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# Developing a Gospel Centered Vision

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# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

FOUND IN TRANSLATION: DEVELOPING A GOSPEL-CENTERED  
VISION FOR TOWER HILL CHURCH

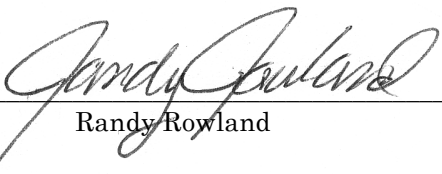
Written by

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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary  
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FOUND IN TRANSLATION: DEVELOPING A GOSPEL-CENTERED  
VISION FOR TOWER HILL 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

JASON TUCKER  
JUNE 2017



## ABSTRACT

### **Found in Translation: Developing a Gospel-centered Vision for Tower Hill Church**

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2017

Over time, Tower Hill Church has become less and less capable of communicating effectively to younger generations, as its institutional life fossilized around the preferences of the Builders.<sup>1</sup> This has led to a growing language barrier between new and existing members. This project will seek to find a shared ministry language and direction through the development of a theological vision.

This paper explores the relationship between the church and the Greater Red Bank Community. Part of this analysis is descriptive in nature (e.g. the community's cultural identity and its connecting points with the church, as well as the church's journey of institutional success, decline, and resurgence). Part of this analysis is also prescriptive in nature (e.g. the opportunities and challenges between the community and the church, the spiritual deficiencies of the church's witness, and the need for a gospel-centered vision).

The vision process is theologically grounded through the relationship between Reformed ecclesiology and missional vocation. The gospel-centered vision process is the necessary bridge between faithful gospel contextualization and ministry implementation. Those who are elect in Jesus Christ are called to join His *Missio Dei* vocation by translating the gospel into the language of culture.

This gospel contextualization begins by equipping and empowering current elders and staff to develop a gospel-centered vision statement through a twelve-week program of sermon and small group learning modules. The statement will provide a shared theological language for the purpose of greater unity, faithfulness, and effectiveness in witness across generations. The elders, pastors, and staff will then use this vision statement as a lens through which to strategically respond to a key obstacle facing the church in this new season of growth.

Content Reader: Randy Rowland

Word Count: 287

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<sup>1</sup> Builder Generation: sociological shorthand for the generation born between 1927-1945. Ken R. Hunter and Bob Whitesel, *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gap in Your Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 22.

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PART ONE

TOWER HILL CHURCH IN CONTEXT

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent sermon series entitled, “Vision: Carrying Faith Forward,” I began by asking the congregation: “What was the first music you ever purchased?” Their response to this question (a long, awkward silence), I imagine, was not unlike if I had asked this traditional Presbyterian congregation to take out their tambourines and play along with hymn number 557. The thought of responding to a sermon, in real time, was a completely foreign concept. Considering the possibility that they were waiting for permission to answer, I followed up by saying, “It’s okay, this is not a rhetorical question: When you were old enough to buy the music you wanted, what was it and in what format did you buy it (i.e. album, 45, cassette, CD)?” After this second question, an octogenarian about halfway back raised her hand and said: “The Andrews Sisters, ‘Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy’ on 78!”

Her enthusiastic response opened the floodgates. Hands shot up in the air around the room and person after person, in stories thick with nostalgia, relived their musical memories. In less than ten minutes, the congregation had heard everything from The Andrews Sisters on 78 to One Direction on iTunes. What began as an awkward Sunday morning question eventually became an incredible inter-generational connection. It was a joyous celebration of adolescence (a miracle in itself). It was so joyous that it took some work reeling them back in for the rest of the sermon.

Once sufficiently corralled, I followed up my original question by asking what music they most recently purchased and in what format. In just a few minutes, a common theme emerged: except for the teenagers in the room, every single person purchased their most recent music in a different format than their first. In fact, roughly 70 percent said



they made their most recent purchase on iTunes (across all generations). While this was a highly predictable outcome in theory, in practice it was a revelation. It was a powerful reminder of how much the music industry (and the way we listen to music) has changed in the last sixty years.

As music consumers, we are continually compelled to adjust to new formats. We may resist for a while, but if we wait too long we may lose our ability to play the music. We may love the format of the 8-track cassette, but no matter how hard we force a CD into the device, it simply will not work. Some of us may find this experience of change to be annoying. Some of us may find continually changing formats to be exhilarating. However, for the record labels themselves, this sea change has been nothing less than terrifying.

Emerging technologies and cultural preferences have forced a dramatic paradigm shift—an entire industry has migrated from a business model based on physical sales to a model based on digital sales. According to IFPI, 71 percent of all music sold worldwide in 2014 was sold in a digital format.<sup>1</sup> Imagine if record labels had decided not to change their approach. The recording industry would have completely failed (and it nearly did). Music is still music (that never changes)—but the continually changing format is always threatening to render it unplayable.

Today, I believe the mainline denominational Church in North America finds itself in a similar predicament. While the music (the good news of Jesus Christ) has never changed, the language of culture (the format) has been constantly changing over the last

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<sup>1</sup> “IFPI Digital Music Report 2015,” <http://www.ifpi.org/downloads/Digital-Music-Report-2015.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2017.

sixty years. As a result, many (perhaps most) churches that thrived in the 1950s are declining due to their insistence upon continuing with antiquated formats. They have been so terrified (or ignorant) to migrate to a different model, that they have inadvertently rendered the beautiful music of Christ unplayable for younger generations. For example, this summer I attended a Sunday morning service in a small, Lutheran church in Schenectady, New York. There were twelve congregants in a sanctuary that seated about two hundred, all of whom were over fifty-five, yet the minister still delivered a children's sermon as part of the morning liturgy. When I had the opportunity to talk with him after the service and asked him why he did this, he responded, "We have always had a children's sermon, and no one wants me to get rid of it."

The Church in North America has struggled to change its cultural language. This is primarily because it makes a tacit theological assumption, amplified by its nostalgia for local church customs, that an unchanging God is somehow averse to change—that change is even an affront to the gospel itself. Not only has this been a powerful driver in maintaining the status quo, but has completely misunderstood the nature of the gospel. The gospel is inherently and inextricably connected with the particularity of each human culture—and as such, experiences change. It adapts as it is translated into each cultural language without any damage to its essential nature. The music is still the music, but the format or delivery system changes as it becomes incarnational in a particular context.

The good news of Christ cannot be understood as pure conceptuality, but instead as concrete reality: the specific history (in real time) of God's interaction with humanity, the fullness of which has occurred in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God's Being is Self-revealed through the specific historical act of the incarnation, the fullness of God in

human form. This affirms that God is not a figurative God, but a real God whose very nature is voluntarily intertwined with, and exposed in, human history. Therefore, the gospel itself (the good news of salvation through the resurrection of Christ) is located within a specific cultural context: precisely that point in time when “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us” (John 1:14). The incarnation is, according to Andrew Walls, “an act of divine translation par excellence.”<sup>2</sup>

If translation is the goal of incarnation, then the Church’s gospel-informed cultural engagement is, at its heart, an incarnational enterprise. It is about making the Word of God “flesh” through the ever-changing language of human culture. The Church, therefore, in order to fulfill the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), must make translation its primary activity. The quality of translation is, in many ways, the difference between making the music playable and rendering it unplayable for emerging generations. Translation is a partnership dependent upon the effectiveness of the translator’s interpretation of the text into a particular culture. This is why the format matters.

Sadly, for most of our mainline denominational churches, the translation has not been effective. This is primarily because they have very little understanding of the cultural shifts around them. In other words, these churches are still playing the music of the gospel on 45 instead of iTunes. The format has not kept up with the language of culture, and the result has been precipitous decline in church participation. The Pew Research Center, in their most recent report on the changing religious landscape in

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 198.

America, indicated that the Christian share of the U.S. population is shrinking, while the share of atheists, non-Christian religions, and religiously unaffiliated have all increased dramatically in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> Churchgoers are getting older (faster than the population) and are attending church less frequently. As a result, “2.7 million church members fall into inactivity... [and] more than 4,000 churches close their doors” every single year.<sup>4</sup>

My congregation, The First Presbyterian Church at Red Bank locally known as Tower Hill Church (THC) is no exception to these trends. From the first interview with the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) in the spring of 2012, to the first meeting with the Session (elders), to the first four meet and greet events with the congregation, there was one question asked most consistently: “What are you going to do to help us grow?” My response was to politely defer the question. I indicated that I must first get to know the congregation and its systems before I could help them form and articulate a vision forward.

Members received my answer graciously albeit with a perceptible sense of anxiety. Most of them belong to the Builder generation (born 1927-1945) and are grieving the disparity between the THC of their youth and the THC of today. There is a time-sensitive pressure, in their minds, to fix the church by restoring it to a contemporary version of its antiquated self. They look around and notice that their children and grandchildren are not coming to worship, and they fear that if the church continues to

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<sup>3</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” The Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>, accessed December 12, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Thom and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), 13.

decline it will at some point cease to be their church. The church at one time was the social hub of the community, but that is no longer the case. According to THC's 2010 mission study, "two thirds of congregation members do not attend church on any given Sunday morning because of conflicting activities and a lack of relevance... [and for those who do come] the majority do not participate in the life of the church outside of Sunday worship."<sup>5</sup>

Membership in our denomination, "the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations (the UPCUSA and the PCUS) peaked in the early 1960s, then began a steady, slow decline. From 2001 to 2011, PC(USA) membership has declined by about two percent annually."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, during the same time frame, THC's membership has declined from 1600 (2001) to 1200 (2011), a decline of just over 2 percent annually. While THC is still a vibrant and vital community, it has not been immune to the significant decline in church participation. This decline has been due, primarily, to a growing cultural language barrier that exists between the generations: *Builders*, *Boomers* (born 1946-1964), *Gen Xers* (born 1965-1983) and *Millennials* (born 1984-2002), who view the world and the nature and purpose of the Church so differently, it is a struggle to find common ground. Each generation has drastically different ways of understanding the world—communication, technology, family dynamics, school, entertainment, basically everything. But most churches have a once-size-fits-all approach to church. When

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<sup>5</sup> The First Presbyterian Church at Red Bank Mission Study, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> "Ten Year Trend Statistics for Congregations," The Presbyterian Church (USA), *Ten Year Trend Statistics for Congregations*, [http://apps.pcusa.org/tenyeartrends/report/4793/all\\_statistics.jsp](http://apps.pcusa.org/tenyeartrends/report/4793/all_statistics.jsp), accessed December 3, 2017.

grandparents ask why their grandchildren do not come, it is precisely because they cannot hear the music.

As a forty-year-old contemporary worship designer, developer, and leader, I was a risky hire for THC. But the year prior to my arrival, after years of fits and starts, they launched a Sunday morning contemporary worship service (with about sixty people) in the fellowship hall concurrent with the traditional service (so as to share the Sunday school hour). This service was best described as a work in progress. It needed a lot of work and a lot of progress, and the PNC knew it. They were convinced they needed someone to help THC reach a different demographic through a different style of worship.

Revitalization and renewal work best when a church is still alive, meaning it has a critical mass of people and resources to make significant changes. If the church is dead, then we are talking about resurrection—which is a whole other enterprise. THC was primed for revitalization, so I did everything I could to work with teams of volunteers, elders, and staff to start new organizational life cycles. I began with most glaring ministry area that needed a format change: worship. As a result, we experienced a new season of growth through the addition of a new contemporary service.

In the fall of 2012, we worked to improve the musicianship and repertoire of the band. We improved our strategic use of visual elements. In 2013 we launched a summer contemporary service (for the first time) and spent \$65,000 to upgrade our fellowship hall (e.g. sound system, video projection, instruments). That fall we moved contemporary away from the traditional time and added an additional Sunday school hour. Almost immediately, 75 percent of our Sunday school children began attending during the contemporary service. By January 2014, we averaged two hundred in contemporary and

were pushing the capacity of our fellowship hall, leading Session to commission a task force to investigate how best to proceed.

This influx of new people—particularly, unchurched people—began to change THC dramatically. I do not know the percentage, but young families (with children under twelve) comprised the bulk of our growth. While worship was the initial catalyst for change, it was the presence of so many new faces that pushed THC to change further and faster than we could have imagined. This was primarily because unchurched people have a different view of church. They have different needs. They listen to the music differently. They do not understand (or particularly care about) church politics or denominational battles. They crave connection, community, and spiritual growth in a way that is different than long-time members. There is an urgency, immediacy, and intensity to their walk with Christ that creates powerful momentum. As a result, we saw new ministry opportunities flourish: small groups (after many years of trying) finally took root along with social events and mission events that began percolating throughout the life of church. This was (and still is) incredibly exciting. But amid all the excitement, there was a parallel story developing—particularly from long-time traditional members (mostly in the choir), that grew louder and louder the larger contemporary worship grew.

At the same time Session commissioned the task force, word got out about the growth of the contemporary service. Then, staff members started hearing statements from traditional worshipers, such as: “the pastors care more about contemporary and that’s why it is growing, and all those contemporary people are not really committed to the church,” and “the traditional worshipers are funding contemporary because they do not give,” and (this is the most disheartening) “our pastors want traditional to die and

change everything to contemporary,” and (this is the most amusing) “Jason is just building a resume so he can go to a bigger and better church.”<sup>7</sup> There is a small but important constituency that truly believes that the growth of contemporary and subsequent decline in traditional worship is the result of pastoral lack of effort and perceived devaluing of a traditional music program that has been widely known and highly regarded by many in the community for years. The conflict reached a boiling point in March 2013.

The task force, after a great deal of work, came to the conclusion that adding another contemporary service was not the answer, but rather, the best way forward was to renovate our traditional, colonial sanctuary in order to accommodate contemporary worship. The ensuing months were the most difficult I have ever faced in the life of any church: endless planning, proposals, town hall meetings, (more) task forces, and late-night Session meetings. But the Lord works in mysterious ways. There was something about the challenge that refined me as a leader and forced me to fight for what I felt really mattered most. It also required a new way of thinking, utilizing a high level of creativity to solve the problem of providing different experiences for contemporary worshipers while maintaining the look and feel of traditional worship. The solution partially came from a conference I attended at Northpoint Community Church in Alpharetta, GA (Andy Stanley’s church). During one of the main sessions, I watched their stage crew set a twelve-piece worship band up in thirty seconds. I thought to myself that if they can do it in thirty seconds, we can do it in less than thirty minutes. So, we put wheels on everything: lectern, pulpit, knee walls, and communion table (this took some convincing).

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<sup>7</sup> Real quotes from church members.



Each Sunday, we wheel these elements to the back of the chancel, set up the worship band, use LED lighting and remote controlled window treatments along with three HD projectors to create a completely different atmosphere. We designed it in such a way that almost everything (except the large screen box on the ceiling) is hidden during the traditional service. Every week, we make this transition in fifteen minutes.

Even though we communicated the plan and process thoroughly, it was definitely quick. This was necessary, as we were completely out of room in the fellowship hall, and needed the space in time for the fall attendance surge. The plan was approved by Session on June 30, 2015 and work began on July 6, 2015. To our utter astonishment, the work was complete (enough to start anyway) by September 13, 2015. Not only have the results been better than expected but have validated the purpose for these changes. In the fall of 2015 we averaged 218 in contemporary worship. Additionally, by offering a contemporary Christmas Eve service along with our two traditional services, we saw nearly 1800 people in attendance compared with 1500 the year before.

The changes have helped bring many people closer to Jesus Christ. Every week our staff hears stories of transformation, which is absolutely incredible. However, it has come at a price. Our choir is more disgruntled now than they ever have been. There has been a deluge of angry emails, letters, and conversations that accuse a lack of leadership that has served to (intentionally) diminish traditional worship at THC. In their defense, there have been staff changes and reorganizations around the traditional music program that no doubt added to these perceptions. But, in the process of responding to changing formats, and translating the gospel to different generations, we have (perhaps

intentionally) created a church within a church and a competitive mentality (almost exclusively from the traditional side toward the contemporary side).

Like a record company in the face of changing formats, it is terrifying. But I firmly believe this is the path God has forged here at THC. This paper will be an attempt to pave the way for reconciliation—to work toward unity that celebrates the generational and cultural diversity within our walls and galvanizes us to reach and serve those outside our walls with the gospel. This project will seek to find a shared ministry language and direction through the development of a theological vision. As a catalyst for congregational revitalization, this doctoral project seeks to lead and empower the ruling elders and staff of THC to develop a gospel-centered vision statement and an overall strategy for its implementation.

The first part of this project will explore the relationship between the church and the Greater Red Bank Community. Part of this analysis will be descriptive in nature (e.g. the community's cultural identity and its connecting points with the church, as well as the church's journey of institutional success, decline, and resurgence). This analysis will also be prescriptive in nature (e.g. the opportunities and challenges between the community and the church, the spiritual deficiencies of the church's witness, and the need for a gospel-centered vision).

The second portion of this project will ground the vision process theologically. The relationship between Reformed ecclesiology (e.g. Calvin and Barth) and missional vocation (e.g. Keller and Bosch) will be woven together as the supporting theology for the vision process. This theological discussion will identify the gospel-centered vision

process as the necessary bridge between faithful gospel contextualization and ministry implementation.

The third part of this paper will identify and discuss the strategy of vision process implementation. It will begin by outlining the twelve-week pastor-led vision statement development through: learning modules, vision casting, and theological study. It will further identify the key obstacle facing the church through a sixty-day congregational needs-assessment. In turn, this section will outline the vision implementation strategy for each area. It is hoped that this process will serve as a catalyst for church revitalization.

CHAPTER 1  
COMMUNITY AND CHURCH CONTEXT

**Community Identity: Red Bank**

THC is situated atop a magnificent ten-acre piece of land (known as Tower Hill) in Red Bank, New Jersey. Red Bank, named for its red clay bluffs, sits at the base of a peninsula between two rivers that lead eastward toward the Atlantic and is only a forty-minute ferry ride from lower Manhattan. Tower Hill is not only one of the highest points in Red Bank, but in all of Monmouth County, affording churchgoers spectacular views to the ocean and surrounding hills.

While the borough of Red Bank has a population of under 13,000,<sup>1</sup> it effectively serves as a regional downtown for the neighboring communities of Middletown, Shrewsbury, Tinton Falls, and Oceanport (inland) as well as Little Silver, Fair Haven, and Rumson (peninsula). Once referred to as “dead bank” by locals who lamented the mega-stores and shopping malls that turned it into a virtual ghost town in the early-mid 1990s, Red Bank has become a destination through gentrification. Two decades later, Red Bank is booming with four coffee houses, sixty-four restaurants (including

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<sup>1</sup> “Red Bank Borough, NJ”, <http://www.redbanknj.org/>, accessed February 1, 2016.

exclusive, chef-owned establishments with long wait lists), high-end retail stores, two major performing arts venues (the Count Basie Theatre and the Two River Theater), a small movie theater that shows independent and art films, a bevy of antique shops, music shops (including the iconic Jack's Music Shoppe), art galleries, and jewelry shops. When the weather is warm, Red Bank's music scene blooms, and patrons crowd the streets, walking between pubs, restaurants, and coffee houses to hear live, local music.

Red Bank has also become a destination for celebrities. Writer, director, and producer Kevin Smith (*Dogma*, *Mallrats*, *Clerks*) owns a comic book store on Broad St. (the main street in town), where the AMC reality show *Comic Book Men* is filmed. Carlos' Bakery of TLC's *Cake Boss* has also moved into a new shop on Broad St., and Bruce Springsteen (a Rumson resident) is often seen shopping and playing impromptu sets at local pubs and charity galas (I recently spotted him and Queen Latifah at the local Starbucks). Jon Bon Jovi runs his nonprofit restaurant, Soul Kitchen, on the west side of Red Bank, and lives just across the river in nearby Navesink.

Although Red Bank is where affluent locals play, it is not where most of them live. Instead they are drawn to the high-end communities surrounding Red Bank that provide small town charm (e.g. tree lightings, Halloween parades), robust programs for young families (e.g. recreation, sports), highly ranked public and private schools, and are most convenient to beaches and New York City ferries. The median home price in Red Bank is slightly above the state average at \$398,000, but the surrounding communities, particularly on the peninsula, have some of the most expensive real estate in New Jersey.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Home Values," Zillow.com, <http://www.zillow.com/red-bank-nj/home-values/>, accessed February 1, 2016.

The median home price for Rumson (the closest to the ocean and only four miles away) is \$1,300,000.<sup>3</sup>

Due to its close proximity to New York City, the Red Bank area, in many ways, feels the influence of the city in nearly every cultural sphere (including church life). This is further heightened by the fact that most young families (especially on the peninsula) are Manhattan transplants, having moved from the city to the suburbs in order to raise their children. Even families who are not from the city have at least one member who commutes there daily. As a result, the cultural products of New York City heavily influence their expectations of work and recreation, entertainment and education, worship and service. As a result, the area is “filled with well-informed, verbal, creative, and assertive people...”<sup>4</sup> who bring an urban sensibility to their life in the suburbs.

### **Community Identity: The Jersey Shore**

While MTV’s reality series of the same name gave the coast of New Jersey a reputation for *guidos*, *guidettes*, binge drinking, house parties and spray-tans, the Jersey Shore has been grossly misrepresented. The truth is that the New Jersey coastline is a national treasure. Rich with history and beauty, the Jersey Shore comprises 130 miles of interconnected barrier islands from Sandy Hook (just south of Manhattan) to the southernmost tip of the state in Cape May, dotted with dozens of beach towns—each with their own flavor of summer activities, lighthouses, restaurants, boardwalks, and even

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<sup>3</sup> “Market Values,” Trulia.com, [http://www.trulia.com/real\\_estate/Rumson-New\\_Jersey/market-trends/](http://www.trulia.com/real_estate/Rumson-New_Jersey/market-trends/), accessed February 1, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 173.

casinos (Atlantic City). It is a destination for thousands of yearly vacationers, as well as a daily summer ritual for locals.

But just as there is exclusivity among the communities closest to the beach, there is also exclusivity regarding access to the beach. Most New Jersey beaches (except for some state parks) require the purchase of a beach badge in order to use a particular beach in a particular town (although even the state parks charge for parking). These represent the most affordable options that provide a low-frills beach experience (perhaps a public restroom and life guard). However, nearly all of the beaches closest to the peninsula are private beaches, owned by what are known as beach clubs.

Beach clubs are a significant part of the Red Bank area culture. Most regular attenders at THC belong to one of the six clubs closest to the peninsula, and as a result, our summer worship schedule changes to accommodate them. Each beach club is different, with different amenities and price points, but generally they are like country clubs on the beach, complete with: swimming pools, youth swim teams, tennis courts, finely combed beaches, showers, cabanas, restaurants, and even tiki bars on the sand. The average cost for a family membership is \$3,000 per summer (Memorial Day to Labor Day). However, at some of the more exclusive clubs, family membership can soar to over \$10,000 per summer (these are the clubs our local celebrities attend). All clubs allow only a certain number of members at a time, and often have extensive waiting lists.

The popularity of beach clubs, health clubs, and traditional country clubs upon the membership of THC only exacerbates the problematic membership milieu of traditional denominational churches. Rather than viewing membership as ministry or engagement, membership is most often viewed as the purchase of certain rights or privileges and the

proper maintenance of religious goods and services. While this benefits the church's ability to preserve its physical property and raise money for capital improvements, it can (and often does) stifle innovation, imagination, and change.

### **Community Cultural Factors: The Time Crunch**

Red Bank area residents, particularly on the peninsula, are some of the most driven, successful, and wealthy people in the state. They have reached the top of their respective fields—most of them within the financial industry. Since Lower Manhattan (home of the financial district) is only a ferry ride away, the Red Bank area has afforded them the best of both an urban and suburban lifestyle. But they pay a price for this lifestyle. They are forced to fight an unrelenting, everyday inevitability: a deficit of time.

It is most often the husband who commutes daily to the city. He will typically leave the house at 5 a.m. and return home anywhere between 7:30 and 9:30 p.m. He may not interact with his children or spouse at all (in person) during the workweek. A byproduct is that his wife functions as a single parent, which generates a great deal of frustration and tension in their marriage. As a result, they spend a great deal of time, energy, and money pursuing recreational opportunities on weekends (e.g. youth sports, summer beach days, frequent vacations, and the desire for as much family time as possible). Even though this family may genuinely desire a closer relationship with God, they find that God is simply squeezed out of their schedule.

These commuter families have articulated the same challenge: participation in traditional church activities outside of Sunday morning is exceedingly difficult due to the time constraints of their daily work life. Unfortunately, our church has not adequately



framed discipleship for these families. As Tim Keller rightly affirms, “[our churches do] not know how to disciple members without essentially pulling them out of their vocations and inviting them to become heavily involved in church activities.”<sup>5</sup> If 90 percent of a member’s week is spent either at work or commuting to and from work, and they have framed discipleship as something that happens at church, then they are not applying the gospel to 90 percent of their life.

In his book, *Subversive Spirituality: Transforming Mission through the Collapse of Space and Time*, L. Paul Jensen argues that the incessant busyness of contemporary culture has effectively emptied the Church’s mission of its spiritual power. Instead of attuning to the Holy Spirit through the cultivation of spiritual practices, Christians rush headlong into the deafening roar of life’s frenetic pace without making time and space to connect with God. This practice of “cramming more tasks requiring greater speed into a given measure of time and packing more into less space eventually leads to a point of collapse.”<sup>6</sup>

This collapse of time and space has made weekly worship attendance difficult, and participation in weekday church activities nearly impossible. At THC, we see the symptoms of the time and space collapse primarily in worship (the most regular and most visible venue). Only one third of our members attend worship on a weekly basis (slightly better than the national average of 20 percent).<sup>7</sup> The primary reason for this, according to our Lower Manhattan commuters, again, is time.

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 176.

<sup>6</sup> L. Paul Jensen, *Subversive Spirituality: Transforming Mission through the Collapse of Space and Time* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 3.

On a typical Sunday morning, worshipers arrive late and leave as the final note sounds. There is one woman who I have unsuccessfully chased (simply trying to make a connection) out the front door at least three times, each time failing to reach her before she reached her car. If worship continues past the one-hour mark, there are fidgets; if it continues an additional fifteen minutes, there are angry letters, e-mails, phone calls, and even face-to-face conflict. Silence in worship is brief because people quickly become uncomfortable with what they consider to be a non-productive use of time. Smartphones are frequently being viewed during fellowship hour, and the natural rhythms of worship are fragmented and erratic. What the time-space collapse has done is not unlike a spiritual heart arrhythmia. The reality is that God's love language is time spent. It is impossible to obey Jesus' call to follow if life is too loud to hear it.

### **Community Cultural Factors: Affluence, Accomplishment, and Discontent**

Affluence and accomplishment generate incredible possibilities. Red Bank area families attack their free time with the same tenacity as their careers. Instead of taking the kids to the park on a three-day weekend, they travel to Aruba, Costa Rica, or England, and are back in time for school on Tuesday. So, when they attend church, they have certain expectations. They are highly trained consumers; if they are going to attend church, it had better meet their needs. As a result, there is a pervasive consumerism and an unrelenting demand for excellence that often influences both church methodology and ecclesiology.

There are two phenomena that are by-products of this reality: church shopping and church hopping. Both reflect a desire to find a church where they perceive their

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<sup>7</sup> Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, 16.

family's spiritual needs can be met (largely based on programming offered and the perceived quality of such programming) and the flexibility of upgrading their church experience as their needs change. They have no time to wait. They refuse to believe that church leaders need more than thirty days to make forward progress on organizational or programmatic change. They dream, offer suggestions, and even make demands that the church needs to adopt a particular program or launch a particular event in order to reach people. Certainly, great outreach opportunities can evolve from such discussion. However, running a church in this way requires constant feeding and will eventually collapse under the weight of this pressure for constant relevance, as it can quickly become unsustainable and runs the risk of becoming hollow. While consumerism and the desire to provide meaningful, relevant, and insightful spiritual content is, on some level, necessary in the faithful proclamation of the gospel, it must never become an idol for a church or its members (yet often does).

### **Community Cultural Factors: Fitness Obsessed**

If Lululemon, the popular clothing company, has a cultural epicenter, the Red Bank area may be it. High-end fitness apparel, especially for women, has become something of a standard uniform for daily activities. Spinning and yoga studios, CrossFit gyms, health clubs and juice bars are outposts of this local religion. Even those 5 a.m. city commuters find time to fit a daily workout into their schedule. It is an incredibly health conscious community that is also home to running clubs, paddleboard clubs, hiking and walking clubs, and a plethora of programs for the fitness minded. It is also home to a burgeoning alternative medicine community.

While health and wellness are an often-neglected spiritual discipline, there is a dark side to this obsession with fitness. I imagine it is not unlike a deep-sea diver or submarine captain who operates under the constant crushing pressure of the sea—one small crack and everything implodes. There is a latent pressure that permeates the fitness culture in the community. It is a pressure to be attractive and to look young at all costs (particularly due to so much beach time). When I moved here in 2012, the first thing I noticed was how white everyone's teeth were—perhaps an appropriate metaphor that speaks to a deeper truth: attractiveness is often not a sign of health, but a veneer that masks an underlying illness. This illness consistently crushes marriages, self-esteem, and identity, as it creates unrealistic standards for men and women to live up to.

### **Community Cultural Factors: Cult of the College-Bound**

On the morning of April 20, 1999, seventeen-year-old Cassie Bernall arrived for class at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Cassie was not an academic standout nor was she exceedingly popular. In many respects, she was a typical American teenager living in the comfort and safety of a typical American suburb (much like Red Bank). But all of that would change when a fellow classmate held a pistol to her head and asked if she believed in God. She said yes and the gunman pulled the trigger.

Christians all over the country (and the world) were deeply inspired by Cassie's story and saw her act of faith as a kind of rallying cry for Christians to re-commit their lives to Jesus Christ. It was reported that nearly 2,500 people attended Cassie's funeral. Songs, devotional books, and other Christian publications bearing her likeness were soon to follow, and in the fall of 1999 Cassie's mother, Misty, released the book: *She Said Yes*.

*The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* (Simon & Schuster). Within the first two weeks of its release, the book reached number eight on the *New York Times Bestseller* list.<sup>8</sup>

The mainstream media sensationalized Cassie's act of faith. Within a week, national media personalities heralded Cassie as a modern-day martyr who refused to renounce her faith even in the face of death. I believe the reason Cassie's story resonated so powerfully with both Christians and non-Christians alike was because of the power of the word yes. This word was able to communicate the sum of her worldview, her hope, and her faith.

In the wake of what has become a school shooting epidemic in the last fifteen years, parents are no less concerned about what matters most in raising their children, but they are no longer looking to the church for answers. Because they have become skeptical of religious institutions, they have instead turned to a burgeoning spirituality industry to meet their needs. This industry (a conglomeration of religion, philosophy, supernatural phenomena, psychic readings, and self-help psychology) has flooded popular culture with books, movies, television programs, seminars, and media personalities, all promising answers to the fundamental questions of all things spiritual.

The collective wisdom from this industry instructs parents to cultivate their children's passions, interests, and preferences (by any means necessary) in order to procure for them a well-adjusted, secure, and successful adulthood. Whatever their children say yes to, these parents pursue with great intensity, including enrollment in

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<sup>8</sup> "The New York Times Best Seller List, October 3, 1999," Hawes, <http://www.hawes.com/1999/1999-10-03.pdf>, accessed January 4, 2016.

higher education opportunities of their children's choosing. As a result, everything becomes an endless attempt to build a resume rather than an integral part of constructing a worldview or growing a faith. This approach, particularly in the Red Bank area, has led to the tyranny of travel sports teams, private tutors, and even private training sessions with professional athletes. It is not that parents do not want their children exposed to God—they still do – but even this exposure is seen as a cog in the wheel of building a well-rounded resume rather than a life transforming relationship with Christ.

### **Community Cultural Factors: Socio-Economic Disparity**

All of the analysis to this point has considered the most culturally relevant issues pertaining to the upper-middle class communities around THC, but there is another Red Bank separated by railroad tracks and lying west of the bustling downtown. Known as the West Side, this area is where virtually all the non-profit organizations supported by THC and other east side churches are located: Lunch Break (soup kitchen), the Boys and Girls Club, Habcore (special needs housing), the YMCA, Salvation Army, and Jon Bon Jovi's Soul Kitchen. It is where all of the African-American and Latino churches are located, revealing Red Bank's stark, ethnic divide. It is where peninsula residents often hire day laborers from the convenience store parking lot to handle their landscaping and home projects. It is where all the affordable housing in Red Bank exists, and where public transportation remains the only option for many residents who cannot afford personal vehicles.

THC and the other east side churches have had almost no reach into this community. Despite many attempts to host programs that benefit West Side residents,

there is a socio-economic disconnect and perhaps even intimidation that creates a powerful (albeit unintentional) barrier. The only exception is at Christmas, where THC partners with Lunch Break to host a Christmas gift distribution for west side families. On that weekend, THC will help distribute gifts for 500 area families who come to the church in order to shop for their gifts in person.

If there is good news about ministry in the West Side, it is that the people are already well served by the West Side network of churches (particularly the Catholic church) and non-profits. Moreover, THC and east side churches participate in a ministerial network that creates opportunities to pray with and for the ministries of the West Side. Yet, there is a deep sense that not is all well with the segregation of our community that many of our pastors share.

### **Church Identity: The Glory Days: 1949-1973**

The local church, in the 1950s and 1960s, was the social hub of society. In the wake of World War II, Americans joined churches not only because they were the places to meet others in the community, but also because church participation became a means of affirming the American way of life. It was a time where ice cream socials also served as business networking opportunities and local political town halls. As religious historians note,

Mainline Protestant denominations [that] had been stagnant during the 1930s, suffering from the Great Depression and low birth rates... [saw] a revival of religion, or at least of an interest in religion, and the era was one that was a comfortable time for the churches... at least in terms of seminary enrollments, facility construction, and membership rolls that were bolstered by the baby

boom.<sup>9</sup>

THC grew even larger and faster than many other Presbyterian churches (that were also growing) in New Jersey during those decades. In 1949, the Pastor Nominating Committee recommended hiring Dr. Charles Webster as Senior Pastor. Dr. Webster, a Scottish Presbyterian (brogue and all), has become the stuff of legends in the memories of many long time members. After less than a year on the job, he was faced with an overcrowded and run-down building that sat in the heart of downtown (east side) Red Bank.

In 1951, Dr. Webster brokered a land deal with Sarah Elkus, who was something of a local celebrity. Her daughter, Katharine, served as the mayor of Red Bank and eventually as the U.S. Ambassador to Denmark, and the Elkus residence, a sprawling estate atop Tower Hill, was once the location of a surprise birthday party for Woodrow Wilson. They were a family that was connected and powerful. Sarah's willingness to sell a portion of her estate to the church made headlines and caused many to wonder how Dr. Webster managed it.

On Palm Sunday, March 18, 1951 the Elkus mansion was dedicated as the "Westminster House," (used primarily for Sunday school and fellowship events), and shortly thereafter a new sanctuary was built next to it. It was only one month later that a recommendation came from the Christian Education Committee to add an additional hour of church school on Sunday morning to accommodate all the new children that were flooding the classrooms (380 children and teachers).

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<sup>9</sup> David Beckworth and Paul J. Olson, "Religious Change and Stability: Seasonality in Church Attendance from the 1940s to the 2000s," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2011), 50(2): 388–396.



By 1956, Sunday school had 667 children on the rolls and an additional Christian Education building was constructed shortly thereafter. By 1963, overall membership had already grown by 1,000 and by 1973 membership peaked at just under 3,000. The Builder generation had all the fuel it needed to build a remarkable institution—and as a result, THC grew in every measurable way.

During the boom years, THC developed a reputation for its music program. In 1952, Dr. Carl F. Mueller was hired as the Director of Music. Under his leadership, he started a Junior Choir with thirty-five children and the Tower Hill Choir with fifty adults. Dr. Mueller gained national recognition as a composer of choral anthems, and together with Dr. Webster, was invited by the Presbytery and Synod to record a program of Christmas music for broadcast on the radio. But, it was the hiring of Bob Ivey in 1967 that catapulted THC's music program into the spotlight.

By the early 1970s, THC boasted a sixty-five-member adult choir and three full-time staff dedicated to the music program alone.<sup>10</sup> In the course of his nearly fifteen-year tenure, Bob Ivey grew the handbell program (and developed his own ringing method that would become an international standard) to comprise six bell choirs whose members ranged from seventh grade through high school. His choirs traveled around the world, playing at such locations as Rockefeller Center, the White House, the United Nations, and for the President of Switzerland in Geneva.

Even the pipe organ itself drew people to the church. Its fifty-two ranks and 3,139 pipes (a portion of them beautifully exposed to adorn the chancel) made it one of the top instruments of its kind in all of New Jersey. THC's exceptional music, along with Dr.

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<sup>10</sup> First Presbyterian Church, *First Presbyterian Church at Red Bank: A History, 1852-2002*, 78.

Webster's emotional preaching (he was known to make people cry every Sunday), drew churchgoers from Monmouth and Ocean Counties, and cemented THC's reputation of excellence.

### **Church Identity: Plateau and Decline: 1973-2012**

In 1973, Dr. Webster resigned from his position at THC and relocated to Florida, where he served as the Senior Pastor for Moorings Church in Naples. While many believe Dr. Webster's departure was due to his desire for warmer weather, reports from those who were Elders at the time indicate that THC felt it was time for him to move on. While THC still appeared to be vibrant and healthy, all of their growth came to a screeching halt. Many accused the church of padding the membership numbers to reach 3,000, in order to mask the real story of plateau and decline most churches experienced during the 1960s and 1970s.

Of course, cultural change was the real issue (not Dr. Webster), as was evidenced by the fate of the pastors that succeeded him. The country was different. It experienced The Beatles, the Vietnam War, Woodstock, and a growing distrust and even anger toward the institutional America their fathers had built (including church). Profound differences emerged in the way generations viewed and experienced the world. The term "generation gap" was coined to describe the growing dissonance between traditional Builder views and those of their Boomer children.<sup>11</sup> While their parents insisted that their children would sow their wild oats and come back to the church when they grew up, what they

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), 119.

discovered was a whole generation of children did not connect with church. As a result, younger generations largely abandoned the faith they grew up with.

Cultural change was not the actual problem in itself. The problem was that despite cultural change, THC (and many churches) did not adapt accordingly. Their style, systems, traditions, and values reflected the worldview of the Builder generation. Even young people (Boomers) who remained in church, found themselves less and less able to connect with the language of worship. Then, their children, Generation X connected less. Then, the Millennials connected less. As a result, THC's membership had declined to 847 members by 2012, the bell choirs generated less interest, and the Tower Hill Choir found itself older and smaller than it had been since before 1952.

### **Growth, Change, and Anxiety: 2012-Present**

Because the language and style of worship at THC was preventing the church from effectively translating the gospel to multiple generations, the Elders realized that change was needed. Rev. Theresa Swenson, who was serving as an interim in 2011-2012, compelled THC to start a Contemporary Worship Service on Sunday mornings. This was largely because many young members were leaving for other churches primarily due to worship style. Although it started small, and the quality was barely adequate, a new chapter began that would set in motion a season of growth.

When I arrived in the fall of 2012, I helped guide the fledging Contemporary Service toward a more effective experience. Designing worship services is simply an act of translating the gospel into the language of a particular culture(s). So, we modified our worship language according to the language of young families we were attempting to

reach, and currently average 230-240 individuals each week (winter 2016). This, of course, is great news—at least for some. For others, particularly in the traditional service, this is a threat to the legacy of THC.

The good news is that most of congregation members (perhaps 85 percent) are behind the changes that were made (even if they do not like them). Out of the remaining 15 percent, I would estimate that only 5 percent are demonstratively angry. However, many in the Traditional Service continue to mourn the loss of what THC has always been, and fear (rightfully) that it will never be the same again. While they are excited about all the new growth, they are convinced that the church's best days are behind it.

### **Church Spiritual Factors: The Missional Challenge**

One of the biggest challenges THC faces is that its members do not understand who they are and (consequently) to what purpose they have been called. As a result, they have an inadequate ecclesiology to carry the burden of their calling to “go into all the world and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). This inadequacy is a byproduct of an understanding of the Church that conflates its soteriological reality with its sociological reality. For many, church is a gathering of like-minded religious individuals who voluntarily decide to exist based on shared beliefs and interests.

However, who we are is not grounded in what we do, but what God does. Who we are is grounded in the resurrection. The Church is an event. It is a movement of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the *ecclesia* (the called out ones): the people of God (through the cross), who have been called out in this life and the life to come to proclaim the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. The Church is rooted in the activity of God rather than

the activity of human beings. God is the One who calls out (1 Pet 2:9), gathers (Eph 2:13), equips (Eph 4:12), and sends (Matt 28:19-20) the community of faith into the world. The Church is, first and foremost, a soteriological reality. Jesus says, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18).

The Church exists, therefore, because of the will of God. That being said, the Church’s existence also necessarily includes a sociological dimension (as human beings do life together). The confusion occurs when the latter becomes its ontological center; its existence defined by an anthropomorphic reductionism: to meet the self-determined needs of the community, rather than the needs defined by God. When this happens, the Church struggles to find its true voice in a cacophony of ever-shifting cultural discourse.

At THC, its mission to the world (both inside and outside the walls of the church) is viewed as one of many programs that need support, not the primary purpose for the church’s existence. For most members (particularly older, more traditional members) this perception of mission is a symptom of an inadequate view of discipleship. Many have been trained (implicitly) to view discipleship as a faith-based combination of routine worship attendance and volunteerism. For example, a lifelong member (eighty-six years old), who volunteered in various capacities around the church his entire life, suddenly fell ill and was unable to continue his church work. As a result, over a period of several weeks, he began to question whether or not he was right with God precisely because he felt he was not doing enough. For him, discipleship was a form of volunteerism, and when he could no longer volunteer, he did not know how to continue following Jesus.

Reclaiming our mission must begin with authentic discipleship: a turning toward God. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to follow the way of righteousness, to

lose ourselves in Christ, and allow ourselves to be shaped by God. We must willingly become “living sacrifice[s], holy and acceptable to God...” (Rom 12:1), allowing ourselves to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Most church members have little desire to allow God to confront their theology with the discomfort of a life lived as a sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. In all fairness, they have been conditioned to view discipleship in this way. My role as their pastor is to help them articulate a new definition of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This, in turn, will necessarily impact the church’s view of what it means to carry out the mission of a missionary God.

### **Church Spiritual Factors: Lost in Translation**

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit roared like a wildfire through Jerusalem, the first Spirit-given gift to the disciples was that of supernatural translation. The disciples were given the ability to translate the Word of God into each particular language, for the purpose of “declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues” (Acts 2:11). Similarly, Paul, during a visit to Athens was invited to participate in a philosophical discussion, held atop the Areopagus, “or Mars’ Hill, one of the more prominent topological features of ancient Athens.”<sup>12</sup> At this meeting he leveraged the particularities of Athenian cultural language (specifically their philosophical and religious traditions) in order to translate the gospel:

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO

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<sup>12</sup> David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 1st ed. 6 vols. Vol. 1. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 370.

AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you (Acts 17:22-23).

Our Great Commission is to translate “the wonders of God in their own tongues” (Acts 2:11) or, more specifically, to leverage human culture in order to proclaim the gospel. Translation, then, requires a robust understanding of both text and context. Failure to translate results from inadequate engagement with the original language (text), inadequate engagement with the native language (context), or inadequate dialogue between the two. In the case of the mainline denominational church in America and, specifically THC, it is a lack of all three phases of translation that has contributed to its precipitous decline over the last fifty years.

What has happened, in effect, is that a language barrier has developed between generations. Because the act of cultural translation has virtually stalled between Builders, Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials, there is a cultural disconnect that has led to tremendous generational decline in church participation. But this is only a symptom of a much greater sickness. The problem is that there is a pervasive biblical, spiritual, and cultural ignorance, stemming from decades of inadequate translation, which has prevented the laity from participating in effective cultural engagement.

### **Church Spiritual Factors: The Need for Gospel Unity**

If we are the Body of Christ, one thing is certain: in order to embody the Word, we must be healthy. If a person is sick on the inside, it will manifest on the outside. The key to health is to maintain a proper diet and get daily exercise. For the Church to be healthy, it must maintain a proper diet (e.g. live on every word that comes from the mouth of God) and get daily exercise (e.g. do what the word of God says). Acts 2:42-47

shows the early church's embodiment of their proclamation by eating right (e.g. devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, prayer) and exercising (e.g. selling property and possessions and giving to anyone who had need, meeting in the temple courts, sharing Eucharist, and praising God). "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (v 47).

In order to embody proclamation, THC will have to move beyond generational preferences and divisions and embrace the task of faithful gospel translation together. Additionally, THC must move away from divisiveness and move toward a celebration of THC as a church that faithfully brings Jesus to all generations. This will require great intentionality, patience, and persistence; it will require the work of the whole church "so that the body of Christ can be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of God" (Eph 4:12-13).

### **Church Spiritual Factors: A Bridge to Somewhere**

According to recent data, four out of five Americans say they believe in God, pray to God, and even share "testimonials of personal encounters with God..."<sup>13</sup> even though "less than half of them ever attend church."<sup>14</sup> It is no longer the case that individual faith commitments include participation in traditional religious activity. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, argues that all of this is a sign of a profound change in American spirituality that has taken place in the last half

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Wuthnow. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, 16.



of the twentieth century: a traditional spirituality of dwelling (e.g., congregations, denominations, and neighborhoods) has given way to a new spirituality of seeking (e.g. the journey of the inner self).<sup>15</sup> Popular notions of spiritual experiences (such as angels, spirit-guides, and near-death experiences) are examples of a growing seeker-oriented spirituality that places a premium on individual experience.

Spirituality, framed in this way, is a journey more than it is a destination. In dwelling-spirituality, one becomes a Christian, joins a church, and is saved. In seeking-spirituality, one is becoming a Christian and is being saved. This shift toward the inner, individual journey has led many people (Christians included) toward a more pluralistic and universalistic worldview. The thinking is since no one human ideology can claim a monopoly on understanding God, one must seek after God in multiple human ideologies. Refraining from committing to any one set of values or doctrines has led many to become hunters and gatherers for spiritual information, assembling their beliefs in piece-meal fashion, engaging in and learning from anything that falls under the spirituality umbrella. This has led many to say that they consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>16</sup>

Naturally, these changing trends have profoundly influenced Christian practice in America. Christianity has tried to remain competitive in the spirituality marketplace (e.g. Christian entertainment, prosperity theology, a focus on technology, and a greater emphasis on finding truth in non-Christian religions). As a result, the Church has become, to a large degree, just one of many purveyors of spiritual goods and services, designed to enhance one’s personal spiritual journey. Confronted with this reality, we must

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<sup>15</sup> Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, 114-115.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

necessarily ask whether Christian spiritual formation is primarily about the individual journey of the spiritual self, or about something more.

The answer, according to the Christian tradition, is that true spiritual formation certainly involves the inner self, but that is not its focus. Rather, spiritual formation is focused on the Person of Jesus Christ. It is secular spiritual formation in reverse; it is focused on God so that God can form the self. As Dallas Willard puts it, “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to 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.”<sup>17</sup> It is a spiritual journey with an end in mind: the loss of self and Christlikeness. It is a constant shaping and reshaping of the human self more and more into the image of Christ. Therefore, if THC is going to carry on the legacy of its storied past and faithfully serve Jesus Christ, it must live what it claims to know: only by being shaped into the image of Christ is mission possible.

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<sup>17</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 22.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### ***Institutes of the Christian Religion, Books III and IV: John Calvin***

The Church is an invisible communion whose being consists in the election of God. This election is “God’s eternal decree [predestination], by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man:” election or reprobation.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the elect (the Church) is to reveal God’s glory to the world, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Since the Church’s being consists in this eternal decision of God, any human attempt to take control of its life or to make human beings the primary subjects of its existence is to deny its divine purpose.

#### **Summary of Main Argument**

Calvin’s concern with predestination was primarily pastoral in nature. It was an attempt to answer questions about the efficacy of the Word of God (why some but not others come to faith when the gospel is preached, whether salvation is dependent on human or divine agency, etc.) Calvin concluded that salvation must be dependent on divine agency for, otherwise, if salvation were dependent upon human action, it would be

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. by John T. McNeill, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 926.

fleeting and uncertain. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, not based upon merit but as a free gift of grace. If the gospel is preached but does not elicit faith in the hearer, it is because (according to Calvin) they are not the elect. This was an attempt to take the pressure off of faithful Church members whose loved ones continually rejected the Word of God. They rejected the gospel because they are reprobate and not because the gospel delivery method or the gospel deliverers are deficient (because there is no deficiency in the gospel).

Those who are elect in Christ form an invisible communion (known only to God) and comprise Christ's true Church. As such, the true Church must be distinguished from the visible, institutional church with all of its rites and doctrines, for the visible church is a mixed body (a sinner-saint reality), composed of both the elect and the reprobate alike. For Calvin, this generates another pastoral concern regarding how one differentiates a true Church from a false Church. While he argues that the responsibility "to distinguish between reprobate and elect – that is for God alone, not for us to do..."<sup>2</sup> Calvin believed there were ways a believer could discern the veracity of a particular church: namely, by its preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments. "The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist."<sup>3</sup>

Calvin taught that it was precisely through the Word and sacraments that faith is awakened in the elect. Therefore, the visible church, for all of its flaws, is incredibly

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1015.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1025.

important because it is the means by which Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, accomplishes His work in people's lives. It is for this reason that Calvin calls the visible church our "mother" and says that, "away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation..."<sup>4</sup> Our unity as Christ's Church is a product of the Word of God that gathers us in and binds us together.

### **Contribution to the Topic**

Calvin's ecclesiology is a necessary step toward grounding the nature and work of the Church in the Being of God. If THC is to work toward gospel unity through a shared theological vision, it must be properly understood that unity is not a result of tradition or sociological realities. The Church is not, fundamentally, a voluntary association of like-minded religious individuals, but rather it is the creature of the Triune God set apart for God's purposes in and for the world. It is Jesus Christ who, by Word and Spirit, gathers, protects and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life. It is Jesus Christ who, through His work on the cross, gives rise to the work of His body, the Church.

However, due to the shifting cultural realities of postmodernism and post-Christendom, the church is experiencing something of an identity crisis. Many Christians, including members of THC, see church participation as an optional supplement to their individual faith journey. Discipleship, following in the way of Jesus Christ, has become more about volunteerism and attendance than a journey toward greater Christlikeness. The called-out and sent ones have turned inward rather than outward. This shift, in turn, has muddied the waters of the nature and purpose of the Church. Any hope of gospel unity for THC will depend upon a properly conceived ecclesiology.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1016.

### **Limitation(s) of the Resources in Light of the Ministry Challenge**

Calvin's understanding of predestination raises concerns about why God chooses some to election and some to reprobation (regardless of individual merit). For if it is true that God wills an unmerited, gracious election, it must also be true that He wills an unmerited reprobation (according to Calvin). However, if God is a God of love and justice, it is difficult to believe He would issue a decree of damnation that ignores human agency. This is where Calvin's doctrine of predestination runs into theological difficulty. If one is ready to affirm Calvin's view, they are affirming that God, who is rich in mercy, condemns souls to damnation simply by His good pleasure, which seems to be antithetical to the Nature of God revealed in the scriptural witness. Interestingly, these concerns have not only posed problems for many of Calvin's critics, but even for Calvin himself. In fact, the potential consequences of affirming that God wills individuals to reprobation regardless of their actions caused Calvin, finally, to back off from a perfectly symmetrical relationship between election and reprobation: "if all are drawn from a corrupt mass, no wonder they are subject to condemnation!"<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is their own sinful nature that is to blame for reprobation.

The problem with Calvin's ecclesiology, at least in conversation with the need for a theological vision for THC, is that it limits the *telos* of God's activity to the awakening of the elect (through a very narrow set of ecclesial activities). This renders mission a passive attribute of the Church at best, and an unnecessary attribute at worst. If God has already decided the spiritual fate of individuals, there is no urgency to evangelize or to risk in proclaiming the gospel to the world. However, drawing on the theology of Karl

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 950.

Barth, the foundation of God's election (the eternal decision of God) can be maintained while widening the scope of election and, therefore, mission.

### ***Church Dogmatics, Vol. II and IV: Karl Barth***

Barth establishes a particular divine ontology, achieved through a careful reconstruction of Chalcedonian Word-flesh Christology and a re-orientation of Trinitarian theology. He then applies this divine ontology to the doctrine of predestination, which enables him to replace traditional predestination with a universal election in Jesus Christ. This communion of the elect, the members of Christ's body, "in His election from all eternity,"<sup>6</sup> is then sent in the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus in speech and action.

### **Summary of Main Argument**

Karl Barth takes great care in developing his doctrine of predestination (election) to assure that his theological convictions stand upon the shoulders of Reformed Theology and the work of Calvin. However, rather than speculate about why some people come to faith as a response to God's Word and others do not, Barth turns first to the incarnation. He is convinced that the only way to reveal God's eternal decree is to find it in Jesus Christ. This was largely the result of the Kantian Epistemology of Barth's time. The logic is that if God is to be truly known, He must make Himself knowable or objective, since we can only know Him through the empirical sense data around us: "thoughts without

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*. (New York: T & T Clark Intl., 1974), 667.



content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, God must reveal Himself in a creaturely medium.

Barth begins with the Trinity: God is One “[Subject] in three distinctive modes of being,”<sup>8</sup> not simply in three modes of appearing. Hence, what can be said about God the Father can also be said about God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is what God does. There is no difference between the immanent Trinity (God’s Being) and the economic Trinity (God’s doing). Therefore, it can also be said that the movement of the Son in historical time is identical to His movement in eternity. It is simply a matter of working from the incarnation backward. Jesus Christ became knowable by placing Himself in human history, and therefore, God is revealed.

In Jesus, God elects the human race. The election of Jesus Christ is an act of Self-determination by which God chooses election (salvation, adoption) for humanity and reprobation (death in God-abandonment) for Himself. In God’s election, Jesus becomes the reprobate man, suffering hell for us on our behalf. He is reprobate so that we may never be. “In that He takes our place, it is decided what our place is.”<sup>9</sup> To say that Jesus is the elect human is to say that all others are elect only because they are in Him.

### **Contribution to the Topic**

The primary difference between Barth and Calvin then, is that in light of an understanding of divine ontology, Barth is able to replace Calvin’s version of

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<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1965), 93.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1* (New York: T & T Clark Intl., 1974) 348.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 240.

predestination with a universal election. The truth of the being and existence of every human being is that he or she is elect in Jesus Christ. Through the cross, reprobation has been permanently removed and election secured in its place.

Both Calvin and Barth shared the conviction that predestination is a source of comfort and hope because it depends upon the sure foundation of God. They both believed that the purpose of election is for us to be holy and blameless before God, and to reveal His glory to the world. It is a vocation to witness. It is a call to proclaim the Word of God so that all the elect may be awakened to faith. It is simply in the scope of the “all” that Calvin and Barth differed.

This understanding of election preserves it as an eternal decision of God (not a human decision), and yet, opens it to the world. This radically broadens the Church’s missionary activity in the world, but more importantly, relocates mission from an attribute of the Church to an attribute of God. Mission is not just something God wants the Church to do, but rather, it is an essential part of who God is. God is an electing God, which also makes Him a missionary God.

### **Limitation(s) of the Resource in Light of the Ministry Challenge**

Although Barth sets the theological groundwork necessary to construct a robust ecclesiology regarding the nature and purpose of the Church, he does not fully develop a Trinitarian missionary theology (which would later become known as *Missio Dei*). This theology, birthed in the global mission movement as it reacted to World War I, began to re-think the nature of God, Church, and mission, which led to a profound re-orientation of traditional missionary paradigms. Mission began to be re-imagined as not just

something “over there” and “for them,” but rather something “right here” and “in us.” In short, mission became less about conquest (expanding Western Christendom) and more about discipleship (what it means to follow in the way of Christ): “one Christian community in each place, indigenous and distinctive but in communion with similar communities throughout the world...”<sup>10</sup>

While many members at THC would agree that mission is about discipleship over conquest, and election for the purpose of witness, they would see this as an activity that occurs primarily within the walls of the church. It is the symptom of an ecclesiocentrism that emphasizes the glory days of Rev. Webster and Bob Ivey where local mission is realized through the attraction of new members by the superiority of the choir, sermon, and music program. The logic goes: if they hear (or hear of) dynamic, relevant, biblical preaching, and excellent music, outsiders will surely flock to the church; and this is good because that is where God is found. While this logic is problematic in our postmodern, post-Christendom milieu, as well as the scriptural witness, there was a time at THC when this was quite literally true, which makes it difficult to speak against. When developing a theological vision, THC must redefine the nature of its missionary activity.

### ***The Open Secret: Lesslie Newbigin***

Christian mission is not primarily an attribute of the Church, but an attribute of the Triune God as revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ: Jesus “announces the coming of the reign of God [the Father], [is] the one who is acknowledged as the Son of God and is

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 246.

anointed by the Spirit of God.”<sup>11</sup> Christian mission, properly conceived, is a Trinitarian endeavor to proclaim Christ’s election for all who come to know Him through faith. It is an open secret: open in its universal availability, yet secret in that it is only intuitable through the eyes of faith. The purpose of our election, therefore, is to awaken the world to faith in Jesus Christ, and so fulfill the mission of God.

### **Summary of Main Argument**

Newbigin, a contemporary of Barth, agrees that election is the foundation of the mission of God, and consequently, the Church. Election has been the vehicle (from the Old Testament to the New Testament) through which God has revealed Himself to, and His purposes for, humanity. There has always been “a process of selection: a few are chosen to be the bearers of the purpose; they are chosen, not for themselves, but the sake of all.”<sup>12</sup> While the Church in the early twentieth century acknowledged the need for mission, it was always seen as an exterior activity of the Church rather than essential to its nature and purpose. “To put it briefly, the church approved of ‘missions’ but was not itself mission.”<sup>13</sup>

Newbigin argued that a proper understanding of mission is critical to the faithfulness of the Church. Building further upon a divine ontology that emphasizes the doctrine of election, he builds a Trinitarian model of mission for the Church to embody; by proclaiming the Kingdom of the Father (mission as faith in action), sharing the life of the Son (mission as love in action), and bearing the witness of the Spirit (mission as hope

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<sup>11</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

in action), the Church reveals God's open secret to the world. With this approach, the mission/sending of the Church is not focused on the beneficiaries and benefits of the gospel as proclaimed and administered by the church, but on God's purposes as the secret to understanding human and cosmic history, the secret which is now made knowable and is to be proclaimed by God's people as Christ's witnesses.

The vocation of the Christian and the Christian community is to make this secret (the event of reconciliation and restored relationship with God) known, which is a process that is reconciling and healing as it happens. It happens between persons, as the message is shared and demonstrated by Christians to their neighbors. God calls, forms, equips, and sends his people to be witnesses to his love and salvation, and their testimony is the Spirit's instrument for "the extension of grace to more and more people to increase thanksgiving to the glory of God" (2 Cor 4:15).

### **Contribution to the Topic**

Newbigin's exploration of what it means to do mission following a Trinitarian model, stresses that the Being and activity of God are missional. The outworking of God's healing purposes generates the mission of God's people. As THC discerns its theological vision, there are at least two important considerations that flow directly from Newbigin's theology: the communal nature of witness, and measuring faithfulness over against numerical growth.

The working definition of spiritual formation for many members at THC centers around the individual journey of the spiritual self. Christian spiritual formation, however, is a spiritual journey with a different end in mind: the loss of self and Christlikeness. As

the Body of Christ, the church must necessarily see spiritual formation as inextricably communal: to be more like Christ requires a community rather than a lone individual. Incarnation is a team sport rooted in the Trinitarian event. In an increasingly postmodern world, where pluralism, tolerance, egalitarianism, and global community are venerated, modern individualism will fall short in its ability to fully witness to the gospel (for both theological and sociological reasons).

Many at THC believe the attendance figures on Sunday morning are the only spiritual barometer needed in the life of the church. Even though Acts 2 discusses the rapid growth of the Church “one must also observe that the rest of the New Testament furnishes little evidence of interest in numerical growth...the primary concern is with their faithfulness, with the integrity of their witness.”<sup>14</sup> I believe it is the church’s preoccupation with numbers that prevents it from greater faithfulness in witness.

### **Limitation(s) of the Resource in Light of the Ministry Challenge**

The primary limitation of Newbigin’s theology is that it requires a paradigm shift in the missionary thinking of THC. The congregation has a very modern concept of mission as a compartmentalized series of programs rather than an outworking of the nature and purpose of God (and by extension, His Body). Moreover, mission—in the current milieu—is for those in foreign countries and far off places. This creates a safe barrier from which the church can operate without truly investing in the lives of those who need to experience the gospel made flesh through the work of the church.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 125.

This approach to mission never (or rarely) connects with the true power of the gospel of Christ, primarily because the gospel is essentially relational. THC reduces its understanding of vocation to knowledge of Christ alone rather than the communal embodiment of Christ as witness to the world. Genuine discipleship is not simply the result of a properly studied collection of religious facts, but a heart-hands-feet level engagement with the *Missio Dei*. THC must break its Christendom methodology and assumptions or else it will continue to decrease in effectiveness of witness.

***Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission: David Bosch***

As with Barth and Newbigin, Bosch believes that mission is primarily an attribute of the Triune God rather than an activity of the Church. He explains the classical doctrine of the *Missio Dei*: “God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”<sup>15</sup> But, there is a crisis facing this missionary movement of the Church that manifests in: “the advance of science and technology and, with them, the worldwide process of secularization,”<sup>16</sup> the de-christianization of the West, religious pluralism, “the subjugation and exploitation of people of color,”<sup>17</sup> socio-economic disparity, and the growing discontent with Western theology in the non-Western world. As a result, “the foundation, aim, and nature of

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<sup>15</sup> David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

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

mission”<sup>18</sup> must shift toward a postmodern ecumenical missionary paradigm in order to fulfill the Church’s elected purpose for the world through new cultural realities. The Church must be the Church that lives and breathes and witnesses in the language of each particular culture to which it is sent.

### **Summary of Main Argument**

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the world had experienced a high tide of Western Imperialism: European powers had colonized all of Africa, with spheres of influence in Asia and the Middle East; America had occupied Cuba and the Philippines through war with Spain; and there was a growing conviction that non-Christian nations were ripe for a kind of ecclesial colonization: “colonization and Christianization not only went hand in hand but were two sides of the same coin.”<sup>19</sup> In his closing address of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, John Mott captured the optimistic and urgent spirit of the times when he announced: “the end of the conference is the beginning of the conquest.”<sup>20</sup> As Protestant denominations and missionary societies from around the world dispersed from the conference, strategies for worldwide evangelism and cooperation became the focus. It was the obligation of each Christian to confront the world with the claims of Christ, to expand the manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 325.



(Western Christendom), and to work for “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”<sup>21</sup>

But in the midst of the missionary fervor that followed Edinburgh, there was one glaring hole in the Church’s understanding of missions: there was never any explicit theological conversation that dealt with the question of why the church participates in mission. There were, however, some implicit theological assumptions that made the goal of missions profoundly Ecclesiocentric: the church-planting missionary model of Paul in the New Testament, and Calvin’s doctrine of predestination that made the True Church (wherever the Word is proclaimed and sacraments properly administered) the place where faith is awakened in the elect. Therefore, the primary goal of the missionary movement was to convert individuals to Christ through the establishment of (Western) native churches.

But in the wake of World War I, the ecclesial optimism of the global mission movement was torn apart, and there was a growing awareness that God’s mission could not be tied to a particular denomination, culture or continent. God was doing something more. The Church’s previous lack of an explicit theology of mission became apparent when confronted by war, and a re-thinking of the nature of God, Church, and mission (as seen from the global mission conferences between 1910 and 1958) led to “a momentous shift”<sup>22</sup> away from an Ecclesiocentric to a Trinitarian and Christocentric understanding of mission.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 370.

Bosch calls for a new paradigm for doing mission that considers emerging postmodern realities and reconnects with the Church's Triune purpose: an incarnational approach to mission. Mission is "the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world."<sup>23</sup> As the developing *Missio Dei* acknowledged, the Church is not the foundation, nor is it even the goal of mission. Rather, God's missionary activity is directed at all of created reality through the cross of Jesus Christ through the local church. The Church's mission begins within its own walls, as it embodies the gospel of Jesus Christ and acts as His witness to the world.

### **Contribution to the Topic**

The concept of mission at THC has (again) been shaped by an institutional definition of discipleship. The locus of mission is focused on work done for the underdeveloped, underprivileged, and malnourished in faraway places. While this may be true, it is hardly a complete view of God's scope of mission for all the world, a mission that begins with our own encounter with the gospel and continues to the consummation of all things.

Mission, seen in this light, is God's turning to the world, despite the world's turning away from God. This turning to the world also implies a de-emphasis on the highly individualistic notion of salvation that was prevalent around the time of Edinburgh 1910. This is not to say that salvation does not have an individual dimension, but rather that God's mission is much broader and includes the whole community of Creation. "Here the church is not the sender [as in Edinburgh 1910] but the one sent...Missionary

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 519.

activity is not so much the work of the church as simply the Church at work.”<sup>24</sup> By implication then, the people of God are God’s pilgrim people, “called out’ of the world, and sent back into the world...”<sup>25</sup> in order to witness to the world.

According to Bosch, the Church of the *Missio Dei* is the Church in mission, “the local church everywhere in the world.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, there was a rediscovery of the local church as the primary locus of the Church’s witness. It was acknowledged that mission occurred in congregations. Therefore, the focus of evangelism began to be re-oriented around the centrality of the local congregation as it seeks to embody the gospel of Christ.

### **Limitation(s) of the Resource in Light of the Ministry Challenge**

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a universal Truth that is translated through the particularity of human culture. The gospel is able to be at home in every cultural context without injury to its essential character because translation is its essential character. The incarnation itself is a divine act of translation—making the Word flesh—through the products and processes of human cultural activity. This requires a re-thinking of the nature of mission. Mission is itself an incarnational enterprise.

THC, as stated in the PC(USA) Constitution, “is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ...[that] sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, [and] the dividing walls of hostility are

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 378.

torn down.”<sup>27</sup> THC is called, through the lives of our individual members and as a community of faith, to live in such a way that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. One of the fundamental problems faced (as a local church and a broader denomination), however, is the lack of institutional agreement on the definition of this good news. The gospel itself must be clearly defined if THC is to gather around it and be sent from it. This is where Tim Keller’s gospel-informed mission paradigm in *Center Church* can help.

### ***Center Church: Timothy Keller***

The goal of mission, as it develops in the local congregation, is to empower and equip church members to engage in gospel-informed cultural translation. It is a bridge-building endeavor that seeks to land the timeless truth of Jesus Christ into a particular point in historical time. In this active contextualization of the gospel, followers of Jesus must leverage human culture in order to say something true about God. It “involves a three-part process: entering the culture, challenging the culture, and then appealing to the listeners.”<sup>28</sup> This process of translation is itself an act of love that should lead to the development of a theological vision: “a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history”<sup>29</sup> for the local church. For, it is only when the local church fully understands its own particular culture that they are able to translate the universal Truth of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>27</sup> The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II, Book of Order* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2011), 3.0200-0401

<sup>28</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 120.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

## Summary of Main Argument

Keller, building upon the theological truss of Calvin, Barth, Newbigin, Bosch, and others, begins with a proper treatment of the gospel. He believes that our method-driven, pragmatic ministry philosophies have failed to ground the work of the Church in the gospel of Christ (quite accidentally) and this is the reason for many of its contemporary struggles. He argues that a robust understanding the gospel is the necessary first step for any local church, and must precede any of its missionary activity; each local church must experience gospel renewal, on some level, in order to be effective in fulfilling its *Missio Dei* purposes because “individuals and churches experience a slow spiritual deadening over the years, unless some sort of renewal/revival dynamic arrests it.”<sup>30</sup>

Gospel renewal cannot be reduced to moralistic behavior nor can it be reduced to an empty relativism; it must transform hearts and lives. As Paul teaches in Titus 3:5: “[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” Paul is saying that if you want true change, you must let the gospel teach you.”<sup>31</sup> This requires an openness, honesty, vulnerability, and repentance before the Lord, a willingness as a community of faith to confess its complicity in the misrepresentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. It is from a posture of humility and repentance that a particular church can experience gospel renewal and further engage its community in gospel contextualization: making the Word flesh in each particular culture.

This means for Keller, and his community of churches in New York City, that they should not be hostile or indifferent to city culture, but rather they must engage the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 68.

culture with love. Many churches position themselves against the culture to which they have been sent due to perceived moral or secular worldview conflicts. The result is a latent animosity toward the very individuals to whom they have been called to love. Effective gospel contextualization, however, is made possible only when the Church truly loves the culture to which it has been sent. “God so loved the world” (John 3:16) not because he agreed with it (quite the contrary), but because he wanted to save it.

### **Contribution to the Topic**

Keller’s work is integral to this project and the mission of THC. Gospel renewal and cultural engagement are critical to the unity of this currently divided local congregation. That being said, THC needs a practical tool or method to begin the translation process of connecting the timeless truth of the gospel of Christ into the particularity of its culture. This activity will be framed by Keller’s model of developing a theological vision: “a vision for what you are going to do with your doctrine in a particular time and place.”<sup>32</sup>

Developing a theological vision is an interpretive movement between doctrinal commitments and particular ministry expressions.<sup>33</sup> It is the heavy lifting of the translation process, the equivalent of a bible translator’s experience of a new culture; it often takes years of enculturation before a single word can be translated into the particularity of that culture. “Between one’s doctrinal beliefs and ministry practices

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<sup>32</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

should be a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Limitation(s) of the Resource in Light of the Ministry Challenge**

The major limitation of this resource is that the development of a theological vision statement does not guarantee actual gospel contextualization or mission. An important step in the contextualization process will be to develop a plan for theological vision follow-through and evaluation. One of the evaluation methods will be to apply the theological vision statement to particular THC ministries and allow the statement to question, challenge, or affirm its practice. This is where the consideration of modern and postmodern sensibilities, as explained by Dan Kimball, can help provide a framework for applying specific contextualization tools in a particular ministry area.

### ***The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for Emerging Generations: Dan Kimball***

Much like Bosch, Newbigin, and Keller, Kimball identifies the current disconnect between the gospel and culture as primarily theological in nature. He argues that there is a need for change that goes beyond style, but rather “we need to change how we think of the church.”<sup>35</sup> Churches can talk about what they believe, and articulate their desire to change, but their actions reveal the truth. Therefore, methodologies, even if effective for a time, will always need to be re-contextualized in order to reach emerging generations.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>35</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 15.

## Summary of Main Argument

For emerging generations (Gen X and younger), there is a growing disconnect or language barrier that is most evident in the way churches conduct their worship services. Worship is central to the Christian life. It is what Christians have been designed and commanded to do. And yet, the reality is that there is an unsettling trend—a virtual exodus—of young adults abandoning worship services because worship is predominantly in the language of Builders and Boomers. In fact, the seeker sensitive worship model (as successfully implemented by mega-church pastors like Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and Andy Stanley) has been a faithful gospel contextualization for Boomer generations.

Due to the success of these churches, many believe that this style of worship is the style that will engage emerging generations as well. However, there is clear evidence that a divide exists between postmodern, post-Christendom culture, and the culture of seeker-sensitive worship. In fact, many Millennials prefer a sense of the sacred in worship: the use of candlelight, incense, ancient prayers, art, liturgy and intimacy (far different from the Contemporary Worship Movement). The issue here is that methodologies, no matter how effective, will always need to adjust to cultural changes. Gospel contextualization is hard work. It can be exhausting. But there is simply no shortcut to effective witness.

Kimball suggests, “being sensitive to seekers is not a style of worship... [but rather] a biblical attitude (1 Cor. 14:23) modeled by both Jesus and Paul. It is loving lost people enough to try to relate to them on their level (whatever that is) so Jesus can save them.”<sup>36</sup> It is a return to the core of the early Church: the proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the language of culture. It is a seeker-sensitive lifestyle in a “post-seeker-sensitive

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 25.



world.”<sup>37</sup> The goal then is to “rethink virtually everything we are doing in our ministries”<sup>38</sup> in order to faithfully reach emerging generations. This may mean changing existing ministries, launching new ministries, or even launching sister churches with different philosophies and methodologies in order to reach emerging cultures with the gospel.

The problem of emerging generations is more than a generation gap. Many believe that these young adults will come back to church (as it currently is) when they grow up and have families of their own. Unfortunately, the numbers do not support this way of thinking. This is primarily because “emerging generations are increasingly being born and raised with a different set of values, a changing worldview, and an evolving belief system that generations before them did not experience.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it will require new methodologies, new values, and new cultural engagement in order for them to hear the wonders of God in their native language (Acts 2:11).

### **Contribution to the Topic**

At THC the language of our worship has prevented the church from effectively translating the gospel to multiple cultures. If THC desires multiple cultures to engage in worship, “to ‘attribute worth to God,’ ‘to kiss toward him in reverence and lay prostrate,’”<sup>40</sup> before Him, then “we must first ask [how] God [can be] truly encountered

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

and worshiped and [how] people [can be] encouraged to be disciples of Jesus”<sup>41</sup> through the language of their particular culture.

Of course, knowing what must change is only the beginning. The next step is to turn to the difficult work of how to change. If THC desires to more effectively translate the gospel, to be the Church here and now, it must start by asking difficult questions, such as: “What would you say the major values differences are between your church’s worship gathering and the values that are characteristic of emerging generations?”<sup>42</sup> By understanding cultural contexts, THC can more effectively translate the text of Jesus Christ.

### **Limitation(s) of the Resource in Light of the Ministry Challenge**

Kimball’s attempt to build models of cultural engagement with emerging generations is incredibly effective. The fundamental concern, however, is that he has done the very thing that seeker-sensitive churches have done: lifted up a methodology rather than a process toward more effective gospel translation. It could be said that he has replaced seeker-sensitivity with aesthetic-sensitivity in the attempt to re-contextualize the gospel message. The concern of modernity is its propensity for creating spectator worship services, however the same concern can be voiced for multi-sensory, experiential worship.

The important part for THC to remember is that there is no escaping its own need to engage culture in order to effectively translate the gospel. THC must use gospel-

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 189.

informed cultural engagement to develop a theological vision for the church, which informs worship gatherings, outreach, children's programs, and everything else in its life. The products of this engagement will certainly follow cultural trends, but will be unique expressions of love for the community in which it lives and works.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE COMMUNITY OF WITNESS

The development of a theological vision for THC will help it launch more effective ministry practices by empowering and equipping elders and staff to engage in gospel-informed cultural contextualization. In other words, it will help to make the music of the gospel playable to the culture around it. It is a bridge-building endeavor that seeks to land the timeless truth of Jesus Christ into a particular point in historical time. With this purpose in view, it is essential to first construct a theological truss upon which build this bridge. In this vision process, there are two distinct but interconnected beams that support most of the theological weight: the ecclesiology that emerges from the doctrine of election (e.g. the nature and vocation of the Church) and the *Missio Dei* act of gospel translation as inextricably incarnational.

#### **God's Election: An Eternal Decree**

For many Christians, the name John Calvin has become inseparably linked with the doctrine of predestination. Although Calvin did not invent the doctrine, he certainly made it famous by vehemently defending it against those whom he called, “dogs and

hogs”<sup>1</sup> in one of his 1559 sermons on the subject. The “dogs” were those who tried to make the doctrine odious, and the “hogs” were those who tried to use the doctrine as a form of elitism. Calvin believed that predestination was the most important doctrine in the Christian faith because it was in this doctrine alone that confidence in one’s salvation is made certain. “Here [God’s predestination] is our only ground for firmness and confidence.”<sup>2</sup>

Calvin defined predestination as follows: “we call predestination God’s eternal decree, by which He compacted with Himself what He willed to become of each person. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others.”<sup>3</sup> By defining predestination in this way, Calvin secured the finality of God’s election—removing the uncertainty of human decision, and placing it in the hands of God alone. There is nothing that can change God’s decree from the human side, because it is a decision made from God’s side. The good news, then, is that if one is elect, they can be sure of their election due to the mere fact that God made the decision.

For Calvin, the security of election was a pastoral care issue. It was a way of assuring that salvation was not dependent upon human faithfulness but God’s faithfulness. It is God’s absolute decree made from before the foundation of the world. It is a divine decision that was made prior to any acts of good or evil committed by humanity. As Ephesians 1:4-5 explains, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications 1996), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.1, 922.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, III.xxi.5, 926.

sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will...” Since God chose human beings in Christ before the foundation of the world (apart from merit), any notion of salvation by works is obliterated. If anyone is saved, it is by grace alone.

If God’s decree is eternal, then by definition, it cannot be conditioned by Creation, the fall, or even individual responses of faith. “That the decree is unconditional,” Calvin argued, “is evident from the fact that God loved [Jacob] and hated [Esau] while they were yet in their mother’s womb...”<sup>4</sup> That the decree is unconditional, is apparent in God’s gracious election of Israel. God’s choosing of Israel was not predicated upon any prior meritorious action, but was based upon God’s love alone (see Deut. 10:14-15). Israel was not chosen because they were a special people, but rather, “sanctification is enjoined upon them because they have been chosen as his ‘special people.’”<sup>5</sup>

God’s *decretum absolutum* is important not only because it is eternal, but also because it is foreordained. If the decree is not conditioned upon any human meritorious action, it must further be said, that neither is it the result of any foreknowledge of such action. God’s foreknowledge is possible precisely because it is a knowledge of that which has already been ordained. Faith is not a prerequisite to election; it is simply an effect of election. Therefore, “Foreknowledge is itself grounded in foreordination.”<sup>6</sup> That is to say, salvation is neither based upon works, nor the foreknowledge of works.

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Sermons*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.5, 927.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Once the nature of the decree itself is understood, individuals are forced to deal with its consequences. The unalterable nature of predestination is a tremendous comfort to the elect. However, the problem that many people have with Calvin's understanding of predestination is not that God graciously elects from eternity, but that he also condemns from eternity. There is a negative side to God's eternal decree: reprobation. Calvin believed that reprobation is explicitly taught by Paul in Romans 9, and therefore cannot be ignored. He believed that Paul, referring to both Esau and Pharaoh, concludes that there are indeed some who have been chosen for reprobation for the purpose of revealing God's glory. Calvin concluded that reprobation, although a *decretum horribile* (dreadful decree), is the necessary corollary to election: "as God by the effectual working of his call to the elect perfects salvation... so he has his judgments against the reprobate, by which he executes his plan for them."<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that Calvin's doctrine of predestination is none other than a doctrine of double predestination (either to election or reprobation).

In response to concerns over the consequences of such a view of God's eternal decree, Calvin tried to put the idea of reprobation in perspective: "...if all whom the Lord predestines to death are by condition of nature subject to the judgment of death, of what injustice toward themselves may they complain?"<sup>8</sup> In other words, accusing God of injustice is a false accusation, primarily because in our sinful nature, we all deserve death. Therefore, if God chooses to save some, it is purely a gracious and free act.

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.3, 951.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 950.

With this perspective in view, Calvin then delivers a solemn warning: “God’s hidden decree is not to be searched out but obediently marveled at.”<sup>9</sup> Echoing the sentiments of Augustine, Calvin concludes: “the Lord has created those whom he unquestionably foreknew would go to destruction. This has happened because he has so willed it. But why he so willed, it is not for our reason to inquire, for we cannot comprehend it.”<sup>10</sup> To question the will of God is to place oneself upon dangerous ground. Predestination is the way it is because God has willed it to be this way. Calvin’s answer is the same as Paul’s in Romans 9:20: “Who are you, O man, to argue with God?” If God wills something, it must be inherently righteous.

But, if it is true that God wills an unmerited, gracious election, it must also be true that He wills an unmerited reprobation. It is precisely this point that has soured Calvin’s doctrine of predestination for many theologians and believers alike. Opponents question whether God, who is rich in mercy, would condemn souls to damnation simply by His good pleasure. Even Calvin wavered on this point. The potential consequences of affirming that God wills individuals to reprobation regardless of their actions caused Calvin, finally, to abandon a perfectly symmetrical relationship between election and reprobation. Although Calvin’s logic seems, at every point, to demand such symmetry, he concludes: “Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity--which is closer to us--rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God’s predestination.”<sup>11</sup> Calvin, then, points to the

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.5, 952.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



condition of sin as the cause for reprobation. Therefore, reprobation is ultimately deserved or merited reprobation, even though this exposes an apparent contradiction in the nature of the *decretum absolutum*.

Calvin's doctrine of predestination led believers within his own circles to naturally begin to question how they can know if they are elect. Calvin did not particularly like the question of assurance, primarily because he considered it to be something only known in the hidden decree of God. However, his response was to look to Jesus Christ. "We have a sufficiently clear and firm testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life if we are in communion with Christ."<sup>12</sup> In other words, if one is in communion with Christ, they have all the assurance they need. Like Augustine, Calvin uses the metaphor of a mirror: "If we have been chosen in him [Christ], we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from the Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, when the gospel is preached, some believe and some do not because: "for some [the reprobate], the Word remains external and thereby ineffectual. For others [the elect], the outer call to repentance and faith is accompanied by the inner call and witness of the Holy Spirit."<sup>14</sup> It is through preaching the Word and administering the sacraments instituted by Jesus Christ that faith is awakened in the elect alone. For the

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.8, 957.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, III.xxiv.5, 970.

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

<sup>14</sup> John Hesselink, "Calvin's Theology," *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*. Ed. Donald K. McKim, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83.

reprobate, there is no amount of preaching or administration of the sacraments that can awaken such faith, precisely because they lack the inner call and witness of the Spirit. Calvin again emphasized that speculation about the status of individuals' election or reprobation was inappropriate and should be avoided. The visible or empirical church, he acknowledged, is comprised of both the elect and reprobate.

Part of Calvin's own struggle with double predestination was, in many ways, a result of his own presuppositions about the Being of God. His God of the absolute decree was the God of classical theism. This picture of God, found in the great majority of the Church Fathers, and much of Christian theology through the post-Reformation period, asserts that God is: impassible, immutable, perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, and cannot, ultimately, be known. The God of the absolute decree exists in a mode of Being that is hidden from humanity.

Although classical theism portrays a God who is divine, it does not give any insight into the Being of God Himself. In the end, this forced Calvin to engage in speculation about this hidden God and His absolute decree. It is this uncertainty that led Calvin to be of two minds about reprobation. "If Calvin maintains a Christ-centered understanding of assurance he can only do so by ignoring the dilemma of his own position, the apparent contradiction of grounding the assurance of election in Christ when election itself is grounded in the hidden counsel of God."<sup>15</sup> In the end, Calvin believed that the purpose of election is to be holy and blameless before God and to reveal His

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<sup>15</sup> John Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth*. (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books 1989), 234.

glory to the world. Being God's elect is not a special status as much as it is a special calling to be God's witnesses so that all the elect may be awakened to faith.

### **God's Election: In Jesus Christ**

Karl Barth's intention was not to break completely with Calvin's theology, but to make a course-correction to the traditional doctrine of predestination, while keeping his feet grounded in Reformed theological soil. He believed that Calvin's necessary speculation about the hidden decree of God served to weaken his theological position. "What Barth accomplished with his doctrine of election was to establish a hermeneutical rule which would allow the church to speak authoritatively about what God was doing—and, indeed, who and what God was/is—'before the foundation of the world', without engaging in speculation."<sup>16</sup>

Barth was heavily influenced by the philosophical epistemology of Immanuel Kant. Kant argued that human knowledge is only made possible through empirical, objective sense data. Therefore, since God cannot be objectively known, knowledge of God is impossible. The net effect of this epistemology (in Barth's day) was a theological shift toward the subject that gave way to a multitude of anthropomorphic reductions in Christology. While Barth wanted to take seriously the concerns raised by Kant, he believed these anthropomorphic reductions did not resolve the problem of theological speculation. Barth believed that if God is to be truly known, He must make Himself

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being," *The Cambridge Companions to Karl Barth*, Ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92.

knowable or objective by revealing Himself in a creaturely medium. Therefore, Barth placed a primacy upon the incarnation as a means of understanding election.

Rather than to speculate about why some people come to faith as a response to God's Word and others do not, Barth turned to that moment in historical time when God made Himself known. He believed that a properly conceived divine ontology, when applied to the doctrine of predestination, would replace double predestination with a universal election. Barth begins with the Trinity. He describes it as: One Subject, in three modes of being, not simply in three modes of appearing. Hence, what one can say about God the Father, one can also say about God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is what God does. That is to say, there is no difference between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. "God's being, for Barth, is a being-in-act."<sup>17</sup>

The implication of this Trinitarian theology is that the movement of the Son in historical time (the incarnation) is identical to His movement in eternity. In Jesus Christ: God has revealed Himself, as He truly is, in a creaturely medium that is intuitable through the eyes of faith. As Jesus says, "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (Jn 14:7). Barth then looks to Jesus Christ for the eternal decision of God that was made before the foundation of the world. For "Jesus Christ was in the beginning with God [according to John 1:1-2]."<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point that Barth's divergence from Calvin is apparent. He believes that "there is no such thing as a *decretum absolutum* [because] there is no such thing as a will

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<sup>17</sup> McCormack, *Grace and Being*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2*, 104.

of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ”<sup>19</sup> which has been made known. For Barth, “the election of Jesus Christ is the eternal choice and decision of God”<sup>20</sup> to be God for us and us for God [in Jesus Christ]. As demonstrated in the Person of Jesus Christ, God is the God who elects. He is the electing God whose very Being is constituted by the gracious election of all men and women in Christ. The Being of God is a covenantal mode of being; a divine decision to be God, in a relationship of grace, with humanity, and to be God in no other way. There was never a time when God had not already made this decision.

But Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is not only the electing God, but also the elected man. Another major departure from Calvin’s understanding of predestination, is that the object of God’s election “is not any abstract concept of man in general, nor the totality of the human race, nor even particular men and their individual destiny,”<sup>21</sup> but Jesus Christ. Jesus is both the subject and the object of election. In the election of Jesus Christ, “God elected or predestinated Himself. God determined to give and to send forth His Son.”<sup>22</sup> Predestination is no longer an eternal decree regarding the election or reprobation of individuals, but the election and reprobation of Jesus Christ.

By replacing the God of the *decretum absolutum* with Jesus Christ, a fundamental shift has occurred. In the words of Paul, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...The God who made the world and everything in it” (Acts 17:23-24),

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality*, 246.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2.*, 162.

has been made known to you in Jesus Christ. Without engaging in speculation, Barth has made it possible to say that in the doctrine of predestination one can rest assured that they are indeed elect in Christ. This view of predestination is also a double predestination, but has been relocated from the *decretum absolutum* to Jesus Christ. “Predestination [remains] ‘double’ because, in choosing himself for the sinful creature, God was choosing reprobation, perdition and death for himself and mercy, grace, and life for human beings.”<sup>23</sup>

It is in this way that Barth upholds Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination while resolving the problems presented by both classical theism and modern theology. In classical theism theology took as its starting point, the order of the natural world, and then constructed a theology of God. Modern theology took as its starting point, anthropology, and then constructed a theology of God. The flaw in both approaches is that ultimately, their theology does not begin with God. The risk of not beginning with God is that there is no sure guarantee that either approach can end with God. By taking as his starting point, the incarnation, Barth decisively ensured that he was beginning and ending with God.

The doctrine of election is the sum of the gospel. It is a source of comfort and hope because it depends upon the sure foundation of God. In the election of Jesus Christ, “God elected or predestinated Himself. God determined to give and to send forth His Son”<sup>24</sup> to and for the world. In election, it is made known that the people of God are a “chosen race” and a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9) called out by God in this life and the

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<sup>23</sup> McCormack, *Grace and Being*, 107.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

life to come for a purpose. This purpose is to proclaim that to which they have been entrusted: “The divine word, the Word of Christ.”<sup>25</sup> By its witness to the world through ministries of speech and action, in love, the Church serves to make known the covenant promise of God’s election, available to all, through faith in Jesus Christ. The purpose of election is for the Church to be holy and blameless and to reveal the glory of God to the world. It is a vocation to witness. It is a call to proclaim the Word of God so that all the elect may be awakened to faith.

### **Sent: God’s Mission**

A theological school of thought that emerged from the last half of the twentieth century known as *Missio Dei* argues that understanding the missionary nature of God is critical in understanding the nature and purpose of the Church: “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.”<sup>26</sup> *Missio Dei* contends that because Jesus is both the One who is sent by the Father and the One who sends us into the world, that God is essentially a God who sends (also evidenced by the sending of the Holy Spirit). God is therefore, a missionary God. Mission is not just something God wants the Church to do, but rather, it is an essential part of who God is.

Since God is a missionary God, God’s people are (inherently) a missionary people. God calls, forms, equips and sends His people to be witnesses to his love and salvation for the world. “Our missionary activities are only authentic insofar as they

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<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3*, 607.

<sup>26</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

reflect participation in the mission of God.”<sup>27</sup> God did not create a mission for His Church, but rather a Church for His mission.

It is in this way that the nature and purpose of God informs the nature and purpose of the Church. The Church is not simply a voluntary association of like-minded individuals who share a common spiritual journey for a shared moral benefit. It is not, in the first instance, a sociological reality, but a theological reality. The being of the Church, in the Reformed tradition, is not the result of human action, but rather, the action of God. It is Jesus Christ who, by Word and Spirit, gathers, protects and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life. It is Jesus Christ who, through His work on the cross, gives rise to the work of His body. The Church is the creature of the triune God, created by the triune God for His purpose.

The problem is that many churches, including THC, have neglected their *Missio Dei* purpose and have grown inward rather than outward. They have shifted their spiritual, emotional, and physical energy toward institutional maintenance rather than gospel sent-ness. In so doing, they have failed to fulfill their calling to be sent by Jesus Christ into the world, which has created a language barrier between the Church and culture.

While this barrier has not (for the most part) been intentional, the problem is that “one of the fundamental realities of organizational life is that systems fossilize with time.”<sup>28</sup> Churches begin as movements. The event of Christ’s resurrection spawned a movement that changed the world. But “what began as unexplainable [the resurrection]

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 391

<sup>28</sup> Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 55.



became institutional.”<sup>29</sup> As the Church strengthened through the centuries, its theological focus became the salvation of the saved rather than God’s mission of the salvation of the world. “Over the centuries, the church became an institution rather than a movement and its energies were primarily directed towards maintenance rather than mission.”<sup>30</sup> The *ecclesia* of God became little more than an assembly hall: the place that managed the community’s relationship with God.

The reality for most churches is that when life in community becomes more focused on building funds, staff salaries, and membership satisfaction, the movement of the good news threatens to be reduced to a meeting of the good news club. It takes great intention to cultivate a *Missio Dei* mindset in particular churches. If *Missio Dei* is God’s mission to reintroduce Himself to and restore fellowship with his wayward offspring, and the local church exists as the vehicle of that mission, it seems the vehicle is in need of repair. For “God, too, desires something more than the conflicted, ill, and marginalized church that is common today.”<sup>31</sup> This necessarily means the Church must correct its course. The Church must change. It must reconnect with its true nature and purpose. It must turn outward in order to turn around, otherwise it risks losing the purpose of its election: its witness.

A key focus for THC will be to help the congregation understand the *telos* of *Missio Dei*: the world. The incarnation is the very life of God made available to the entire world: “For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). In other

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 17.

words, “The redemption achieved by Jesus Christ is [not only for the sake of human beings, but is] cosmic in the sense that it restores the whole creation.”<sup>32</sup> This world, which has been broken by the effect of human sinfulness, is itself the object of God’s redemptive action in Christ. As Romans 8:19-22 confirms, “all of creation participates in the drama of man’s fall and ultimate liberation in Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

The Church must itself be liberated. It must “receive back from Christ the practice of being the people of God he has called us to be.”<sup>34</sup> If the North American Church is to rediscover its nature and purpose, and reclaim and fulfill its gospel-mandated mission, it must begin with the Word of God. This is the primary mark of the Church; the mark that uniquely identifies it as the body of Christ, and from which all other marks flow. As Martin Luther contends, “even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a holy people must exist there, for God’s word cannot be without God’s people, and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s word.”<sup>35</sup> The Church must recommit to its proclamation of the Word. “People are dying, and can’t be exhorted... nagged back... entertained or massaged back to life again. They have to be raised from the dead,”<sup>36</sup> and this is only accomplished by the Word of God.

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<sup>32</sup> Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), viii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

The first Spirit-given gift to the Church was the gift of translation: “declaring the wonders of God” (Acts 2:11) in the language(s) of the people. If Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh for the purpose of translating the reconciling love of God to the world, then the proclamation of the Word is inherently incarnational. The incarnation is, essentially, an act of divine translation. If THC is going to recommit to its gospel mission it must seek to translate the Word into the particular cultural language to which it is sent.

### **Word-Flesh Contextualization**

Jesus Christ experienced the human condition through the cultural perspective of first century Galilee and Roman Judea. From his childhood, Jesus participated in the traditions of Second Temple Judaism: circumcised on the eighth day, schooled in the Scriptures along with his classmates, and trained in obedience to the Law of Moses. As an adult, it is known that Jesus was baptized, became an itinerant rabbi (with his own unique interpretation of the Law), chose disciples, attended religious festivals in Jerusalem and at least one memorable wedding in Galilee. While the Scriptural witness does not explicitly affirm his knowledge of carpentry, tradition would suggest that he knew something of his stepfather’s trade. Everything he taught, every person he loved, every miraculous sign he offered, and every argument he engaged in, was tethered to his particular cultural reality.

Jesus Christ is God’s Self-revelation through a specific Person living in a specific cultural context. In this way the incarnation is particular. But, if Jesus Christ is Lord of all, then it must be said that the incarnation is not only nested in culture, but also transcends culture. In other words, it is necessary to reconcile both the universality and

the particularity of the incarnation. This is made possible through the Word-flesh Christology of Chalcedon (two natures, one person, without confusion, division, separation, or change). “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14): Jesus Christ, one person, with two natures.

Jesus of Nazareth was a particular man living in a particular context, yet there is a universality of the incarnation that is able to transcend the particularity of human culture. If that were not so, the saving work of Jesus Christ would only be efficacious for those who share a common Jewish-ness with Jesus (rather than a common humanity). But according to the Scriptural witness, Jesus not only died for Israel, but for the world. God does not come to humanity as pure abstraction or philosophical construct, but at the same time, is not trapped in a particular cultural context. For, Christians do not simply affirm a Word-Jewish-male Christology, but a Word-flesh Christology.

God’s way to universality is through the particular. The Word-flesh model makes it clear that “the Subject who effected our redemption was not merely God in a [particular] human being, but rather God as a human being.”<sup>37</sup> The gospel is such good news because salvation through Jesus Christ is available to “all who call on the name of the Lord” (Acts 2:21). There is, in other words, a universal truth that is translated through the particularity of human culture. The gospel, then, is able to be at home in every cultural context without injury to its essential character because translation is its essential character. “The fact that we must express universal truth in a particular cultural context

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<sup>37</sup> McCormack, *Grace and Being*, 162.

does not mean that the truth itself is somehow lost or less universal.”<sup>38</sup> Jesus experienced the fullness of the human condition through the particularity of his cultural context.

The incarnation is God’s Self-communication to the world: the Eternal Word of God (the Logos) communicated in and through a specific human being (Jesus of Nazareth). Thus, the very nature of God is made known not through any human form, but a particular human form: God as a human being in Jesus Christ. The implication for the Church is that a properly formed Christology will serve as an important affirmation of the essential nature of the gospel (that it exists to be translated).

The truth is that there is no universal translation of the gospel for everyone in all cultures and times. As Paul describes his gospel translation across cultures, he says, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:22-23). The key to effective ministry in and through the local congregation is the skill of gospel translation. It “is a direct implication of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.”<sup>39</sup>

But, just like any translation, there is a danger of losing critical meaning in the movement between languages. It is not always a straightforward endeavor. It is as much an art as it is a science. For translation is not only about word-for-word accuracy between the original and the native languages, but an interpretive dialogue between the words on the page and the “tone, mood, attitude, feeling, [and] voice of a speaker.”<sup>40</sup> For example,

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<sup>38</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 93.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

to know the Father through Jesus Christ is not only to know what he said and did (text), but the cultural perspective in which he said and did it (context), and further, the application of that information as it pertains to a specific location in history (translation).

The true nature and purpose of Christ's Church is inextricably connected to its ability to perform ongoing Word-flesh translation that Tim Keller refers to as active contextualization.<sup>41</sup> Active contextualization is the mechanism of God's divine translation. It is the process of moving between text, context, and offering a culturally informed translation. God uses human culture (often repurposing it) to teach something true about God. This is true from both the divine side (God teaches) and the human side (humans teach about God).

An example of divine active contextualization begins in 1 Samuel 8 when Israel asks God for a king. While God saw this as a symptom of brokenness in the relationship between God and Israel in verse seven (they have rejected me as their king), God accommodated their request (along with warnings about the consequences). But then, God continues to use kingship not only as a continual object lesson in what it means to trust in the Kingship of God, but even attaches a divine promise to this human cultural activity. In 1 Chronicles 17:14, God promises to use the Davidic line of kings to rule over God's people forever. During what was perhaps Israel's darkest hour of exile, God used the prophet Isaiah (Is 11:10) to declare: "the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for all peoples." In Luke 1:32-33, God promises to Mary that Jesus "will be great and will be

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<sup>40</sup> Edward L. Greenstein, "Theories of Modern Bible Translation," *Prooftexts, Vol. 3, No. 1, Special Issue on Translation* (January 1983), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689053>, 12, accessed December 19, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 119.

called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." And all of this culminates in the Book of Revelation, where God uses the concept of kingship to describe God's ultimate reign and the reconciliation and consummation of all created reality through Jesus Christ, "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5).

Active contextualization, or translation, is not only an activity that occurs from the divine side, but also from the human side. Followers of Jesus Christ also seek to leverage human culture in order to say something true about God. This process emphasizes that although God views human cultural activity positively in a general sense, this does not mean that God approves of all human cultural activity. The gospel both affirms and challenges culture in order to redeem it.

The Great Commission is a call to translation: to leverage human culture in order to proclaim the gospel. Translation then, requires a robust understanding of both text and context. Failure to translate results from either: inadequate engagement with the original language, inadequate engagement with the native language, or inadequate dialogue between the two. In the case of the mainline denominational church in America and, specifically THC, it is a lack of all phases of translation that has contributed to its precipitous decline over the last fifty years.

### **Translation: Postmodern, Post-Christian**

Alan Roxburgh, in *Missional*, tells the story of a marine biologist who spoke to him about coral reefs around the world: "She said they are dying, all of them, and there is nothing anyone can do about it... I can continue to swim among them as if nothing has

changed... How do I get my head around the fact that in a generation they'll all be dead?"<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Roxburgh contends, the sociological reality of the institutional church in North America is that it is dying; yet many local congregations continue to swim as if nothing has changed. Moreover, if these churches continue to use the same ecosystem (e.g. methods, approach, cultural assumptions) in order to regenerate, they will inevitably fail.

Extending this analogy further, the reason the ecosystem is failing is because the ocean around it has changed. Similarly, many churches (THC included) operate under the assumptions of modernity, while the ocean has shifted, largely, to post-modernity. The way the American Church speaks and thinks about itself is still firmly rooted in a decaying Modern, ecclesiocentric ecosystem. In an increasingly postmodern world, where pluralism, tolerance, egalitarianism, and global community are venerated, Modernity is falling short in its ability to fully witness to the gospel (for both theological and sociological reasons). Yet, many are swimming as if nothing has changed.

This is, perhaps, exacerbated by the Christendom mindset that is pervasive in many of these churches. The relationship between Christendom and modernity is a symbiotic relationship of mutual feeding. Modern assumptions fuel Christendom and vice versa. Where Christendom thrived in the ocean of modernity, its "values, structures and models [have been] less appropriate ..."<sup>43</sup> in the changing postmodern waters, and has been decaying as a result. The ecclesiocentric view of religious participation coupled

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<sup>42</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.



with the primacy of institutional maintenance has been the biggest obstacle to the Church's continued faithfulness. It has led the Church to believe that it is the subject and object of the work of God in the world. As a result, the Church has become preoccupied with who is in and who is out (because the locus of God's redemptive work in the world is within the walls of the Church).

In our postmodern, post-Christendom world, the Church must engage in faithful gospel contextualization. "Whereas the classic church celebrates textual exegesis, the missional movement yearns for journalists who can tell us what God is up to today."<sup>44</sup> An example of such a spiritual journalist is Shane Claiborne, who founded The Simple Way in North Philadelphia. In response to an event that affected the homeless community, Claiborne translated the gospel into the language of culture by creating an intentional Christian community for and with the homeless:

"A rancher once explained that there are two ways to keep the cows in. One is to build lots of fences and gates. The other is to keep a really good source of food and water at the center of the ranch. Building a community is sort of like that. Rather than having too many fences and gates to hold people in or lock people out, we prefer having a good source of food at the center."<sup>45</sup>

As a result, The Simple Way has cultivated a gospel-informed community made possible by faithful active contextualization. Translation is a response to culture. It is born out of the desire to make the Word flesh for a particular people in a particular time and place. As a result, it leads to a translation that is culturally bound.

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<sup>44</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 141.

<sup>45</sup> The Simple Way, <http://www.thesimpleway.org/about>, accessed January 15, 2017.

Claiborne is a “Counterculturalist thinker, [who believes in] a life of simplicity, of material self-denial for the sake of charity, justice, and community.”<sup>46</sup> For him, the gospel translation to the homeless of North Philadelphia involves a strong criticism of capitalism and other Modern, Christendom values. He emphasizes “strong multiracial, cross-class Christian community; a simple lifestyle; practical engagement with the poor; contemplative spirituality; and a prophetic stance against big corporations...”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Claiborne lifts up gospel-informed themes and translates them into his context.

Faithful contextualization will necessarily lead to different ministry applications according to context. What is a faithful translation in North Philadelphia might be unintelligible in suburban New Jersey. “To contextualize with balance and successfully reach people in a culture, we must both enter the culture sympathetically and respectfully and confront the culture where it contradicts biblical truth.”<sup>48</sup> If THC is going to be successful in its contextualization of the gospel it must necessarily engage in both the Word and the culture.

The method for gospel contextualization at THC will be to create a theological vision statement: “a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history.”<sup>49</sup> This vision statement will provide an interpretive lens through which THC can apply its theological beliefs to its cultural context. “If you think of your doctrinal foundation as ‘hardware’ and of

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<sup>46</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 206.

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

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

ministry programs as ‘software,’ it is important to understand the existence of something called ‘middleware’<sup>50</sup> which makes communication between the two possible. A theological vision is a middleware, or in translation terms, it is the language of context that makes the application of the Word possible.

There are certainly many ministry expressions or applications that emerge directly from doctrinal commitments without any theological visioning. The reason is that the process is much more immediate. In fact, some of these expressions succeed at first because they are born from a particular cultural response to the gospel. The problem is that once the cultural context begins to change, these expressions become less effective over time. The further they are from the original cultural context, the more likely they will lose touch as ministry expressions. THC must begin, whether on an organizational level, or an individual level to ask questions that will help discern a theological vision: “What is the gospel, and how do we bring it to bear on the hearts of people today? What is this culture like, and how can we both connect to it and challenge it in our communication?”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 18.

PART THREE  
STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

## CHAPTER 4

### PLAN FOR DEVELOPING A THEOLOGICAL VISION

The overall goal of developing a theological vision for THC is to equip and empower elders and staff to translate the timeless truth of Jesus Christ into the language of culture. This will prepare them for more effective gospel contextualization in each of the ministry areas they lead. The strategy, while beginning with only fifteen elders and six staff members, will eventually permeate throughout the entire organization (through their leadership).

Effective gospel translation is a matter of discernment, and discernment is an activity of the Holy Spirit. Translation, therefore, requires an attunement to the movement of the Spirit. It is only through spiritual formation and the cultivation of spiritual practices that believers can “attest and approve what the will of God is” (Romans 12:2) and follow it accordingly. Discernment is a path of disciplined grace that quiets the “noise, hurry, and crowds”<sup>1</sup> of contemporary society and creates room to be still and know God.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 15.

The process of spiritual formation, just like gospel contextualization, is a Word-flesh endeavor; “it is God working in us and it is us working at growth.”<sup>2</sup> A well-conceived spiritual formation strategy should help increase spiritual receptivity for God’s transformative work. This program should aim to help our elders and staff discover how to make time and space for God. Consequently, our leaders must discover how to hear God’s voice in the midst of life’s noise, to build spiritual systems with which to connect with God anytime and anywhere.

Spiritual formation, throughout the biblical witness, is often described as the decision (both individual and communal) to turn toward God (e.g. Deuteronomy 30:17-18, Acts 3:19). This turning is always a matter of the heart, the degree to which one is willing to be shaped by, and reflect, the heart of God. If THC elders and staff have a desire to discern the will of God in their theological visioning and ministry expressions, they must first develop spiritual practices so they may turn their hearts toward God. This is precisely why the teaching and practice of ancient spiritual disciplines will be the hinge upon which our entire formation program will turn.

In the Great Commandment, there are two interconnected axes of love: the vertical (love of God) and the horizontal (love of neighbor). Just as these leaders turn toward God, they must also turn toward the culture to which they have been sent. This will necessarily include both an internal analysis of THC (e.g. history, strengths, core competencies, weaknesses) as well as an external analysis of the Greater Red Bank community. This will help identify the cultures in the community (e.g. generational, ethnic, affinity) and examine both opportunities for outreach and threats to ministry that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 12.

are beyond THC's direct control. As a result, this strategy will utilize a two-pronged approach of spiritual formation and cultural engagement.

### **Strategy Goals and Content**

The strategy goals of the theological vision process are to cultivate spiritual practices with elders and staff, train them for faithful gospel contextualization, and help them develop and implement a theological vision statement that serves as a catalyst for congregational revitalization. The cultivation of spiritual practices will be developed through two distinct modules that emphasize individual, small group, and congregational learning. The beating heart of the program will be a twelve-week small group experience with elders and staff that culminates in a three-part retreat. The first seven weeks will feature one spiritual discipline (as seen in Richard Foster's *The Celebration of Discipline*) that will be experienced both cognitively and behaviorally with the goal of accomplishing an affective result: transformation by the Word of God.

A seven-part sermon series (incorporating the spiritual formation portion of the small group sessions) will run in sync with the small groups, featuring the spiritual practices and allowing time in the worship service to engage in each practice. This will not only strengthen the effectiveness of the weekly topic for elders and staff, but also begin the conversation of spiritual formation and gospel contextualization in the congregation.

Engaging spiritual practices in worship will not simply offer bullet points or fill-in-the-blanks for the congregation to complete but, rather, a personal and communal reflection time that elicits a response. Each week when speaking about an individual

discipline, there will be five minutes built into the service for the congregation to silently practice that discipline (if applicable) or pray about how they could incorporate that discipline into their lives.

After the first seven weeks, the remaining five weeks will focus on identifying the cultural context of THC and the process of gospel contextualization that will culminate in the development of a theological vision statement and the opportunity to apply it to a key ministry challenge. The ministry challenge will be cultivated and identified through our church consultant, Dr. Bob Whitesel, and his team prior to the launch of the program. This will necessarily include congregational assessment through historical information, task forces, and a SWOT analysis. Hiring special leadership for this portion of the process will help alleviate the pressure on the pastoral staff (who are already leading the weekly sessions). Dr. Whitesel will also lead the final retreat so the pastors can participate in the vision process.

The flow of the program will move generally from inner contemplation to outer expression (particularly aided by the disciplines). This pattern is mirrored in the movement between text, context, and gospel translation. In order to keep the number of participants an effective small group number, the elders and staff will meet separately (although follow the same curriculum) but will participate in the retreat together to work on the specific ministry expression (key obstacle). The following section represents a weekly overview of the program.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for a fuller sampling of the program.



## Small Group and Sermon Themes Overview

The discipline of prayer is foundational in our relationship with God and “the central avenue God uses to transform us.”<sup>4</sup> Prayer, as it is currently practiced (corporately) at THC, is most noticeably brief, rote, and focused almost exclusively on the sick and dying. Equipping and coaching the church to pray, and to invite God into their circumstance, is of critical transformative importance. Without prayer, there will be no gospel contextualization, theological vision, or revitalization.

The sermon will focus on Jesus’ teaching about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:5-13), which emphasized that prayer is about the heart. The problem is that THC’s corporate prayer has turned Jesus’ example (the Lord’s Prayer) into a rote, exercise of memory rather than a model for inviting God into their lives. The Lord’s Prayer, however, is meant to be highly practical: a template for communicating with God. Jesus modeled this prayer template in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46), as he invited the Father into his circumstance—into the pain and uncertainty and sorrow of his life.

The goal of the sermon will be to help broaden the congregation’s perception of prayer, and begin moving that perception from a rote exercise to a personal invitation. At the conclusion of the sermon, the congregation will be invited into a five-minute reflection using *The Prayer of Examen*.<sup>5</sup> This exercise will challenge and equip them to invite God to enter into every aspect of their lives. Likewise, the first small group class will use *The Prayer of Examen* as the primary focus activity, in order to reinforce the

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<sup>4</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix.

practice. By cultivating this first spiritual discipline, participants will begin to consider how prayer informs faithful gospel contextualization.

The dialogue between prayer and contextualization will begin with the pre-class assignment: a viewing of the film, “End of the Spear” (2005). This film tells the true story of five American missionaries who attempt to evangelize the Waodani people of Ecuador in 1956. Participants will be asked to view the film and consider in what ways it speaks to the relationship between Christ, culture, and the translation of the gospel. The key theological point of the first class will be to emphasize the relationship between prayer and faithful gospel translation.

### **Week 2: Study**

The second week of the program will focus on the discipline of study. Study recognizes the importance of loving Jesus with one’s mind as well as one’s heart and strength. The truth is: “Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us... Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.”<sup>6</sup> While study involves the reading of theological works such as Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the greatest need at THC, and “among Christians today is simply the reading of large portions of scripture.”<sup>7</sup> For many at THC, their understanding of scripture is frozen in time—at whatever point of development they reached during their Sunday school years. This has led to a biblical illiteracy in the congregation that has been difficult to overcome.

Indeed, if there is no text, there is no faithful contextualization. The sermon will use Psalm 119:9-16 as a starting point to help the congregation consider developing a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 71.

system of communication with God. This system can be constructed by using disciplines that help create time and space to hear God’s voice. If prayer is about inviting God in, then scripture study is about God inviting us in. By studying God’s Word, one can hear God’s call and discern where Jesus bids to come. “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word” (Psalm 119:9). After the sermon, the congregation will again be invited to participate in a sermon reflection. They will have the opportunity to discover the *Inductive Bible Study Method*<sup>8</sup> by using the Psalm 119 text. The goal will be for each member to learn the inductive method as a tool for personal scripture study.

Since the overall small group goal is both about cultivating spiritual practices and faithful gospel contextualization, the curriculum will reflect this two-pronged approach—often using the first to focus on the second. For example, the small group will begin with the TED Talk: “*David Gallo: Underwater Astonishments*: David Gallo shows jaw-dropping footage of amazing sea creatures, including a color-shifting cuttlefish, a perfectly camouflaged octopus, and a Times Square's worth of neon light displays from fish who live in the blackest depths of the ocean.”<sup>9</sup> The class will then use the inductive method to consider Genesis 1-2 as a fundamental affirmation that God’s creation is inherently good. Creation, despite its brokenness, remains fundamentally good because of the Supreme Goodness of the God who creates, sustains, and ultimately redeems it. The purpose of this affirmation is to frame human cultural activity as a reflection of the residual goodness of God. In other words, human culture is not a product of the fall, but

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> David Gallo, “Underwater Astonishments,” <http://www.ted.com>, accessed on December 8, 2016.

rather, is something God wishes to redeem and restore to its created intent. This helps re-frame the relationship between church and culture as something primarily positive.

### **Week 3: Fasting**

The third week of the program will focus on the discipline of fasting. Refraining from food or drink has no intrinsic spiritual effect, but combined with the first two disciplines of prayer and study can amplify God's voice in our lives. Fasting, in other words, is a catalyst discipline. The primary reason for this is that fasting "reminds us that we are sustained 'by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matt. 4:4). Food does not sustain us; God sustains us."<sup>10</sup> If we want a greater focus on God's kingdom and righteousness, fasting can be a powerful tool in our journey.

"More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us."<sup>11</sup> This may even include a misuse of the disciplines themselves. Sometimes, we seek to use good things like spiritual disciplines in order to serve our own ends. Fasting, however, helps us identify where religion has become hollow and relationship needs to be fostered.

The sermon will engage this discipline through Jesus' experience in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11, 6:16-18). Scripture study and prayer sometimes need a catalyst. There is perhaps no discipline that generates greater focus on God than fasting. Jesus was about to embark on the most important mission in human history. If he was going to see it through (torture, crucifixion, death, God abandonment) he needed to be profoundly focused. Fasting provided great focus for his understanding of scripture and prepared him for spiritual adversity.

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<sup>10</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

During this week's sermon reflection, the congregation will be invited to prayerfully consider how to use the discipline of fasting in their lives, through a bulletin insert that explains the practice (Adapted from: *A Simple Guide to Fasting* by James Rene).<sup>12</sup> They will be encouraged to begin with a partial twenty-four hour fast and choose one particular life issue that requires a deeper level of prayer. They will be also be encouraged to keep a fasting journal to track the experience of focused prayer in the midst of physical discomfort.

The small group, in turn, will focus on fasting and encourage members to participate. In preparation for the class, they will also be invited to watch the film, "Crash" (2004). This film follows several interweaving stories that take place over two-days in Los Angeles. The film addresses the problems of racism, classism, and sexism, all in an attempt to bring out the issues facing today's society. This film explores the relationship between what is true, what is racist, what is good and what is bad, and the line that is sometimes blurred between them. Participants will be asked to preview this film and to track places where God's goodness can be affirmed through the actions of the characters.

This film, along with Richard Mouw's *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, will introduce the theological concept of common grace. This concept affirms that there exists a common operation of the Holy Spirit to both believers and unbelievers alike: a non-salvific grace that permeates all reality and affirms that goodness (and wickedness) can be found in all God's creation. The purpose of affirming common

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<sup>12</sup> James Rene, "A Simple Guide to Fasting," <http://www.pcctoday.com/fasting/>, accessed on February 2, 2016.

grace is to follow up with the previous week's theme about culture in general to specific intersections between today's culture and the goodness of God. If the congregation believes that human culture is the enemy, or antithetical to the kingdom of God, it will not be able to successfully contextualize the gospel to it. Rather, it will only attempt to destroy or replace it.

#### **Week 4: Solitude**

Solitude is perhaps the most straightforward spiritual practice, and yet the noise of cultural activity tends to limit its feasibility in everyday life. It is more than finding a quiet place away from the noise (although that will undoubtedly help), but a state of heart-rest in the peace of Christ. It is attuning the heart to hear the gentle whisper of God. It is this discipline that is perhaps the most difficult for our THC families to practice due to the frenetic pace of their lives.

The sermon will reflect on 1 Kings 19:1-13 and Elijah's experience of hearing God's voice at the mouth of the cave. Elijah attuned his heart to hear God's voice through solitude. Likewise, Jesus consistently practiced solitude in order to listen to the Father. The congregation, then, will primarily be encouraged to consider what it looks like to "take advantage of 'little solitudes' that fill our day,"<sup>13</sup> as well as consider longer periods of solitude and silence. The sermon reflection will feature a viewing of the *Nooma* video "Noise" by Rob Bell, as a primer on solitude.

Prior to the small group class, participants will also be encouraged to view "Into Great Silence" (2005), a film that examines life inside the Grande Chartreuse, a

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<sup>13</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 105.

monastery of the Carthusian Order. The film will open a discussion regarding the rhythm of life and the busyness that sometimes prevents solitude or drowns out the silence. The small group will then consider their specific rhythm of life and how to adjust it in order to hear God's voice.

The key theological point will be to introduce the topic of sphere sovereignty. Participants will engage in a focus activity designed to identify and list the independent spheres (e.g. family, work, church, civic) in which they live and their discreet roles in each sphere (e.g. mom, boss, deacon, coach). While these spheres of life seem to be competing for time with God, the truth is that God is already present in each sphere (as each sphere of life belongs to God). The key is finding and feeding the kingdom of God as it consists in each of life's spheres—to use solitude to connect with God's rhythm in each sphere of life.

### **Week 5: Simplicity**

The spiritual practice of simplicity is the first of the outward disciplines—disciplines that require outward expression in order to be fulfilled. The goal of simplicity is “to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of His kingdom first and then everything necessary will come in its proper order.”<sup>14</sup> It is an exercise in becoming conscious of material addictions, reigning in consumption, and struggling through it as a community.

This discipline may be difficult for THC, a church filled with successful people, living successful lives, defined (in general) by a sometimes-idolatrous attachment to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 86.

wealth. It is true that “contemporary culture lacks both the inward reality and the outward life-style of simplicity.”<sup>15</sup> The challenge will be to use the sermon and small group class to consider consumerist attachment to wealth and to find practical, straightforward steps in fostering greater simplicity.

The sermon will use Matthew 6:19-24 from the Sermon on the Mount to discuss the damage the desire for wealth can cause. Today’s culture displays an incessant desire to upgrade (e.g. possessions, relationships) revealing a perpetual dissatisfaction with life. The spiritual impact of consumerism and materialism has distorted the concept of blessing and has fostered a false sense of need. The sermon reflection will be a prayer exercise adapted from chapter six of Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*,<sup>16</sup> designed to identify and expose the personal behaviors that lead to, or flow from, consumerism.

The pre-class preparation will be to incorporate three minutes of solitude time into each day (from the previous week) and prepare to share about the experience. The class will then discuss the prayer exercise from the sermon reflection regarding cultivating a life of simplicity. The key theological point will be to lift up the tension between consumerism and God’s cultural mandate: that human cultural activity is part of God’s original creative purpose for humanity. Because human culture has been corrupted by sin, it can tear down that which God is building up. This is an important step in understanding faithful gospel contextualization because the gospel must have a positive view of culture while simultaneously confronting it when necessary.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix.



## Week 6: Humility and Service

There is a big difference between providing acts of service, and being a servant in the likeness of Jesus Christ. Acts of service are often forms of “self-righteous service [that are] affected by moods and whims. [They] can serve only when there is a ‘feeling’ to serve.”<sup>17</sup> True service, however, is about an orientation based on the servanthood of Christ. Service is a byproduct of genuine Christ-like humility.

The importance of developing genuine humility is paramount because it is only when one is truly humble that they can most identify with Jesus. Jesus’ followers are called to practice God-sized humility. There is a reason it feels good to serve others and treat them better than ourselves: we are designed that way. If THC is to cultivate the discipline of humility, we must follow Paul’s exhortation to have the same mind as Christ.

The sermon will use Philippians 2:1-15 to emphasize Paul’s encouragement to cultivate the discipline of humility. Humility is the difference between being full of oneself and being full of God. If people always act in their own self-interests, if they lack humility, they become incapable of obedience. Christ-followers must be teachable, trainable, and willing to let God shape their lives: they must empty themselves and allow God to fill them with His Spirit. Paul implores believers to “have the same mind as Christ” (v 5) in their relationships with one another, “not looking to [our] own interests but... to the interests of others” (v 4).

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<sup>17</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 129.

The congregation will be led through a sermon reflection that uses an ancient prayer known as the Humility Prayer (adapted from the work of Neil Babcox<sup>18</sup>) as a practical exercise of self-emptying in the way of Christ. They will be instructed to pray slowly, with an intentional pause after each line. Moreover, they will be encouraged to listen for and focus on the phrase that most connects to something going on in their life at the moment.

The small group pre-class assignment will be to view the film, “La La Land” (2017). This film is about an aspiring actress who falls in love with an aspiring jazz musician. The film questions whether true love or fame and success is the key to happiness. The class will be asked to preview the film and consider the ways in which it elucidates sphere sovereignty by considering the way(s) God’s hand is present even in what seems like a very secular story. It will also serve as a connection between the need for Christ-like humility and the process of effective gospel contextualization. In order to engage the culture, one must be willing to recognize the places where God is already present.

Participants will focus again on the Humility Prayer, and discuss the ways in which humility is a prerequisite for evangelism. It is only through genuine Christ-like humility that one can enter into culture with the gospel. Without humility, gospel contextualization becomes increasingly difficult (perhaps impossible) because effective translation requires genuine listening. Active contextualization involves a three-part

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<sup>18</sup> “Humility Prayer,” [http://www.southridgeworship.com/humility\\_prayer.htm](http://www.southridgeworship.com/humility_prayer.htm), accessed on December 15, 2013.

process: entering the culture, challenging the culture, and then appealing to culture. It is most effective when done in humility.

### **Week 7: Worship**

Worship is more than attending a service; it is a lifestyle (a very difficult concept for many at THC). As Romans 12:1 puts it, our spiritual act of worship is to become “living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God.” Worship is the glue that holds spiritual formation together—a continuing confession that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). As we commit our lives to Christ in worship, we are forgiven and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do God’s will.

The sermon will use Daniel 3:13-27 as a means to elucidate the nature and power of worship. The connecting point for THC is for the congregation to then consider practical methods for infusing worship into daily life beyond Sunday mornings. Moreover, worship itself at THC has become such a passive and safe endeavor, that it fails to reflect a holy expectancy. In ancient times, there was nothing safe or passive about worship. Moses used to meet with God and his face would shine so brightly that he had to wear a veil over his face so people would not be frightened. Many times people would come too close to God’s presence and drop dead. When God showed up, there was some very real danger involved. At THC, we need to develop a holy expectancy again—that God is going to show up.

Developing a lifestyle of expectancy is a byproduct of genuine worship. Cultivating a lifestyle of worship will be the focus of the sermon reflection exercise using

Richard Foster's *Steps into Worship*<sup>19</sup> adapted from *Celebration of Discipline*. Worship is a recalibration of our heart to God's heart—placing God above all things and seeing God's activity in daily life. Faithful gospel contextualization will necessarily flow from a lifestyle of worship.

The pre-class preparation will include *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, by Richard Mouw, which will be in dialogue with “Your Love Is a Song” by *Switchfoot*, from the album: *Hello Hurricane*. The group will listen to the song (with lyrics handed out) and discuss the ways in which it reflects God's reclamation of creation and themes of common grace, sphere sovereignty, and gospel translation. This discussion will emphasize the key theological point: that God not only actively contextualizes human culture, but is reclaiming and repurposing culture to fulfill its original created intent: the glorification (and worship) of God.

### **Week 8: Meditation**

Although the sermon series will have ended, the small group curriculum will continue (as the focus begins to turn toward crafting a theological vision for THC) with the discipline of meditation. “Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word.”<sup>20</sup> In this session, participants will practice: “the meditation of Scripture [that] centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage [where] the written Word becomes a living word addressed to you.”<sup>21</sup> Using *Lectio Divina* to read Matthew 26:6-13, the story of the woman with the alabaster jar,

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

participants will discover how to engage in Christian meditation. The class will consider the ways in which the discipline of meditation is a means by which God translates the gospel into our lives. Before we can share the good news, we must experience the good news, for it is impossible to share what has not been experienced.

As it pertains to translating the gospel to others, the pre-class preparation will include a portion of *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* by Luc Ferry. This book will serve as a primer for understanding the influence of philosophy on the New Testament and a helpful tool in understanding the Word-flesh Christology of Chalcedon. The key theological point will be to affirm that Greek enculturation of the gospel is an example of how the gospel is contextualized for each particular culture. The incarnation itself is an act of divine translation: the universal truth of Jesus Christ translated through the particularity of human culture. The gospel is at home in every cultural context without injury to its essential character because translation is its essential character.

The class will then view *Most* (2003), a 30-minute award-winning foreign film that tells the story of a father who takes his son to work with him at a railroad drawbridge. The father, the bridge-operator, does not see that his son has become stuck in the bridge apparatus just as a train is about to cross. The father is then faced with a terrible choice: to lower the bridge and kill his son or leave it raised and derail the train, killing everyone on board. In agony, the father lowers the bridge. The passengers on the train pass over the bridge, oblivious to the sacrifice made on their behalf. After viewing *Most*, participants will discuss: the ways in which this film is an allegory of the

relationship between Christ and culture and how the gospel is translated and proclaimed through this particular film.

### **Week 9: Confession and Introduction to Theological Visioning**

Confession is perhaps the most difficult discipline for members of THC, primarily “because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners.”<sup>22</sup> While confession is certainly a private matter, it is clearly a shared discipline that requires trust, prayer, and grace. Since this is a sensitive and difficult practice, each group member will spend time in individual silent confession, and will be assigned a prayer partner for the closing retreat. During the retreat, partners will be asked to confess and pray together.

Confession is a gateway to discernment, and discernment is the starting point for developing a theological vision. Prior to the class, participants will be asked to preview the “Center Church Theological Vision” by Tim Keller<sup>23</sup> and be prepared to discuss the purpose of developing a theological vision for ministry. This is the heavy lifting of the translation process that enables the interpretive movement between text and application, doctrinal foundations and ministry practices. It is the lens through which we view the application of theological beliefs at a particular point in time. As an example, the group will engage in a focus activity, “Fish or Cut Bait?”<sup>24</sup> The group will be asked to articulate the theological vision of Cascades Community Church and how the further development

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>23</sup> Tim Keller, “Center Church Theological Vision,” <http://www.centerchurch.com>, accessed December 15, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Anderson, *A Case Book for Theological Reflection: A Study Guide for Theological Students* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theology Seminary, 1994), 1-2.

of that vision could impact their particular context. This activity will give participants some non-threatening practice (since it is about another church) identifying the importance of creating a theological vision for THC.

### **Week 10: The Role of Election in Theological Visioning**

The doctrine of election flows from the sure foundation of God. Election proclaims that God has sent forth the Church to partner in God's worldwide restoration project. By its witness to the world through faithful gospel contextualization, the Church serves to make known the covenant promise of God's election, available to all, through faith in Jesus Christ. This faithful contextualization will require members of THC to engage in cultural sifting: determining the spiritual pain points of the greater Red Bank community in order to see where the gospel can come to bear in the lives of the people. Participants will be led through a discussion on election from Calvin to Barth in order to begin to understand the *Missio Dei*.

Prior to the class, participants will be encouraged to watch *Into the Wild* (2007). This film follows the journey of 22-year-old Christopher McCandless who decides to walk away from his privileged yet tormented life in search of adventure. Confronted with his own mortality, he comes to realize a profound truth: Happiness is only real when shared. Participants will split into pairs and be asked to dig deeper into the Chris McCandless story by listing the ways in which he is a product of his cultural reality. They will then consider the ways in which Jesus would attempt to speak into this reality. Emerging from the findings of the focus activity, each pair will be encouraged to name and pray for the cultural barriers that prevent people from hearing the good news of God's gracious election for all who believe.

### **Week 11: Theological Visioning and the *Missio Dei* (Part 1)**

Following the previous class discussion on election, participants will discuss the meaning and purpose of *Missio Dei*. The Church is called to partner with God's mission to and for the world through faithful gospel contextualization, made possible by an effective theological vision. In order to begin developing this vision, participants in the group will begin a SWOT analysis of THC. The pre-class preparation will include reading THC's *2010 Long-Range Plan*, *2008 Vision for the Hill Campaign*, the *2016 Mission and Vision*, and *2016 Faith Forward Campaign* materials.

The class will also spend time discussing their personal faith journeys, specifically how God made them new and who God used to bring them to faith. In the large group, each individual will share one word that represents their gratitude (summarizing their faith story) to God for bringing them to faith. The purpose of this exercise is to build a bridge between *Missio Dei* and their personal faith experience.

### **Week 12: Theological Visioning and the *Missio Dei* (Part 2)**

Prior to the class, participants will be invited to view *Simon Birch* (1998), which tells the story of a young boy with physical deficiencies who believes that God has a specific purpose for him. Using the Book of Ruth as a connecting point, the class will discuss finding one's God-given purpose. The key theological affirmation is that each individual has been uniquely gifted to serve the Body of Christ as it seeks to fulfill *Missio Dei*. For members of THC, this means identifying and using their gifts in order to develop a theological vision statement and execute faithful contextualization.

Faithful *Missio Dei* living is not necessarily about out-of-the-ordinary, dramatic examples of service but rather the faithful execution of mundane tasks. Doing what God



wants in everyday life has everything to do with noticing and responding to the pull of the Holy Spirit. As a practical exercise, the small group will be invited to engage in a prayer walk around Red Bank.<sup>25</sup>

### **Prior to the Retreat**

Between the prayer walk and the retreat, leaders will continue to engage the community by identifying some of the different cultures in the community (e.g. generational, ethnic, affinity) and examine both opportunities for outreach and threats to ministry that are beyond our direct control. It will be important in this process to canvas non-church members, including but not limited to: parents of Tower Hill Preschool,<sup>26</sup> patrons at Starbucks (Red Bank and Shrewsbury), No Joe's Café (Red Bank), Sickles Market (Little Silver), and students at Monmouth University and Brookdale Community College.

### **Closing Retreat: The Application of Translation**

This retreat will utilize solitude, service, silence, spiritual direction, teaching, meditation on scripture, meditation on creation, and community activities in an effort to discern God's will in the application of the program's theological foundations. It is designed for listening for the direction of the Holy Spirit in the development of a theological vision statement and its use in a specific ministry expression.

Prior to the retreat, participants will be given, and encouraged to read, Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. While these practices will be incorporated in the flow of the retreat, the discipline of guidance will involve the

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>26</sup> Tower Hill School is our cooperative preschool. It is a secular school that shares resources and oversight by the congregation. The Director is a full time member of the THC staff.

opportunity for group and individual spiritual direction. Also, the discipline of celebration will be reserved for the final session. The goal of these disciplines will be to attune THC's leaders to both God's heart and the pulse of the community in order to develop a theological vision statement that will inform gospel application.

Participants at the retreat will be given opportunities in both group and individual settings to discern the three-part active contextualization process as described by Keller. After the vision statement is complete, they will use it as a lens through which to view the key obstacle or specific ministry expression: inadequate space in the building for children's Sunday school. After the retreat, elders and staff will be given a rubric that helps apply the theological vision statement to each particular ministry area, thus allowing for and encouraging effective contextualization.

### **Target Population and Leadership**

The primary participants in this theological vision process are not selected based on representation, generation, gender, interest, or even gifting. Rather, they are selected based on their status as currently serving elders. This reflects our polity (elder and minister shared authority) where fifteen elders serve for three-year terms and are responsible for the oversight and spiritual leadership of the church. Each elder is also the chair of his or her ministry team (e.g. Children's, Youth, Missions, Worship) and will play a key role in facilitating and shaping the overall ministry and direction of THC.

While the elders bear responsibility and authority, they also employ a staff to run specific ministry areas as well. These are the frontline ambassadors for the mission and vision of the church as they perform their discrete ministry tasks. Although THC employs

a staff of over twenty (plus an additional twenty in the preschool), only the director-level staff will participate in this process. The reason for this is twofold: in order to keep the size of the group manageable and effective and to delegate the continued staff vision-casting to these leaders, creating broader leadership support.

Leadership will be the biggest challenge to the success of this process. While the process will depend upon the three pastors (Senior Pastor, Associate Pastor for Spiritual Formation, and part-time Teaching Pastor) for most of the facilitation of the small group sessions, the goal is to equip the elders and staff to carry this process out to the congregation as they do their ministry work. As such, the twelve small group sessions of the program will be co-led by the pastoral staff. However, the pastors and an outside facilitator will lead the closing retreat. While the pastors will lead the overall flow of the retreat, the facilitator will lead each of the working sessions. It will be important to hire an outside facilitator so that the pastors can engage in the process together with the elders and staff. In turn, the leaders at the retreat will discuss how to run their ministry teams at THC through the theological vision statement.

Like many mission and vision statements, there is very real danger of it becoming an intellectual exercise rather than a heart transformation that translates to the hands and feet. “Once this vision is in place, with its emphases on values, it [can lead] church leaders to make good decisions on how to worship, disciple, evangelize, serve, and engage culture in their field of ministry,”<sup>27</sup> but not without great intention and

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<sup>27</sup> Tim Keller, “Center Church Theological Vision,” <http://www.centerchurch.com>, accessed December 15, 2016.

persistence. The development of a theological vision statement will require a well-conceived plan for implementation.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The effectiveness of the theological vision statement will be evaluated by how well it guides the leaders through an existing key obstacle facing the church, as identified by the sixty-day congregational needs-assessment. The timing of the twelve-week theological vision development program will take into consideration THC's program year, cultural context, and seasonal fluctuations in attendance patterns. It will include an overnight training retreat for the pastoral staff for prayer and preparation leading up to the first week's launch. This process will be dependent upon a clear communication and implementation plan. The vision will take "make judgments on some aspects of the past and present, including, where necessary, core values and practices, while envisioning a more desirable future for the congregation."<sup>28</sup>

The pre-program timeline (April-August 2017) will be critical in determining the key obstacle and providing time for the organizational analysis. The congregational needs assessment will seek to reveal the key ministry challenge that is preventing THC from greater *Missio Dei* effectiveness. This will be the subject of the first application of the theological vision statement during the closing retreat in January 2018. The needs

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman et al, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 184.

assessment will necessarily include an historical analysis, and SWOT analysis led by church consultant, Dr. Bob Whitesel.

It will be critical during this pre-program time to make all necessary book orders, prepare participant folders, and small group handouts assembled by the pastoral and administrative staff. Additionally, Harvey Cedars Bible Conference in Harvey Cedars, NJ will be booked for January 2018, as well as the staff conference room for the small group program on Sundays at 12 p.m. and Tuesdays at 9 a.m. On August 25-26, 2017, the pastoral staff will gather for an overnight retreat at Princeton Theological Seminary, in order to pray, discuss resources, materials, schedule, leadership responsibilities, and early analysis of the key obstacle.

The sermon series and small groups will begin on September 10, 2017 and conclude December 3, 2017 (taking a break during Thanksgiving week). In order to both maximize effectiveness and time available for the elders to meet, the small group will be held with lunch, at 12 p.m. on Sundays. The staff group will meet Tuesday mornings at 9 a.m., prior to weekly staff meetings. The closing retreat will take place on January 12-14, 2018 at Harvey Cedars Bible Conference.

The post-program timeline will be just as important as the program itself. During the following Session meetings on January 16 and February 20, elders and pastors will apply the vision statement to ministry areas identified by the elders. By going through the process as a group, it will help elders perform this work with their ministry teams moving forward. Additionally, in all session meetings thereafter, a twenty-minute time block will be designated for continued conversation around the vision process within ministry teams and the church in general as they surface.

## Leadership Development

One of the greatest challenges in the vision development process will be to anticipate and respond to change reactions amongst both the staff and elders. It will be critically important for the pastors to use the process as a means of not only educating, but building consensus around the ministry needs of THC. Awareness of how people react to change will be vitally important to recognize and understand as leaders. Some elders (and perhaps staff) will actively react to change and either take steps to leave or voice their concerns. If leaders are preparing to leave in response to change, pastors will need to actively listen for the root of the problem, agree to address the problem, create a possible solution (with a timeline), and then give them permission to either voice their concern or exit.

Additionally, some leaders may passively react to change and either remain loyal (permitting the problem to linger), or neglect the problem as if it does not exist. While there is not much that can be done with these reactions, the pastoral staff can help neutralize some of them by preaching, teaching, and speaking to potential concerns before they are raised. The pastoral staff must begin by championing the process, continually lifting up the narrative of THC and its mission to the community. They must become habitual storytellers of *Missio Dei* as it is discovered in the life of the church.

Stories provide windows into the human experience evoking visceral reactions. They have the ability to capture the imagination and attention in a way that no other human communication does. When someone shares their deepest fears, longings, and joys in life, their deepest emotions, they tend to choose narratives over principles. This is because the primary framework in which the drama of life is viewed and the mode of

communication that is finally capable of bearing the weight of our deepest emotion is that of story. The pastors must constantly tell the stories of gospel transformation (of both individuals and the congregation) at THC to celebrate and inspire the work of the process.

Pastoral staff training and cohesion will be critical throughout the theological vision process. As a means of solidifying relationships, the pastors will register for the Orange Conference in Atlanta, GA on April 26-28, 2017. While the act of attending a conference builds a sense of community, it will also begin to forge a shared ministry vision (based on engaging in a common message) for THC. Hopefully, this will serve as a catalyst for the pastors to spiritually and emotionally prepare for the theological vision program.

After the conference, the pastors will read Tim Keller's *Center Church* together and engage in online discussion questions available from Redeemer's City-to-City resources.<sup>29</sup> Then, they will read Richard Foster's *The Celebration of Discipline*, because it is critically important for the pastors to engage in the spiritual disciplines prior to teaching them. Between April and August, one hour prior to weekly staff meetings, the pastors will engage in the material, priming them for gospel contextualization and spiritual formation.

One of the primary goals of the process, however, is to develop the leadership capability of both elders and staff. This development will be a product of the theological vision process. The program itself is a training to equip leaders to engage in effective

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<sup>29</sup> Redeemer City to City, <https://learn.redeemercitytocity.com/library/by/category/center-church/>, accessed February 3, 2017.



gospel contextualization. While it is not likely that all leaders will engage with equal enthusiasm and commitment, the momentum generated by the twenty participants and three pastors will hopefully act as a catalyst for congregational revitalization. In order to realize this goal, we must “create a learning environment where all leaders become reproductive leaders.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Resources: Facilities**

Most of the facility needs are simply a matter of reserving the conference room in the church. It is fully equipped with sound, conference phone, white board, and a flat screen monitor with Blu-ray and DVD capabilities and computer HDMI inputs. Both of the retreat opportunities will involve reserving rooms at both Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, NJ (pastors only) and Harvey Cedars Bible Conference (pastors, staff, elders, and church consultant) in Harvey Cedars, NJ.

### **Resources: Written Materials**

Wolters, Albert M. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. 2nd ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005 (\$10.70)

Mouw, Richard J. *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002 (\$15.50)

Mouw, Richard J. *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*. Revised. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002 (\$10.51)

Keller, Timothy J. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012 (\$26.88)

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978 (\$13.54)

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<sup>30</sup> Whitesel, *Cure for the Common Church* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 116.

Ferry, Luc. *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*. Original. Harper Perennial, 2011 (\$9.89)

Read THC's *2010 Long-Range Plan*, *2008 Vision for the Hill Campaign*, the *2016 Mission and Vision*, and *2016 Faith Forward Campaign* materials.

### **Budget**

**Weekly lunches for eighteen people for twelve weeks:** \$2,400

**Books:** Six books each for twenty people: \$1,750

**Folders:** Twenty folders: \$20

**Church consultant, Dr. Bob Whitesel:** Two-year contract: \$3,000 plus expenses (\$5,000)

**Princeton Theological Seminary:** Pastor Continuing Education: \$0

**Harvey Cedars Bible Conference:** Eighteen guests for two nights, including meals: \$300 each (\$6,000)

**The Orange Conference:** Pastor Continuing Education: \$0

**Total Budget: \$15,470**

### **Additional Personnel**

Since the staff, elders, and pastors are all engaged in the process, there are only a few other personnel needed. The first, and largest financial obligation, is the two-year consultation contract with Dr. Bob Whitesel. This will perhaps be the largest investment made for the sake of the theological vision development. Dr. Whitesel's ability to rapidly make an assessment of THC and report his findings to the leaders will not only save time, but take pressure off of the pastoral staff. Other than the church consultant, custodial staff and administrative staff will need to be scheduled in order to facilitate lunches,

coordinate hospitality service for the meetings, and make copies and process paperwork necessary for the program.

### **Evaluation Process**

The danger with a theological vision statement (or any vision statement) is that it can easily be ignored. While there is some merit in the process itself, it is the product's effectiveness that must be measured. The theological vision must be “institutionalized [into] the life of the congregation—in its structure, processes, and programs.”<sup>31</sup> The only way to make it a part of the DNA of the church is to be intentional. This will require the development of evaluation rubrics that keep THC leaders accountable to the theological vision for years to come.

During the course of his two-year consultation, Dr. Whitesel will lead workshops based on site-visit observations and data collected to help pastors, elders, and staff analyze the effectiveness of particular ministry expressions and areas of ongoing need. These workshops will be held three times per year for a total of six. His evaluation rubric, the Parish Profile Inventory,<sup>32</sup> will help THC leaders to continue the evaluation process long after his contract expires.

After the theological vision statement is developed, a one-page document will help leaders apply the statement to specific ministry areas. They will use this document with their ministry teams in conjunction with all program planning and evaluation. It will have the statement and its meaning on one side, and three questions on the other. After

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<sup>31</sup> Ammerman, *Studying Congregations*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-249.

naming the specific ministry program it will ask: In what way(s) does this program or event help fulfill Tower Hill's vision? What is your primary goal for this program or event? In what way(s) will the program or event successfully contextualize the gospel into the language of culture?

### **Measuring Outcomes**

It is often the case in measuring outcomes that there is an overemphasis on numerical growth through ministry initiatives. Perhaps it is because numbers are, all spiritual things considered, a straightforward objective metric in a sea of subjectivity. Perhaps it is because American notions of success are tethered to numerical increase. Theologically, however, I believe it is the byproduct of an ecclesiocentric understanding of the *Missio Dei*. While growth in numbers may be a sign of spiritual growth, it is not the only metric to assess the spiritual health of particular outcomes. Acts 2 gives a rubric by which to spiritually measure these outcomes:

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

Verses 42-43 speak to growth in maturity. While this is difficult to measure due to its subjective nature, it certainly can show trends in the spiritual formation of the congregation. It is not the practice of judging souls; that is God's business alone. Rather, it is an attempt to faithfully discern the growth of the disciples whom we have been

commanded to teach. One tool for measurement will be to track what *House Divided* calls our “composite maturation number.”<sup>33</sup> The process would be to ask small group leaders to discern the growth of members within their circle of influence and report the results back to the leaders.

Verses 44-47a speak to growth in unity. While this too is difficult to measure, a litmus test will be to see if “the congregation can state and identify its tri-generational goals and vision, then unity is being shared at least intellectually...”<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed measurement, we will use the congregational questionnaire suggested in *House Divided*.<sup>35</sup> This questionnaire will be distributed at all worship gatherings twice per year for two weeks in a row (most likely around Genesis Sunday: First Sunday after Labor Day, and Super Bowl Sunday).

Verse 47b speaks to growth in favor. This measurement “indicates the extent to which a church is establishing and maintaining a positive image and mutual respect in the community.”<sup>36</sup> The best way to measure this is through regular contact between our members and the larger community. It will be important to foster a culture that invites feedback from our members about the perceptions of THC. As suggested in *House Divided*, we will use a “Telephone Community Awareness Survey”<sup>37</sup> (most likely around Christmas and Easter).

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<sup>33</sup> Hunter and Whitesel, *House Divided*, 209.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-211.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>37</sup> Hunter and Whitesel, *House Divided*, 213.

Verse 47c speaks to growth in numbers. While this may be the most straightforward measurement, it is important to not only keep track of overall numbers, but the attendance breakdown according to generations or cultures.<sup>38</sup> As a starting point, the measurement tool suggested in *House Divided* to compute our annual growth rate will be used.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 217.

## CONCLUSION

Theological reflection about *Missio Dei* must never become an abstract reality; it must land in everyday life. Currently, THC's mission to the world (both inside and outside the walls of the church) is viewed as one of many programs that need support, not the primary purpose for the church's existence. For most members (particularly older, more traditional members) this perception of mission is a symptom of an inadequate view of discipleship. Many have been trained to view discipleship as a faith-based combination of routine worship attendance and volunteerism.

The process of developing a theological vision statement must be utilized to help members at THC articulate a new definition of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Reclaiming their participation in *Missio Dei* must necessarily begin with discipleship. The congregation of THC must willingly become "living sacrifice[s], holy and acceptable to God..." (Rom 12:1), transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is what will impact THC's view of what it means to carry out the mission of our missionary God.

THC must reimagine its ecclesiology that assumes that the number one priority of Christians is to attract people to the church so they might encounter, and be transformed by, Jesus Christ. At first glance this view of church may appear to be sound. The local church is, after all, a part of the Body of Christ. It is the place where the wonders of God are, indeed, proclaimed. Moreover, it is Jesus himself who promises, "where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them" (Mt 18:20). It makes sense then, in this view, that the church would be seen as the primary locus of God's work in the world.

The problem is not the belief that God works through the local church, but rather, the belief that God's activity is, primarily, directed to the local church. This relocates the receptacle of God's missionary activity from the world to the church and reduces discipleship to a church activity rather than a way of life. Mission becomes a program application. It is something to attend. The Holy Spirit is treated as something the Church can possess and control—a tool to be wielded to bring more people in.

God indeed works through the local church, but it is always facing toward the world to which it is sent. Effective gospel contextualization, the communication of the gospel in the ever-changing language of human culture, is always an incarnational—and therefore messy—enterprise. It is about making the Word of God flesh all over again; a Spirit-driven enterprise to “become all things to all people so that by all possible means [we] might save some” (1 Cor 9:22). It is Paul reasoning at the Aereopagus. It is Jesus using fish to talk about discipleship with fishermen. It is the necessary, faithful gospel contextualization that most mainline churches have neglected for years.

The incarnational nature of gospel contextualization affirms that it is the Body of Christ, as it consists in each community through the lives of individual members that proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Their communal witness announces God's in-breaking into human history—bringing healing and reconciliation to a fallen world. Instead of an ecclesiocentric approach, it is a theocentric approach. It is God's mission, a self-sending to the world in which the Church is called to participate. God calls, forms, equips and sends his people to be witnesses to his love and salvation and living extensions of God's grace. The Church is not an end in itself, but is called by God to be the instrument given to the world in order that all may believe.



## **A Way Forward for Tower Hill Church**

Jesus Christ brought “the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 3:1-2), near and resisted the devil’s temptation to trade that kingdom for “all the kingdoms of the world” (Mt 4:8). He taught God’s Kingdom through parables, and instructed the Twelve that “the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you” (Mk 4:11). He told Nicodemus that if he wanted to “see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3) then he must be born again, and he taught his disciples to pray that God’s “kingdom come” (Mt 6:10) and to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Mt 6:33) in their lives. When Jesus entered the plane of human history, he entered it announcing something. There is a new reality, a new Kingdom of God that will bring God’s shalom to the world.

In our Postmodern, post-Christendom world, if the Body is to be healthy, it must live its proclamation of the Kingdom of God. If THC grows, it will not be because of better preaching strategies or more effective church growth plans, but because of the power of the Word of God, as it is lived by God’s called out and sent ones. Our task will be to proclaim that the full reign of Christ, the Kingdom of God is near, and we are citizens of this Kingdom where true justice, freedom, comfort, peace, and mercy are found. We must proclaim that there is a way out of the darkness, and his name is Jesus Christ.

I recently heard a story about a woman who worked for a major financial company in Manhattan. She had been in a series of short-term relationships and one-night-stands with other company employees for several months, and on one occasion, one of these employees was seen leaving her office, leaving her visibly distraught. A Christian man (who was known throughout the office as such) placed a hand on her

shoulder and said, “You don’t have to live this way.” The woman responded, “I don’t?” And from that moment, not only did she refrain from casual office relationships, but eventually returned to a childhood faith that had been dormant for years. The act of Christian gospel contextualization does something. It proclaims a new reality.

In 1 Corinthians 14:27-28, Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.” This list is comprised of actions that Jesus Christ performed while he was on earth. The Church, the Body of Christ, is the continuation of His work, the embodiment of the Word. As Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 13, he not only describes the functions of the body, but the heart that keeps them alive: love. Loving God and loving neighbor is a reflection of the heart of Christ and therefore must be the heart of Christ’s Church.

For THC to live out and embody the gospel in the community will require THC to look like Jesus Christ. When the world sees members of THC in action, they should see Jesus. A consequence of this reality is that embodiment is not simply a mental exercise but an exercise of hands and feet. This is the goal of the theological vision process: to effectively go out into the community and invite people into God’s story. Sometimes this will involve activities at the church, perhaps in a sermon. Other times it may happen in planting a community garden. We must learn to re-engage in the ordinary lives of people and help them live into faith. We must let Christ set the agenda through his Body. We must let our ministry arise from the needs of the community. This means gathering around tables, breaking bread, praying, and sharing the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It

means we must count home-visits and dinner parties and T-Ball games as just as valuable uses of time as sermon preparation and bible studies. For, it is through these activities that the Spirit bubbles to the surface the needs of the people. This dramatically increases the depth and breadth of a proclamation that speaks directly to the needs of the community.

Changing the culture of THC will be incredibly difficult. It may feel a bit like Sisyphus pushing the boulder of enculturated religious habit back up the hill. A starting point may be simply to begin to cultivate what Brueggemann calls the Church's "prophetic imagination."<sup>1</sup> This is accomplished through the actions of both criticizing and energizing—as it seeks to filter ministry methodologies through its theological convictions. We must critically engage the particular ministry expressions that are failing to speak the language of culture. We must shift away from the needs of our own existence and back to the needs of the world: from inward to outward, maintenance to mission, stagnation to revitalization.

The degree to which THC can live the gospel in the community is directly proportional to its degree of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation, traditionally at THC, has been more contemplative than active, more programmatic than organic, and more fellowship-driven than conformity-to-Christ-driven. Moreover, by framing spiritual formation as primarily a church activity, THC has not only excluded many in the community but also has failed to equip them to live their faith in the midst of everyday life. Consequently, our spiritual formation strategy must seek to recover a classical

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 1

understanding of the spiritual journey that involves both the active life and the contemplative life.

The active life is most often referred to as Martha-based discipleship: a working out of the Christian life through direct action; this life consists of: “repentance or conversion; the development of virtue or human excellence, which includes the redirection of emotions or passions; and love of neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> The contemplative life, on the other hand, is often seen as Mary-based discipleship: “in which we are receptive rather than active,”<sup>3</sup> sitting at the feet of Jesus Christ prepared to receive his teaching. This life takes the form of either indirect contemplation of God (through the universe, human nature, and the holy scriptures) or direct contemplation of God (through direct vision). If we could recover a more balanced (classical) model of spiritual formation, that emphasizes both the active and contemplative life with the goal of witness in mind, then perhaps we could recover a more faithful form of discipleship for our THC leaders.

It will be critically important to help these leaders (and the congregation) understand that spiritual formation is transformation, and transformation is a process. Often, transformation in Christ is seen as a spiritual mountaintop experience that involves a sudden, complete, and often dramatic watershed moment. The truth is that while transformation can, indeed, be instantaneous, it is never complete all at once. There will be setbacks, obstacles, and seasons of drought. Healing takes time.

If the elders, pastors, and staff can attune their hearts to God and work together to cultivate their ability to translate the eternal Word of God into the flesh of THC’s

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<sup>2</sup> Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 1997), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

particular culture(s), the church has a greater chance at faithfulness to God's *Missio Dei* calling. THC can make the music of the gospel playable for generations to come regardless of changing formats. The world is waiting for the people of God, chosen before the foundation of the world, elect through faith in Jesus Christ, and sent to embody the gospel of Christ to make the Word flesh, so they may experience the gospel and live.

## APPENDIX

### **Sermon Series and Small Group Curriculum:**

#### **Week 1: Prayer**

**Outcomes:** To broaden the congregation's perception of prayer to an invitation for God to enter into every aspect of their lives. The goal is for people to try a new way of praying while opening them to daily prayer disciplines.

**Sermon Text: Matthew 6:5-13**

**Five-Minute Sermon Reflection:** Congregation members will be encouraged to use *The Prayer of Examen*<sup>1</sup> (printed as a bulletin insert)

1. **Become aware of God's presence.**
2. **Review the day with gratitude.**
3. **Pay attention to your emotions.**
4. **Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.**
5. **Look toward tomorrow.**

#### **Small Group: Week 1**

**Pre-class Preparation:** "End of the Spear" (2005) is a film that tells the true story of five American missionaries who attempt to evangelize the Waodani people of Ecuador in 1956. Participants will be asked to view the film and consider in what ways it speaks to the relationship between Christ, culture, and the translation of the gospel.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Acts 2, 17:16-34

**Key Theological Point(s):** The practice of prayer is a critical component to faithful discernment and translation.

**Focus Activity: The Prayer of Examen:** The group will be led through this prayer, followed by a discussion of what it looks like to exhibit a lifestyle of prayer.

**Spiritual Practice: Prayer (Inward Discipline):** "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>, accessed February 2, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 33.

## Week 2: Study

**Outcomes:** Each member will learn and practice the *Inductive Bible Study Method* as a tool for scripture study.

**Sermon Text: Psalm 119:9-16**

**10-Minute Sermon Reflection: Inductive Bible Study Method:** The congregation will have an opportunity to discover the *Inductive Bible Study Method* by using the Psalm 119 text. This method, in its simplest form involves asking three questions of the passage: 1. What does it say? (Reading for information) 2. What does it mean? (Reading for deeper meaning) 3. What does it mean for me? (Reading for practical application).

## Small Group: Week 2

### **Pre-class Preparation:**

Wolters, Albert M. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. 2nd ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005 [Read all]

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Genesis 1-2

**Key Theological Point(s):** The fundamental affirmation of Genesis 1-2 is that God's creation is inherently good. Creation, despite its brokenness, remains fundamentally good because of the Supreme Goodness of the God who creates, sustains, and ultimately redeems it.

### **Focus Activity: Inductive Bible Study: Genesis 1-2**

- 1. Opening:** the goodness of God's creation as seen through TED Talk: "*David Gallo: Underwater astonishments*": David Gallo shows jaw-dropping footage of amazing sea creatures, including a color-shifting cuttlefish, a perfectly camouflaged octopus, and a Times Square's worth of neon light displays from fish who live in the blackest depths of the ocean."<sup>3</sup>
- 2. Text Reading:** volunteer
- 3. Historical Background:** lecture with power point: ancient near east cosmogony
- 4. Chart of Who, Where, What Happened:** individual activity followed by group discussion
- 5. The Meaning of the Passage:** a general discussion guided by leader questions
- 6. A Personal Paraphrase:** Individual work followed by 2 x 2 sharing with prayer
- 7. Leader Summary:** affirm the discoveries of the group while lifting up the theme of God's good creation

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<sup>3</sup> David Gallo, "Underwater Astonishments," accessed on December 8, 2016, <http://www.ted.com>.

**Spiritual Practice: Study (Inward Discipline):** The spiritual practice of study is about knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ (much different than reading Scripture devotionally). “Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us... Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.”<sup>4</sup> This particular discipline will be introduced through the inductive bible study on Genesis 1.

### **Week 3: Fasting**

**Outcomes:** Each participant will be encouraged to begin with a partial twenty-four hour fast, and choose one particular life issue that requires a deeper level of prayer. They will be encouraged to keep a fasting journal to track the experience of focused prayer in the midst of physical discomfort.

**Sermon Points: Matthew 4:1-11, 6:16-18**

**10-Minute Sermon Reflection: *A Simple Guide to Fasting*:** Worshipers will have an opportunity to prayerfully consider how to use the discipline of fasting in their lives, through our bulletin insert (Adapted from: *A Simple Guide to Fasting* by James Rene).<sup>5</sup>

#### 1. What are the guidelines set forth in the Bible concerning fasting?

It is to be done in a manner of humility with a right heart unto Father God, not for public display or seeking the approval of man. Matt 6:16-18

#### 2. How to fast safely.

Start slowly. Fast for one meal a day, or one day a week, or one week a month. Build up your spiritual muscles so that you able to extend your fasting as the Lord leads you.

In spite of the absolute safety and benefits of fasting, there are people who should NEVER fast without professional supervision. For example:

People who are physically too thin or emaciated.

People who are prone to anorexia, bulimia, or other behavioral disorders.

Those who suffer weakness or anemia.

People with medical issues—tumors, blood diseases, cancer, chronic problems with vital organs.

Individuals who take Insulin for diabetes.

Women who are pregnant or nursing.

#### 3. How should you fast? There are different types of fasting.

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<sup>4</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> James Rene, “A Simple Guide to Fasting,” <http://www.pctoday.com/fasting/>, accessed on February 2, 2016.



*Absolute Fast* - No water, liquids, or food. Ex: Acts 9 The Apostle Paul went on an absolute fast for three days after his encounter with Jesus.

*Water Only Fast* - The max duration seen in the Bible is 40 days. Water-only fasts that last more than several days should be undertaken with plenty of rest and under medical supervision.

*Water & Juice Fasting* - This type of fasting will provide you with more energy, especially if you are going to fast for an extended period of time.

*Partial Fast* - Denying yourself certain foods. An example we see in the Bible is Daniel who did not eat bread, meat, or drink any wine for three weeks eating only vegetables, fruit, and drinking water.

*Media/Activity Fast* - If you cannot fast food safely, instead remove media and outside activity from your life for the week. Take that time to focus on God during the silence that will replace our usual busy loud lives.

#### 4. Spiritual activities you can add:

- Read Your Bible.
- Memorize Scripture.
- Pray.

There is no formula to fasting. Fasting is about the condition of the heart and being obedient to God's leading. Devote yourself to seeking God, meditating on Him and worshipping and praising Him for who He is and what He has done.

### **Small Group: Week 3**

**Pre-class Preparation:** "Crash" (2004) is a film that follows several interweaving stories that take place over two-days in Los Angeles. The film addresses the problems of racism, classism, and sexism, all in an attempt to bring out what's happening "on the ground" in today's society. This film explores the relationship between what is true, what is racist, what is good and what is bad, and the line that is sometimes blurred between them. Participants will be asked to preview this film and to track places where God's goodness can be affirmed through the actions of the characters.

Mouw, Richard J. *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002 [Read all]

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Genesis 1-2; Matthew 5:43-48

**Key Theological Point(s):** *Common Grace*:

**Focus Activity: For Goodness Sake:** Participants will be encouraged to think of real world examples of God-given goodness in human culture that exist outside the walls of the Church. This activity will begin with a discussion on the “goodness” they identified in the film, “Crash.”

**Spiritual Practice: Fasting (Inward Discipline):** Each participant will be encouraged to begin with a partial twenty-four hour fast, and choose one particular life issue that requires a deeper level of prayer. They will be provided with a fasting journal to track the experience of focused prayer in the midst of physical discomfort.

#### **Week 4: Solitude**

**Outcomes:** Participants will primarily be encouraged to consider what it looks like to “take advantage of ‘little solitudes’ that fill our day,”<sup>6</sup> as well as consider longer periods of solitude and silence. The goal will be to offer a time of silence within the worship service as a practice-run of experiencing solitude.

#### **Sermon Text: 1 Kings 19:1-13**

**10-Minute Sermon Reflection:** This segment will feature a viewing of the *Nooma* video: “Noise” by Rob Bell. Worshipers will then be encouraged to use their bulletin insert: *Steps to solitude* as a segue into practical application: *Step 1:* We can take advantage of little solitudes in each day (e.g. in the shower, the car, or evening walk) *Step 2:* We can schedule a solitude *stay-cation* (e.g. find a place at home, make a prayer closet) *Step 3:* We can go outside the home (e.g. the park, the beach or church) *Step 4:* We can schedule a few times each year for longer periods of time (e.g. monastery retreats, silent afternoon).

#### **Small Group: Week 4**

**Pre-class Preparation:** “Into Great Silence” (2005) is a film that examines life inside the Grande Chartreuse, a monastery of the Carthusian Order. This reclusive monastery is a powerful example of what Ezekiel calls “the sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12).

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Genesis 1-2

**Key Theological Point(s):** *Sphere Sovereignty*

**Focus Activity: Hats:** Each participant will be encouraged to list the independent spheres (hats) in which they live and their discreet roles within each sphere. The group

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<sup>6</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 105.

will then discuss the relationship between roles and how discipleship engages each differently.

**Spiritual Practice: Solitude (Outward Discipline):** Solitude is perhaps the most straightforward spiritual practice, and yet the noise of cultural activity tends to limit its feasibility in everyday life. While the group will participate in a longer time of solitude during the closing retreat, they will be encouraged to consider what it looks like to take advantage of little solitudes that fill our day.

### **Week 5: The Discipline of Simplicity**

**Outcomes:** To challenge our consumerist attachment to wealth and to find practical, straightforward steps in fostering greater simplicity in our lives (bulletin insert).

**Sermon Points: Matthew 6:19-24:** We have a perpetual desire to upgrade our lives that shows a perpetual dissatisfaction with what we have. What does this mean for us spiritually? How should Christians handle consumerism and materialism? What does Jesus have to say about my incessant need for bigger and better?

**10-Minute Sermon Reflection:** This activity will be based on the suggested steps in chapter 6 of Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*.

1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
2. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
3. Develop a habit of giving things away.
4. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
5. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
6. Develop a deeper appreciation for creation.
7. Look with a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes.
8. Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech.
9. Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.
10. Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.

### **Small Group: Week 5**

**Pre-class Preparation:** Incorporate three minutes of solitude time into each day (from last week) and prepare to share about the experience.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Genesis 1-2; John 2:1-11

**Key Theological Point(s):** *God's Cultural Mandate*

**Focus Activity:** This activity will be based on the spiritual practice of simplicity, based on a list of suggested steps in chapter 6 of "Celebration of Discipline." Each participant will work together 2 x 2 through the list, then report back to the large group.

**Spiritual Practice: Simplicity (Outward Discipline):** The spiritual practice of simplicity is the first of the outward disciplines—disciplines that require outward expression in order to be fulfilled. The goal of simplicity is “to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness of His kingdom first and then everything necessary will come in its proper order.”<sup>7</sup> It is an exercise of becoming conscious of our material addictions, reigning in our consumption, and struggle through it as a community.

### **Sermon Series: Week 6: The Discipline of Humility/Service**

**Outcomes:** Congregation members will learn the Prayer of Humility as a practical exercise of self-emptying in the way of Christ.

### **Sermon Text: Philippians 2:1-15**

**10-Minute Sermon Reflection:** The congregation will be led through this ancient prayer that has been adapted from the work of Neil Babcox. They will be instructed that it will be prayed slowly, with a pause after each line to let it sink in. Moreover they are to listen for and focus on the phrase that most connects to something going on in their life right now.

*From the desire of being praised, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the desire of being honored, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the desire of being preferred, deliver me, Jesus.*

*From the desire of being consulted, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the desire of being approved, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the desire for comfort and ease, deliver me, Jesus.*

*From the fear of being criticized, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the fear of being passed over, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the fear of being forgotten, deliver me, Jesus.*

*From the fear of being lonely, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the fear of being hurt, deliver me, Jesus.  
From the fear of suffering, deliver me, Jesus.*

*O God, grant me the grace to humble myself  
under your mighty hand today,  
and to clothe myself with humility toward all I meet.*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 86.

*Amen.*”<sup>8</sup>

### **Small Group: Week 6**

**Pre-class Preparation:** “La La Land” (2017) is a film about an aspiring actress who falls in love with an aspiring jazz musician. The film questions whether true love or fame and success is the key to happiness. The class will be asked to preview the film and consider the ways in which it elucidates sphere sovereignty by considering the way(s) God’s hand is present even in what seems like a very secular story.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** 1 Samuel 8, 1 Chronicles 17:1-14, Luke 1:32-33, Revelation 1:5

**Key Theological Point(s):** God leverages human culture to say something true about God. Likewise, the Church must do the same.

**Focus Activity: Humility Prayer:** Pray it slowly, pausing after each phrase to let it sink in. Listen for and focus on the phrase that most connects to something going on in your life right now. Spend time lifting that situation up to God.

**Spiritual Practice: Submission (Outward Discipline):** Submission is “the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way.”<sup>9</sup> The group will engage with the “Humility Prayer” as the focus activity.

### **Week 7: Worship**

**Outcomes:** The congregation will consider practical methods for infusing worship into daily life.

**Sermon Points: Daniel 3:13-27:** While the church has certainly failed to provide worship experiences that connect with younger generations, it has failed to reflect the majesty and glory of God. It has become such a passive and safe endeavor (we simply attend a service). And, in that service, who is really being served? Is it God or our own consumerism?

**10-Minute Sermon Reflection:** The congregation will reflect upon Richard Foster’s Steps into Worship, adapted from *Celebration of Discipline*:

1. Learn to practice the presence of God daily (e.g. prayer, bible study, silence)  
[www.pray-as-you-go.org](http://www.pray-as-you-go.org)

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<sup>8</sup> “Humility Prayer,” [http://www.southridgeworship.com/humility\\_prayer.htm](http://www.southridgeworship.com/humility_prayer.htm), accessed on December 15, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 111.

2. Seek out different experiences of worship (e.g. small groups of people, different styles than you're used to)
3. Find ways to really prepare for the gathered experience of worship (e.g. go to bed early on Saturday night, spend time in confession and examination)  
www.examen.me/
4. Let go of "I" and embrace "we" in worship
5. Cultivate holy dependency
6. Absorb distractions with gratitude and focus

**Small Group: Week 7**

**Pre-class Preparation:**

Mouw, Richard J. *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*. Revised. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002 [Read all]

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Isaiah 60

**Key Theological Point(s):** God not only actively contextualizes human culture, but is reclaiming and repurposing culture to fulfill its original created intent: the glorification of God.

**Focus Activity:** "Your Love Is a Song" by *Switchfoot*, from the album: *Hello Hurricane*. The group will listen to the song (with lyrics handed out) and discuss the ways in which it reflects God's reclamation of creation and themes of common grace, sphere sovereignty, and gospel translation.

**Verse 1:**

I hear you breathing in, another day begins  
The stars are falling out, my dreams are fading now... Fading out

**Pre-Chorus:**

I've been keeping my eyes wide open  
I've been keeping my eyes wide open

**Chorus:**

Oh, Your love is a symphony  
All around me, running through me  
Oh, Your love is melody  
Underneath me, running to me  
Oh, Your love is song

**Verse 2:**

The dawn is fire bright, against the city lights  
The clouds are glowing now, the moon is blacking out... It's blacking out

**Spiritual Practice: Service (Outward Discipline):** There is a big difference between provided acts of service, and being a servant in the likeness of Jesus Christ. True service, however, is about an orientation based on the servanthood of Christ. As a segue to practical application of servanthood, the group will individually then corporately consider what service looks like in the marketplace of daily life.

**Small Group: Week 8****Pre-class Preparation:**

Ferry, Luc. *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*. Original. Harper Perennial, 2011. [Read pp. 1-91]

The Chalcedonian Creed, 451 C.E.

**Key biblical text(s):** John 1, 14:7

**Key theological point(s):** The gospel is at home in every cultural context without injury to its essential character because translation is its essential character. The incarnation itself is an act of divine translation: the universal truth of Jesus Christ translated through the particularity of human culture.

**Focus Activity: Lost in Translation:** “Most” (2003) is a 30-minute award-winning foreign film that tells the story of a father who takes his son to work with him at a railroad drawbridge. After viewing “Most,” participants will discuss: the ways in which this film is an allegory of the relationship between Christ and culture, and how the gospel is translated and proclaimed through this particular film.

**Spiritual Practice: Meditation (Inward Discipline):** The practice of *Lectio Divina* will be introduced, using Matthew 26:6-13, the story of the woman with the alabaster jar.

**Small Group: Week 9**

**Pre-class Preparation:** The participants will be asked to preview: “Center Church Theological Vision” by Tim Keller,<sup>10</sup> and be prepared to discuss the purpose of developing a theological vision for ministry.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Keller, “Center Church Theological Vision,” <http://www.centerchurch.com>, accessed December 15, 2016.

**Key Theological Point(s):** *Theological Vision*

**Focus Activity: Case Study: “Fish or Cut Bait”<sup>11</sup>**

The group will be asked: what is the theological vision of Cascades Community Church? How would the further development of a theological vision impact the situation?

**Spiritual Practice: Confession (Corporate Discipline)**

**Small Group: Week 10**

**Pre-class Preparation:** “Into the Wild” (2007) is a film that follows the journey of 22-year-old Christopher McCandless who decides to walk away from his privileged, yet tormented life in search of adventure. Confronted with his own mortality, he comes to realize a profound truth: Happiness is only real when shared.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Ephesians 1:4-5, 1 Peter 2:9, Romans 12:1-2

**Key Theological Point(s):** *Election*

**Focus Activity: Investigating Culture:** Participants will split into pairs and be asked to dig deeper into the Chris McCandless story by listing the ways in which he is a product of his cultural reality. They will then seek to answer the question: how would Jesus speak into his cultural reality?

**Spiritual Practice: Partner Prayer:** Emerging from the findings of the focus activity, each pair will be encouraged to name and pray for the cultural barriers that prevent people from hearing the good news of God’s gracious election for all who believe.

**Small Group: Week 11**

**Pre-class Preparation:** Read THC’s *2010 Long-Range Plan*, *2008 Vision for the Hill Campaign*, the *2016 Mission and Vision*, and *2016 Faith Forward Campaign* materials.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** Romans 8:18-24, Revelation 21:1-5, John 3:16

**Key Theological Point(s):** *Missio Dei*: God is making everything new. God has chosen a Self-limited partnership in this re-creation of the world due to His partnership with humanity. We are called to partner with God’s mission to and for the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Ray Anderson, *A Case Book for Theological Reflection: A Study Guide for Theological Students* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theology Seminary, 1994), 1-2.



**Focus Activity: Telling Your Story:** Breaking into pairs, each person will share their faith journey—specifically how God made them new, and who God used to bring them to faith.

**Spiritual Practice: Corporate Prayer:** In the large group, each individual will share one word that represents their gratitude (summarizing their faith story) to God for bringing them to faith.

### **Small Group: Week 12**

**Pre-class Preparation:** “Simon Birch” (1998) is a film that tells the story of a young boy with physical deficiencies who believes that God has a specific purpose for him.

**Key Biblical Text(s):** The Book of Ruth

**Key Theological Point(s):** *We are chosen for a purpose:* The purpose of election is for the Church to be holy and blameless and to reveal the glory of God to the world. It is a vocation to witness. It is a call to proclaim the Word of God so that all the elect may be awakened to faith. We are called to participate in *Missio Dei*.

**Focus Activity/Spiritual Practice: Prayer Walk:** Doing what God wants in your everyday life has everything to do with noticing and responding to the pull of the Holy Spirit. A great way to practice this is to do a prayer walk.

- **Say a brief prayer that God will help you be awake to your surroundings.**
- **Start your walk (5 minutes or more).** Pay attention to what you notice (people, places, feelings): For example, the angry driver... or the woman with the stroller... or the fast-walker shoving through the crowd. What are you feeling? How is your pace affecting your mood? What do you notice about the area you're walking? Allow the Holy Spirit to draw you to what's going on.
- **After your walk, take a moment and think about what stood out to you**
- **Once you've identified it, ask God to show you how to proceed:** Maybe you are led to pray for a person or situation you saw. Maybe you are compelled to an action. Whatever that is, pray about it.

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