community must guard against relying on human desire and technique. Bonhoeffer declares, “In the spiritual realm, the Spirit governs; in the human community, psychological techniques and methods.”⁶² Facilitating the small groups will require a profound trust in the Spirit to speak, move, and even silence as is necessary. Thus, no methodology will be taught in the small group facilitator training. Undoubtedly, such trust will stretch leaders and participants alike.

According to Bonhoeffer, there are certain practices that are essential to continuing in the Christian life together. Foremost among those practices is reading Scripture. In particular, he calls for families to read Scripture together daily. He notes, however, that as soon as one begins reading, “it becomes apparent that the whole of Scriptures and hence every passage in it as well far surpasses our understanding. It is good for us to be daily reminded of this fact, which again points to Jesus Christ himself, ‘in whom are hid all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3).”⁶³ A true hearing of Scripture leads to a recognition of Jesus himself, whose depths can never fully be known but is constantly revealed where two or more gather in his name. Like the others in this section on theological reflection, Bonhoeffer recognizes that Scripture must be understood as a living word wherein the Church expects to be formed via the revelation of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such an expectation undergirds the proposal that this paper makes.

⁶² Ibid., 32.

⁶³ Ibid., 52.

CHAPTER THREE

A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION THROUGH SMALL GROUP

Building on the theology set forth in the literature review, this chapter synthesizes and articulates the theology undergirding the small group paradigm proposed by this paper. As well, it explores the limits and potential of Reformed theology in relationship to this paradigm. Practically, this chapter unpacks the central role of *lectio divina* in the process of formation. Finally, this chapter explores three texts from Scripture that inform and illuminate the house based small group paradigm.

Basic Assumptions about the Nature of Christian Community

The community of God finds its foundation and identity in the person of God. Because God is triune in nature, God is in God's very essence relational. As Bolsinger summarily observes, "God is a covenant group."¹ Because God is love, the three Persons of God relate to one another in an eternal, self-giving love. They are "cosubstantial, coeternal, and coequal," and in their "essence they are so joined together that they are one

¹ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church*, 59.

God.”² While a covenant group, the intimacy and nearness of the three Persons of God are such they are, paradoxically, one God.

The Church is called to be the image-bearers of God in this world, and so the Church finds its understanding of community in God’s image. As God is fundamentally relational, so too the church is fundamentally relational. Each member of God’s family is called into covenant relationship - mutual, self-giving love toward and alongside one another. In such love, the family of God grows in intimacy, vulnerability and trust. They experience the mystery of being the many parts of the body of Christ who are, at the same time, one in Christ.

To know such one-ness, the Church must embody its communal call routinely and frequently. In a fast-paced culture with strenuous work demands, seemingly endless outlets for recreation, and the continual draw of social media, this frequent, in-person embodiment is in itself a challenging commitment. At the same time, it is the only way to be transformed into people God created us to be. For truly where two or more gather in Jesus’ name, there he is; and there, then, is the presence and power who transforms the Church into his likeness. Moreover, the fact that God came in the flesh to redeem and transform humanity undergirds the fact that the Church, too, discovers continued sanctification and transformation insofar members gather in the flesh. As Stassen underscores, our loyalties only shift from the selfish and sinful to God and God’s Kingdom by way of the Spirit’s work in embodied covenant community.³

² *The Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.016-17 in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 96.

³ Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus*, 116.

Notably, a church that simply gathers routinely and frequently is not necessarily a church that experiences the transforming power of the Gospel. Transformation occurs insofar as Christians walk in the humble and vulnerable way of Jesus. In order to save and transform humanity, Jesus did not hold onto the privileges and prerogative of heaven but instead emptied himself in humility to become one of us (Phil 2:5-6). He was born as an infant in a manger, walked his days humbly in light of the will of God, and then died naked on a cross. From birth to death, the way of Jesus was one of humility before God and vulnerability before humanity. Through his life, death, and resurrection, the power of transformational life was known. Likewise, for the Church to know the transformative power of Christ means that the church (his body on earth) must en flesh this life as he did. In particular, this means congregants must open their hearts vulnerably with and toward one another. The seed of God's Gospel does not as readily take root in guarded, hardened soil.

To open space for vulnerability, the leader must first exude vulnerability. Whitworth University President Bill Robinson puts it this way: "God's glory was beheld in walking, talking, eating, sleeping Jesus. Being a Christ-like leader requires the same kind of 'beholdability.' It means being transparent."⁴ Teaching doctrine is important, but the meat of formation happens in transparent communities in which the leader sets that tone. As Larry Crabb adds,

Only broken people share spiritual community... It is our weakness, not our competence, that moves others; our sorrows, not our blessings, that break down the barriers of fear and shame that keep us together in hope. A spiritual

⁴ Bill Robinson, *Incarnate Leadership: 5 Leadership Lessons from the Life of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2016), 40.

community, a church, is full of broken people who turn their chairs toward each other because they know they cannot make it alone.⁵

The great benefit of a transparent community is that the Holy Spirit is given space to show forth the power of grace amid brokenness.

Notably, the small groups in which members become a more transparent and transformed community should meet outside the church building. When Parker Palmer asserts that the definition of teaching “is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced,” “space” has meaning on multiple levels, one of which is the physical space in which learning happens.⁶ He explains,

When the chairs are arranged facing the lectern, row upon row, the learning space is confined to a narrow alley of attention between each student and the teacher. Such an arrangement speaks. It says that in this space there is no room for students to relate to each other and each other’s thoughts; there is no invitation to a community of truth; there is no hospitality.⁷

Grace Covenant, like many larger church buildings with decades of tradition, has a number of large rooms designed to accommodate long rows of chairs facing a lectern. The sanctuary solidifies this pattern with pews drilled into the spot they have remained for a century. Ultimately, the space has a strong, largely unconscious grip on the congregation’s imagination about what discipleship looks like. Since the congregation has a strong emotional attachment to the way the building is designed because of the cherished memories (baptisms, funerals, and other special events), there is no incentive or desire to radically reorient the space.

⁵ Crabb, 27, 32 in Gorman, *Community that is Christian*, 198.

⁶ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

A home environment, on the other hand, has the potential to assist congregants to see, hear, and receive God in fresh, transformative ways. As Milton Freedman explains, “In order to imagine the unimaginable, people must be able to separate themselves from surrounding emotional processes before they can even begin to see (or hear) things differently.”⁸ Part of separating from emotional processes entails breaking from the familiar environment. The houses of members who live in the Fan are an ideal setting for this break from the familiar to occur. Not only do these spaces offer a more hospitable setting than the church building, they aid in opening members to new levels of trust and vulnerability.

Setting alone hardly guarantees a shift to Spirit-led formation will happen. Once the people of God are meeting regularly to be transformed by the living Word of God the process of maturity is in its infancy. At first the group may experience a ‘honeymoon’ experience in which members enjoy new connections with others with whom they did not know as well (or at all) previously. While this phase of communal maturity is normal and even enjoyable, it also cannot last for full maturity to be made known. Indeed, Julie Gorman notes that, “a group that must always be conciliatory in spirit may never develop a level of trust that leads to high commitment and investment because they realize they are only dealing with half-truths.”⁹ While it is understandable and natural to avoid conflict in the earliest stages of a group formation, eventually conflict must be emerge or

⁸ Milton Freedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 31.

⁹ Gorman, *Community that is Christian*, 172.

genuine depth of commitment will not be formed. Moreover, she observes that conflict can be vital in spurring a group toward becoming “more creative and more productive.”¹⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a helpful theological perspective on the importance of God’s community experiencing disillusionment with one another. He writes, “By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for us a brief period in a dream world.”¹¹ He trusts that when conflict does eventually emerge that it is most truly God’s work of unsettling that which remains false in the group. Idols and selfish resistance are broken amid conflict. Indeed, Bonhoeffer continues, asserting that it is “only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight.”¹² Bonhoeffer explains that the death of the dream community allows for the people of God to finally see that they only foundation on which they stand and the only foundation strong enough to hold them and transform them is the Word of God.

According to Bonhoeffer, the most mature Christian community is the one whose people recognize that community is entirely “a gift from God which we cannot claim... it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”¹³ When that is recognized, the mature community gathers solely in thanks for this gift. Gratitude, therefore, becomes one of the central indicators of communal health.

¹⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 30

The Process of Formation

The Reformed Tradition has much within it that can and does undergird the process of formation that occurs through small groups. However, the Reformed Tradition also has a couple factors that can limit or hinder the process. Those must first be named clearly so one can move faithfully forward in a Reformed context like Grace Covenant.

The first of these limiting factors is the Reformed Tradition's strong emphasis on didactic teaching. In his book on missional leadership, van Gelder notes that since the Reformation those in the Reformed tradition have largely understood ministers to be highly educated persons who have a strong "pedagogue" role. It is their learned teaching that is passed along to the congregation in a lecture or sermon format. It is a "believing pedagogy" concerned primarily that right, cognitive beliefs are taught, and oftentimes, this does not involve much verbal exchange or interpersonal encounter.¹⁴ The lack of interpersonal exchange in the traditional pedagogue format is at odds with the most fundamental way that Christians are shaped and know truth. As Parker Palmer observes,

In the Christian tradition, truth is not a concept that 'works' but an incarnation that lives... (the) tradition understands truth to be embodied in personal terms, the terms of one who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Where conventional education deals with abstract and impersonal facts and theories, an education shaped by Christian spirituality draws us toward incarnate and personal truth.¹⁵

The key failure of the pedagogue model is that it errs towards abstract theology and impersonal knowledge. As Palmer underscores, the Christian tradition most fundamentally comes to know truth in the opposite manner; namely by way of a personal

¹⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 45.

¹⁵ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 14.

encounter. In particular, Christians have that encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ who is made known through his body, the church.

A second deficiency of the Reformed tradition resides in precisely the same place as its most potent strength: the central focus on the Word of God. In reflecting upon the education of Christians, the former Grace Covenant Sunday school teacher and prominent twentieth century theologian John Leith writes, “The first task in the church is to read the Bible as the Word of God with attention focused on the narrative of what God has done, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ There exists, however, a significant strand within the Reformed tradition which attends closely to the Bible but do so in a manner wherein the focus is on knowing and learning scripture and doctrine apart from formation. Indeed, Leith builds upon his first statement by observing that, “The second task of Christian education is to teach theology of the church – the church’s message as it has been put together in rational, coherent statements.”¹⁷ Reading the Bible and teaching theology are undoubtedly both central to Christian education as they necessarily undergird a Christian faith, but these alone do not ultimately shape hearts. In fact, they can become an intellectual exercise that errs toward an idolatry of knowledge – an issue famously confronted by Paul when he declares, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor 13:2).

¹⁶ John Leith, *From Generation to Generation: The Renewal of the Church according to Its Own Theology and Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 126.

¹⁷ Leith, *From Generation to Generation*, 127.

A central focus on the Word of God remains a critical strength of the Reformed Tradition. However, the focus must shift from valuing biblical knowledge and doctrine to valuing an encounter with the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, through Scripture. This point is underscored in one of the PC(USA)'s *Confession of 1967*. It declares that, "The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures."¹⁸ The written words are essential, but ultimately the church is listening for the living voice of the One to whom the written word is pointing; namely, Jesus Christ.

Deficiencies aside, the Reformed Tradition has three key strengths that can be harnessed in helping facilitate a formative encounter with the living Word of God through Scripture. The first of these strengths is the central importance given to living in covenant community. Bolsinger explains that the "God is a covenant group," and therefore the people of God are called to be in covenant with one another, thereby giving living expression to the image of God.¹⁹ In Reformed tradition, concern about an individual's faith is secondary to concern about how God is calling a people. Lukas Vischer explains the essential nature of covenant community, stating that "the Church, the body of Christ, is the place in which God's salvation becomes present in history, and

¹⁸*Confession of 1967*, 9.27. in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 325.

¹⁹ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church*, 59.

that for this reason no one comes to faith and Christian life except by belonging to this community.”²⁰ He then explains that this theology finds its roots in Calvin. He states,

Calvin was able to refer to the church as “Mother”: “let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in than her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off all mortal flesh, we become like angels [Matt. 22:30].”²¹

The connection that an individual has to the congregation is no less vital and basic than a child to her mother. While Calvin does not use the word ‘covenant’ in this particular excerpt, he nevertheless underscores the strong, organic connectedness that undergirds covenant relationships. That there exists a deep appreciation for covenant community in the DNA of the Reformed tradition helpfully undergirds this project in which the practicing covenant is foundational.

A second, related strength within the Reformed Tradition when considering the process of formation through Scripture is a strong belief in the priesthood of all believers. As Vischer notes, “The Reformed church emphasizes the responsibility of the congregation as a whole. Each member participates in the fulfilling of the communal task; each member helps to lead the church.”²² Vischer also points out that this emphasis has not always been readily apparent in the Reformed tradition. Calvin, for instance, insisted upon greater authority and responsibility to be given to those in the ministry

²⁰ Lukas Vischer, “The Church-Mother of All Believers,” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, and Traditions*, eds. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 273.

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4 in Lukas Vischer, “The Church-Mother of All Believers,” 273-74.

²² Vischer, “The Church-Mother of All Believers,” 267.

“over and against the congregation...because he was convinced that the church lives from the preaching of the Word and the gift of the sacraments.”²³ This basic assumption of Calvin’s is one many at Grace Covenant have.

Nevertheless, the Reformed tradition has grown and changed since Calvin’s time, particularly in the United States where the congregational movement has intersected with and informed it.²⁴ Anymore, a large swatch of the Reformed tradition does, in fact, take seriously that every member is part of the priesthood and therefore carries significant responsibility in helping to lead the Church and connect one another to God. This emphasis provides the theological undergirding for meaningful leadership training. Rather than relying solely or even mostly upon the pastor to teach and lead the small groups, a theology of the priesthood of all believers points congregants to their essential leadership role.

Perhaps the most vital Reformed tenant which undergirds the formation process is a robust, healthy understanding of the sanctification process. The Larger Catechism provides a full definition of the Reformed tradition’s understanding of sanctification in question seventy-five of the catechism:

Q. 75. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is a work of God’s grace, whereby they, whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are, in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit, applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise into newness of life.

²³ Ibid., 268.

²⁴ Ibid.

It is clear in the Reformed tradition that the entire work of making people more into the image of God who live with “newness of life” is done by God’s grace through the power of God’s Holy Spirit. Human beings do nothing to grow or mature themselves. As *The Westminster Confession of Faith* further explains, it is only via God’s “Word and Spirit dwelling in (the called people of God)” that “a new heart and a new spirit (are) created in them.”²⁵ This frees facilitators and participants from pressuring themselves to grow and mature in certain ways or at a certain pace. Rather, acknowledging that all sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit allows the Church to approach these new small groups with openness and a willingness to trust the Spirit’s work and timing. The facilitators also are freed from having to know all of the answers to difficult theological and biblical questions that may arise in the group time. They are assured that even as they do their best with whatever response they give, the growth of the group does not rest of their knowledge or ability but on the Spirit’s work. As is explained below, their only role is to cultivate the heart soil of the participants.

Drawing from the Reformed Tradition’s emphasis on covenant community, the priesthood of all believers, and the power of the Holy Spirit, the home groups developed at Grace Covenant will take a shape that is different from the current outlets for Christian formation. In contrast to the leader-as-lecturer model, the groups will be highly participatory, and they will be led by facilitators more keen on cultivating space for the Holy Spirit to shape the group than on relaying information or doctrine. Emphasizing group participation and the leader-as-cultivator model are uniquely new for Grace

²⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.0075 in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 121.

Covenant, and they offer two avenues through which the Holy Spirit can shape and transform the community.

Notably, the participatory nature of these groups begins from the moment the group first gathers. Parker Palmer explains that in his own practice of teaching, he

Begin(s) a course with extended self-introductions, asking my students to respond to queries about themselves that go beyond the surface statistics. Feelings will not be expressed and community will not form until we know each other and feel known in certain elemental ways. When self-introductions are omitted it is a clear signal that in this class only the teacher and the subject will have a chance to be known, that the subjective experience of the student is of no account.²⁶

If a group does not begin to make emotional connections on the front end, then the implicit message is that the group has gathered to download external data. Julie Gorman echoes this insight. In explaining how small groups grow in maturity she remarks, “Self-disclosure is absolutely vital to the building of Christian community. Being known, accepted, and cared about is the seedbed for growth and transformation.”²⁷ Being known, of course, means sharing far more than facts, figures, and insights only drawn from one’s mind. As Palmer goes on to explain, “Our feelings may be more vital to truth than our minds, since our minds strive to analyze and divide things while our feelings reach for relatedness.”²⁸ In other words, a significant part of what “participatory” means entails drawing forth emotional engagement from participants.

Ultimately, Palmer says that only in this way do we begin to achieve what he calls “relatedness.” At first glance, this does not sound like the goal of the home groups being proposed in this paper – forming a people into the image of Jesus Christ who proclaim

²⁶ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 85.

²⁷ Gorman, *Community that is Christian*, 143.

²⁸ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 85.

the person of Christ in word and deed. However, in Ephesians 4:13 the Apostle Paul speaks of Christian maturity as growing up in the body of Christ. That mark of maturity is not knowledge or doctrinal insightful doctrinal formulations – it is the ability of the various parts of Christ’s body to work with and alongside one another in the singular motion of love. A healthy body makes for a full proclamation. “Relatedness,” then, is an essential goal of the participatory model insofar as it means the visible witness of Jesus Christ is strengthened. Moreover, such relatedness is an essential way in which the groups live into a more genuine, committed understanding of covenant community, thereby indwelling an essential theological tenant of the Reformed faith.

Contemporary insights from social scientists outside the church echo the importance of the participatory model for genuine growth. In his book on leading change in people groups, Otto Scharmer stresses the absolute need for groups to participate actively in dialogue around a common text, reflection, or problem. As Scharmer puts it, “Dialogue is the art of seeing together...People resist change only if they are asked to make difficult changes and sacrifices without being able to see the bigger picture and understanding the context that makes the change necessary.”²⁹ The aim of these groups is to change hearts and minds such that the congregation more fully proclaims Jesus in word and deed. Dialogue allows the participants to jointly see Jesus and his call to transformation in a way that minimizes or breaks down natural resistance. As will be explored at a later portion of this chapter, the group participation model is not only foundational to the outset of a group’s gathering, it is to be maintained throughout the

²⁹ Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 135.

gathering. In particular, it essential to the *lectio divina* process wherein the group listens for God's Word through Scripture.

Participation without leadership can become chaotic. Trained leadership is therefore essential to disciplined, life-giving participation. Importantly, the leader's primary function is not to serve as a pedagogue who provides a lecture or offers answers to difficult questions. Rather, it is to be a cultivator. Roxburgh and Romanuk maintain that 'cultivator' is the most critical paradigm for those in church leadership to learn and live into if the church wants to effectively proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a post-Christian society. As they explain, the "missional leader is cultivating an environment within which God's people discern God's directions and activities in them and for the communities in which they find themselves."³⁰ The leader is not providing lessons or answers, but an environment for discernment. It is a model that emphasizes a strong reliance on the Holy Spirit to speak to, lead, and shape the group.

Eugene Peterson provides more specificity to the leader-as-cultivator paradigm. Such a leader, he writes, "create(s) conditions under which people can come together in shared life to discover their participation in God's mission. That means facilitating spaces of communal belonging, sharing, and practice....creating spaces of listening and dialogue, of engagement with Scripture and theological tradition, of encounter with the world."³¹ Opening such space takes seriously the fact that all in the body of Christ are priests in the Reformed sense of the word - each person can and does connect others to

³⁰ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 17.

³¹ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eardmans Publishing Company, 2009), 156.

God. However, this model recognizes that the group is best equipped to offer and make those connections when a leader is present to ensure space for listening and dialogue is honored. The details of how this space is maintained will be explained in the leadership training section of chapter four chapter of this paper.

Notably, the leader-as-cultivator paradigm takes seriously the Reformed tenant that it is truly only the Holy Spirit who grows the Church. As Scott Comode observes, “the Gardener (Comode’s imagery for the cultivator model) acknowledges that he can only evoke growth, he can never produce it.”³² The cultivator-leader opens space for connections to be made via listening and dialogue, but fundamentally this type of leader must be patient and flexible with the group’s growth for that aspect is entirely outside of her control. Cultivation cannot be rushed and the rate of growth cannot be predicted. Cultivation rests in the assurance that the Spirit promises to teach and transform (Jn 14:26; Rom 12:2).

In church settings like Grace Covenant, the cultivator model is largely foreign. This is particularly unfortunate because of how important this model of leadership is when it comes to engaging one of the most fundamental aspects of the Reformed faith – Scripture itself. Roxburgh and Romanuk observe that

A missional culture is cultivated within a congregation as it learns to indwell and engage Scripture in new ways. For too long, congregations have been schooled in viewing Scripture as a tool to be used for a variety of reasons and to meet innumerable needs. Sometimes it’s a help desk for finding an answer to a pressing problem. At other times it is used as a hammer to drive home a doctrinal position. Scripture has become a safety deposit box holding a depository of information and knowledge that can be collected when needed.

³² Scott Comode, “Multi-layered Leadership: The Christian Leader as Builder, Shepherd, and Gardener,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 70.

But all uses of the Scripture as a tool fail to engage it as a the narrative presence of God, who invites us into a story that reads and shapes us.³³

For years, the church has employed tool-based paradigms for engaging Scripture. Over and against the tool models of Scripture, Roxburgh and Romanuk underscore the vital need for the people of God to indwell Scripture. The church that is truly proclaiming Jesus Christ in a vibrant way within and beyond the membership is one with an approach to Scripture that is fundamentally attune to the living presence of God who is inviting the church into God's story of redemption. Indwelling Scripture faithfully requires leaders who see themselves as cultivators of the heart.

The Process of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a method through which such an approach to Scripture can happen. Eugene Peterson states the difference between the typical Mainline Church approach to Scripture and what *lectio divina* offers when he writes, “*Lectio divina* is the deliberate and intentional practice of making the transition from a kind of reading that treats and handles, however reverently, Jesus dead to a way of reading that frequents the company of friends who are listening to, accompanying, and following Jesus alive.”³⁴ Reading Scripture in a way that attends to the living Jesus in our midst is what transforms communities. This approach takes seriously that Scripture is filled with “living words” requiring exploration and personal engagement,” rather the dead words that become tools for theological debate.³⁵ In fact, so alive-with-Jesus is God's word that Peterson declares

³³ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 33-34.

³⁴ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 85.

³⁵ Hart, *From Information to Transformation*, 52.

Scripture fundamentally “is personal address, inviting commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing... From beginning to end, the word of God is a dialogical word, a word that invites participation.”³⁶ Hence, it is an invitation to maturity in Christ.

The *lectio divina* exercise has four parts: “*lectio* (we read the text), *meditatio* (we meditate the text), *oratio* (we pray the text), and *contemplatio* (we live the text).”³⁷

Peterson is quick to note that these four elements need not be thought of as linear, but rather “more like a looping spiral in which all four elements are repeated in various sequences and configurations.”³⁸ The elements mutually inform one another and no one element should be separated from the others. Reading should not be divorced from prayer, for instance, and action should not be divorced from meditation.

Practically, a group gathers around a particular Scripture text is only a few verses in length. Before the Scripture is read, the leader of the group invites participants to listen for a word or phrase in which the Holy Spirit invites particular attention. The Scripture is read at a deliberate pace, and it ends with the group remaining in silence. After a few moments, the group is invited to listen again for a word or phrase the Holy Spirit is lifting to their awareness. The second reading then commences, and after its completion the group is invited to share the words or phrase that the Holy Spirit has brought to their attention.

³⁶ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 109.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

During this initial process the group is learning to indwell the Scripture. They are not only reading it but meditating upon it. They are “entering the world of the text” and finding “the text is taking (them) into itself.”³⁹ The repetition in particular allows for those gathered to slow down and truly begin to hear God speaking through the text. Moreover, using a single text frees those who are present to have more meaningfully engage in dialogue since the single text brings everyone present to a common focus. As Palmer observes, “When all students in the room have read the same brief piece in a way that allows them to enter and occupy the text, a common space is created in which students, teacher, and subject can meet. It is an open space since a good text will raise as many questions as it answers. It is a bounded space since the text itself dictates the limits of our mutual inquiry.”⁴⁰ The text, then, is the boundary through which the community of God finds a free space in which it can grow together. As Palmer adds, the text becomes something of a “monastic cell” in which the community is called to “sit there so that the truth can seek us out.”⁴¹

Notably, Peterson observes that these repeated readings may sound strange to many of our congregants. The words, concepts, and contexts are often quite foreign from our day-to-day existence. This, he notes, is a good thing: “The word’s very strangeness and remoteness from the ordinary may even be an advantage in recovering its distinctive punch: it administers a verbal jolt to our ears, surprising us out of our hurried, harried, self-defeating addictions to what we have become used to calling fulfillment and the

³⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹ Ibid.

pursuit of happiness – our American culture’s emasculated version of heaven.”⁴² Though it is counterintuitive, the foreignness of the text is itself a space through which the Holy Spirit can speak with new clarity because the listener must slow and listen with more attentiveness than usual.

As the sometimes “strange and remote” scripture is repeated, the Holy Spirit not only speaks directly to the individuals gathered, but also to the group as a whole. Space is opened so that the community of God begins to speak with and to another. The cultivator-leader invites this open dialogue to begin after a third reading of the text. Through this dialogue, the Holy Spirit speaks both through the Scripture itself and through the body of Christ gathered. The community begins to discover the truth that the community of God, “meet(s) one another as bringers of the message of salvation.”⁴³ Imperfect, frail humans are the voice of God’s good news to others.⁴⁴

Ultimately, the body of Christ is strengthened by the weaving process the Holy Spirit does in this space listening and dialogue. Throughout the process, a good facilitator remains essential. She helps ensure every voice is being heard and that trust continues to build so that hearts remain open to the voice of God. If the process continues to unfold week after week, a kind of “role reversal” takes place wherein, Dykstra explains, “What we hope for is not just that people will come to know what is in the Bible but that the Bible itself will get under their skin to the point that it will not let them go. If Bible study is effective, it will stop people in their tracks from time to time, change their minds about

⁴² Ibid., 112.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 22.

⁴⁴ “And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Rom10: 14c).

things, or help them make up their minds. It may even fill them up with something and make them swoon.”⁴⁵ The effective study changes people. It leads them into more confidence prayer as individuals and in the group setting. It is also changes the way in which Christians live because the Word indwells them and is enfleshed through them in acts of obedience. This work of the Word upon a Christian’s actions “is a gift, it is something to which we are receptive and obedient...it is ‘infused.’”⁴⁶

Importantly, Peterson says that because this process from first to last is the work of the Holy Spirit through Holy Scripture, the group nor the leader can take charge of the process and impose goals or expectations of what the transformation will look like. There is a certain “impossibility to evaluation,” though testimonies about how Jesus is speaking and working through lives offers one particularly poignant and visible way to ascertain the Holy Spirit’s faithfulness.⁴⁷ *Lectio divina* is a method through which the Bible can be truly heard as God’s living and active word and so begin shaping and changing people.

The Goal of Formation – Mature Christ-Followers

Mature followers of Christ have a full sense of Christ’s life dwelling and through them. They see Jesus in their midst, particularly in and through community and Scripture. They see and love others as Jesus loves. As well, they enter into Scripture seeking always to be formed further into Jesus’s likeness by the living and active Word. The following Scripture passages illumine this understanding of maturity and inform the house-based small group discipleship paradigm set forth in this paper.

⁴⁵ Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 152.

⁴⁶ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 116.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Forming the Leader, Shaping a People – Mark 6:30-44

The formation of the congregation begins with the formation of the cultivator-leaders, and Mark 6:30-44 provides a paradigm for the call that these leaders have. The Mark 6:30-44 passage begins with by explaining that “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat (Mk 6:31). It is unclear as to whether Mark is referring to the people of a particular village, his own disciples, or society in general. What is clear, however, is that for some – if not all – busyness was a defining feature of their day-to-day life such that there was not even time for one of the most essential things in life; namely, eating. While that reality may have described only a portion of Mark’s society, it certainly describes a large swath of contemporary society in North America. It also describes the contemporary Mainline church culture where the busyness of congregant lives is compounded by endless programming and the need for more member involvement to uphold the operations of the church.

Into extreme busyness Jesus invites, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mk 6:31). Mark does not tell us where Jesus’ disciples went or for how long. The point is that busyness prompts an invitation from God to go in the direction of desertedness where all the concerns that keep one busy are put at a distance. It is an invitation that echoes another, more well-known invitation of Jesus’, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28).

The invitation of Mark 6:31 is the invitation that the cultivator-leaders are being asked to make when they invite congregants into house-based groups. It is an invitation

away from the church building and all of the responsibilities one feels when inside that building. It is also an invitation away from one's own home and workplace so that, alongside a small community of Jesus followers, one has the opportunity to rest with, hear from, and be shaped by Jesus. As Palmer advises, the space should convey, "openness, boundaries, and an air of hospitality" that Jesus might be known in and through those gathered.⁴⁸

A second aspect of this passage that is relevant to the cultivator leaders is the way that Jesus sees the people. Mark writes that Jesus, "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6:34). Jesus views the crowd with compassion, a word from the Latin "com," (with) and "passion" (suffering). Indeed, it is Jesus' compassion that allows him to see the people "like sheep." Later he will have those sheep seated on green pastures, an echo of Psalm 23 that makes it clear that Jesus seems himself as the Good Shepherd. He is a leader who cares for them to the point that he enters their suffering, and he is a leader who tends to the needs of his people, whom "He calls...by name" (Jn 10:3).

It is essential for the cultivator leaders of the small groups to have a small enough group of individuals that those leaders can truly get to know and care for each individual. Their call is not to pass along doctrinally correct information or teach a three-part lesson; most fundamentally, they must be intentional about seeing themselves as shepherds who know and care compassionately for the sheep by name, even to the point of entering into the cares and suffering of those in the group. Then relationship, then, between facilitator

⁴⁸ Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 71.

and participant proves an essential conduit through which the Holy Spirit forms the people. Indeed, “students require a relationship or sense of belonging before their engagement of the material becomes effective.”⁴⁹

A third aspect of this text that is particularly relevant to the call and formation of the cultivator leaders occurs when the disciples tell Jesus, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat” (Mk 6:35-36). The disciples see both the need (food) and their own limitation (lack of food) and therefore offer the highly practical solution of sending the people away. Jesus, however, sees the potential for so much more if the people simply offer whatever they currently have. Once given, Jesus blesses and breaks the five loaves of bread and divides two fish among all the people so as ultimately to feed five thousand, far more than anyone could have thought or imagined.

Similarly, the cultivator leader is not called to didactically teach or offer all the answers; instead, they are called to draw forth whatever the people in the group have to offer. Their thoughts, questions, insights, and prayers – however limited they may feel to the participant – are precisely what is needed. In a space of trust and hospitality, the Holy Spirit works with that vulnerability and can multiply what is offered to the great blessing of everyone in the group and those beyond the group. The key, however, is a leader who finds gentle and continual ways of asking, “How many loaves have you?”

⁴⁹ Hart, *From Information to Transformation*, 44.

It is essentially a question inviting participants to discern what voice, gift, and wherewithal they bring to the group (Mk 6:38).

One final, relevant aspect of this passage to the proposed project is the manner in which Jesus seats the people. In Mark 6:39-40 the people are seated in smaller sections of fifty and one hundred. While that is far too large for the small groups being proposed in this project, it is noteworthy that the Greek for “sections” is *prasiai*, the “normal Greek word for the rows of vegetables in a vegetable garden.”⁵⁰ Clustered in smaller groups, the people are ideally situated for cultivation and fruit-bearing, the same aim as the house-based small groups.

The Gift of Seeing Jesus – Luke 24:13-35

This Scripture opens by situating the reader in a place of disappointment and disillusionment. There are two who walk along, one is named Cleopas and the other goes unnamed, as if inviting the reader to place herself in those shoes. They encounter Jesus without recognizing him, and we are told that they are “looking sad” as they explain how they had hoped Jesus would be the Messiah, but it turned out he was crucified and though there were now reports that he was alive, no one has seen him (Lk 24:17, 21-24). That this passage opens in a place of disillusionment and disappointment about how the disciples had hoped God would show resonates with where many Mainline congregations are today. They are walking the path and wondering amid dying members, shrinking membership, and burdensome buildings requiring constant upkeep. They wonder why Jesus did not show up as expected. While they hear Jesus is on the move and alive in the

⁵⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 182.

Global South and new church plants, they do not see him presently in their midst. It is comforting to know, however, that Jesus is most assuredly in that space of disillusionment about the church. The issue is that these followers cannot see him.

Notably, the people still do not see him for who he is even when he teaches from the Scriptures about himself (Lk 24:27). Teaching alone does not suffice in opening heart to see reality. Rather, it is only when Jesus goes to the disciples' home and shares a meal with them that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Lk 24:31). What occurred was not something that they could have learned or attained to; rather, it was gracious revelation wherein Jesus showed the disciples not only his true identity but the way in which he calls them. The breaking of bread offered a symbol of the broken and poured out life the disciples were to have in this world as they proclaimed Jesus who was broken and poured out in love on behalf of all. Labberton describes the gift of Jesus showing himself and his way to us when he reflects on his recovering from eye surgery and the spiritual lesson he learned:

More than sight, I needed vision. That is, I needed a change in perception, not just in visual acuity. I need more than the information gained through sight could deliver to me. If I was going to see the word I in the love and mercy of Jesus Christ, and perceive the people and needs of the world in a way that was truthful, then I needed to see with the heart of Jesus. No surgeon could give me this.⁵¹

Labberton continues that he began praying during his recovery that he would be given the gift of vision so that his heart might see and approach the world as Jesus does. He longed for what Jesus gave the disciples in a home, over a meal, as part of an extended conversation around Scripture.

⁵¹ Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor*, 76.

From Depersonalized to Personalized - Luke 10:25-37

This familiar story begins with a lawyer and religious scholar who seeks to “test Jesus” (Lk 10:25) The Greek word for “test” is *ekpeirazein*, the same verb used to describe what the Devil is doing to Jesus in the wilderness scene from Luke 4. From the outset of the passage, it is clear that the lawyer’s question is not innocent, and it informs the manner in which Jesus responds. The lawyer portends to want to know what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus asks a question in response, saying, “How do you read this?” (Lk10:26). Importantly, Eugene Peterson points out that the typical translation for this verse reads “What do you read there?” which obscures a key point: Jesus is not asking about the content that this lawyer has read but about the manner in which he is reading. Jesus seeks to know if he is reading for self-justifying information or reading in order to be shaped and formed by the living word.⁵²

The lawyer’s response summarizes the law of God – love God and love neighbor. It is thoughtful, scriptural, and theologically correct. The lawyer embodies the result of a discipleship paradigm that works to ensure right doctrine absent the formative work of the Holy Spirit. The lawyer is not only professionally respectable, but theologically astute. While many congregation’s would see this man and consider him mature in life and in faith, Jesus soon reveals the profound immaturity of his faith.

The reader of the text soon finds that the lawyer seeks to justify himself, and so he asks, “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29).

⁵² Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 83.

The lawyer wishes to keep the discussion in the realm of theological debate rather than consider how the law of God confronts his heart and actions in the world. He has a “cool and detached expertise” he brings to Scripture.⁵³

Peterson observes that the lawyer asks for a definition because “he needs to define himself against responding to the text personally. Defining “neighbor” depersonalizes the neighbor, turns him or her into an object, a thing over which he can control, do with whatever he wants.”⁵⁴ A theological question that appears to deepen the conversation proves in fact to hold the real work of the Spirit at arm’s length. This is why Jesus does not respond with “a Bible study of Deuteronomy and Leviticus under the shade of a nearby oak tree,” but instead tells a story so as to awaken the lawyer to the direct, personal call to “love your neighbor.”⁵⁵

Jesus is inviting the kind of “participatory attentiveness” necessary for rightly reading Scripture – the same attentiveness cultivated in and through *lectio divina*.⁵⁶ While the letter of the law alone “kills, but the Spirit gives life,” and the Spirit speaks through Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan (2 Cor 3:6). The Spirit then convicts when Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Lk10:36). The lawyer “was impaled by the question” for the text pressed into his heart, insisting upon the question, “Will you (the lawyer) be a

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

neighbor?”⁵⁷ Jesus teaches the lawyer not only how to read Scripture in a way that speaks directly and personally, he also makes it readily clear that no reading of Scripture is faithful unless it so indwells a person that it overflows into enfleshed or incarnational discipleship. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus declares as he prompts the lawyer to action (Lk 10:37).

Stassen defines of incarnational discipleship as “empathically entering into the pain of others and taking personal responsibility for acting of their behalf,” and this is precisely the call of the lawyer who must now move from a theological debate about his neighbor to full empathy and responsibility with regard to neighbor.⁵⁸ This, too, is the end goal of the *lectio divina* process. There is no reading, meditating or praying upon the text that is divorced from faithful, embodied action.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus*, 29.

PART THREE
PRACTICE

CHAPTER FOUR

MINISTRY PLAN

This chapter unfolds the practical application of the theological foundation provided in the previous chapters. Key goals for the process are stated and an explanation for strategic process is provided. Notably, this chapter reflects on the importance of paying attention to change dynamics in the congregation. As promising as the house-based small groups are, they press the congregation to consider adaptive change. This requires attentive pastoral leadership.

Formation within Intentional Community

Mature disciples of Christ are formed in covenant communities within the church. Participation requires intentionality and consistency so that the Spirit can truly shape and open each group as it traverses the necessary relational highs and lows through which maturity is formed. Such groups must also meet in-person with one another rather than merely maintaining a connection via the various technological tools at society's disposal today. Being bodily present acknowledges the importance of incarnation and its fundamental role in the sanctification process.

Just as Jesus came in the flesh to save humanity, so too, we gather most powerfully as “bringers of the message of salvation” when we gather visibly with one another.¹

As the Holy Spirit begins to draw forth fruit from the participants gathering for in-home meetings, the hope is that the congregation will begin to accept the home-based small group model as a viable and even essential one for discipleship. Currently, however, Sunday school remains the standard for how the congregation envisions good discipleship. Many see home-based groups as an alternative, less-demanding option for those who do not prefer Sunday school.

Goals

This project has three primary goals. The first of those goals is to articulate the essential role of community in formation. Christian in general and congregants at Grace Covenant in particular largely agree that the community of God is important. We are called to fellowship and we need one another in times of difficulty. As well, we enjoy the gift of one another’s friendship. However, based on the fact that our primary arenas for discipleship mostly involve chairs sitting in rows that face a lectern, it is not evident that the church sees the community as essential to the formation as followers of Jesus. Community is viewed more as a group of people alongside whom discipleship information and tasks are learned. What must be articulated is that those who gather - not merely a lecturer - are essential to the Holy Spirit’s formation of the community.

This also has implications for the church’s process with new members. Rather than simply welcoming them into the congregation on a particular Sunday, the

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 23.

congregation must consider how it can build a culture wherein it is expected that every member share in the kind of community wherein Holy Spirit-formation is continual and vibrant. Indeed, one measure that this first goal has been accomplished will be when the session proactively seeks to articulate the expectation that new members be involved in home-based Bible studies.

A second goal of this process is to have the church embrace a Scripture-focused, dialogue-based paradigm for discipleship. While the congregation already places a high value on Scripture, it does not place a high value on understanding and hearing the voice of Jesus through Scripture in dialogue-based settings. Scripture is most properly and maturely learned by way of expert teachers lecturing about the right understanding of Scripture passages and the accompanying Christian worldview that is built from that foundation. While nourishing the mind in this way in the discipleship process is important, Smith's critique of such a paradigm makes it clear that another paradigm is urgently needed. He asks:

What if a Christian perspective turns out to be a way of domesticating the radicality of the gospel? What if the rather abstract formulas of a Christian worldview turn out to be a way to tame and blunt the radical call to be a disciple of the coming kingdom? Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn't actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to *think* about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I *love* not the kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market. By reducing the genius of Christian faith to something like an intellectual framework – a “perspective” or a “worldview” – we can (perhaps unwittingly) unhook Christianity from the practices that constitute Christian discipleship.²

To truly embrace the value of dialogue-based discipleship paradigm means that the congregation implicitly admits to the the deficiency in the current model which nourishes

² Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 218.

a worldview but too readily leaves the affections – the seat of our willpower and desire – unmoved and therefore our lives largely lacking in the transformation one would expect in followers of Jesus who came to usher in nothing short of the Kingdom of God. In short, the congregation must first recognize that “Christian education, has, for too long, been concerned with information rather than formation,” and therefore must open itself to new paradigms, in particular that of *lectio divina* practiced within the homes of congregants.³

Stanley Hauweras’s insight makes clear, however, that this second goal is not easily attained. He observes, “(Christianity) is not beliefs about God plus behavior. We are Christians not because of what we believe but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus... (which means) becoming part a different community with a different set of practices.”⁴ Hauweras not only pushes against the notion that the Christian faith is about right beliefs, he underscores the fact that to be a Christian in the most basic sense means participating in a community of people with a different set of Jesus-inspired, Jesus-led practices. For the congregation to embrace the value of Scripture-centered, dialogue-based discipleship means embracing a shift in how one understands what makes for a faithful Christian. This is a significant paradigm shift. Most basically, they will be challenged to embrace the fact that while beliefs are important and necessarily undergird our actions, it is most fundamentally our participation in the body of Christ and our exercise of Kingdom of God practices that is the true mark of a follower of Jesus.

³ Ibid., 219.

⁴ Stanley Hauweras, *After Christendom? How the Church is the Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 95.

One sign that the congregation is embracing this goal will be in the manner that the group dialogue progresses. In the beginning, the group facilitator will undoubtedly need to lead the discussions with continual questions and prompts. However, as the congregation embraces the value of the Spirit working through open, honest discussion around Scripture, they themselves will begin to not only offer insights and reflections but also ask one another questions. Hart calls this a desire to “ride the question.” This desire grows in people who no longer gather in search of answers but who value how the Spirit shapes in and through the conversation itself, which is always furthered and deepened by more questions.⁵

The third goal of this project is to develop within the congregation a vision for Holy Spirit-led formation that empowers disciples to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. This goal is strongly connected to the second goal because Holy Spirit-formation happens most fundamentally when the community of God is gathered, dialoguing with and about Scripture to one another. Currently, the predominate understanding of the Holy Spirit in the congregation is as a teacher whose presence is made known most assuredly and deeply in the preaching of God’s Word and sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This understanding is both true and right, but also limited. The goal is for the congregation to experience the Spirit’s teaching power throughout the week, in particular in and through fellow congregants. In this way, the congregation also will embrace more deeply an essential tenant of the Reformed faith; namely, the priesthood of all believers.

This third goal not only involves a more expansive experience of the Holy Spirit, but also an understanding that the Spirit empowers us to proclaim the good news of Jesus

⁵ Hart, *From Information to Transformation*, 116.

in word and deed. The Spirit, then, is more than a teacher or right content, but a living and active agent of transformation who daily invites and prompts our words and shapes and directs our actions. For the congregation to articulate faithfully this third goal means that they grow to understand and experience the Holy Spirit's presence every day, rather than only in the times when the Word is preached and the sacraments administered.

The Content of the Strategy

To accomplish these goals will take time and a focused strategy. That strategy is a seven-step process. The first step entails inviting ten congregants into an eight-week, home-based small group led by the pastor who is leading the transformation process. This small group is not something advertised to the entire congregation. Rather, the session is informed about this experiment wherein the pastor invites key congregants to try out a new discipleship paradigm that could prove meaningful for the rest of the congregation. The characteristics of these ten will be described in the Leadership and Target Population section below.

After the group is selected, the second step begins as the group meets in the home of a Fan-based participant. This helpfully roots the first effort in the immediate context of Grace Covenant, and begins the process of opening the congregation's imagination for where and how discipleship unfolds in its context. If congregation is going to open themselves to a new way of discipleship, it will not happen through more learning via the current, predominate modes of learning. Instead, "in order to image the unimaginable, people must be able to separate themselves from surrounding emotional processes before

they can ever begin to see (or hear) things differently.”⁶ Bringing together a new mixture of congregants inside a fresh setting that is set apart from the church property and normal emotional process of the congregation opens a core group of leaders to a way of being shaped that would not simply emerge by downloading data in a lecture-based class.

Once in the home, the group meets for an hour and a half as they learn to listen for Jesus through Scripture and one another. The Scripture chosen for each gathering is the one that will be preached on at the next Sunday morning service. This ties the discipleship and worship together more intimately and allows for the Spirit to continue and speak through a specific Scripture for a longer stretch of time during the week.

As the group meets, testimonies about Jesus shaping and speaking will emerge. The pastor facilitator listens closely for those moments and collects these stories. This is the third step in the strategic process. The goal is that some of these testimonies will be shared in corporate worship as a source of encouragement to the congregation. As well, these testimonies will prove important for helping the rest of the congregation better see why they would want to try this discipleship paradigm for themselves. In short, these testimonies are essential for the congregation-wide effort for they make clear the truth that Jesus is alive and at work in our midst; in particular in and through a different kind of listening to Scripture and one another.

After meeting for eight weeks, the pastor facilitator invites the ten congregants to consider being lead facilitators for future groups. These are now the congregants who are most prepared to lead an effort into a new paradigm for discipleship.

⁶ Freedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 31.

As these ten prayerfully consider this invitation, the pastor simultaneously repeats the initial process, and she begins a second eight-week group which will walk through the same process as the first group.

Facilitating a second group is the fifth step in the process. Leading this second group ensures that when a congregation-wide effort is eventually made, there are enough facilitators for all of the small groups. In a congregation like Grace Covenant where the average worship attendance is around one hundred and thirty people, a healthy goal for the congregation-wide participation is eighty percent of that number, according to Martha Grace Reese who coaches congregational leaders about launching successful church-wide small group efforts.⁷ At Grace Covenant, eighty percent is one hundred and four participants. To ensure each group has two facilitators and eight to twelve participants in total, sixteen to twenty facilitators will be needed. Hence, a second eight-week group led by the pastor is critically important to reach that number range. In larger congregations, the pastor may consider having an Associate Pastor or another full-time staff member to assist in leading yet another group or groups so that enough facilitators can be trained inductively ahead of the congregation-wide effort.

Once the process has been repeated, the sixth step of the process begins: formal training in small group facilitation. This training entails both specific reading and two pastor-led classes. This training is essential to helping participants shift into faithful group facilitators. The details of this training are outlined in the Leadership Development section of chapter five.

⁷ Martha Grace Reese, interview by author. Phone. Richmond, VA, November 8, 2015.

Following their training, the seventh and final step begins as an effort to involve the entire congregation in house-based small groups is launched. As will explained in chapter five, this step begins with a focused recruitment effort wherein the first group of participants play an essential role. It also entails continual and broad communication throughout the congregation.

Adaptive Change Awareness

Throughout this seven-step process the pastor must be cognizant that the emerging small groups are the beginning of a process that, if successful, will shift and transform the culture of the congregation. Insofar as the Holy Spirit leads this, that is a wonderfully faithful thing. However, this also means that what will begin to happen is adaptive change – the kind of change that transforms the “attitudes, values, and behaviors” of an organization.⁸ Adaptive change in its fullest expression “often demands some disloyalty to our roots,” since it presses a people to break from a way they have done something for so long.⁹

In the case of this project, it is disloyalty toward the Sunday school paradigm and the many teachers who steadfastly taught for so many years that will be no small pain for many in the congregation.¹⁰ In light of this pain and sense of loss, a leader must show great compassion for the people (Mk 6:34).

⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2002), 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

He must find ways individually and through the pulpit to acknowledge the present pain. Indeed, “people need to know that you know what you are asking them to give up on the way to creating a better future.”¹¹

Practically, the challenges of adaptive change will be addressed in three ways. One, the pilot group participants will all be people of influence who can help other congregations navigate the sense of loss. This group will serve not only as facilitators but as pastors who carefully attend to the complaints and grief that will emerge from within the congregation. Two, the pastor must acknowledge publically that she is aware of the sacrifice that everybody is making with their schedules and comfort level. Doing this with empathy and gratitude is important for the congregants to hear in this time of change.

The third way in which the stress of adaptive change will be assuaged during this congregation-wide small group effort is through how the Sunday school is addressed. During the eight weeks, Sunday school will be offered during the normal time and in the normal classrooms. The Sunday school space and curriculum, however, will change. The classrooms will be changed into small group settings wherein the people who gather meet in the round. The curriculum for the classes will be the same as unfolds at in the homes: a facilitator will lead the group through the *lectio divina* process.

While this is not ideal given the importance of meeting in homes, most contexts with a few decades of history do have a group of people for whom too much change all at once will cause severe unrest and resistance. Because of this, it is important that during

¹¹ Ibid., 94.

the first church-wide effort that most of the small groups meet in homes, but that there are also two options for Sunday morning meetings in the normal time and space. The new approach to the lesson in and of itself will inevitably stretch those congregants who choose the Sunday morning option.

Leadership and Target Population

Those invited into the initial group are selected by the pastor. The pastor will look to invite persons who have three particular characteristics: openness, vulnerability, and influence. These three characteristics are important for ensuring that those gathered have the essential qualities necessary not only to participate meaningfully in a house-based. They also are essential qualities necessary for eventually facilitating a small group themselves.

Foremost, the first group of participants must be people who have at least some openness to new ideas and change. They are among the “10 to 15 percent of innovators” who are quickest to grasp onto new ideas and rarely show strong resistance to change, and their involvement always for immediate forward momentum.¹² Discerning who these people are is no easy task at Grace Covenant and like congregations. Many Mainline congregations have very few of these early adopter-types because, over the years, the Mainline paradigm has erred toward governance by those who appreciate stability and predictability.¹³ Indeed, it is an unfortunate commentary that “Change is not what we expect from religious people. They tend to love the past more than the present or the

¹² Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 103.

¹³ Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 44.

future.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, from among the religious community Jesus has gathered in the church, those invited to this first group should be those who exhibit the most amount of openness.

Vulnerability is a form of openness and also is essential for this first group of participants. A key to this discipleship paradigm involves honest, open dialogue, and the success of this first group will depend on participants opening their lives to one another. While this undoubtedly takes time and trust, a group that already is willing to be vulnerable will move much more quickly into a space where they experience the Holy Spirit powerfully shaping them.

Moreover, if this group can grow in their ability to be vulnerable, then they will be further equipped to build trust in the groups that they eventually lead. As Lencioni observes with regard to the corporate world, “The most important action that a leader must take to encourage the building of trust on a team is to demonstrate vulnerability first. This requires that a leader risk losing face in front of the team, so that subordinates will take the same risk themselves.”¹⁵ Robinson applies this insight to the church setting, explaining vulnerability in terms of the Scripturally-based paradigm of ‘beholdability:’ “God’s glory was beheld in walking, talking, eating, sleeping Jesus. Being a Christ-like leader requires the same kind of ‘beholdability.’ It means being transparent.”¹⁶ Leaders of house-based small groups must show forth beholdability so that the group can grow in

¹⁴ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: The Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 3.

¹⁵ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* ((San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 201.

¹⁶ Robinson, *Incarnate Leadership*, 40.

trust and risk themselves opening in dialogue and to the Spirit's work in their life.

Ultimately, both openness and vulnerability are concrete expressions of humility. Find those who are humble, and the first group will have a promising start.

Notably, however, some if not all of the initial participants should not only be humbly open and vulnerable, they should be people of influence within the congregation. As these participants will be some of the initial facilitators for future groups in the congregation, it is important that these participants have the relational capital within the congregation to invite others into the experience. As well, they can more readily persuade resistant congregants to try the experience. Finally, their leadership by example (by participating in the house-based small groups) will spur still other congregants into participation.

It should be noted that the qualities of openness, vulnerability, and influence are not the traditional leadership qualities that a congregation like Grace Covenant highlights for its leadership. There is no mention, for instance, of needing to find facilitators who have a high degree of biblical knowledge. Granted, this is important and helpful, but it is most important to recruit those who are obviously molded by the Gospel to the point that they exude the kind of humility and strength found in Jesus Christ who humbled himself to the point of death and found himself thus exulted (Phil 2:5-11). As Freedman observes, "what counts is the leader's presence and being," and these aspects of a person cannot be trained through a book or memorization so much as they emerge from the shaping of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

¹⁷ Freedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 17.

Ultimately, the process of developing house-based small groups in the congregation does not begin with a lecture in front of the whole congregation on why the church should open itself to new discipleship paradigms, nor what those paradigms might look like and how they work. As noted earlier in this paper, “People don't know what they want until you show it to them.”¹⁸ Thus, initial participants will first experience the new paradigm with the pastor as lead facilitator. It is a purposely inductive approach. Once initial participants have experienced the paradigm and the Spirit has shown himself faithful through the process of *lectio divina*, then the participants are at a place wherein they want to know more about how this paradigm works. As well, they are motivated to want to have others in the church experience the same thing.

The author of this paper is the architect, facilitator, and trainer throughout this process. He is the architect who builds the structure of the timeline, the content used by small group participants and facilitators, and the communication and recruitment plan detailed in chapter five. As well, he facilitates the first two house-based small groups thereby modeling the process – the pace, the manner in which dialogue unfolds, and the way in which the facilitator uses certain questions and prompts to help move participants hear what Jesus is saying. Finally, the author of this paper is the trainer. Again, much of that training happens when future facilitators experience inductively what they will eventually lead. As the trainer, the author structures and leads formal training, the content of which also is detailed in chapter five.

The participants in this project are, for the most part, members of Grace Covenant. As stated earlier, initial participants are comprised of a particular subset of the

¹⁸ Reinhardt, <http://www.businessweek.com/1998/21/b3579165.htm> (accessed November 2015).

congregation. From there, the project is to reach the entire congregation. Notably, while the goal is to proclaim Jesus in word and deed beyond the membership, it is most fundamentally the membership who must be equipped and formed for this work. Thus, this discipleship paradigm purposely focuses most of its attention on the membership. It trusts that the Holy Spirit remains faithfully to reach even to the ends of the earth through the ordinary saints whom God has gathered to be the church.

Once this paradigm expands beyond the initial pastor-led small groups, it will be important to involve everyone in the congregation, even as a concerted effort is made to invite new visitors and new members into the groups. Helpfully, this group often has less resistance to new ideas since they have not been around long enough to know what is, in fact, old or new. As well, this group is often looking for a way to be meaningfully involved, but it can be difficult to discern how best to do that. A congregation-wide effort opens an obvious and easy path for that. Finally, this will be the first opportunity for many of them to be involved in the life of the congregation. If this discipleship paradigm informs their understanding of following Jesus, they will be part of a new group within the congregation who can energetically lead this model forward into future years.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The implementation process is gradual. It begins with two eight-week house-based groups which are led by the pastor. Unless the pastor does these simultaneously, this will take at least sixteen weeks before an initial group from within the membership has begun to be prepared for a congregation-wide effort. Below outlines how the implementation process best unfolds given the context and ministry rhythms of Grace Covenant and many similar Mainline congregations.

Timeline

The initial group of ten congregants will be chosen in the Fall of 2017. These individuals are given an in-person invitation from the pastor. Again, these participants are chosen because the pastor has discerned qualities of openness, vulnerability, and influence in them. One of these participants is asked to open his or her home as the location for this experiment. While the pastor can choose to open his or her house, it is best if a congregant is willing so that the congregation can begin imagining how they can truly own this apart from the pastor who may or may not be serving the congregation in coming years.

Once a group of ten is recruited, the pastor emails the group. He provides the dates and location for their eight meetings which will begin in January of 2018 and end by late February or early March. The winter is an ideal time for a group comprised of Grace Covenant members to meet because it is a space when most folks are not traveling and the ministry calendar is not overly full. The email also includes information about the Scriptures that will be considered each week in light of what the texts already chosen for worship during that January and February timeframe.

At the seventh meeting, the pastor invites the participants to consider prayerfully two questions: one, “Is this experience something from which the rest of the congregation would benefit?” and two, “Is this experience something you would want to help facilitate for others in the congregation?” During the eighth meeting, participants can begin sharing their thoughts on these two questions. While the pastor cannot control where and how the Holy Spirit moves in a group, a basic assumption of this project is that the Holy Spirit is faithful in abundance to speak and shape participants who gather around God’s Word with a desire to listen to God’s Word through its reading and through the way it is spoken through other participants in the group. Thus, it is with confident hope that these first ten participants respond with a desire to see the rest of the congregation try this discipleship paradigm. As well, there is a realistic hope that most if not all of these ten will be willing to be lead facilitators for future groups.

During the time that the first group is meeting, the pastor is recruiting individuals for the second eight-week group that will begin shortly after the first one ends. An ideal time to begin a second group is just after Easter, which is a space in Richmond where most spring breaks are over, but everyone remains in town before summer vacations. In

the spring of 2018, this means that the second group will begin the week of Sunday, April 8. This group will walk through the same process as the first group, and hopefully by the end of this group's eight weeks most if not all participants will be willing facilitators for future groups.

The pastor will then choose a post-Sunday worship date in mid-May of 2018 for the initial twenty participants to gather. To avoid Mother's Day, Sunday, May 20 is the best choice. This gathering will allow the pastor to gain further feedback and reflection from the initial participants. Those participants who are willing to be facilitators for a congregation-wide small group effort in the Fall of 2018 are given two reading assignments for the summer: chapter one of Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, and chapters five, six, and seven of Peterson's *Eat this Book*. In the first week of August, these facilitators are brought together for discussion on both texts. Ideally, *Life Together* will help provide a vision for what a faithful gathering of Christians looks like and *Eat this Book* will underscore the importance of and process for *lectio divina*. The training received in this first week of August meeting will be explored more in the section on Leadership Training.

While completing their readings, the facilitators also will be asked to consider, prayerfully, hosting a small group in their home. Not all twenty facilitators will need to host as they will be leading in pairs. However, at least ten of them will need to host to ensure enough groups are available for the whole congregation.

Given the congregation's desire to do ministry more faithfully in the immediate Fan context, participants with a home in that area will be especially encouraged to consider hosting. At the meeting during the first week of August, the pastor will ascertain which homes will be used for hosting in the fall.

During this same time, the pastor will finalize key administrative logistics, including childcare and important dates. He will work coordinate with the necessary staff to ensure that childcare can be made available free of charge during some of the small groups that are offered in the fall. In the case of Grace Covenant, childcare will be provided at three of the houses used during the eight weeks of small groups. With regard to dates, the pastor will choose the specific date on which formal training will happen for the facilitators as well as the dates for church-wide house-based small groups to be offered in the fall. For 2018 at Grace Covenant, facilitator training will fall on Sunday, September 9 from 12:30pm to 2:30pm. The small groups will begin the week of Sunday, September 16 and finish during the week of Sunday, September November 4.

During the first week of August, the church's Communication Director will begin advertisements about the eight-week small groups. As George Cladis advises, "Church leadership must use every communication tool available to acculturate the staff and congregation in the mission of the church."¹⁹ One announcement or even numerous posters will not suffice. The Communication Director will communicate the details about the small groups through the website, social media, posters in the hallways of the church property, mailings, the weekly e-newsletter, and the Sunday worship bulletin.

¹⁹ George Cladis, *Leading the Team Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staff Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 82.

The pastor will assist in the communication process, particularly through the design of Sunday morning worship in August and September. From Sunday, August 19 to Sunday, August 16 the pastor will ensure that there is a portion of the service reserved for testimonies about the house-based small group experience. Each week, a different participant from the first one of the first two groups will come forward and share a specific way they heard from and were shaped by Jesus through their eight week small group experience. Along with these weekly testimonies, the pastor will ensure that during one of those services there is a commissioning of the facilitators wherein the facilitators stand before the congregation and receive a prayer and commissioning. For Grace Covenant, this commissioning will happen on Sunday, September 9, a week before the small groups begin.

Testimonies and commissioning alike will make the small group effort repeatedly visible to the congregation. Moreover, the testimonies in particular will likely prove a critical aspect that helps the congregation see more clearly why and how they would benefit from this new paradigm for formation. Finally, for those initial participants who give a testimony in worship, that space offers them a chance to put into words something Jesus has been or is doing in their life thereby helping them learn how to witness to the good news of Jesus in word. In short, they will be practicing evangelism.

During the weeks that the testimonies occur in worship, there will be a table set up in the post-worship fellowship area for congregants to sign up for a small group. A volunteer will be chosen to handle sign-ups and answer any questions about the process. That volunteer will submit the sign-up list to the church office so that the office administrator can keep track who is in what group since others will sign up for a group

via an email or phone call to the church office. Both the volunteer and administrator will need to be aware that no group should exceed twelve participants, lest the group grow too large for the kind of Spirit-empowered, dialogue-based formation sought through this paradigm.

Finally, during the six weeks leading up to the beginning of the church-wide small group experience, the pastor will do a sermon series that underscores the themes of formation-in-community and the power of the Holy Spirit to shape people through Scripture and the body of Christ. The passages explored earlier in this paper - Mark 6:30-44, Luke 24:13-35, and Luke 10:25-37 - will be part of this series. APPENDIX A offers an example of a six week sermon series that can help prepare a congregation for the small group effort, particularly in a congregation like Grace Covenant where there is a deep appreciation for Scripture and Reformed theology.

The groups will begin meeting the week of Sunday, September 16. The pastor will assist in leading a group while also remaining in regular contact with each of the facilitators. Throughout the gatherings, facilitators will not only be leading their group but also listening for testimonies of how the Holy Spirit is at work shaping and leading people. When given permission by the person who shares, the facilitators will relay that testimony to the pastor as a possible story to be shared in worship or another congregational setting. The facilitators also are paying attention to which participants show forth the kind of openness, vulnerability, and leadership that would make them good candidates as future facilitators for new groups. Again, these names are shared with the pastor so that personal invitations can be made for those persons to consider just such a thing as the congregation looks to continue and build beyond the first launch of groups.

At the eighth and final meeting, small group facilitators will hand out a Small Group Evaluation (APPENDIX B). This will help the pastor and facilitators see more clearly how the Spirit was at work in the groups and what might be a faithful way to move forward from this first congregation-wide effort. At the same time, the pastor will send the facilitators an evaluation specifically for them (APPENDIX C). The assessment process - including details about the two evaluations - will be explained in more detail under the Assessment Plan section.

The final step in the first congregation-wide effort is a post-worship celebration. On Sunday, November 11 the entire church will be invited to a large luncheon wherein a meal will be shared and some of the testimonies from previous weeks will be told. This celebration will not only provide space to declare the faithful works of God, but also to let folks know about next steps in light of the testimonies and evaluations. The hope is that one of the next steps will be that some groups will continue to meet in 2019 and other new groups will be launching at that same time.

Leadership Development

As mentioned in chapter four, the facilitator-leaders will be carefully chosen with an eye toward those who are open, vulnerable, and influential in the congregation. Those leaders will first experience leadership development inductively via participation in a pastor-led small group. They will then receive formal development via two key readings and two key meetings. The reading from *Life Together* will help the facilitator-leaders find language for what they experienced in the pastor-led small group; namely the centrality of and need for formation to happen in close Christian community.

Bonhoeffer makes vividly clear just how important listening to Scripture and one's sisters and brother play is in the sanctification process.

The chapters from *Eat this Book* will aid in providing the leaders with a better sense of how the *lectio divina* process works. Peterson begins chapter five by stating, “‘Eat this Book’ is my metaphor of choice for focusing attention on what is involved in reading our Holy Scriptures formatively, that is, in such a way that the Holy Spirit uses them to form Christ in us. We are not interested in knowing more but in becoming more.”²⁰ This opening summarizes the essences of these three chapters. Helping facilitators open space for Peterson's kind of approach to Scripture will be the focus of this portion of the training. Chapters six and seven provide the practical details and theological undergirding necessary for walking others through the *lectio divina* process. Collectively, these three chapters will assist in relieving facilitators of the sense that they need to know all of the answers. Peterson makes clear that the Spirit is good and faithful enough to speak quite powerfully through the Word alone.

Because the Spirit is truly in charge of the teaching and formation, the training will highlight the fact that these facilitators should conceptualize themselves as cultivators. They are to “cultivate conversation of imagination and hope rooted in the biblical narrative but without manipulating people into a prearranged plan or prepackaged program.”²¹ Silence, questions, prayer, and continued dialogue birthed through the *lectio divina* process are the key ingredients to such cultivation.

²⁰ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 59.

²¹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 115.

Even as the facilitators are trained to be cultivators, the pastor remains mindful of the congregational context. In a setting like Grace Covenant it remains important for the facilitators to have some contextual and theological background for each Scripture that is considered in the small group. For that reason, the pastor will write a short background piece on the Scripture being considered in the small group each week. That background piece will include key historical and theological issues surrounding the text along with a list of two or three relevant resources pertaining to the passage and the issues it raises. This will be emailed to the facilitators ahead of their meeting so they can plan appropriately.

The first of the two facilitator training meetings will have a two-fold agenda: a book discussion and a prayer process for recruiting participants to the eight week small group effort. During the book discussion, the pastor will continue to model a participatory format, inviting continual discussion around the main themes of chapter one in *Life Together* and chapters five, six, and seven of *Eat this Book*. Following this discussion, the pastor will lead the facilitators through an important prayer process for recruiting the entire congregation. The pastor will provide the facilitators with copies of the membership directory and then open a time of prayer in which the question is posed to God: “Who am I supposed to invite to my group?” Participants will listen in silence while turning through the directory to see who they sense God might want them to invite. After a few minutes of prayerful listening, facilitators will link up with their respective co-facilitator and prepare to make personal invitations to the folks whom God has placed on their heart.

While members will be able to sign up for the small groups after worship each week for the latter half of August and the first half of September, personal invitations are the best way to ensure broad participation. Proactive and prayerful training the facilitators to recruit is essential to reaching the whole congregation. As participants are recruited, the facilitators ensure that those names are submitted to the office administrator so that the administrator can record this and keep track of how full the groups are becoming.

Resources

The most essential material resource for this project is houses. Members within the congregation must be willing to open their homes to help facilitate a new kind of openness and imagination for the congregation as they gather around Scripture and in prayer alongside one another. Notably, hosts will be asked to provide light snacks and drinks in their home thereby taking responsibility for this material resource. After the first meeting, hosts can ask participants to take turns in bringing the snacks and drinks. Along with the homes and accompanying food and drinks, a \$1000 budget also is necessary to ensure childcare is adequately provided for at least four of the small groups. The final material resource is the weekly background material about the Scripture. The pastor provides this weekly resource as it gives the facilitators helpful information should difficult contextual or theological questions arise during the course of the conversation.

In terms of personnel resources, the facilitators and the church's Communication Direction (CD) are the most necessary. Facilitators ultimately ensure all the administrative details are worked out within their respective groups while also doing the hard work of facilitating formative space and dialogue. The CD oversees and implements

a comprehensive communication strategy to ascertain congregation-wide awareness about the home-group effort. As well, the CD maintains the database that keeps track of who has signed up for which small group. Keeping these records centralized with one person helps ensure that no group grows too large and therefore unable to foster the kind of formative space essential to these groups.

Assessment Plan

Assessing spiritual growth is never a perfect science. As stated previously, Peterson believes that if we take seriously that it is truly the Holy Spirit alone who is responsible for transformation then we cannot control, manipulate, pace, or predict the results of the Spirit's work through *lectio divina*. There is an inherent "impossibility to evaluation."²² However, there are at least three indicators that the Spirit is forming the congregation through this process.

The first indicator is an increase in questions asked by participants. As many in the congregation are familiar with discipleship paradigms in which they remain silent and listen, it will be telling if over the course of the group experience participants are asking more and more questions. Indeed, to "wisdom seeks questions," and participants formed by Wisdom incarnate, Jesus Christ, will be a people "ride the question" rather than look for settled doctrinally correct answers.²³

A second indicator of the Spirit maturing the congregation will be the testimonies. The more people who share stories of how Jesus spoke to them or shaped them through

²² Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 116.

²³ Hart, *From Information to Transformation*, 116.

the group experience the more readily it will be apparent that the Spirit is proving faithful through this paradigm. A final important indicator of maturity will be made known through recruitment. If participants grow into a willingness and even strong desire to recruit other people to these house-based small groups, then the impact is obvious. They have now grown into evangelists as they seek to bring others into a space where the Good News can be heard and received with power.

The main assessment tool for this project are author-created questionnaires. There will be one questionnaire for participants (APPENDIX B) and another for facilitators (APPENDIX C). The questions in these evaluations are asked in a way that helps elicit whether any or all of the indicators listed above are being seen. Facilitators will distribute questionnaires to their participants during the final twenty minutes of the final small group meeting. As for the facilitators, the pastor will distribute their questionnaire through SurveyMonkey immediately following the final small group meeting. They will be asked to respond to the evaluation within a week.

The pastor will ultimately compile all of the complete questionnaires and tabulate the results. He will share these results with the session, and he also will reach out to those participants who both shared a testimony in their evaluation and indicated a willingness to share it with the congregation. The pastor will work with that congregant to figure out the best time and space for that testimony to be shared. Finally, the pastor will prepare a presentation of the results to be given to the congregation at the subsequent congregational luncheon meeting.

CONCLUSION

Like many Mainline churches in the Reformed tradition, Grace Covenant maintains a paradigm for discipleship that does not effectively form the hearts and desires of the congregation. It relies heavily on academically trained teachers who then impart correct doctrine to a passive gathering of students seated in large Sunday school classrooms. The weaknesses of this model are increasingly apparent to key leaders at Grace Covenant. Some admit that the continually diminishing Sunday school attendance points to a real problem. Others are aware that leading Christian and secular epistemologists recognize that shaping a person's heart is not effectively done through pedagogue models of teaching.

This paper is a response to the need for a new discipleship paradigm at Grace Covenant and like congregations. Importantly, the new paradigm is rooted in key theological tenants of the Reformed faith. For instance, this proposal recognizes the centrality of the Triune God. Because God is a three-in-one "covenant group" the Church most faithfully bears God's image by living in regular, vulnerable covenant with one another. This proposal also recognizes the centrality of Scripture, a vital focus in the Reformed tradition since its inception. In each covenant gathering of the church Scripture is the most fundamental thing considered. As well, it recognizes the truth that all sanctification happens only and fully through the work of the Holy Spirit. Finally, this proposal takes seriously the Reformed tenant that the church is a priesthood of believers. By equipping twenty congregants to be facilitator leaders, the pastor ensures a broad base of leaders beyond himself.

Moreover, by accenting the importance of dialogue within each of these groups it becomes clear that the congregants can and do connect one another to God. They are the priests for and with one another.

While rooted in the Reformed tradition, this proposal does make two significant shifts from the current, predominate discipleship paradigm at Grace Covenant: the manner in which Scripture is attended is notably different and the location for the space of formation is new. In terms of Scripture, this proposal calls for the congregation to listen prayerfully to Scripture through the *lectio divina* process. More knowledge or even right doctrine is not the goal of gathering around Scripture. Rather, hearing the living voice of Jesus and being shaped by that voice is the goal. The *lectio divina* process also invites the notion that considerable formation happens in and through the dialogue that unfolds in the body of Christ. Jesus not only shapes us in and through his Word but his body on earth. In particular, this paper has highlighted that some of the most mature and formative dialogue happens in and through groups that learn to ask and “ride” the questions more and more frequently.¹

The location for formation also shifts in the proposed paradigm for discipleship and houses become the locus of formation. The Sunday school classroom environment keeps congregants in a space that does not invite vulnerability or interaction. They are made for the passive reception of information given through the medium of a lecturer. Notably, this paper does not propose simply transforming the Sunday school space so that congregants can gather in the round in a more familiar manner. Part of the problem with the Sunday school space is that one particular paradigm has unfolded there. Congregants

¹ Hart, *From Information to Transformation*, 116.

need an entirely different kind of space for them to open to a new approach to Scripture and formation. As well, homes are ideal settings for formation because they invite a healthier level of openness and vulnerability, two essential qualities through which the Spirit works powerfully.

One primary goal of this project is for the congregation to embrace the fact that it truly is the Holy Spirit who shapes and matures a people. Right knowledge and doctrine is not the measure of maturity. Another primary goal is that the congregation embrace the value of a discipleship paradigm that emphasizes dialogue and home settings. In fact, the hope is that the congregation will ultimately embrace it so thoroughly that it becomes the predominate model through which Holy Spirit formation unfolds.

Such goals are lofty where an old discipleship paradigm remains entrenched and feelings of loss will become apparent as steps are taken toward the new paradigm. For this reason, the process of introducing this paradigm to the congregation will unfold deliberately. It begins with two small groups that meet with the pastor. The initial participants are given the opportunity to inductively experience a new paradigm for formation.

The first participants are chosen carefully so that the pastor can be confident that they will be open to the new idea. They also are chosen carefully because ideally they will eventually become the facilitators for future groups. Finally, the buy-in and leadership of these first participants will ultimately prove essential in helping the rest of the congregation try the paradigm. Their testimonies in particular are crucial to helping build toward a successful church-wide effort.

The eight weeks of small groups for the entire church promises to be a uniquely challenging and exciting season for the life of the church. Amid all of the logistics and coordination, one of the most important things the pastor and facilitators can do is pay attention to the signs that the Spirit is maturing the congregation. If the groups are learning to ask more and better questions instead of looking only for answers, that is a sign that the Spirit is creating a new openness wherein the people are seeking more to be formed than merely informed. If testimonies of Jesus speaking to or shaping certain people are emerging, those too are strong signs of maturation at work. Finally, if participants grow in their desire to invite others into similar *lectio divina* house-based groups, that too is a strong sign of the Spirit's work for it is an indicator that participants are becoming evangelists.

As has been asserted time and again in this paper, it is the Holy Spirit alone who can accomplish the transformative work of the church. Though this paper lays out a theologically-informed plan for how to open space for the Spirit to work in new and powerful ways, the author cannot control the pace and manner in which the Spirit ultimately chooses. Nor can the author have any appreciation for the unforeseen realities that may emerge in the life of the congregation which then force this design to be reconsidered or shifted in one way or another. Still, if in five to seven years a new visitor to Grace Covenant readily sees a host of ways to join a local, house-based small group then that will be one very strong indicator that the culture around discipleship has shifted significantly. Moreover, if that same visitor is quickly invited into one of those groups by an enthusiastic member, that will be even more telling. Such an action would be an especially strong indicator that the groups not only exist and function, but that they

continue to be conduits through which participants become evangelists who actively desire to see others know a space wherein the presence and power and formation of Jesus is known.

APPENDIX A

Below are six Scriptures that can be used in a sermon series that prepares the congregation for the launch of house-based small groups.

1. Ezekiel 37:1-14 – The Animating Breath of Life

This sermon proclaims that it is only the Spirit of God who animates the congregation and once animated, the congregation functions as a single, covenant-bound body.

2. Mark 6:30-44

This sermon highlights the personal, relational nature of Jesus's teaching as he has "compassion" upon the people.

3. 2 Corinthians 13:14 – Made in the Image of a Covenant God

This sermon highlights how the relational nature of the Trinity and that the church most faithfully bears God's image in the world when it exists likewise in covenant community.

4. Acts 2:42-47 – Formation Through Community

This sermon explores the way the church is formed as a generous people through regular house meetings where Scripture and prayer are central.

5. Luke 24:13-35 – Seeing Jesus in our Midst

This sermon explores how the revelation of Jesus in the midst of community is a gift.

6. Luke 10:25-37 – A Personal Encounter with the Word

This sermon contrasts a depersonalized approach to Scripture with a personal approach wherein the voice of Jesus calls for an embodied response of faith.

APPENDIX B

House-Based Small Group Evaluation for Participants

1. What I liked best about this experience was:

2. One thing that would improve this group experience is:

3. One story about how Jesus spoke to me or shaped me through this experience is:

4. I am opening to sharing this story with the congregation in service of worship, a congregational meeting, or through the church newsletter: Y ____ N ____

5. I would like to participate in another house-based small group: Y ____ N ____

6. On a scale of 1 to 10 how motivated were you to invite others into this experience before the groups began? “1” being “not at all” and “10” being “highly motivated: _____

7. On a scale of 1 to 10 how motivated are you now to invite others into a future experience like this? “1” being “not at all” and “10” being “highly motivated: _____

8. If your answer in question seven differs from your answer in question eight, please explain below:

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