Developing a Spiritual Growth Pathway for Adults at St. Matthias Episcopal Church

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This ministry focus paper entitled

DEVELOPING A SPIRITUAL GROWTH PATHWAY FOR ADULTS
AT ST. MATTHIAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Written by

JEFFREY BASSETTE

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

Doctor of Ministry

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

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DEVELOPING A SPIRITUAL GROWTH PATHWAY FOR ADULTS AT ST. MATTHIAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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

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

BY

JEFFREY BASSETTE SEPTEMBER 2018
ABSTRACT

Developing a Spiritual Growth Pathway for Adults at St. Matthias Episcopal Church
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Doctor of Ministry
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2018

The goal of this project is to lay foundations at St. Matthias Episcopal Church for a new adult educational ministry that designs a contextualized pathway for spiritual growth, train lay leaders, and initiate small groups. The purpose is to deepen community and cultivate spiritual maturity among the church’s members. Particular attention is given to the social-emotional dimensions of Christian maturity, with reflection on both the classical call to “love God and neighbor” and the current contributions of developmental psychology toward an understanding of human and Christian maturity.

St. Matthias Episcopal Church is an historic church in Whittier, California, seeking renewal after years of declining attendance and morale. The church’s seasons of growth and decline correlate largely with those of the urban Uptown Whittier location in which it is set. This paper traces those seasons of growth and decline, reflecting on the current challenges for renewal faced by the church and its new rector, Father William Garrison.

A pilot small group worked with Father Garrison to achieve these foundational aims over a period of twelve to eighteen months. Part one of this paper considers the communities of Whittier and St. Matthias, naming some of the hopeful signs of renewal evident in recent years. Part two asserts that the social-emotional dimension is an often underdeveloped aspect of Christian discipleship. It also reflects on what a vision and pathway for cultivating Christian maturity would look like in the theologically diverse context of St. Matthias.

Part three shares the results from the pilot small group. The church’s encouraging progress is summarized toward: designing a growth pathway, shifting congregational culture, deepening bonds of community, launching new groups, and training new lay leaders. Remaining challenges and future work to be done in the years ahead are also briefly considered.

Content Reader:
Word Count: 293
To Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church and the one who has captured my heart, whose life I seek to emulate, whose people it has ever been my privilege to serve.

To my families, who through all the seasons of life’s joys and sorrows have shaped me, served with me, and taught me love.

Gratitude, gratitude, gratitude!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Father Bill Garrison and the congregation of St. Matthias Episcopal Church for their continual openness to allowing me to serve with them and discover together what it means to be followers of Christ in our generation. They have welcomed us with open arms, remained open to serving Christ in new ways, and dared to dream with me of a better future and a coming “Spring” for St. Matthias.
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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

In many ways the story of St. Matthias Episcopal Church in Whittier, California corresponds to the story of many mainline churches during the post WWII era: a post-war boom, followed by a prolonged period of general malaise and decline, resulting in a present-day struggle for renewal, identity, and a fresh sense of mission. The church faces many challenges, but also shows promising signs of adaptation and new life. Challenges include: an older congregation, relatively few families with children, financial pressures, an historic church with aging buildings and limited parking, a strong orientation among long-time members toward the church’s past, limited opportunities for adult spiritual formation, and a strong reliance on professional clergy when it comes to facilitating spiritual growth—with a corresponding lack of lay leadership. The church’s sense of identity is also tied to an extensive Soup Hour ministry which drains financial resources and in which few members currently participate.

At the same time, there are many reasons for hope and optimism. The current rector tops that list. In his seven-year tenure, Father Bill Garrison has stemmed the tide of decline and the church has begun growing once again. Though he has conducted funerals for more than sixty long-time members, the church has grown from a regular attendance of ninety-five to almost 140 and the average age has declined. About twenty-five children and youth now call St. Matthias home. Church giving has increased, the complex budget has been simplified, and steps to address the Soup Hour’s financial pressures are being explored. Perhaps more importantly, the congregation has a renewed sense of hope that the church can continue to grow and find its new sense of mission for serving the
community of Whittier, and, for addressing the limitations of the church’s current offerings for adult spirituality and spiritual formation, which is the focus of this project.

Perhaps first among the reasons that I have remained at St. Matthias is an appreciation for Father Garrison and a personal identification with his challenge of growing a church from the bottom up. After coming to a living faith in Christ during my college years, I quickly felt a call into ministry, a call which led me to participate in numerous church planting efforts. About fifteen years prior to my arrival at St. Matthias God had opened doors for me to launch a new multi-ethnic evangelical church not far away in San Gabriel, California. As the founding pastor, I led the church to grow from its nucleus of twenty adults and their children to a congregation of about 250 people with several staff members. From the beginning, we built the church around a cell-based model of ministry where every pastor and member actively participated in the mission of God through relational small group gatherings. I loved the church and empowering the people of God to engage in all of his purposes through small groups. My natural leadership gifts helped the church to grow through its various stages and motivated ordinary people to take risks into ministry, trusting God by faith to use them in helping others to grow in their walk with Christ. I was excited by the prospects of once again helping a small church to grow by partnering with Father Bill—and he needed partners, especially in developing lay leadership to broaden the opportunities for fostering community and spiritual growth among adults.

Father Garrison had recently been ordained a priest, having spent a career as a businessman and owner of his own flooring company. At the age of 61, he took the call to St. Matthias. It was his first time ever leading a church. They took a risk on each other.
He was a capable leader, a hard worker, and committed to pastoring people. He was also open-minded and humble, recognizing that he needed help and the gifts of others. He had also been a very successful football coach for youth, so he knew how to build teams and partner with his coaches to bring out the best in those around him (qualities I appreciated about him, having played college football myself). Father Bill loved the Bible and loved teaching it to others. The Bible was a life-giving well for him, as it had been for me, and he modeled this consistently to the congregation in his sermons. I liked Bill, respected him, and wanted to help him. More personally, I missed the work of pastoring a local church and helping its members connect with God and each other through small groups. The question remained: how open would Father Bill be to me partnering with him in ministry, as an evangelical pastor who had landed fairly recently in his more liberally-minded Episcopalian church?

Numerous changes in my own life and ministry had led me to St. Matthias: my voluntary transition four years earlier out of my role as Senior Pastor of the San Gabriel church in an effort to save a struggling marriage, a career transition to working as a full-time hospital chaplain in Whittier, a divorce, the purchase of a home in Whittier within walking distance of St. Matthias, and a new marriage to a wife who was a cradle Episcopalian. As my new wife and I explored churches in our new community of Whittier, we eventually settled on St. Matthias as a place in which we could both bring our best selves, our own spirituality, and offer our gifts to a church that seemed open to receiving us both.

In our first two years at St. Matthias, relationships were built, and trust deepened. Father Bill opened the pulpit to me and allowed me to preach. He asked me to lead the
church’s finance team to help simplify the complex financial systems of both the church and the $100,000 per year Soup Hour ministry. My wife and I initiated small groups and invited people to participate and open their homes to one another, keeping him abreast of things as they were developing. Through their experience in these meaningful small groups, members of the congregation took first steps into leadership and began asking about how we might create new opportunities so that others in the church could experience what they had tasted in their small community groups.

As the church’s finances solidified and other leadership was put in place, I approached Father Bill about stepping away from the finance team so that I could focus my efforts more toward helping him develop adult spiritual growth opportunities through small groups, unsure of how he would respond. In his ever-honest way, he acknowledged that he had no training in small groups and he had never been in a church-based, lay-led small group that had been helpful to his growth or well led. Nonetheless, he had heard from church members how positive their group experience had been. He felt acutely the limitations on his time and capacity to provide more leadership, knowing intuitively that he needed church members to provide spiritual leadership if the church was to continue to grow. Probably most importantly, through many conversations and much observation, he had come to trust me, that I would leverage my gifts to support but not usurp him, and that I was willing to follow his lead and allow him to set the agenda and pace moving forward. He also knew that I was willing to invest significant time in the church’s life as an active member and as a focus for my Doctor of Ministry degree. I shared with him my emerging drafts for my thesis, allowing him to shape its direction and scope, so that a
sense of mutual clarity gradually emerged about how to move forward and how he would be involved as the rector and leader of the church.

That led us to the mutual launch of this Doctoral Project in the fall of 2016. Our shared purpose was to strengthen the church’s offerings for adults, addressing the church’s gaps in discipleship and community. The goal of this doctoral project was to form a task force together at St. Matthias to lay foundations for a new adult educational ministry, one which would design a contextualized pathway for growth, train lay leaders, and initiate small groups for cultivating emotional and spiritual maturity. There were competing tensions to navigate in moving forward. First, how were we to honor Father Garrison’s role as the primary spiritual leader of the church, involve him in the process of discernment, and allow him to be the visible spokesperson to the congregation, while the primary leadership and expertise in small group formation was coming quietly from me? Next, how to allow him to be fully engaged in the process, but in a way that didn’t require a time commitment he could not reasonably offer on top of his other responsibilities? Trust and good communication would both be essential.

Father Bill and I agreed that we would form a congregational task force, a small group in which he would participate, as a learning community over a period of months. This group would reflect on an initial congregation-wide survey of adults we would design together. The survey was to ask the congregation about its desires for spiritual growth, gaps in discipleship, experience with small groups, and members’ available time to invest in growth. The task force group would practice spiritual formation exercises, reflect on what a contextualized spiritual growth pathway might look like for the church, and help shape the contours of subsequent offerings. One intent was to empower lay
leadership for small groups which could help deepen the spiritual life of church members, provide more entry points into meaningful community, and help the church more effectively enfold its next one hundred members in a way that wouldn’t overburden Father Garrison or rely on adding paid clergy which the church could not afford.

This project summarizes the progress made toward achieving our objectives and the obstacles encountered along the way. Chapter one of this project explores the historical, cultural, socio-economic, and theological factors that have contributed to the lack of lay leadership, connected community, and spiritual growth opportunities at St. Matthias. The history of Whittier is outlined from its early struggle and emergence, to its period of relative prosperity and growth, through its decades of decline, and its current struggles for renewal both economically and in its sense of community identity. The history of St. Matthias is then traced, reflecting on ways in which its periods of growth and decline correspond to the community of Whittier in which it sets. Finally, special focus is given to the church’s own current challenges of renewal, especially as that relates to a more empowered lay leadership which is able to contribute to overcoming the weaknesses in adult spiritual formation and growth.

Chapter two reviews relevant literature that reflects on the interrelated issues of Christian maturity, Christian community, and Christian formation. It considers the question: what is Christian maturity, on both emotional and social levels, and how can we know when we have achieved it? Maturity is defined in terms of Christ’s foundational call to love, how well we are able to build relationships of mature, healthy love—love for
God, for neighbor, for self. Peter Feldmeier’s insightful work on the stages of human development, both from a psychological and a spiritual perspective, is here considered and allowed to inform our vision of the mature Christian adult. The chapter affirms the vital centrality of small groups as a vehicle through which such relationships of mature love can be practiced, cultivated, modeled, and developed. The need for intentionality in spiritual practices is also considered, as we reflect on the classic spiritual disciplines, the imaginal world of liturgy and prayer which forms such a foundational part of Episcopalian spirituality and formation, and how these practices might be combined with a rigorous Christology to inform a liberal ethic of social justice—one which remains rooted in the person and lifestyle of Jesus.

Chapter three offers some theological foundations on which to construct our emerging vision of Christian maturity, and how these concepts might find expression in the contextualized spiritual growth offerings developed for St. Matthias Episcopal Church. Dallas Willard articulates the vision for Christian maturity as one of progressive transformation into the likeness of Christ, a life “where all the essential parts of the


human self are effectively organized around . . . and integrated under God.” The person of Jesus himself, including the dimensions of his social and emotional life, serve as a paradigmatic example of this fully God-centered integrative wholeness.

As we age, we pass through various developmental stages of intellectual, moral, social-emotional, and spiritual growth. As a result, our view of what constitutes Christian maturity must be redefined as a person ages and moves through these natural human stages of developing capacity and awareness. Jesus’ life is re-envisioned briefly through these developmental lenses. Core biblical foundations for the primacy of relationships, and small groups as a context for that growth in love, should be characteristic of the Christian’s developing maturity throughout the life span. Finally, we consider the means and process of spiritual growth, reflecting particularly on those classical spiritual disciplines which might resonate particularly well in the context of a theologically diverse, liturgically-oriented Episcopalian church community such as St. Matthias.

Chapter four presents the ministry plan for listening to the congregation through a congregational survey, then initiating a task force group with the rector’s participation to digest results and consider implications for identifying which new offerings or small groups might best facilitate a deepening community and the ongoing spiritual growth of St. Matthias’ adults. Chapter five summarizes the results of those efforts: lessons learned from the congregational survey, the experience of those representative church members who participated in the task force small group, the insights they gained through discussion with each other and reflection on the congregational survey, and the impact of

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7 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 31.
that group experience on the participants’ own willingness to step out and launch new groups or growth opportunities for others in the congregation.

The goal through this task force group with the rector is not merely to design the contours of the church’s next generation of spiritual growth offerings, but to enlist at least some of those early group members in launching these offerings, thereby laying needed foundations on which to continue developing lay leadership. By doing so, the church’s life in community can be broadened and their spiritual life together may be deepened and enriched. One specific hope is to see at least two new small groups emerge through this journey together, while maintaining the strong support of Father Garrison and the positive momentum that has been achieved thus far.
CHAPTER ONE

ST. MATTHIAS OF WHITTIER: PROUD RELIGIOUS PAST, UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The history of St Matthias Episcopal Church begins essentially where the history of Whittier begins, and their stories have been interwoven ever since. This chapter traces the corresponding seasons of both the church and the city in which it has been planted, showing how the church’s challenges largely reflect the struggles of Whittier and of the church’s location in the city’s historic Uptown core. In many ways, as Uptown Whittier has prospered, so has St. Matthias. When Whittier has struggled to redefine and renew itself, as it has for the last few decades, the church has reflected the community’s struggle and responded to it in various creative ways.

The 130 years of Whittier’s history could be divided into four, or optimistically five, time periods—each of which could be likened to a corresponding season in its growth and maturity. The “Spring” of Whittier would be that first season when it struggles to take root as a community, from the spring of 1887 to the period of the First World War. St Matthias is planted at virtually the same time, with its first services beginning in 1896 as a new mission outpost, until eventually it becomes a fully self-sustaining parish in 1912. The “Summer” of Whittier and of St. Matthias, that period in
which both become firmly rooted and then enjoy steady growth, would be 1918-1945.\(^8\)

The “Autumn” season of harvest, of abundant fruitfulness for both Whittier and St. Matthias, begins in the post WWII baby boom, a time of explosive growth throughout Southern California. The fruits of this boom period would linger up to about 1970.

Since then, Whittier has been in a decades-long season of “Winter”—an uncertain period of rapid ethnic demographic change and shifting financial realities. The historic Uptown area in which St. Matthias is located has struggled to redefine itself and compete with the newer commercial centers and population growth emerging at the city’s eastern suburban edges. For St. Matthias and the shifting Uptown neighborhood in which it is rooted, this era since 1970—compounded by Uptown Whittier’s financially devastating earthquake in 1987—has been a prolonged Winter season. The community’s hoped-for Spring has felt elusively slow in its arrival. At least for St. Matthias, however, since Father Garrison’s arrival in late 2011 there is some reason for optimism that perhaps it is entering its own long-hoped-for Spring. The church’s prolonged decline in attendance and giving has been halted. It is growing once again, with more families and young children arriving every year.

This doctoral project is set in this current ministry context, a season of vulnerable new growth for St. Matthias Episcopal Church. How can the church’s sense of community be enriched as it enfolds new members from different backgrounds? How can the spiritual life of its adult members be deepened in ways that do not rely on Father Garrison, who is already serving at maximum capacity and is unable to add additional

time commitments to his full schedule as the sole parish priest? What can be done to develop effective lay leadership, promote discipleship, and design fresh pathways for spiritual growth? What role might small groups play in these efforts? The pages below consider how St. Matthias has adapted and evolved through these historical seasons outlined above. I consider how that history has shaped the identity, philosophy and present ministry context of St. Matthias. Finally, I consider how to address the central ministry challenge of renewing community and deepening Christian formation in the context of this hoped-for new Spring of St. Matthias’ life.

The church’s first Spring began when it was planted in the soil of Whittier’s earliest years. In the spring of 1887, a Chicago businessman named Aquila Pickering bought the 1,200 acre ranch encompassing the Whittier region for the purpose of establishing a “Quaker Colony” in California, a state where “the need of moral and Christian influence was everywhere apparent.”

Early street names reflect the influence and aspirations of the city’s founders, rooted in the Friends Church tradition (Penn, Friends, Philadelphia). By the summer of 1887 the town itself was named after the celebrated Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier—who graciously acknowledged the honor and even wrote a poem for the fledgling community. After the founder’s home, the first building built was the local Friends Church.

The spring of 1887 saw rampant real estate speculation, with lots of five to ten acres selling quickly. By the summer of that year, large numbers of Quakers traveled

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9 Ibid., 14.

10 Ibid., 16-17.
west by train to establish their new community with high hopes for establishing a thriving community of Friends in Southern California. The dream was challenged by the collapse of the real estate market later that year and the struggle to locate sufficient water for agriculture and drinking in the arid region. From 1888 to the early 1890’s, the new community struggled to survive in the midst of an economic depression affecting the entire region. Population growth plateaued.

Their fortune gradually turned when an abundant water supply was established in 1891. With plentiful water, soon the region’s fertile soil was producing an abundance of citrus. By 1906, a full 1,000 cars of oranges and lemons were being shipped by train annually from Whittier, along with 600 cars of cabbages and over 4.5 million pounds of walnuts. Oil had been discovered and provided another source of early wealth. By 1906, the area wells were producing an astonishing 96,000 barrels of oil per month\(^{11}\) and the city of Whittier had firmly taken root.

From the beginning, the city’s religious founders shaped the tenor of public life. As one writer put it, Whittier from the outset was “anti-saloon and pro-education.”\(^{12}\) At its founding in 1887, twenty acres was set aside for a college to be built. Construction began in 1893 for what would eventually become Whittier College, located today just a short walk from St. Matthias. An early Chamber of Commerce publication proudly declared: “Whittier has another advantage that few towns can boast of: there are no saloons, consequently no need of a jail, and no paupers.”\(^{13}\) The first legal drinking


\(^{13}\) *Whittier California*, 5.
establishments were not allowed within the city limits until 1940. The population continued to grow in the city’s formative years. By 1920 it would house the largest Friends Church building and congregation in the world, also located in the city’s historic Uptown Core and a block away from where St. Matthias stands today.

Into this religion-friendly climate, Whittier’s first Episcopal Church was planted as a small mission outpost in 1896. It took the name St. Matthias in honor of the new bishop of Los Angeles, who was consecrated bishop on St. Matthias Day. The fledgling congregation began meetings at the Masonic Hall in that year, but regular services did not begin until 1898. The Pickering Land and Water Company, responsible for the planning and development of early Whittier, generously donated a small lot on Washington Avenue for the new church, but it was not until late 1898 that the small congregation could begin construction. By May 1899, Whittier’s first Episcopal Church building was completed and the small chapel served as home for St. Matthias for over twenty years.

In its first eight years (1896-1904), the Episcopal mission in Whittier was served by five different clergy. No Sunday school program could be sustained until about 1906, at which time the congregation had grown sufficiently to sustain a more regular program for children. By then Whittier had begun to prosper, despite its tenuous beginnings, and both the city and St. Matthias enjoyed steady growth as the population expanded rapidly.


17 Ibid., 254.
between 1900 to 1920 (from 1,590 in 1900, to 4,550 in 1910, to 7,997 in 1920—an increase of over 400 percent). The church hired its first resident clergyman in 1910, changed status in 1912 from a mission to a self-sustaining parish, and by 1920 was poised to sustain its first in a series of long-tenured priests—capable leaders who would guide the church well through expansive, at times explosive, seasons of growth in the decades ahead.

Already in these earliest years leading up to World War I, St. Matthias developed a reputation for responding generously to community needs, especially to the poor or marginalized. Notwithstanding the boast of a 1906 Board of Trade\(^{18}\) publication that Whittier had no “paupers” or need of a jail, the church had already established a ministry to homeless men prior to World War I. Known as St. Andrew’s Mission, it provided much needed food and lodging to men riding the rails who were searching for work. The St. Matthias Club for young men and older boys began in a lot next to the church during the same time period. Eventually a building was constructed, which after the war was donated first to the American Legion, and later to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), providing a basis for the establishment of the YMCA in Uptown Whittier. The Uptown YMCA continues to this day, providing extensive programs for the community’s poorer children and families, even though it has long since outgrown these early donated facilities from St. Matthias.

\(^{18}\) The Board of Trade is the precursor to what we would know today as the local Chamber of Commerce. Since its inception, Whittier has promoted itself well and the Chamber of Commerce has played an important role. The Whittier Public library has an excellent collection of annual publications of its Chamber of Commerce dating back to the early 1900’s.
Many of the opportunities and challenges unique to the ministry context of St. Matthias from its earliest days continue to the present day. The church was situated in the city’s historic Uptown Core, where the first residents were concentrated, and the central commercial corridor was developed. For the first sixty years of Whittier’s life, this strategic Uptown location would enhance the church’s growth and contribute to its mission and prestige in the community. For the last sixty years, however, as Whittier’s economic and population growth has largely shifted east and to the suburbs, St. Matthias’ location in the more urban, commercially-dated Uptown District has been mainly a detriment to the church’s inherent capacity for growth.

As a result, inherited challenges for the church in today’s ministry context are issues such as: limited land and parking, older historic buildings requiring more costly maintenance, and a sense of historical identity among the congregation’s long-time members that may inhibit fresh, innovative solutions to the challenges of the present-day context in which the church finds itself. This new Spring in which the church hopes to find itself blossom presents different challenges than those which confronted the community’s first founding members.

The Summer season of steady growth for Whittier and St. Matthias runs through the period straddling the two World Wars. For the city of Whittier, the years 1918 through 1939 brought a boom in new construction as the economy began to transition gradually away from agriculture toward service and manufacturing.¹⁹ In the first six months of 1919, the number of building permits filed was already virtually twice that of

the entire year 1918. The population doubled again between 1920 and 1940, growing from 7,997 to 16,115 citizens. Rail passenger service between downtown Los Angeles and Uptown Whittier made multiple daily round trips from 1918 through 1931. The city center, still concentrated in Uptown Whittier, saw significant development, both in its financial center and in church construction. Significant infrastructure investments were made, expanding the city’s electrical, gas, and water resources.

In 1918, Rose Hills Memorial Park opened and today it operates 1,400 acres in the Whittier Hills surrounding Uptown, making it one of the largest cemeteries in North America. There were already 1,000 students in Whittier’s grade schools by 1920. In 1921, the city opened its first hospital, Murphy Hospital, just a few blocks from St. Matthias. Whittier still boasted 10,000 acres of citrus groves, over 5,000 acres of walnuts, and nine fruit shipping associations as of 1931. Throughout the 1920’s and into the 1930’s, automobiles became increasingly prevalent, as did spaces for parking in the busy Uptown area. By 1931, Uptown Whittier’s rail depot stopped servicing passengers and the depot became a bus terminal. This shift away from rail passenger transportation to the automobile would only increase after the Second World War.

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22 *Whittier, Los Angeles County, California,* 5.


The city was proud of its churches and maintained its somewhat conservative atmosphere. A city ordinance in the 1920’s ruled it unlawful to operate theaters or dance halls on Sundays.\textsuperscript{25} A 1931 Whittier Chamber of Commerce publication boasted that “Whittier is a city of churches, twenty five denominations being here represented” and houses the “largest Friends church in the world.”\textsuperscript{26} The city offered friendly spiritual soil in which St. Matthias could continue to grow.

The church also was blessed with a lengthy pastorate from a capable leader, the Rev. Edwin Lewis, who served the church from 1920 to 1946, from the end of one World War to the end of the second. Under his leadership, in 1929 St. Matthias built the sanctuary which remains home for the congregation to this day. Many early founders of the Whittier Red Cross association were women from St. Matthias Church. During the Depression era from 1929 to 1939, the church responded once again with generosity to those in need. The church, led by its rector, rented a store front near the railroad tracks and provided meals and a bed for the men riding the rails in search of work. This ministry continued to about 1939 when war production began in earnest and jobs were once again plentiful.\textsuperscript{27}

By 1939, the Depression had passed and St. Matthias was running three services each Sunday, with a large and active children’s program at all ages.\textsuperscript{28} Rev. Lewis

\textsuperscript{25} Whittier Area Chamber of Commerce Commemorative 100\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Book and Business Directory: 100 Years in Action, 1914-2014 (Whittier, CA: Chamber of Commerce, 2014), 43.

\textsuperscript{26} Los Angeles County, California, Whittier Edition, 19.

\textsuperscript{27} Conversation on July 16, 2017 with Yvette Rawlinson, a member of St. Matthias for 78 years (since 1939) and Director of Christian Education for St. Matthias from about 1974-2000.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
continued serving the church until World War II concluded, having led the church faithfully through its Summer season of growth. When he passed the baton of leadership to St. Matthias’ next rector, he was tired and grateful to be able to entrust the church to a young pastor with lots of energy, but neither of them could have imagined the explosion of growth, energy and activity which lay ahead for St. Matthias in the years immediately following the war. The coming years would be the “heyday” for St. Matthias, its Autumn season of overflowing “harvest.”

The young Rev. Albert E. Jenkins and his newlywed wife Nancy took over the reins of well-established St. Matthias in 1946, with some fear and trepidation, but theirs began a remarkable tenure of service that would last formally until 1973, but informally until Nancy’s death in 2013, a full sixty-seven years later. St. Matthias’ membership rode the surging wave of growth that swept over the entire Southern California region after World War II. Even sixty-four years later, in her 2012 memoirs Nancy Jenkins remembered this era vividly:

People were flooding into Southern California by 1948 or 49. It was not unusual to have four or five new families come to church each Sunday. Most of them were new in the area; they knew no one and were eager to make connections. Friendships started, groups were formed—these were able, educated young

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29 The yellowed type-written manuscript of Rev. Lewis presumably dates from 1946. In this document, he gives guidance to his successor, the young Rev. Jenkins, about various aspects of managing the church’s life, ministries, and traditions. It is a veritable treasure chest of information. In one of his final lines, he writes: “If you should ask what needs I have to suggest, there would be quite a long list. You will find plenty. I have been so slowed down during these last five years that I haven’t had the umph to push where it was needed.” One can almost feel the aged rector’s weariness in the document. He was about sixty-eight when he retired and served another several years as Rector Emeritus, until his death in 1954. Portions of the church are lovingly named after him to this day.

30 Nancy comments on her early fears in a memoir posted on the church’s website in 2012, one year before her death. The Jenkins’ would eventually remember St. Matthias significantly in their estate and today various endowment funds they helped establish continue to support the present-day needs of the church.
people in their 20’s and 30’s and ready to go to work in their new situations. Within a couple years we had a solid core of willing and able people ready to enhance the work of the parish in all sorts of ways.31

Growth continued steadily, so that by 1952 the church had built a new education and fellowship wing to accommodate large-church gatherings32 and add much-needed children’s classrooms.

Throughout the 1950’s both the church and the entire Whittier community boomed. The church literally gave away members while helping to establish two new Episcopal churches nearby: to the west St. Bartholomew’s in Pico Rivera and to the east St. Stephen’s in La Habra. The entire St. Matthias congregation enthusiastically lent their aid to the emergence of these new Episcopal churches. Nancy Jenkins wrote:

The areas east and west of us were growing, like us . . . in Pico Rivera . . . we found a beautiful 10 acre strawberry field . . . so the diocese bought it. On a memorable Sunday our entire congregation drove to the field and we formed a procession enclosing the property. We sang, and paused here and there to consecrate the land for different purposes that the church would offer to God. It was thrilling, and a wonderful start for 60-70 of our people to join in building their own spiritual dwelling . . . A big crew joined talents, tools and lots of weekends and built St. Bartholomew’s church with alacrity.33

St. Matthias also supported the emergence of St. Stephen’s to the east. Again, Nancy Jenkins remembers:

. . . there was a considerable core group in existence there already, and with 50 or 60 of our people they rented the women’s club Sunday mornings and appropriated Al’s assistant as their priest. Within a year they had found land and started building . . . For each new church we had a ceremony releasing the people who

31 Nancy Jenkins memoirs, St. Matthias Episcopal Church website, 2012.

32 The large gathering room, still used today for all-church meetings, was named Lewis Hall, in honor of Rev. Edwin Lewis, who had served the church for 27 years from 1919-1946.

33 Nancy Jenkins’ written memoirs from 2012.
...had initiated their own spiritual community. We were still bursting at the seams here in Whittier. Something had to be done.  

Not only did the church give away many members and build their own Lewis Hall during this era, but at their fiftieth anniversary as an independent parish (1912-1962), they were once again in the midst of a large building and expansion program to enlarge their campus footprint.

In their 1962 capital campaign brochure, St. Matthias listed “887 families of 2,660 Baptized men, women, and children” and boasted that “among the 172 Episcopal Churches of the Diocese we have grown to be the fourth largest in number of Baptized members and eighth largest in number of Communicants. No Episcopal Church in Southern California has a larger Sunday school or High School Youth Program than ours.” With “more than 700 Sunday School students” and over 830 people attending four tightly packed services every Sunday, St. Matthias was bursting at the seams and alive with growth. By 1963 they had built an additional two-story wing to accommodate the many children and classroom needs. This era was truly the Autumn season of abundant harvest for St. Matthias, the pinnacle of its growth. This new building would prove to be the final expansion project, as the church would struggle in the decades to come with a pattern of gradually declining attendance and a shrinking congregation as the community of Whittier continued to evolve and change.

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34 Ibid.

35 50th Anniversary Building and Expansion Program, St. Matthias Episcopal Church, 1962.

36 Ibid.
Like St. Matthias after the war, nearby Whittier College also exploded with growth. In 1945 the small college had 426 students enrolled, but by 1949 that number had surged to 1,313 students in large part due to young men returning from the war. Among the college’s 556 male students in 1947, a full 500 of those were GIs heading back to school.\footnote{Garabedian and Ruud, \textit{Images of America: Whittier}, 79.} One of the town’s native sons and an earlier Whittier College graduate, Richard Nixon, was elected to the California House of Representatives in 1946 and the Senate in 1950. Between 1940 and 1960 Whittier’s population more than doubled (from 16,115 to 33,663). The automobile was king, as drive-ins and cruising Whittier Boulevard became popular pastimes. In 1960 a startling twenty-eight percent of the city’s taxable retail sales revenue was due to motor vehicle dealers (over 24,000,000 dollars).\footnote{Real Estate Research Corporation, Economic Base Study (South Pasadena, CA: Simon Eisner and Associates, 1962), 64. Located at Whitter Public Library.}

The town was in its heyday, but growth also came with a price. Throughout the 1950’s, Whittier’s agricultural groves had continued to disappear at alarming rates, with housing tracts going up in their stead to support the burgeoning population. The city’s growth pushed ever further east to the suburbs and away from the densely packed historic Uptown core in which St. Matthias was located. Large new shopping malls were constructed away from the city core: first the Quad in 1953, then farther east the Whittwood Mall a few years later. In the early 1960’s Whittier annexed the Friendly Hills area on its eastern border, so that within ten years the population had more than doubled once again (from 33,663 in 1960 to 72,863 by 1970). This eastward expansion further contributed to a steady decline in business in the Historic Uptown area. One 1962
economic study showed that the Uptown vacancy rate of commercial property stood at a high sixteen percent when compared to the commercial vacancy rate elsewhere at 5.5 percent.\textsuperscript{39} It stated flatly that Whittier “has lost its strong position of dominancy in the region as it has become a smaller portion of an expanding whole.”\textsuperscript{40} Already, the report named those problems which would challenge the Uptown area for decades to come: an older commercial and housing stock in need of modernization, traffic congestion, parking challenges, and overbuilding. St. Matthias, situated squarely in this Uptown area, would share all these struggles in the coming years.

Many of the challenges which St. Matthias faces today find their roots already here in events of the 1960’s. The church’s buildings today are aged. Even its most recent buildings were constructed in 1963. Repairs, maintenance, and modernizing the large, dated church campus prove costly. As is true for many older congregations, the facility is far larger than is needed by today’s much smaller congregation, so the church needs to rent out empty rooms in order to generate revenue from the otherwise under-utilized space. Thus, the sheer size and age of the church facility puts financial pressure on the congregation, which in turn inhibits the congregation’s capacity today to staff for growth.

Civic leaders in the early 1960’s already recognized that the Historic Uptown area needed revitalization to remain competitive economically in the face of suburban growth away from the city’s core. Located in this Uptown district, St. Matthias’ fate would essentially be wedded to the Uptown area and —for better or worse—would largely share

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{39} Ibid., 9-10.
\footnote{40} Ibid., 16.
\end{footnotes}
Thus, already here in the final days of St. Matthias’ abundant Autumn season of harvest, there is evidence of the first dawning frosts of that Winter which lay ahead. We have dated St. Matthias’ Autumn season from 1946-1973 to correspond with the tenure of Rev. Al Jenkins, who even to this day is dearly loved, remembered, and revered by many members of the congregation. In truth, Winter’s encroaching decline had already probably begun by the late 1960’s, years before his retirement, not long after the church constructed its final building in 1963.

Upon Rev. Jenkins’ retirement in 1973, the church hired a former Associate Pastor who had served the church years earlier, the Rev. Chester (Chet) Howe. Like the two rectors before him, he would provide leadership for more than twenty years (from 1973-1996). He would be followed by the Rev. Bruce Gray (from ca. 1998-2009). Both rectors helped the church navigate its difficult season of Winter and respond to its challenges in often courageous ways. In the early 1970’s a shift in the city’s ethnic demographic base was being noticeably felt, as the community’s Mexican-American population grew significantly. By 1975 a Social Needs Study Report noted this shift to an increasingly Hispanic population, observing “demographic changes . . . are producing social problems . . . Many Whittier citizens feel a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement. These feelings are especially pronounced in the Mexican-American sector, in youth and elderly age groups.”

This report surveyed the Uptown neighborhoods surrounding St. Matthias, which had become increasingly saturated with high-density apartments and housing in efforts to

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revitalize the Uptown area by bringing in more people and younger families. While succeeding in this endeavor, the revitalization efforts also brought in a lower-income population—those unable to purchase homes of their own. The community was feeling this shift and struggling to adjust. The Social Needs Study of 1975 noted, somewhat soberly, that in one sixty-block area of Uptown Whittier a startling 52 percent of families were trying to live on household income of less than $5,000 per year. 

It was during this year 1975 that Rev. Howe and St. Matthias responded to the need in its surrounding community by initiating an annual Thanksgiving meal for families and individuals who could not otherwise afford one. The church took pride in the ministry, with active participation from many members of the congregation. Over the next several years the church began collecting and distributing food, with eventually over 100 bags of food being distributed to families in need each week. Ten years later, in 1985, the church at Rev. Howe’s initiative, launched a Soup Hour ministry to provide lunch five days per week. Years later Nancy Jenkins described the community need this way: “It was evident at the time that there were a handful of people in the neighborhood that were really poor. They weren’t homeless, but toward the end of the month their funds would run out and they were hungry.”

Once again, Rev. Howe embedded this ministry into the life of the church and into its sense of mission in Whittier. One long-time member recalled how congregants

42 Ibid., 11.

43 Nancy Jenkins written memoirs from 2012. It seems evident from the 1975 Social Needs Study Report that the need in the community was likely far greater than Mrs. Jenkins suggests, but the church is to be commended for responding as it did then, and church members continue to feel genuine pride in the Soup Hour ministry to the present day.
donated to the Soup Hour as part of their pledge to the church, with Sunday worshippers bringing canned goods on Sundays to be donated after the offertory.\textsuperscript{44} In the early years, virtually every volunteer for the Soup Hour ministry came from St. Matthias. Some were drawn to the church in their retirement years because the ministry offered a meaningful, practical service to the community.\textsuperscript{45}

The city of Whittier continued its efforts to revitalize the Uptown area even as it took steps to preserve its historic landmarks and green spaces. In late 1971 the Whittier Redevelopment Agency was founded. By 1974 it had identified the Uptown area near St. Matthias as the focus for its first major redevelopment project. The commercial corridor in Uptown was re-envisioned as “The Village,” a walking area without cars that harkened back to the city’s pre-automobile days, with significant beautification efforts on sidewalks and store fronts.\textsuperscript{46} The effort was not successful in the long run.

On October 1, 1987, a magnitude 5.9 earthquake rocked Whittier, with another severe aftershock following three days later. The quakes caused over $100 million dollars in damage. With its plethora of older historic structures, the city’s Uptown area was hit especially hard. Twelve commercial buildings and seventeen historic houses were leveled by the tremors. Thousands of people were uprooted from their homes.\textsuperscript{47} The Whittier Redevelopment Agency immediately initiated a new project in 1987 to help the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{44} Conversation with Yvette Rawlinson on July 16, 2017, a member of St. Matthias for 78 years.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{46} Garabedian and Ruud, Images of America: Whittier, 124.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 125.
devastated area to recover, but it has remained chronically unable to compete with the larger commercial shopping areas to the east.

In the ensuing years, many local merchants would band together to form the Whittier Uptown Association. Efforts at revitalization continue to this day, with lighting and sidewalks still in need of improvements, parking remaining a challenge, and the presence of a growing number of homeless residents causing continual concern. At the same time, new popular restaurants and bakeries have emerged in recent years, seasonal community street fairs are well-attended throughout the year, and the Whittier Uptown Association remains an active presence in efforts toward renewal.

Arguably the most significant shifts in Whittier over the last forty years have not been economic, but rather, demographic. During that time the city has moved from mostly Anglo-American to a dominantly Hispanic-American population, with no signs of this shift slowing down. Throughout the 1960s and 70s this shift was just beginning. By the 1980 census, 16,000 of its 68,558 residents were Hispanic (23 percent). Ten years later the Hispanic population had almost doubled, to 30,000 of the city’s 77,671 residents (39 percent). By 2000 Hispanics represented 55.9 percent of Whittier’s population. By 2010 that figure had climbed to 65.7 percent and by 2015 to almost 70 percent.\(^48\) The school age population reflects an even higher percentage of Hispanic students.

This massive demographic shift plays itself out at every level of the city’s life. Recent lawsuits have fought voting district boundaries, in attempts to address the

underrepresentation of Hispanic elected officials in city government. In efforts to cater to Whittier’s growing Hispanic population, different stores and markets have emerged. Seasonal street fairs offered by the Whittier Uptown Association are designed with growing sensitivity to what will appeal to the city’s dominantly Hispanic population. At the same time, St. Matthias has seen its percentage of Hispanic congregants steadily rising in recent years.

The St. Matthias Soup Hour ministry started under Rev. Howe in 1985, but it was his successor Rev. Bruce Gray who significantly broadened its funding base, working to secure grants from organizations outside the church.\(^{49}\) During his tenure the Soup Hour budget grew, but both the volunteers and funding came increasingly from outside the parish. The ministry was thus able to serve the community in greater ways despite the decreasing involvement of St. Matthias’ members, as church attendance declined and the congregation aged. This would eventually lead to a growing disconnect between the church and the Soup Hour which continues to be felt in the present day.

While the Soup Hour ministry grew from 1985 to 2005, the congregation of St. Matthias shrank. This trend resulted in the Soup Hour becoming an increasing financial burden on a congregation that was increasingly unable to bear it—a pressure which continues today. The church directory from 1978, five years into Rev. Howe’s tenure, still showed 1746 people (1103 adults, 643 children) listed as “members and friends,” although it is difficult to know how many were in actual attendance. The ethnic mix of

\(^{49}\) Rev. Gray was also instrumental in helping to found First Day Shelter, a coalition of Whittier organizations that banded together to provide comprehensive health, employment, and housing solutions for the community’s growing homeless population.
the congregation was 98 percent Anglo, with about 2 percent Hispanic representation.\textsuperscript{50} Eighteen years later, when Rev Howe retired in 1996, St. Matthias called itself the “spiritual home to a congregation of 641, of whom 375 received communion at least 3 times in 1996,” but average weekly attendance had shrunk to 175 between both the 8:00am (40) and 10:00am (135) services.\textsuperscript{51} The church was not ethnically diverse: 95 percent identified themselves as “white,” with 2 percent identifying themselves as Hispanic and 1 percent as African-American.\textsuperscript{52}

By 2004, the church directory listed a total of only 136 people (106 adults, 18 children), of whom 92 percent were Anglo, with 4 percent Hispanic and 4 percent African-American representation.\textsuperscript{53} A few years later, by 2011, just before Father Garrison’s arrival, average Sunday attendance had further declined to about 95 people, children’s ministry was virtually non-existent, and some long-time members had decided reluctantly that it was time for them to leave the church.\textsuperscript{54} At the same time, the annual

\textsuperscript{50} The author conducted a review of every name and photo in the 1978 church directory in an attempt to identify the ethnic background of the church’s “members and friends.” While the results are imprecise, it remains the only way to establish a sense of the congregation’s ethnic mix at the time. Twenty adults (2%) and nineteen children (3%) had traditionally Hispanic surnames. Only four Asian congregants could be identified (both adults and children). No African-American members were found in the photographs, but it was not possible to deduce from surnames if any of the “members and friends” listed without photos were African-American.

\textsuperscript{51} Parish Profile, (Whittier, CA: St. Matthias Episcopal Church, 1996), 12. This forty-two page Parish Profile was created after Rev. Gray’s departure while the church was apparently in its Pastoral Search process for a new rector. It’s a wealth of information concerning the church’s present state at that time, including budget, program, demographic, and attendance information.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{53} Church Directory, (Whittier, CA: St. Matthias Episcopal Church, 2004). This directory likely represents those who were actively participating in the life of the church at that time, not the more inflated numbers that would be typical in the broader category of “members and friends” from 1978.

\textsuperscript{54} The author has reviewed the church worship attendance records from November 28, 2010 through June, 2018 and categorized them by six month intervals to assess trajectories of growth or decline. Average attendance for the first six months of 2011 was 95 people. Father Garrison arrived on September
costs of the Soup Hour were approaching $100,000. Despite generous outside funding for the Soup Hour, it still remained an increasingly unsustainable position for the small and struggling congregation. Something had to change, and soon. This was the challenging ministry context into which Father Garrison arrived in late 2011. St. Matthias had probably reached its lowest point in over one hundred years, with a looming uncertainty about whether a renewing Spring could at this point possibly emerge once again.

Since his arrival in 2011, Father Garrison has been working to address four interrelated challenges, each of which is essential in the church’s efforts for renewal: 1. reversing the pattern of declining attendance, especially attracting children and younger families, 2. enabling the church and Soup Hour to become financially self-sustaining, 3. broadening the congregation’s central locus of identity beyond “doing the Soup Hour,” and 4. providing more opportunities for spiritual growth and deepening the sense of community, especially as the congregation grows with new members. Progress has been made in each of these areas since Father Garrison’s arrival six years ago, but it is this final arena of deepening spiritual growth and community that this doctoral project seeks to address.

The first challenge to reverse the declining attendance was quickly overcome. The average weekly attendance in the first six months of 2011, prior to Father Garrison’s arrival, was ninety-five people. One year later, after his arrival, attendance in the first six months of 2012 had already increased more than twenty percent to 116 people each week. Despite deaths of more than sixty long-time members in the intervening years, 18, 2011. In the first six months of 2012, upon Father Garrison’s arrival, worship attendance had already increased significantly to 116 people per week.
average attendance has slowly continued to climb, with 165 people each week in the first four months of 2018.\textsuperscript{55} The ethnic mix of the congregation continues to shift, with a steadily growing Hispanic population that is more reflective of the community at large. Currently about 15 percent of the congregation is Hispanic. Perhaps more significantly, there is now an active children’s program with about thirty-five children and youth who call St. Matthias their church home.\textsuperscript{56} This growth in attendance is likely due to a number of factors: sheer diligence and hard work pastorally by Father Garrison, his efforts to reach out to members who had recently left (some of whom subsequently have returned), strong Christ-centered preaching, and efforts to provide more spiritual growth opportunities for those attending.

Father Garrison’s background as a career businessman and owner of his own flooring company helped him to address the second challenge: helping the Soup Hour and the church to become financially viable and self-sustaining. He inherited a complex financial accounting system which the church had developed through the years to fund the Soup Hour, but which few people understood. As a result, the true total annual cost of the Soup Hour was unclear, as was the actual amount the church was contributing annually to sustain it. It took years to gradually develop more transparent accounting reports in order to identify the true costs of the Soup Hour (which stood at about 102,000

\textsuperscript{55} St. Matthias weekly attendance statistics since November 28, 2010, kept on a spreadsheet by Father Garrison and his predecessors, with notations on special Sundays. Average attendance figures here exclude special Sundays such as Christmas, Easter. Had those days been included the average attendance would be higher still.

\textsuperscript{56} Over forty percent of the children and youth are of Hispanic background, which is another hopeful indication that the church is adapting and more closely mirroring the mix of its surrounding Whittier community.
dollars annually as of 2018). Finance team members reduced more than thirty sub-accounts to about ten special funds essential to the church’s ministry, making financial balances much easier to monitor.57

Annual stewardship campaigns, testimonies, and teaching about tithing and generosity increased both the annual budget and the overall giving as the congregation grew. Between 2011 and 2016, contributions alone increased significantly from 204,000 dollars to over 270,000 annually. Outside grants enabled the church to make major improvements in the church campus. Importantly, Father Garrison articulated both a clear commitment to continuing the Soup Hour but also limits to the degree the church would financially underwrite it, setting an annual goal of a 30,000 dollar contribution limit from the church. This would be crucial to addressing the third major issue: the degree to which the church’s sense of identity had become enmeshed with the continued existence of the Soup Hour, with little concern for the impact on the church itself and its capacity to staff for other program needs or growth.

When asked, “How do you see the importance of the Soup Hour to the identity of St. Matthias?” one long-time member summarized succinctly the perspective shared by many: “It’s absolute. It’s very tangible.” When asked simply, “What is the mission of St. Matthias?” the reply was similar: “This community outreach, because that’s what they’ve always done.”58 As St. Matthias seeks to define itself afresh under Father Garrison’s leadership, this remains an issue yet to be fully resolved: how central is the Soup Hour

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57 This author, in my role as Finance Team member and Chair of the Finance Team between 2014-2017, helped Father Garrison in this process of simplifying accounts, developing more accessible accounting reports for Vestry members, and clarifying the true cost of the Soup Hour ministry.

58 Conversation with Yvette Rawlinson on July 26, 2017.
ministry to St. Matthias’ emerging sense of identity and what are the limits, if any, to which the congregation will commit funds to preserve it?

On the one hand, the strong ministry value of serving the vulnerable members of its community has been expressed time and again throughout the long history of St. Matthias. On the other, the church today faces financial challenges and pressures which cannot be ignored. Monies allocated for the Soup Hour are funds which could otherwise be used to add pastoral staff who might help fuel growth. Such growth would in turn increase the church’s financial capacity to fund the Soup Hour and other social programs. No easy solution exists. Choices must be made about how to faithfully serve both the members of St. Matthias and the vulnerable members of its surrounding community. In naming this issue directly with the congregation and beginning to articulate the need for limits on how much the church will underwrite the Soup Hour—even suggesting the Soup Hour will need to be cut back if solutions cannot be found—Father Garrison is providing the spiritual leadership needed to guide the church through an essential values-clarifying process, while making Christ and his call to discipleship more central to the church’s foundational identity and sense of mission moving forward.

The fourth major challenge which St. Matthias presently faces, and the focus for this project, is the need to provide more opportunities for deepening both the spiritual life and sense of community among the church’s growing congregation. Father Garrison is stretched to capacity and cannot lead another major initiative, nor does he feel he possesses the needed expertise to design or select spiritual growth curriculum or to form small groups. Since the church’s financial constraints limit its capacity to add staff for this need, the present context requires active lay leadership to address this ministry
challenge. Unlike long-time members who share a common historical memory and inherited sense of community, new attendees are seeking community and hoping the church can provide it. They are also less likely to be life-time Episcopalians.

Many of the new members at St. Matthias are coming either from evangelical or Catholic backgrounds, often in search of a church home that is less rigid and more theologically inclusive than those from which they came. They want thoughtful guidance for their spiritual lives, but they do not want to be told what or how to think. They are open to prayer, in fact hungering for it, especially the more contemplative prayer traditions. Congregants are interested in small groups of many kinds, both those oriented toward spiritual growth or toward community service. Very few, however, have experience leading small groups since they have not traditionally been a strong emphasis in either the Episcopalian tradition or in St. Matthias. The hunger is great, but the workers are few. St. Matthias must creatively address this ministry challenge of providing more opportunities for spiritual growth, especially for those who are newly attending and looking for spiritual guidance and community.

What would the contours and characteristics of such a spiritual growth and small group ministry be, given the particular ministry context of St. Matthias Episcopal Church and at this stage in its long history? That constitutes the central ministry challenge which this paper seeks to address. The Episcopalian tradition seeks to walk a “middle way”

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59 The congregational survey conducted in fall 2016, showed significant interest in: contemplative or centering prayer, and, personal/devotional time with God.

60 Again, the congregational survey reflects these realities. Of all those from the church who replied, only eight adults had ever led a small group in a home, whereas twelve had actually led a class at the church. After help with their personal devotional lives, interest in small groups was of next greatest interest to members/attendees.
theologically, one which initially emerged in Anglican England as an attempt to avoid the extremes of Roman Catholicism and Continental Protestantism, one which today both embraces the classical creeds and traditions of the church, but also remains open to rational enquiry, with a generous vision for the inclusion of all people, even skeptics and doubters.\footnote{Thomas McKenzie, \textit{The Anglican Way: A Guidebook} (Nashville: Colony Catherine, 2014), 4.} It seeks to form a spiritual community of unity in the midst of diversity, gathered around the central figure of Jesus Christ.

Whatever shape the spiritual growth pathway of St. Matthias will eventually take, it must make room for this diversity of thought, providing options and pathways, not rules or a one-size-fits-all framework. While one of the church’s long-time members acknowledges frankly that the sense of community among the church’s members today is weak, her caution about small groups and how to design a spiritual growth path is incisive and compelling. She states, “Episcopalians want to think about it, not just accept it. To me that’s the genius of the church, because you’re allowed to bring what you can and take what you want or need.”\footnote{Conversation with Yvette Rawlinson on July 26, 2017.} This response beautifully captures the spirit of St. Matthias Episcopal Church and artfully articulates the spirit with which this resilient, historic church must frame fresh pathways for its members’ spiritual growth in the renewing Spring of this present day.
PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Christian maturity? How is it cultivated? What place does the community of faith play in the process of Christian formation? These are the issues this chapter addresses, with sensitivity to the ministry context of St. Matthias—a liberally-minded, theologically diverse, liturgical church with a strong sense of corporate history but a weak tradition of lay-led small groups. By attempting to define Christian maturity, the goal is set toward which to move, the ideal for which to aim, in any efforts at Christian formation. Defining maturity is a more daunting task than one might anticipate due to the multi-dimensional nature of human beings. The work of both Dallas Willard and Peter Feldmeier is incorporated here toward this end, rooting the vision for Christian maturity in Christ’s foundational call to love God and neighbor. Feldmeier’s work considers how various stages in human psychosocial development might further inform a vision for the mature Christian. The central role of relationships, and particularly small groups as intentional expressions of such loving relationships, is evidenced through the work of Icenogle and Wilhoit.

Finally, the processes for formation are considered—both those classical practices which Christ’s followers may intentionally adopt to aid them in cultivating Christian virtues (Foster), but with sensitivity also to the way life itself presents believers with tasks of ongoing growth and development to which they must adjust. The contributions of
James Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom*, envisioning humans as essentially loving-desiring beings, with appreciation toward the ways in which worship shapes our worldview in precognitive ways, provides fruitful reflection for the liturgical and theologically diverse context of St. Matthias. Finally, Stassen’s work, *A Thicker Jesus*, is considered for how it might provide a more Jesus-centered vision for St. Matthias’ social ethic and community service.

**Christian Maturity: Loving as God Loves**

When Jesus is asked to define the greatest commandment, he immediately goes to the core affirmation of Jewish faith, stating, “You shall love the Lord your God . . . this is the great and first commandment” (Mt 22:37-38). This is not new teaching. His enduring spiritual genius is captured in what he adds next, “A second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:39-40). Love for God and for neighbor—love expressed both vertically and horizontally, inwardly and socially—encapsulates Jesus’ core spirituality and expresses what he seeks to shape in the lives of his followers. This conviction is further expressed in some of his final words to the apostles, on the eve before his death, when he states: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35). Love is to be the singular defining

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characteristic of Jesus’ followers and the core virtue of Christian spirituality. Christ’s call to love, as modeled by the sacrificial love and life of Jesus himself, has indelibly shaped the vision of a mature Christian spirituality ever since, from the age of the apostles, through the Desert Fathers and Mothers, on through Catholic mysticism, Orthodox Fathers, Protestant catechisms, up to the modern civil rights movement of Martin Luther King and the at-times conflicting visions of both contemporary American Evangelicals and their liberal Protestant cousins.

*Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* by Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard represents an informed Evangelical and Christ-centered vision for Christian maturity: the “ideal of the spiritual life in the Christian understanding is one where all the essential parts of the human self are effectively organized under God . . . Spiritual formation in Christ is the process leading to that ideal end, and its result is love of God . . . and of the neighbor as oneself.”³ As such, “Christian spiritual formation is focused entirely on Jesus” and is “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁴ This is an articulation of Paul’s eloquently Christo-centric vision in such passages as Galatians 4:19 (“Christ is formed in you”) and 2 Corinthians 3:18 (“we all . . . are being transformed into the same image”). Willard assiduously resists reducing the process of Christian spiritual formation to a legalistic series of mere external practices, but


⁴ Ibid., 22.
thoughtfully insists it is ever an inner work of God’s Spirit, a work of God’s grace in the life of the believer.\(^5\)

This vision for the mature Christian life represents an ancient and diverse stream of thought within the Christian tradition. Athanasius (ca. 298-373) articulated just such an incarnational theology, when he wrote: “He (God) became what we are (human) in order that we (humans) might become what he is.”\(^6\) Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376-444) stated it even more succinctly: “What he is by nature, he makes us by grace.”\(^7\) The Eastern Orthodox tradition refers to this as the Christian’s process of divinization or deification.\(^8\)

In this framework of Christian development, the Christian soul, through union with God, becomes more like Christ both inwardly and experientially in daily living. The incarnation of Christ, thus, is not just an example worthy of emulation but an experiential possibility through the empowering Spirit of Christ within the believer. Willard insists that from beginning to end the Christian life is lived from the inside out, that an ordered and surrendered heart naturally produces a spiritually vital life and leads one inexorably into that loving maturity which is expressive of deep faith.

While Willard keeps the focus squarely on the human heart—which he refers to somewhat interchangeably as the will or spirit of a person, that operative center from which all one’s actions flow, and which is in need of renewal by God—he insightfully

\(^{5}\) Ibid., 23.


\(^{7}\) Ibid., 129. Citing Cyril, *That the Christ May be One*.

\(^{8}\) Ibid., Ch.4, The Eastern Christian Tradition, 128ff.
names the other dimensions of a person which are likewise in need of the Spirit’s renovating work. He sees six dimensions of every human life: thought, feeling, choice (will), body (physical interaction with the world), social context, and soul (how all the other dimensions integrate to form this one particular life). This broader focus on other dimensions of human experience provides helpful points of contact with the more diverse theological streams which are present in a church community like St. Matthias.

While some more classically orthodox members of the congregation would readily embrace the biblical vision of “becoming like Christ” in one’s inner being, other members who have difficulty accepting or integrating the Bible’s teaching would find this articulation of the “vision” for the mature Christian life to be somewhat confusing. They might question how much they could genuinely know about the inner life of Jesus, let alone how much they would want to imitate that life. Such members see Jesus more as a human product of his generation, culture, and the limited spiritual understanding of his era, and less as an embodiment of God incarnate in human flesh and the spiritual paradigm for every human life. Such congregants would be more familiar with considering and celebrating how a Christian’s faith should lead them bodily into the social/civic arena, and this would be the sense in which they’d more naturally envision themselves imitating Jesus.

This tension of perspectives will be inherent throughout the discussion of how to frame opportunities for spiritual growth in St. Matthias. Rather than eliminating the tension, congregants will benefit from considering both perspectives and working in

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9 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 30.
community to incorporate both the wisdom of the many streams which comprise the Christian tradition and the emerging insights of our contemporary day—particularly the contributions of developmental psychology.

_The Developing Christian: Spiritual Growth through the Life Cycle_ by Peter Feldmeier

Classical Christian models for the spiritual life typically have depicted the vision for progress and growth in terms such as Willard’s (‘becoming more like Christ’) or in terms of deepening inward experience (e.g. the classic 3 fold way of: purgation, illumination, union with God).\(^10\) The emerging field of developmental psychology has provided us with fresh lenses through which to view the dynamic journey of Christian growth and maturity. Fowler is one of the early pioneers who applies developmental insights to the field of Christian theology and how a maturing Christian faith continues to evolve over a lifetime. His seminal work, _Stages of Faith_, posits an early framework for the contours of how Christian faith matures psychologically and cognitively over time.\(^11\) Fowler asserts that various levels of faith maturity correspond respectively with developing levels of cognitive and psychological maturity. This foundational assumption and insight provides the starting point for Peter Feldmeier’s reflections on a maturing Christian faith, in his book, _The Developing Christian_.\(^12\)

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\(^{10}\) Peter Feldmeier, _The Developing Christian: Spiritual Growth Through the Life Cycle_ (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 77-80.


\(^{12}\) Feldmeier, _The Developing Christian: Spiritual Growth through the Life Cycle_, 5-13.
In his chapter on models of human development, Feldmeier engages various developmental theorists, such as Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan and Erikson. His thesis is that Christian maturity cannot be reduced to any one dimension of the human self. Any fully-orbed vision for Christian maturity must include a vision for both our psychological wholeness and personal holiness. While holiness and psychological health are not the same thing, both dimensions must be accounted for in our “vision” of what constitutes a mature spirituality, especially given the preeminence of Christ’s call to love, which has so profoundly shaped Christian spirituality through the ages and which is essentially a call into healthy relationships in the social dimension of our common humanity. As St. John of the Cross wrote, “When the evening comes, you will be examined in love . . . Learn to love.”

In constant dialogue with Christ’s call to love, Feldmeier reflects on the contributions of various developmental theorists to our understanding of human maturity. He notes how different writers, in various ways, frame the journey of human growth as a developing movement from a self-oriented to an others-oriented way of being; and in its more mature stages, as a movement beyond even an others-oriented posture into an ethic of universal care. This represents a more “unitive” way of being in relationship. Here, there is a paradoxical freedom of caring for both the other and for oneself, as the need dictates or the Spirit directs. The hard distinctions between self and other, or self and

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13 Ibid., Ch. 2: Models of Human Development.

God, dissolve as somewhat artificial and one lives increasingly from the awareness of how all things are interconnected in God and in love.

As Feldmeier traces the contours of Kohlberg’s stages, he notes this developmental trajectory: Stages 1 and 2 (pre-conventional) focus on self; Stages 3 and 4 (conventional) shift the locus of moral reasoning outward toward others; Stages 5 and 6 (post-conventional) broaden further to become principal-oriented, increasingly less tribal as one moves from Stage 5 (social ethic) to Stage 6 (universal ethical). In his later years, Kohlberg posited the possibility of a Stage 7, the “spiritually unitive” stage which makes room for paradox and mystery, is non-dualistic and contemplative, and lives from a profound place of both inner union with God and profound inner freedom spiritually.¹⁵

Feldmeier notes that while Kohlberg envisions the stages of moral development as an expanding ethic of justice, in which moral maturity is conceived in terms of one’s autonomy from the judgments of others,¹⁶ other developmental theorists such as Carol Gilligan remind us of the essentially relational fabric within which all such moral-spiritual living occurs. Gilligan’s research with women observes that they define psychological health and mature ethical-spiritual living more in terms of “connection with” than “autonomy from” other human beings.¹⁷ Her four stages move from: 1. Care for self (self-protecting), 2. Care for others, 3. Care for others and self (equally), to 4. Universal care (freedom of interconnection between concern for self and responsibility toward others). As is evidenced in the life of Jesus himself, each developmental theorist

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¹⁵ Ibid., 42-50.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47-50.
posits that people who have progressed into these highest stages of psychological and spiritual maturity evidence an inherent inner authority, a paradoxical freedom between self-assertiveness and service to others, and an often radically inclusive ethic of concern for the healing and well-being of the entire human family. Once again, but now expressed in the contemporary language of developmental psychology, we are seeing the vision of a life lived in whole-hearted responsiveness to Christ’s call to love God and neighbor, wherein “neighbor” is defined (as Christ does) in shockingly-inclusive ways which transcend inherited boundaries of race, culture, religion, and gender (Lk 10:29-37, Jn 4).

This confluence of contemporary theories of human development with the classical Christian vision of Christ’s paradigmatic life of healing love poured out for God and others, constitutes a fruitful point for further exploration and dialogue in a ministry context such as St. Matthias. Many members of the church have a desire to better understand what constitutes a mature Christian faith and how faith develops over a lifetime. More theologically traditional members who naturally look to Jesus as their model for a mature faith would be provided with fresh lenses to consider his life. Such members have expressed interest in reflecting together on what an older Jesus might have looked like, imagining how Jesus’ faith or the tone of his teaching might have changed had he been able to live another thirty years. Here is where the contributions of modern developmental theory, as well as their own lived experiences of aging and living in an increasingly inter-connected global world, can provide rich opportunities for further exploration and dialogue.

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18 A congregational survey conducted in the fall of 2016 revealed that this was one of the areas of highest interest among congregants, an area in which there was widespread desire for growth and better understanding/integration.
personal integration, as well as enriching points of dialogue with fellow congregants for whom Jesus’ life would be examined less an authoritative model and more as an imaginative example of how a spiritually integrated person lives and confronts the oppressive forces of his day.

The enduring contribution of Feldmeier’s work is in the way he calls for integrating the insights from both classical Christian theology and contemporary developmental psychology, without reducing our vision for Christian maturity to either one of these ways of knowing. Both theology and psychology offer helpful “lenses” through which to see more clearly the many dimensions of our complex humanity, and to imagine how they might integrate together within a fully mature human being. Willard’s work similarly reminds us of our rich multi-dimensionality and the importance of allowing the Spirit of God to transform us in every area of our being. The mature Christian manifests qualities such as: compassion in the face of imperfection, kindness, patience, being present, integration, a learning posture, comfort with paradox, and healthy relationships.19 Such qualities are cultivated within the context of Christian community, for it is in this relational matrix that Christ’s love becomes both mirrored to us and reflected through us to others.

**Christian Community: The Context for Loving Maturely**

Any framework for developing maturity in love or faith must take into account the diverse ways in which one’s community influences, for better or worse, the

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19 Ibid., 225. Here, Feldmeier lists ten qualities named by author Jack Kornfeld.
Christian’s journey of growth. Willard’s writing reflects briefly on ways in which one’s social dimension may need the Spirit’s renovating work, but it is not his primary focus and he issues a clear call for others to further develop this vital communal aspect of transformative discipleship, especially pastors of local churches.\textsuperscript{20} Here, the writings of Wilhoit and Icenogle underscore the vital ways in which flawed human relationships have ever been one of God’s most important crucibles for our spiritual formation and transformation into the likeness of Christ.

\textit{Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry} by Gareth Icenogle

Before human community ever came into being, God existed in loving communion within God’s own Trinitarian being. The very nature of God constitutes the starting point for Icenogle’s comprehensive theological reflection on the Bible’s call into community as God’s preferred context for forming human beings, and for re-forming us into God’s image, an image which has become malformed/distorted through our turning away from God’s path. As Icenogle writes: “God as Being exists in community. Humanity as the imaged beings of God were created in community and are called to live and mature in community. The natural and simple demonstration of God’s communal image for humanity is a gathering of a small group.”\textsuperscript{21}

Far from being an optional extra to the life of discipleship, or a mere contemporary program for church growth, the author states that living in loving community constitutes the very core of God’s purpose for humanity: “Community . . . is

\textsuperscript{20} Willard, \textit{Renovation of the Heart}, Ch. 13: Spiritual Formation in the Local Congregation, 235ff.

the common life between God and humanity, and small groups are the most visible and frequent form of this community. The general thesis of this book is that the small group is a generic form of human community that is transcultural, transgenerational, and even transcendent. The call to human gathering in groups is a God-created and God-directed ministry, birthed out of the very nature and purpose of God’s being.²²

As such, the author states categorically: “Community is the purpose for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, being born, living among us, dying and being raised from the dead.”²³ Christ comes not to do something to get people into God’s kingdom at some future time, but rather, he came to be with and among us as a living embodiment of God’s kingdom now. He invites all people into that shared quality of loving relationship with him which he himself enjoys in his relationship with the Father (Jn 15:9-17, 17:13-26) and into that quality of relationship with others which he models for all who would follow in his way.

Icenogle further develops his thesis by reflecting creatively on the Old Testament narratives and how they, too, reveal God’s purpose of calling people into community by virtue of their shared covenant relationship with God. The exodus narrative is insightfully highlighted as not merely a geographical movement from Egypt to Israel, but as a spiritual/psychological empowerment movement, in which the very identity of God’s people and God’s leaders are being transformed from a slave/victim mindset to an identity as precious child/beloved community.²⁴ The Ten Commandments become an

²² Ibid., 11, 13.
²³ Ibid., 10.
²⁴ Ibid., 97.
early paradigm for the key elements of a contemporary small group covenant. Jethro’s council for the overwhelmed Moses to decentralize his leadership burden by entrusting leadership to others, proportionally according to their abilities, models how God’s people can be better served by entrusting leadership to ordinary people of good character in whom the Spirit of God dwells.

God is depicted by the author as “always grouping . . . always bringing things and persons together.” God’s purpose for calling community into being is ever four-fold: to serve God, one another, “outsiders,” and all of creation. From the call of Abram to be a blessing to all peoples (Gn 12), through the prophets and their vision of the Spirit’s universal outpouring, to the example of Jesus, this manifold purpose of God is consistently revealed. Jesus calls his people first into community with each other through their shared allegiance to him: “He appointed twelve . . . so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach” (Mk 3:14). Only from within that context of reconciled community does he eventually send them out as healing agents into God’s world—but even then, always they are sent in teams, in community, so that their reconciled relationships can themselves embody the very kingdom of God they proclaim.

The twelve apostles comprise the church’s first small group, called into being by Jesus himself, but Icenogle highlights how Jesus surprisingly calls “outsiders” of his day into community as well. Jesus consistently gives prominent place to women and children.
He is willing to push the boundaries of gender and race, even religion, in the way he interacts with people and invites them into relationship with himself and his Father. He models this inclusiveness for the Twelve in ways which were shocking for his generation, and which resonate deeply with people in today’s generation, especially in a diverse context such as St. Matthias where inclusivity is a deeply embraced corporate value.

Community is clearly the context in which God forms human lives and seeks to shape them into the likeness of Christ, into that multi-dimensional maturity which embodies both personal holiness and psychological wholeness. The Christian gospel is good news of both. It is fundamentally a call from community into community. The movement and progression toward maturity comes as its members learn, through practice and their shared life together, to move away from an independent, self-oriented individualism and toward an others-oriented interdependence in shared pursuit of God and God’s healing mission in the world. Growing into maturity for the Christian is, thus, less a linear path wherein one masters information and content, and more like a family systems process of learning to live lovingly in one’s new being-redeemed family of God.

*Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* by James Wilhoit

James Wilhoit is a pastor who has taken seriously Willard’s call for the local church to focus its efforts intentionally upon the spiritual formation of its members. He declares categorically: “Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period . . . Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence. The church was formed to

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29 Ibid., pp. 120, 141. Chapters 9-11.
form.” He articulates four dimensions of the community’s formational influence: receiving (God’s grace), remembering (God’s story), responding (with faith and obedience), and relating (to God and others in love). For each of these dispositions, he devotes one chapter to explaining the concept, then a subsequent chapter to describing how that dimension is expressed and pursued through community. He rejects both the easy individualism and heady intellectualism that characterizes many approaches to Christian maturity. Rather, when it comes to our growth in Christian character, he flatly states: “We need the church far more than the church needs us” and “seeking Christlikeness is a lifelong endeavor that requires personal and corporate commitment.”

Whereas Icenogle’s comprehensive work serves as something of a manifesto for small group ministry, Wilhoit’s work takes a more measured approach to the role of small groups in forming a church’s members. While he, too, sees them as vital components in our personal growth, he does not envision them as primary: “Spiritual formation does not take place primarily in small groups and Sunday school classes; instead, it mostly takes place in the well-lived and everyday events of life. Our small groups, retreats, and studies should help us respond wisely to the events of life that form us.”

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31 Ibid., 55.

32 Ibid., 51-55.

33 Ibid., 177, 55.

34 Ibid., 38.
to such events, provide our lives a veritable kaleidoscope of opportunities through which we can learn to refract the light of Christ.

Here, Wilhoit is making a helpful distinction: whereas some spiritual disciplines (e.g. service, study, worship, prayer) we can choose intentionally, others in effect choose us.35 They show up as the ordinary events of human life, as the necessary stages of development through which we all have opportunity to pass: suffering, loss, rejection, adolescence, falling in love, falling out of love, discerning a calling/career, aging, illness, death and dying. Life itself, in all its diverse complexity and human ordinariness, represents God’s primary greenhouse for our spiritual growth and development.

This helpful contribution provides a more holistic framework within which to discuss Christian formation in a church such as St. Matthias, wherein some members find the classical language of spiritual disciplines, and putting them intentionally into practice, to be less compelling. In this author’s experience, however, all church members have naturally found value in sharing their lives, reflecting on their life experiences, and considering how their faith speaks to the diverse issues they face every day as parents, partners, employees and friends.

In his chapters on relating, Wilhoit offers another important contribution when he challenges our orientation to time and how we use it. In virtually every church, and certainly at St. Matthias, one of the major challenges to growing in community or to investing in activities which members know would further their spiritual growth, is a perceived lack of time. Wilhoit confronts this issue directly and thoughtfully: “We live in

35 Ibid., 93.
a remarkably future-oriented culture . . . However, an excessive orientation upon the future robs us of some of the deepest joys that we were designed to know. For it makes it hard for us to dwell in the present time—the time where we meet and enjoy God.”

The author appeals helpfully to our common human desire to experience joy and reminds us that we only experience joy in the present. A preoccupation either with the future or the past, thus, diminishes our capacity for joy:

“The spiritual life requires that we step out of the future orientation where we ask, what does this present activity do for me in terms of the future? and simply live our present . . . One simple definition of friendship says, “Friends are the people we waste time with . . .” At some level, we can only enjoy friendships when we enter into the present and simply enjoy the reality of talking and sharing and supporting one another. For a little while we lose track of time. Our excessive future orientation robs us of relational depth and makes enjoying God’s presence nearly impossible.”

It also makes enjoying the presence of others nearly impossible, which in turn hinders our growth. At St. Matthias, framing the call into community not only as an invitation to spiritual growth, but also as a call into joy is something which will resonate deeply, this author believes. Such an appeal to experiencing life fully, to embracing joy and aliveness, fits well the ethos of Episcopalian spirituality. It will likely also prove helpful when trying to motivate members to engage in spiritual disciplines—such as making time for community—in more intentional ways.

36 Ibid., 182.

37 Ibid., 182-183.
Christian Formation: How God Shapes Lives and Community

In forming a vision for Christian maturity, a multi-dimensional approach is clearly needed, one which makes room for the full range of our complex humanity: personal holiness (toward God), psychological wholeness (toward others and self), and an awareness of the normal developmental stages through which people pass as they age their way through life. Living in community is central to one’s ongoing progress in maturity—for it is there in the context of flawed relationships and everyday life together that Christ’s followers practice the rhythms of loving God and neighbor. This section considers the place for intentional spiritual practices, habits that can be chosen which contribute to Christian growth. Here, St. Matthias’ unique ministry context is also considered, reflecting on which spiritual disciplines might prove to be of particular relevance and importance to the formation of its members and its corporate life together.

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

As an Episcopalian church, St. Matthias’ style of worship is deeply liturgical and feels comfortably familiar to the Catholic mass with which many of its new members were formed as children. Willard states categorically that “worship is the single most powerful force in completing . . . restoration in the whole person.”38 In my experience, most members of the church have not reflected theologically or thought very deeply about how this particular form of worship—a liturgy which some of them have experienced for decades—contributes to the formation of their Christian identity or life of discipleship. Here, the seminal work of James Smith offers valuable guidance. As an

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38 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 78.
educator in a Christian college, Smith rightly challenges the primacy on developing a “Christian worldview” as too narrowly focused on forming the one dimension of the human mind, and, as an effort rooted in a flawed anthropology, one that envisions human beings as primarily thinking-believing beings rather than loving-desiring beings.

As imagination precedes conscious thought, so our practice of worship and liturgy precedes doctrinal formulations: “Before Christians had systematic theologies . . . they were singing hymns . . . celebrating the Eucharist . . .” 39 Liturgy/worship “shapes us, forms us, molds us to be a certain kind of people whose hearts and passions and desires are aimed at the kingdom of God.” 40 Smith’s core assertion is that “liturgies . . . shape . . . our identities by forming our most fundamental desires.” 41 Liturgies, whether secular or sacred, “train our hearts through our bodies” and teach us “to be a certain kind of person.” 42 Christian liturgy/worship powerfully shapes our imaginal world in pre-cognitive ways, forming our desires and loves, our longing for the good and beautiful life. As a result, according to Smith, “being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head . . . rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love. We are made to be such people by our immersion in the material [e.g. bodily] practices of Christian worship . . . ” 43

39 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation, 139.
40 Ibid., 18.
41 Ibid., 25.
42 Ibid., 26.
43 Ibid., 32-33.
In the theologically diverse context of St. Matthias, wherein many members struggle to affirm fully the classical doctrinal affirmations of the Nicene Creed—even though they are recited every week in the liturgy of worship—Smith’s work offers a constructive pathway for members yet to form a spiritually enlivening Christian identity centered on the person of Jesus Christ. By articulating the Christian faith more as a “form of life” than a rigid adherence to a “set of beliefs,” Smith invites us to reimagine Christianity as more a path of common desire, a communal ongoing pursuit of Christ’s formative call to love God and neighbor more than a static circle of doctrinal certainty into which we all must enter and remain.44

Smith provides room for a more inclusive, generous vision of the Christian life and of a mature Christian identity, one which is defined more in terms of loving than “knowing,” but which still finds its concrete location in the person of Jesus. Every week the Episcopal liturgy leads the worshipping congregation in a prayer of confession: “We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.” As Smith helpfully reminds us, this bodily practice of liturgical corporate confession is itself a deeply formative act, one which centers the congregation around a shared pursuit of Christ, and which offers members a kind of centering creedal practice and aim rather than proscribing a list of creedal beliefs to which every member strictly adhere. That aim is loving God and others, as we ourselves have been loved by Christ (1 Tim 1:5).

44 Ibid., 134.
While the liturgy of worship does indeed shape us in unconscious ways, there are still time-proven practices which we can consciously choose to practice in our aim to press on toward Christian maturity. This is where the work of Richard Foster provides a needed counterpoint to the contributions of Smith. Yes, much of our deep inner formation is pre-cognitive, unconscious, rooted in the shaping of our fundamental longings, loves, and desires—as Smith rightly reminds us. However, we can also partner with God in the Spirit’s transforming work within us. Our “response” matters, as Wilhoit reminds us. There are “means” we can pursue, as Willard and others teach us.

Richard Foster’s exposition of these “spiritual disciplines” has become a recent classic. He articulates eloquently twelve spiritual practices which we can adopt as “means of receiving [God’s] grace,” habits which allow us “to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us.” Such practices are examples of consciously practiced activities that “allow our spirit ever-increasing sway over our embodied selves.” In the context of St. Matthias’ tolerant and somewhat laissez-faire Episcopalian ethos, Foster’s reminder that we can choose to pursue spiritual practices which will aid us in our Christian growth is an important and needed corrective.

Foster names twelve time-proven spiritual disciplines whose ultimate aim is to cultivate an inner freedom of responsiveness toward loving God and neighbor.  

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47 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 15.
organizes these habits into three categories: inward, outward, and corporate disciplines. Inward disciplines are: meditation, prayer, fasting and study. Outward disciplines are: simplicity, solitude, submission and service. Finally, the corporate practices are: confession, worship, guidance and celebration. While there are certainly other spiritual disciplines of value and other frameworks within which they could be categorized, Foster offers an accessible framework whose value can be readily grasped.

Many members of St. Matthias already practice some of these spiritual practices, or there is widespread interest in exploring them further. These are: prayer (especially contemplative prayer practices), study, service, and worship. Others are corollary practices, easily within reach, which would complement and deepen congregational life together: meditation, simplicity, fasting, confession and celebration. Meditation practices could be taught which supplement teaching on contemplative or centering prayer, and which provide theologially accessible ways of being spiritually enriched through Scripture for those members who might otherwise have intellectual barriers that would hinder them from meaningfully engaging the Bible as a wellspring for their own spiritual growth. To the church’s practice of corporate confession during worship-liturgy, the practice of personal confession in the context of small groups could be gently cultivated—confession as vulnerability, transparency, sharing one’s life, bearing one another’s burdens. In this way, the congregation can naturally be encouraged to deepen its bonds of community.

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48 Ibid., Chapters 2-13.

49 Specific spiritual disciplines of current interest to the congregation became evident through a Congregational Survey conducted in the fall of 2016 for this project. See Appendix B.
Practicing celebration as hospitality, as welcoming the stranger (e.g. the new attender), will also deepen the sense of loving connection between members. Finally, the practice of simplicity of lifestyle, even of fasting from activities during lent, resonates well with the church’s commitment to social justice, income equality, and an identification with the poor and vulnerable (such as those being served through the church’s extensive Soup Hour ministry). Cultivating such spiritual disciplines with increasing intentionality will help the congregation’s members become more proactive participants in their own formation, less dependent on merely that formation which their participation in the Anglican liturgy/worship is able to provide.

_A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age_ by Glen Harold Stassen

In addition to a more robust and proactive practice of spiritual disciplines in the lives of individual members of St. Matthias, there is room also to cultivate a more Christ-centered social ethic for their community engagement. Here, Glen Stassen’s work on “incarnational discipleship” can make a helpful contribution. In _A Thicker Jesus,_ Stassen is asking two questions: 1. how to find a solid identity for Christian faith and ethics, 2. how that identity can guide us in an increasingly interactive, pluralistic, and rapidly changing global landscape.\(^50\) The author argues that, too often, the church’s social ethic has become divorced from the prophetic example of Jesus himself, and that to the extent this occurs, the church’s members develop an inadequate Christian identity and the church’s witness is subject to being co-opted by secular political ideologies.

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\(^{50}\) Stassen, _A Thicker Jesus_, 4.
He asserts we need “a thicker Jesus” to guard against this challenge, a thicker understanding of Jesus that fully embraces his unique historical particularity as one who stands firmly rooted within the Hebrew prophetic tradition. When Christian leaders have embraced this “thicker Jesus,” they have been armed with insight to resist the secular ideologies of their day which would otherwise co-opt Jesus (and his followers) to some agenda other than his prophetic call to give primary allegiance to the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{51} The person of Jesus serves as the church’s “Rosetta Stone,” an embodied/incarnational model for faithful discipleship which calls the church as a community to engage in continual reflection, repentance and humble self-correction as it follows Jesus as Lord in all areas of life.\textsuperscript{52}

Stassen’s call to incarnational discipleship also issues a strong challenge to the “buffered self” individualism that characterizes much of contemporary Western Christianity, an individualism that quietly permeates much of the ethos of St. Matthias as well. Stassen’s vision of the Christian self is not static but dynamic and interactive, not individualistic but social and communal. It’s less a matter of defining conceptually the internal psyche of self-hood and more a matter of envisioning the relational interactions which characterize how we are either loving or destroying one another as human beings. He writes: “Recovering a social understanding of selfhood requires recovering an understanding of churches as community . . . the human being is emotionally interactive,

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 5-6. False ideologies could be either authoritarian (e.g. nationalism, fundamentalism) or privatistic, according to Stassen.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 99. The image of the Rosetta Stone is one which Stassen borrows from H. Richard Niebuhr. It is an image for articulating how Jesus himself, and alone, provides the necessary interpretive key through which we are enabled to understand the other words and many ways of God.
not an isolated buffered self or purely a rational seeker of self-interest. And so is our globalizing world . . .”53

Stassen’s work challenges the church to imagine how Jesus’ call to love God and neighbor must shape our interactions not only at the personal level, but also in the public arenas of community service, national political policy, and the great global challenges of our day. This call to an understanding of “self” as how one is interacting in community, and to a more Jesus-centered social ethic, offers the theologically and politically diverse community of St. Matthias a helpful pathway to forming a more coherent Christian identity, one which returns all of its members together to the church’s one Rosetta Stone, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As we seek to envision forming mature Christian adults in the context of St. Matthias Episcopal Church, we have seen that our vision for Christian maturity must be multi-dimensional and centered in Jesus Christ. It involves our personal holiness and our ever-developing psychological wholeness (Feldmeier), both love for God and for neighbor, with a social ethic of justice rooted deeply in the life of Jesus himself (Stassen). Foster and Willard offer us thoughtful reflection on classical practices, spiritual disciplines which we can intentionally engage as we pursue the aim of becoming “more like Christ.” However, Wilhoit reminds us that life itself—with its inevitable challenges, losses, surprises, and changes—always provides the primary opportunities for our growth and transformation. This is always in the context of Christian community, as Icenogle has

53 Ibid., 119.
demonstrated, for we are primarily loving-desiring beings, creatures hard-wired by our creator to live in loving relationships (Smith). In the following chapter, building on the insights of the above authors, I seek to articulate a theology of Christian maturity which takes seriously this highly relational aspect of our humanity and our formation, a theology that is both biblically grounded and psychologically informed.
CHAPTER 3

A DEVELOPMENTAL THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY

Any comprehensive framework for a mature Christian spirituality must certainly include a vision for the Christian’s emerging social-emotional maturity. This involves an ongoing process of development and growth throughout the life cycle. Yet, as Feldmeier states: “the fundamental nature of Christian holiness is not ego complexity but loving knowledge of God.”¹ This chapter articulates some contours for a biblically grounded theology of Christian maturity. First, the evidence of Christian maturity is defined as a life that increasingly reflects that of Christ himself. The life and person of Christianity’s founder itself offers the paradigm for any Christian who seeks to cultivate a fully “Christian” spirituality. Next, various core themes in Christian theology are considered, which together point toward loving relationships, life in community itself, as constitutive of God’s primary context for shaping human lives. Finally, this chapter ends by reflecting on how we can cooperate with the Spirit in the process of our ongoing formation by engaging intentionally in spiritual disciplines. In that vein, four specific spiritual

disciplines are considered which might prove of particular relevance to the congregation of St. Matthias Episcopal Church at this stage in its life, and in developing opportunities and pathways for spiritual growth which would appeal to its members.

**The Marks of Maturity: “Transformed Into His Likeness”**

What are the evidences of a mature Christian faith and life? What virtues would be cultivated over time? How does one know when they’ve arrived, or does one ever “arrive”? Such questions highlight the importance of articulating a vision for Christian maturity, and for how one progresses in that journey toward fullness of life in Christ.

**Transformation of the Whole Person: Multi-Dimensional Discipleship**

A biblical vision for Christian maturity must not be reduced down to any one dimension of our complex humanity. Humans are embodied spiritual beings, hard-wired for relationships, rich in emotion, desire, intelligence and creativity. Willard’s framework for cultivating Christian maturity suggests six dimensions of our human-ness which must be re-formed through the Spirit of Christ: feeling, thought, choice (will), social context, the body, and soul (which he defines as how all the other dimensions combine to compose our unique persona).² From within this multi-dimensional holistic approach to our formation, he summarizes the aim of Christian maturity as a “transformation of the whole person into the goodness and power seen in Jesus”³. While one may certainly receive benefit from learning to pray, memorizing the Bible, and studying the Christian

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³ Ibid., 20.
faith, these activities in themselves may be woefully inadequate in empowering someone to love authentically, set aside their innate ego-centricity, or be led into a lifestyle of promoting justice for the marginalized. Yet Jesus’ spirituality leads him robustly into all of these arenas and more. Personal piety is not enough; social engagement and loving service must be its inevitable corollary. Love for God must be expressed through every aspect of our humanity, not only with all our “heart, soul, and mind” but also with all our “strength” (Mt 22:36-40), not merely within our inner being but also in our embodied actions, as Christians engage God’s world as agents of healing, reconciliation, service and shalom/justice.

Jesus: Our Paradigm for the Mature Person

Jesus is the pattern and paradigm for human fullness, and thus, for Christian maturity. Numerous biblical passages give voice to the absolute centrality of Jesus’ own life in shaping our vision for what a mature Christian life and faith will eventually look like. Jesus’ core command to every person is: “Follow me” (Mk 1:17). He teaches that a fully mature disciple will be like his master (Mt 10:25), calls his followers to imitate his example, and then sends them into the world in mission in the same way that he himself has been sent by God (Jn 20:21). The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as both “founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2). Paul depicts the entire journey of transformation for the Christian as one of “being transformed into his likeness” (2 Cor 3:18). In the most unequivocal terms, Paul asserts that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9) and that any growth in maturity is a growing up “into him” (Eph 4:15). Jesus models for his followers, and calls all of them into, an utterly God-centered life: “I
always do the things that are pleasing to him” (Jn 8:29). “Seek first [God’s] kingdom” (Mt 6:33). For Jesus, this call for every person to reorient their life around God as one’s unifying center always leads centrifugally outward into loving relationships with others, into healing service in God’s world.

The Essential Jesus: Love as Our Foundational Virtue

Jesus himself imbues Christian spirituality with its unique genetic imprint. It is also arguably the defining characteristic of his own life. That imprint is love. When challenged to identify the most important commandment of all, Jesus declares without hesitation: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Mt 22:37). He then identifies his second greatest command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39). In his final words to those who would lead his movement upon his death, he articulates a “new commandment . . . that you love one another just as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). Clearly for Jesus, a radically God-centered and kingdom-first lifestyle involves living out these core commands to love. His teaching, life and sacrificial death all combine to model this singular virtue.

Jesus teaches his followers that the defining characteristic by which his followers manifest his continued presence in the world is to be the fullness of their love for one another. These are relationship-oriented commands. He calls his followers to become masters in doing relationships artfully and well, to grow in love. Here is the heart of Jesus’ sense of self and the one thing he desires to be most evident in the lives of his followers. That is: love. Any biblically-rooted vision of what constitutes Christian maturity must reflect this highly relational example of Christ, and his call to love.
Throughout their lives Christians must learn to love ever more wisely and well. If it is to reflect the image of Christ himself, any Christian vision for spiritual maturity must include a call to keep developing throughout one’s life a growing emotional and social wisdom, to cultivate through each stage in the life cycle an ever-emerging wisdom in the manifold ways Christians are called by Christ to love.

**Maturity throughout the Life Cycle: Stages of Development**

How might a Christian’s love, or faith, mature as one ages and moves through the changing seasons of life? Various models for spiritual growth, with their respective visions for Christian maturity, have been developed through the centuries by the church. No one model prevails or encapsulates fully the call to develop a robust social and emotional wisdom. Only more recently has the field of developmental psychology begun to articulate how the process of human growth evolves throughout the life cycle. The church can learn much from this emerging wisdom, especially since it focuses so clearly on those dimensions of our humanness related to loving others well: namely, the social, emotional, mind, and bodily dimensions of our humanity. This section reflects briefly on some well-known models for spiritual and psychological development, considering how together they might aid in framing a vision for Christian formation and discipleship that feels relevant and sufficient for the challenges of the present day.

**Spiritual Maturity: Models of Spiritual Development**

Not even Scripture presents one uniform schema or model for growing into Christian maturity. Instead, Scripture offers a veritable kaleidoscope of images, all of which combine to paint a vivid portrait of maturity’s landscape. For instance, Jesus likens
the process of growth to one of cultivating a natural organic union to himself, saying his followers are like branches who must remain connected to him, the one who is our vine and life-source. As people stay in union with him, they naturally produce fruit for God (Jn 15:1-11). Jesus models and teaches that the mature ones, the leaders in his kingdom, should be “like servants” (Lk 22:26-27) who humbly take the “lowest place” (Lk 14:10) in the way they care for others. His call to love God, neighbor, and one another form both the foundation and the finish line for a faithful life (Heb 12:1-2). The book of Hebrews calls Christ’s followers to “go on to maturity” by persevering in faith, promising that “God . . . will not forget . . . the love you have shown him as you have helped his people” (Heb 6:1-2, 10). Persevering in the work of loving God and others; this is the self-evident quality of those who have pressed forward into maturity in Christ.

One of the few biblical passages that explicitly offers a schema for spiritual development, along with some suggestion about what characterizes growth at its various stages, is 1 John 2:

“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven . . . I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” (1 Jn 2:11-12).

From the basics of being forgiven, through a lifestyle of cultivating virtues and godliness, finishing with a deep experiential knowledge of God—this is the journey of growth. Here we see the contours of beginning, intermediate and advanced stages in the spiritual journey. This three-stage schema for spiritual development has profoundly shaped the Western Church’s model for advancement in the spiritual life. The monastic tradition has
framed it as a journey through: purification, illumination, then union.\textsuperscript{4} In the first stage of purification, the focus is on living out Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor as oneself. The second stage of illumination focuses on loving God fully, as one deepens in their knowledge of God. In the highest stage of union, the Christian directly experiences God and receives direct but glimpsing (i.e. temporary and fleeting) foretastes of their promised “face to face” union with God in the life to come (1 Jn 3:1-3, 1 Cor 13:12-13).

This schema for progress and development in the Christian life focuses largely on the individual’s inward journey, and on how the believer experiences God in prayer. Protestant theologians have challenged this model as too focused on the individual believer, asserting that the Spirit of God moves believers forward in their journey of sanctification in much more varied ways. Many early Protestant writers rejected the three-fold way of Monasticism, which was largely Catholic. They suggested numerous variations for what might constitute a more biblically-rooted “order of salvation.”\textsuperscript{5}

The pioneering writing of James Fowler represents an early and seminal effort from a modern Protestant theologian to apply the emerging insights of developmental psychology to the issue of faith formation and spiritual maturity. Fowler studied how faith as a cognitive construct for meaning-making matures, and changes, as the Christian’s cognitive capacities and life experiences continue to evolve throughout life.\textsuperscript{6} He posited six stages of faith, starting with the magical, literal thinking of children and

\textsuperscript{4} Evan B. Howard, The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 249.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 250.

childhood faith (Stages 1-2). Stages three and four are intermediate levels of faith. Stage three faith emerges typically in adolescence. Here, in working to form a stable identity and find a community of belonging, most young adults adopt the norms and belief system of their community and its respective religious authorities. Fowler suggests most adults remain at this level of faith, where the answers of their “tribe” become their answers throughout life. However, as people encounter suffering, loss, unanswered prayers, develop relationships with people from other faiths, or simply continue to reflect on their inherited belief system, many move into a time of deep struggle and inward tension as the confines of their religious community, and its teaching, feels too limiting and inadequate.

At this point, people either lose faith or work out new integrations of their Christian faith (Stages 4 and 5). They become more comfortable living with questions, ambiguity and paradox. They have more trust in their own spiritual authority, and are more affirming of the God-life and experience of those from different religious communities and traditions. Few people ever arrive at Fowler’s highest level of faith (Stage 6), which he labels “universalizing faith.” People at this level live with an ethic of universal justice, seeking to promote the good of all people, regardless of religion and often in ways that lead them well beyond, and frequently into conflict with, the traditional boundaries of their own religious community. For Fowler, Jesus himself is an example of just such a prophetic, universalizing faith. While these various models of spiritual growth differ in significant ways, all affirm: growth in character, Jesus as example, crisis periods of inward conflict whenever one struggles to move beyond the inherited limitations of their faith community, and a life of growth in love.
Psychological Maturity: Models of Social-Emotional Development

Just as there is no one model for spiritual growth that encompasses all the rich complexity of experiencing our infinite God, so there is no one model for psychological growth which can address all the inter-related dimensions of our developing personhood. For that matter, even the distinction between “spiritual” and “psychological” growth is a somewhat artificial construct. As those who are fashioned wondrously “in the image of God,” no single dimension of our humanity can be separated from its connection to each of the others. Willard reminds us of this when he affirms that Christian formation must take seriously each of the six dimensions of our humanity. In fact, he writes: “It is the central point of this book that spiritual transformation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness . . .”7 We are each one integrated whole, comprised of many parts. Nonetheless, by making such distinctions, we can then consider these differing aspects of our being one at a time, and as a result, perhaps more clearly identify how one dimension of our humanity may develop and mature over time in contradistinction to, or in parallel with, the other dimensions. This is where our contemporary models for human development can offer us fresh insight.

As we have seen in more detail above, the work of Kohlberg and Gilligan focuses on how humans develop an emerging moral consciousness. Kohlberg’s work studies cognition (i.e. dimension of “mind”), and ways in which our developing physiological (i.e. bodily) capacity for higher abstract thought correlates to ever more complex systems of moral reasoning as we mature. He notes how the locus of moral concern shifts from

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7 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 41. Italics added.
egoistic self-concern, to concern for others, then for living by ethical principles and into an increasingly inclusive ethic of justice for all people.\textsuperscript{8}

Carol Gilligan’s work likewise studied the phenomenon of our growing moral consciousness as humans, but she found that the experience of women differed significantly from the men in Kohlberg’s study. Her research found that women gave far more weight in their locus of moral concern to the “social” dimension of their shared humanity with others. Her female subjects conceived of mature ethical reasoning more in terms of “connection with” others than “autonomy from” others for the sake of abstract ethical principles.\textsuperscript{9} That two theorists both studying the same phenomenon (i.e. emerging moral reasoning) come to such contrasting conclusions and frameworks is itself an evidence of our complexity as humans. Each theorist contributes insightfully to the discussion, yet neither can posit what constitutes “the definitive” framework for our maturing moral consciousness.

The life-cycle work of Erik Erikson takes a different approach to how one progresses toward maturity than writers such as Kohlberg, Gilligan, and even Fowler (on faith formation). Rather than focusing on how one mentally constructs meaning or morality, Erikson suggests that the human journey itself, and the very process of aging, presents people with a series of tasks through which they must progress if they seek to become socially and emotionally mature as persons. Erikson’s schema of human development predicates eight stages, sequential in nature. To progress to the next level,

\textsuperscript{8} Feldmeier, \textit{The Developing Christian: Spiritual Growth through the Life Cycle}, 42-50.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 47-50. Gilligan’s four levels of moral development for women were: 1. Self-protecting, 2. Care for others, 3. Care for others and self, 4. Universal care (needs of others and self no longer compete).
one must resolve an inherent tension and develop a corresponding strength.\textsuperscript{10} Like James Wilhoit who suggests that life itself provides God’s primary context for the believer’s spiritual formation and ongoing growth, Erikson asserts that people develop psychological and social maturity precisely as they move through such universal human tasks as: forming a healthy sense of identity, learning how to develop loving and authentic relationships, living with a sense of purpose, and contributing positively to the well-being of others. While Erikson’s stage theory leaves the “spirit” dimension underdeveloped, it still provides an insightful map of how maturity progresses in the “social” and “emotional” dimensions of life.

In constructing any comprehensive theology of Christian maturity, the insights from both traditional models of spiritual maturity and from these emerging—at times competing—schemas of human development arising from contemporary developmental psychology are all needed. The human bodies’ physiological capacities for increasingly abstract thought undergirds the models of Kohlberg and Fowler, whose work on moral reasoning and faith formation focuses largely on studying the dimensions of “mind” and “body.” Gilligan’s model for growth in moral consciousness is rooted in a nuanced attentiveness to humans’ “social” and emotional dimensions, particularly to their engendered distinctiveness as male and female persons (i.e. body). Classical models of spiritual formation—such as the 3-fold way of purgation, illumination and union—arise from a monastic tradition that is millennia-old and which distills the accumulated wisdom of spiritual masters who have devoted their entire lives to attending wholeheartedly to the

human dimensions of “spirit” and “soul”—and then articulating what progress or maturity in those domains looks like.

All of these models contribute to understanding more fully what it means to be people who are “fully alive to God” in every aspect of our multi-faceted humanity. Even developmental models which give little or no attention to the spiritual domain can, nonetheless, offer great insight in learning to love neighbor and self. When contemporary models are considered together, despite their differences they offer a trajectory of psychosocial growth which comes surprisingly into alignment with the classical Christian vision for a life of spiritual maturity. The maturing person is gradually transformed from a posture of self-concern to a concern for the well-being of others, deepens in her skill at developing loving relationships, and seeks justice for all people—even one’s enemies.

Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Fowler all cohere in affirming that at the highest stages of human moral-spiritual-psychological development people demonstrate, paradoxically, a simultaneous concern for both the well-being of others and of their own human selves. These wisest ones have come to a profound intuitive awareness, and even mystical experience of, the absolute interconnectedness of all people. Christian theology attributes this to being fashioned “in the image of God.” Christian formation is the process of renewing this blemished image within every person. Christian faith looks to Jesus Christ

11 Fowler calls this “universalizing faith.” Kohlberg’s later work suggests the possibility of a final and transcendent stage which he calls the “spiritually unitive” stage. Gilligan labels her fourth and highest level “universal care.” Each model suggests that at our highest levels of human development we transcend the dualistic, either-or, dichotomous reasoning of earlier stages and enter into a both-and posture of being “for” all people, for both self and the other, both my “tribe” and the people of every tribe. This final stage feels paradoxical to us and yet it’s remarkably resonant with the writings of great Christian mystics and contemplatives all through the ages, who at their fullest experiences of God always struggle to find ways to give voice to this ineffable “union” with All-Being (i.e. God) which is at once both separate from and insububly one with the writer. Even the classical 3-fold spiritual way, rooted as it is in the prayer experience of monastics, names “union” as the highest level toward which we may aspire.
as the supreme example and fullest embodiment of such a life, and, calls people to follow Jesus into an ever-developing journey of human transformation.

Why a Developmental Approach to Christian Maturity is Needed

The insights arising from developmental psychology are needed because the modern American church has often focused its efforts at spiritual transformation too narrowly on the cognitive dimension (i.e. “mind”), giving insufficient attention to the “social” and “emotional” dimensions of well-being. Such an imbalanced approach can easily form Christians whose lives are filled with biblical information but who lack the deep inner transformation of character that embodies humility and love for all people, including those with whom they disagree. One writer labels this the American church’s “sanctification gap,”12 citing the Barna Group’s research that “spiritual immaturity” is one of the American church’s greatest deficiencies.

Missing also is that Spirit-infused joy which the Apostle Paul proclaims is evidence of following Christ (Rom 14:17), and which itself is an evidence of our own emotional health and vitality. Peter Scazzero calls this “emotionally unhealthy spirituality” and laments the ways in which he as a pastor modeled this underdeveloped paradigm for Christian transformation, in the process harming himself, his family, and his church.13 As we seek to form the lives of Christians in the “social” and relational work of

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“loving neighbor” and “loving one another,” this is precisely where the insights of developmental theorists can help us immensely.

Even a basic understanding of developmental theory could offer liberating hope to Christians as they face the inescapable challenges of life and struggle to hold onto a faith that feels adequate for the painful realities with which life confronts them, or for their own deepening encounters with people from faith traditions other than their own. When confronting life’s soul-shaking crises—an unwanted divorce, grievous losses or death, injustice or cruelty, pastors who abuse authority, churches that leave them emotionally scarred—many adult Christians could draw hope from understanding how faith matures through the life cycle, and particularly through painful experiences such as these which come to us all.

Familiarity with Fowler’s schema of faith formation could reassure them that their very sense of inner sadness, disorientation, and loss is itself an indication not that something is wrong with their faith, but rather, perhaps the very sign and evidence that their faith may be progressing, deepening and maturing in very normal ways. When one is struggling to navigate the transition from one stage in faith to another stage, this sense of inward tension is what Robert Guelich calls “hitting the wall.” It is completely normal, even healthy, although we experience and feel it as a “loss.” Understanding this process could offer Christians hope as their faith is struggling to deepen into one that is

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more fully their own, rooted ever more deeply within them and their own experience of
God, as opposed to a faith that has merely been received from those around them.

Understanding Carol Gilligan’s contributions could offer an entirely different
perspective on how to support Christian women as they are maturing through the life
cycle, especially as they enter mid-life. It might help us empower Christian women to
allow themselves more freedom in moving away from a simplistic Christian paradigm of
“care for others” (stage 2) and into a broader paradigm of “care for self and others” (stage
3), while reassuring them that such care for self is not in any way a betrayal of faithful
discipleship. It may, in fact, be very pleasing to God.

Awareness of the normal sequential stages in the human life-cycle, as articulated
by Erikson, could inform pastors’ ministry as they are seeking to form the faith of people
at every age-range, from children to seniors. The key developmental tasks in forming a
maturing adult faith are insightfully explained by Erikson’s framework: forming an
identity during adolescence (stage 5), establishing healthy intimate relationships during
early adulthood, becoming appropriately assertive and wisely loving (stage 6), facing loss
and the end of life as elders, with a sense of generativity, having lived well and given
something of value to the next generation (stages 7-8).

Pastors are called to form a community of people who are increasingly adept and
wholeheartedly committed to “loving God and neighbor” at every changing stage
throughout their lives. As St. Irenaeus declares, “The glory of God is a human being fully
alive.”\(^{15}\) This full aliveness will express itself differently at these various stages in the

\(^{15}\) Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.7.
life cycle. Embracing this reality can help Christians to actualize their own inner aliveness, increase their joy, and thereby enhance the church’s witness to a watching and wounded world, one that too often perceives the church as “unloving” and “narrow minded” rather than the loving community of Christ it is called to ever become and to increasingly exemplify.16

A Developmental Approach to the Life of Jesus

Classical Christian theology teaches the “incarnation” of God in the person of Jesus Christ, that his life itself manifests God with a fullness of “grace and truth” which is not found in any other human life (Jn 1:14-18, Col 2:9). Thus, his entire life serves as a paradigmatic example of what constitutes a God-filled human life. This would include not just how he loves and lives in each individual moment of his life, but also how his life itself naturally unfolds over time, the developing trajectory of growth which his life demonstrates. Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus does not arrive from the outset as a fully-developed person. He progresses naturally through all the normal developmental stages of any other human being. How might “seeing” his life through these normal developmental lenses offer fresh insight for one’s own life of faithful discipleship? How might the contributions of contemporary developmental theorists such as Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler help Christians understand Jesus more comprehensively or embrace more compassionately their own ever-emerging faith journeys as his followers?

First, it’s notable how the life cycle schema of Erikson aligns in many points with the glimpses given in scripture of Jesus’ own development throughout his life. The core tasks of childhood and adolescence are to develop personal agency (stages 2-4) and a secure identity (stage 5). Jesus’ formation during childhood clearly demonstrates these emerging qualities. Without his parents’ consent, the adolescent Jesus lingers three days at the temple in Jerusalem, inexorably drawn into discussion with the scribes and religious teachers. When his frightened, troubled mother confronts him, he replies, “Did you not know I must be in my father’s house?” (Lk 2:49). He is clearly referring to God and not to Joseph. Even as an adolescent, Jesus here is revealing an identity that has already become securely and profoundly rooted in God.

At the same time, however, we are told that Jesus nonetheless remains “submissive” to his parents in the ensuing years, and that he continues to mature as he moves through adolescence and into early adulthood, increasing “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (Lk 2:51-52). In other words, even Jesus must grow up. His is a naturally developing growth in physical strength, moral-spiritual understanding, and social-emotional wisdom –as ours is as well.

Jesus’ adult life, ministry, and death provide further examples of alignment with Erikson’s life cycle paradigm of maturity. Discerning his life’s calling and vocation, establishing loving authentic relationships, building a ministry team (stage 6), serving his world in a generative way (stage 7)—all these describe the core tasks of Jesus’ early adult years. As his brief life progresses and eventually concludes in an early death, he models how to live wisely, grow in compassion, and die well (stage 8). As his death approaches, Jesus is acutely aware that, in some sense, his mission is unfinished. Nonetheless, Jesus
dies at peace with himself and the life he has lived, a life affirmed as both complete and incomplete at the same time. He is able to say to God in prayer “I have accomplished the work that you gave me to do,” and even as he dies can declare “it is finished” (Jn 17:4, 19:30). Yet he also knows that much remains to be done, and that in fact the greater part of his work will be carried on through his disciples, through others, after he dies.

Seeing Jesus through these eyes, with his life ending as paradoxically both finished and unfinished, models for Christians how to embrace their own imperfect lives and incomplete efforts. Adopting such a developmental view of Jesus can offer powerful reassurance to Christians facing the end of their own lives, or pastors nearing the end of their ministries, reminding them all that they will have faithfully played their part even while much of their life’s work yet remains to be completed through the lives they have touched and formed.

Next, consider Kohlberg’s paradigm for the emergence of moral reasoning. His model insightfully describes much that is evident in Jesus’ own subversive life and prophetic teaching. Jesus can be abrasively unconventional. He tenaciously challenges the theological conventions of his day. Jesus’ teaching clearly exemplifies “post-conventional moral reasoning” (level 3). In Kohlberg’s model, most people (and religious teachers) operate from a “conventional moral reasoning” framework (level 2). Their values are shaped primarily by the teaching they have received from their family, community, or theological tradition. This changes as one matures. The maturing person increasingly develops an internal sense of their own inward authority, rooted in their own experience of God and less restricted by their community of origin. In the process, one
becomes more passionately committed to promoting the good, the healing, of all people—not just of one’s “tribe.” Jesus models such an increasingly-inclusive ethic.

Jesus courageously confronts the prevailing religious teaching of his day whenever he feels it hinders people from experiencing God’s heart and healing mercy. “Woe to you, scribe and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Mt 23:23). The “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27). “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you” (Mt 5:21ff). An appreciation for Kohlberg’s model for how people mature in moral reasoning offers fresh insight into Jesus’ ministry and how he finds the courage to confront abusive religious authority in his own day. It might then empower his disciples, or Christian pastors, to find courage to do as Jesus does—perhaps hearing their own religious tradition more truthfully and with a prophet’s loyal criticism.

Finally, Jesus models for his followers how a fully mature, liberated faith can empower them to allow their own faith to evolve and change over a lifetime. He refuses to be confined within the inherited authority of his own religious community (stage 4, individuative-reflective faith). He does not serve merely his own ego. He comes to serve God and others, with radical freedom and abandon. He does not need to fully understand the path upon which God leads him. In this respect, he models Fowler’s “conjunctive faith” (stage 5) and its openness to mystery. He seeks the good and healing of all people, even those who were considered “outsiders” or “far off” from God by the conventional standards of his own religious community. He welcomes a Samaritan woman to be his follower and commissions her as his ambassador in her community, despite (or perhaps due to) her scandalous reputation. He praises a Canaanite woman for her faith (Mt 15:28),
heals the servant of a devout Greek Centurion (Mt 8:8ff), and welcomes into paradise a crucified thief who is hanging beside him as he dies on the cross (Lk 23:43).

All these actions exemplify Fowler’s “universalizing faith.” One’s faith has become increasingly broad, expanding to include others, less restricted and bound by the teaching of others, more open to paradox and unknowing, more inclusive of those whose spiritual path differs from our own. By understanding these evolving changes as not displeasing to God, but as natural to a maturing faith—even as they are modeled in the life of Jesus himself—Christ’s followers can be protected from false guilt, more free to allow themselves to grow in faith, love and grace. Such growth can be seen not as a betrayal of faith, but rather, as the natural way one develops a more “generous orthodoxy” that is characteristic of mature followers of Christ who continue to grow throughout their lives.17

The Context for Maturity: Life in Community

Christian maturity has been defined in terms of a growing likeness into the fullness of Christ, a growth wherein all the various dimensions of one’s embodied humanity find their coherence and integrating center in God. The contributions of contemporary theories of human development have been considered, and how maturity develops naturally and continually throughout the human life cycle, as it does for Jesus. Ongoing maturation involves development not merely in the spiritual domain, but also—

17 An example of such thinking, at once both increasingly inclusive and universalizing, yet also remaining rooted faithfully within one’s own tradition, is Evangelical author Brian McLaren. See: Brian D. McLaren, A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), and Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World, (New York: Jericho Books, 2012).
and perhaps especially—in the often underdeveloped social-emotional domain. This section considers what context provides the greatest opportunity and possibilities for our ongoing growth to emerge in each of these domains. That context is loving community.

Trinity: God as Beloved Community

Christian theology begins and ends with its vision of God. The God revealed in Scripture is loving and relational, personal and interpersonal. Classical Christian theology affirms a triune God who has forever existed in a loving communion of three “persons.” All created reality arises from this singular source, and as such, all of creation expresses the infused relationality present in the very being of its Creator. Human beings represent the fullest embodied expression of this inherently relational God (Gen 1:26-28), who creates people as relational beings fashioned for loving union as “male and female.” Every person is invited into the very flow of love which has been eternally occurring within the very being of our Creator Source, and even now is ever flowing outward in fruitful abundance and mutually self-giving love. As those fashioned “in God’s image” and “likeness,” humans are called to mirror increasingly God’s rhythm and flow of love in their relationships with one another. This cannot be done in isolation from others.

Incarnation: God Among Us, Forming the Beloved Community

Classical Christian faith affirms that Jesus Christ, as both fully God and fully human, is the one human being whose life reveals most completely the “image of the

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18 This calling is reflected in Bondi’s insightful work on the desert fathers and mothers of the early church period. Bondi rightly reads their even their monastic call into the wilderness as an expression of this commitment to live fully a life of love: “As they understood it, an ability to love is the very goal of the Christian life…for them, ‘to love is human; not to love is less than human.’ Roberta C. Bondi, To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 18.
invisible God” (Col 1:15). God’s very nature is embodied in Jesus and expressed through the life that he lives. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:1, 14). For the Christian, this one singular life of Jesus Christ models uniquely and reveals most fully what a mature person looks like. Likewise, his life itself must then reveal something of the developmental tasks through which each person passes as they progress toward greater maturity. Throughout Jesus’ life, he gives the central place to relationships, to forming mature human lives through living in community.

Jesus’ first formative community is his own family of origin. In the normal rhythms of family life—shared meals and Sabbath observance, being disciplined by parents, playing or fighting with siblings—year after year the child Jesus is gradually being formed. He submits to his parent’s authority during his childhood and adolescence (Lk 2:51). They exert the single greatest influence on shaping his identity and faith. In adolescence, the boy Jesus has to reconcile his emerging identity in God (“did you not know I must be in my Father’s house”) with his inherited role as first born son of an Eastern family, whose primary responsibility would be to his parents and his people. In the early years of his ministry, Jesus has to further differentiate himself from his family and cultural obligations, establishing boundaries and asserting his primary allegiance to God’s calling on his life rather than the claims of his mother (Mk 3:21-35). As various developmental theorists remind us (particularly Erikson), these are developmental tasks that every adolescent and young adult must navigate successfully as they progress into successive stages of human maturity and fullness. Jesus models this progression as well.
As Jesus begins his ministry, one of the first steps is to gather a team who will share the journey with him. Jesus entrusts this community of practice and shared mission with increasing responsibility over time. They receive ever-deepening investments of his time. Jesus ministers to the multitudes—healing the sick, teaching and preaching broadly—but he gives himself deeply to a few, to a community of followers who have bound themselves to him and one another in shared allegiance to his mission. It is within this community that Jesus models his lifestyle, shares his joys and sadness, expresses his frustration, confronts their distorted values, offers correction, and asks for their emotional support. Emotionally vulnerable, transparently authentic, flawed human relationships provide the primary context for how Jesus forms human lives into the fullness of God.

Witnessing Spirit: Impetus to Expand the Beloved Community

Even as he prepares for his death, Jesus demonstrates his passion to enlarge God’s community of love when he declares “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also” (Jn 10:16). God’s heart pulses in Jesus for the sake of forging this ever-expanding community. Jesus will continue to be present among his followers, but now in the Holy Spirit who will dwell within them (Jn 14:12). The Spirit will “bear witness” to Christ both in, and through, them (Jn 15:26-27), ever calling new communities of Christ into being. Throughout the story of the early church, we encounter this dynamic Spirit moving Christ’s followers outward in mission, in ever-widening circles to create new expressions of God’s people—starting in Jewish Jerusalem and Judea, then spilling outward into religiously-hybrid Samaria, and finally to the far-off Gentiles and “the end
of the earth” (Ac 1:8, 2, 8, 10, 13). Jesus tells his disciples, “As the Father... sent me, even so I am sending you” (Jn 20:21).

As Jesus originally shapes human lives by choosing to live in close-knit bonds of emotionally authentic relationship, so he commissions his church to continue his ministry, and so the Holy Spirit takes initiative to accomplish in each new generation. Learning to love others, as Christ has loved them, has been from the beginning God’s preferred process for growth, the ideal context for forming mature human lives—people who are increasingly responsive to God and loving toward neighbor as they move through each successive season of life.

The Church as a Community of Transformation: Maturing Together in Love

In its efforts to fulfill Jesus’ commission to “make disciples of all people,” the early church clearly continues in the highly relational pattern modeled by its founder. The apostles describe the nature of their pastoral authority as relating like “a father” or “a mother” in God’s family: “As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children . . . We loved you so much . . . we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children” (1 Th 2:6-12). In fact, this familial language constitutes one of the dominant metaphors used in Scripture to describe the quality of community which the early church sought to embody. The church is “the family of God.” Every person is born into a family. Through the Holy Spirit, every follower of Christ becomes re-born into God’s spiritual family (Jn 1:13). Within this new relational bond, Christians are “brothers” and “sisters” to one another, called to “be imitators of God, as beloved children” and to “walk in love, as Christ loved
[them]” (Eph 5:1-2). The apostles call the first Christians to replace the old value systems they inherited from their families of origin with the new value system of Christ, which is preeminently depicted as a path of self-giving love expressed in a shared familial life.

Another biblical image commonly used to describe the early Christian community is “body of Christ” (Rm 12, Ep 4). The Spirit which lives in such fullness within Jesus now lives in fullness within and among them. As God’s Spirit becomes incarnate in the body of Jesus, now that same Spirit becomes incarnate through the bodies of Jesus’ followers, in their shared community and ministry in his name: “The called gathering of Jesus became the new body of Christ who continued to live in the world . . . his life was to continue as a community life and . . . his Spirit would be shared among the many.”19 Maturity is depicted as a growing up into “the fullness of Christ” and is achieved only through their mutually shared life together, “as each part does its work . . . speaking the truth in love . . . joined together . . . and build[ing] itself up in love” (Eph 4:14-16).

Both of these pervasive biblical images, family of God and body of Christ, reflect the early church’s commitment to continue doing both what Jesus did (shaping lives for God) and how he did it (primarily through relationships). The primary gathering place for the first Christian communities was, thus, not publicly at the temple courts but clustered together in the most intimate and familial of environments, the homes of its members.20


20 Ibid., 354-370.
The Process of Formation: Spiritual Disciplines within Community

In contrast to the intimate and highly relational character of the early church as it sought to form human lives into the fullness of Christ, many of today’s churches seem content to offer a more programmatic approach to Christian discipleship, one which is centralized in church buildings and offered through classes taught by clergy rather than located in the homes of its members who are sharing their lives deeply with one another. This is certainly true for St. Matthias Episcopal Church and it represents a fundamental shift in the church’s culture and ministry focus which will need to be gradually and patiently cultivated over time. At the same time, some aspects of the Episcopal Church’s ethos and history provide natural departure points for beginning this journey. Despite its characteristically laissez-faire posture of respecting the privacy, conscience and lifestyles of its members, that posture is rooted in the church’s firm commitment to love all people—a commitment which is arguably the core expression of its vision of the Christian faith and the call of Christ. This commitment to loving every person who comes through the church’s doors is a great strength on which to build.

Likewise, the Episcopal Church has a strong tradition of cultivating the life of the mind and the spirit, often expressed through the practices of prayer, service to the poor, social justice, and spiritual disciplines. These offer additional pillars and foundational practices on which culturally appropriate pathways for the discipleship and spiritual formation of its members can be constructed. The Anglican Church has a rich tradition of cultivating the spiritual disciplines,21 those intentional practices of training the various

dimensions of our humanity for maximum receptivity to the transforming grace of God’s Spirit. This section briefly considers four specific spiritual disciplines which have natural appeal to St. Matthias’ members, can be readily practiced across the wide theological spectrum represented in the church, and provide natural departure points into a deepening life of community expressed through home-based small groups.

**Study: Spiritual Reading**

Scripture, tradition and reason constitute three pillars of the Anglican approach to spirituality. As a result, the spiritual discipline of study provides a natural, familiar path for members of St. Matthias to explore their faith and reflect on their lived experience. Richard Foster categorizes study as one of four inward disciplines, an analytical process wherein the mind reflects deeply in an effort to understand. It involves the study not only of books but also of creation itself, including careful observation of nature, ourselves, and the cultures in which we live. Jesus teaches “the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32). The Apostle Paul calls for spiritual transformation through “the renewal of [the] mind” (Rom 12:2) and states that the role of Scripture in our lives is “for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). The “central purpose is

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24 Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55-56.

25 Ibid., 63-66.
not doctrinal purity . . . but inner transformation. When we come to the Scripture we come to be changed, not to amass information.” 26

The spiritual discipline of study makes room for St. Matthias members from both liberal and conservative theological backgrounds. Study can include not only the Bible but also a rich and diverse array of other books or resources of interest to members. People in the church have a strong interest in going deeper in the practices of prayer, in understanding faith formation and human development over a lifetime, and in how their Christian faith should lead them to engage thoughtfully the major issues of our day (e.g. environment, politics, gun control, global refugee crisis, war). Book studies offered on all these topics would provide natural pathways for exploration. Foster asserts “one of the principal objects of our study should be ourselves.” 27 Members of the church also have a natural interest in sharing their life experiences with each other, and since most of the congregation is still over fifty years old there is much wisdom present when its members gather together and begin to open their lives to one another.

Prayer: Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer

Another spiritual practice which can be mutually pursued by all members of St. Matthias, regardless of how traditional or progressive they are in their approach to faith, is prayer. This is another “inward discipline” but one which moves us from the dimension of mind into the realm of spirit, from thought to emotion, from thinking about God to experiencing God. When added to the discipline of study, prayer can further the work of

26 Ibid., 59-60.
27 Ibid., 65.
inward transformation by engaging different dimensions of our being. There is much
interest in prayer among members of St. Matthias.²⁸

The ancient practice of lectio divina (divine reading) provides a way for the
curch’s liberal members to engage Scripture in a meaningful, and spiritually fruitful
way, while not requiring them to affirm any particular belief about the Bible’s truth or
inerrancy.²⁹ With its focus on the imagination as a pathway into experiencing God and on
listening for God’s “word/voice” coming to them through the medium of Scripture, lectio
divina cultivates a growing capacity to discern God’s “still small voice” and confidence
in following God’s leading into service.

The practice of centering prayer likewise trains one to release one’s own thoughts,
observe recurring patterns of thought, and detach from them in an effort to cultivate an
inner stillness and comfort in simply “being with” God. This prayer discipline is an
accessible contemporary expression of ancient contemplative practices.³⁰ It has great
potential to fuel the self-awareness that Foster asserts should be a primary focus of our
study, as one through practice becomes more conscious both of her own recurring or
obsessive thoughts, and of God’s gentle presence within.

²⁸ Results of a congregational survey conducted in fall of 2016 showed that 61% of respondents
were “somewhat” or “very interested” in learning about “contemplative or centering prayer.” A slightly
lower but still significant number (57%) were interested in learning about “praying for others.”

²⁹ M. Basil Pennington, Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures

³⁰ M. Basil Pennington, Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form (New
York: Image Books, 2001). See also Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening (Lanham,
Liturgy: The Christian Year as Living into Our Formative Story

The church’s weekly liturgy of word and sacrament when it gathers for corporate worship is one common experience with which every member of St. Matthias is familiar, but which surprisingly few have ever reflected deeply upon. The liturgy of worship was crafted to inhabit a “middle way” between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, as the Anglican tradition envisioned itself primarily as a “community of practice” bound together by “liturgy rather than doctrinal emphasis.” As a result, even today it continues to attract new members from Catholic backgrounds who feel spiritually at home in the familiar rhythms of its liturgy but are looking for a more progressive and inclusive faith community than what they have experienced in their Catholic upbringing. The church’s liturgy exposes people deeply to Scripture as passages from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles and Gospels are regularly read. Rhythms of prayer are embodied as the gathered church offers confession, thanksgiving, intercession, and praise.

Themes for weekly services also follow the cycle of the church’s annual liturgical calendar, which divides time itself into recurring seasons (Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, ordinary time). This annual rhythm reintroduces Christians to their faith tradition throughout every season of their own emerging lives, inviting further reflection and ever-deepening experience. In the process, it continually shapes their fundamental desires for Christ and his vision of the kingdom. As Smith notes, the church’s annual calendar and sacred liturgy of weekly worship exert a profoundly formative role in shaping Christian

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identity, grounding believers time and again in the biblical story which leads them both to Christ and to follow in his way.\textsuperscript{32} By teaching explicitly the historic reasons for the Christian year, for different aspects of the weekly service, and how each element contributes to shaping their Christian identity and forming members spiritually, the church could add depth to members’ experience of worship and how liturgy itself can be a more central part of their own ongoing formation.

Service: Integrating Contemplation and Action

Long time members of St. Matthias are justifiably proud of the church’s longstanding commitment to the poor and marginalized in Whittier’s community, an activism and commitment to social justice which is deeply embedded in the Anglican spiritual tradition.\textsuperscript{33} The spiritual discipline of service is an “outward discipline” which, ideally, arises from the “whispered promptings” of the Spirit within rather than the “frantic energy of the flesh” (i.e. our own ego needs or self-righteousness).\textsuperscript{34} There is much room to help the church’s members integrate their inward journey with their outward journey, so that their outward service is flowing increasingly from an inner well of contemplation and responsiveness to the Spirit’s promptings. Currently less than ten percent of the church’s membership is involved in the soup hour ministry which now constitutes over twenty-five percent of the church’s present budget. In what ways might Christ be calling

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34 Richard J. Foster, \textit{Celebration of Discipline}, 112.
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church members today either to adjust upward their level of personal engagement or, alternately, to reduce the church’s level of commitment to this ministry? The answer is unclear, but the need to invite church members to cultivate a “both-and” posture toward their formation is clear. Members must be encouraged to cultivate both “inward disciplines” such as prayer and study, and also “outward disciplines” like service for “the least of these” (Mt 25:40-45) in the community which surrounds them. Precisely here a deeper reflection upon Stassen’s call to incarnational discipleship, one firmly rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus himself, can aid the church’s members in this work of integrating their “doing” with “being,” their service with their life of prayer.\footnote{Glen Harold Stassen, \textit{A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age} (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2012), 16-20.}

Conclusion

A relational theology of Christian maturity involves the transformation of the Christian’s entire being, in all its dimensions, into the likeness and fullness of Jesus Christ. It must include a vision for both psychological and spiritual wholeness, taking adequately into account both their social-emotional dimensions and their ongoing evolution throughout the seasons of life. In these areas the insights of contemporary developmental psychology can contribute much, offering needed perspective on how the vision of maturity necessarily shifts and evolves throughout the life cycle. The primary context for formation is always the community in which Christ’s followers are placed, the relational web wherein they practice the call to “love God and neighbor.” Finally, through the intentional practice of spiritual disciplines believers can cooperate with the
Spirit in this work of transformation and consider how some of these practices—such as study, prayer, liturgy, and service—fit particularly well within the ministry context of St. Matthias Episcopal Church.
PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY
CHAPTER 4
MINISTRY GOALS AND PLANS

This chapter introduces the key ministry goals and plans for developing spiritual growth pathways and small groups at St. Matthias Church. It begins by summarizing key theological implications when thinking about spiritual formation and fostering community, especially in light of the church’s theological diversity and limited experience with lay-led small groups. Initial ministry goals and strategies are then outlined, followed by consideration of how to involve the church’s key stakeholders. Finally, a potential timeline for implementation is suggested.

Theological Implications for Formation and Community

St. Matthias as a church reflects its Anglican spiritual tradition. It seeks to walk a theological “middle way” that generously makes room for people from diverse backgrounds to gather around a common liturgy and shared pursuit of God. The church’s liturgy presents both opportunities and challenges for the spiritual formation of its members. Opportunities include: regular exposure to all of Scripture through public readings based on the lectionary; the weekly practice of corporate prayers of confession,
intercession and praise; and, a constant re-centering around the person of Jesus Christ through the celebration of communion during every worship service.

Challenges of this liturgical focus include: reinforcing a culture of over-dependence on clergy leadership; minimizing the call for each believer to cultivate personal responsiveness to the Holy Spirit and his callings into ministry; and, fostering a more program-centered and large-group approach to being in community as God’s people, rather than the more relationally-centered and small-group pattern seen in Scripture. There is little interest in changing aspects of the church’s worship service, so efforts to promote spiritual formation will likely need to focus on cultivating other options for growth (e.g. contemplative listening prayer, small group experiences), while also enriching members’ understanding and appreciation for how the existing liturgy can contribute to their ongoing formation.

One corollary of St. Matthias’ theological diversity is the richness of discussion which becomes possible when its members do gather to share their perspectives, experiences and lives with one another in small groups. The Anglican middle way fosters an open-mindedness to the differences of others, a willingness to love generously whoever comes through the church’s doors, and a non-judgmental spirit rooted in a deep respect for the conscience of other believers. In small groups at St. Matthias, I have watched conservative Republicans and liberal democrats share openly their stridently divergent political views, cringe and brace themselves visibly at the opinions of other group members with whom they radically disagree, and yet leave the group as brothers and sisters in Christ who have maintained affection and appreciation for one another. Such a diverse community, comprised of traditional and progressive, gay and straight,
racedly diverse Christians provides much opportunity for practicing love of all people, perhaps especially whoever one might be most inclined to label as “enemy” or “other.”

Another theological implication for developing spiritual growth pathways at St. Matthias is the importance of maintaining a developmental focus with regard to faith formation. This developmental focus is important because the church has members widely distributed across the spectrum and stages of faith, each one of whom deserves thoughtful spiritual guidance for their evolving life in God. The church also still has a preponderance of members over the age of fifty, many of whom are very interested in understanding how their Christian faith might be expected to change over time as they mature.¹ Some are seeking pastoral reassurance that they are not alone or without faith, since they have outgrown formulations of faith from earlier periods in their lives and are unsure whether these changes are to be seen as “good” or “bad.”²

A commitment to the intentional pursuit of specific spiritual disciplines will be important to fostering any lasting growth in the life of the church and its members. Specific practices of particular relevance are: lay-led small groups, contemplative and listening prayer, and integrating members’ inner prayer life with their outward life of service. In the future, initiating service-oriented small groups that combine an element of

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¹ A congregational survey conducted in September, 2016, found that seventy-eight percent of adult respondents were aged fifty-five or older, with ninety-four percent being over age forty. Seventy-six percent were either “very interested” or “somewhat interested” in learning more about “stages of adult faith development.”

² I have been in small groups where long-time members of the church expressed gratitude and deep relief when they realized they were not the only ones whose faith had changed. They had wrestled inwardly for years with guilt and uncertainty. Being able to share their journey and their faith in a small group, without fear of recrimination, was healing for them. It enabled them to feel a renewed connection to the church and other members of the church with whom they had worshipped for years, but with whom they had never before talked personally about such matters.
inward contemplation, or mutual personal disclosure among team members, could help to bridge this gap. In the meantime, exploring small ways to invite personal disclosure or faith-sharing within the church’s existing task-groups (e.g. finance team, vestry, and choir) might be a step toward such integration. Finally, it is important to teach how the spiritual disciplines contribute to Christian formation, how through their intentional and habitual practice they “train us” in godliness (1 Tm 4:7), cultivating an increasing inward freedom and responsiveness to God’s enabling Holy Spirit, thereby gradually enlarging believers’ capacities for loving God and others as they move through the varied seasons of life and of their own souls.

**Ministry Goals**

Initial ministry goals for this doctoral project involve four interrelated areas: developing a pathway toward Christian maturity that’s contextualized to St. Matthias Church, cultivating the congregation’s value to pursue spiritual growth in an intentional manner through the practice of spiritual disciplines, mobilizing an initial band of five or six lay leaders for small groups, and initiating at least two new small groups to deepen community and lay positive foundations for future offerings. These goals feel somewhat modest compared to other churches I have led, where I have enjoyed the freedom to lead from the church’s “first chair.” However, given St. Matthias’ lack of experience with groups and with spiritual leadership from the laity, they feel more appropriate and achievable during our available time span of about twelve to eighteen months. These goals are foundational in nature, designed to build the substructure and cultivate values on which the church can build. More will certainly remain to be done at the end of this
project’s time frame, but I hope to have helped our rector learn much, lay needed foundations, and generate momentum to help St. Matthias move forward in that journey.

In developing a contextualized pathway for emotional and spiritual growth at St. Matthias, four aspects must be considered: an annual timeline, potential curriculum, the cultivation of spiritual disciplines, and the formation of new growth opportunities through small groups. Given the church’s long history, many traditions, and predetermined liturgical calendar, any new growth offerings will need to be thoughtfully correlated with the church’s current schedule. When could new small groups optimally be offered, and for how many weeks at a time before they start competing with other events on the calendar? In dialogue with the rector and other key ministry stakeholders, at least the contours of an annual calendar must be developed and agreed upon in advance. It will be crucial to take time at the outset to help current ministry leaders understand how the church’s current ministry offerings—such as Wednesday morning bible study, seasonal adult Sunday school offerings, or annual Lenten dinners—can be enhanced and complemented by providing new growth options for members, rather than feeling that they are in competition with existing programs.

Possible curriculum must also be considered, once there is greater awareness of members’ interests and needs for spiritual growth. I anticipate it may be a challenge to find any one curriculum or publisher that sufficiently encompasses all of St. Matthias’ members, given the breadth of theological, political and growing cultural diversity within the congregation. It may be that a more eclectic selection of books, resources, study guides and curricula will need to be utilized, or experimented with, to see what proves most resonant and helpful over time.
Two other aspects for developing a pathway for spiritual maturity at St. Matthias are cultivating spiritual disciplines in the lives of members and forming new small groups. Many older members of the congregation with more traditional theological backgrounds have well-developed patterns of prayer and scripture reading, which inform their devotional life. At the same time, many of the church’s middle-aged members do not have much awareness of classical spiritual disciplines, and they are looking for guidance. This younger segment of the church community also constitutes a growing potential leadership pool for new small group leaders. Helping these members cultivate a rich inner prayer life, where they have a living and growing sense of connection to God, will fuel not only their own personal growth, but it will give them greater confidence to step out into ministry in response to God’s leading and voice. I hope to engage a small core of these middle-aged potential leaders in a process of intentional spiritual growth through the context of a small group, eventually enlisting some of them in teams to form the first new small groups for other church members.

Ministry Strategy

The strategy for achieving these ministry goals will be pursued in collaboration with the church’s rector at every stage of its development. First, a congregational survey will be conducted to establish the congregation’s baseline of interest in spiritual growth, desired growth areas, perceived obstacles and barriers, and to identify any members with experience or interest in leading small groups. While the congregational survey is being conducted, and during subsequent weeks through various means and media, the vision for
pursuing spiritual growth will be promoted, along with the value of doing so in community.

A task force will be created with the rector to review the congregational survey results, consider its implications for designing a contextualized pathway for spiritual growth, and give input toward creating that pathway. The rector himself will be an active participant in this task force group, to allow him to shape the emerging recommendations each step of the way and ensure ownership. The group will deliberately be comprised of representative members who reflect the church’s diversity: young and old, men and women, theologically traditional and liberal, longtime members and new attendees. The task force will also be designed as an incubator for new small group leaders, offering participants an experience of the various elements of a meaningful small group and of the deepening community that a small group can cultivate. Through modeling and encouragement, it is hoped that some of the task force members will team up with one another to offer the first small group experiences for other congregational members.

I hope to see at least two new groups form as a result of the initial task force group, led by five or six motivated leaders/facilitators. Ongoing coaching will be provided to these leaders, the shape of which will need to be determined through dialogue with them and their own sense of need or readiness. Eventually, I see the need to design leadership training to enlist other facilitators for small groups, but this will likely need to occur subsequently to this project, whose goals are more foundational in nature. If St. Matthias can build on the momentum created thus far, continue offering small groups and new invitations to spiritual growth, enlist the first batch of lay-leaders for these efforts, and do so in a contextualized way that fits the church’s ethos and history, healthy
foundations will have been laid on which St. Matthias can continue building in the coming years.

**Target Population and Leadership**

Various constituencies need to be thoughtfully considered for our ministry goals to be achieved. They are: the congregation itself, the rector (Father Garrison), a task force small group that is representative of the congregation, new lay leaders, and eventually the new small groups which will be formed as a result. First, the congregation itself must be assessed as to its desires for spiritual growth, any additional opportunities it would like to see the church offer, and its own readiness to be part of the solution by providing spiritual leadership that is not reliant upon Father Garrison or other professional clergy.

Conducting a congregational survey will provide not only an opportunity to assess these issues, but also to promote awareness of the need for congregational leadership in order to move beyond where the church currently finds itself. The survey will provide an opportunity to state the reality that Father Garrison has reached the limits of what he is able to offer toward providing spiritual growth opportunities, and that future offerings will need to be provided by the members of the congregation themselves. The congregational survey, thus, provides an opportunity to articulate the problem (i.e. Father Garrison’s limitations) and the solution (i.e. the congregation must step forward to take greater responsibility for fostering community and spiritual growth among its members).

Father Garrison is the next key constituent in helping the congregation advance into greater spiritual maturity, depth of community, and shared ministry. In the Episcopalian tradition, which is so clergy-centric and dependent, the rector exerts a
profound influence within the congregation. If Father Garrison were not supportive of the emergence of lay leadership and laity-led small groups, they simply would not happen. In order for the congregation to be willing to offer spiritual leadership, he needs to be willing to cede some measure of his own control, acknowledge his need for the congregation’s help, and offer the congregation his endorsement and trust for the leadership which they could provide.

Fortunately, Father Garrison is a secure and humble spiritual leader who recognizes that he does not possess all the gifts needed to move the church into greater maturity. He trusts that God will bring the people needed who do possess such gifts and that it is his responsibility to steward and sponsor those people whom God brings to the church in order to help it grow and mature.³ The strategy outlined here recognizes his central role as spiritual leader of the congregation and it involves him at every level, to the extent he is able and motivated to participate. By having him participate in the task force small group which reviews the congregational survey and recommends the corresponding pathway for spiritual growth, this strategy helps sensitize him to the congregation’s felt needs and enables him to shape, and thereby support, the ultimate recommendations for how to proceed.

The task force small group comprises another key constituent in the strategy. Father Garrison will be enlisted to help select representative members of the congregation for the task force group, consisting of ten to twelve members from various segments of

³ More than once in sermons and publicly Father Garrison has humbly stated precisely this perspective, that he is not the “smartest guy” God has called, but that he trusts God to bring him people who have gifts to help the church grow, and that it is his responsibility to recognize this when it occurs, and to allow such people to help him. More than once he has publicly sponsored me in precisely this open-hearted manner to the congregation, thereby providing me a platform from which to help him.
the church. Attempts will be made to include: participants from diverse theological backgrounds, two to three vestry members and/or core ministry leaders, two to three younger adults, two to three new attendees, one or two parents with children, and three or four participants who are open to leading new small groups. Some participants in the task force group could fulfill more than one of these criteria, otherwise the group would become too large to model effectively a typical small group experience. Having such diverse perspectives from the congregation will ensure not only that recommendations for the design of a spiritual growth pathway are responsive to various constituencies in the church, but that these representative participants in the small group experience can then become effective ambassadors to their respective segments of the church community.

A final key target population for this strategy is those members of the laity who will become the first-generation leaders of new small groups. Groups emerge only as leaders emerge, thus, the key strategic focus must not be upon forming new small groups but upon identifying and deploying new small group leaders. For this reason, one of the questions in the congregational survey will be designed to identify which members of the congregation have provided any form of spiritual leadership/mentorship in the past (e.g. offering discipleship, teaching a bible class, leading a small group) and who might be interested in leading a group.

The task force small group experience will be designed in such a way as to model the value of a small group, what leadership of such a group involves, and that leading a small group is within the reach of the ordinary lay person who simply has a heart to serve God and others. My belief is that if we can surface four or five willing lay leaders we will be able to form some new small groups, which will in turn enfold fifteen to twenty-five
adults active in small group experiences designed to deepen their spiritual lives and foster connection and community among them. The key strategically is not to focus on forming groups, but rather, on developing leaders.

**Timeline for Implementation**

The time period for implementing this ministry strategy is twelve to fifteen months. Thinking through scheduling and curriculum issues, providing initial small group experiences, mobilizing a few first generation leaders, and laying necessary foundations for future ministry offerings can realistically be put in place during this time frame.

The project would be launched with a congregational survey in the late summer or early fall of 2016. The survey is designed to determine the congregation’s baseline of interest in various spiritual growth opportunities, desired areas of growth, their perceived obstacles, and the readiness of any members to provide initial leadership for new small groups or growth offerings. In order to reach the widest audience, it needs to be offered on Sunday mornings and over two consecutive weeks, with other options to complete the survey online during that time frame. Correlating and aggregating the results then requires another week or two, ideally in time to send out the results to the church’s task force members prior to their first meeting together. In that way, task force members who are commissioned with crafting recommendations for the congregation will have sufficient time to digest the results and implications of the congregational survey.

The task force group would meet for seven weeks during the fall of 2016. Seven weeks allows sufficient time to thoroughly digest the results of the congregational survey. It also provides time to model an effective and meaningful small group experience for
participants. Since one of the foundational ministry goals is to enlist some of these task force members as first-generation small group leaders, meeting for several weeks also provides time to motivate them toward leadership and to practice together some of the core spiritual disciplines (e.g. prayer, engaging Scripture) which would empower their spiritual leadership.

An excellent tool to promote greater awareness of spiritual formation, and how to pursue it intentionally across the diverse traditions within the Christian faith, is James Bryan Smith’s *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Spiritual Growth*. The workbook introduces six broad spiritual streams represented across all Christian traditions and affirms the unique contributions, strengths and weaknesses of each stream. Seven weeks of the task force small group allows for not merely reflection upon the congregational survey, but time to reflect on how each of these six traditions might be reflected in the backgrounds of St. Matthias’ members and might offer value in designing spiritual growth offerings for members.

Whereas the fall task force group would be designed to digest the congregational survey and formulate initial recommendations, a subsequent task force group would meet in early 2017 to work out details of designing the contextualized pathway and annual schedule for St. Matthias’ additional spiritual growth opportunities. Hopefully many of the initial task force members who digested the survey results will continue on with this next small group experience, together with the rector, to work through details of how the

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5 The six streams/traditions are identified as: Contemplative, Holiness, Charismatic, Social Justice, Evangelical, and Incarnational (i.e. liturgical/sacramental, such as Catholic, Orthodox, and Episcopalian).
church should move forward. This provides another opportunity for modeling a positive small group experience, how to lead a small group, team problem-solving, involving the rector, cultivating values, and in general, creating greater ownership among all participants of the ultimate recommendations.

Once the rector and task force group have formulated recommendations and helped design the initial pathway for spiritual growth, the next step is to empower and enlist the first few leaders who will launch the first new small groups. The projected timeline for preparing leaders and launching new groups for spiritual growth would be the summer or fall of 2017, depending on the obstacles which emerge and the readiness of any first generation leaders who may emerge through the task force small group experiences, especially the group which finishes in spring of 2017.

This timeline from late summer of 2016 to fall of 2017 seems necessary and sufficient to enlist the rector of St. Matthias, the congregation, its core leaders and representative constituencies, in a process of intentional discernment and exploration about the church’s current needs for additional spiritual growth offerings, and how best to address those needs through the potential spiritual leadership of the congregation’s own members. It also provides enough time to model new behaviors, to experience new ways of being in community and pursuing spiritual growth which are not dependent on clergy leadership, and to empower new lay leadership. More work will certainly remain to be done at the completion of this doctoral project, but the essential and healthy foundations on which to build will have hopefully been laid in a way which honors the church’s past, reflects its present hopes and needs, and prepares St. Matthias for its emerging future.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

This chapter summarizes the key elements of the pilot project to lay foundations for designing a spiritual growth pathway and for deepening community at St. Matthias Episcopal Church. Those elements involve: a congregational survey, an initial task force small group which serves as a pilot group, the rector of St. Matthias, designing a contextualized spiritual formation pathway, training new leaders, and launching new small groups. At each stage of this pilot project, empowering leaders is an important focus. The rector, task force group members, and first generation leaders all must be empowered to lead in their different but essential ways. This chapter also considers the resources needed for implementation and how progress is to be assessed. It concludes by reporting on actual results from within the time frame of this doctoral project (twelve to fifteen months between summer 2016 and fall 2017), while briefly acknowledging the ongoing work which remains yet to be done as the church moves forward.

Pilot Project Summary

The congregational survey serves to provide baseline data for the rector and task force to consider when designing spiritual growth offerings needed at St. Matthias. It also
provides an opportunity to cultivate publicly the values of spiritual growth, of finding community through small groups, and the necessity of greater lay leadership for both of these things to occur. The task force small group serves many purposes: to model for its participants (including the rector) a healthy small group experience and the joyful influence it can make in the lives of its members, to provide a representative cross-section of the congregation who can more thoroughly digest the results and implications of the congregational survey, and to form an incubator for the emergence of the church’s first lay leaders of new small groups. These twin goals of empowering new lay leaders and launching small groups are embedded into each phase of this project.

**Leadership Development and Training**

Leadership development efforts focus respectively on: the rector, task force group, and congregation of St. Matthias. Father Garrison acknowledges his lack of experience with lay-led small groups, how to facilitate them, and how to prepare members to lead them effectively. However, despite his lack of experience, he is not unwilling to try them in an effort to foster spiritual growth in people’s lives. The congregational survey is designed to help assess the congregation’s felt need for teaching on various topics, where they are wanting help in their spiritual lives, what issues they wrestle with and obstacles they encounter, and where they would like the church’s help. By involving the rector in designing this congregational survey and its questions, he is empowered as a leader with the information that he wants as the church’s primary spiritual leader to help design next steps and needed new growth options for members. Since the congregational survey addresses the entire congregation, it also provides Father
Garrison as the rector an opportunity as the primary spiritual leader to explain why the church is conducting the survey, what he hopes to gain from it, and the importance of empowering lay leaders to partner with him in promoting spiritual growth and depth.

Developing leaders from among task force members is designed to be achieved first by heightening simultaneously both their awareness of the congregational need (through reviewing results of the congregational survey) and their rector’s limitations (as he makes the case publicly and shares with them more personally through their dialogue with him in a small group context). Essentially, the goal is to help this representative group acknowledge and take ownership of the “problem” to be solved: namely, the church’s need for expanded lay leadership in promoting spiritual growth among its members.

While helping group members to acknowledge the need for lay spiritual leadership is one thing, empowering them to see themselves as potential leaders is another. As a result, the task force group experience deliberately includes elements designed to empower them as leaders. Spiritual disciplines of prayer and Scripture study are practiced, and then discussed, in order to help them learn how to connect with God personally and with growing confidence. Biblical devotions are included showing how ordinary believers respond to God’s call and are used by God to advance his purposes in the lives of others.

If the task force pilot group proves successful in its effort to empower lay leadership, it is hoped that five or six of its members will team up to launch the church’s first new small groups. These first group leaders, ideally, will have a regular practice of some spiritual disciplines in their own lives (particularly prayer and study), vision to
believe God can use them as leaders, basic skills in facilitating group discussions, and some sense of how people’s faith changes as it matures over a lifetime. In the effort to cultivate such leadership, each of these elements is modeled or practiced during the small group task force experience.

**Resources Needed**

The budget and items needed for this project are well within reach of St. Matthias, essentially consisting of resources for hospitality, curriculum and promotion. Virtually all spiritual growth offerings at St. Matthias have traditionally been offered in the church building. This tends to reinforce a clergy-centric vision of spiritual leadership, create an implicit barrier to greater lay leadership, model a more program-centered rather than relationally-centered paradigm for ministry, and foster a more superficial level of community and connectedness among members. Thus, offering the task force group in the context of a home is an important component of modeling a different way of being the church in both community and mission. Snacks and drinks (e.g. wine, other beverages) all contribute to a welcoming, relaxed atmosphere. The cost of such items can readily be shared among members, paid for by the church, or absorbed by the host as needed. In this case, my wife and I opened our home and paid for most of the snacks, allowing other members to contribute as they wished.

As the group’s initial curriculum, we used James Bryan Smith’s helpful resource, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*. Each edition costs about fifteen dollars and task force group members were asked to purchase a copy prior to the first meeting. While other curriculum, videos, or
study resources might need to be purchased in efforts to train leaders or facilitate new
groups, such costs would likely be minimal and could readily be covered by some
combination of the church’s adult education budget and contributions from participants.
Printed documents which might need to be created, either for promotional purposes or for
resourcing new groups, will cost the church very little other than time.

Assessment Plan and Tools

The congregation survey tool is designed to help the rector and leaders assess the
varied needs for spiritual growth among different populations in the church, according to
length of attendance and age range. The survey is short in order to maximize likelihood
of completion, consisting of one sheet of paper printed on two sides. It starts by asking
how long the participant has been attending St. Matthias and what his/her age range is.
Options for attending are: less than one year, one to three years, four to ten years, and
more than ten years. Age range options are listed as: fifteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to
thirty-nine, forty to fifty-four, fifty-five to sixty-nine, and seventy or more. Participants
are asked to check one category for each section.

The first three questions ask specifically which “spiritual activities” people
“currently practice” on a regular basis, which ones “contribute most” to their spiritual
growth, and what “new activities” or expanded opportunities they would like to see the
church offer. Specific activities listed as examples are: Sunday worship service, Sunday
adult classes, Wednesday morning bible study, monthly group (e.g. Men’s Breakfast,

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1 The actual Congregational Survey is included as Appendix A. The Aggregate Response from the
survey is included as Appendix B.
Women’s Spirituality, Theology on Tap), weekly book group in evening, relationship
with a spiritual mentor/friend/director, my own personal self-study or spiritual reading,
my own personal prayer life or meditation practice, and a space to fill in any “other”
activities.

The next two questions ask respectively about “areas of interest or need” and
“areas of struggle or tension” in the participant’s spiritual life or discipleship.
Congregants can write in any topics, though some prompts are provided as examples.
Under question four related to areas of “interest or need,” examples suggested are:
“prayer life, interpersonal relationships, understanding the bible, marriage, parenting, and
understanding stages of faith over a lifetime.” Question five lists potential examples of
“struggle or tension” as: “doctrinal questions, time pressures, dealing with grief/loss,
death, finances, loneliness, marriage/family, etc. . . .” Some of these examples are
provided in order to assess the depth of community/connection among members,
common life pressures associated with an elderly population such as that of St. Matthias
(e.g. death, grief/loss, finances, loneliness), and potential barriers to small group
involvement (e.g. time pressures).

Question six asks congregants to rank their level of interest in various spiritual
disciplines, though they are referred to generically as “spiritual practices” for ease of
understanding. In general, the spiritual disciplines listed focused on various expressions
of prayer, study, and community. Four different types of “small group meeting” are listed
in order to assess what small group options might be of greatest interest to current
attendees. They are “small group meetings” for: learning about and practicing specific
spiritual disciplines, reading and discussing a spiritual book or the bible (i.e. study),
interpersonal growth and support, a focus on service/outreach.

One of the categories listed is more a topic to explore than a discipline to practice
(i.e. “stages of adult faith development”). Four different prayer practices are named:
personal/devotional time with God, contemplative or centering prayer, praying for others,
and praying with the Episcopal prayer book.\(^2\) Members are asked to check only the one
box that best matches their level of interest in each of the practices provided. Levels of
interest proceed from: not at all interested, not much interested, unsure, somewhat
interested, or very interested.

Questions seven through nine focus on how and when people are most interested
in meeting. They are designed to provide the rector and task force group with guidance
about what types of group formats to offer (question 7), how frequently they should meet
(question 8), and when during the week are the best times to offer them (question 9).
Since most of the church’s traditional and current spiritual growth offerings are class-
oriented, clergy-led, and located at the church, question seven is designed to gauge
congregational interest in other formats. The three options offered, in order, are: adult
classes at church, adult small groups in homes, and personal mentoring relationship.
Question eight is designed to help assess the readiness for more intentional small groups

\(^2\) This last category (praying with the Episcopal prayer book) was added at the request of Father
Garrison. When he later saw the general lack of interest expressed in this category, he responded with his
typical humility and sense of humor, acknowledging with some laughter that one thing he’d learned from
the survey is that “there’s not much interest in learning to pray the prayer book.” People of all age ranges,
however, were quite interested in learning more about contemplative or centering prayer—something he
was happy to discover.
that might meet every week and outside the church, since there is little experience with this format for spiritual growth among many of the church’s current members.

The final question focuses on assessing the leadership readiness of the congregation, and identifying any potential members willing to provide leadership for the first-generation small groups. It asks if respondents have ever led or helped to lead an adult class at church, an adult small group in homes, or served as a spiritual mentor to someone. Below this question an invitation is given to anyone “interested in perhaps leading a small group, or learning how to team up with one or two others to lead a small group,” to indicate their interest by completing a small sheet provided in the worship bulletin and including that with their completed survey.

After the baseline assessment of the congregation provided through the survey results, the task force small group is intended to provide the rector with another level of assessment and discernment. This representative group meets as a team to discuss the survey results and discern the implications for designing a growth path for the entire congregation. Whereas the fall task force group focuses primarily on digesting the survey results and discerning implications, the spring group focuses more on actually designing the congregational growth path and timeline. In both groups, however, people experience life together as a model small group, practice spiritual disciplines of prayer and study, experiment with curriculum related to spiritual formation, press deeper in relationship, and are encouraged and empowered toward leadership.

At the end of the fall task force group, participants are asked if they wish to continue their involvement by serving in the spring small group. At the end of both group experiences (fall and spring), participants are asked to assess: curriculum used, spiritual
disciplines practiced, and their own emerging readiness to step forward into leadership of a small group or other offering for the congregation. The rector, myself, and task force group members are all then intended to serve as ambassadors to the church vestry, staff and congregation by communicating findings and recommendations.

**Results from Pilot Project**

The congregational survey was completed in September, 2016 by fifty-one regular attendees of St. Matthias. Sixty-four percent of respondents had been attending for more than four years, with twenty-six percent attending one to three years and ten percent less than one year. Seventy-eight percent of participants were over age fifty-five, with sixteen percent between forty to fifty-four years of age and only six percent in the twenty-five to thirty-nine year old age range. No respondents were under twenty-five.

These results reflect the church’s relatively stable and more elderly population. After preliminary assessment, results were sorted in various ways, generating six distinct reports: four reports sorted by age (i.e. one for each of the four age ranges of participants), one report for all those in attendance less than one year, and an aggregate report summarizing all participants together.

Findings were relatively consistent across all age categories. All age ranges showed a marked interest in contemplative or centering prayer and in receiving help with “personal/devotional time with God.” There was also interest in every age range for: meeting with a spiritual director, stages of adult faith development, classical spiritual

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3 The Aggregate Report combining all fifty-one respondents felt most helpful to the Task Force Small Group and Father Garrison. See Appendix B.
disciplines/practices, and small groups of various kinds. In contrast to older congregants, younger adults (i.e. those aged twenty-five to thirty-five) were less interested in adult classes and most interested in a “personal mentoring relationship” or “adult small groups in homes.” This reflects perhaps both their developmental life-stage and their heightened challenge in finding community within a more elderly congregation.

Task Force Small Group Results

Goals for the fall and spring task force groups, which met in late 2016 and early 2017, were to: digest thoroughly the congregational survey and its implications for designing a growth path and for forming new groups, model a healthy small group experience for the rector and potential leaders, and enlist some participants to lead new small groups. The fall task force group met for seven weeks. Each week focused specifically on one section of the survey at a time to facilitate deeper analysis.

Results from survey questions one through three showed that the congregation found the Sunday worship service, adult classes, and Wednesday morning bible study (all led by the rector), as well as personal study and prayer, to be the dominant spiritual practices and contributors to members’ spiritual growth. For “new activities,” the congregation was most interested in more options for growth and connection through small groups. The survey also revealed that congregants strongly valued their independence, but felt that the church was correspondingly weaker at inviting people to participate more actively and needed to do a better job at helping people connect and find community.
Some participants recalled previous positive experiences with small groups at the church, but acknowledged that groups did not continue simply because there was no leadership to continue cultivating them. The congregation felt that obstacles to seeing new groups form were: need for someone to provide overall leadership as an ongoing ministry focus, clarity about what types of groups were allowed, how to start them, responsibilities and roles of leaders, time constraints, awareness of curriculum resources, and training for group leaders to handle the common challenges of group life.

The independence of mind and theological diversity among congregants created challenges, it was felt, with choosing curriculum and resources to support group life. Choosing resources wisely, and training leaders to navigate skillfully the diverse perspectives of members, would be important both for facilitating small groups and for designing any kind of growth pathway for the congregation. Task force members’ opinions on the use of Smith’s curriculum, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook*, reflected this diversity. While most found the spiritual practices helpful and its perspective relatively inclusive of the Christian faith’s diverse spiritual traditions, other opinions expressed that the material was too limiting in approach, broad in focus, or demanding in application. As the group reflected on its own experience of Smith’s curriculum, it became apparent that attempting to design a singular curriculum pathway would likely be met with resistance and prove inadequate for the needs of the entire congregation.

All members of the fall task force group agreed that further reflection was needed to design the congregation’s pathway forward. The fall group agreed in its final session that goals for the spring group would be, in order of priority: design practical next steps for an adult spiritual formation program at the church, practice spiritual disciplines
ourselves (e.g. lectio divina), and deepen relationships with one another. About half of the members were able to continue into the spring group.\textsuperscript{4} Over the course of five sessions (January 12-February 9, 2017) members discussed respectively: obstacles to lay leadership and forming new lay-led groups, types of groups needed, annual calendaring issues, curriculum resources for growth pathways, and immediate next steps.

Members felt that many things could be done to address the obstacles to lay leadership and particularly the feeling among members that they were unqualified to lead: clarifying how groups could form and what groups were allowed, defining manageable expectations of time and responsibility for leaders, calling them “facilitators” rather than leaders and organizing them into teams, providing initial training and ongoing support. A significant recommendation about the types of groups needed was the desire to cultivate social groups, whose main purpose would be helping people to connect and which would be easier to begin since leadership requires less skill and training. Father Garrison expressed the need, and his strong desire, to offer a Newcomer’s Lunch to help new Sunday attendees connect with the church more effectively.

The task force group concluded that the existing adult classes offered by Father Garrison were adequate to meet the needs of current members and that the ministry priority for new offerings would be to add small group options. It was felt that any new small group offerings should complement, rather than compete with, the existing adult classes and all-church programs for spiritual growth. Group members believed short-term

\textsuperscript{4} Six of thirteen participants continued. One additional participant joined the spring task force group who had wanted to participate in the fall but had been unable to do so due to scheduling conflicts.
groups would be best for the congregation because they would be less threatening for inexperienced leaders to lead, and easier for people to commit to attending.

Annual Calendar and Designing New Pathways for Spiritual Growth

Once the task force group decided upon the parameters which would maximize chances of successful participation, a recommended annual calendar quickly emerged:

**Fall Season:** (mid-Sep. to end Nov.) Natural time for longer small groups, more in-depth.

**Winter Season:** (mid-Jan. to beginning of Lent) Another good time for longer groups.

**Lent Season:** (before Easter) No small groups meet. Only all-church Lent dinner series, which includes a spiritual growth focus for about fifty minutes.

**Post Easter:** (late April to mid-June) Shorter small groups (three to six weeks). Natural invite for newcomers.

**Summer:** (July-August) Shorter small groups (three to six weeks). Natural invite for newcomers. Topics/events can be fun, perhaps more social in nature.

**Newcomer Lunches:** Perhaps every two to three months. One-time Sunday events, at someone’s home within a few minutes of church. Use to connect to groups-classes.

Such an annual timeline would not require members to choose between traditional offerings such as the Lenten dinner series and new small group options. It lowered the entrance bar and skill level required for new leaders to emerge by offering short-term groups. It also responded to the need, and to Father Garrison’s desire, for helping recent attendees find community and connection more rapidly through Newcomer’s Lunches.

While establishing the annual calendar for St. Matthias proved to be relatively manageable, designing a contextualized curriculum proved more challenging. Members wanted a more eclectic approach, one which provided various interesting options for
them to pursue. Many resisted a one-size-fits-all approach to spirituality.\footnote{Father Garrison was one of the strongest voices for this. One of his critiques of Smith’s presentation of the six streams of Christian spirituality was the assumption that we need a “balance” of these approaches in our own spiritual life. Father Garrison commented that most people find themselves dominantly in only one or two of these streams, and that this is fine because we are all unique.} The congregation did seem to cohere, however, in desiring resources in one area of particular interest: namely, contemplative or centering prayer. Task force members found value in practicing lectio divina together as a small group. Feedback from the congregational survey also showed strong interest across all age categories in contemplative prayer and devotional time with God. Thus, the group concluded that it would be important to offer regularly a small group option for practicing contemplative prayer in some form. This proved to be a somewhat surprising result, but one which would inform future offerings.

Father Garrison and task force members felt less need to design or choose a specific curriculum for spiritual formation and more need to take immediate action in helping people find meaningful connections with the church, especially recent attendees. This surprising recommendation emerged from the task force group as it reflected with Father Garrison on the congregational survey. As a result, the first Newcomer’s Lunch was offered in April 2017, two weeks after Easter Sunday (just a few weeks after the close of the spring task force group). One of the participants of the fall 2016 task force small group offered their home and hospitality for the occasion. Father Garrison personally invited a number of recent attendees.

The results were significant. Eight of the thirteen fall task force members attended to offer hospitality. Seven new guests came. Of the fifteen people who attended that first Newcomer’s Lunch, eight were formally confirmed into the church on July 9, 2017. They
comprised over sixty percent of the thirteen people confirmed. Father Garrison has taken personal initiative to reconvene this group periodically to continue supporting them in their efforts to connect with the church more deeply. Since that time, nine of the fifteen participants in that first Newcomer’s Lunch have led or are planning to lead a new small group at St. Matthias.

Enlisting New Leaders

One of the important objectives for the fall 2016 and spring 2017 task force small groups was to cultivate the first generation leaders for new small groups. I modeled for group participants the key components of effective leadership: facilitating meaningful discussion and cultivating one’s own inner life in God through practicing prayer and spiritual disciplines. Devotionals were designed to empower lay leadership by speaking to member’s perceived obstacles, reminding them through examples in Scripture that God has always used ordinary people like them, and that the primary work belongs to the Spirit of God not to us. Results were significant. Thirteen people participated in the fall task force group. During the summer and fall of 2017, eight of those initial thirteen members helped in some way to lead or facilitate a new group. Six were facilitating groups for the first time at St. Matthias.

Initial training for these new group leaders was minimal. Several factors contributed to this: members’ desire and willingness to take immediate action, time

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6 This figure includes my wife and myself. It also includes one long-time member who opened their home to provide hospitality for our first Newcomer’s Lunch, which was a modified group experience created as a result of the task force and Father Garrison’s input. The other five, all of whom were new to leading groups at St. Matthias, helped facilitate new ongoing small group offerings in the summer and fall.

7 This figure includes the Newcomer’s Lunch and other new groups cited above for the summer and fall of 2017. It excludes my wife and myself, since we’ve previously led groups at the church.
constraints, and lack of felt need. Although I had concerns about proceeding without
further initial training for the first group leaders, I decided to be responsive to the
participants’ commendable (and hoped for) desire to take action and get started. With
their input, the initial small group experiences for the summer of 2017 were designed to
be simple and relatively easy to lead. I participated in each group as much as possible,
offering informal training and real-time relational feedback and encouragement. Between
sessions new leaders were offered further encouragement or feedback through emails,
phone calls, and conversations. Overall, this worked well. Moving forward, however,
more formal training and ongoing coaching will be needed if efforts are to be sustained.

Launching New Groups

Another objective of the task force pilot small group was to launch new small
groups that could provide fresh opportunities for spiritual growth and for deepening the
community life among those attending St. Matthias. The goal for this doctoral project
was to help at least two new groups emerge following the pilot group, led by five or six
motivated new leaders in the summer and fall of 2017. It was believed that achieving
these initial objectives would provide a sufficient foundation on which to continue
nurturing leaders and sustaining new groups as the church moved into the future.

New groups and leaders did emerge, with encouraging results. In keeping with the
annual timeline for groups which the task force group designed, two short summer
groups were offered by five new leaders organized in teams. In response to the interest

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8 The timeline designed summer groups to be shorter (typically four to five weeks), fall season
groups to be longer (from six to twelve weeks). See page 119 above.
shown in the congregational survey for contemplative prayer, one summer group was a four-week Lectio Divina group. It was led by two new leaders who had both participated in the fall task force group. Eight congregational members participated, four of whom were participants in the fall task force group.

The other summer group was a four-week video-based discussion group using Rob Bell’s Nooma films. These are brief ten to twelve minute films designed to provoke discussion around important aspects of the Christian life, or the journey of discipleship. The group was led by two participants from the fall task force group, with each of their spouses providing additional support (one of whom had also been in the fall pilot group). Fifteen members of the congregation attended, eleven of whom had never before been in a small group at St. Matthias. Feedback from participants was uniformly enthusiastic, with everyone wanting to continue with a group in the fall.9

Three new groups were offered in the fall of 2017, building on the foundation of the summer offerings. The lectio group continued on a monthly basis and moved its location to the church building for the sake of some elderly members. I led a study group in our home with my wife, using Krista Tippet’s book Becoming Wise.10 Ten people attended, three of whom were long-time members of St. Matthias who had never before

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9 Rob Bell represented an intriguing teacher and spiritual guide for the theologically diverse community of St. Matthias since he came from an orthodox Evangelical background, with a deep reverence for Scripture, and yet was on his own ongoing spiritual journey of wrestling with his tradition and exploring how to hold his Christian faith in more broadly inclusive ways. Bell’s journey reflected the spiritual path and intuitive longings of many of St. Matthias’ members, whose starting points were more traditional—many Catholic or Evangelical by background—but who have deliberately sought out St. Matthias as a safe context in which they can work out an approach to their Christian faith that feels more in line with their own emerging values.

participated in a small group at church. One of those three, a retired teacher, became an enthusiastic advocate for groups who has since volunteered to help lead another small group.\textsuperscript{11} The Rob Bell video group continued and grew. Seventeen people attended regularly, six of whom were completely new to small group life. It was led by the same team who had led the summer session, but who by the fall had become more cohesive and effective as partners.

By the end of fall 2017, momentum for groups and for emerging lay leadership was clearly growing. Thirty six people were participating in three different groups, almost half of whom had not participated in groups at the church prior to 2017. Leaders were naturally emerging. Congregants were asking about when the next groups would be offered. A new seminarian and deacon had joined the church and was working with the church’s women to help them discern God’s calling, to cultivate lay leadership, and to encourage new ministries. Eight of the twelve lay members from our 2016 fall task force group have stepped forward to facilitate, lead or host new groups.

Through their positive experiences in the 2017 summer or fall groups, four other participants have expressed interest in learning to lead or facilitate new groups in the future.\textsuperscript{12} In addition, other congregants are now asking for training on how to lead groups well. Early hesitancy to invest the time in formal leadership training has been replaced

\textsuperscript{11} She is currently helping me facilitate a book study using Richard Rohr’s \textit{Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life}. My other co-facilitator is a young mother from an Evangelical background who attended our first Newcomer’s Lunch group in the summer of 2017. Since then, she has attended and provided hospitality at every subsequent Newcomer’s Lunch and is preparing to launch a new monthly group called \textit{Anam Cara: Soul Friend} that is focused on supporting young adult couples in their spiritual lives.

\textsuperscript{12} All four are participating in a group with me at the time of this writing in early 2018. Two of them are currently co-leading with me (their first time). Once again, I am providing them informal coaching through modeling, conversation, email outside the group, debriefing and lots of encouragement.
with a desire for more support and help in leading groups well. These signs of budding new growth—new groups sprouting, leaders organically emerging from within the soil of life-giving small groups—seem to represent a kind of first-fruits harvest of new spiritual growth. After the church’s prolonged season of Winter, they offer fresh hope that St. Matthias may well be entering into its own renewing Spring—even as much tilling of the soil yet remains to be done.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this doctoral ministry project has been to: “form a task force at St. Matthias Episcopal Church to lay foundations for a new adult educational ministry, one which will design a contextualized pathway for growth, train lay leaders, and initiate small groups for the purpose of cultivating emotional and spiritual maturity.” Specific ministry goals for St. Matthias all related to this aim: 1. Develop a contextualized pathway for emotional and spiritual maturity 2. Cultivate the congregation’s value to pursue growth intentionally 3. Identify and train lay leaders for small groups 4. Initiate two new small groups to deepen community and maturity. This final section reflects briefly on progress that has been made toward fulfilling these aims, challenges encountered, insights gained, and work that remains to be done.

As a pastor, my life’s driving purpose has always been toward forming a people who are “mature in Christ” (Eph 4:11-16). That is the central aim of this project in the unique ministry context of St. Matthias. This fullness of Christian maturity involves both a well-developed faith in God and a wisely-expressed love for others. In fact, central to the Christian vision of maturity is Christ’s call to wholehearted love—for God, neighbor, and one another (Mt 22:36-40). Many churches today have an underdeveloped focus on
the social-emotional dimensions of Christian discipleship. Within St. Matthias, I have sought to address that deficiency by cultivating the value of being in more intentional community with one another, expressed primarily through engagement in small groups and beginning with a pilot task force small group to model this new practice and rhythm.

The scope of this project has been “to lay foundations” toward this aim and to “cultivate” not complete the formation of new congregational values. Ministry goals reflect this limited scope. As a result, while much progress can be celebrated and each of these ministry goals has been substantially met, inevitably much work remains to be done. Value formation is a never-ending process. New leaders and groups have emerged, with a growing number of members expressing interest in learning to lead new groups, yet a leadership team still needs to be organized to sustain this hard-earned momentum.

The task force pilot small group did serve its foundation-laying role well. It digested the congregational survey thoroughly, reporting the results back to the church’s leadership and congregation. Father Garrison was an active participant at every stage in the task force group, which contributed greatly to the final ownership of the group’s findings, its eventual recommendations for the congregation, and the overall success of this project. He personally analyzed the congregational survey, generated various ways of reporting the results, and actively communicated the findings to the whole church. He took the lead in promoting new groups in the summer and fall of 2017. He openly acknowledged to the congregation his need for help and his enthusiastic support for the leadership that they could offer. The task force group, as designed, successfully contributed to each of the primary ministry goals of designing a contextualized pathway for growth, training new leaders, and initiating at least two new small groups.
The goal to design a contextualized pathway for growth did not develop as fully as originally envisioned. I had hoped to either identify an existing curriculum or develop one which would introduce people to what a developing spiritual and social-emotional maturity would look like over a lifetime. This proved too ambitious. The task force group and Father Garrison, probably reflecting the tenor of the larger congregation itself, resisted somewhat the idea of any “one-size-fits-all” approach to spiritual formation, nor did it feel any immediate need for such a curriculum.

The group was interested, however, in taking concrete action to address immediate issues of congregational concern. For example, Father Garrison shared with the task force group one evening how much he wanted to see some sort of Newcomer’s Lunch to help our new attendees connect with the church. The group rallied around this concern and together made it a reality, with eight of the thirteen task force members in attendance at the first Newcomer’s Lunch and one family serving as the host. The group’s collective wisdom in taking that action became evident as eight of the people who attended the first Newcomer’s Lunch in April 2017 were later confirmed into the church in July. In fact, three of the task force members themselves were confirmed.

Although the task force group felt little need for adopting a particular curriculum to promote emotional and spiritual maturity, they agreed it was important to address the other aspects of developing a contextualized pathway for growth: promoting spiritual disciplines, forming new small groups, and establishing an annual timeline that allowed new ministry offerings to emerge without competing with traditional offerings that the church has offered for years. When the congregational survey revealed an interest in contemplative prayer among every age category of respondents, task force members
determined that the annual timeline for new groups needed to offer regular options to explore various forms of prayer.\textsuperscript{13} Having anticipated this interest, I consciously introduced the task force small group members to various forms of lectio divina and centering prayer. Since they had experienced how enriching it was and how easily it could be introduced to others, two task force members teamed up to offer a weekly lectio divina small group as one of the first small group offerings in the summer of 2017.

Another key aim and ministry goal of this project was to identify and train lay leaders for small groups. Father Garrison could not be expected to add more to his already full schedule, yet new attendees needed help connecting with the church. Many attendees, old and new, were looking for additional help in developing and deepening their relationship with God and others. It was hoped that some of these first leaders would emerge naturally from the modeling and nurturing of the task force pilot group. This did occur naturally.

Every new small group leader who stepped forward in the summer and fall of 2017 came from the task force small group. As mentioned above, two of the members teamed up to initiate a lectio divina group in the summer. Three others teamed up in the summer to offer a video-based group featuring Pastor Rob Bell. That group continued naturally in the fall, eventually growing to seventeen people (including six who had never been in a small group before). I teamed up with my wife to offer another group in the fall. Leadership for the successful Newcomer’s Lunches also came from this task force pilot

\textsuperscript{13} The church’s annual ministry timeline that emerged from the task force is given in Appendix C.
group. These are all encouraging developments and evidence of the congregation’s willingness to contribute to the life of the church.

At the same time, some unexpected obstacles toward training leaders emerged and further work clearly remains to be accomplished. The first-generation leaders were eager to get new groups started but had only limited interest in receiving further training. I had planned on designing and providing a one-time training event prior to launching new groups, specifically to prepare them for some common group dynamics and potential challenges. When scheduling that event proved challenging, the decision was made to allow new leaders simply to get started with their groups and then stay in dialogue with them informally to provide ongoing support and coaching as issues emerged. Both leadership teams for the first two groups experienced early struggles in how to be effective partners with one another as fellow-leaders. Expectations for the group, styles of leadership, how best to use the group’s time, and learning how to communicate clearly with their leadership partner were all issues they had to navigate. I did my best to provide real-time coaching and support as each of these issues arose, but it is clear that moving forward such issues need to be more fully addressed.

As groups have continued to be offered beyond the fall of 2017, more members of the congregation have expressed interest in groups and openness to helping lead them. There is now more awareness among members that they need help and training to lead groups well. This has emerged naturally from their early experiences in groups and with leadership, so I plan in the summer of 2018 to design and offer an initial training curriculum for everyone interested in leading small groups. The congregation, and our
first generation leaders, now appear to be motivated to receive this training and they recognize their need for it.

The final aim and ministry goal for this project was to initiate two new small groups in the summer and fall of 2017 in order to deepen community and maturity among the congregation’s current members. If we could offer at least two different groups during that time, on topics of felt relevance and led at least reasonably well by lay members of the church, we would have hopefully laid a sufficient foundation on which the ministry could expand and build. This has proven to be true. Two new groups were offered in the summer of 2017, following the task force group. Three groups were then offered in the fall. Momentum for groups has grown steadily. Members of the church who have not been in groups before this time are now asking when the next groups will be offered. New small group participants, who were not in the task force pilot group but who have actively participated in the first small groups offered since then, are now volunteering themselves for leadership and are enthusiastic about future possibilities for new groups. This momentum and enthusiasm is deeply encouraging.

My goals for this project were foundational in nature, thus, limited in scope. I hoped to “lay foundations for a new adult educational ministry . . . for the purpose of cultivating emotional and spiritual maturity.” These goals have been met and ministry foundations have been well laid, however, much work clearly remains. While foundations are strong, construction must continue. The ongoing work of building leaders and lives, who in turn can help deepen Christian community and maturity among the members of St. Matthias, still remains as the challenge before us. Training for new leaders must be designed and built into the annual ministry calendar. Ongoing strategic leadership for
promoting group life, cultivating new leaders, and identifying group resources must broaden beyond me and my leadership. I will need to form a leadership team, eventually with a point leader other than myself, who can provide effective leadership to maintain progress and continue the values shift of empowering lay leadership. Nonetheless, that culture shift has begun and there is a growing hopefulness for the church’s future.

In a recent conversation with Father Garrison, he expressed this growing sense of optimism and stated his vision for the future in this way: “I see the future in building leadership and listening to the Holy Spirit.”

He spoke enthusiastically about different ministries he saw naturally emerging and new leaders stepping forward in areas important to the church’s outreach, such as “church advancement” and communications. He was encouraged by the marked Sunday attendance growth over the past twelve to eighteen months. He expressed enthusiasm for: being able to hire a female Associate Priest who was organizing ministries among women; recent large estate gifts of over $300,000, the Soup Hour ministry moving toward incorporation as a separate 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and growth in annual contribution income—all of which were indications of

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14 Conversation with Father Garrison on June 1, 2018, during which we reflected together on the progress of this ministry project to date, what remains to be done, his hopes for the future of the church, and how I could continue to be an effective ministry partner with him.

15 Attendance has indeed grown. After five years of slow incremental growth between 2011 and 2016, the church has experienced a visible upsurge in attendance since the second half of 2016. Statistics for each year’s average Sunday attendance since 2011, excluding special Sundays such as Christmas or Easter, are: 102 in 2011, 113 in 2012, 118 in 2013 and 2014, 130 in 2015, 128 in 2016, 140 in 2017, and 165 through May of 2018. Since the second half of 2016 when this project began, a growth trend has been evident and increased during each six month window of time: 123 in first half of 2016, 132 in second half of 2016, 138 in first half of 2017, 141 in second half of 2017, and 165 during first five months of 2018.

16 Rev. Carole Horton-Howe is the Associate Priest, who is currently a deacon but will be ordained as a priest later in 2018. She plans to continue her ministry as a priest at St. Matthias, in partnership with Father Garrison.
the church’s increased financial health and stability. He said, “I’ve heard nothing but good things about the new groups that are being formed.”

We spoke openly together as colleagues about our hopes for St. Matthias in the next two to three years and the contributions we each might be able to make. When I asked him how I could be a good partner and ally to him, he suggested simply, “Why don’t we get together once a month, just to talk and stay connected as things continue to emerge?” I readily agreed. Both of us continue to work toward and hope for the same goal, that St. Matthias Episcopal Church might continue to blossom, mature and grow in this season of its own renewing Spring.
APPENDIX A

Adult Spiritual Growth Survey
St. Matthias Episcopal Church

Thank you for your help! The survey is completely anonymous, but the data below may help us assess different needs in various segments of our church family and design programs/opportunities accordingly.

How long have you been attending St. Matthias?
__ Less than One Year  __ 1-3 years  __ 4-10 years  __ More than 10 years

What is Your Age Range?
__ 15-24  __ 25-39  __ 40-54  __ 55-69  __ 70 +

1. Which spiritual activities do you currently practice on a regular basis? (Check ALL that apply.)

__ Sunday Worship Service  __ Sunday Adult Classes
__ Wednesday Morning Bible Study
__ Monthly Group (Men’s Breakfast, Women’s Spirituality, Theology on Tap)
__ Weekly Book Study Group in Evening  __ Other: _______________________
__ Relationship with a Spiritual Mentor/Friend/Director
__ My Own Personal Self-Study or Spiritual Reading
__ My Own Personal Prayer Life or Meditation Practice

2. Which activities currently contribute most to your spiritual growth? (Name ONLY TOP 3. Rank as 1.2.3.)

__ Sunday Worship Service  __ Sunday Adult Classes
__ Wednesday Morning Bible Study
__ Monthly Group (Men’s Breakfast, Women’s Spirituality, Theology on Tap)
__ Weekly Small-Group Book-Study in Evening  __ Other: _______________________
__ Relationship with a Spiritual Mentor/Friend/Director
__ My Own Personal Self-Study or Spiritual Reading
__ My Own Personal Prayer Life or Meditation Practice

3. What new activities/programs would you like to see the church offer to support you in your spiritual growth, or, which of the current activities/programs listed above would you like to see the church expand or offer help with?
4. What are some *areas of interest or need* that you’d most like help with in your spiritual life or to learn more about? (e.g. prayer life, interpersonal relationships, understanding the bible, marriage, parenting, understanding stages of faith over a lifetime, etc.)

A.  
B.  
C.  

5. What are some current *areas of struggle or tension* in your spiritual life/discipleship? (e.g. doctrinal questions, time pressures, dealing with grief/loss, death, finances, loneliness, marriage/family, etc.)

6. In general, how interested would you be to learn more about or participate in . . .

*(Check ONLY ONE box for each Spiritual Practice.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Practice</th>
<th>Not At All Interested</th>
<th>Not Much Interested</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Somewhat Interested</th>
<th>Very Interested</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal/Devotional Time with God</td>
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<td>Personal Bible Reading/Study</td>
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<td>Other Types of Spiritual Reading</td>
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<td>Other (please specify):</td>
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</table>
7. What formats for learning/growth are you most interested in? *(It’s OK to check more than one.)*
   __ Adult classes at church  __ Adult Small Groups in homes  __ Personal mentoring relationship

8. What best describes the frequency with which you’d be interested in meeting?
   __ Weekly (ongoing)  __ Weekly (for 6-10 weeks at a time)  __ Twice a month  __ Monthly

9. What are the best times for you to meet during the week? *(It’s OK to check more than one.)*
   __ Mid-week evenings  __ Mid-Week mornings  __ Saturdays  __ Sundays (before 2nd service)  __ Sundays (after 2nd service)

10. Have you ever led, or helped to lead . . .
    __ An adult class at church  __ An adult Small Group in homes  __ As a spiritual mentor to someone

If you are interested in perhaps leading a small group, or learning how to team up with 1-2 others to lead a small group, please take a moment today to write your name and contact info on the tear-off sheet provided in today’s worship bulletin and deposit that in the same place as the completed survey. Drop off locations are in the back of the sanctuary as you exit, or in the patio near the snacks. *Thanks!*
APPENDIX B

Adult Spiritual Growth Survey
Aggregate, Total Responses: 51

The numbers typed in below represents total number of responses checked for that item by people in this category.

How long have you been attending St. Matthias?

5 Less than One Year  13 1-3 years  10 4-10 years  22 More than 10 Years

What is Your Age Range?

0 15-24  3 25-39  8 40-54  23 55-69  17 70 +

1. Which spiritual activities do your currently practice on a regular basis?

48 Sunday Worship Service  11 Sunday Adult Classes
8 Wednesday Morning Bible Study
8 Monthly Group (Men’s Breakfast, Women’s Spirituality, Theology on Tap)
7 Weekly Book Study Group in Evening
6 Other: “Not attending Sunday service due to illness. Weekly sermon and worship guide are sent to me US Mail. I will return soon.”
6 Relationship with a Spiritual Mentor/Friend/Director
25 My Own Personal Self-Study or Spiritual Reading
30 My Own Personal Prayer Life or Meditation Practice

2. Which activities currently contribute most to your spiritual growth?

41 Sunday Worship Service  8 Sunday Adult Classes
12 Wednesday Morning Bible Study
6 Monthly Group (Men’s Breakfast, Women’s Spirituality, Theology on Tap)
8 Weekly Small-Group Book-Study in Evening  8 Other: _______________________
5 Relationship with a Spiritual Mentor/Friend/Director
15 My Own Personal Self-Study or Spiritual Reading
23 My Own Personal Prayer Life or Meditation Practice

3. What new activities would you like to see the church offer to support you in your spiritual growth, or, which of current activities listed above would you like to see the church expand or offer help with?
(10) **Small Groups**: small groups, sm grp focusing on practical everyday living through God’s word, spiritual prayer groups, PM bible study?/classes, evening bible study for working parents, weekly book study in evening, evening bible study, small group study,

(5) **Study**: Doctrine for dummies class, objective religious study, Sunday adult classes, reading and discussing Christian classics

(4) **Sunday Service suggestions**: 3 re prayers: verbally stated prayers of the people, prayers of current events, prayers of people from our people/region- personalized, creative ministry (alternative music, art, expression)

(4) **Prayer**: prayer for other individuals, prayer life, silent meditation, two by two visits and prayers those who are in need

(3) **Social Events**: increase outing with Sally, attend theater functions/LA Phil concerts, Parish picnic annually off-campus

(3) **Children/Youth**: teach the young ones about Jesus in my life, having a children’s service with children reading lessons and collections, youth group monthly activities

(2) **help with relationships**: marriage, interpersonal relationships

(1 each) **Misc. Other**: two by two visits and prayers those who are in need, song fest (once a month?), meeting with a spiritual mentor, Spirituality on Tap, Sabbath observance,

4. **What are some areas of interest or need that you’d most like help with in your spiritual life?**

(12) **understanding stages of faith over a lifetime**: changing of faith throughout life, faith building,

(9) **Understanding the Bible**: the bible in now days

(7) **Prayer**: prayer life,

(7) **relationships, marriage, parenting**: marriage, interpersonal relationship, marriage/couple retreat, marriage mentoring,

(4) **Christian Living**: relationships, self-improvement, how to live in Christian life in modern, America, understanding God’s purpose for me

(1 each) information on the church rituals, Sunday School teaching, eucharist service, sabbath

5. **What are some current areas of struggle or tension in your spiritual life/discipleship?**

(11) **Doctrinal Issues**: how to understand the bible as Word of God, uniqueness of Jesus and his exclusive claims vs. being inclusive of other religions, doctrinal, doctrinal questions, the creeds, what I have heard about the episcopal Church and about the baptism for the second time and about women’s pastoral service, Hell?
How to explain evil? Dealing with why God would not answer my prayers, dealing with unanswered prayers
(6) time pressures: finding/making/taking time for spiritual reflection, time pressures,
(5) Grief, Loss, Death: life changes, illness, grief, depression/anxiety, dealing with grief (sweet Father Kevin), death, grown children’s loss of believing in God and Jesus, loneliness, depression,
(3) marriage/family: communication with spouse while dealing with daily routine, family, marriage
(1 each) dealing with abuse/self-depreciation/value, finances, health limitations, avoiding relapses of faith, retirement, lack bible study with others, spiritual vision, finding a sense of purpose

6. In general, how interested would you be to learn more about or participate in . . .

Highlighted those which have total responses of 31 or greater as: “somewhat/very interested”, OR, which have 18 or greater as: “very interested”.

Those marked with “*” had both categories checked (somewhat/very interested) in ALL age categories.

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<tr>
<th>Spiritual Practice</th>
<th>Not At All Interested</th>
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<tr>
<td>Small Group Meeting (interpersonal growth and support)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Group Meeting (with a focus on service/outreach)</td>
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<td>Other (please specify): Sabbath, Women’s Mysteries, Youth Ministry</td>
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</table>
7. **What formats for learning/growth are you most interested in?**
   - 28 Adult classes at church
   - 17 Adult Small Groups in homes
   - 13 Personal mentoring relationship

   * NOTE: Younger adults more interested in small groups in homes.

8. **What best describes the frequency with which you’d be interested in meeting?**
   - 11 Weekly (ongoing)
   - 12 Weekly (for 6-10 weeks at a time)
   - 13 Twice a month
   - 18 Monthly

9. **What are the best times for you to meet during the week?**
   - 22 Mid-week evenings
   - 10 Mid-Week mornings
   - 10 Saturdays (before 2nd service)
   - 10 Sundays (after 2nd service)

10. **Have you ever led...**
    - 12 an adult class at church
    - 8 an adult Small Group in homes
    - 6 as a spiritual mentor to someone
**APPENDIX C**

**Church Adult Spiritual Growth Calendar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Growth Ministry Event</th>
<th>Fall Ministry Season Sep-Dec. (pre-advent) (longer groups, up to 12 wks, greater depth)</th>
<th>Winter Season January-March (pre-Easter) (longer groups)</th>
<th>Post-Easter April-June (3-6 wk groups, invite newcomers)</th>
<th>Summer July-August (3-6 wk groups)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newcomers Lunches</td>
<td>Sep-Oct</td>
<td>Jan-Feb</td>
<td>April-May (post Easter)</td>
<td>as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Invitational Events for Connecting</td>
<td>as needed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1x events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Cycles</td>
<td>Sep-Nov (longer groups)</td>
<td>Jan-Mar (finish before Lent)</td>
<td>Apr-June (briefer groups, invite newcomers)</td>
<td>July-Aug (short groups, social, simple)</td>
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<td>Small Group Leadership Training</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan (leadership boost)</td>
<td></td>
<td>July or Aug (in prep for fall groups launch)</td>
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<tr>
<td>All-Church Educational Events</td>
<td>Mid-Sep (SS Launch) Adult Sunday School Advent</td>
<td>Wed AM Bible Study Adult Sunday School Lent Potluck Series</td>
<td>Wed AM Bible Study Adult Sunday School</td>
<td>No Bible Study Sunday B-fasts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


BIBLIOGRAPHY


