

# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

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CULTIVATING MISSIONAL IMAGINATION: LISTENING AS A WAY FORWARD FOR FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF POMONA

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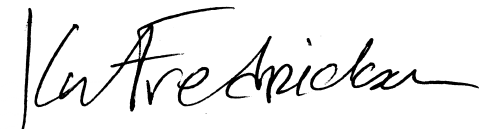
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CULTIVATING MISSIONAL IMAGINATION: LISTENING AS A WAY FORWARD  
FOR FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF POMONA

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
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BY

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## ABSTRACT

### **Cultivating Missional Imagination: Listening as a Way Forward for First Presbyterian Church of Pomona**

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This project tests how the practices of listening to neighbors, listening to Scripture together, and reflecting on God's work in the neighborhood can cultivate a missional imagination within First Presbyterian Church of Pomona. Specifically, this missional endeavor engages in an experiment of congregants listening to a group of young adults and tracks the church's shift in missional imagination. This project is discussed in three parts.

Part One describes the ways that the church has sought out its neighbors. It explores various frameworks that shape the imagination of the church. It presents the primary adaptive challenge that led to framing this specific project as a next step.

Part Two discusses the project of gathering young adults, who have grown up in the neighborhood, with learning partners who have relocated to the neighborhood. The gatherings consist of a meal, sharing stories, and reflecting on Scripture together. Recordings of the participants' reflections and comments are tracked to note qualitative shift in missional awareness.

Part Three examines a theological framework for this experiment. This section examines a theology of listening and making space for the other across socioeconomic lines. It also explores the practice of shared hospitality and listening and evaluates missional learnings that occurred during two debrief meetings. This evaluation uses the principle of simultaneity to highlight ways in which the Spirit began moving in the church during this project, despite the project's inability to launch further experiments.

Content Reader: Alan J. Roxburgh, PhD

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In Memory of  
Jonah and Joseph

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of I would like to honor and thank Pomona Presbyterian Church. I am incredible grateful to pastor this great church. Without your partnership and participation this ongoing work of figuring out the gospel in our neighborhood, this paper and work would not happen. Even when tragedy struck everyone leaned in and loved in such incredible selfless ways.

I would also like to thank all of the young adults who have grown up in Pomona who have walk with us and taught us so much.

Thank you to my family, my kids who continually amaze me even as they host and are hosted by neighbors. Thanks to my parents who first showed me, taught me about hospitality and loving neighbors. Thanks to my wife, who encouraged me through the writing process and who endlessly loves those across the “chasm” in her work, the kids schools sports, and our neighborhood. Thanks for your partnership in this wild ride.

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## INTRODUCTION

This project is an exploration in congregational change and investigates one church's journey in cultivating a missional life. The first section examines the current praxis of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona (hereafter Pomona Pres). This is followed by the second section, which describes a missional experiment. The final section theologically reflects on the project itself and contains recommendations for further experimentation. The goal has been to test how the practices of listening to our neighbors, listening to Scripture together, and reflecting on God's work in the neighborhood can cultivate a missional imagination within the church.

Pomona Pres is an old historical church founded in 1883 by fourteen people, when the Pomona valley only had a few hundred residents.<sup>1</sup> As the valley and eventually the city of Pomona grew in number, so did the church. The city continued to see steady growth through World War II as a suburb of Los Angeles connected by the Southern Railroad. By the 1930s the congregation had two thousand members and a thousand children in Sunday school. It was guided at this point by one of the prestigious pastors in the denomination, the Reverend Dr. Louis Evans, Sr. This was its heyday. Today's leaders tend to describe the church during that era as large, white, wealthy, and politically connected.<sup>2</sup>

Following World War II, with the decline of the war industry and citrus industry, housing became more affordable. The African-American and Latino population within the city grew substantially.<sup>3</sup> This process continued through the 1970s. As the population

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Arthur Wicher, *The Presbyterian Church in California 1849-1927* (New York: The Grafton Press, 1927), 215.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona* (Pomona, CA: First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, June 13, 2010), 4. All historical information regarding the church is taken from this source, unless otherwise indicated.

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

grew poorer and more diverse, many members of Pomona Pres moved away to other communities and the church was unable to adapt to its changing environment. By the mid-1980s the membership was down to about three hundred members with the average member's age ranging between sixty and eighty. On February 1, 1985 the sanctuary caught fire and was burned to the ground. Some in the church wanted to take the money and relocate to Phillips Ranch, a new wealthier development of Pomona, while some wanted to give the money away to missions. Still another group wanted to stay and rebuild. After a long search, those desiring to move the church facility were unable to find a suitable place to build. The church stayed in the same location.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a few college students along with their Inter-Varsity staff from the Claremont schools became interested in issues of justice and God's work in Pomona. As they came to Pomona and started looking for a church home, they were warmly welcomed at Pomona Pres. When they began talking of running a Summer Kids Club, they were invited to live upstairs in the education building. In the years following, more students joined them. Many of these students moved to Pomona following graduation. Some married and stayed in the neighborhood. These re-locators into Pomona became the new core leaders within the church. Over subsequent years, there have been other waves of college graduates who have relocated to Pomona to be part of neighborhood ministry.

Due to the strong sense of being called by God to live in Pomona and to be part of the church, there is a culture of deep involvement in neighborhoods and in the broader city.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, Pomona Pres has been trying to be a missional church for over twenty years. There have been many experiments in neighborhoods as well as long-term relationships built with neighbors. Time has been spent in people's homes; and although it

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 8. Nearly 88 percent of people surveyed prior to my arrival said the reason they were in the church was not due to the sermon, music, or friendliness of the congregation; rather, it was because they felt called specifically by God.



has been challenging for those who have stayed, there are clear marks of participating in God's mission in the city.

Describing a church as missional in today's North American culture is quite common. Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk give a helpful description in understanding what it means to be missional:

[It] is not a program or project some people in the church do from time to time (as in "mission trip," "mission budget," and so on); the church's very nature is to be God's missionary people. We use the word missional to mark off this big difference. Mission is not about a project or a budget, or a one-off event somewhere; it's not even about sending missionaries. A missional church is a community of God's people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God's missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

These authors point out that missional life is more than activities and even experiments. Missional life is about God cultivating the imagination of congregants to see themselves as participants in God's ongoing work in the community. Missional imagination is about continually reflecting on how God is at work as we engage the local community. As a result, experiments and actions do not become new methods. Essentially, each experiment leads to further reflection about what God's people are learning about God, his work in their community, and how they participate.

Cultivating missional imagination is not easy, even for people who feel called to be part of God's work in their neighborhood. People have relationships with neighbors but often feel like a failure, when many ultimately are not interested in worshipping with Pomona Pres on Sunday mornings. There are no easy answers nor simple solutions. This kind of challenge can best be described as an "adaptive challenge."<sup>6</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky describe the nature of adaptive challenges: "Adaptive challenges require experiments, discoveries, and adjustments from many places in the organization or

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), xv.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13-20.

community. To make the adaptive leap to survive in the new environment requires people to learn new ways of behaving and adopt new values and attitudes. Sustaining change requires the people with the problem to internalize the change itself.”<sup>7</sup> One kind of change entails addressing what Heifetz and Linsky term “technical challenges,” which involve solutions based on known methods, available resources, predictable change, and familiar competencies.<sup>8</sup> These are challenges that an organization already has the capacity to address. On the contrary, adaptive challenges require new learning and unknown resources, because the change is unpredictable and the future is uncertain. “Solutions to adaptive problems lie in the stomach and the heart and rely on changing people’s beliefs, habits, ways of working or ways of life.”<sup>9</sup> This project involves new learning from an experiment to address the adaptive challenge Pomona Pres faces to engage cross-culturally in the neighborhood with the gospel. It also explores the church’s ability to reflect and identify new missional experiments.

This whole process is characterized by the Missional Change Model. This is a non-linear process by which churches diffuse missional change within the congregation.<sup>10</sup> It begins with raising awareness. This means starting where people are and helping them discover a need for change.<sup>11</sup> The second stage is about gaining understanding. Here awareness is taken to a deeper level, where people begin to internalize what is going on in those around them. This leads to the third stage of experimentation, where people test new ways of missional life. The fourth stage is evaluation, where people begin asking

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, “When Leadership Spells Danger,” *Educational Leadership* 61, no. 7 (April 2004): 38.

<sup>10</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 79-108.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 84-90.

new kinds of questions about who they are and what they practice. The final stage is commitment where, after many experiments, people start to own and foster a missional culture.

I have served as solo pastor at Pomona Pres for six years. Since that time, I have been raising missional awareness and cultivating understanding in hopes of deepening missional imagination. This three-part project focuses on how the experiment of intentionally engaging the young adults from the neighborhood through the action of listening to our stories, to Scripture, and to God can deepen missional understanding.

Part One gives the context for the project. It begins in Chapter 1 and discusses Pomona Pres' long history, when people of power and influence once gathered in the large flagship church. It details the change in city demographics, the church's inability to adapt, and its result in a long decline in membership. This chapter also chronicles how the first waves of InterVarsity college students arrived and helped move the church from being reactive to developmental<sup>12</sup> and how, despite the variety of the current outreach in the neighborhood, the congregation still remains church-centric.

Chapter 2 explores at greater length the places the church feels stuck in its outreach ministries. This portion of the discussion shares observations from the Adaptive Challenge Team that led to identifying the church's adaptive challenge as a question: "How can we engage people cross-culturally in our community with the gospel and create a place to grow in faith?" This chapter concludes with observations regarding how contemporary notions of separation of inward and outward life, success, and expertise continue to shape the church and work.

Part Two describes the project of listening to our neighbors. Here Chapter 3 lays out the description of the neighborhood experiment with the young adults of the neigh-

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 126-127.

borhood. It shows how the discipline of listening can reshape the framework of expertise. It describes the process of building trust through listening, the discoveries of dwelling in Scripture, and how we have been shaped by reflecting on God's work together. Chapter 4 reports what happened in each of the meetings with the young adults. It examines the expectations and struggles of gathering together as well as the outcomes of this time. It tracks how the missional imagination began to shift for those involved.

Part Three reflects on the project and examines how missional imagination shifted and did not shift. Chapter 5 explores the theology of listening. It studies how listening to God is central to the biblical narrative. It goes on to explore how Jesus expanded the concept of listening to include listening to and loving one's neighbor. Next, it examines the chasm that exists between socioeconomic classes, how God calls his people to cross the divide, and various ways this can happen. Chapter 6 notes the research methods used in this project and evaluates the experiment. It explores the challenges faced and also the way the Spirit began to move in Pomona Pres. Finally, this chapter concludes with ways missional imagination has shifted to foster spontaneous experimentation and recommends intentional steps for future experiments.

PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1  
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
OF POMONA

For over 130 years Pomona Presbyterian has been engaging in mission to the people of Pomona. During its early years, the congregation was able to grow significantly as an attractional church.<sup>13</sup> This worked in an age when people sought the church to provide excellent music, great child programming, and wonderfully expounded sermons. Also, this functioned well when the predominantly white, wealthy, educated congregation reflected its neighbors. However, for the last seventy years this has become less and less true.

Beginning in the 1940s growth began in Pomona's Latino and African-American populations along with a shift in the socioeconomics, with many more poor people moving into the city. While the present leadership in the church would describe the church as becoming more reactive to the changing culture around it, there was a transformational moment when the largely aging congregation welcomed waves of college students with generous hospitality starting in the late 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Some of these students moved into the neighborhood. They engaged their neighbors in a variety of ways. This became a transformative experience for the church, as it creatively began to reengage the neighborhood.

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<sup>13</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 127. The basic assumption of a developmental model of church in a changing culture is that by improving what is already happening people will be attracted to the church. This is called an attractional model. There is nothing wrong with congregations wanting to be attractive, and even wanting others to join their church, but the underlying assumption in this type of church is that there is nothing basically amiss with it. The church just needs to improve what it is already doing. Alongside this assumption is the unspoken attitude that the people of the congregation and their basic outlook on things are not going to need to change.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

When I arrived in February of 2012, there was already a deeply held belief that God was at work in the neighborhood.

This chapter offers an historical perspective of Pomona Pres' ministry context and describes some of the ways that the church has engaged in the neighborhood. Members spent time in neighbors' homes, a youth program for neighborhood children was developed, and a non-profit organization was launched to offer after-school tutoring and broad-based efforts to combat some of the systemic injustices present in Pomona. This brought hope for the congregation to become a transformative agent that would be involved in actively seeking the *shalom* of the city.<sup>15</sup>

### **History of Pomona Pres in Its City**

On May 2, 1883, in the fields and orchards of the Pomona valley, the Reverend Thomas Fraser with fourteen members and three elders launched Pomona Pres.<sup>16</sup> At the time, the valley that later would become the city of Pomona only had a few hundred people.<sup>17</sup> The growth of the area, and then later the city, was fueled by the Southern Railroad.

Prominent Pomona businessman Francisco Palomares drew up an agreement approved by voters to bring the Southern Railroad to Los Angeles with a stop halfway in Pomona, between San Bernardino and Los Angeles. In return, the county would provide a brand new station in Pomona and \$600,000.<sup>18</sup> Along with the rest of Los Angeles County, Pomona experienced a boom in population and expanded to over three thousand inhabitants by 1889 as rail fares fell and developers advertised across the country. The city was

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<sup>15</sup> Mission Statement of First Presbyterian Church 2010: "The Mission of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona is to engage, equip and empower families to follow Jesus and together participate in public life for the spiritual health and restoration of Pomona." First Presbyterian Church of Pomona Congregants, *Report of the Mission Discernment of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona* (Pomona, CA: First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, November 29, 2009 – July 4, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Wicher, *The Presbyterian Church of California 1840-1927*, 215.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Gloria Lothrop, *Pomona: A Centennial History* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1988), 31.

built on the premise of attracting people to a suburban utopia, where one could live in the orange groves and take the train to work in downtown Los Angeles. Signs read: “No one need go away dissatisfied” and “Pomona is the place for a home!” and “To visit Pomona is to create invariably a desire to remain in so lovely a spot.”<sup>19</sup>

The church grew as well. The congregation built its first church sanctuary in the middle of downtown in 1883. In 1907, the church began construction on a much larger sanctuary. The new location was nestled in the center of Pomona’s most affluent homes.<sup>20</sup> The city prospered, centered in Southern California’s citrus groves, a \$2 billion industry from 1890 through 1940.<sup>21</sup> This new large church building soon was filled. In the 1930s, with Dr. Evans as pastor, there were two thousand members on the rolls and a thousand children enrolled in the Sunday school program.<sup>22</sup>

The model of ministry was centered on attracting like-minded people to its quality programming for children and families and its excellence in music and preaching. More recent leadership described the church’s program of the time as “big, large attendance, central to the life of the city, lots of programming, white and wealthy, politically connected, focused on children and families, formal worship, choir, organ, highly educated membership.”<sup>23</sup> This model of ministry worked as the economy continued to attract other similar people to the city and region.

However, following World War II economic drivers, such as defense spending, caused thousands of officers and troops to pack up and move away from the Fairplex,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Linthicum, “A City Not Forgotten” (speech, Pomona Hope Fundraising Dinner, Pomona, CA, February 4, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Lothrop, *Pomona*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



which then significantly downsized. Thousands of acres of citrus groves were torn down to make way for new affordable track homes for returning military personnel. As the once vital citrus industry declined, Pomona turned more and more into a bedroom community dependent upon economic opportunities in other parts of Los Angeles.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1960s, Pomona's population increased by 22,000 residents, 17,000 of whom were African Americans responding to new housing opportunities in Pomona and the civil unrest happening in the Watts Riots in nearby downtown Los Angeles. As a result, Pomona's traditionally small black community, which had numbered about 900 for some years, grew from 1 percent to 12.2 percent of the total population by 1972.<sup>25</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, and continuing today, further waves of Latinos moved to Pomona. These were not only Mexicans but immigrants from all over Central America, most fleeing either revolutionary conditions or economic poverty. This third group experienced phenomenal growth, soon overwhelming the African-American presence in the city and clearly becoming the dominant culture in the community. Whereas the Latino community was 13 percent of the total population in Pomona in 1972, they reached nearly 65 percent by 2000. Most were young; in fact, by 1972, one-half of all the city's population was under the age of thirty.<sup>26</sup>

Rapid population growth, cheap housing to purchase or rent, lack of jobs, and an increase in Latino and African-American population led to increasingly negative community reaction. It all exploded in disturbances in April 1966, again in February 1968, and then finally in January 1971 during which all of Pomona's high schools were closed for four days due to race riots. Crimes against property rose 59 percent, and arrests nearly

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<sup>24</sup> Lothrop, *Pomona*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> Linthicum, "A City Not Forgotten."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

doubled from two thousand to close to four thousand between 1965 and 1970.<sup>27</sup> The inevitable reaction was a citizen revolt that manifested itself in both a decade of bond measures being defeated and a vast number of middle- and upper-class Caucasians abandoning the city of Pomona.

As the population exploded and became increasingly different in its racial composition, the church remained primarily white and middle class. With turmoil and unrest building within the city due to the lack of work, long commutes, and economic and educational problems too complex to address, the church also experienced a period of unrest. This was symbolized by the short tenures of a large number of pastors who arrived with high expectations yet became overwhelmed with the changing conditions, only to leave defeated a few years later.<sup>28</sup> The struggle of Pomona Pres in its changing world was most symbolized by the fire that destroyed all but its education building in 1985. The once massive sanctuary and bell tower, now charred and burnt to the foundation, expressed how the old sturdy church was no longer viable in such an explosive new world.<sup>29</sup>

### **Rebirth in the Neighborhood**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, InterVarsity students from the Claremont Colleges began coming down to Pomona to participate in summer projects.<sup>30</sup> The church welcomed the students with open arms. Pomona Pres expressed its receptivity by allowing the students to live in its building and work in the poor and largely Latino neighborhood surrounding the church. That summer internship, in turn, led to a number of Clare-

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Linthicum, "A City Not Forgotten."

<sup>29</sup> Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> InterVarsity, "About Us," accessed May 16, 2016, <http://intervarsity.org/about/our/ministry-overview>. InterVarsity is an evangelical and interdenominational campus ministry.

mont students feeling called by God to Pomona Pres and its neighborhood. Many acted on this call by moving into Pomona after graduation.<sup>31</sup>

This led to more pilgrimages of students and young adults in the mid- and late-1990s, both from other colleges and from the incarnational mission organization, Servant Partners (SP).<sup>32</sup> In this way, Pomona Pres began to undergo profound change as it moved toward increasingly becoming an intentional mission community. The former college students and SP mission workers became deeply involved in the church and neighborhood as a result of feeling a call to urban mission and the desire to live out their faith through the church in a poor community.<sup>33</sup> The church was profoundly hospitable to the student ministry and the growing young adult congregation, inviting them in, investing money in their ministry, and integrating them into the life and work of Pomona Pres. These former students began working with neighborhood children and families and addressing community concerns, like the lack of street lighting and environmental pollution.

Not long after these college students and young adults moved into the neighborhood, many were invited into various leadership roles within the church. Some of this happened by necessity, as the increasingly aging and shrinking congregation no longer had the energy to lead. In these early days, the Session (board of elders), which is the decision-making body of the church, became a center of struggle as decisions started leading the congregation to transition away from a reactive environment. One elder described the former meetings as screaming matches.<sup>34</sup>

### **Current Engagement**

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<sup>31</sup> Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Servant Partners, "Purpose," accessed May 16, 2016, <http://www.servantpartners.org/index.php/purpose>.

<sup>33</sup> Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> David Drake, interview by author, Pomona CA, 2012.

Today there are several ways Pomona Pres relates to the people in its neighborhood. The first is that most of the people live in the neighborhood where they have built significant relationships. When I first arrived, I was told that 85 percent of the church lives within four miles of the facility.<sup>35</sup> People within the church had strategically decided to live in the neighborhood to be in relationships with neighbors. One member articulated his early housing choice in this way, “I remember Kenneth, Keyshawn, Eddie and Hugo. I remember having Bible study with them in our apartment, going to Joshua Tree on the weekends, and watching movies. I remember Eddie could smell Lynnette’s brownies though he lived clear on the other side of the complex.”<sup>36</sup> John Whitney was one of many re-locators who prioritized his time to be with neighbors. This intense desire to be in relationship with people who live in the neighborhood surrounding the church provided his reason for his own residence there.

A second significant way relationships have been built is through broad-based community organizing. One such example was when members of the church began hosting house meetings in the neighborhoods to listen to concerns. Together with the neighbors, they heard that one of the main worries was a lack of streetlights. These neighbors approached the city to release funds to get more than five thousand street lights installed in the poorer neighborhoods.<sup>37</sup> Nobody from the church went into these neighborhood gatherings expecting to ask the city for lights. However, as they listened to the neighbors and spent time building those relationships, the concern over lack of light and feeling trapped in homes along with prevalence of crime in dark areas kept being repeated. Listening and working together to solve common problems deepened the church’s relationship with the neighborhood.

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<sup>35</sup> Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> John Whitney, *I Remember Relocating* (prose poem, Pomona, CA, Summer 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Inland Communities Organizing Network, “Crime,” accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.icon-if.org/stories/crime/>.

A third way in which the church has developed relationships in the neighborhood is through the non-profit Pomona Hope. Pomona Hope was created by Pomona Pres. Pomona Hope seeks to strengthen Pomona's youth, families, and its neighborhood by creating a safe environment for children and by providing educational opportunities and programmatic support to the residents.<sup>38</sup> Its present major effort is in the operation of its After-School Program and its summertime Pomona Hope Kids program. Both of these efforts are offered to all children in the neighborhood surrounding the church and provides the opportunity for one-on-one tutoring, help with their studies, recreational programs and arts, and teaching in music and drama.<sup>39</sup> Congregants have spent much time with children who have grown up in the neighborhood. Many of these children grew into teens who have participated and then volunteered in the program. Now that Pomona Hope has been around for more than ten years, there are some students who have made it through and even graduated from high school. Even more significant are their long relationships with people in the church who have walked alongside these young men and women for many years.

A fourth way the church has built relationships in the neighborhood is through its youth ministry. The youth ministry is comprised almost entirely of neighborhood students from middle school and high school. Many students, who are first known through neighborhood connections and through Pomona Hope, gather together weekly to worship and grow deeper in faith. They foster relationships by going on retreats and spending time in leaders' homes on the weekend.

Finally, a community garden also was launched in 2009 with the help of a few neighbors to transform a trash-ridden, weed-infested lot owned by the city. One of the hopes of the garden was to allow for neighbors to grow fresh vegetables and to foster re-

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<sup>38</sup> Pomona Hope, "Values," accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.Pomonahope.org/who-we-are/values/>.

<sup>39</sup> Linthicum, *A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pomona*, 6.

relationships. Although after three years only a few neighbors have used the plot, within the last year this number has increased. However, due to the nature of the garden, people spend only a few minutes a week there and rarely see one another. Even the monthly workdays have provided little opportunity to meet one another due to low turnout. While the garden continues to flourish, the relationship building through it has been slow. One highlight has been an annual garden party now in its third year. Over eighty people showed up last year, with many families from the surrounding community also in attendance.

Pomona Pres has experienced a remarkable revitalization over the past twenty-five years. A once increasingly elderly church that had become less connected to the neighborhood has seen a renewed commitment to its relationships with neighbors. Young adults have moved into the neighborhood and built relationships. Even though many Pomona Pres congregants have relationships with neighbors, there exists an undercurrent of disappointment because most of the people they know do not worship with the congregation on Sunday mornings. This dynamic serves as the springboard for the focus in Chapter 2, which deals with current challenges the church now faces.

## CHAPTER 2

### NEIGHBORHOOD CHALLENGES AND GROUNDWORK FOR MISSIONAL CHANGE

This chapter explores in greater detail the areas where Pomona Pres feels stuck in its neighborhood work. In particular, the discussion imparts observations from the Adaptive Challenge Team that led to naming the church’s adaptive challenge in the form of this question: “How can we engage people cross-culturally in our community with the gospel and create a place to grow in faith?”<sup>40</sup> This chapter also highlights how modern notions of efficiency, success, and expertise in the gospel have shaped the congregation and its ministry.

As part of laying the groundwork for re-entering the neighborhood, diffusing innovation and bringing about change in the culture of Pomona Presbyterian Church began by using the Missional Change Model, as presented by Roxburgh and Romanuk.<sup>41</sup> This model assumes that change does not happen in a linear method with the leader dictating a desired outcome; rather, it is full of mistakes and new learning, as the Spirit of God moves the congregation toward a never final yet progressing target. As mentioned in the Introduction of this paper, the Missional Change Model is made up of five stages: raising awareness, gaining understanding, evaluation, experimentation, and commitment.<sup>42</sup> The

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<sup>40</sup> Tom Hsieh, John McKellar, Colleen Moore, and Adam Donner, “Adaptive Challenge Team Meeting” (Pomona, CA: Pomona Presbyterian Church, July 16, 2013). Further details regarding the Adaptive Challenge Team and how it arrived to this statement will be offered in Chapter 3.

<sup>41</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 133-146.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

process begins where a congregation is currently, gives space for listening to the stories, and eventually connects these to biblical narratives.<sup>43</sup> Evaluation applies the work of the first two stages, raising awareness and gaining understanding, to discern ways to act out the discernment through the next stage: experimentation. It is during this stage that the congregation is led to address an adaptive challenge.<sup>44</sup> The final stage is when a church culture alters into a new reality, as people commit to a new way of being.<sup>45</sup>

This process involves the entire church body, the Session, and a team of people who have wrestled with the challenge.<sup>46</sup> The hope is not to create a new vision to lead the church or to identify a problem to solve but rather for people to find a life-giving framework in order to move forward. “As the initial experiments bear fruit, others in the congregation begin to see that it is possible to imagine and practice new habits and actions without destroying what they know and love. This encourages increasing confidence in the change process and starts to change the culture of the congregation.”<sup>47</sup>

This involves discerning current frameworks that are present in the congregation. The reason frameworks are important to identify is that they shape congregational imagination. If Pomona Pres is to live into God’s mission, congregants need to allow their imagination to be reshaped. This is why the missional process is so important when confronting neighborhood challenges. Roxburgh comments, “In our clearing we are asked to discern what God is seeking to shape even though all of our instincts are to turn back to our default settings to make things work and control the outcomes. In this clearing we have to let go of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 143-145.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>46</sup> The Session is made up of six elders appointed by the congregation. *Bylaws of the First Presbyterian Church of Pomona* (Los Angeles, CA: State of California, December 18, 2011), art. V, sect. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader*, 101.



our need for manageability, predictability, and control in order to listen to the God from whom new things emerge.”<sup>48</sup> As Pomona Pres slowly works toward a deeper understanding, this leads into an inclination to experiment.

### **Struggling from the Start**

The process of cultivating a missional imagination began earnestly in 2012. Developing a missional imagination involved recognizing (who was doing the recognizing here – you, elders, ???) that the Spirit of God is among the people of God and that they have the ability to discern how to join what God is already doing in their surrounding neighborhoods. Roxburgh and Romanuk state:

This implies that at its core, missional church is how we cultivate a congregational environment where God is the center of conversation and God shapes the focus and work of the people. We believe this is a shift in imagination for most congregations; it is a change in the culture of congregational life. Missional leadership is about shaping cultural imagination within a congregation wherein people discern what God might be about among them and in their community.<sup>49</sup>

However, a confusion between adaptive challenges and technical challenges distracted and slowed the work of cultivating a missional imagination at Pomona Pres. Energy was diverted from the adaptive work into brainstorming creative solutions to the technical challenges that the church faced. Though misguided at times, it was a positive step towards furthering a missional imagination.

One of the last acts that the Reverend Dr. Robert Linthicum did as interim pastor before he left Pomona Pres was to push the Session to address the church budget. While expecting the congregation to be able to meet its budget in 2012 due to saved funds, there was an anticipated deficit of \$41,000 in 2013. Dr. Linthicum wrote that the church would need an additional “15 family units, giving at an average of \$52.00 per week.”<sup>50</sup> Session

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Roxburgh, *Introducing Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 118.

<sup>49</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Linthicum, “Doing the Math: 2013 Hard Money for Pomona Pres,” in *Session Minutes* (Pomona, CA: First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, January 23, 2012).

was tasked to come up with a proposal to grow membership. A task force was set up. This outreach team was comprised of Tom Hsieh, Bree Hsieh, Derek Engdahl, Lisa Keller, John McKellar, and me.<sup>51</sup>

The team began meeting in April 2012 and had two distinct tasks that competed for attention: the technical challenge of growing membership to balance the financial budget and the adaptive one of how to help the church begin to wrestle with how it engaged its neighborhood. Many of the meetings bounced between reflections on Luke 10:1-11 and discussions of ways to connect people to the church. Meeting after meeting, the team kept returning to trying to solve the technical issue and leaving the struggle of deepening their understanding of the adaptive work to engage people in the community more deeply. Some of this was important, but it distracted the team. As a result, the team struggled to differentiate between technical and adaptive issues. For example, one of the technical solutions was to build a more thorough welcoming team on Sunday mornings. This and other such issues could have been followed up by the team or by fellow congregants.

In the midst of the struggle, some of the discussion around the adaptive work could have functioned as neighborhood experiments. These might have included conversations around spending time with neighbors, but they were not given any space or energy to proceed. Due to focusing on hastily completing the technical task at hand, an early opportunity for people to begin experimenting and start an action-reflection process was missed.

### **Raising the Church's Awareness and Understanding**

Raising awareness and understanding throughout the church was an important first step in beginning the missional change process. The team that had been meeting to discuss the technical and adaptive work planned a retreat in order to allow members to re-

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<sup>51</sup> T. Hsieh and Engdahl serve as elders on Session. B. Hsieh is a former elder, Keller is a young adult, and McKellar is a youth director doing significant outreach to neighborhood youth.

flect on neighborhood engagement and sense where God was at work. This would begin the work of identifying a core adaptive challenge that Pomona Pres faced.

### Church Retreat

The all-church retreat date was set for October 13, 2012. The purpose was to gather together to listen to one another in an experience called “Re-entering the Neighborhood.” After spending some time in worship, participants dwelled in Luke 10 around tables and then shared as a group about how the Spirit had highlighted the text. Luke 10 describes Jesus’ directions for seventy-two disciples that he sends without “a purse or bag or sandals” (Luke 10:4) and their dependence on a household that extends peace. It was hoped that retreat participants would reflect on how God is already at work in our neighbors’ lives and their extension of peace to us. Gathered at tables, retreat participants took time to listen to one another through appreciative inquiry questions focused on best experiences of engaging the church’s Pomona neighborhood.<sup>52</sup> Participants received a handout that gave questions for each group to reflect on best experiences with neighbors. This helped focus efforts on real and positive work the people could build upon. After lunch, the group proceeded with sharing its wishes for neighbors, new knowledge, and common themes.

As participants listed key questions, they felt the need to address how to become a missional people and the challenges they might encounter to engage in missional transformation. There was a lot of positive energy. Many people reflected on the process of the day. They appreciated a chance to gather, ponder, and, share how God has worked. Originally, Whitney was hesitant to come due to doubts about what was going to happen at the retreat. He was reluctant to dwell in the past and expressed skepticism about some “big plan” to engage with neighbors. However, at the end of the experience, he comment-

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<sup>52</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 23. Appreciative inquiry is a process that assumes that by bringing into conversation an organization’s stories, there is a positive force to bring about major change.

ed, “This was great. Thank you for setting up the time.”<sup>53</sup> His words echo his sentiments, and those of others, that there had been an expressed feeling of failure with regards to engaging neighbors. However, this time of gathering for reflection and to appreciate neighborhood relationships helped them to appreciate their past activities as building blocks for further engagement. Others articulated an increase of their faith in God and in his work, a sense of peace, and patience even when it is difficult to discern what God is doing in a person’s life. Overall, this brought a sense of being equipped to bring peace and healing.

Having the space and time to do this provided a great opportunity for the congregation to step forward in its missional imagination. It was this reflection at the end that seemed to help the congregation decide to engage in further missional understanding and even a desire for missional experimentation. To conclude the retreat, the Adaptive Challenge Team decided on two next-step options: distributing copies of the Hospitality Bible studies<sup>54</sup> and embracing a method of seeking people of peace through a “transformational deviance model” used by Servant Partners.<sup>55</sup> The transformational deviance model used in urban and slum communities encourages people to work with neighbors who display positive deviant behavior and attitudes as compared to the status quo. These attitudes and actions can be a sign of God’s work in them.

While the retreat was able to change the nature of the conversations within the church and create some excitement about moving forward, the implementation of offering next steps fell flat. The team did not put much energy into creating a structure for people to begin experiments. In following up with Bible study leaders, only one of the two Bible study groups that planned on participating used the materials in the spring of 2013. While

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<sup>53</sup> John Whitney, interview by author, Pomona, CA, October 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Alan Roxburgh, *Practicing Hospitality: A Study Guide* (West Vancouver, BC: Roxburgh Missional Network, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Derek Engdahl, “The Transformational Deviance Method” (draft essay for Servant Partners, Pomona, CA, 2011).

the retreat was a very big step forward in creating some awareness and understanding for missional change to happen, not having a structure with follow-up opportunities to help people engage these practices was a missed opportunity. The follow-up step could have been as simple as the team inviting people into one of the options.

The one positive outflow of the retreat was to give the challenges and the questions to the Session to wrestle with in order to narrow the focus and to choose something for a group of people to embark upon. At the Session meeting that followed on October 23, 2012, elders took time to read over the listed challenges and questions people had reported at the retreat. They began brainstorming on what the core challenge might be. One insightful leader sensed that while it was important to press forward into these challenges, there were still a lot of hurts, wounds, and disappointments from the early years for many of the people who had relocated into the neighborhood. For this reason, the Session proposed expanding the circle of listening before moving forward to identify a challenge.

The core group of re-locators to the neighborhood was gathered for further discussion. The Sunday night dinner on December 8, 2012 was hosted at my house but led by two of the people on the Adaptive Challenge Team. This group had some overlap from the all-church retreat yet included many more who were unable to attend. The overall goal was for people to understand and engage in both missional content and process. Much time was spent sharing hopes and dreams for living in Pomona. One activity that was intended to have people privately write down a pain, hurt, or disappointment evolved into group sharing. Through both laughter and the tears, this group of re-locators reflected on God's presence through the whole time. The gathering ended with a reading from Isaiah 61:1-11, which highlights God's work of rebuilding from ruins. People responded with how that text spoke into the context of what was shared as well as how it is shaping the congregation today.

## Session Retreat and Follow Up

A Session retreat followed the all-church retreat. This special Session gathering on February 16, 2013 was set to accomplish several things. On the agenda was to spend time continuing to be shaped by Jeremiah 29, which focuses on God's plan to bless the people of Babylon and the exiled Jews as they put down roots in the community. It was chosen to allow people to hear God's blessing of them and the city of Pomona in their ordinary actions. There was space for a renewed conversation around engaging the neighborhood. There was also teaching and workshop time focused on adaptive challenges, the difference between adaptive and technical difficulties, and how working through adaptive challenges requires a different process. Also, time was spent sharing the Missional Change Model again to help shape the process.

The first task of looking at Jeremiah 29 provided the elders a chance to listen to the Holy Spirit in relation to how the exiles began to discern God's work in their new land. Using a Bible study method called *Lectio Divina*,<sup>56</sup> elders were each asked to listen for how God was highlighting for them a certain phrase or word in the text. This also was about not using a more familiar Pomona Pres Bible study method called inductive study, which requires a cognitive mastery over the text in order to gain understanding.<sup>57</sup> The process of listening to the Spirit was as important for creating missional imagination as the text chosen. While the reflection of how God has spoken at times delved into textual observation or interpretation, it was a start in listening to how the Spirit might be guiding participants.

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<sup>56</sup> Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2003). *Lectio Divina* means divine reading and involves four steps to absorbing Scripture. There is the *lectio* or reading, *meditatio* or meditation, *oratio* or prayer, and *contemplatio* or contemplation. Together, the components of this process allow people to immerse themselves in Scripture and invite the Holy Spirit to make himself known to them in intimate ways.

<sup>57</sup> InterVarsity, "Inductive Bible Study Hints," accessed December 7, 2016, <https://interVarsity.org/bible-studies/inductive-bible-study-hints>. Many re-locators within the church have a background from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which teaches a cognitively focused group Bible study method called inductive study. This method asks the following questions in order: "What does it say? What does it mean? How does it apply to me?"

In leading up to the conversation on adaptive work, the elders took some time to talk and reflect on where the church had been recently and how change occurs through the Missional Change Model. The first two steps of raising awareness and understanding led to the final part of the day: identifying the adaptive challenge that the church would work on. After looking through the various questions, challenges, and wishes generated from the all-church retreat, the elders spent some time brainstorming. From all the challenges, they picked out two or three that stood out as ministry challenges Pomona Pres currently faces, for which the church presently does not have an answer but must be addressed in order to live into God's future. After further brainstorming, the Session agreed that the primary challenge was this question: "How do we reach people cross-culturally with gospel relationships?" Naming the adaptive challenge was a significant step for the elders. It did not have an apparent answer, and no one had the expertise to solve its critical nature.

With this stated, an Understanding Team was created to spend some time with this challenge. This team was made up of T. Hsieh, J. McKellar, Engdahl, Colleen Moore, and me. Our task was to comprehend the layers of this adaptive challenge. This work of understanding kept us from turning it into a technical problem with a solution. With guidance from the Adaptive Challenge Workbook to frame discussions,<sup>58</sup> the group was able to clarify the adaptive nature of the question and to name what was at stake.<sup>59</sup> Many questions surfaced that were unanswered. These included how to help the congre-

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<sup>58</sup> TMN Resources, *Transformed by the Spirit: Adaptive Challenge Team Workbook* (Vancouver, BC: The Missional Network, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> *Understanding Team Meeting Minutes* (Pomona, CA: First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, May 29, 2013). Here is a list of what was brainstormed regarding what is at stake: upsetting the balance; bringing others in; different comfort level; change is hard; want to show Christ but it costs time, comfort, not on my terms; enmeshing lives with people who need a lot; blessing of unity community; to learn about God; future generation; God's people movement through time, kids step into faith, God would multiply out small offering.

gation enter into the missional process and what it meant to grow in faith together.<sup>60</sup> The group did not know what it was going to look like nor what the outcomes would be. By delving into this work, the team began to internalize this unknown future as well as understanding the adaptive nature of it. Finally, the team named why the adaptive challenge was so important. “The Church is called to this task. We do not want people just to come. The church is an outward movement. It’s our identity, called to Kingdom work in Pomona. It is the work that’s yet to come that we long to see. It’s what is in our heart.”<sup>61</sup> From this work, which was shared later with Session and with others in the church, there was a clear deepening of missional understanding and passion to begin to move towards an experiment into a new future.

### **Social Imaginary**

As stated, the thesis of this project is to cultivate a missional imagination within the people of Pomona Pres. A helpful way to understand this concept of imagination is articulated by Charles Taylor in his discussion of social imaginaries.<sup>62</sup> Simply put, a social imaginary consists of the practices and stories that shape its common life. Taylor expresses how social imaginary is “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, a social imaginary is held by a large group. Although Taylor focuses on entire societies, this project applies the concept of the social imaginary to a smaller group: the congregation of Pomona Pres.

There are several important aspects of social imaginary pertinent to this project. The first is that the social imaginary is held by all of the people. It is not limited, held, or controlled by experts or leaders. It does not depend on education level. Taylor explains,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 23.



“I adopt the term social imaginary because my focus is on the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings and this is not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends.”<sup>64</sup> It is found in the shared language used by a group and is revealed through the group’s collective practices. According to Taylor, “Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice.”<sup>65</sup>

Essentially, a group becomes defined by its common practices and the expectation to carry them out. In this way, the social imaginary creates boundaries or edges to the group. This happens on profound levels. The social imaginary, says Taylor, “constitutes a horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond.”<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the social imaginary becomes deeply embedded in the individual members of the group and becomes a normative to each person’s experience.

Although deeply embedded, social imaginaries are not always healthy or true.

Taylor writes:

Can an imaginary be false, meaning that it distorts or covers over certain crucial realities? Clearly, the answer to this is yes. . . . Take our sense of ourselves as equal citizens in a democratic state; to the extent that we not only understand this as a legitimating principle but actually imagine it as integrally realized, we will be engaging in a cover-up, averting our gaze from various excluded and disempowered groups or imagining that their exclusion is their own doing. We regularly come across ways in which the modern social imaginaries, no longer defined as ideal types but as actually lived by this or that population, are full of ideological and false consciousness.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 183.

As social imaginaries are expressed within a group through its practices and stories, people can come to embrace falsehoods or develop myopic vision. This leads to the struggle, which is pertinent to this thesis: how one can go about changing a group's imagination.

Taylor also asks this same question and suggests the following:

What exactly is involved when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary? For the most part, people take up, improvise or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. Hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.<sup>68</sup>

When a new theory penetrates and is widely adopted by a group, it is no longer exterior to the group. It is now within the group. As such, it takes on its own life. It interacts with people's belief and experiences. People test their beliefs against it. They understand their experiences because of it. More importantly, the social imaginary causes people to initiate and take on new practices. As time progresses, the theory is continually shaped and shapes those within the group. Taylor writes:

But this process isn't just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In coming to make sense of the action the theory is glossed, as it were, given a particular share as the context of these practices. . . . The new practice with the implicit understanding it generates, can be the basis for modification of theory, which in turn can inflect practice, and so on.<sup>69</sup>

Social imaginary is not a static list of directions for people to engage the world around them. People compare the new practices with their new social imaginary. Given any discrepancies between practice and theory, one or both can be modified. Social imaginary becomes a living thing within a group. People act according to this imagination, modifying it according to each new phase of reflection and discovery. As new practices are initiated as a result of the theory put into action, so too will a shift in the imaginary be caused by the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

ongoing reflection of those practices against the current theory. Consequently, this is the basis for starting with practice to help Pomona Pres form a new missional imagination.

### **The Struggle of Existing Frameworks**

In trying to cultivate a missional imagination, it is important to recognize and understand the frameworks at work in a church. These frameworks often reveal the narratives congregants use to tell their story, the ways they carry out leadership, and the lens that influences how they perceive God's work. Avery Dulles explains that images or models for frameworks are required to hold the church together. "They suggest attitudes and courses of action; they intensify confidence and devotion. To some extent they are self-fulfilling; they make the Church become what they suggest the Church is."<sup>70</sup> These become functional theology, because they depict the spiritual reality within the group. Dulles differentiates a formal theology within a church. A formal theology is one that is institutionalized and "governed by explicit rules, often written."<sup>71</sup> A shift in missional imagination requires being aware of these frameworks and exercising the ability to discern God's presence. Roxburgh explains the importance of understanding frameworks and narratives: "While it is absolutely necessary to then look for ways to change the institutional and organizational systems . . . [missional change does] this through an engagement with the underlying narratives that have been shaping the systems in order to discern what is actually at work."<sup>72</sup>

One of the dominant frameworks present in Pomona Pres is a formal theology of incarnational living that has been reshaped by a strong separation of inner and outer life. The church was "reborn" with college graduates who began relocating to Pomona in the early 1990s, with the desire to live incarnationally among the poor. This central tenet

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<sup>70</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 13.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>72</sup> Alan Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 85.

shaped their theology. Bryant Myers discusses the power of such incarnational living in *Walking with the Poor*. He writes:

The incarnation provides a highly instructive model for how we must be willing to practice transformational development. God emptied himself of God's prerogatives. Are we willing to empty ourselves of ours? Jesus did not come as an all-knowing, problem-solving Christ. . . . In the form of a man, Jesus was the God who was not able to save himself, and so he is able to save others.<sup>73</sup>

These young arrivals describe moving in among the poor in apartment complexes and struggling with the issues of children, poverty, and being in the midst of families who wandered in and out. The messiness of urban living characterized and shaped much of the early incarnational living. These congregants share stories of neighborhood children and teens hanging out in apartments and taking cover from gun fire.<sup>74</sup> This deeply held value of living among and sharing lives with financially and spiritually impoverished neighbors was central to the church's re-birthed identity.

While this formal theology remains, the functional theology has drifted over the years. A "formal theology" is what an organization says it believes, while a "functional theology" is the belief that drives the actual practices.<sup>75</sup> As people began to buy homes in Pomona, a distinct functional theology took root. Richard Sennett describes it this way, "Stated badly, 'home' became the secular version of spiritual refuge, the geography of safety shifted from the sanctuary of the urban center to the domestic interior."<sup>76</sup> Without intention, many of the families moving into homes became more distant with the neighbors with whom they were trying to build relationships. Their houses became a refuge of sorts from the chaos that existed outside its walls.

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<sup>73</sup> Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 87.

<sup>74</sup> John Whitney, interviews by author, Pomona, CA, 2012-2013.

<sup>75</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 39.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 21.

Essentially, families became more isolated from their neighbors in switching from living in apartments to houses. Sennett suggests that originally it was the industrial revolution that pushed human culture toward embodying what he calls “nothing more cursed” than the separation of “inner” and “outer” life.<sup>77</sup> At Pomona Pres, the development of an Augustinian tradition helped lead to this inability to make sense of “the street . . . [as] a scene of outside life . . . beggars, tourists, merchants, students, children playing, old people resting a scene of human differences. What is the relation of these differences to inner life?”<sup>78</sup> For Pomona Pres, the difference is these people became objects of a mission rather than simply people, fellow residents with whom they lived. Even though the purpose of buying a home has been a way to make permanent their decision to live in the city, it has had the unintended consequence of separating home as sanctuary from outward mission work in the city.

#### Framework of Reciprocal Learning versus Being an Expert

Another framework that shapes Pomona Pres’ imagination is related to how congregants view their neighbors. There is a formal understanding and desire to be among the people of the neighborhood, valuing the other and their contributions.<sup>79</sup> Myers lists several characteristics of transformation. One of them is “reciprocity between the poor and the non-poor; each have something to learn from the other.”<sup>80</sup> This characteristic is manifested in mutuality, where neither is an expert and learning comes from each other. However, at times, the church unintentionally defaults to being experts. In being great community activists, Pomona Pres slips into “expert” mode in an effort to organize the neighborhood for the better. Organizing intends to train up more indigenous leaders.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 153.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

However, so far this has been very limited, with the church still holding on to its expert status and believing it knows how things should be done. Seeing neighbors through the lens of being their expert organizer for community change limits the church's ability to live into a reciprocal learning experience.

Pomona Pres has been very active in the community seeking to do the work of justice. Many years ago, leaders in the church were introduced to the work of broad-based community organizing. With a desire to address some of the systemic problems within the city and region, people began experimenting and using community-organizing techniques to combat issues of illiteracy, health, and safety within the city. One of the people who helped shape this for the congregation was Dr. Linthicum.

Community organizing as a whole values people and empowers residents in a community who might not already have a voice to be part of the change they want to see happen. A popular quip that floats around Pomona Pres and fellow organizers that has become a congregational motto is this: "Never do what people can do for themselves."<sup>81</sup> For Pomona Pres, this means not just tutoring children who need help learning to read or with math but listening and working together with families to address needs all are willing to solve together. An earlier example already mentioned in this paper was helping to have working streetlights in a poorer neighborhood. Myers says, "Community organizing has proven effective in creating community participation and ownership and has been particularly successful in dealing with inaction on the part of local government bodies."<sup>82</sup> The strength of community organizing has given the church an opportunity to build relationships with people with whom to take up issues in the city.

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Linthicum, *Building a People of Power* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005), 149. Known as the Iron Rule, I also have heard this chanted at several local gatherings of the Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee, the larger community-organizing group in which First Presbyterian Church is a member.

<sup>82</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 254.

However, this is only one part of community organizing. Myers also notes that community organizing has a built-in weakness. “First, community organizing contains a temptation to reduce the purpose of development to the creation of power alone.”<sup>83</sup> There is a value of truly seeking to hear and understand other people. This is much like the understanding step in the Missional Change Model. Listening to one another leads to greater understanding.<sup>84</sup> However, in organizing, understanding leads to a means of developing power to effect change. There is a default of expertise in having a predetermined process to solve problems. In contrast, the Missional Change Model does not assume expert knowledge or to know the process and road after deeper understanding happens. Rather, it suggests experiments as the way to learn and discover where God is leading.<sup>85</sup>

For example, currently the organizing team spends a considerable amount of its time and energy on expanding the organization’s network further to include the Inland Empire, an area that encompasses much of San Bernardino County. There exists the hope of building a broad coalition that can gather around common issues of poverty, environment, and immigration that many other cities share. There is a deep value to allow neighbors and community members to determine the community-organizing goals; however, the ongoing networking and coalition-building pressures lead to thinking about how the people they are meeting in their neighborhoods can serve in leadership or for the organization—in essence, fueling “the creation,” instead of “the creation” edifying those for whom “the creation” was birthed. Urban residents are seen through the utilitarian lens of whether they bring with them further networks or capacities to extend the organizing process. This functional framework of expertise results in a loss of reciprocal learning.

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#### A Narrative of Deprivation Formed by Modern Notions of Success

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>84</sup> Part Three of this discussion will elaborate upon this step of the Missional Change Model.

<sup>85</sup> Roxburgh, *Introducing Missional Church*, 140-146.

A framework that presents itself within Pomona Pres is the narrative of deprivation. This manifests through the congregation's speech in the way stories are told and particularly how comparisons are drawn. The church sees itself as lacking something attractive, as compared to another group. As a result, people in the church have felt they are not worth much.

I first heard this narrative of deprivation while debriefing with the pastoral search committee. During a dinner to thank the search committee in April 2012, the chair of the committee asked if we could spend some time to debrief the process. Members talked about how many times they had thought about settling on a pastor they did not want, because they felt as if that might be the best that they could find. It was not about having high standards for a pastor but that a decent pastor would not want to join them. Within this narrative is the framework of a modern sense of success.

This modern notion of success is deeply embedded in both the church and today's culture. The framework highly values and promotes efficiency and productivity. David E. Fitch writes: "Modernity extols efficiency and productivity as ends in themselves... choosing to manage for efficiency is a choice with moral implications... It presents values and purposes all on its own that may conflict with what it is we are trying to organize for."<sup>86</sup> Values held by other organizations or people are put through this lens of production. If people have failed to produce, then they are failures.

Essentially, members of the church felt like failures because they had been unable to bring many people from the community into the worship service. "Success" was primarily based on the numbers and diversity of people sitting in the pews on Sunday morning. As the church continued to shrink in numbers, the framework of success became legitimated by a perspective of the modernist framework of growth.

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<sup>86</sup> David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 38-39.



This spiritual framework of deprivation is discussed by Myers in *Walking with the Poor*. He says that three spiritual realities belie the entire system of poverty: the deceptive and dominating activity of the non-poor, the contribution the poor make to their own poverty through destructive behavior within the household, and the poverty of being.<sup>87</sup> The third applies here: “the poverty of being (we are of no value and are unworthy) and meaning (there are no answers for important questions).”<sup>88</sup> In its poor urban environment, Pomona Pres has felt unworthy to have a pastor who had the gifting, experiences, and values that they desired. The search team had hoped for a pastor who valued their mission and wanted to live and minister incarnationally with them in the neighborhood, to equip and work with lay leaders, and to lead reconciliation in an urban context. This sense of deprivation was reinforced by how long it took the pastoral search committee to hire me. As the search dragged into the second year, they felt confirmed that any pastor whom they might want would not want them because they had failed numerically and cross-culturally.

Although this church has huge visible assets—faithful followers of Jesus, a non-profit tutoring program, a community garden, organizing for neighborhood streetlights, helping to effect new policies in schools benefiting the health of students, and even its large buildings—living among the poor who have this similar view of deprivation has strongly shaped its framework. People were shocked when one Pomona Pres elder was invited to share at a large national gathering in the summer of 2013 about the church’s journey. Instead of focusing on what they do have, congregants see the negatives as insurmountable giants: reserves get depleted, mission groups struggle to do their work with very little money, and few people from the neighborhood attend the church worship services.

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<sup>87</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 117.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

Some even have commented that this narrative of deprivation exists within the entire city of Pomona.<sup>89</sup> The search committee noted that in their dealings with the leadership at the schools and city government level there exists little hope for change, because they feel as if the best Pomona will ever receive is the leftovers.<sup>90</sup> This reveals how the city sees itself through a modern framework of success, in which its high crime rate and failing schools indicate a failed city. Daryl Grigsby, former director of Public Works for the city of Pomona, even commented to me that he often had other leaders in the city question if it was worth making improvements within the area.<sup>91</sup> One example he gave was being questioned and even doubted by these leaders for putting in new covered bus stops. These other leaders felt a small improvement would just get ruined and so was not worth the effort. This larger cultural narrative is a deeply rooted framework within the mind and soul of the ministry context.

The reason these frameworks are important to identify is that they shape congregational imagination. If Pomona Pres is to live into God's mission, congregants need to allow their imagination to be reshaped. This is why the missional process is so important when confronting neighborhood challenges. Roxburgh comments, "Unless, as leaders, we are willing to enter this in-between space that disrupts our settled assumptions and threatens our formulas and expectations, we will remain locked into a monologue of church questions and strategies."<sup>92</sup> As Pomona Pres slowly works towards a deeper understanding, this fosters an inclination to experiment. Consequently, Part Two focuses on one particular

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<sup>89</sup> Tom Hsieh, interview by author, Pomona, CA, April 15, 2012.

<sup>90</sup> Members of the search committee, interviews by author, Pomona, CA, April 15, 2012; Derek Engdahl, interview by author, Pomona, CA, April 2012.

<sup>91</sup> Daryl Grigsby, interview by author, Pomona, CA, September 18, 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 90.

experiment in response to the adaptive challenge of growing in faith with cross-cultural neighbors.

PART TWO

EXPERIMENT IN CULTIVATING MISSIONAL IMAGINATION

## CHAPTER 3

### PHASE ONE: DEVELOPING AN EXPERIMENT WITH YOUNG ADULTS

In order to cultivate a missional imagination within Pomona Pres, the goal was to launch an experiment in which the church could begin experiencing how God was at work in cross-cultural relationships. This was not a way to solve a problem. Rather, it was a way to learn what God was already doing to help the church reflect and act toward a new future together. Overall, Part Two describes the process in which the experiment was developed. It also discusses the experiment's vital components of listening through appreciative inquiry and listening to Scripture, all centered around a meal.

This present chapter describes the first phase of the experiment, in which young adults gathered with learning partners. Here the discussion explores how the experiment was unable to reach a critical mass of participants to help the church learn and reflect on what God was doing within it. The chapter then goes on to study how the experiment provided an opportunity to reflect and launch the second phase of gathering with young adults.<sup>93</sup>

#### **Developing the Experiment**

Following the naming of the adaptive challenge, a new team of people gathered to name an experiment in which to address the adaptive challenge. This team consisted of Engdahl (who created the transformational deviance method), Anisha Zachariah, Emily

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<sup>93</sup> The second phase of the experiment will be described fully in Chapter 4.

Margolis, Lisa Engdahl, and me. The goal was not to solve the problem but to explore ways in which the church could continue to learn about it and discern how God is at work in the midst of the challenge. This new team used materials from the *Action Learning Teams* workbook.<sup>94</sup> The task of the action learning team was to clarify the adaptive challenge that needed to be addressed, brainstorm potential ways to address the challenge, commit to and test an experiment, and then reflect on what learning and further steps needed to be taken.

In pulling the team together and in talking through the first task, it was evident that people were tired of meetings. Enthusiasm had waned. One person who had expressed interest wrote back when planning a time to meet, “Upon some further reflection, I think I will have to decline being a part of the committee (though I would love to attend any events that get planned!). I’m a little overwhelmed by the number of leadership positions I have this year and don’t think I have much idea-generating/visioning capacity left.”<sup>95</sup> This is indicative of Pomona Pres. People tend to involve themselves in lots of activities both within the church as well as outside it.

The team addressed questions like these: “What are the major barriers in dealing with the adaptive challenge?” and “How are we currently dealing with them?” The conversation focused much on how people in the community experience a Pomona Pres worship service. Here was the general consensus: “When people come into the worship service, they don’t feel like they belong no matter what.”<sup>96</sup> Much of the conversation flowed in this manner and then narrowed in on technical challenges, like how to fix the worship services. Only when the team settled down to its task of brainstorming was it able to separate the adaptive from the technical. The team identified several groups of

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<sup>94</sup> TMN Resources, *Action Learning Teams* (Vancouver, BC: The Missional Network, 2012).

<sup>95</sup> Congregant, email message to author, August 13, 2013.

<sup>96</sup> *Action Learning Team Meeting Minutes* (Pomona, CA: First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, September 20, 2013).

people with whom the church has existing relationships: neighborhood young adults who have been part of the youth ministry, Pomona Hope families, immediate neighbors near members' homes, and participants in the community garden across the street from the church. There was a lot of excitement around spending intentional time with young adults who had grown up in the neighborhood with whom Pomona Pres congregants have had a strong relationship.

### **Components of the Experiment**

A plan was developed to invite fifteen young adults to gather for a meal twice a month for four months with learning partners from the church. During the dinner, a Scripture passage would be read and then those gathered would reflect on it together. In between dinners, a young adult and learning partner would pair up to deepen relationship through appreciative inquiry questions.

The main components of the plan each had an intentional piece to facilitate listening to one another and to what God was doing among the group. The first component was the shared meal. A shared meal is more than a just a utilitarian time to eat food when one is hungry. Essentially, it seeks to create space in which diners can get to know one other and move beyond cultural differences. Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez describe a process in which people can experience hospitality that deepens into biblical *shalom*. They suggest a common meal or shared meals in homes as a place to begin:

The goal is to start at biblical hospitality and move through encounter, compassion, passion and finally arrive at biblical shalom. As people who take seriously the implications of biblical hospitality we are called to new levels of commitment to the other, and these steps lead to other commitments and practices. This journey of conversation leads us to a situation in which we begin to approximate God's shalom in our intercultural relationship.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez. *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 240.

The action learning team saw the venue of a meal in a home as the best place to facilitate this process of breaking down barriers and allowing each of the participants to move into a place of wholeness, in terms of how individuals related with one another and with God. By beginning with a meal, the home is opened up and the invited guests are welcomed into the host's private space as an act of hospitality. The person who was a stranger no longer is a stranger, as the two people encounter one another.

This can develop into a sense of compassion as people begin to hear one another and develop an understanding for the other person. This can finally move into a place where the person who was once the stranger is now no longer a person with whom there were lines of division. Both have been brought together into a new place of relationship and peace. Branson and Martinez explain that creating space to encounter people across cultural lines gives a place for stories to be shared and for important cultural symbols to be properly interpreted.

Another aspect of hospitality is in how it contributes to and transforms a community. John McKnight and Peter Block describe three basic and universal properties of an abundant community: "the giving of gifts," "presence of association," and "compassion of hospitality."<sup>98</sup> These can be summed up in saying that people have gifts to offer; and when joined together, they are multiplied and celebrated. Hospitality is a level of competency in which a stranger can be welcomed and people want to share with others what they have. McKnight and Block write: "Hospitality generates from trust and produces trust. It is what is missing in the world of fear and scarcity. . . . Welcoming strangers is not just an act of generosity; it is also a source of vitality and learning."<sup>99</sup> Therefore, hospitality around a meal is a place where even a group of strangers open

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<sup>98</sup> John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010), 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



themselves to a level of trust to gather, which then develops and produces more trust. Hospitality can replace hostility, as a person's new learning about the other proceeds.

The next component of the experiment is the use of appreciative inquiry questions. Appreciative inquiry consists of five basic processes:

The first is to choose the positive as the focus of inquiry. The next is to inquire into stories of life giving forces. The third is to locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry. Fourth is to create shared images for preferred future. And finally is to find innovative ways to create that future.<sup>100</sup>

This process guides appreciative inquiry into helping participants focus on their positive collective history and bring that history into a preferred future. The appreciative inquiry style of questions was used intentionally, in order to discover more about participants' stories. Despite any differences people in the experiment might have had in their stories, together they were positioned to figure out how the gospel could be part of those stories for the future.

The specific assumptions underlying appreciative inquiry proved helpful. The first assumption is this: "In every organization, some things work well."<sup>101</sup> In looking at the relationship between the neighborhood young adults and the learning partners, there was much to be built upon. Rather than a committee naming these strengths and deciding what to do about it, these questions surfaced to help the group of young adults and learning partners discover a "hopeful future."<sup>102</sup> A second assumption is the idea that "what we focus on becomes our reality."<sup>103</sup> Appreciative inquiry does not dismiss challenges or differences between participants but rather focuses people's imagination on strengths. This was particularly useful in helping Pomona Pres move past previous

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<sup>100</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 140.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

discouragements in cross-cultural ministry.<sup>104</sup> Those planning the experiment also recognized that a third assumption of appreciative inquiry would contribute to the experiment: “Asking questions influences the group.”<sup>105</sup> The type of listening the learning partner wanted to do with the young adults was going to influence them and their perceptions.

The fourth and fifth assumptions were critical, particularly from a historical perspective. “People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry parts of the past.”<sup>106</sup> The undiscovered future can produce fear in the participants, but this can be diminished when realizing that growing in faith includes the best of the past into a new future. The fifth assumption of appreciative inquiry related to the previous one: “If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about our past.”<sup>107</sup> Rather than repeating unhelpful patterns or behaviors, positive change in Pomona Pres can displace them.

This led to understanding the sixth assumption: “It is important to value differences.”<sup>108</sup> There were significant differences in participants’ histories, socioeconomic realities, and ethnic backgrounds. Through appreciative inquiry, these do not need to be diminished or viewed as standing in opposition. Instead, appreciative inquiry provides new ways to hear one another’s values and to imagine a collective future that includes these differing backgrounds. This occurs when participants discover deeper shared values.

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<sup>104</sup> Joe George, interview by author, Pomona, CA, November 2, 2012. There are many stories, but the first I heard was from George: “Of the many youth people I mentored over eight years, they all ended up in jail or on parole.” This could have been discouraging, but appreciative inquiry allowed him to see this as a work that was not yet finished. God was still sovereign and at work in these young men’s lives as well as in his own.

<sup>105</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

Appreciative inquiry's seventh assumption is that "the language we use creates our reality."<sup>109</sup> Pomona Pres could brainstorm all it wanted about outreach to young adults, but the reality to live out those brainstorms would be limited. When people share and reflect on what God already has done through them, the words can shift their perception. Brainstorm is no longer some unachieved future but something God is in the midst of doing. As a result, motivation and behavior shift with the new reality.

The eighth assumption is that "organizations are heliotropic."<sup>110</sup> Organizations will move towards where there is energy. The church has identified that the core adaptive challenge was to grow in faith cross-culturally with its neighbors. This experiment was intended to help the church find new energy toward its future. As people become excited and see God at work, that energy is contagious. When people share about it, others want to experience it. This leads to the next assumption: "Outcomes should be useful."<sup>111</sup> The experiment was designed to be a dynamic through which the entire church could learn. The hope was to help Pomona Pres see its future with these young adults growing in faith in cross-cultural relationships. It also could open up a new imagination of the church engaging its diverse neighbors.

Finally, "all steps are collaborative."<sup>112</sup> It was not the action learning team's hope to discover something on its own about these young adults. Rather, the hope was that together all participants, both team members and invited guests, would discover something of what it meant to grow in faith. Following, this in turn could be shared with a larger group so that learning could continue and further experiments could be engaged.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

The concluding component of the overall plan was the inclusion of Scripture. This was modeled like the work that participants did in dwelling in Scripture during the church retreat described earlier.<sup>113</sup> The hope was that participants in this experiment would experience God's presence together, as they listened to one another and to the Scripture. Eugene Peterson describes it in this way: "Christian reading [of the Holy Scriptures] is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practice of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love."<sup>114</sup> He goes on to contrast this with other ways people can read Scripture. There are those who read Scripture for the "intellectual challenge," "practical bent," or "inspiration."<sup>115</sup> However, there is a difference. Peterson points out that in each of these groups, "you will be *using* the bible for *your* purposes."<sup>116</sup> There can be a tendency for people who read the Bible to take from it what they want, but they can do so without "dealing with God as God has revealed himself, without setting ourselves under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>117</sup> The preferred position to the biblical text is one of submission to the Word of God, rather than mastery over it. In this way, readers can come into a relationship with the Trinity and allow themselves to be formed by God. Listening to the same text together is a receptive act. After having been fed and satisfied physically, participants were positioned to be fed and satisfied by God and one another—especially since they already had been lowering walls to give and receive, feed and be fed, by one another.

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<sup>113</sup> See Chapter 2 of this project for further details.

<sup>114</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat This book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 28.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 129.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

## **Launching Phase One of the Experiment**

Phase One first began with preparation, starting in January 2014. A list of names was developed and followed up with over the next few months. People who had relationships with various young adults volunteered to contact them. Early Friday night was determined to be the best time to gather together. People within the church who could be learning partners were asked to be part of this. Potential learning partners were thought to be people who had a desire and experience to build cross-cultural relationships. Many had existing relationships with these young adults. After many calls, emails, and conversations the first dinner was hosted at my house on March 7, 2014. As the date drew nearer, many of the people who had expressed interest were unable to take part. Of the fourteen young adults we contacted, eleven had expressed interest. Initially, we were expecting at least eight of them to arrive, until two let us know at the last minute that they were unable to make it. The first dinner ended up being two young adults, Charles Collins and Arturo Ramirez, and two learning partners, Milt Lyles and me. Two more learning partners had canceled at the last minute as well. Though the number of participants was significantly lower, the hope was to build upon this humble beginning.

The first night was centered around a meal and the dinner table. It was articulated to the learning partners that we were trying to “build deeper relationships and together discover what the gospel looks like in our neighborhood.” During the meal, we would listen to one another and to Scripture and learn together what the gospel looked like. The first question asked was an appreciative inquiry question:

Take a moment to think about the experiences you have had in contributing to our church, our community (either in Pomona or elsewhere), your family, or some other group with which you’ve been involved. Think of a high point or “peak experience” in which you felt most alive, energized, and excited to be involved in making a positive difference. Please tell a story and who was involved. What made the experience so memorable for you?<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Meeting Minutes* (Pomona, CA: First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, March 7, 2014).

Ramirez named working with the Pomona Hope after-school program and how he liked helping the younger kids. Collins said he did not know. Lyles went on at length about how he appreciated Collins and the work he had done helping to paint the cave and then told various other stories about the church.

The dinner ended with biblical discussion. We read the Parable of the Sower from Mark 4:1-23. The Parable of the Sower was chosen, because it is a story that Jesus tells to a large crowd and then interprets for his disciples. In the story, a farmer casts seeds on four types of soils; but only the seeds that fall on the rich soil are fruitful, which are the ones “who hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop” (Mark 4:20).<sup>119</sup> Jesus challenges the people, “Let those who have ears to hear listen” (Mark 4:9).

The hope was to begin with a passage that would lead people to be challenged to listen to God and allow that listening to bear fruit. Four questions were used to allow participants to dwell on the Scripture: “What do you like about it?” “What questions do you have?” “What do you learn about God/Jesus?” “What are you going to do about it?”<sup>120</sup> Comments included, “It seems like such a waste to scatter seeds everywhere,” and “Why would Jesus let seeds get choked off?” Some even ranged into the more personal: “There is too much around me in my life for me not to get choked off,” and “There are times in my life when I feel like I am in the rocky soil, shooting up and then dying off and other times in fertile soil producing fruit.” A few stories were shared. There was some telling or interpreting for people, which limited conversation rather than asking participants to share more. While not a group of ten to fifteen young adults with corresponding learning partners, the four who participated enjoyed their meal, conversation, and time reading and

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<sup>119</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985) will be used, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>120</sup> These four questions were adapted from New Life Church in Lincoln Heights, an East Los Angeles neighborhood with illiteracy and urban blight similar to that which faces Pomona. These basic questions are asked to encourage people regardless of educational background to engage the biblical text.

reflecting on the Parable of the Sower. It was satisfying and enough of a start to move forward.

A second meeting was scheduled for March 21, 2014. Again, the much larger list of eleven young adults who had expressed interest were invited. Seven had expressed interest or said they were planning on coming. In the end, the same people arrived with the addition of J. McKellar. Again, we gathered around a meal at my house. The agenda included another appreciative inquiry question: “When has your family been at its best? Tell us a story about it? What qualities or behaviors have you appreciated most?” The Scripture was Luke 10:25-37, the story of the Good Samaritan. It is a text about an expert in the law challenging Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). In response, Jesus tells him how to love his neighbor by relating a story about a Samaritan who, unlike a priest or Levite, stopped to show compassion for a man beaten and robbed. Ultimately, it is a story about listening and a person coming to Jesus with a question. The parable ends with the uncertainty of whether or not the expert in the law listened and responded to what Jesus offered him.

The dinner group used the same four questions as the first meeting to look at the text. There were a multitude of responses to the parable. One person shared about his father’s “generosity” and employing people when they needed work.<sup>121</sup> Another person shared how his “dad was strong. He hit a guy who was in his business.” Another told about a mother’s strength to “keep going when things were hard,” and a final story was shared about “hard work which was installed in him from an early age.” Some reactions came in the form of questions. These included: “Was the expert trying to trick Jesus?” “Why did the guy offer to help but then leave him for someone else to do the work?” “Why did the Samaritan stop to help?” and “What’s wrong with the priest and Levite?”

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<sup>121</sup> While participants are named, all commenters are kept generic in order to protect the specific privacy of each person in both Phases One and Two.

Some of the questions were answered with brief answers. Here are some examples: “The priest and Levite were too busy,” “They didn’t want to get their hands dirty,” and an insightful comment regarding the third question, “Jesus cares about people who actually go and love neighbors, more than religious people.” At one point or another, everyone had expressed the sentiment about loving people. It then seemed easy for people to say that they wanted to love people. However, when someone asked, “Who will you love?” there was more silence. Although the group had not grown in number, deeper relationships had been forged as participants engaged in a shared meal and struggled with Scripture. In particular, they enjoyed the food and conversation, so a commitment was made to gather for the next three months.

The group met again on April 11, 2014. The appreciative inquiry question that started as we sat down for dinner was this: “What do you like most about living in Pomona?” The first responder said, “It sucks,” but there were more answers like “my family is here” and “there are good people making a difference.” The person who did not think highly about Pomona finally admitted that the Pomona Pres and Pomona Hope were good things, too. The group read from Mark 10:17-31, the story of the Rich Man and the Kingdom of God. In the passage, a man asks Jesus about inheriting eternal life, to which Jesus eventually responds that one thing the man lacks is to sell all he has and give to the poor and follow Jesus. Ultimately, the man walks away saddened. This passage was used because it has the same question asked of Jesus as the Good Samaritan yet with a different response. People had more questions than parts of the Scripture that they liked. One person liked Jesus’ questions of the man and that “Jesus loved him,” but others wondered, “Can rich people get into heaven?” “Does he really have to give up everything?” and “Why does Jesus ask him to give up all of his wealth?” Views varied on Jesus. They spanned from “Jesus will take me. I don’t have much,” to “It seems impossible to please him.” Overall, joy and discussion deepened over this meal.



The group gathered again on May 9, 2014. Participants ate a meal and after sitting down, the opening question was posed: “Who is one person that has contributed the most to your life? Tell one story that exemplifies this?” One person shared at length how the person who encouraged him was a teacher. This supervisor helped him in his role and his ability to mentor youth. Another person talked a lot as well. He said, “Emily [the former youth director and current director of the non-profit Pomona Hope] taught me, helped me set and reach my goals, and encouraged me when I was down.” Similarly, this person was able to appreciate the ways someone had walked with him through ups and downs and had helped him move forward in life. For another, “Drew was the best, he believed in me, he spent time with me. We started the community garden together.” “Drew” was a slightly older friend, who helped the participant move in a positive direction in life. Finally, I shared about the impact of my youth pastor and recounted, “He offered an awkward kid leadership opportunities and then later helped me discern how to follow God’s call in working with youth.” In comparison to other appreciative inquiry questions, despite the differences in age and background, this question helped us to hear how we all had been helped by mentors and a supervisor in similar ways. Basically, informal discipleship had happened in one form or another, which had aided us in learning how to employ our gifts and steer our potential down positive paths.

Following this conversation, we finally turned to a passage in the Bible. The passage was the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant in Matthew 18:21-35. Jesus tells a story in order to answer Peter’s question, “How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister?” (Matthew 18:21). Jesus contrasts a king’s mercy to a servant, who owes him much, with the same servant lacking mercy to another who owes him little. One dinner participant liked the king’s decision to torture the servant. Others had questions about seeing God as the king, “How can God be like the king if he is torturing the servant?” Another speculated, “Why does God’s forgiveness depend upon our forgiving others?”

Then a bigger, more difficult question was asked, “How do you forgive someone who isn’t sorry?”

This led to a long discussion and several stories about forgiveness. One person shared, “I don’t want to forgive my dad for all the ways he hurt me.” Another shared a story about visiting a memorial for victims of Nazi Germany with a plaque that read: “Forgive, but do not forget.” One wondered, “How could they could forgive?” While another pondered if they “really forgave,” someone eventually asked a core question: “What is forgiveness?” People shared various stories of forgiveness. One person said that forgiveness was the “king no longer holding the debt against the servant.” The conversation ended with a sense of gratitude for being forgiven, which contrasted with the struggle to forgive others. This passage provided a rich discussion with several stories shared.

It took another month before the group could gather again. The dinner group met on June 6, 2014. A decision was made to not include an appreciative inquiry question, to allow conversation as the dinner got started. It was noted that at the most recent gatherings, the cultural barrier had been lowered and that participants had become freer in sharing personal stories. When people showed up, they immediately began to ask one another about their prior month and share stories of their personal lives.

The discussion of the Bible text centered on Mark 5:1-20, which relates the story of the Demon-Possessed Man. It is a passage in which Jesus heals a demon-possessed man by casting them into a nearby pig herd. The dinner companions liked a variety of aspects about the story. One person appreciated how Jesus sat with the man after he was healed. Another liked how the demon-possessed man approached Jesus to be healed. Another focused on the man’s strength and “ability to survive even in tough situations.” Finally, another individual liked Jesus’ ability to cast out the demons.

Along with the appreciation, there were many questions. Here are some examples: “What happened to the demons when the pigs died?” “If a person is that strong, how did they bind him and force him to live in the tombs?” Why didn’t Jesus let the healed man come with him in the boat?” “Why did Jesus have to send the demons into the pigs?” And finally, “I wonder what Jesus said to the man when they sat there?” While there was one participant who supposed, “Jesus does not like pigs,” others gravitated towards Jesus’ ability to heal. Participants made the following comments: “Jesus is more powerful than all the demons,” “Jesus heals and cares for him,” and “Jesus restores him to his family and friends.” While one person wondered who is demon-possessed today, another thought about “sharing what God has done with family and friends.” A few others agreed with this, and a short conversation about what God has done in their lives followed. There was plenty of conversation about the text and about Jesus’ power versus the demon’s power. Although people told fewer stories about themselves, there was much engagement. Overall, an interesting and invigorating discussion ensued among the participants.

As summer headed into full swing, it was a challenge to meet. Even when we did, it ended up only being two people—basically, Ramirez and me. We decided to do something a little different. We cooked dinner together. First, we went to the store and bought meat and fruit. Then we barbecued hamburgers and cut up fruit for a salad. Instead of a Bible study, we talked and shared about ourselves. Much of the conversation was about food, cooking, and families. Although no time was spent looking at the biblical passage, the meal was generative in that it provided an opportunity to cook and laugh and share our lives with each other. As a result, we created a shared memory and grew in our knowledge of shared passions.

Since it continued to be difficult to find times when even the four of us could gather, a final meal was planned for August 1, 2014. The desire was to wrap up and give

thanks for the time spent together. The biblical text of how Jesus heals ten lepers from Luke 17:11-19 was used as the passage of focus. After healing the afflicted men, Jesus sends them to the priest. However, only one returns to Jesus to give thanks when he realizes he has been healed. This passage was selected to help the group reflect on what Jesus has done in our dinner times together and to pause and give thanks. People liked how Jesus heals the lepers, although they wondered about the nature of the healing. The following questions reflected this: “Wait. Jesus didn’t heal them right away. They had to go the priests. Why?” “Did the nine still get healed?” “Why send them to the priests?” In terms of learning about Jesus, people were split. Some did not like that Jesus would expect “to be thanked” and thought he had made it “complicated to get healed.” Others appreciated that “Jesus’ healing took place as they walked.” As the group spent time in gratitude, the two younger participants came to an agreement about Lyles and said, “Milt you have great stories. I love them.” Lyles affirmed and encouraged the boys. He replied, “You are two outstanding young men. You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to.” People also nodded in agreement when I said, “I appreciated getting to know each other better.” There was a general agreement about the joy spent together sharing meals and stories. There was a deep appreciation for the deepening relationships and possibly a bit of surprise that it happened across the various cultural and even age barriers.

### **Reflections on the Experiment**

Following the last meeting, another group of learning partners gathered on August 14, 2014. This group included some of the initial people who had expressed interest but were unable to commit as well as others who had relationships with these young adults. This second group included Lyles, Coco George, J. McKellar, Shantee McKellar, Jeff Johansen, and me. The meeting had a couple of goals. The first was to reflect on any

learning we had experienced from the time spent with the young adults.<sup>122</sup> The second was to look forward to see how the church could continue to move forward and launch more experiments to help us further engage the adaptive challenge of growing in faith cross-culturally with Pomona Pres' neighbors. From the conversation came a desire for further listening to people's stories. Lyles shared how he led a group of prisoners to express themselves through a creative writing process. There was much excitement about this. It was agreed to see if there was interest in hosting a monthly dessert and creative writing workshop.

Six young adults expressed a desire to participate, with many more noncommittal. They confirmed that they would attend a creative writing and dessert night at the church. On October 14, 2014, Lyles, J. McKellar, Johansen, and I waited around. Finally, one young adult showed up—although he was significant. It was Ramirez. Despite the solo young man and our disappointment, we went ahead with a modified version of what was planned.

As we ate pie, Lyles began sharing that “every story is a quest.”<sup>123</sup> He proceeded to tell a story about a time when he was young man and he heard a noise coming from underneath his house. After minutes of describing the situation and the struggle to squeeze under the house, he finally climbed deeper still and with a gun in his hand. “A screech as claws gripped into my back. I spun around firing off the pistol right through the bathtub above. Fortunately, I had missed our cat.”<sup>124</sup> After a few people exclaimed, “Wow!” and then, “Wait. Did that really happen to you?” Lyles proceeded without answering to teach on the components of character, setting, conflict, action, and

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<sup>122</sup> With regards to the first goal, what was learned will be evaluated extensively in Chapter 5.

<sup>123</sup> Milt Lyles, “Creative Writing” (workshop, First Presbyterian Church of Pomona, Pomona, CA, October 14, 2014).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

resolution.<sup>125</sup> Ramirez was asked what his “story” might be, but the young man did not know. Although there was a little more dialogue back and forth, no story was shared. The highlight of the evening was Lyles’ story, but sadly there were no steps toward helping even the one young adult who showed to tell part of his story.

This first phase of gathering for a meal with two young adults and two learning partners did not include as many participants as desired, yet it still created space to grow deeper relationships and break down cultural barriers. Sharing stories, listening to one another, and collective dwelling in Scripture was quite enjoyable for everyone in the group. It also offered an opportunity to start the process of understanding one another on a more profound level. This provided a spark in developing a missional imagination. Through the experiment of listening to one another and to Scripture, there was some awareness of generative aspects of being together in shared hospitality. However, due to the lack of breadth in the experiment, there was a desire to launch a second phase to broaden the experience that this experiment offered. Chapter 4 of this discussion studies these starts and restarts of missional imagination.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

### PHASE TWO OF EXPERIMENT WITH YOUNG ADULTS

In order to expand the opportunity to cultivate a missional imagination, a second phase of the experiment with young adults and learning partners from the church was launched. This chapter describes the experiment in which the meal with the young adults was moved to the McKellar home. The experiment involved a slightly less formal agenda yet with the same components of food, the giving and receiving of one another's stories, and listening to Scripture.

After being unable to pull together people for a creative writing project, several informal conversations followed. There was a recognition that these young adults displayed a pattern that they only sometimes showed up to an event even when they said they would. Consequently, a decision was made to try dinners at the McKellar home, because the students had a history of visiting and might feel more "safe."<sup>126</sup> A decision also was made to modify the appreciative inquiry to be a more open-ended question that would allow people to tell stories about themselves. The final adjustment included fixing the dinner to a specific time and date that would be easy to remember and accommodate the second Sunday of the month.

#### **Phase Two: Dinner at the McKellars**

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<sup>126</sup> Shantee McKellar, interview by author, Pomona, CA, November 25, 2014.

On January 11, 2015, the second phase of the experiment began. A few days prior, six to eight young adults initially were expected based on the various types of positive response given to the invitation. On the day of the first dinner J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and I heard that two were unable to make it and two would be late. The three of us gathered at 6:00 p.m. and ended up waiting for nearly an hour for A.J. Garcia and Alex Mesa to arrive. During this delay, as the three learning partners, we decided to simplify the first meeting. An appreciative inquiry question would be asked to allow for some time to listen to one another, but the Scripture would be skipped. Once Garcia and Mesa arrived, there was much celebration and greeting. The group sat down and after starting on dinner, the question was asked, "What hopes do you have for this year?" Answer varied considerably. Some were pragmatic, "I want to get through school." One went on to describe school and career goals. Two shared about family. "I want to be more patient with my family and raise my voice less." Another said, "I want to get along with my mom." These prompted short stories about family life.

Some stories about relationship with God also were shared. This may have been due to the context of church people gathering. Even "I want to grow closer to God" was shared in response to the context, which proved significant. It opened the door for another to impart a short story of the role God played in his life. He admitted, "I ignore God too much. I like it when I feel like God is close, and I can pray." After listening, there was a brief description of the purpose for our collective engagement: to grow and learn together while gathering for meals and listening to one another's stories and Scripture. Due to the low number of young adults, there was some skepticism about whether this could happen. Nevertheless, the time with those who showed up was quite enjoyable.

On February 15, 2015, the group gathered for a second dinner at the McKellar home. There seven participants: J. McKellar, S. McKellar, Collins, Chris Moran, Ana Cuellar, Fonzi Gaona, and me. After people greeted one another, we eventually sat down



for dinner. The group talked and caught up about life since the last time they had gathered. Partway through dinner I pulled out a Bible passage: the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The group read it and then I asked one question, “When was a time you were forgiven or chose to forgive someone else?” Two people shared about their struggle to forgive their mothers. They said, “I want to forgive her, but I have a hard time letting go of the things she has said to me,” and “I have said, ‘I forgive you,’ but I am still angry.” They went on to converse back and forth regarding experiences with their mothers. They talked about wanting things to change but were unsure how forgiveness would help.

Another person, who is soft spoken, became animated when he shared about the movie, *Les Misérables*, in which forgiveness plays a powerful role.<sup>127</sup> This participant observed, “The priest forgave the guy who stole the silver and offered him more. I would like to be like that, but I don’t think I can.” This led others to reflect on “being taken advantage of” when forgiving. Some shared about being forgiven by family members. “Sometimes they say to me, ‘That’s okay.’ And I tell them, ‘No! It’s not, but will you forgive me?’” In general, participants shared openly about being hurt and hurting those close to them and their relationship to the other person.

The group gathered again for dinner on March 8, 2015. Following a similar format, participants took time to catch up, while waiting for late arrivals. The group eventually included J. McKellar, S. McKellar, Sandra Mesa, Mimi Jollie, Jorge Gaxiola, and me. After much discussion around what had been happening during the previous month, we ate dinner and I posed this question: “When was a time God worked in your life?” After some silence, one woman shared how she was “bounced around from house to house.” She spoke about family turmoil and fighting, the “chaos of my life.” It was a

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<sup>127</sup> *Les Misérables*, directed by Tom Hooper, produced by Working Title Films (Universal Pictures, 2012).

vulnerable story about her childhood. At the end, she wondered, “Did God watch over me? I survived.” Several people affirmed her and expressed gratitude that “God had walked with her.” Another said, “God protected you.”

One female participant expressed a very different story. She said, “God has never done anything for me. I have done everything for myself. I got myself through school, got a job, I got myself into college and through college.” To which another person argued, “God has worked in your life. What about all of those winter camps?” The woman replied, “No, God hasn’t work in my life.” The two went back and forth a few more times until I interrupted them, “Let’s allow her story to be her story.” There was clear frustration from someone who had known this woman in the context of the church deny God’s actions in her life.

Another person shared about the conflict in a relationship compounded by an illness. She poured out her heart, “I cried out, ‘Help me, God!’ That was the bottom. Slowly things got better. We went to counseling and then I went to counseling.” It was a story of seeing God answer a prayer providing physical and relational healing. Another person verbalized struggles with fear: “When finances have been tight, God has provided. When we have gotten to the end of the month and didn’t have food or couldn’t pay bills, a check has shown up or extra food to stretch what we have.” This participant was very appreciative for God’s provision time and time again.

Following the stories, the group read Deuteronomy 8:10-18. This is a command given to the Israelites by God. After their entrance into the promise land, they are to remember the things God has done for them to get them out of Egypt. The basic point is that if the Israelites do not remember, they will grow proud. I asked two questions, “What does God ask them to remember?” “Why is it so important to remember?” Answers to the first question were similar and included the following: “They need to remember how God saved them,” “They will forget,” “They will think it is all about themselves,” and “It is

easy to forget.” One person personalized it and admitted, “I sometimes forget how God has worked. When I stop and am grateful, it helps me see God now.”

On April 12, 2015, the group gathered again for dinner. Participants talked about what had been going on recently. As Jenni Noriega, Garcia, Jollie, J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and I conversed, we served ourselves dinner and sat at the table on the patio of the McKellar house. After dinner, I posed this question: “When did you experience joy? What made it so joy-filled?” One young woman interjected, “It was fun watching my cousins hunt for Easter eggs. They were screaming and laughing. Joy is being full. It was great to be with my family. They brought me joy.” It was a remarkable insight in seeing a moment that filled her with joy. A few others talked about the joy of being with family and two shared, “My kids surprised me with a meal. We had silly hats,” and “I enjoy spending time with each person doing what they like.” Many stories were given and received by the group. Then followed a short passage from John 15:9, where Jesus commands his disciples to remain in his love so that they may experience Jesus’ full joy. There was very little discussion before the conversation was sidetracked.

The discussion on joy actually provoked other significant conversations, which took over. A conversation started about the racial protests that had been going on in the country. Several people shared about their own experiences of race and racism. One said, “I have had to work hard to get my education. People don’t expect much from me.” Another admitted, “There are some issues in my neighborhood, but I don’t like getting involved.” While people’s experiences varied, it seemed that people were willing to share intimate issues and struggles.

Later on, one person asked me, “Why did you become a pastor?” I shared my story and highlighted both my boredom with engineering and God’s call and desire to help the next generation learn about Jesus. She was very intrigued that I had studied engineering. I then asked her, “Why are you studying psychology?” She answered

through an expression of her intimate experience. “I know many poor families in Pomona that fight and have other issues. They could really use a counselor. I want to be a counselor for the poor.” Impressed, I affirmed her devotion to give back to her community. This was a significant story that revealed her motivation for working so hard to get through college. I told her about the Urbana Mission Conference that would be held later that year to help college students see how God can use them in their work.<sup>128</sup> I asked if she would be interested and shared more deeply how Urbana had been significant in my calling as I also considered other job options. Although the conversation on joy was brief, there were a couple of significant opportunities where cultural divides lowered even further to share and listen more deeply to one another’s stories.

The next month the dinner was postponed from the second Sunday back a week to May 17, 2015 to avoid conflicting with Mother’s Day. Prior to dinner I invited other learning partners to gather beforehand to “share and debrief what we have been learning.”<sup>129</sup> Two of the learning partners ran late due to a prior event, so there was little time for conversation. By the time they arrived, one of the young adults was there. We prayed but were unable to spend any time reflecting. The group sat around and eventually gathered for dinner. Fabii Gaxiola, Zachariah, Gaona, Cuellar, J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and I enjoyed a meal. The question asked was this: “When was a time you were repeatedly frustrated by a situation, and how did you respond?”

In addition, Habakkuk 3:17-18 was read. Here the prophet declares that he will rejoice in God despite failed crops. One person commented, “You have to have a good attitude. I don’t get frustrated because I focus on the positive.” Even when asked, “Does your daughter ever frustrate you?” he replied, “Sometimes she doesn’t listen, but I remember that she is such an incredible gift.” He went on to describe how he had chosen

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<sup>128</sup> Urbana, “Discern Your Place in God’s Global Mission,” accessed January 12, 2018, <https://urbana.org/>.

<sup>129</sup> Adam Donner, email message to participants, Pomona CA, May 5, 2015.

to find joy daily. Another person connected and added, “I do get frustrated with my kids. They don’t always listen even asking them multiple times. Sometimes I get angry, sometimes I am able to be patient, but I can’t say I rejoice.” It was an honest assessment of an everyday frustrating interaction. Another person agreed, “It is too easy just to say, ‘Be joyful.’” The storytelling was much briefer this month as compared to prior months. Nevertheless, the level of sharing continued to deepen as did the joy expressed for our time of gathering for conversation and a meal.

On June 14, 2015, the group met for dinner. Participants included Garcia, Noriega, J. Gaxiola, J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and me. Although people slowly trickled through the door, there was still energy and a genuine sense of gratefulness to gather. I posed the following question for discussion: “When was a time you experienced peace?” This was intentional, as the topic matched up with the sermon preached earlier in the day. It served as a way to elicit storytelling yet continue the expansion of a faith conversation started in the worship service that morning.

Psalms 46 was read as a way to introduce the topic of peace. In it the psalmist declares, “God is our refuge,” through any natural disasters or war (Psalm 46:1). God protects and makes wars cease yet issues this invitation, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). One person responded, “This seems different than when people generally talk about peace.” Someone else agreed, “Yeah, like when people look for inner peace.” A third person expanded on the same sentiment, saying, “I have felt this even when trying to balance work, school, and home. There have been times when things were very difficult and I have felt a kind of peace.” Still another person offered, “I have felt that kind of peace when people have prayed for me. I told my friend about how hard it had been to parent lately. When he prayed for me, he shared an image that helped me trust in God’s presence in midst of my parenting.” Another person echoed this. “When we have struggled financially and people have prayed for us, God has given me peace

even if I am unsure how things will go.” For several people, there seemed to be a recognition as people shared about God’s provision and serenity during challenging times. Listening to personal stories caused participants’ hearts to resonate one with another. One individual was honest and shared a different point of view: “I like it when people pray for me, but I don’t usually feel any peace until things have changed.” Even as the group sat around enjoying dessert, the conversation varied. Overall, there was an expressed appreciation about the sharing and the time spent together.

In July, Jollie, Mesa, Noriega, J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and I gathered for dinner again at the McKellar home. As had been the developing pattern, people arrived and trickled in over the course of thirty minutes. After getting food, we sat around the table outside. The question that was asked again related to the Sunday morning sermon, essentially continuing the conversation started during the worship service: “When have you experienced a random act of kindness?” The passage that was read along with the question was Mathew 25:31-46. In it, Jesus invites those who have fed him while hungry, clothed him while naked, extended hospitality, cared for him when he was sick, and visited him when he was a prisoner to receive their heavenly inheritance—all while those who have not are cast off. Neither group remembers seeing Jesus in need, but Jesus responds, “Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45).

The responses to the question became animated. One person said, “I saw a person buy coffee for the person behind him in line.” Others were surprised, “Really?” To which he replied, “Yeah, it happened about a year ago. I watched it. I was surprised. The person ran after him to thank him.” Another participant related this experience: “I had a homeless couple pray for me. I had said hello to this couple I had known and walked by them because they appeared to be in a hurry. After only a few steps they turned and asked if I could pray for them. I did, but at the end they prayed for me. It was incredibly

generous.” Another person stated, “My mom surprised us by giving us her car.” More than one dinner companion was impressed by this. “Wow, that’s awesome!” echoed throughout the room. The conversation then turned to other stories people had heard about. Prompted by such personal stories, the conversation stayed around this theme. One person did offer a comment in regards to the passage, “I do think about this passage when I help feed the homeless and when my daughter gives away some of our groceries to homeless people she sees. They are not just needy people. God loves them.” Someone did ask, “How do you be kind and not get taken advantage of?” People agreed the question was a good one but never answered it, and the group seemed to be okay with not having to have all the answers. Although the conversation wandered a bit during the evening, relationships continued to grow as participants learned more about one another and spent time together.

In August, the dinner was moved to my house, because it was so hot. Garcia, Ramirez, Collins, F. Gaxiola, J. McKellar, and I gathered for pizza by the pool on August 16, 2015. What marked this dinner from previous meals was that people sat apart for the first part of the evening in groups of ones and twos. Eventually the group gathered around the table to answer this question: “When have you experienced someone being faithful to you?” Luke 16:1-13 was read to accompany the question. This passage details the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. Here Jesus tells the story of a manager who, before he is fired, settles accounts with several people in their favor. The owner commends the manager for acting shrewdly. Jesus summarizes by saying, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much” (Luke 16:10). The text and the topic of faithfulness were from the sermon that morning, but it led to very little discussion. One person mentioned, “John, you have been there for me many times.” Another person commented, “My wife has encouraged me through all of my schooling.” A few questions and comments were directed toward the text, such as

“That guy totally swindled him” and “Why would the king commend a guy for basically robbing him?” Although there was less conversation, people stayed a while to linger around the pool and chat.

On September 13, 2015, the group met back at the McKellar home. Participants consisted of F. Gaxiola, Noriega, Collins, J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and me. The following conversation starter, which was easier to answer and elicited more stories, was offered: “Share a favorite celebration.” This was highlighted in view of Psalm 66, in which the psalmist repeats the theme of praising God and telling of the amazing things that he has done. There were a few people who named annual gatherings, such as “I love Christmas morning with my family, watching people open their presents,” and “I like coming to Shantee’s Thanksgiving and Christmas. Miss Dorothy and Shantee’s cooking is the best.” Another participant said, “I really enjoyed my birthday. People from various points in my life came to celebrate. I really appreciated the people who gave me toasts. That was best gift.” Some annual events included non-holiday activities, such as “I like going to the beach every year with the church, playing volleyball and sitting around the campfire.” Several other people agreed. These were the few stories told before the conversation moved on to others things.

On October 18, 2015, F. Gaxiola, Cuellar, Gaona, J. McKellar, S. McKellar, and I gathered for another meal at the McKellar home. The question was asked, “When have you experienced meaning or purpose in your life?” Coupled with this question was John 15:1-5, in which Jesus compares himself to a vine. He invites disciples to stay connected to him in order to produce fruit in their life. One person spoke up right away, “I find purpose in providing for my daughter. Every day I go to work I think I am doing it for her.” Another person also found meaning in relating to other people. “I don’t like my work, but I find it very meaningful to be with all of you.” It was a generous comment depicting some of the depth of relationships that had developed. More responses focused



on personal battles. Someone said, “I also struggled to find meaning when I worked at the power plant, but have found meaning walking alongside people as they discover Jesus.” Another participant shared, “Sometimes when I take the time to listen to a homeless person, I feel like I am doing what God wants me to do.” One person, who had sat quiet for much of the evening, upon prompting agreed that helping out at Pomona Hope was meaningful. In each response, people noted that it was in being in relationships and doing things for other people that gave them meaning in their life.

### **Reflections on Phase Two**

Gathering young adults from the neighborhood with learning partners from the church was an experiment in cultivating missional imagination for Pomona Pres. By listening to one another’s stories and listening to Scripture around a meal, the hope was to begin to learn about the church’s adaptive challenge, “How can we engage people cross-culturally in our community with the gospel and create a place to grow in faith?”<sup>130</sup> Many meals were shared, with a total of ten young adults and five learning partners.

One of the hopes for this project was to gather a group who would learn together, as they listened to one another and to God. In particular, it was hoped that this would contribute somehow to a shift in missional imagination for the church. As the two phases played out, it was not possible to gather the same group of people from month to month. Even when the young adults had stated they were coming, many times they did not show up or things arose that prevented them from gathering.

While some might blame age or maturity for inconsistency, hearing their stories revealed the incredible amount of pressure and numerous struggles they experience in their families, work, and school. Their persistence to gather when they could revealed an enormous amount of grace offered to the listening partners from the church. The lack of a

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<sup>130</sup> T. Hsieh, J. McKellar, Moore, and Donner, “Adaptive Challenge Team Meeting.”

consistent group from month to month stymied the project from gaining momentum. All of this is analyzed further. Specifically, how the church grew and did not grow in missional imagination will be addressed further in the Part Three.

PART THREE

REFLECTIONS ON LISTENING TO THE OTHER

## CHAPTER 5

### THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF LISTENING THROUGH SHARED HOSPITALITY

This chapter explores the theology of listening and how it serves as a springboard for mutual learning in reciprocal relationship. It also studies ways a local church can regain the listening aspect of Jesus' ministry and how such a practice can restore marred human identity. This theology highlights the chasm of socioeconomic barriers that exists between people and the means to come together to listen to one another and learn through shared hospitality.

To accomplish this, the chapter first embraces a biblical understanding of listening to God and to others who are marginalized. Then it studies *The Great Chasm*, by Engdahl.<sup>131</sup> This book, written by one of the members of the church, highlights the chasm that exists between the rich and the poor, studying Luke 16 and surrounding text. Using the unfinished story in the biblical text, the book challenges readers to finish the story for themselves and respond to this chasm.

While commenting on Engdahl's methods in which to "cross the chasm," the theological reflection in this chapter ultimately explores listening and dialogue as a way for people across socioeconomic barriers to become co-learners together. It employs Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," to examine ways in which those who would

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<sup>131</sup> Derek Engdahl, *The Great Chasm: How to Stop Our Wealth from Separating Us from the Poor and God* (Pomona, CA: Servant Partners Press, 2015).

be teachers can become co-learners alongside those who have been oppressed.<sup>132</sup> Finally, this discussion concludes with an examination of table fellowship.

### **Listening in the Bible**

Listening is central to the biblical narrative. While most of the listening in the Old Testament is directed towards God, Jesus expands this in the New Testament to include one's neighbors. Listening is the ability to become aware of and hear from someone else.

Psalms 5:1-3 in many ways defines the concept of listening. The psalmist seeks God's ear and says, "Listen to my words, Lord," and "Hear my cry for help." This is with the understanding that the Lord will heed his voice. For this reason, the psalmist waits with hope: "In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice . . . and [I] wait expectantly." In listening, the Lord recognizes a specific person calling out and directs his perception and attention towards the person speaking. From the very beginning through to the end of Scripture, people are encouraged to reciprocate and listen to God as well. They also are warned against not listening to God.

In Genesis, God commanded Adam to eat of any tree in the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). After eating of this tree God said to Adam, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' Cursed is the ground because of you" (Genesis 3:17). Adam is punished for listening to Eve and eating the fruit, rather than listening to God. Myers comments, "Being like God was apparently more attractive than listening to God and doing as God asked. The effect of this disobedience ensured that human identity would be marred and all dimensions of human relationships would work less well for human well-being."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

<sup>133</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 64.

Consequently, the process of turning their hearts and ears toward God becomes part of the redemptive story of God's people. The Shema, repeated throughout the generations by Jews, states, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). The people are told to listen and keep their focus on God. They are advised to put this commandment figuratively in their hearts and upon their children. Those who follow God are to talk about the commandments in their home and as they walk on the road (Deuteronomy 6:8-9). In the morning and in the evening, they are to heed the Word of God. There is no time during the day or in any activity when they should stop paying attention to the central fact that God is God. All love and attention should be directed towards him. Those who follow God are commanded to listen and constantly consider what he says and who he is.

Old Testament worship also included a reminder to listen to God. Psalms are filled with God's call to listen. In Psalm 50:7 he says, "Listen, my people, and I will speak; I will testify against you, Israel: I am God, your God." Here the psalmist is calling people to listen to God's judgment for forgetting him. In Psalm 49, the psalmist calls out for all to heed God's wisdom, "Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world" (Psalm 49:1). This psalm is calling out to those who are wealthy and who have turned away from God. The psalmist warns that "people who have wealth but lack understanding are like the beasts that perish" (Psalm 49:20). In Psalm 81, God speaks and urges those who follow him to listen. He declares, "Hear me, my people, and I will warn you—if you would only listen to me, Israel! You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not worship any god other than me" (Psalm 81:8-9). Here God extols the people to hear him and turn away from false gods. Reciting or hearing the Psalms became a way to structure time in which people remembered their attention was to be devoted to God.

Similarly, the prophets warned the people against not listening. “‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 7:13). God judges the people for not listening to him. Jeremiah laments to God, “To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the Lord is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it” (Jeremiah 6:10). Given a warning about coming disaster, Jeremiah knows people will not listen to him, even if the word is from the Lord. The prophet Isaiah shares this from God: “Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness. I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed” (Isaiah 46:10). Despite people’s stubbornness and tendency to not listen, God calls out to them because he desires to bring about salvation. Listening to God means turning one’s attention to him, which is central to the Old Testament narrative.

In the New Testament Jesus expands this idea of vertical listening to God to include horizontal listening, specifically to one’s neighbor. When asked about the greatest commandment Jesus responds, “The most important one, is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31). Jesus reminds the crowd that they must turn their devotion towards God with all of their faculties, and then he expands this by including a law from Leviticus 19:18 about loving their neighbor. It is not enough to simply turn their devotion to the Holy One; people also must direct their attention to those around them, see their plight, and hear their heart. In this way, Jesus establishes listening to God and listening to one’s neighbor as a required combination.

Jesus also shows how human beings need to pay attention to and listen to their neighbors who are on the margins of life. In particular, he sets the example by taking care where and how and to whom he gives his own attention. He stops to address and listen to people who are not even considered worthy of count in a census. He pays attention to women and children (Mark 5:21-43; 7:24-30; Luke 18:15-17) and the sick (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:40-2:12; Luke 13:10-17) and even highlights a despised Samaritan as a neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). In Matthew 25, when Jesus shares about the final judgement, he commends those who pay attention to people who are strangers or hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison. “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45). Jesus equates love of God to thoughtful listening and addressing the needs of those most vulnerable.

### **The Great Chasm**

One of the places where people’s identity is marred, which God is in the process of restoring, is in the socioeconomic chasm that exists. Both the call to cross this divide and ways in which people’s relationships are redeemed are found in the book, *The Great Chasm*. In it, Engdahl looks at Luke 16 and nearby texts that focus on Jesus’ call for wealthy Christians to build relationships with the materially poor.<sup>134</sup> This book has been read widely in Pomona Pres, and its theology is embedded deeply within the congregation. While remaining a call and challenge for people within the church to build relationships across socioeconomic lines, this theology also serves as a helpful framework for this project. Following is a summary of the major points within the book that are applicable to the missional endeavors being discussed.

### **Relational Chasm between Poor and Wealthy**

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<sup>134</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 16. Engdahl was part of the first group of people to relocate to Pomona and join the church in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He co-directs an organization called Servant Partners, which plants churches in urban and slum communities around the world.



There exists a large chasm between the poor and the wealthy. Luke 16 details Jesus' parable about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus, who lives outside the man's comfortable home and beyond his gates. Eventually, both characters die. Lazarus is carried to Abraham's side, while the rich man resides in the agony of fire. In life, the gate and the rich man's wealth separated the two. Lazarus longed for only the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. In death, the rich man longs for just a drop of cool water on his tongue, but the chasm is so large that neither can cross to the other. At the end, the rich man begs for his family to be warned to change their way and be merciful to beggars outside their gate. Abraham tells him that Moses and the prophets already had given God's Word to be merciful and that even a warning from the grave will not change the rich family's decision to be merciful with the poor.

The gate that was built with the man's wealth kept the poor man from his table. It kept him far enough away, so he did not need to see Lazarus while he ate. In understanding this economic chasm, which is also relational, it is important to notice that Jesus flips the table by naming the poor man and not naming the rich man. This starkly highlights how the names of the poor can remain unknown to the rich. The passage does not criticize the person's wealth but rather reveals the need that each individual has for the other.

People from different socioeconomic classes rarely have significant relationships with one another. This exists in contemporary western culture as well as within the Church. Engdahl explains, "We tend to surround ourselves with people who are like us. It's simply more comfortable. This impulse also affects what churches we attend."<sup>135</sup> Human beings tend towards that which gives them comfort. This often takes shape as homogenous relationships because they do not challenge the assumptions about wealth,

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 10.

generosity, and communal need for one another. Unless people are intentional, building relationships across cultural and economic divides will not get formed.

Engdahl points out, “Very few churches are socioeconomically diverse. Even churches that boast of their cultural diversity often draw people from same socio-economic class.”<sup>136</sup> Like the rich man and his family in Jesus’ parable, who had read Moses and the prophets, the local church who also has heard God’s Word fails to respond to its call to be merciful and in relationship with the poor. The Body of Christ can become comfortable not being in relationships with the poor and not challenging its assumptions on how it uses its wealth. Engdahl urges people to recognize: “Most of us do not have deep relationships with people outside our social class.”<sup>137</sup>

#### Faithful Use of Wealth

Although this chasm between the poor and wealthy exists, Jesus does not necessarily issue a call for everyone to give up their wealth. Throughout Scripture there is a recurring theme that people’s wealth is from God. God calls those who follow him to seek his provision and to give thanks for it (Matthew 6:25-34). Furthermore, God calls his people away from the sin of greed and urges them to share, redistribute wealth, and give generously (Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 6:19-24; Luke 12:13-21).

The call to faithfully use one’s wealth begins in the Old Testament. In the Garden of Eden, God provided all that Adam and Eve needed. Their job was simply to steward these resources (Genesis 2:15). The Mosaic Law addressed the issue of wealth and faithful use. For example, in the Sabbath year, people were to cancel debts owed by others (Deuteronomy 15:1-3). The poor were allowed to glean the edges of a field (Leviticus 19:9-10). Every three years a tithe was to be brought into the towns and shared

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 11.

with the Levites who did not have land along with orphans, immigrants, and widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). The tithe was routinely given as a reminder that God had provided for the crops, but in this case it was directed also to be shared with those in need. The prophets warn God people against the abuse of wealth. For example, Amos proclaims, “They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground” (Amos 2:7). The wealthy had used and abused the poor to obtain more wealth against God’s intentions.

In the New Testament Jesus continues to encourage those with wealth to care for the poor and to be in relationship with the poor. Luke 14:12-14 offers this example:

Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

In addition to his story about Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus told other parables and offered strong instruction to emphasize the proper use of wealth and attention to neighbors. To a ruler who claimed to have followed all the commandments, Jesus asked him to give away his wealth to the poor and follow him (Matthew 19:16-26). The ruler is sad because it appears that he loves his riches more than following God. Although this is not a command Jesus gives to everyone, the Lord does give a stern warning, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” This is because Jesus desires for his people to be free from the power money can have over them.

Similarly, *The Great Chasm* explores Scripture at length with respect to the faithful use of wealth. Engdahl highlights several faithful ways followers of Christ can use their wealth. These topics include hospitality, celebration, and generous living—

which are discussed in more detail below. It is worthy to note that while some are called to give money to the poor, all are called to be in relationship.

## **Hospitality**

Engdahl emphasizes how hospitality is a theme throughout Scripture and points out many examples. For instance, in the Old Testament Abraham compelled three travelers to stop so he could wash their feet. He offered rest and food to them (Genesis 18:2-8). Whenever there was a sojourner in Israel, that person was supposed to be protected according to Jewish law (Exodus 22:21). The Law called for the people of Israel to remember that they too were once foreigners; and consequently, they should provide generously for others who are as they once were.

For Jesus, hospitality is central to the gospel message. He gives basic commands to extend hospitality. In describing the final judgment, he says, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in” (Matthew 25:35). Jesus compares the hospitality given a stranger to that of himself. Those who give this hospitality will be rewarded with eternal life (Matthew 25:46). He warns those who do not extend hospitality to strangers that they will receive eternal punishment. In Luke 10, Jesus sends out the seventy-two disciples to receive hospitality from those who extend peace. They in turn are to offer their peace back to those in the house while healing the sick and proclaiming the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:5-9). This reciprocal hospitality reveals a mutual need that Christians have with others.

Hospitality is central to the gospel narrative. In the New Testament, Paul commanded the Body of Christ to extend hospitality to strangers (Romans 12:13). Also, one of the qualifications to serve as a bishop in the church was hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2). Engdahl believes so strongly in the call to hospitality that doing otherwise is not an

option. He writes: “As Christians, we must open our homes to each other and to those who have no homes to go to.”<sup>138</sup>

When Christians open their homes and eat with one another, they open their lives to be in relationship with others. In this space, they have the opportunity to extend and receive God’s grace. It also opens their eyes and ears to the context in which God is working. Eating itself is not a Christian practice. Everybody has a need to consume food. However, there is a way in which eating is specifically Christian. If Jesus is the divine model, then he exemplified eating with outcasts; and in these meals, God’s Kingdom reigns. Sharing food becomes a way of breaking down barriers that separate groups.

Bryan P. Stone writes:

The story of Jesus’ table fellowship may be singled out as especially important in this regard, for it exemplifies not only the abundance, sharing, and communion into which persons are invited when God’s reign breaks in (so that the great eschatological banquet had already begun) but also the “table manners” that create the condition under which such communion is possible. At this table, tax collectors, Pharisees, Zealots, and prostitutes eat together—a community made possible only by the dismantling of social hierarchies and opposition. There is an equality around the table: each is called to care for the other person’s plate over one’s own and greatness is defined by serving at the table and washing dirty feet.<sup>139</sup>

A new equality and restoration of relationship is created by eating the same food around the same table together. It tears down social barriers and becomes a social equalizer for the duration of the meal, paving the way for future reciprocation. In “Missional

Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” Inagrace T. Dietterich writes:

Shared meals construct and sustain human relationships. Inviting someone to share a meal powerfully symbolizes solidarity. Indeed, the word companionship comes from the Latin *sum + panis* meaning *breathing together*. Meals are social realities of great importance. Because meals express the very texture of human associations, they often exhibit social boundaries that divide human communities. . . . Patterns of table sharing reveal a great deal about the way of life—the norms and commitments—of a particular community.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 65.

<sup>139</sup> Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>140</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich, “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,”

The shared hospitality in which people eat together becomes both a symbol of the work of Christ bonding them together and the act that can take down those barriers. Meals can build companionship and solidarity with others who would normally be distant. People are connected to the actual reality in which God is working as they listen to the sometimes hard realities of those around them. Hospitality provides intentional space in which listening connects Christians to their local context and helps to form their understanding of God's actions there.

### **Celebration**

Celebration is another area where wealth can be used faithfully and as an opportunity to build relationship with the poor. This comes alive in the Old Testament. In Exodus 23:14-17, Israel was commanded to come together three times a year to celebrate what God had done for them. These were extravagant celebrations involving travel and food. The first celebration was the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. The second celebration was the Feast of Weeks, and the third was the Feast of Tabernacles. All men were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for these three celebrations. On a regular basis, these festivals brought people together to share resources, essentially joining the rich and poor.

Together the festivals reunited the people of God around a common table in joy and fellowship. In the Festival of Unleavened Bread, there is a provision in Exodus 12:4 for those who are unable to provide a lamb to share one with their neighbor. This was a communal feast in which they ate the roasted lamb as they celebrated God's Passover and redemption from Egypt. The Festival of Weeks was a joyous celebration bringing the first fruits of the wheat harvest. At the Feast of the Tabernacles, God said, "Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 165.

the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns” (Deuteronomy 16:14). The feast had explicit directions to include those most vulnerable and marginalized. An eight-day feast brought all people together to share and offer hospitality to one another. It celebrated God’s presence during the wilderness and their dependence upon his provision in providing mana daily. No one was excluded, and they were to offer what they could (Deuteronomy 16:17).

The New Testament also shows the importance of celebration. In Matthew 26:6-13, Jesus honors a woman who reached out to him in celebration and worship. She anointed him with a jar of perfume that would have cost about a year’s salary for a laborer. The disciples chastise the woman, because they thought the expensive perfume poured out on Jesus was a wasted act. They believed that the money could have gone to the poor (Luke 26:9). However, Jesus responds, “The poor will always be with you” (Luke 26:11). Jesus is not highlighting that people should not give to the poor but rather emphasizes that celebrating is also an important use of wealth. Jesus encourages them not merely to think of giving to the poor as a transaction but to think also in terms of building a relationship through celebration.

Engdahl notes:

When you have relationships with people who are poor, it is easy to feel that we should never spend any money that could be given to them instead. . . . I believe it is good to be indulgent from time to time with our resources in an effort to be thankful for what God has done and to be extravagant with one another. . . . we should be free to celebrate, but we especially need to invite the poor into our celebrations, which was commanded in Israel times. (Deut 14:28-29)<sup>141</sup>

Celebrating with the poor is a mutual way to recognize and honor God’s abundance towards us. After talking with the rich man and Jesus’ camel and needle parable, where he asks the rich man to give everything to the poor, the disciples remind Jesus that they have left everything. Jesus encourages them by saying, “Truly I tell you, there is no one

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<sup>141</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 66-67.

who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come” (Luke 18:29-30).

Consequently, when the gospel calls Christ-followers to leave biological families, they gain a spiritual family who takes them into their homes. Engdahl writes: “Not only is there a promise of future riches, there is also a promise that, as we place our trust in God, we will be taken care of in this life” (Matthew 7:11).

God is ultimately far more generous towards his people than they could ever be to one another. Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount tells the people gathered, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11).

Celebrating can serve as a small recognition of God’s provision towards all people, both rich and poor. If Christians find themselves hesitant to use money in this way, Engdahl offers this reminder: “We have to remember that our material wealth is worth very little in the kingdom of god, and it is not really ours to keep in the first place.”<sup>142</sup>

### **Generous Living: Building in Relationships**

One key way to use wealth faithfully is through what Engdahl calls “generous living.” This involves a general disposition of willingness to share resources with others. Engdahl writes: “By living generously, we are not only seeking what is of ultimate worth, we are transformed more and more into the likeness of God. . . . By being free with our wealth in this life, we develop the kind of godly character that is perfected in the eternal kingdom.”<sup>143</sup> Essentially, practicing generosity shifts a believer’s character from being focused on accumulating things for themselves and towards loving their neighbor.

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<sup>142</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 71.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



Generosity opens the door of a deeper relationship as time is spent with one another and as needs are shared and met. The overall wellbeing of the other person becomes bound up in their own wellbeing.

To understand this concept in *The Great Chasm*, Engdahl studies the Parable of the Rich Man in Luke 16. As described above, the parable tells the story of the chasm in life and in death that the rich man had with Lazarus, who was poor. The chasm that the rich man built with his wealth could have been overcome in his life had he listened to the law and prophets to build a relationship with Lazarus. Engdahl believes that this call also extends to each Christian. In the Kingdom of God, there is much to be made of the reversal of fortune. He observes:

But the rich will not become poor and the poor will not become rich simply because of their earthly experience. Within the context of the first parable in chapter 16 we understand that the reason the rich man ends up in torment is not because he was rich, but because he did not use his wealth to make friends with Lazarus, and so the poor man could not welcome him into the eternal homes.<sup>144</sup>

The Kingdom of God flips the cultural values of who is important and significant. Although the poor can be nearly invisible, they are actually of deep value and so worthy of building relationships. Engdahl comments on the cause of the rich man's judgement, "The sin was ignoring the plight of the poor man at his gate. He did not love his neighbor as himself."<sup>145</sup> Building relationships with the poor ultimately is not about doing so out of pity or being altruistic but about the basic commandment to love one's neighbors.

Jesus affirms across the synoptic gospels that all of the law is summed up with this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27; Mark 10:30-32; Matthew 22:37-39). In Luke, following this command leads to eternal life. An expert in the law challenges Jesus about this and asks, "And who is my

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 135.

neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Jesus responds by sharing the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable tells of a priest and then a Levite, both who intentionally avoid a person who had been beaten and robbed and left on the side of the road. A Samaritan, despised by the Jews, helps the man and goes out of his way to nurse him back to health. Jesus ends the story by asking, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:36). For Jesus, the neighbor is not only someone who is near a Christian, or like a Christian, but intentionally includes those who are outcast or marginalized.

Those who follow Christ are bound up with the poor more than perhaps they tend to see. If the central message of Jesus and eternal life is found in loving the poor neighbor, then the way to follow Jesus and understand God's work is to be with and listen to the poor. Clemens Sedmak writes:

Doing local theology requires that we keep our feet on the ground. . . . Jesus paid special attention to the poor, the excluded, to the marginalized to the "little ones," to the weakest members of society: the children, the sick, person with handicaps. Theology is a way of following Jesus, that is why the theologians call to pay special attention to the poor. This is challenging because we have to ask hard questions: Who are the weakest members of our society? Where are they? Why are they vulnerable and weak? Where is their strength?<sup>146</sup>

Staying connected to the poor is not something that happens by accident. It is too easy to ignore or find excuses like the responses of the priest and Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Engdahl surmises: "One of the ways to shake us out of our numbness is to have contact with the poor at the gate."<sup>147</sup> In this way, those who consider themselves disciples of Jesus will not fall into the same trap as the rich man whose wealth became a barrier to following Jesus. As the rich build relationships with the poor, the rich can begin to gain new perspective on God's Kingdom and the people around them.

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<sup>146</sup> Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 99.

<sup>147</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 137.

## **Generous Living: Sharing in Common**

On the day of Pentecost, several distinctives were noted about the early Church, especially how “all believers were together and had everything in common” (Acts 2:44). This is later described as people from time to time selling property and bringing the proceeds for the use of the entire community (Acts 4:34-35). Later, the whole community selected seven men to make sure that even the Hellenistic widows were being taken care of (Acts 6:1-6). Everyone was provided for, which was such a powerful counter-cultural experience that it was a witness to those outside the early Christian community. The story of the Hellenistic widows finishes: “So the word of God spread” (Acts 6:7). Part of this was due to how particular people were designated to care for those most vulnerable.

This is not a one-way relationship, with the rich taking or gaining from the poor. Sharing material possessions in common significantly shifts how believers see and spend their money, power, and time. Jacques Ellul in his book, *Money and Power*, describes two different worldviews. One is based on transactions, and the other focuses on giving. He writes: “There is one act par excellence which profanes money by going directly against the law of money, an act for which money is not made. This act is giving.”<sup>148</sup> Ellul describes that by giving and sharing, participants in this mutual action break down the spiritual power that people give money to save or to comfort. Instead, by giving it away, it becomes a means of grace. It allows Christians to see the other person rather than objectifying them.

Based on his experience with walking with the poor, Engdahl feels quite strongly about this. He writes: “We could cut back on our spending a great deal if we followed their model by giving away what we do not need and lending the things we have.”<sup>149</sup> He also is critical of those who may help the poor but keep them at arms’ length. He says,

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<sup>148</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*, trans. LaVonne Neff (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 110.

<sup>149</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 144.

“Some people are glad to help the poor as long as they keep them—and the problems they associate with them—at the gate.”<sup>150</sup> Being in relationship implies reciprocity. There are things people learn from one another.

In *The Great Chasm*, Engdahl shares a few examples that he has found in common from his experience in various poor communities. He says that the poor are often rich in faith because they pray for it.<sup>151</sup> When someone is unsure about food or shelter for the day, they pray from their depths because their life depends on God, to literally “give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). One thing that Engdahl has observed many times is that there is often extended family or communal pressure to help one another in times of financial need, even if that means a deep sacrifice. The poor can be rich in generosity as they share what they have with extended family and neighbors.<sup>152</sup> Since people often have very little money, community values often develop to help one another in times of financial need or crisis. This is different from those who live where they can provide for themselves, believing they do not need to rely on neighbors for help.

The poor are then rich in community, as they depend upon one another.<sup>153</sup> By giving and sharing with one another, a tighter community is built as people share one another’s burdens. The poor are rich in humility, having little pretense about their identity.<sup>154</sup> When someone has very little, they often do not puff themselves up; instead, they know they are dependent on God and neighbor.

These characteristics and others are just a few of the many things the poor have to offer. It is not just the rich who build relationships to share their wealth. “The poor have

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 176-177.

<sup>152</sup> Engdahl, *The Great Chasm*, 177.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

richness in Christ that the larger body of Christ needs. We need people of unusual faith, generosity, community and humility to encourage us toward the fullness of Christ.”<sup>155</sup> This reciprocal relationship is ultimately a sign of the Body of Christ offering their gifts to one another to become more Christlike (1 Corinthians 12). Being in relationship with the poor is not about a transaction or getting them more money. “It is not our goal to make the poor rich—they do not need to be enslaved to mammon—the goal for the kingdom is balance and interdependence . . . . When rich and poor believers come into relationship with each other things tend to equalize.”<sup>156</sup> Building relationships across socioeconomic divides is a way for the Body of Christ to more fully reflect gifts and talents, as members share in common what they possess in spiritual and material resources.

### Crossing the Chasm

The concept of “crossing the chasm” comes as Engdahl’s concluding call to the wealthy to bridge the socioeconomic divide that exists in order to build reciprocal relationships with those who are different. “The rich man was held responsible because he had the power to act and yet failed to do so. . . . If we have the power to cross a particular chasm, we are obligated to so do since those on the other side likely do not have the same ability. We cannot wait for the poor to come to us.”<sup>157</sup> Engdahl acknowledges that there is a cultural chasm that keeps poor and rich people separated. The responsibility is on those who can use their riches to bridge that gap. This does not happen automatically or even organically. He says, “If we want to be in relationship with people from other classes, we need to create space in our schedule and go where they are.”<sup>158</sup> This bridge building is one of mutual benefit and is Kingdom-minded. Much like

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 198.

the project described in this paper, it is a scheduled opportunity to be in relationship with one another. This project sought to cross not only a socioeconomic chasm but a generational one as well, so all who participated could benefit from relating with one another. Engdahl offers an important caution when bridge building:

The rich need to give up their trust in mammon as a tool for self-justification and the poor need to know that they are created in the image of God and have gifts to offer even the rich. This may be the most important reason we need to push back from the table, take off the fine clothes and go out to the gate where Lazarus lies. We who are rich need real relationships with our poor brothers and sisters for our sake as well as for theirs.<sup>159</sup>

In *The Great Chasm*, Engdahl presents many concrete steps to help readers bridge the gap. These practical insights and advice include starting with a desire to learn, empowering people rather than treating them as projects, deeply valuing the poor, and allowing them to become family. He suggests, “Find a place where you can really learn about someone’s life, but do not come in with an attitude of being a wealthy savor; meet the poor with a desire to learn from and with them. . . . if we want to reciprocity in our relationships with the poor, we need to put ourselves into their world and let them into ours.”<sup>160</sup>

Sharing life together is not just about being nice or generosity; it is an opportunity to bridge a large socioeconomic chasm for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Engdahl offers some advice, “Learn to love and serve people in a way that empowers them and treats them as partners not projects.”<sup>161</sup> The poor are not to be objectified. Any project or experiment in the neighborhood needs to start with this approach that the poor in a church’s midst are partners in discerning what God is doing among them. Engdahl wisely suggests, “The underlying value must be to embrace our poor brothers and sisters as members of our

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 256-257.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 257.

family—members who are smart, resourceful and have things to offer us as well.”<sup>162</sup> The poor are part of God’s family and are to be treated as valuable members. Engdahl ends by calling any who claim to follow Jesus to use God’s divine example in their effort and struggle to cross the socioeconomic chasm to build and restore relationship:

We only have to look at Jesus himself to find our role model, he bridged the greatest chasm anyone ever has. He chose to leave his wealthy comfortable home with the Father and went out to the gate to love those in need, laying down his life on their behalf. If we want to follow him, we have to get on the same bridge. Jesus does not send us to the other side of the chasm to minister to the poor and vulnerable, rather he pleads with us to join him there—with them—just like the father pleaded with his older son to join the party for his returned brother. If we want to be near Jesus, he is easy to find—he is at the celebration for our poor brothers and sisters on the other side of the chasm.<sup>163</sup>

### **Becoming Co-learners**

When people cross the socioeconomic chasm, there is a need to address the way in which individuals engage and listen to one another to break down the structures and frameworks with which they bring to the interaction. Freire in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues for a dialogical method of learning in which teachers and students become co-learners with one another. He writes: “The central problem is this: how can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be the ‘hosts’ of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of the liberating pedagogy.”<sup>164</sup>

For those in positions of power, there are several movements that are required to help facilitate a co-learning environment. First, there is the movement toward contact and discovering the people as they are. “The oppressor is solidarity with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as a person

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>164</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30.

who has been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice . . . and risks an act of love.”<sup>165</sup>

This movement towards action, to actually hear stories and listen to people, is a risk. It is a way in which people can love their neighbor by taking steps towards them and listening.

Second, this is a movement towards action and reflection through dialogue. “This [turning upon oppression] can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”<sup>166</sup> Together as people act towards a new future, coupled with both action and then reflection, this can lead the church and its neighbors to a new future together. Essentially, it a shared future that is created together. Freire explains the role of the teacher, “For us, however, the requirement is seen not in terms of explaining to, but rather dialoguing with the people about their actions.”<sup>167</sup> Rather than the traditional view of the one in power or in control dispensing information, a term Freire calls the “banking” concept of education, dialogue becomes the method of co-generating a new future.<sup>168</sup>

Third, a redefining and acting of roles needs to take place. “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher student contradiction, be reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.”<sup>169</sup> Freire argues that this conversation happens through dialogue:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which they all grow.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 61.



This process of turning passive, oppressed people into active participants while also turning those in control into co-learners is a transformative process. Freire explains how the barriers are overcome:

Problem posing education . . . enables teachers and students to become subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of the reality. The world . . . becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization.<sup>171</sup>

He goes on to explain that three values undergird the process and transformation: love, humility, and faith in humankind.<sup>172</sup> While the faith in human beings is the limit of humanism, their faith is placed beyond themselves. In this project, faith is not limited to each other but also extends to God and in his Word. When these values are acted upon and lived, there results in a deeper trust of one another. Freire writes: “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith in people, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence.”<sup>173</sup>

As shown, listening to God and to others is central to the gospel narrative. Shared hospitality becomes a means to cross the chasm that socioeconomics creates between people. Choosing to become co-learners breaks down frameworks to enable listening to happen. Through these theological frameworks, the experiment at Pomona Pres is evaluated in Chapter 6 of this present discussion.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 72.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Over a period of about eighteen months, Pomona Pres engaged in intentional dinner and conversation with young adults with whom church members had existing relationships. This work tested the thesis that the missional imagination of the congregation could expand through listening to the other and listening to God around a shared meal. The hope was that as this experiment progressed and as people gathered to reflect on what they had learned, the imagination of the participants and that of the church would shift as a whole. This would be seen in the language used in describing neighbors, people who had grown up in the neighborhood, the work of Pomona Pres in the neighborhood, and perspectives or activity regarding hospitality. Any shift would be considered evidence of a missional imagination shift.

#### **Qualitative Research Methods: Participant Observation**

This project was completed using qualitative research. The primary way of collecting data for this project was through participant observation. The data was obtained from the dinners and follow-up meetings to see whether there has been a shift in missional imagination.

In traditional quantitative research the researcher is an abstract observer, not part of the research being done. However, that was not the case for this project. I was part of the research. I am unable to remove myself and my connection with the church or my

influence that even the project that I am doing has on the group as a whole. Using qualitative research allows for treating Pomona Pres and the people who make up the church as partners rather than objects to study and observe. In *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, Uwe Flick writes: “In participating, the researcher methodologically authenticates his theoretical premise and furthermore he makes the research subject, the other, not an object but a dialogical partner.”<sup>174</sup> Pomona Pres is both being researched and participating in the shaping of the research being done.

Essentially, qualitative research is about observation. Philip Carl Salzman describes participant observation as “living for a good period among the people; observing their economic, political, and ritual activities; and speaking with them to learn their perspectives, attitudes, and values.”<sup>175</sup> In addition to functioning as researcher, I am also pastor and friend in this church community. I am involved in various ways. I worship with congregants, lead them, and participate alongside them in a wide variety of activities both sacred and mundane. In his expertise, Salzman acknowledges this:

Participant observation includes such activities as attending rituals and ceremonies, going to the fields and pastures and fishing areas to watch and even help with production activities, sitting in on court cases, following political deliberations, engaging in play and debates, and arguments, as well as having informal conversations with local people, holding formal interviews, doing surveys, and collecting oral knowledge and written documents.<sup>176</sup>

This was the type of research that was done at Pomona Pres. Following the meetings, I would write down notes and talk to leaders who participated. I also recorded firsthand observations. The goal was to observe the language and actions of the participants, both the young adults and members of Pomona Pres, and then to evaluate in terms of the thesis of this present discussion.

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<sup>174</sup> Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 2009), 229.

<sup>175</sup> Philip Carl Salzman, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theory* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

### **Getting on the Balcony**

Observing what is happening and getting involved is the basic back and forth of leadership. Heifetz and Linsky call this “getting on the balcony.”<sup>177</sup> They describe the need for the leader to gain perspective in the midst of action. This means that “seeing the whole picture requires standing back and watching even as you take part in the action being observed.”<sup>178</sup> In this way, I was both observer and participant in the role I played in this project. “Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray.”<sup>179</sup> This observational status allows people to see the whole dynamics between the various parties involved and prevents the observer from misdiagnosing what is happening. However, staying on the balcony in a “safe observer role” makes the observer ineffective. “The process must be iterative, not static. The challenge is to move back and forth between the dance floor and the balcony, making interventions, observing their impact in real time and then returning to the action.” This process of “balcony” work and then “dance” is the work of leadership, but it is also the work of a qualitative researcher. The qualitative researcher is both observing the whole and involved in the very research being done.

### **Reflections on Church Imagination**

Following the first series of dinners, on August 14, 2014, a group of people interested in this experiment of engaging young adults from the neighborhood gathered to reflect on lessons learned. This group included George, Johansen, J. McKellar, S.

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<sup>177</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 52.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 53.

McKellar, Lyles, and me. The goal of this meeting and the following meeting was to reflect back on the work done and to observe what had been learned, in order to continue working out the adaptive challenge: “How can we engage people cross-culturally in our community with the gospel and create a place to grow in faith?” I had told them that this meeting was more than mere brainstorming for how to engage the church’s neighbors; rather, reflection to foster learning was critical. This is because it is necessary to address adaptive challenges by what is done and reflecting on what is being learned. Commitment to learning is essential. While the short-term experiment addresses the challenge, the long-term learning gained through the exercise benefits the Body of Christ and its members. The goal was to foster the group to discern how the Holy Spirit had been moving.

In order to ground the conversation in God’s movement, the meeting started with a reading of Jeremiah 29:1-14. Here Jeremiah shares that God wants the exiles in Babylon to settle down and bless the foreign city where they reside. God will bless the Israelites as they do this, rather than in their immediate return to Jerusalem. The reading provided rich discussion in which to shape the group’s imagination. A few of the comments centered on the tension of being in exile and settling down. One person was led to say, “People are in exile and God wants them to settle down, to sink roots that are not temporary.” Another person highlighted, “The command to build houses for a nomadic people is radical,” while another person added, “and scary in a foreign land.” People felt the tension of God’s command to settle down amidst the hostility and displacement that the Israelites experienced while in Babylon.

Settling down seems counterintuitive to a belief that people or God need to fix things. Other group members sensed a space of hope in the foreign land. One person observed, “Much of our lives are praying about hope and future. Lord says, ‘I am going to give it to you.’” Someone else noted that in the Jeremiah passage, “God is still

speaking to them.” A third person commented, “This is a reminder to myself that God wants to prosper and not to harm you. When I’m in a bad situation and there is no hope, I tend to wonder, ‘Why does God allow it?’ We don’t know that something good can come out of it.” Finally, another individual observed that “in verse 14, ‘I will be found by you and bring you back,’ God can still be found there in a foreign land. They have not been taken to a place where God is not.” People were wrestling with the reality of God’s presence in a foreign land and how that brought hope without immediate resolution. Due to this tension, a few people even commented about the length of time before they would return: “Seventy years is a long time, almost two lifetimes for them,” and “It’s a long time for me.”

With a chance to frame the conversation in light of Scripture and God’s challenge of engaging the city, the conversation next turned to what lessons have been learned in relationships with young adults. The question was asked, “What has happened this year and what are you learning?” People paired up to dialogue and listen to one another. Then all returned as a whole group to listen. There was still some inclination to offer solutions: “We need to help them on how to do a good job interview and how to care about work.” While these may be good opportunities for teaching, the goal of the questions was to wrestle with how the learning partners are learning. One person admitted, “I am failing.” This indicated the difficult nature of engaging these young adults as well as the frameworks of success.

Eventually, the conversation got back to lessons learned. One person mentioned hearing a ministry partner talk about being more intentional with just a few girls and to take conversation deeper and around spiritual issues. The ministry partner became very animated, “I have seen a huge shift in Cambria. She was positive about God’s presence coming back from Triennium. Fabii, I have known her since she was four. I am frustrated,

but like the seventy years, we can still do this until they are fifty.”<sup>180</sup> It was an honest moment of learning for both people to see God’s work in a young adult’s life and admit the frustration of relationships and the slow work of growing in faith. Above all, there was a willingness to be faithful to the long process of being in relationships cross-culturally with the ups and downs that come with it. Another person echoed this sentiment, “We don’t see the impact we are making. I got an email from a person in 1976. I am a teacher because of you. We have to take a long-term view.” More importantly, these moments of learning highlight the importance of reflection. People were encouraged because they could see the slow work of God in the past, despite not seeing much in the present.

There was another insightful observation around learning. One person shared, “We had failed attempts of Jenni and Elmer in our home. That it may not be the best thing for them. We may have held them back. Instead of becoming independent, they have become dependent.” This insight revealed the default mindset that exists: to help solve problems, even very tangible ones, like providing housing. There was acknowledgment of having created a dependent relationship rather than a co-learning relationship. His wife agreed, “I think that, too. If we love them it doesn’t necessarily work.” This was an admission that being kind and helpful can create a “savior” relationship, which is not helpful to young adults, nor to all growing in faith together.

Another insight came around the level of engagement in conversations. One person wrestled with this question: “Do they just tell me what I want to hear?” There was a sense that the young adult’s communication was not very authentic and at times was directed towards simply pleasing the person. It seemed to be a point of frustration and unknown when even the conversation around faith may have been words given with hopes to impress. One person said, “Just having dinners doesn’t produce any depth [of

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<sup>180</sup> Presbyterian Historical Society: The National Archives of the PC(USA), “Presbyterian Youth Triennium,” accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.history.pcusa.org/blog/2016/07/presbyterian-youth-triennium>. Triennium is a national conference for high school students held every three years hosted by the Presbyterian Church (USA).

relationship]. [Good questions] enabled us to have deeper conversations.” It was an admission that people can spend time together without growing deeper. Also, this comment recognized that the personal questions that elicited stories provided opportunities to grow in dinner participants’ understanding of one another.

As the conversation went on, there surfaced a realization that, despite difficulties in relationships, building relationships requires a long-term commitment. One group said as much, while another reflected in a more personal way. “The people who poured into me when I was their age would have had the same conversation that we are having. Steadiness is important.” This insight began reframing and seeing the struggle not as a failure but as a long-term commitment around learning and engagement. There was even some ability to see how long-term relationships represent a positive movement. This was reflected in the following comment that was made: “Every time I see Charles, I am still glad he thinks our community is safe. He does not have a chip on his shoulder for us. That’s positive.” Observing changes in attitude over the years was viewed as a positive movement of God; but more significantly, there was a desired relationship on the part of the young adults with re-locators from the church.

Next the conversation turned to the expectations learning partners had for the young adults. One person reflected:

I have a hard time separating what I hope for them. I want them to become godly men and women who are faithful and give back. Mixed in with that, I want them to go to college, have full-time jobs, and get married before they get pregnant. There are lot of expectations I have that are culturally mine because of my socioeconomics. If someone doesn’t meet them, do I push for them?

This woman began to realize that her expectations were from her own culture and that she was uncertain as to whether she wanted to keep them all or find new ones that were more appropriate to fit the cross-cultural relationship. Another person viewed this in a different way. “If we are encouraging them, at what point is it coddling them? Do we lower expectations?” This indicated both the nature into which relationships can fall,



when nice words are offered but there is no learning together on ways to move forward. Finally, I offered an emotional struggle about the changing nature of relationships. I shared, “I have a deep sense of love towards the people we know. But there is a tension if they opt out of something we want for them. I feel terrible. There are cultural barriers.” It was a statement of wanting one thing for the relationship but recognizing that it is difficult to come together across divergent expectations and grow together.

Finally, on this day, there was some time spent reflecting specifically around what has been learned regarding the stated adaptive challenge. As simple as it seems, the first response was a profound statement: “I try to do more listening and less talking. Things come out when I ask questions and don’t tie it up all nice and neat.” This simple answer of listening more seemed to reinforce the process and the need to focus on listening in the experiments with the young adults. Another person began to see that there was a real value in understanding each other’s world. “Sometimes I wonder if am trying to pull them into my version of the world. Instead I could be like Coco and spend more time listening. Maybe it’s more about seeing God at work in their family situation.” There was a real desire to see that God might be in the midst of the relationship rather than trying to control certain Holy Spirit experiences. Another person realized the way a relationship is objectified by becoming a task. “There are things we want to see change. It does not mean that there are not some fantastic thing already [going on in their lives]. I would hate if [the young adults] felt like a project. I want to affirm what is already there. If we haven’t gotten to that level, then they may feel like a project.” It was insightful that even a well-designed experiment to build relationships could slip into a transaction.

We met again the following week to talk about next steps. Despite one person who gets frustrated with meetings, we met on August 21, 2014 to brainstorm ideas for experiments. What was not as evident for those brainstorming was that while there was a desire to enter into a mutual space, most of the conversation centered around what the

participants felt the young adults needed. The conversation started with a reflection from the prior weeks: “Someone mentioned last week that [the young adults] need someone to listen to them. They don’t have anyone that listens.” The conversation soon turned into a reflection on failure. One person reflected on two young adults who had been invited to live with them for a short while. “We did not give to receive. There was an investment made and the troubling part is how both left [amidst conflict] with little resolution.” It was an honest assessment but one framed in models of success and failure. A relationship ending in conflict was seen as a failure. In response to this, one person offered, “Are we choosing best methods of engagement. It feels optimistic. Are we going about it the right way? We want to see lives change.” Again, rather than seeing the work of engaging students in terms of learning, it was seen in terms of best practices from an economic viewpoint.

I urged the group, “How do we listen, find places to learn about their world? What is God doing there? Let’s just brainstorm.” A few ideas were suggested, based on past positive experiences. One person shared, “I liked it when Milt painted the mural with Charles. I like it when they were a part of something.” While the painting idea was a good one, the commentary around being a part of something led the conversation away from experiments. Soon the group was talking about what the church could do for someone else to make them want to be part of our group. Several comments followed: “Ideally church would have something very similar to Uprising trying to come in and be there,” “They feel too old but there is nowhere else to go,” “They remember their youth group,” and “We tried meals but without much success.”

The model of youth group is one that is about offering a religious service to youth. At these often-weekly meeting, leaders from the church provide a forum to spend

time, play, eat, and look at Scripture.<sup>181</sup> This is both a known experience that has appearances of success with number and continuity, but with little opportunity to have mutual learning. Other ideas also tended toward what could be offered to the young adults: “We talked about a forming group that meets once or twice a month, they can learn living skills,” “Help with a resume, and also have a Bible study time,” and “We could touch base once a month and ask what do you need? We could help with their paperwork.”

Then the conversation switched subtly, “They like the home thing better than at the church.” This shift toward hospitality and spending time with the young adults, though still framed somewhat in what could be done for them, provided an opportunity to think a little bit about creating a space together. While this was not the immediate choice for the experiment, it would be the one that would eventually provide a great opportunity when dinners were hosted by the McKellars, as described in Chapter 4. One person went on to talk about the benefit he had experienced gathering around table fellowship. Another person who had previously wanted to mimic the youth group model suggested, “We could have more than one structure.” It seemed to form the beginning of an understanding around the idea of experimenting rather than solving a problem. When the comment was made to continue the conversation around ideas of mutual learning, more mutual dreaming and imagination surfaced: “How do we get in a place where we get in place to listen? We have lots of things we offer them. How do we learn, too? We don’t understand what they need. I don’t fully get into their world. I need to learn.” Several people agreed that this was important and that “spending time with them” was the direction needed for the experiment.

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<sup>181</sup> These can be good things for a church to do. However, in terms of entering into an experiment, providing a means to join a group limits the mutual learning on both sides.

However, the conversation quickly turned back to utilitarian approaches. One person said, “I like the idea of doing something they need.” This implies that the church can give something to them rather than be with them. Then another likeminded idea was offered: “Or we could start a writing lab and get them to write stories. If we set up once or twice a month, we could build slowly.” Looking at this on the surface it provided space to tell stories, a space to listen to understand each other, but it was framed in a tutoring or education framework where church members could provide a classroom setting to offer a way for young adults to become better writers. “We could develop them as communicators. They get to learn about themselves and how to communicate to others. Everyone likes to write poetry. I ran a writing program for convicts. Get people to talk about themselves and write. Draw upon their own experiences.” There was a strong intention of providing space to share stories through writing, and this was applauded. “If I hear their story it will also help the congregation hear their story.” Still, the economic framework seemed to overwhelm the creation of mutual space. One person even suggested, “How do we sell it to them?” The idea of writing stories was something to be bartered rather than a mutually creative space to gather and learn together. Excitement around this idea grew; the intention of giving space for storytelling was real and desired. One person saw how this could deepen the relationships between young adults and people in the church, “We could have other people come in and tell stories of their life. We are talking about intimate things. That would be great to get people sharing.”

After a lot of talk of logistics, a final comment was made to summarize, “Why are we telling stories? We want to get together and deepen our understanding of one another. We want a place to share and hear how God is part of the story. [We can] start with a gathering for young adults. They may take it in another direction.” This final thought proved a great summary of what the experiment could be. The group realized that it was open to the learning partners and young adults coming together and creating a new space.

Also, there was an understanding that it would involve listening well to one another and together discerning a piece of a larger narrative of how God was at work in their midst.

### **Simultaneity**

The second set of dinners with the young adults did not conclude with the learning partners gathering to reflect on new understanding or new imaginations. If that was all there was, it could be seen as a failed experiment. People gathered but the experiment was unable to provide any forward movement in terms of launching new experiments or new understanding of missional engagement. However, this was not the only way to evaluate the experiment. Using the science of quantum theory as a metaphor for organizations helps in looking at what happened from a different perspective.

Branson describes it well. He writes: “The primary shift is from a focus on parts to a focus on wholeness and an emphasis on connectivity. The previously discrete parts are now understood connected and the parts change when aspects of the whole change.”<sup>182</sup> This means that a look at the missional imagination of Pomona Pres cannot be viewed just by observing one part and one experiment. This one experiment is connected to a whole host of other parts of the church. Branson goes on to state, “Parts do not exist in isolation but in relationship to everything else, even when there is no mechanical connection. These relationships increase possibilities beyond that mechanical chain of events.”<sup>183</sup> It is not hard to see that this experiment with young adults did not happen in a vacuum. The learning participants were in a host of relationships with other people in the church. These relationships, essentially “the stuff between the parts,”<sup>184</sup> can change the parts. Even the process of gathering and launching the experiments causes shifts in the organization. “The research changes what is being researched; the questioner

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<sup>182</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 32.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

makes an immediate impact on the organization.”<sup>185</sup> The conversations about gathering with young adults changed people’s perception of ministry and mission. Like the appreciative inquiry questions that were used, the assumption is that the very questions contribute to the participants being shaped. In this way, the experiment changed how individuals within Pomona Pres and the organization think and respond.

There are several ways in which the Spirit has moved and shaped the church simultaneously with this experiment. The couple who hosted the dinner for the young adults from the neighborhood was soon hosting potluck monthly dinners with families of students from the youth ministry. Families from the church and families from the neighborhood were soon gathering around tables sharing food on a regular basis. This was not a next step of some strategic plan to “reach out” to neighbors. It arose from the relationships that existed on the margins joined with a desire to deepen them.

Along with this was a shift in imagination. As these adults gathered in a potluck style meal, the relationships were less therapeutic. The couple hosting the dinner did not function as a caregiver to these other young adults. The meal allowed all to contribute and to exist more on an equal footing. The relationships continue to deepen, allowing people from the church and young adults from the neighborhood to enter into each other’s lives. While there has been some expressed hope that these families would attend a Pomona Pres Sunday morning worship service, this is not a goal or a felt reason for gathering. It may happen, and it would be encouraging if it happened, but the relationships continue to be the primary focus of the meals.

A second thing that happened simultaneously was that the worship team began experimenting with cross-cultural worship. This arose from recognition that there were as many as four people worshipping on Sunday whose were bilingual but whose original language was Spanish. Due to the focus on listening, many conversations with them and

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 34.

others about worship ensued. The worship team has been able to listen to and hear stories of how a variety of people from various ethnicities express and have experienced worship. These stories led to a change with the call to the Lord's Table being expressed bilingually. This bilingual aspect symbolizes that all are welcome and invited to gather around Jesus' broken body and shed blood.

Furthermore, two of the worship team leaders who are bilingual have led worship songs bilingually. This has been explained to the congregation but in a way to let people know that the bilingual aspect is not to get people to come to church but as a way to express worship with the people of the neighborhood. The bilingual music has been a challenging place, yet the worship team forges ahead in this impromptu experiment. During the process of sharing stories among the worship team, several leaders continue to refer back to times where they "tried" bilingual music, but "it did not work." This refers back to when they hoped people would worship with them because of the music. In light of this existing mindset by some, the new approach is a bit difficult for those who struggle not to fall back into the narrative of strategically planning a bilingual worship set to increase the attendance of the church. Nonetheless, the worship team is listening and experimenting in leading the church as a whole into ways to worship alongside neighbors of Pomona Pres. One of the worship team leaders, a woman from southern India, has even shared in a worship service about her own culture and expectations around worship. In the process she invited people to experiment by taking off their shoes as they worshipped the Holy God.

A third, and final, visible way the Spirit is moving simultaneously has been through a group of people from the church who have served as a welcoming team to a Syrian refugee family. This team formed out of a series of conversations about refugees moving into the neighborhood, which happened over dinner at my home on January 31, 2016. Lisa Drake, Brianne Imada, Hugh Wire, Karen Walters, Rusty Beith, Sara

Moncayo, and I were present. People gathered and shared how this story of a refugee family moving here intersected with their own stories. At the first gathering, an initial question was asked, “Why are you here?” The responses ranged from how people’s parents were immigrants to the United States and eventually led to one woman’s story. I had known this woman for five years but never really heard her share this: “I was in a refugee camp after we fled the Czech Republic as a child.” Another man said, “I worked for an agency that helped refugees from Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War.” Then I shared how “I got to meet and work with two Syrian refugee kids as I volunteered in my kids’ school.” Together these stories began to weave together to see what it might look like to welcome a family.

After much planning and preparations, and with the family soon to arrive, the team realized there were two distinct tasks. The first was that of helping the family get settled into an apartment and helping with the logistics of getting them signed up with various government agencies. The second, more important task ultimately was realized: to be in relationship with the family. These two tasks had very different goals and models at work. The first was a model in which Pomona Pres offered help to someone in need. However, the second one was a posture of mutual learning with much listening. A significant number of people on the team who have chosen to focus on relationships have enjoyed spending time with the family and learning from them. Interestingly, this time spent together often involves being hosted for dinner around a table.



## CONCLUSION

This project explored Pomona Pres' journey in cultivating a missional life. The goal was to test how the practices of listening to our neighbors, listening to Scripture together, and reflecting on God's work in the neighborhood can cultivate a missional imagination within the church. This project involved primarily middle-class re-locators and individuals from a poor Latino neighborhood gathering together to discover what God was doing. Given the socioeconomic disparity and cultural barriers between those involved, part of this project entailed becoming co-learners with one another. This meant that those who act and are often seen as "saviors" (middle class and Caucasian) would need to learn to replace the savior complex with that of being learners alongside low-income Latinos, who are often disenfranchised. Here was the hope of this project: as each group listened to the other, to God, and to Scripture, there would be a new learning together of what God was at work doing in their collective midst.

As the group gathered over meals in shared hospitality, it was not possible to collect the same people from month to month. Even when the young adults had affirmed their participation and said they were coming, many times they did not show up or things came up that prevented them from gathering. While this hampered the experiment from gathering momentum, the young adults' persistence to gather when they could revealed an incredible amount of grace offered to the listening partners from the church. Another significant barrier to missional change was the embedded framework of seeing the relationship in terms of what could be exchanged. Even after an evening of listening, growing in trust, a comment from a listening partner, though intending to be generous like offering to help or pray, indicated that there was a deep sense of keeping the relationship in terms of what was given to the other. Despite all the struggles of the project there was a significant growth in depth of relationships and trust built with one

another. There was genuine joy in being with one another. Some of the most important times came simply sitting around the table at dinner or after dinner during time that was unscripted, with no questions being asked. The thesis revealed how listening shifts missional imagination; it was clear that the context and the environment of sitting around a table at a meal was an incredibly important aspect of this project. The meal became even more important than the questions.

Pomona Pres has been blessed by this process. It is similar to the scriptural text of Luke 10, when Jesus receives back the disciples after being sent out. Jesus engages with them: “Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it” (Luke 10:23-24). The disciples receive a blessing because they have seen and heard, more so than the kings and prophets who have gone before them. They have seen the Kingdom of God, despite how it sometimes was received. They have heard and responded in faith to Jesus as they were sent out. They have heard those to whom they were sent as they received hospitality. This season of being sent out to experiment and of coming back and reflecting has indeed been a blessing for the congregants of Pomona Pres. They have seen and heard. They have witnessed the Kingdom of God at work. They have heeded Jesus’ call to listen to their neighbors, and they have heard their neighbors’ voices. Pomona Pres is blessed to have seen and heard how to attend to the working of the Holy Spirit in the neighborhood.

However, this is not a once-and-done process, nor is it a linear journey. Roxburgh uses the analogy of a sailboat to describe the discernment process:

In sailing, the crew focuses on how the winds are blowing and then works the sails to capture the winds. But the crew has no control over where the wind will blow. On the missional journey the challenges are the same. We can’t manage and control the Spirit, nor can we assume we know where the winds of the Spirit are blowing in this new space.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup>Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 121.

Pomona Pres attended to the working of the Spirit. Congregants have experienced some movement forward in missional imagination. There were moments of understanding as well as in practice. However, there were seeming setbacks. People took up old habits even after shifts in missional imagination. However, this too may be part of attending to the Spirit and the Spirit's movement. There may be new understanding and practice that comes as Pomona Pres continues to listen to the Spirit.

There are several next steps Pomona Pres can take to continue in the process of cultivating a missional imagination and a more missional life. The first step would be to spend some time listening and reflecting on how God has been active. The church has recently gone through and continues to go through a season of mourning following a tragic death. During this time most of the congregation's energy was turned inwards to care for those grieving. Although there continues to be much caregiving, many also feel a hopeful sense of what God may be doing next. In addition, the intentional listening done by the church in the past was well received and has helped the congregation move forward into some new experiments of mission. It has been almost eight years since the congregants last spent some time in churchwide listening. The church now has many new people and is in a very different season. Given these circumstances, Pomona Pres could gather a listening team to craft some appreciative inquiry questions to ask the church. It would be important to gather not just those who attend Sunday morning but those who are part of the larger church community: neighbors, friends, and those with whom the church has relationships.

This team could begin by first experiencing and spending time as a team answering appreciative inquiry questions. This would allow the team to understand how listening can shift the imagination. This could be followed up by the listening team learning about appreciate inquiry questions. Then they could create some questions

formed around experiencing God, as they spend time with people in the neighborhood. Afterwards, they could form pairs to gather small groups to spend time reflecting on these questions. The listening team would come back and summarize the major themes discovered. These themes would be brought back to a churchwide gathering. This gathering then would spend time reflecting on those themes and crafting statements imaging a new future in which Pomona Pres is living out God's work in the neighborhood. From these, people could brainstorm experiments in which to engage neighbors.

## APPENDIX

### ABBREVIATED TIMELINE FOR THIS PROJECT

May 28, 2013	First meeting to begin discernment process
June – July, 2013	Follow-up meetings regarding discernment
July 16, 2013	Meeting to name adaptive challenge for Pomona Pres
August – September 2013	Brainstorming and designing missional experiment
March 7, 2014	First young adult gathering
March 21, 2014	Second gathering with young adults
April 11, 2014	Third gathering with young adults
May 9, 2014	Fourth gathering with young adults
June 6, 2014	Fifth gathering with young adults
August 1, 2014	Final gathering with young adults in phase one.
August 14, 2014	First Debrief regarding young adult experiment
August 21, 2014	Second Debrief regarding young adult experiment
October 14, 2014	Failed writing class experiment
January 11, 2015	First Young Adult dinner of Phase 2
February – October 2015	Monthly dinners with Young Adults – Phase 2

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