11-2018

Building Up the Whole Body: Discipleship in Diverse Urban Community

Marc de Jeu
dmin-fpcoord@fuller.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin/345
Building Up the Whole Body: Discipleship in Diverse Urban Community

Marc de Jeu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin

Part of the Christianity Commons
Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

BUILDING UP THE WHOLE BODY: DISCIPLESHIP IN DIVERSE URBAN COMMUNITY

Written by

MARC DE JEU

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

Doctor of Ministry

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

Soong-Chan Rah

Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: October 31, 2018
BUILDING UP THE WHOLE BODY:
DISCIPLESHIP IN DIVERSE URBAN COMMUNITY

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

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

BY

MARC DE JEU
NOVEMBER 2018
ABSTRACT

Building Up the Whole Body: Discipleship in Diverse Urban Community
Marc de Jeu
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2018

The purpose of this project is to create an assessment to be used by the leadership team of SOMA, a church plant in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This assessment will help us understand how effectively we are equipping our increasingly diverse membership for missional discipleship in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. The first section explores SOMA’s community and ministry contexts. I discuss the marginalizing forces in Beaver Falls and explain the tension between SOMA’s roots in the Reformed tradition and its desire to equip its diverse membership for faithful witness in the city. This tension requires resistance to the culturally-conditioned tendency toward abstraction found in our theological tradition and an encouragement of practices of formation that equip the variety of people in our faith community.

In the second section I first review literature that reflects theologically on social and racial marginalization, on the church’s engagement with the city, and on the kind of discipleship that develops the church’s ministry of reconciliation. I then offer my theological reflections to understand churches as reconciling communities in which people are experiencing the table mutuality of faith in Christ, confessing and repenting of the Western tendency toward abstraction, and embodying Jesus’ incarnation to see discipleship as a whole-person practice that churches should encourage across the distinctive qualities of our members.

In the final section I describe the development of SOMA’s assessment process, by which an Assessment Team solicited, received, and interpreted feedback related to how effectively members of the congregation feel they are being equipped to participate in the missio Dei. The interpretation of that feedback culminated in four recommendations to SOMA’s leadership team regarding how to improve our discipleship ministry. These recommendations both encourage better accessibility for more of our members and highlight our need to continue growing in cultural competency as a church family.

Content Reader: Dr. Soong-Chan Rah

Word Count: 300
To Emily, Joe, Will, & Katie
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to SOMA’s leadership team, assessment team, and worshiping body for your participation in this project. It is a joy to co-labor with you as a part of Jesus’s body.

Thanks to my friends and partners in the Beaver Falls community, for your hospitality and friendship.

I am also deeply thankful for the shared learning and friendship of the members of my DMin cohort. You all inspire me to keep learning and doing!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

iv

## PART ONE: MINISTRY CONTEXT

### INTRODUCTION

2

### Chapter 1. SOMA’S COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

12

### Chapter 2. SOMA’S MINISTRY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

31

## PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

### Chapter 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

56

### Chapter 4. A THEOLOGY OF DIVERSE SPIRITUAL FORMATION

76

## PART THREE: MINISTRY STRATEGY

### Chapter 5. MINISTRY PLAN

102

### Chapter 6. IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES

115

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

131

## APPENDICES

136

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

162
PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

While studying at seminary in the mid-2000s I served as a pastoral intern at a large Presbyterian church. During the course of this internship I developed a handful of one-on-one mentoring relationships, one of which was with a man named Michael. Michael was in his early thirties, the son of a member of our church, and had a long history of struggle with drug addiction. Michael and I had been meeting weekly for six months or so, and he had recently started showing a strong desire to learn more about matters of faith.

After acquiring a Bible and attempting to read it, Michael confided that he found it very difficult to understand. I shared with him my joy that he was reading the Bible, and I affirmed him in his struggle, explaining that all of us, even the most scholarly, will not be able to completely grasp the fullness of God. I continued by describing the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the mystery of Christ in a sacred collection of stories and poems and letters spanning millennia. He nodded at all of this, then added, “Plus, all the ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ are just tough to get.” Realizing that he had been reading the King James Version, I handed him a New International Version that was in my bag. He browsed a few lines, and his face lit up as he nodded, “This makes way more sense!”

This experience made a strong impression on me, and it serves this project as a microcosm for what I hope to address: that the sincere desires of many people to learn and develop in their faith are frustrated by church practices that do not speak to them in ways they readily understand. More specifically, I believe this is a serious challenge for churches in American cities, particularly those rooted in the Reformed theological tradition seeking to be diverse, mission-oriented bodies. This focus on the Reformed
tradition is not meant to suggest other faith traditions do face this struggle. Rather, in highlighting how specific historical and cultural realities of the Reformed tradition create distinct obstacles to diverse faith formation, I hope to encourage the awareness and courage needed to faithfully address these challenges for our congregations to become genuine communities of God’s reconciliation.

While I very much desire that this project will prove helpful to Reformed churches and denominations broadly (including my own, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church), the main focus of the work will center very locally with the church I pastor, an eight-year-old Presbyterian church plant called SOMA in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Over the years SOMA has grown more and more to reflect, in our gathered life together, the diversity of the Beaver Falls community: racially, generationally, socio-economically, educationally, and in other real ways. What started eight years ago as a white, middle-class, educated mission team looks and sounds different now on Sunday mornings. And while I am grateful to God for that, I recognize that if we are going to develop as a faith community that equips our increasingly diverse body for faithful life and mission in our city Monday through Sunday, we need to be equipping the whole body, not just those who fit a particular profile.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been attributed with saying that Sunday morning at 11am is the most segregated hour in America. And while this still largely holds true 50 years later, I am compelled by the observation that even those churches that display visible diversity in their weekly corporate worshiping life often struggle profoundly to speak the languages of all our people when it comes to faith development and
discipleship. The scope of this project, then, is designed to accomplish two things: first, I will work with SOMA’s leadership to recruit and train a diverse team of people from the worshiping body who will be responsible for assessing our church’s current effectiveness in tending to the spiritual formation of all our members. Second, based on what we learn from that assessment, this team will make recommendations about adjusting current methods and developing new practices to more faithfully equip our body for God’s mission in Beaver Falls.

In the era of pre-packaged church curriculum, discipleship easily becomes one-size-fits-all, which does not really work in genuinely diverse communities of faith trying to equip all the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12). Therefore, a significant need exists for local congregations to do the contextual work of developing the kinds of practices that make sense for the women, men, and children of their specific time and place, in the language of the neighborhood. And while the practical aspect of this work is indeed challenging, I believe that the greatest hindrance to taking the first big step in this effort is the deeper problem of desire, by which I mean desiring for others as much as I desire for myself or my family, the very best God offers. We learn though, through social psychology and history, that we simply do not evidence that desire for people not like us. Rather than experience our neighbors as brothers and sisters, we fall into the trap Mother Teresa once diagnosed: “Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other. That man, that woman, that child is my brother or

1 All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.
my sister.” People tend to objectify each other and divide across differences; a practice also known as othering.3

This othering problem surfaced during a small gathering of local pastors in our community. One of the pastors was sharing about the recent decision of his church’s leadership to close its doors for good. As part of their process, they were searching out options for the different community groups which use their building on a weekly basis: Meals on Wheels, a community Bible study, and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). This prompted the group to share stories of our different churches’ experiences with AA, leading one to talk about a former church he had pastored and what he called the “infamous coffee mug dilemma.” The church, not much for engaging its surrounding community, had agreed to let AA use their building as long as they followed the very strict rules of building use. As it turned out, very shortly into their relationship, one of the congregation’s matriarchs, the president of their women’s sewing circle, discovered that her coffee mug was missing. This led to a very loud and drawn-out series of accusations and investigations designed to arrive at the only possible conclusion: that those people in AA had exclusively targeted and maliciously absconded with her coffee mug.

This same dilemma presented itself on a Thursday afternoon I spent with John, our third consecutive Thursday afternoon together. John and I were on our way to the DMV, in yet another attempt to help John obtain government photo identification. John

---


3 The following four anecdotes are from my 2015 DMin paper entitled Setting the Table: An Ecclesiological Engagement with Social & Racial Marginalization in the American City, 1-3.
had spent the last several years in prison and was working to start over: no job, staying
with a friend’s cousin in an unreliable situation, and no transportation other than what
was offered publicly. Already severely limited in options due to a felony criminal record,
John was struggling to obtain even those jobs that were open to him. Every legitimate
employment opportunity required some combination of government issued photo ID,
birth certificate, and/or social security card. John had none of these. What’s more, the
mechanism for acquiring any one required at least one of the other two (a very Catch-22
situation) and no one seemed to know how to start from scratch. So I joined John on the
merry-go-round of trying to begin again. John is extremely bright, having studied
criminal justice while incarcerated, and he is prophetic in his assessment of the state of
incarceration in the U.S. After a couple of fruitless hours at the DMV, on the way back
into town to follow the next lead, John sighed, “I’m not giving up, but doesn’t it make
sense why so many of us do?”

I experienced this issue when I received a call from Jackie one Wednesday. Jackie
has been a part of our community of faith since shortly after we moved to Beaver Falls in
2011. She is reliable, insightful, and quick-witted. She also struggles with clinical
depression and at time feels the weight of it all to the point that she begins entertaining
thoughts of suicide. I could tell from her voice that she was struggling, and so we sat in
the yard outside of her rental house as she explained the last few months. With changes in
health care coverage at the turn of the year, Medicaid no longer covered what had been
very effective medication. The new pills covered by her plan did not work as well, and
she felt it: slipping and despairing. She talked, I mostly listened, we prayed, and she
suddenly brightened up as she shared an idea she had had for a couple weeks: that the kids in our church go on a walk with trash bags, pick up garbage on the main street while talking with the adults about God’s love for creation, and then have ice cream together. After I shared that I thought it was a really good idea, Jackie looked at me and spoke to both of us when she said, “I have good ideas, if anyone wants to pay attention.”

My friend and fellow pastor shared with me a conversation he had with a parishioner, in which the man expressed how much he deeply appreciated their church’s ministry to men and women struggling with drug and alcohol addiction; after all, if the church doesn’t care for them, then who will? Encouraged by this conversation, my friend was then blindsided as the same man explained in the next breath, “Of course, the really tough thing is dealing with all the black people. I mean, look at Ferguson! You can never tell what they’re going to do, and that makes things dangerous, doesn’t it?” Since we have forgotten that we belong to each other, we are satisfied in blaming those people for not only their struggles, but for society’s ills as a whole. We are guilty of not caring enough to provide the tools to help people start from scratch, and we do not pay attention to each other. We allow negative racialized stereotypes to shape our perception of another before we ever truly encounter that person. We have a powerful capacity to “other” one another, and this does not happen arbitrarily. Stigmatization and marginalization progress out of a denial of the fundamental reality of God’s image in each person individually and, most profoundly, in every person together.

In the world of the Christian Scriptures, a world deeply rooted in the Hebrew culture, table fellowship represented a deep sense of kinship. Sharing food at the table
together meant entering into communion with one another; hence the first century scandal of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Throughout the biblical narrative we see God calling his people to the table, whether with the tithe in Deuteronomy 14:22-29, in the reconciling encounter of David and Jonathon’s son in 2 Samuel 9, or in the remembrance of the Passover meal and the Lord’s Supper. As theologian Diana Butler Bass explains:

God welcomes the stranger. We were all made strangers to God in that Genesis story. We became strangers to one another, strangers to created nature, strangers to what was once a harmony, and everything became dissonance. And salvation is God setting a new table, welcoming all back to the table. When we deserved to be far off God brought us back in. Those who were strangers have been made friends. That is the primary definition of salvation in the Christian New Testament.4

This way of understanding salvation means God’s people must learn God’s intention for his table: a shalom-saturated community in which we move beyond the illusion that we are separate. God is the one who sets the table and who makes the invitation to join him there, and God’s church carries those invitations into the world he is reconciling to himself. This means that the church misrepresents God’s table so long as anyone whom God invites is excluded from participation. And all this generates from Jesus’s reconciling work of life, death, and resurrection, which creates the kinship that brings and binds together equitably those who sit at God’s table. We move toward this reconciled relationship now and we experience its consummation in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 19:6-9). God’s reveals his character in these qualities, and so at this table we find the glory of God.

---

The deep problem of our sinful othering tendencies, along with the beauty and power of God’s table invitation, inspire this project to center on SOMA’s current and future effectiveness in tending to the faith formation of all its diverse membership. Thankfully discipleship in this paradigm occurs not only for the benefit of SOMA’s membership, but for the purpose of equipping a kingdom-heralding, table-inviting witness in the Beaver Falls community. To that end, chapter one will establish SOMA’s community context through an examination of the city of Beaver Falls. This examination will include a discussion of the history of the American rust belt, the broad social forces of marginalization evidenced in the previous ‘those people’ stories, and how these have affected the present realities of our city. Chapter two will describe our ministry context, beginning with a discussion of our church’s history, demographic make-up, and efforts at missional discipleship. I will then take a deeper look at our theological tradition and its specific cultural and theological barriers to genuine diversity and reconciliation in the context of the Reformed urban American church.

After part one lays the foundation of SOMA’s ministry context, part two will focus on the necessary theological engagement with that context. Chapter three involves a review of relevant literature that has influenced my ministry reflection and practice, from which I will make the case for a theology of mutual, diverse spiritual formation as a hallmark of God’s reconciling community in the world. Chapter four will then draw from Scripture, employing the table motif, to reveal God’s heart for those who have been separated from one another to become family in Him, and for churches to be reconciling communities in which people are experiencing that social mutuality of faith in Christ. For
this movement to take place, particularly within churches in the Reformed tradition, there is a need to recognize (confess) and move away from (repent of) a culturally conditioned tendency toward cognitive abstraction, which prefers some groups of people over others. With Jesus’s incarnation as the theological correction to this tendency, we can see discipleship as a whole-person practice that churches can learn to encourage across the unique cultural diversities of their members.

Following this theological reflection, part three will concern itself with the actual project. Chapter five will explain a ministry plan that results in an accurate, community-based assessment process to determine the current effectiveness of SOMA’s leadership in tending to the faith formation of its diverse membership. The first step in this process involves the cultivation of cross-cultural competency through specific training attended by those recruited to be part of the spiritual formation assessment team. This team will then meet to develop a process that solicits congregational feedback, and that feedback will be collected, interpreted, and shared with the leadership team and worshiping body. This assessment team will also make recommendations to the leadership team on how to cultivate practices that honor and equip everyone in SOMA’s diverse community.

Finally, chapter six will outline the implementation of the doctoral project. After SOMA’s Leadership Team gives the go-ahead for this project to take place, I will recruit a diverse cross-section of SOMA’s members to be part of the Assessment Team. This team will be trained in the basics of cross-cultural competency through a two-day seminar. The winter of 2018 will be spent developing the survey/feedback process, which will then be implemented with SOMA’s congregation in March. Once received, this team
will interpret the input in April and May, and key findings/recommendations will be given to the Leadership Team in June. To assess the effectiveness of my project, I will develop my own questionnaire to be completed by the members of the Assessment Team and the Leadership Team, both before the project begins and at its completion.
CHAPTER 1
SOMA’S COMMUNITY CONTEXT & CHALLENGE

I will explore the concept of abstraction throughout this project as one of the tell-tale tendencies of a theology conditioned in Western culture. Since I will be encouraging the church to explicitly recognize and engage with this tendency over these six chapters, I recognize the importance of grounding this exercise within a particular congregation in a specific time and place. For that reason, I begin with a brief social analysis of SOMA’s community context: Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. The framework for this analysis is a modified version of the approach Joe Holland and Peter Henriot suggest in their work Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice.¹

Significant Developments in the City’s History²

Beaver Falls has gone through several cycles of development and recession in its history. In the 1860s, the city benefited greatly from a religious order known as the Harmony Society. The Harmony Society purchased many homes and properties


² This section on social analysis is adapted from my 2015 DMin paper entitled Setting the Table: An Ecclesiological Engagement with Social & Racial Marginalization in the American City, 6-13.
throughout Beaver Falls, paved the way for Geneva College (a small Christian college with about 2,000 students enrolled currently) to build a campus in the city, and induced many small factories (employing 200-300 people each) to take root in Beaver Falls. At this point the small city began to thrive and earned the nickname “The Little Pittsburgh.” It had a rich cultural district full of art and theater, famous visiting lecturers, and became a shopping and recreation destination for those throughout the region.

At the turn of the twentieth century, due to the city’s strong reputation, the presence of Geneva College, and a culturally conditioned reputation that “the population of Beaver Falls were morally upright and mature individuals,” large companies began to move into the city. Many of these were steel companies, and each employed thousands of people. Two-hundred thirty-three shops lined the main street in that time. Tens of thousands of people would come to attend the city’s parades and events. In short, from 1905-1985, Beaver Falls was a thriving and prosperous economic center. The most significant change in Beaver Falls, the effects of which carry into the present day, was the collapse of the American steel industry in 1983. In twelve months, 51,000 people in Beaver County lost their jobs. B & W Steel, the largest employer in Beaver Falls, closed their doors in 1985, taking with them the livelihood of thousands of people and forty percent of the city’s tax base.

Beaver Falls also has a particular racial history. Most of its early settlers were Covenanters or Quakers: small separatist religious communities with a core belief in the dignity of all people. So the dignity of persons was embedded in the ethos of the

---

community from an early time in the city’s history. One of the ways this manifested was in the establishment of Beaver Falls as an important stop in the Underground Railroad during the time of slavery in the United States. Enslaved people would make their way to Beaver Falls, and from there would be taken up the river to New Castle, Pennsylvania or Salem, Ohio. As manufacturing boomed in the northeastern United States in the mid-20th century, African American men and women joined many others who were struggling to subsist in the southern part of the country, migrating from the Jim Crow south to find employment. Many did so in the cities of Beaver Falls and Aliquippa, which had the highest concentration of living-wage labor work in the county.

The same racial tension that existed throughout the country in the second half of the twentieth century, however, was no less a reality in Beaver Falls. The Beaver Falls school district lines were re-drawn in 1973, and a new school district (Blackhawk) was created explicitly around racial and socio-economic distinctions. Long-time residents of the area remember race riots along the main street in the late 1960s. Following the 1992 Rodney King verdict acquitting four white police officers following a brutal video-taped beating of an African-American motorist, those tensions sparked. One African-American leader in Beaver Falls remarked, “Our community is a little closer-knit, so maybe that’s why you haven’t seen the kind of violence here that there’s been in L.A…we have a subtle racism that takes place here, [but this could be what] breaks the camel’s back.”

---

Beaver Falls Today

Over the next few decades, with the dramatic decline in industry and population, the decision to locate many of the county’s social services in Beaver Falls changed the demographic (particularly socio-economically) of its citizens in a significant way. Beaver Falls is now a small city of roughly eight thousand people, a population that is roughly half the size it was forty years ago. Socio-economically, Beaver Falls is comprised mostly of lower and middle-income residents; the median income in Beaver Falls is nearly $25,000 lower than the median income in the state of Pennsylvania. Beaver Falls is a supportive services hub in the county, and as a result, significant substance addiction recovery, mental health consumer, and formerly incarcerated populations reside in the city. A lack of business development on the main street means that there are very few jobs to be had in the city itself. Since many in the recovery, mental health, and formerly incarcerated population lack reliable transportation, this has resulted in widespread unemployment and dependence on government assistance programs. Anecdotally, drug dealing and prostitution are both notably present in the city.

As of the 2010 census, Beaver Falls reported seventy-five percent of its citizens as “white alone,” twenty percent as “black or African American alone,” and five percent as “more than one race.” Needing further interpretation, these numbers represent the entire Beaver Falls municipality, which carries its own geographic racial segregation. The part

---


of the city known as “downtown” houses the overwhelming majority of the black community, while the part of Beaver Falls often referred to as “the hill” was established to be much more homogeneously white. While official census numbers are not available around these distinctions, lived experience in the downtown area reveals a generally even white and black population. As is the case in any urban environment, the racial demographics of Beaver Falls are best understood in relationship to its surrounding communities. The cities in the immediate vicinity of Beaver Falls, such as New Brighton (eighty-five percent white, ten percent black), Chippewa (ninety-seven percent white, less than one percent black), and Beaver (ninety-five percent white, one percent black) indicate a racial segregation correlating, not coincidentally, with economic disadvantage.

Structurally, the city’s formerly thriving main street is much quieter than it was 40 years ago. While there are social services, non-profit organizations, and businesses dotted along the main street, many storefronts remain vacant. Residually, the housing stock significantly outweighs the population, and many large homes are now abandoned and in disrepair. This has led to a significant blight problem within the city. What’s more, renters inhabit many of the occupied homes in the city (more than fifty percent of the residents live in rental housing of some kind), and conversation with the city’s code enforcement department reveals that a large percentage of the city’s rental homes are owned by absentee landlords, many of whom live out of state, and who fail to keep the homes in reasonable condition.

By way of local organizations and associations, there are many churches in the city, a significant number of them small congregations with an older population who do
not currently live in town. The school system is a source of pride in the community, consistently over-achieving academically considering the resources available to it. The city government is accessible and there are a number of citizen associations passionate about seeing Beaver Falls revitalized.

Geneva College has a complex and sometimes difficult relationship with the downtown community. In some ways, this is geographically evident. The college sits up on the hill, slightly north of downtown Beaver Falls, and quite literally looks down on the city. The difficult relationship also manifests itself in the strained relationship between both the city council and the college’s administration; both are generally suspicious of each other’s motives, and therefore have been historically at odds. However, a small but growing number of students have invested in the city and have chosen to live here after graduation, and a new task force of college faculty and staff and city government representatives has begun gathering to address a better way forward in that institutional relationship.

Money and the City

By way of city government, the city operates in the black and has been able to do so despite a shrunken tax base. This is especially laudable given a recent financial scandal within the last decade, in which a beloved state representative, a strong advocate for development in Beaver Falls, was sent to prison. The city’s relative financial stability does not, however, extend to its citizens; many residents suffer from a clear lack of financial sustainability. Neither does it extend to the schools; the Beaver Falls school
district recently suffered a significant decrease in state funding, which led to teacher layoffs, as well as cuts to extra-curricular and academic support programs.

There are those who seek to boost the economic development of the city by advocating for industry or a large corporate presence downtown (e.g. Wal-Mart), while others prefer a more grassroots, small business or artisan-driven approach. Money plays a part in the city’s situation as far as city government, schools, the business district authority, and residents all experience the need for more of it. As a result, there is a high level of competition for funding sources at the county and municipal levels.

Many view those taking part in supportive services as an impediment to economic development. It is not uncommon to hear those passionate about the city’s economic development cite mental health consumers who walk along the street during the day as problems scaring away potential shoppers and, therefore, potential business owners. During the development of the city’s recent comprehensive plan, it was determined to rezone areas so as to reduce the number of recovery group homes able to locate in the community, undoubtedly due in no small part to this stigma.

**Decision Making in the City**

The important decisions for the city are typically made by the city government, particularly the city council, which has a tenuous relationship with many citizens due to past dysfunction and suspected corruption over the last several decades. The existing group seems much healthier, though distrust remains. Residents offer input to the council, and the close-knit nature of the city means that the power-brokers tend to have
relationships with many people in the community. There are definite cliques of power, both financial and decision-making, but the council tends to be accessible and willing to engage others in the decision-making process.

Decision-making in our community definitely reveals a racial bias. Several years ago our church teamed up with other Christian community development practitioners in our county to bring Noel Castellanos, the CEO of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), to our area to share with us his heart “to keep the margins at the center” of our work and ministry. During this visit he spoke with a few leaders and asked the pertinent question, “Do men and women of color have a prominent voice of leadership in your community?” One would have to concede that they do not have as prominent a voice as they should. A few African American men and women do occupy places of leadership in our community: the city manager in Beaver Falls is an African American man; the director of TRAILS ministry, a ministry supporting people affected by incarceration, is an African American woman; Pastor Bernard Tench, a longtime community leader, pastors Second Baptist Church, an African American church with a deep and powerful history in the city. While these examples and others exist, they represent the exception to the disproportionately white voices of influence in our city. One should not take this to mean that strong black leaders are not present in Beaver Falls, but rather that, on the systemic whole, their voices are not heard to the same degree as their white neighbors. This reality was reinforced for me when a colleague, an African American man, told me that he took the staff of his ministry to attend the national CCDA conference “so that they can see what it looks like when non-white people are in charge
of things, because they never get to see that around here.”

The relationships people value most in the city tend to be those with family and friends. More than official, transactional relationships, the people of this city value life-on-life relationships. Camaraderie exists amongst those who stayed in the midst of the flight from the city years ago. The need for supportive relationships when attempting to stay sober and the necessity to depend on family/friends when facing financial hardship also drive mutually dependent relationships with family and friends in the community. And any analysis of Beaver Falls would be incomplete without mentioning the community that develops surrounding the common interest of athletics (particularly high school football and basketball), which are a large source of civic pride.

The Important Causes of Beaver Falls’ Present-day Reality and Future Trajectory

One cannot understand the current social situation of Beaver Falls without taking into account multiple interrelated factors. These factors include: the loss of the steel industry, particularly the factories which made their home in Beaver Falls several decades ago; the relocating of many county social services into the city; the political distrust between government and citizens that developed through the struggle of the city’s transition from economically thriving to under-resourced; the competition over resources (resulting from a mentality of scarcity) between government offices, churches, non-profit organizations, and citizen associations; and the racial history of Beaver County as a whole, and Beaver Falls in particular.

The city is at a compelling time in its history, as a strong movement for
revitalization has worked its way through citizens, to associations, and now into the city government itself (the power-brokers of the community). A Community Development Corporation was formed several years ago with the city council’s blessing, and several initiatives are emerging from citizens in cooperation with city government. In retrospect, this could be a developmental turning point in the city’s history, though the turn may be a slow, steady one.

From the viewpoint of those who embrace a holistic gospel that believes practical hope for our cities is found in God-inspired reconciliation, much will depend on our desire to pursue God’s dream for mutuality with one another. This involves a willingness to engage with those social structures that maintain and exacerbate the forces of marginalization present in the city. This task is no simple one, as the powers that keep us living separately – that allow some access to the table while denying it to others – are deeply rooted. The next section will demonstrate the ways in which the “othering” taking place in Beaver Falls are in fact rooted in the broader social forces of marginalization occurring in cities across the country.

**The Problem of Marginalization in Our Urban Environments**

In his theological exposition of urban life, *The Meaning of the City*, Jacque Ellul suggests that the values of the city are by their very nature in contradiction to the values of God. Therefore, any ones who seek to minister in an urban context will find themselves faced with the competition of these values.  

---

concede completely to Ellul’s pessimistic sociology, we can observe the ways in which
the natural human desires for security and progress, combined with the sinfulness of
seeking them out apart from God’s provision, have led to urban environments in which
we pursue these desires above/against other people. If we judge people as unsafe to our
collective way of being (stigmatized), then they must be locked out or locked away
(marginalized). If people are not viewed as helpful in our city’s collective pursuit of
progress (stigmatized), then they must be sent to the social fringes (marginalized).

Ellul and others have observed that the sheer volume of people present in urban
centers only contributes to the temptation we feel to objectify one another. First, it is
relationally impossible to fully know thousands, and in some cases millions, of other
people. Professor Harvey Cox, along with others, proposes an alternative to Ellul’s
pessimism by arguing that the anonymity offered by the urban environment actually
presents an advantage to the gospel. However, one would be hard pressed to make the
case that increased anonymity is entirely positive, or that it does not contribute to the
objectification of others. Simply put, objectifying someone one personally knows is more
difficult than objectifying a stranger. It is, therefore, a short leap from anonymity to
stigmatization. The teeming mass of anonymous humanity that the city affords also
exacerbates the problem of marginalization, in the sense that so many people at the table
makes it easy not to notice when a few are missing.

Beaver Falls is not a city of millions but thousands, and as such anonymity does
not arise from a large population in the same way as occurs in and around major metro

---

centers. However, the transience of our population and racial/socioeconomic divisions do create the capacity for unknowing in which people’s dignity can slip through the cracks and be forgotten. The community-oriented nature of my ministry has afforded me an opportunity to listen to and learn from many neighbors about the ways in which they experience these othering forces. Their stories have been enlightening and disheartening.9

Jim Sherwood, a friend who passed away in 2016, had been the Coordinator of the Crossroads Men’s Emergency Shelter in Beaver Falls. Like many shelters for people without homes, Crossroads coordinates with the area’s social services to help men connect with resources for recovery, housing, job acquisition, and mental health services. Jim’s personal experience in substance addiction recovery and incarceration reentry gave him a unique skill set in coming alongside these men during an incredibly vulnerable time in their lives, as well as a unique insight into the specific societal obstacles they face in their attempts to live functional, contributing lives in a community.

Jim observed that individuals who have struggled with substance addiction, even when in total recovery and in every way functional, are often stereotyped as addicts and treated with noticeable derision. The mental health system is overwhelmed and underfunded, which often leads to under-diagnosis and misdiagnosis of people who are impaired, thanks in no small part to their tragic life experiences. Individuals returning from prison in our area, particularly those with felonies on their records, face an already-limited job market; factor in the additional job restrictions that come with probation terms and company policies on hiring people with felony records, and it is extremely difficult

9 The following two anecdotes are from my 2015 DMin paper entitled Setting the Table: An Ecclesiological Engagement with Social & Racial Marginalization in the American City, 19-20.
for incarceration reentry individuals to find gainful employment. In talking about this, Jim explained that the people who are successful in transitioning from the shelter into society are those who are able to begin living normal lives. He then paused to ask me, “But how can they do that if they don’t have a job?”

Maria managed a café ministry in an under-resourced community located a few miles from Beaver Falls. We see many of the same people in both communities, especially our marginalized brothers and sisters, and Maria has experienced first-hand the challenges faced by those returning from prison. She shared that, upon leaving a local women’s correction facility, she was told by the staff, “See you soon.” Her experience exemplifies what Michelle Alexander describes in her study of mass incarceration in the United States:

If shackling former prisoners with a lifetime of debt and authorizing discrimination against them in employment, housing, education, and public benefits is not enough to send the message that they are not wanted and not even considered full citizens, then stripping voting rights from those labeled criminals surely gets the point across…

Through a web of laws, regulations, and informal rules, all of which are powerfully reinforced by social stigma, they are confined to the margins of mainstream society and denied access to the mainstream economy.

This stigma most dramatically affects African-American men, who through drug enforcement policy and the unseen forces of racial discrimination, are targeted by law enforcement and incarcerated at a staggeringly higher rate than their white counterparts. According to the most recent data, 6.7 percent of the general citizenry of Beaver County

---


11 Ibid., 4.
is African-American, while that same racial group makes up 41.2 percent of the county’s incarcerated population. The social effects this has had in the black community in our city cannot be overstated.

Individual hearts and minds need to be liberated from the sinful tendency to stigmatize and marginalize fellow people made in the image of God. Equally vital is the need to confront the systems and structures in our society that push our brothers and sisters to the margins. As Eldin Villafañe explains in his work *Seek the Peace of the City*, “Any and every spirituality to be authentic and relevant must come to terms with the personal and social sin and evil…It must realize that sin and evil go beyond the individual; that we are all enmeshed in a social living that is complex, dynamic, and dialectical; and that our spirituality, and the very gospel that we preach, needs to be as big and ubiquitous as sin and evil.” Perhaps nowhere is the massive ubiquity of sin more evident in the city than when it comes to the specific forces of racialization.

**Race & the City: Seated at the Back of the Table**

If we are to heed Dr. Villafañe’s call to acknowledge the complex and dynamic reality of our social sinfulness, we must recognize the unique othering that happens along racial distinctions. In 2015, while I was studying racialization and its implications for

---


14 This section on race was adapted from my 2015 DMin paper entitled *Setting the Table: An Ecclesiological Engagement with Social & Racial Marginalization in the American City*, 21-25.
ministry in the urban context, the national news reported story after story of race-centered incidents. The President of the University of Missouri resigned over intense pressure centering around the lack of institutional response to racially motivated incidents on campus. Staff at Yale University came under fire for defending what many students felt to be racially/culturally degrading Halloween costumes. The city of Chicago’s police department released, under court order, video of a police officer shooting Laquan McDonald, an African-American teenager, sixteen times. The city of Cleveland declined to charge the officers involved in the shooting death of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old boy playing in the park with a toy gun.

That same year, during a cultural competency training that our church hosted, the facilitator opened the time reading the incidences of unarmed black men who were killed by law enforcement officers in the United States over the past two years. She simply read a brief description of each event. Some were well known (Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York, for example), while others were not so highly publicized by national news media. The exercise had its intended effect: the sheer number of these stories created an atmosphere in the room whereby participants could not deny that there exists a deep and deadly problem in our country surrounding racial identity.

Opportunities for confusion abound when discussing race in any substantive way. In order to avoid this confusion, I will explain what I mean when employing the term race in this exploration of marginalization in the urban context. Dr. Denise Eileen McCoskey offers a framework for our racial understanding in the following:

At its most basic, race is an ideological structure that organizes and classifies
perceived human variation. Race thus allows the division of people into broad
categories that presume to demarcate according to fundamental differences, such
as ‘black’ and ‘white’…Scholars have come to increasing consensus that the
dominant view of race today, one adamantly linked to skin colour, is not some
universal response to human variation, but rather the specific produce of popular
beliefs about human differences that evolved from the sixteenth through the
nineteenth centuries…Such theories were soon readily harnessed to claims of
European superiority, casting Europeans as racially superior (therefore ‘naturally’
superior) and providing and important rationalization in the rise of European
colonialism and the African slave trade.\(^{15}\)

Many people understand race today almost exclusively in terms of skin color due to the
forced disassociation of people from all other indicators of their cultural identity (land,
language, clothing, rituals, etc.). The United States Census Bureau explains “The racial
categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race
recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically,
anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of the
race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups. People may choose to
report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture.”\(^{16}\) In other words, race is not a
biological feature, but a social construction that has over time employed biological
features, most notably the color of one’s skin, as the primary variation by which people
are classified. In an abstract sense these classifications can have any number of effects on
people groups. However, given the real global history of Western European and African
interaction and its impact on the social reality of the United States today, we must
acknowledge the dramatic imbalance of power between white and black.

\(^{15}\) Denise Eileen McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity & Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press,
2012), 2-4.

\(^{16}\) United States Census Bureau, *About* (website), last revised July 8, 2013, accessed September
Of course, race in the United States does not exist in binary categories. The reason this project concerns itself primarily with white and black is two-fold: first, because Beaver Falls’ racial make-up overwhelmingly consists of these two groups. Second, social scientists who draw unique attention to racial categories identified as white and black do not do so to over-simplify or minimize the experiences of people who do not neatly fit into those classifications. Rather, given the specific racial history of the county as a whole – a history whose effects dramatically influence the reality of millions of men, women, and children living in our cities today – these categories represent opposite ends of the spectrum as it relates to racial identity and power. White and black do not exist as distinct yet equal experiences. Instead, the white experience in the United States has been one of power, privilege, and conquest; while the black experience is marked by displacement, enslavement, and marginalization.

The effects of this hellish inequity scream into the ears of our national consciousness today, though in reality they are no more potent than the suffering of those who have lived under its burden for centuries. For this reason, many who consider the Black Lives Matter movement have commented that insisting “black lives matter” does not in any way minimize or marginalize other lives. In fact, as far as black lives represent those who have been most marginalized in our country’s real racial dynamic, “all lives matter” is necessarily implied. But people’s resistance to this, including by many evangelicals, reminds us that the power of marginalization is deep and hard to root out.

We see how this inequity plays itself out systemically in the social environment of the contemporary American city. In his work *The American City and the Evangelical*
Church, Harvey Conn explains that:

The suburban neighborhoods quickly were becoming white, Gentile preserves of good taste. The motor age permitted white, middle-class Americans not only to escape from the congestion, soot, and clatter of the central city, it allowed them to isolate themselves from those ethnic and economic groups deemed incompatible with their way of life...The growing loss of the middle class to the downtown area now began to show its effects. As the urban whites fled for the suburban frontier, the shrinking central city came to be more heavily populated by poor and low-income people, by blacks, Hispanics, and other new immigrant groups...Unlike earlier immigrants, all these newcomer groups, refugees from rural poverty, arrived in the cities when demand for unskilled labor was declining and industry was suburbanizing. The net result was the impoverishment of the central city and continued patterns of social, economic, and racial isolation of city from suburb.¹⁷

In the course of urban studies in the twentieth century, few phenomena have been discussed more critically than white flight. As Conn describes, rather than face the emerging challenges of city life, upwardly-mobile white families left the cities for the surrounding suburbs, leaving to the struggle those lacking such mobility, which predominantly meant people of color.

While white flight revealed and exacerbated the racial inequity of the American urban landscape in the last century, gentrification appears to be its twenty-first century counterpart. This return to the city-center by predominantly upwardly mobile white men and women has resulted in many things that community developers desire: improved safety, a revived economic base, thriving business centers, and more in the urban core. However, the underside is undeniable; people no longer able to afford the rent or taxes in these cost-soaring neighborhoods are displaced from their homes and communities.

Several years ago my wife and I visited Charlotte, North Carolina, and while there

¹⁷ Harvey Conn, The American City and the Evangelical Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 80, 85-86.
a young woman showed my wife around the city. She explained that her family had purchased their home a couple years prior in a quickly gentrifying area, and that when they had taken possession they discovered an African American family living there. The previous owner had not disclosed this, and had not told the family living there that he was selling the house. When my wife asked what they did about the situation, the woman responded, “We offered them each $50 to leave that day, and they did.” While this example may represent an extreme version of displacement due to gentrification, it nonetheless reveals the kind of race and class dehumanization often involved in the dramatic population shifts taking place in the city centers of the United States today.

Whether locally or nationally, people experience the sinful forces of marginalization at work in American cities. The church I pastor in Beaver Falls has worked, imperfectly to be sure, to create a welcoming space for all, and we have committed to pursue God’s open table community in every area of our life together. This commitment gave birth to my interest in developing an urban ecclesiology that takes seriously spiritual formation in this particular context. Our attempt to move from aspiration to lived reality in this effort has revealed the depth of the challenge for our congregation in encouraging meaningful discipleship for our diverse community.
CHAPTER TWO
SOMA’S MINISTRY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

In July of 2009 I was hired by a seven hundred member, over two hundred-year-old Presbyterian church in a well-to-do small town in Western Pennsylvania. I was brought on to serve as the founding pastor a new church plant, and we had a rapid timeline. By January 2010 we were holding our first worship services, which we called gatherings, and had plans to move that April into the local YMCA and hold our weekly time of worship on Saturday evenings. As the planting pastor, I had a significant amount of freedom given to me from the parent church to establish the mission and values of this new worshiping body. With this freedom and a small core of members from the parent church, we knew that our focus would involve engaging those we called un-churched, which due to the heavy influence of the Catholic Church in our area meant more formerly-churched than those who had never attended church.

At this point in my ministry I was heavily influenced by the missional church movement as inspired by authors such as Leslie Newbigin (The Open Secret), Darrell Gruder (Missional Church), and others. While the term missional has come to mean

---

1 This narrative history of SOMA is adapted from my 2016 DMin paper entitled Twelve-month Ministry Plan for SOMA, a Missional Faith Community in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, 3-6.
many different things to many different people, I resonated deeply with an ecclesiological insistence that participation in the missio Dei should be the organizing activity of every congregation. I was not drawn to attractional church planting models with a heavy emphasis on bringing people to high-production quality worship services. As a result, our church started out far less focused on the weekly worship gathering; from the outset we tried to communicate the importance of following Jesus together with our everyday lives, not simply on Sunday mornings. We named the church SOMA, the Greek word for body, and so tried to understand our primary communal identity as a part of the universal body of Christ. First Corinthians 12:27 became our founding verse and we continued to encourage our missional value by embodying an in-and-out breathing rhythm as a church. Since we met every Saturday evening for our worship gathering, we also met every Saturday morning or afternoon for outreach efforts. We took seriously the belief that a church actively participating in the missio Dei in its context is the most faithfully evangelistic church possible. This was our strategy to reach the un-churched: to introduce them to Jesus by being the hands and feet of Christ in tangible ways in our community, and to winsomely invite others to participate in this life committed to God’s mission.

We met in the local YMCA for a little over a year, but it was only about six months into our life together that we recognized challenges to getting traction as a new church. First, while Saturday night finds success in certain contexts, for many culturally conditioned reasons Sunday morning is the window for church gatherings during the week in our area. We could have tried to fight that but decided it was not worth the battle. Second, our meeting location at the YMCA, while financially and logistically a huge gift (we had space rent-free and the YMCA staffed our childcare), was not helping us in our
desire to be an incarnational presence in a neighborhood. Our county has a very strong set of municipal identities, and the YMCA facility exists between towns. We sensed that if we were going to be effective as a small church, we needed to be much more specific in our geographical area of focus. Over the course of six months we went through a process through which we determined that, largely due to existing community relationships, we would start to put down roots in the city of Beaver Falls. I look back at this transitional season in SOMA’s life and have a strong sense of God’s providential guidance.

In June of 2011 we made our move to Beaver Falls. A small handful of us moved into the city, and about forty people make the transition to Sunday mornings in the lightly renovated basement of an old Masonic temple. Only a few of us lived in the city. I speak of God’s providential hand because, although we had strong sense of the importance of participating in the mission of God, we lacked any real wisdom in the dynamics of a white church plant from a wealthy parent church moving into a racially diverse and economically under-resourced community. Because we did not abide by the attractional church model we did not move into town loudly and brashly. But our ignorance did manifest itself in some of our early community outreach efforts, such as sending a thousand stock invitation postcards in the neighborhood declaring that “the church for you” was soon to arrive, as well as providing free lunches in our worship space to children over the summer with the county YMCA. We had an implicit service provider/service recipient understanding of church outreach. Since 2011 we have experienced a progressive cultural shift in our church’s sense of mission: moving from being a church for the city to being a church with the city. Our body’s main partner in this shift has been the CCDA.
I was introduced to the CCDA in the summer of 2011 and attended the annual conference that year in Indianapolis, Indiana. After acquiring several Christian community development resources, including participation in a training on listening to the community, and I began to incorporate some of these lessons into our leadership team trainings and church outreach practices. We stumbled around a bit, but the guiding principle of learning how to listen in the community took hold. Our leadership team committed to five years of listening and learning as our church’s primary outreach, and this led to the growth of strong relationships with existing churches, ministries, non-profits, services, and citizen groups in the city. The commitment to being with the people of Beaver Falls, not just for them, has opened the door for serious conversations within our church body about what it looks like to experience the reconciling power of Jesus in our own cross-cultural relationships. This has taken the desire to participate in the missio Dei to a deeper level as we recognize that a community of reconciliation bears an incredible witness to the kingdom of God.

This re-orienting of our missional culture has been incredibly rewarding and we have seen good fruit as the result of it. It has also, however, resulted in significant turnover in the membership of our church body. We currently have about 150 individuals who call SOMA their church body, while fewer than ten of those were a part of the original group that met at the YMCA. Many of those who have transitioned away from SOMA are middle-income white families who commuted in from out of town, and our church is now overwhelmingly made up of people who live in Beaver Falls, many of whom find themselves in socially and economically marginalized situations. Alongside these brothers and sisters, we have a very strong contingent of students and staff from
Geneva College, a small Christian college located in our city. While obvious to me that our majority-white cultural roots remain SOMA’s dominant cultural influence, we have become a more racially, generationally, educationally, and socio-economically diverse worshiping community that is trying to move toward a more fully embodied, kingdom-manifesting cultural diversity. Our three-year discipleship development process is one example of this effort.

SOMA’s Three-Year Discipleship Development Process

This doctoral project focuses on assessing SOMA’s effectiveness in equipping our increasingly diverse worshiping community for faithful kingdom witness. A pivotal part of our church’s story relates to the development of our current discipleship plan. In 2013 our leadership team recognized that we had a need for clear, meaningful practices of faith formation. I was authorized to begin developing what those practices would look like, and taking what I had learned through the CCDA we formed a three-step process. Each of these steps took about a year to complete as each involved soliciting input from the entire worshiping body and generating contextually meaningful results for our church body and for the Beaver Falls community. The first step involved defining discipleship for our time and place. The second step ended with our portrait of discipleship describing the life of following Jesus as individuals and together in our city. And finally, to encourage growth into that portrait, step three ended with specific practices for both community and individual formation.

Three years is a long time for any project, particularly considering the high degree of transience in our congregation. We had to continually remind and engage with our
members as we went along, and at the beginning of 2016 we revealed the final version of what we called SOMA’s discipleship process (see Appendix A). Now having had over a year to see this process at work, I find myself excited and anxious to take this step of evaluating the fruit of those three years. I hope to be encouraged by some of the results of an intentional, long-form, community-based effort like the one we started in 2013. At the same time, I fully expect to see the evidence that SOMA has a very long way to go in our goal to faithfully equip diverse women, children, and men for kingdom witness so that we will continue to grow as a healthy corner of God’s garden in Beaver Falls.

The Church’s Contribution to the Problem

SOMA has its own particular story, told within a much larger story. We are part of the Church universal, the Body of Christ of all times and all places. While there is much to celebrate in that catholic community of faith, I will spend the rest of this chapter exploring the short-comings of two of the relevant larger stories in which SOMA is situated: the story of the American Evangelical Church in the urban context, and the story of the Reformed tradition’s theological interactions with non-Western cultures. To understand the depth and kind of SOMA’s need for growth in our efforts to equip our people for ministry, I believe it is necessary to examine the challenges both of these stories bring to bear in our discipling work.

While the Church is charged with heralding the kingdom of God in our cities, our congregations are not exempt from the effects of sin. In her insightful work *Disunity in Christ*, sociologist Christena Cleveland observes the general ingroup/outgroup dynamics

---

2 This section is adapted from my 2015 DMin paper entitled *Setting the Table: An Ecclesiological Engagement with Social & Racial Marginalization in the American City*, 25-28.
at work in communities of faith, claiming, “One would hope that Christians who are reminded of their Christian identity would love all others more. However, that is not the case. Being reminded of Christian identity leads people to love their fellow group members well, but hate those who do not share their core values, attitudes and experiences.”

This hatred extends not only to those in the outgroup as related to our churches, but in a heightened way to those who fall in the outgroup of society at large.

A local pastor friend, Mark Ongley, has a church re-plant engaging specifically with those in the addictions recovery community. He is a specially trained addictions counselor, and in his years of pastoring and counseling, he has observed that churches tend to be communities in which the participants value being those who consistently overcome: they overcome sin, they overcome struggle, and they overcome past wounding. Therefore, if someone becomes part of a church that values overcoming (and most do), and that person does not quickly and completely overcome her or his addiction, it becomes a liability for the gospel. Demonstrating a syncretism with western culture’s tendency toward triumphalism, these overcoming churchgoers view people in the addiction recovery community as those with uniquely problematic struggles that disqualify them from full participation in the life of the community.

The church also tends to stigmatize those they view as perpetrators of their own pain. Particularly in the incarceration re-entry community and the substance abuse recovery community, it feels easy to make the connection between a person’s bad choices and the consequences of those choices. Affirming that one reaps what one sows, a

---

gracelessness withholds welcome from those people who have sown such trouble.

The attitudes underlying many of our outreach ministries exemplify attitudes of stigmatization and marginalization in the church. A large concentration of people within an urban area means a large concentration of needs, and churches with a conviction to meet those needs often face what seems like an overwhelming task. Feeding, clothing, and sheltering numbers of people becomes the object of many ministries, and what is often sacrificed is the communication of dignity that affirms people’s humanity. Churches feel forced to focus on meeting needs and not on meeting people. Several years ago a local ministry in Beaver Falls hosted a block party in which everyone from the surrounding several blocks of homes was invited. The hosts of the party were white people from middle-class backgrounds, and many of the guests who came early to the party were of the same demographic. As a small group of other neighbors made their way to the event, also from the neighborhood but mostly black and poor, one of the event organizers leaned over to a friend and commented with derision about those people who came only for the free food.

This stigma did not appear overnight; years of experience treating churches in the city as service-providers, and people as mere service-recipient, have shifted the tangible work of the Church in the neighborhood. The church is no longer inviting humanity to a communally shared meal; instead, we are running a food pantry. We no longer see others as image-bearers of God who are worthy of deep and abiding relationships; instead, we see nameless faces shuffling quickly through the line to get free food. This high moral distance always works against the heart of God’s gospel of reconciliation, even when it happens through the very people intended to bear its good news in our community.
One can trace the development of this distance historically. In her work *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, Gay Byron identifies “a form of Christian self-definition [that] was dependent upon ethnic othering,” particularly of black women and men, in writings as far back as the first centuries after Christ. Harvey Conn points out that, early in the nineteenth century, wide-spread religious American literature displayed an explicit distinction between middle-class values (seen as more godly) and those of the lower-class. “The slum family from which the Sunday school reformers turned in fearful hostility was perceived as a social failure and a moral disaster. The society they promoted was to be a stable middle-class structure of authority and predictable routine…infuse the slum home with middle-class values and the home will become the nurturer of morality…[This began] to identify the evangelical cause with the middle class.” The twentieth century church growth phenomenon made heavy use of practical social science to explicitly employ the homogenous unit principle in order to grow large church organizations comprised of targeted types of people.

This targeted demographic represented the most privileged members of society. While it was extremely effective in accomplishing its intended goal of large, influential churches, the unintended consequences are undeniable. Thousands of church leaders, schooled in church growth through the recruitment of ethnically and socio-economically similar people, are faced with the current reality of their churches’ perpetuating segregation along these very distinctions. According to Christena Cleveland,

---


5 Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church*, 47.
Social psychological research shows that simply reminding people of their Christian identity by exposing them to concepts like *Bible, sermon, heaven* and *Messiah* leads them to engage in pro-social behavior, *but only toward ethnically-similar Christians*. This shocking finding is consistent with basic group processes and has everything to do with how we categorize Christians. Humans naturally create group categories that distinguish *us* versus *them*. This distinction is good for group formation; we have a stronger group identity and greater group solidarity when we can easily distinguish ourselves from other groups. However, when it comes to the way we categorize Christians, our natural tendency to make *us/them* distinctions is complicated by the fact that our fellow church members are mostly, if not entirely, composed of ethnically-similar others. For this reason, the people who belong to our homogenous church group with whom we interact on a regular basis (our “us”) are the people with whom we most closely associate the term “Christian.” As a result, we automatically and nonconsciously apply the term “Christian” exclusively to “us” (our church group) and not to the broader, diverse body of Christ. As a result, ethnically-dissimilar Christians are labeled “them” and are treated like the outsiders they are perceived to be.⁶

Church members, having already been *caught* with the implied promise of community with people just like them, will be hard-pressed to respond favorably when *taught* the sinfulness of this promise and the fidelity of an alternative goal of lived diversity in Christ: socio-economically, ethnically, and otherwise.

This lack of diversity, and the empathy and wisdom God provides through it, does not just affect individual congregations. It also has damaging implications for the faith fabric of entire urban communities. Chapter one’s discussion of white flight and the decades-later phenomenon of gentrification also holds true in current church planting trends. Dr. Cleveland wrote in an article entitled ‘Urban Church Planting Plantations’:

> Many predominantly white, wealthy suburban churches in the area have expressed renewed interest in [the] urban center. But rather than connecting with the urban pastors who have been doing ministry among the oppressed in [the city] for years, and looking for ways to support the indigenous leaders who are already in place, they have simply begun making plans to expand their

---

suburban ministry empires into the urban center. In other words, they’re venturing out into the world of urban church planting. This is happening all over the U.S. In Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Boston, Charlotte and many other cities, I’ve seen predominantly white, wealthy suburban churches take an imperialistic glance at the urban center, decide that they are called to “take back the city” and then proceed with all of the honor and finesse of a military invasion.\(^7\)

To this day one can find very few voices in dominant culture church planting movements critically examining new urban church planting’s relationship with gentrification.

Dr. Cleveland goes on to explain more about the relationship of these church plants to the people in their new urban neighborhoods in terms of assimilation. While Beaver County is not a large metropolitan area, and SOMA’s planting church is not a megachurch per se, the racial and socio-economic dynamic between Beaver and Beaver Falls would lend itself to falling into the trap Dr. Cleveland describes above, though perhaps on a less grand scale. By God’s grace, wise counsel, and the influence of the CCDA early in our move to Beaver Falls, cultural assimilation was not the primary quality of our relationship with Beaver Falls. Dr. Todd Allen, a lifelong resident and respected community leader with a PhD focusing on the Civil Rights movement, expressed to me that, “A lot of folks have come into this town, full of energy, and tried to fix it, tried to save it, tried to turn it into something it’s not. But that’s not SOMA’s reputation in town. That’s not what you’re about. And I appreciate that.”

I celebrate that people do not view our body as a church plantation. However, our story begins as a church plant moving from a white middle/upper-middle class community to a racially diverse under-resourced community. This origin means we will

---

need to continue to contend, at deep cultural and systemic levels, with the social

tendencies inherent in that dynamic; tendencies from which, unfortunately, churches are

not spared. I believe that God’s Spirit makes such contending possible and even fruitful,

which I intend to explore in more detail in chapter four. I want to continue detailing the

challenge of SOMA’s ministry context by exploring our roots in the Reformed tradition.

Reformed Theology and the Distance\(^8\)

The marginalizing influences working against the movement of God in the city

and in our churches are not strictly sociological. If they were, the Church could simply

wield her pure, unaffected, biblically faithful theologies to correct those social errors. An

honest assessment of the Church in the city reveals, however, that this is not the case. At

its very best, the hard work of theological exploration gives us a rich and powerful insight

into the nature and character of God, and of God’s redemptive work in the

world. Theological traditions are as varied as the people and cultures of our planet, and it

is exciting to consider the ways in which God can, and does, reveal himself uniquely and

consistently to people of all places and all times. However, if we understand that our

theologies are just as susceptible to the influence of sin as any other discipline, we are

able to begin to confront honestly the ways in which well-intentioned attempts at

understanding the revealed mystery of God have been co-opted and used as means for

exclusion from God’s table.

My theological training and pastoral ministry have taken place in the context of

the Reformed tradition. Growing out of the Reformation movement of Western Europe in

---

\(^8\) This section on Reformed theology is adapted from my 2015 DMin paper entitled Setting the Table: An Ecclesiological Engagement with Social & Racial Marginalization in the American City, 28-38.
the sixteenth century, Reformed theology has had a significant influence throughout the American church landscape. As Molly Worthen summarizes in her book *Apostles of Reason*,

There was no way around it: international theological conversation in the mid-twentieth century required fluency in the Reformed tongue…The great Christian debates of the twentieth century hailed from a heavily Reformed heritage. These theologians upended traditional orthodoxies, but most also shared old Reformed preoccupations: the depravity of man, the complete sovereignty and transcendence of God, the need for harmony between faith and reason, and the responsibility of the Christian church to sanctify the world. Non-Reformed evangelicals had no choice but to adapt.9

The influence of the Reformed tradition on the church in America runs deep and wide.

While broadly influential, Reformed theology made a particularly lasting impression on the northeastern part of the United States. As a small sampling, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the denomination in which I serve, has seventy-one congregations in our regional presbytery, which covers only parts of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. By contrast, there are just 115 congregations in the entire western half of the country. Western Pennsylvania in particular became a kind of Presbyterian hub during European colonial expansion, as

The end of the War for Independence encouraged families (often Irish Presbyterians) already located in central and eastern Pennsylvania to cross the mountains and create new homes in the valleys of west-flowing creeks in the Ohio basin. The formal cessation of the Revolutionary War allowed migration to western Pennsylvania directly from Ireland…[and the subsequent] explosive growth in regional Presbyterianism resulted from rising new generations in Presbyterian enclaves, a series of local revivals near the turn of the nineteenth century, and continuing migration from Ireland.10

---


The basic premise of Enlightenment-derived Scottish Common Sense Realism, which served as the operative philosophy of those responsible for our nation’s chartering, reinforced the Reformed emphasis on the reasonability and logical consistency of theology as an enterprise. The late Princeton Seminary professor BB Warfield articulates this position:

It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the [Westminster] Confession, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications…It is, therefore, an unimportant incident that the recent plea against the use of human logic in determining doctrine has been most sharply put forward in order to justify the rejection of a doctrine which is explicitly taught, and that repeatedly, in the very letter of Scripture; if the plea is valid at all, it destroys at once our confidence in all doctrines, no one of which is ascertained or formulated without the aid of human logic.11

In Warfield’s Reformed contention one finds an explicit trust in the cooperation between God’s self-revelation and human powers of reason. Due to the deep Reformed influence explored by Worthen and others, such a contention would seem obvious and inarguable to many Christians, particularly those in my part of the country. I do not highlight this contention in order to argue for it or against it. I hope simply to demonstrate that the Western cultural tendency to prioritize the world of the mind is an undeniable component in the development of the Reformed tradition and its influence around the world, including my ministry context.

The Reformed tradition has made a deep impact in the part of the country in which I pastor. While I believe that we can celebrate much of what this has to offer the Church and world as a whole, it is necessary to spend time discussing two ways I believe it has been co-opted to further the us-them divide across social and racial lines: the first

by corrupting its systematic strength and the second by taking advantage of its culturally-conditioned weakness.

I was once sitting across the table at a local coffee shop from a member of our church, hearing what he called his confession. He had served for years at the highest level of lay leadership at his former congregation, a large middle-to-upper-class suburban evangelical congregation. He had taught classes, trained leaders, and was a person of high influence in that body. Now a part of our small and intentionally diverse faith community in downtown Beaver Falls, he shared with me how his eyes were being opened to the ways in which people without a strong formal education nor the cognitive capacity to readily recite large passages of Scripture or statements of doctrine are, in fact, capable of deep faith and influential leadership in the church and community. He asked for forgiveness because he had never before considered that this was possible. This man’s confession represents an awareness of a kind of elitist understanding of giftedness and capacity for leadership in many of our churches; one that certainly ignores Paul’s contention that “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things of the world to shame the strong, the lowly and despised of the world, those who are not, to bring to nothing those who are, so that no one can boast before God” (1 Cor 1:27-29). Our churches often take their cue from leadership culture literature more than from Scripture, going after those whom it deems the best and the brightest, the influencers, and the culture-shapers.

The intersection of this culture-shaper mentality and the Reformed tradition results in a blind spot regarding sound doctrine, and an environment in which theology covers over a multitude of sins. In 2014, a Reformed superstar pastor was placed under
discipline by his congregation after over a decade of alleged concerns about his character, hurtful words, and abusive behavior toward members of his congregation. For the years during which men and women would bring these concerns to light, the common defense from this person’s apologists went something like this: “Sure he has flaws and issues to deal with. Don’t we all? But we do not find him disqualified from ministry, as he has not erred in his doctrine.” This reasoning communicates that sound doctrine takes priority over other important means of determining fitness for Christian leadership and demonstrates a clear cultural bias toward the Western priority of abstraction.

Such a culturally conditioned myopia not only leaves the door open for people who should not be in leadership, but it also limits access to people who are otherwise gifted for leadership in the church. At my denomination’s national gathering in 2013, lively debate ensured around whether accommodations should be made for men and women who sensed a call into pastoral ministry, but who did not have reasonable access to a graduate-level accredited seminary education. While we continue to work this question out, I contrast this scenario with many churches in my community that regularly appoint people with no formal theological training as pastors and ministers. These churches are often more charismatic, with a much higher value on the day-to-day experience of God’s power, which creates a zeal for serving God. In these communities of faith being called by God means He will use someone in spite of any limitations. It makes sense then that these churches tend to be the landing places for many of the socially marginalized men and women I have described throughout this project. They offer these people a worshiping body to which they are not simply welcome, but quickly considered key contributors and influencers, able to use their gifts for the glory of God.
This quick access to leadership is not without its problems, and I do not mean to suggest that congregations in the Reformed tradition should eliminate everything that makes us distinct. It bears repeating that I do believe we need to lessen our passion for true and faithful theology. I affirm my friend and fellow Presbyterian pastor (one of only a small handful of African-American pastors in our denomination) who is planting a church in his hometown of Newark, New Jersey, who shared that his growing up experience in that community gave him a first-hand view of the deep damage that poor theology does in people’s real lives. He made it clear that “Newark needs good theology.” I agree whole-heartedly, while at the same time suggesting that that the logic-based bar we set for spiritual growth, and therefore access to leadership, may be more culturally conditioned than biblically normative. This simply means that we need to examine closely the ways in which our attempts to disciple people are unwittingly exacerbating the kind of marginalization we have been discussing here.

Beyond access to official pastoral leadership, participation is simply more easily encouraged when the assumption of “the more letters (educational degrees) the better” is not present. One of the members of our church, a man who experiences social and racial prejudice on a daily basis, shared with a small group of us that one of the main reasons he invests so heavily in our ministry is that he does not feel like a second-class citizen. While he will not soon be writing a widely-published theological treatise, his love for others and insight into the inner-workings of life on the streets of Beaver Falls are an invaluable contribution to our church’s presence in the city. When our churches unwittingly focus almost exclusively on the propositional aspects of our faith, we truncate the good news of the gospel as well as exclude those whose contribution to the
community lay more in the doing than in the thinking. As a result, every member of the community misses out on an opportunity to engage with the church’s full-bodied work of the Reign of God in the city. Commenting on the marginalizing power of this Reformed theological tendency toward abstraction in his own context, the twentieth century Scottish poet Edwin Muir wrote a chilling lament:

The windless northern surge, the sea-gull’s scream,  
And Calvin’s kirk crowning the barren brae.  
I think of Giotto the Tuscan shepherd’s dream,  
Christ, man and creature in their inner day.  
How could our race betray  
The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake  
Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?

The Word made flesh here is made word again  
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.  
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,  
And God three angry letters in a book,  
And there the logical hook  
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent  
Into an ideological argument.

The fleshless word, growing, will bring us down,  
Pagan and Christian man alike will fall,  
The auguries say, the white and black and brown,  
The merry and the sad, theorist, lover, all  
Invisibly will fall:  
Abstract calamity, save for those who can  
Build their cold empire on the abstract man.¹²

While abstraction provides excitement and opportunity for some, it also represents marginalization for many of our sisters and brothers who deeply desire to participate in God’s here and now work. This betrays the very heart of the God who invites us to the table without demanding that we first pass a written test.

I believe that the Reformed theological tradition also contributes to the cultural captivity of people, not just in its priority on logic, but also as a result of the Western European soil in which it was birthed. The Euro-centric Christianity of which I will speak is not specific to Reformed theology; it in fact embeds itself into any theological system growing out of western, white culture. But Reformed theology, as one that traces its roots explicitly into this soil, needs to acknowledge the ways in which it has been used to exacerbate the problem of cultural and racial stratification.

Several years ago a large, well known, explicitly Reformed network of churches and Christian leaders published a blog article calling for celebration, as many of their books and Bible study curricula were going to be made available at a very low cost to churches and church leaders in Africa. The reason they gave for celebrating was essentially: “Our brothers in Africa are so passionate about reaching their culture with the gospel, but what they lack are rich theological resources. We are now able to provide those resources to assist them in evangelizing their communities. Praise God!” By “rich theological resources,” they were speaking of books by Tim Keller, RC Sproul, JI Packer, John Piper, and others like them. Nowhere did this article acknowledge that there are indigenous men and women who have been doing the good, hard work of theologically contextualizing the gospel of Jesus Christ for their time and place and people. The organization assumed that the Reformed resources were rich and that any indigenous African resources were lacking in comparison.

In his work Race: A Theological Account, J. Kameron Carter traces the progression of Greek philosophical thought, particularly that of Gnosticism and its material/spiritual dualism (which contributes heavily to the tendency toward abstraction
mentioned here earlier), through to a prevailing Christology of Western Europe in the early twentieth century. He writes:

Christology, that area within the theological curriculum that investigates the person and work of Jesus the Christ, was problematically deployed to found the modern racial imagination. For at the genealogical taproot of modern racial reasoning is the process by which Christ was abstracted from Jesus, and thus from his Jewish body, thereby severing Christianity from its Jewish roots. Jewish flesh in this moment underwent a religious conversion: it was converted into racial flesh, positioned within a hierarchy of racial-anthropological essences, and lodged within a now racialized chain of being. In making Christ non-Jewish in this moment, he was made a figure of the Occident. He became white, even if Jesus as a historical figure remained Jewish or racially a figure of the Orient.\(^\text{13}\)

Carter argues that the dualistic tendency of Western theology had sufficiently disassociated Jesus from his historical Jewish flesh so that, given the intense ideological pressure of the Nazi state in Germany, he could be recast as white, thereby reinforcing the position of Arian supremacy. With this understanding, Carter makes the case that this Euro-centric Christology provided divine fuel for the atrocities committed against millions of Jewish people during the Holocaust of Nazi Germany.

It would be overly simplistic to not mention the tide of resistance from within the Reformed church in Germany during this time, including Deitrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church movement. The *Theological Declaration of Barmen* states: “In opposition to attempts to establish the unity of the German Evangelical Church by means of false doctrine, by the use of force and insincere practices, the Confessional Synod insists that the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the

Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit. Thus alone is the Church renewed.”

Even taking this resistance into account, Carter makes a compelling case for centuries of Western theological groundwork creating an environment in which a white Jesus became normative, and we can see how this transition provided ammunition for the devaluation and marginalization of non-white people and their distinctive cultural identities.

I mention this historical theological phenomenon, not simply to look back at what was, but to help make sense of what the church in the American city still experiences today. In their seminal work *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith “argue that religion, as structured in America, is unable to make a great impact on the racialized society. In fact, far from knocking down racial barriers, religion generally serves to maintain these historical divides, and helps to develop new ones. In short, religion in the United States can serve as a moral force in freeing people, but not in bringing them together as equals across racial lines.”

While progress has been made in valuing and working toward racial reconciliation in communities of faith since Smith and Emerson first conducted their research, homogeneity is still the norm in most of our urban churches. Soong-Chan Rah explains, “Generally speaking, most Americans have a rich knowledge of history from the perspective of white America. Our schools and even our Christian colleges and theological seminaries teach a perspective on American history and American church

---


history that is centered on the story of Americans of European descent.”\textsuperscript{16} I believe much of the urban American church’s homogenous reality owes itself to the failure on the part of the majority-culture Church in America to acknowledge and address our own complicity, theologically and socially, in the marginalization of non-white brothers and sisters.

A man I know was discussing racial identity as it relates to our common identity in Christ. In that discussion he asserted that “no matter what race a person is, we all are prone to ethno-centrism. Sure, we white people do it, but I believe every person does it.” While he may have been psycho-socially correct, I have never seen a picture of black Jesus in a white church. There is a real racial history in the Church in America and, like the broader society in which she finds herself, its preference of power skews inequitably toward whiteness. This has to be admitted by those of us whose privilege could afford us the opportunity to deny it. Until this confess occurs, every attempt to move toward diversity will occur in the same vein as a marriage relationship in which one partner insists on moving back into together without really repenting for breaking the marriage vows. Only once this occurs can we move toward truly embodying Dr. King’s beloved community.

To that end, I believe that it would be helpful if those of us within the Reformed Christian tradition would acknowledge certain truths. First, we need to confess that our white Western cultural roots have influenced our tradition, and that one of these cultural tendencies is disembodied abstraction. Second, we need to confess that white, Western

\textsuperscript{16} Soong-Chan Rah, \textit{Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church} (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 42.
culture is uniquely privileged amongst all cultures on earth, particularly in the United States, and this ill-gotten privilege gives us a sense of cultural superiority (as evidenced by centuries of colonial conquest across the world). Third, we need to confess that our culturally conditioned tendency toward abstraction combines with our sense of superiority to cultivate a theological posture in which we find it exceedingly difficult to acknowledge either limitation. We have not reckoned with effects of our sinful fallenness in this specific regard, and so we create an echo chamber in which the only voices of influence come from within our own tradition, since those are the only ones we find worthy of serious consideration. Lastly, we need to confess that this inability to recognize our limitations and our sinful failure to listen to the cultural perspectives of others contributes to social and racial marginalization in the church, and it severely limits our prophetic credibility when trying to address those same ills in the city. In this respect, we have become the man with a plank in his eye, unable to rightly see the speck in the eye of the other.

Reformed congregations in the city face unique, culturally conditioned barriers to embodying God’s beloved community in diverse expressions, and I have attempted to touch upon two of those barriers which influence SOMA’s ministry in Beaver Falls. Gratefully, I believe that we are empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit to respond to the marginalization of our brothers and sisters and to offer an alternative expression of community that heralds the open table invitation of God’s good reign. As Bryant Myers states, “The church, the community of faith, is the bearer of the biblical story, the ‘cracked pot’ that is to continue announcing the good news of the unchanging person an the unshakable kingdom until Christ comes again…when at its best, the church is the
sign, a witness, to the kingdom of God breaking into the world.”

We see this accomplished when the church’s life takes its lead from God’s heart and character, revealed fully in Jesus Christ. With that confidence I will spend the next two chapters of this project exploring the theological basis for addressing the challenges of SOMA’s context.

---

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

This project aspires to encourage the development of missional discipleship in diverse urban communities of faith, particularly those with roots in the Reformed tradition, and most particularly our church in Beaver Falls. In order to substantiate my effort toward that encouragement I have chosen to review literature that engages three areas of theological reflection that I believe help shape a church culture conducive to discipling a diverse body: theological reflection on forces that marginalize people, the relationship between church and city, and the church’s particular ministry of reconciliation in the city. While I explore how each of these works relates to SOMA’s cultivation of missional discipleship, none of the reviews deal directly with specific discipleship methodology or suggested spiritual formation practices. However, I believe that together they help to situate the church’s discipling ministry in relationship and local context, providing the necessary foundation for building an effective assessment and development of the church’s work of diverse spiritual formation.
Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation by Miroslav Volf

In his work Dr. Volf engages the problem of enmity, with all of its very tangible and violent repercussions, with a theological exploration and application of Jesus’s reconciling work on the cross. Volf initially situates his analysis of exclusion in an examination of strife between people groups and cultures. Volf himself experienced such strife in his native country of Croatia (formerly Yugoslavia), and reflects upon the deeply rooted causes of what he and others suffered. He posits that “…the problem of ethnic and cultural conflicts is part of a larger problem of identity and otherness…” and that “Various kinds of cultural ‘cleansings’ demand of us to place identity and otherness at the center of theological reflection on social identities.”\(^1\) I found the value of Volf’s work to my specific project; that he treats with thorough care both the social realities of objectification and marginalization and the Christian theological response robust enough to offer a meaningful corrective. He articulates this framework by explaining that

A genuinely Christian reflection on social issues must be rooted in the self-giving love of the divine Trinity as manifested on the cross of Christ; all the central themes of such reflection will have to be thought through from the perspective of the self-giving love of God. This book seeks to explicate what divine self-donation may mean for the construction of identity and for the relationship with the other under the condition of enmity.\(^2\)

As Volf’s themes of distance and belonging, exclusion, embrace, and peace are particularly relevant to my work, I explore each of them in this review.

---

\(^1\) Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 16-17.

\(^2\) Ibid., 25.
Volf’s theme of distance and belonging highlights the tension between being distinct and the desire to belong to a group. The formation of identity involves an appropriate kind of othering, which recognizes and honors the autonomy that people possess in relationship to one another. When this othering begins to compromise a mutually beneficial relationship, however, it contributes to a state of enmity between individuals and groups of people (be those distinctions ethnic, cultural, religious, or otherwise). Volf suggests a healthy balance of distance and belonging, the lack of which he describes.

Both distance and belonging are essential. Belonging without distance destroys: I affirm my exclusive identity as Croatian and want either to shape everyone in my own image or eliminate them from my world. But distance without belonging isolates: I deny my identity as a Croatian and draw back from my own culture. But more often than not, I become trapped in the snares of counter-dependence. I deny my Croatian identity only to affirm even more forcefully my identity as a member of this or that anti-Croatian sect. And so an isolationist ‘distance without belonging’ slips into a destructive ‘belonging without distance.’ Distance from culture must never degenerate into flight from the culture but must be a way of living in a culture.³

Volf goes on to explore Paul’s engagement with Abrahamic identity for the people of God in Romans 4:13, highlighting that “whereas Abraham’s original departure is lived out in the one body of Jewish people, Christian departure is lived out in the many bodies of different peoples situated in the one body of Christ.”⁴ Distance gives us the space to receive each other, and belonging embraces our desire to be received by the other. When I consider SOMA’s worshiping body and our desire to grow as a more credible witness to the diversity of God’s kingdom in our neighborhood, I am here

---

³ Ibid., 50.
⁴ Ibid.
strengthened against the notion of color blindness or the classic United States vision of the melting pot, in which all distinctions morph or melt away into one indeterminate mass of uniformity. Rather, the return to the biblical metaphor of Church-as-body substantiates the multiple and complementary realities that the members of the body are at once distinct, individually as well as culturally, and situated together.

Exclusion, then, is a betrayal of that healthy distance and belonging in which othering leads away from the mutual interdependence of God’s divine community. Volf identifies two effects of exclusion; the first in which “the other then emerges either as an enemy that must be pushed away from the self and driven out of its space or as a nonentity…that can be disregarded or abandoned. Second…the other emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or subjugated to the self.” Exclusion results in either marginalization or assimilation, both of which perpetrate violence against the other. Volf provides a framework for the American urban church seeking to equip a diverse community. This framework enables the church to recognize the ways in which white, Western Christian culture has perpetrated this very violence upon both people of color in our majority-white faith communities and traditions, as well as people for whom the world of the mind is not the primary way in which they engage with their faith. In response to this way of violence, Volf suggests the way of embrace.

Remembering that Volf’s focus in this work deals with reconciliation through the cross of Jesus Christ, between those who are perpetrators and their victims, we hear the deep challenge in the assertion that

---

5 Ibid., 67.
…the cross is a divine embrace of the deceitful and the unjust…at the core of the Christian faith lies the claim that God entered history and died on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ for an unjust and deceitful world. In taking upon himself the sin of the world, God told the truth about the deceitful world and enthroned justice in an unjust world…The cry of the innocent blood was attended to…[and] one can embrace perpetrators in forgiveness because God has embraced them through atonement.6

While I have personally benefited from this perspective of atonement in relationship to restored relationship amongst people, I find it particularly applicable to the theological foundation for the work of the urban church in the ministry of reconciliation. Although Volf does not specifically address ecclesiology in this work, I consider his theology of atonement to be vital for the church’s community life within and for her witness in the neighborhood. Considering SOMA’s community life, I see our diversity as something to be celebrated. However, there are ways in which our differences are co-opted by sin-sick power dynamics which cause some to suffer to the benefit of others. This is true regarding culture, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and more. In a world that seems to specialize in either minimizing the pain of victims or scapegoating the sin of wrongdoers, we receive in this theology of the cross a power to actually deal with the enmity between individuals and cultures within our church communities. The sin and violence of the majority culture is not ignored, excused, or enabled, but confessed and repented of. Victims of that violence are not required to forget their suffering, but are able to know and tell the hard truth of their pain while extending the same supernatural forgiveness as Christ on the cross. In this way the great circle of God’s compassion widens and all those who have been distanced from one another are brought together in genuine reconciled relationship.

6 Ibid., 294-295.
In this work Dr. Carter labors to lay a sturdy historical sociological foundation for his contention that “modernity’s racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity’s quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots.” Following a significant analysis of the contemporary critical race studies of Cornel West and Michel Foucault, as well as an engagement with the racial theory of Immanuel Kant, Carter builds upon both of these to develop his theory on how “theology came to aid and abet…the inner architecture of modern racial reasoning.” Specifically, he details the process by which Gnosticism, with its dualistic worldview, influenced the Western Church’s Christology during the eighteenth century. This influence resulted in the functional disassociation of Jesus from his historical Jewish flesh, thereby paving the way for an eventual re-appropriation of Jesus as white in Western Christian consciousness. Carter describes the power of this process as creating a theology in which “whiteness came to function as a substitute for the Christian doctrine of creation, thus producing a reality into which all else must enter.” He further contends that in this way, Christianity became the cultural property of the global West and the impetus for a racial imagination in which races exists in hierarchy, a hierarchy on top of which sit those who are white.

As the theological reflection undergirding my project attempts to wrestle with the role of the Reformed tradition and its influence on our urban churches and communities, Carter’s perspective is sharply prophetic. We who swim in the Reformed stream are

---

8 Ibid., 230.
9 Ibid., 230.
tempted to understand our theology as the pure and pristine truth of God, only acted upon by the sin of the outside world by forces like racism, pride, greed, and the like. Carter, however, urges us to consider an honest evaluation of the role our theology plays in actually shaping those sin-sick forces which give rise to the very social evils, particularly white supremacy, we seek to dismantle in the name and power of Christ Jesus.

I am grateful for profound influence of Carter’s work in my own reflection and practice, as it inspired me to explore the heritage of Reformed theology’s complicity in people’s social marginalization much more deeply than I otherwise would have done. To do such an exploration within a confessional Christian tradition, in which we determine inclusion by assent to statements of belief, runs the risk of striking at the very heart of an institution’s identity. As I consider that challenge at the national level of my own denomination, my project attempts to be most meaningful at the local level with SOMA in Beaver Falls. In this regard we have the benefit of not identifying our church primarily as Presbyterian, as one would not find that word anywhere on our church’s first-impressions communication. When asked about our denominational affiliation, we attempt to communicate that we are a part of the Presbyterian tradition while not defining ourselves primarily as such. Nonetheless, we are implicitly Reformed as a faith community; to deny this would be dishonest, an abdication of the responsibility we bear as part of that tradition, and also a foolish repression of the gifts that the Reformed tradition can bring to bear in our reconciling ministry in the city. As Carter thoroughly constructs a framework in which the reader can understand a particular Christian theology’s complicity in racial imagination and hierarchy, he nonetheless contends that theology also plays a key role in correcting its own error. In speaking of his usage of
certain antebellum texts, Carter affirms that “they draw on a Christian self-understanding to unsettle racial self-understandings...[and] appropriate theological and, in particular, Christological ideas in the interests of destabilizing racial identity and beginning to theologically challenge the whiteness of modernity.”\textsuperscript{10}

Carter’s work makes space for Reformed tradition churches to participate in that theological work of destabilizing and challenging in two significant ways. First, the Reformed tradition’s belief in total depravity can drive us into confession and repentance regarding our complicity in shaping this sinful racialization that has elevated whiteness and marginalized blackness. Second, the Reformed tradition’s embrace of Sola Christus points us back to the incarnate God whose particular first-century Jewish flesh stands defiantly against any attempt to divinely sanction white supremacy. Taken together, these beliefs become allies in the struggle against a theologically formed and sustained racialization.

As I consider my own denominational context, in which race tends to exist exclusively in the realms of the social and political, I read Carter’s theological exploration and subsequent admonition to be both timely and necessary. Particularly as tragic events over the past year have put race back at the center of the majority national consciousness, I believe that Carter theologically equips the urban church to reconsider its own role; not as mere peripheral players borrowing from the language of the social and political realms, but as prophetically central voices in getting to the core of the dilemma.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 256.
In order to understand the evangelical church’s current relationship with urban communities, insight occurs through tracing the story of that relationship throughout America’s history. As Dr. Conn traces that story he uncovers a history fraught with social prejudice, local disassociation, evangelistic bifurcation, and missions captive to a belief in western cultural supremacy. This of course does not tell the entire story; God’s grace has used the church to herald his kingdom in our cities in countless ways. This review focuses on the historical struggle of the church to live out that mission. I believe an understanding of that struggle helps to explain the current tensions between church and city, particularly the white evangelical church, and that learning from our history will also serve the urban church in preparing for the future.

In trying to explain the complicated church-city relationship, Dr. Conn hones in on the growth of industrialized urban centers, paying particular attention to the moral assessment of these cities by the voices of the church. “By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, this image of the ‘wicked city’ had become a stereotype already deep in the national consciousness…[and] some saw a growing disinterest of the church in the city because of it.”11 While some did choose to live and minister within the city, that which became known as the evangelical church in the twentieth century internalized this urban moral assessment and responded in two primary ways: by either leaving the city and its sinful influence or by trying to save the city and those poor souls within it. Conn observes that “suburbanization had still another effect on the churches and particularly

11 Conn, The American City and the Evangelical Church, 38.
the evangelical segment. For the first time in American history, the ‘urban crisis’ was in danger of being isolated from the issues of social responsibility. In the past, they had been inextricably linked together in the urban mind…to speak of the city was to speak of the church’s context.\textsuperscript{12} This loss of incarnational identity within the city meant that post white-flight attempts to minister there were prone to paternalism and lacked the relational capital that truly heralds God’s kingdom in a place.

Dr. Conn’s work was written in 1994, meaning that he was not able to speak to the most recent urban phenomenon of gentrification. It would be interesting to learn his insights while observing scores of white evangelical churches being planted in now economically re-developing urban centers throughout the county. From the church’s perspective, this phenomenon seems to perpetuate the same perception of the city as what Conn uncovered throughout American history; namely, that the city is morally deficient and should be changed. Now that it is changing, and for the better from the vantage point of the white evangelical gaze, it is kingdom work to be a part of it.

Beaver Falls is located far enough from the Pittsburgh metro center to not be currently experiencing the tidal wave of gentrification and urban re-development in the city. However, the same culturally captive moral assessments exist in our community. I have heard on countless occasions from Christian people in our county that they are grateful SOMA is in Beaver Falls because of the perception that it is a bad place in need of much help. Regrettably, that perception did inform our narrative upon making the decision to move to Beaver Falls in 2011; I struggle with that part of our story. So while I am grateful to God for the chance to partner with other churches and to engage in good

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 99-100.
work in our city, I believe that our church needs to invest in the place-specific discipleship of our people by learning from the history Dr. Conn reveals, that we confess the ways in which we have bought into the wicked city narrative, that we resist the savior mentality, and that we retain an incarnational relationship with our neighborhood.

*Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry* by Eldin Villafañe

Dr. Villafañe offers a way of understanding the urban landscape and the church’s role within it: he envisions a community engaged with the Spirit-empowered mission of God’s liberation in the life of our struggling cities. Starting with the book’s title-inspiration (Jer 29:5-6) and using the Hispanic church as his basis, Villafañe begins with the belief in “an overarching, holistic vision for the city that can inspire our work in urban ministry.” He then builds upon this belief to drive the church toward a richer relationship of presence with the city, a richer mission of peace within the city, and richer spirituality of prayer in the city.

As an academic and practitioner, Villafañe seeks the rescue theology from the ivory tower and bring it to the street in his section on socio-theology, reminding us of the gospel-centered role of scholarship in service to God’s work in the city. This effort to integrate theory and life, which he terms praxis, is evident in his liberationist focus on the underside as not simply recipients of the church’s service, but as the locus of God’s revelation and activity in the city. At SOMA we have attempted to cultivate a posture of listening in our city, particularly to those at the social margins of the community. We have committed ourselves to presence and listening as our primary practices of

---

13 Villafañe, *Seek the Peace of the City*, 2.
community engagement through weekly open hours at our building, our community
garden space in town, partnering with existing ministries and non-profits, and the
encouraging of individuals in our church showing up in the neighborhood through
common practices like walking, eating, and shopping. Through these practices we have
learned a great deal about our city, and we continue to develop in our understanding of
what should be our unique role, as a church body, in its well-being.

His section on the Church in the city speaks practically while still challenging the
reader to return to the paradigm of presence, peace, and prayer. Nowhere is this more
apparent than his chapter on patience, in which he describes the burning patience required
of the church for effective ministry in the city. This patience lets the Spirit to move at
God’s pace while not allowing the church to sit on her hands, reminding us that “patience
in Scripture is not a passive quality or virtue…rather, it is an active quality, a burning
virtue, that, captivated by an eschatological vision of God’s heavenly city, can, hope
against hope, see signs of the splendid city manifested concretely, if but for short and
imperfect moments in history, our earthly city.”  

Villafañe here expresses what others refer to as the now-and-not-yet of God’s kingdom; a refrain we have used often at
SOMA. This refrain provides a conceptual framework for our people to long for the deep,
rich reality of God’s kingdom evidenced in community flourishing through reconciling
relationships, instead of finding satisfaction in only the outward appearance of urban
community development; an appearance steeped in the perspective of white culture. This
difficult tension requires the kind of burning patience Villafañe encourages and which
SOMA is still very much learning to practice.

\[14\] Ibid., 43.
Finally, Dr. Villafañe devotes the final section to theological education in the city, maintaining his core convictions from Jeremiah’s paradigm as he explains its essential elements. These elements are determined with an understanding of the uniqueness of the city, and they ask the academic institutional powers-that-be to take seriously what is required for the educational discipline within the urban context. He prophetically insists that “If we are to effectively educate leaders for our urban scene, this contextual reality – multicultural and socioeconomically poor – must inform all aspects of the theological enterprise.”15

As a congregation in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, we have inherited a systemic priority on formal seminary education as a prerequisite to pastoral leadership. The EPC has yet to figure out, however, a means of contextualizing that seminary education for the kind of urban leadership Villafañe highlights. This book was written in 1995, over twenty years ago, and I cannot help but be discouraged by the lack of progress made by my denominational body in this respect.

In looking for examples of what the development of this kind of contextual theological education might look like, I consider Centro Hispano de Estudios Teologicos (CHET) in Los Angeles. Having had the opportunity to visit and learn about this seminary program, the development of something similar in our community could be very fruitful. It would also be challenging to develop given the specific denominational requirements of the EPC. In this respect and as it relates to my project, I leave this book with more questions than answers. The way forward is deeply challenging for the EPC to contextualize not only the access to our system of theological education, but also bring under consideration the content of said education, particularly when the Reformed

---

15 Ibid., 78.
tradition so emphasizes the rightness of its particular systematic theology. I can envision our seminary partnerships encouraging the development of scholarships and online programs and remote urban campuses, and these are commendable efforts to contextualize access. Once in the classroom, however, every student still receives the same Western-centered educational experience. In this way I believe Villafañe’s work best serves as a call to consider the long road still ahead of those us in the Reformed community in our need to allow the urban contextual reality to inform all aspects of the theological enterprise.

**Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church by Soong-Chan Rah**

As churches in the city purse diverse community together, Dr. Rah asserts that church leaders must be aware of and competent in navigating diverse cultural realities. Otherwise the unrecognized and unchecked power dynamics will create a church body in which the subdominant cultures, ethnic, socioeconomic, or otherwise, will be pressured to assimilate to the dominant culture if they wish to fully participate as members of the body. As Dr. Rah states, “By not talking about the dynamics of power at work in cross-cultural relationships, we unwittingly continue to perpetuate the systems of power that are at work.”16 In this book he puts forth an accessible and insightful exploration of culture, power, diversity, and hospitality for the American urban church, and his influence in this regard has been felt by me personally and in the conversation around multiculturalism in our church community.

Explaining that culture is akin to the shared software downloaded into the minds of people making up a common group, Dr. Rah points out the three levels at which culture operates: “(1) behaviors that are learned, (2) ideas that reinforce beliefs and values, and (3) products that reinforce beliefs.”

In our church we see all three of these levels at work, and each continues to skew toward the dominant white, Western culture with which we began in 2010. As an example, one of our current music leaders, who grew up in an African American church, has raised on several occasions the lack of physical space available in our worship gathering for worshipers to dance. Until two years ago, this was nowhere on the radar of our church’s consciousness, even though we have been very deliberate about organizing the space to reflect our values.

The same dynamic holds true in our methods of discipleship. Until several years ago we encouraged everyone to join a community group for Bible study, fellowship, and community outreach. These groups meet in people’s homes on a regular basis, and we noticed a hesitancy on the part of our low income and African American members to participate. An African American friend of mine who pastors a church in Philadelphia shared over lunch that the same thing happened in his multicultural congregation, so they started holding some of the groups at the church building. “Black folks don’t meet in homes for Bible study!” he laughed, before finishing, “And there’s nothing wrong with that.” Our church has done the same and met with positive results, but we have needed to become much more intentional about understanding the distinct cultural realities of our faith community for the sake of our worshiping and discipling ministry.

---

17 Ibid., 24.
Several years ago we began our mosaic team, members representing a cross-section of our church and neighborhood who together pay specific attention to how well our church is embodying God’s Kingdom-heralding diversity. This work has included the identification of our congregation’s three primary power-centered diversities (race, gender, and class), cultural competency training, and most recently a commitment to enter into a season of reconciliation through developing shared congregational practices of lament, hospitality, solidarity, and mutuality.

In speaking of the corporate nature of Christ’s body at the work of developing cultural competency, Dr. Rah contends “Multicultural learning, then, must be experienced through the context of community. Learning in community occurs through shared experience. This process involves journeying together, sharing meals together, multisensory opportunities, and participatory learning.”18 While he then goes on to speak about powerful experiential mission opportunities such as Sankofa, I also see tremendous value in cultivating regular and ongoing group learning opportunities locally. SOMA is part of an initiative called Neighborhoods of Hope, in which city council has promised resources to help revitalize energized neighborhoods who want to see their area thrive. In partnership with this effort our church has been hosting monthly prayer walks, in which we invite neighbors to join us for a time of shared conversation, prayer, and story as we walk through the neighborhood. The racial and socio-economic diversity of people who participate on these walks creates a shared learning that provides a much fuller and more vibrant picture of this community.

---

18 Ibid., 148.
A systemic understanding of culture and the church means that the work of developing cultural competency is never done. “Cultural intelligence is not merely changing externalities of cultural forms or recognizable external events…It is a transformation of the system that produced the values in the first place.”\(^\text{19}\) Dr. Rah cites the work of Doug and Judy Hall, who contend that the linear ways in which Western culture tends to view and solve problems are not sufficient for the task of what they call living system ministry. In their work *The Cat and the Toaster*, they describe churches as exactly these kind of living systems which need to address God’s intangible, high-order reality in which all the living parts interrelate in highly complex ways. Otherwise, “our low-order activities will inevitably, though…unintentionally, cause damage to high-order life.”\(^\text{20}\) SOMA’s leadership continues to ask for God’s Spirit to help us engage those systems in order to cultivate a diverse community of faith that really is good news for the communal faith formation of our worshiping body and our mission in the city.

*Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*

by Brenda Salter McNeil

Many people are contending with the term reconciliation within the diverse community of Christians committed to the work of justice, and some of that contending relates to defining the concept so that it is both faithful to the biblical witness and meaningful in our communities. Dr. McNeil lends her voice to that conversation, defining reconciliation as “an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 189.

justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish.”

I deeply appreciate her insistence that genuine reconciliation goes deeper than the ending of active hostility. Rather, it moves us toward relating to one another in God’s love. If the work of reconciliation is fundamentally spiritual work, that means that the work belongs to the church in and for the sake of the world, “[requiring] a posture of hope in the reconciling work of Christ and a commitment from the church to both be and proclaim this type of reconciled community.”

Furthermore, she points out the communal call of this work. Speaking of the landmarks of genuine reconciliation, shares that her experience has taught her:

Individual learning rather than group or organizational change…was not enough. I want to teach people how to be reconcilers, yes, but I also want to train them to build communities of reconciliation. It’s not enough to build a model for individual change if we ignore the groups that shaped them and the communities in which they live. Cultural transformation in a church or organization must go beyond inter-personal models of changing one person at a time, which dominates Western evangelical thinking.

Our goal is to be ambassadors of reconciliation in our city, and this means doing so as a community that is increasingly being reconciled within itself by the power and love of Christ.

Dr. McNeil’s roadmap involves several steps, all of which can be understood in the context of congregational discipleship. While she leads the church ultimately into preparation and activation, or doing justice, she spends most of her time laying the foundation by describing the necessary preceding phases. She writes, “The realization

---

21 Brenda Salter McNeil, Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

22 Ibid., 21-22.

23 Ibid., 35.
phase of the journey involves more than cognitive understanding. It is more than awareness for the sake of awareness. In this phase we reach beyond vague understanding and intellectual assent and come to an awareness that is contextually connected. An incarnational pursuit of reconciliation is not satisfied with abstract confession and repentance. Rather, in the same way that incarnation can shape the urban church in her expressive and developmental ministry practices, it also takes seriously the actual people and situations in which harm has been done. Both within the worshiping community and in the neighborhood in which that church is located, the time-and-place embodiment of repentance must occur for God’s reconciliation to be manifest in and through the body of Christ.

In providing a walkable way forward for congregations to learn how to practically pursue this work, Dr. McNeil speaks to the power of what she calls “catalytic events.” Acknowledging a church’s tendency to stay embedded in isolation for the sake of preservation, these events “allow us to move from the isolation and stagnation of life in homogenous groups and break through into a new reality that introduces us to something we have never experienced before.” When I consider SOMA’s story I recognize two such events as contributing to our growth in internalizing the congregational value for reconciliation and the development of our lived practice of it. The first event was our move into Beaver Falls in 2011, which saw our ethnically homogenous missionally motivated church move into a racially diverse and low-income community. In order to

---

24 Ibid. 56.
25 Ibid., 45.
26 Ibid.
effectively herald God’s Kingdom in our new city we had to confront both our need to
grow in congregational diversity and our philosophy of neighborhood engagement. The
CCDA became our primary teacher of deep biblical reconciliation during this period.

Our second catalytic event was our move in 2016 from a rented basement space
into the development of a church building, gifted to us, into a shared neighborhood space
for the Beaver Falls community. We had the chance to work to create and steward a
functioning monument to God’s reconciling power in our city, partnering with non-
profits and ministries that are working with children, youth, those affected by
incarceration, men experiencing homelessness, the bereaved, women caught in
prostitution and trafficking, those consuming mental health services, and more.

I have spent considerable time through the conceptual portion of this project
attempting to point out the Reformed tradition’s tendency toward abstraction. I am
grateful for Dr. McNeil attempting to provide concrete steps for churches looking to live
into the reconciling power of Jesus. While our church still has a long way to go, I am
grateful to see the evidence of this power through our short history.
CHAPTER 4

A THEOLOGY OF DIVERSE SPIRITUAL FORMATION

From the very beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus was tearing down the social barriers that kept people separate. In calling his twelve disciples, he accomplished this in a dramatic way. He drew people toward himself from disparate crowds that would have undoubtedly seen the others in objectifying and marginalizing ways. Luke was a doctor while Peter and Andrew were fishermen. Simon was a zealot, ideologically committed to overthrowing the Roman Empire in the land of Israel, while Matthew was a tax collector, in service to Rome and taking advantage of his own people while personally profiting from the injustice. In the face of all these causes for division, Jesus told them that the world would know they were his disciples by the love they had for each other (Jn 13:34-35). Formerly stigmatized others became brothers in their new identity as followers of Jesus.

During his three years of preaching, teaching, and healing, and thereby ushering in the Kingdom of God, Jesus touched lepers, spent time with the woman at the well, ate with tax collectors and sinners, and cast as hero a Samaritan man in his response to the question of the identity of a neighbor. He actively dismantled those forces that kept
people stigmatized, and he did so by being with and of those who had been cast to the religious and social margins. As Robert C. Linthicum explains in *City of God, City of Satan*:

The gospel accounts contain a surprisingly large amount of evidence about Jesus’ commitment to the poor and his perception that ‘theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ His incarnation involved not only becoming flesh, but also living among the poor and weak. A strong argument can be made for Jesus’ being born, not into a poor, but into a middle-class family…Yes, in his ministry he chose to move among the outcasts and the needy, he had nowhere to lay his head, and he was intentionally poor.¹

Perhaps nowhere in the life of Jesus is this intentional seeking out of the poor and the outcast taught more explicitly than in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46). Jesus’s parables characteristically featured a twist, an unexpected turn in the story that took the listeners to a different conclusion than what they were expecting. After teaching extensively on the nature of the reign of God, he tells the crowd about the final judgment and reveals the means by which one is able to participate in this new kingdom:

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ‘The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’ (Mt 25:34-40).

This must have been as paradigm shifting for Jesus’s ancient listeners as it is for us today: Jesus identifies himself with the least of these brothers and sisters. He does not claim that in feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting the prisoner, the providers of services are like Jesus to those people, although many in our modern-day churches engage with people on the margins in this way. Rather, he far more profoundly states the reality that he chooses to be found in the company of and in solidarity with the people on the margins of our urban communities. Jesus makes himself uniquely present on the fringes of society. Such a statement of divine social association should drive God’s Church, and therefore all local congregations, to reexamine exactly what God’s ministry of reconciliation should look like. Followers of Jesus do not distance themselves from him; they always seek to be where he is and to know him more fully. God knows this, and so he knows that identifying himself with those stigmatized and marginalized members of his family should motivate his followers to seek authentic and humanizing relationship with them.

In his work *The Galilean Journey*, Virgilio Elizondo identifies “that God had chosen to become a Galilean underscores the great paradox of the incarnation, in which God becomes the despised and lowly of the world…What the world rejects, God chooses as his very own…One cannot follow the way of the Lord without appreciating the scandalous way of Jesus the Galilean.”

The Spirit-empowered impetus for reconciled relationships in which othering and distancing are impossible to maintain is the very draw of Jesus to himself. The Church in the city knows that the highest calling is not service to

---

but rather relationship with. Father Greg Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, articulates this calling when he says:

[We inch] ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship such that God might recognize it. Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.3

Jesus’s incarnational nature proves to us all that God’s desired posture is always with.

Any Christological examination demands unique attention to the cross of Christ. There is perhaps no more mysterious and awe-inspiring event in human history as that of the God-man suffering death in order to bring his created world back to life. It is on the cross that we find God’s response to stigmatization of both victims and perpetrators; through divine identification, God illustrates a new relationship between the two, and provides a model for his Church to follow. In speaking about the urban church finding its identity in partnership with those who make up the underside of the city, Eldin Villafañe claims, “It is at the cross of Christ that paradoxically our poverty and powerlessness are transvaluated into the power of God for personal and social transformation.”4 When the Church seeks to witness to the reign of God in its city, it must do so with the tools of his Kingdom. These are not tools of power over-against the other, but rather tools that help us acknowledge the counter-cultural reality of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.


4 Villafane, *Seek the Peace of the City*, 31.
Generally speaking, those in the Western world who identify as conservative in their Christian faith often emphasize the penal substitutionary aspect of atonement on the cross: all the guilty ones, because Jesus bore their sin, are made holy in God’s sight. These same Christians will often minimize the aspect of victimization on the part of individuals who do wrong, and so little is said about Jesus’s solidarity with the victim on the cross. Progressive Western Christians will often emphasize the aspect of Jesus joining the oppressed in his death, and the outworking of this emphasis focuses on the ways in which unjust systems and social structures work against people in distress. While this provides a helpful counter to the myopic focus on guilt, this perspective can go to an extreme and attempt to explain away people’s responsibility for their sin. Neither of these extremes presents the full picture of Christ’s work on the cross; both must be taken together.

When faced with the individual and institutional effects of sin in the city, the Church needs to insist upon a view of the cross that embraces Jesus’s redemption of both victim and perpetrator. Both the ones who sin and the ones sinned against meet in Jesus on the cross of Calvary and are reconciled forever in God’s own broken and bleeding body. Paul alludes to this dual-identification when he claims that “God made him who knew no sin [the sinless Jesus who was wrongly accused and suffered a criminal’s death] to be sin on our behalf [became the vessel to receive God’s wrath against injustice], so that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Miroslav Volf speaks to the only way in which the line between us and them is erased and peace is made when he contends, “Much more than just the absence of hostility sustained by the absence of
contact, peace is communion between former enemies. Beyond offering forgiveness, Christ’s passion aims at restoring such communion – even with the enemies who persistently refuse to be reconciled. At the heart of the cross is Christ’s stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in.”

The Church must get this right because the cross reveals something fundamental about the remedy to our theologically bankrupt justification for allowing the city to continue unchallenged in keeping our brothers and sisters away from the table and on the margins of our social life. Many of the people in our churches have taken their cue from the culture’s moral dualism of deserving/undeserving, good guy/bad guy, innocent/guilty. A significant element of the social stigma placed on many of our struggling brothers and sisters is that they have brought their struggle upon themselves. Our churches capitulate as we look for the ways in which people have been victimized as justification for embracing them. And while systemic victimization is overwhelming amongst these marginalized communities, we betray a lack of trust in the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross when we exclude some from God’s table based on guilt or innocence. The twentieth century Catholic activist Dorothy Day addressed this dynamic specifically when she claimed, “The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.” Jesus told the criminal on his right side, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). The cross eliminates our need to determine

---

5 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 126.

6 A direct reference is not available; this statement has famously been attributed to Day, though always second-hand and perhaps mistakenly.
where the innocence ends and the guilt begins when deciding who is invited to God’s table and so welcomed into God’s family. God’s simple answer, as illustrated on the cross, is that all whom God invites are welcome.

**Take and Eat**

In the biblical book of Acts, chapter eight begins a pivot point in God’s redemptive story. It begins with one of the apostles, Philip, hearing a call by the Holy Spirit to share the gospel with an Ethiopian eunuch who was just returning from worshiping the God of Israel. In chapter nine, Saul is converted, and will soon become the ambassador of God to the Gentiles. In the tenth chapter, the apostle Peter is shown a vision of a sheet of animals, understood is his God-ordained tradition to be unclean, and told by a voice to “take and eat” (Acts 10:13). After resisting out of a desire to be faithful to God’s own commands, the voice tells him “do not call anything impure that God himself has made clean” (Acts 10:15). A divinely ordained encounter follows, in which the Gentile Cornelius and his entire house receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized. We recognize this series of events as the fulfillment of God’s eternal intention first revealed in the Abrahamic covenant, that “all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Gn 12:3).

This narrative sequence definitively marks God’s inclusion of the Gentiles to the table of reconciliation. Those who tend toward abstraction sometimes understand this phenomenon only in its religious aspect: the Gentiles now actively believe in and worship the one true God. While we must recognize this new allegiance as central to the redemptive story, we run the same risk of dualism if we neglect the very real and
important cultural and racial reality of God’s reconciling work. In the ancient world of this text these identities were practically indistinguishable; hence the dilemma amongst the Jewish believers about whether or not culturally-identifying Gentiles needed to become culturally-identifying Jews, primarily through circumcision, in order to become religiously-identifying Christians.

The Jerusalem Counsel of Acts 15 gives us an insight into the seriousness of this issue for the early church. Paul wrote his entire letter to the church in Galatia in order to answer this question. As readers of the text today, we suffer from myopia when we think that the gravity of the circumcision question for those men and women was only based upon a soteriological dilemma between the role of faith and law. It also carried with it the charged and challenging issue of reconciling across ethnic identities. And in a beautiful example of the Church’s history of following the often-unexpected movement of God’s Spirit, Peter defends his act of baptizing Cornelius and his family when he says, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (Acts 11:15-17)

Naiveté would have one believe that, once resolved at a council meeting, the divisions between formerly separated people groups would be forever demolished. In fact, the struggle to live into God’s reconciling work plays out over and over again. The same Peter who received the message of God’s welcome for the Gentiles was later
chastised publicly by Paul for withholding table fellowship from Gentile believers when Jewish-Christian leaders came to town. This struggle, the progress and the regress, the stepping and the stumbling, is why we in the Church need the rich practices of confession and repentance.

**Confession and Repentance**

Having already explored the ways in which I believe Reformed theology has been co-opted for the purpose of supporting the implicit claim to Western, logically-minded superiority, I want to give equal attention to a unique and powerful role I believe those with a Reformed theological perspective can play in moving our churches and the individuals therein toward God and one another in mutuality. In the 2014 book *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*, the authors offer specific areas in which the Church, by which they largely mean the American evangelical church, needs to acknowledge her sinfulness. In the book’s introduction they offer this endorsement of the necessity of the practice of confession:

The practice of confession is rooted in the Bible. The Scriptures consistently attest that confession and repentance are expected of those who have neglected and injured others and turned their backs on God. From the Hebrew Bible through the Christian Scripture, Scripture repeatedly calls on God’s people to repent. Confession is the appropriate response to sinfulness...Godly confession tells the truth about God, about us, and about our actions. It tells the truth about the repercussions our actions have for us, our relationship with God, our families, others, the rest of creation, the systems that govern us, and life itself.7

Specifically addressing Reformed theology, the doctrine of total depravity is deeply embedded into our hamartiology and subsequent soteriology. This is the belief by

which we acknowledge that the depth and breadth of sin’s power in and around us is far
greater than we want to admit. It infects us to the core, individually and corporately,
consciously and at our blind spots. I can think of no better foundation upon which to
build the case for addressing marginalization in our cities; where we desire to shield our
eyes from the brutal reality of the effects of the illusion of our separateness, the Church
has the theological wherewithal to engage in the truth-telling practice of confession. We
can acknowledge the truth of our complicity in the effects of social and racial
stigmatization and marginalization that course through the streets of the city. And this
recognition can move us into the practice of lament, whereby we feel and grieve and
repent of the weight of this complicity before God and with one another.

At any given Reformed-tradition church on any given Sunday morning in the city,
one is likely to experience a point in the liturgy called the call to confession. This is
always followed by a prayer of confession, which is followed by an assurance of pardon.
This pivotal point in the service of worship calls the community to recognize the truth
about God, about us, and about our actions. It tells the truth about the repercussions our
actions have for us, our relationship with God, our families, others, the rest of creation,
the systems that govern us, and life itself. It then opens us up to the hope that God loves,
forgives, saves, and reconciles. God takes what is lacking and provides abundance, what
is broken and gives wholeness.

In his work The Christian Imagination, Willie James Jennings shares his vision
for a truly and deeply reconciled Christian community. Considering the Reformed
tradition’s tendency toward abstraction, and of God’s provision for what is lacking in it,
Jennings writes, “I yearn for a vision of Christian intellectual identity that is compelling and attractive, embodying not simply the cunning of reason but the power of love that constantly gestures toward joining, toward the desire to hear, to know, and to embrace.”

The addictions recovery community reminds us that what is hidden cannot be healed. To that end, confession lets us come clean, moves us into lament, and lets us move toward the experience of God’s healing; not only in our individual relationships with God, but also in how we relate to one another. It leads us into “a change in lifestyle…building relationships between individuals and communities that have previously been divided by hostility and oppression.” To this end, Jennings continues, “Moreover, such an identity enters imaginatively into various social forms and imagines the divine presence joining, working, living, and loving inside boundary-defying relationships.” Beginning with the recognition, through the practices of confession and lament, that these relationships do not exist presently as God intends them to, God’s Spirit moves us toward the lived experience of his reconciled community, gathered at his just and grace-filled table.

That They Would be One…

Every time our church celebrates Communion, someone says what amounts to these words: “This is not just our faith community’s table. This is not just our

---


9 Rah, *Many Colors*, 47.

denomination’s table. This is God’s table. And for anyone who has come to know the
invitation of God through Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, this table is open
to you.” A white, middle-class man in our church once helped me serve Communion by
holding the cup and speaking to the line of individuals coming forward over and over
again the words “the blood of Christ, shed for you.” Afterward he shared with me the
power of those moments, seeing brothers and sisters from every corner of our town
meeting at the table of Jesus the Reconciler. Theologian Walter Bruggeman speaks to the
nature of what happens at the Eucharistic table in this way:

Notice how the old age/new age drama is played out in the elements. It consists
in our giving up the elements, our surrendering them to God’s rule and use. God
takes them, and blesses and breaks them. They are given back to us, and we are
invited to receive and embrace. Something dramatic has happened. What we
bring to the table is our produce, even our property. But when handled by the
Lord, it becomes a gift to us. The new age is to have our life handed back to us,
after it is broken (God’s rule established) and after it is blessed (empowered as
gift). Our life handed back to us under God’s rule and empowered is what the
new age is about…All things are new.11

This newness of life, ordered in the shalom of God and experienced at the Communion
table, is intended to be lived always and everywhere by the people of God’s Church.

Sara Miles, a pastor and author who works with the urban poor in San Francisco,
comments on the nature of healing in restoring creation to order when she says, “We pray
together for those who are blind, not just so that the blind will see, but so that the sighted
ones will finally experience undivided community. The whole community becomes more
whole.”12 When Jesus let his followers listen in on his prayer to the Father, he exposed

11 Walter Brueggemann, Peace (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001), 140.
the heart of God and the nature of the glory God desires when he prayed, “My prayer is not for them [the twelve disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:20-21). God is creating this unity now and God consummates it in John’s vision of the age to come: “Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear’...Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb!’” (Rv 19:6-9a). God sets the table.

Every table God created for Israel, every meal Jesus shared with tax collectors, sinners, disciples, and Pharisees, every Eucharist celebrated today, all point to this feast in which all those reconciled in Christ celebrate in complete mutuality as the one bride: free from objectification, free from stigmatization, free from marginalization. In Christ, all will finally be one as God is one. Robert Linthicum states:

It is God’s intention to transform every city into the city of God by making of that city the embodiment of God’s rule. God would seek to do this in every city by creating in that city a new community: the church. That community would be the very embodiment of God’s kingdom in the city. In its life together, the church would practice that new social order. Through its witness, the church would call the city to participate in God’s kingdom. By its solidarity with the economically, politically, and spiritually poor of the city, and by its confrontation of the powers that would seek to control and oppress rather than recognize their own poverty, the church would work for God’s kingdom...The underlying question to every

---

church in every city is this: How far has the kingdom of God become embodied and made real in the life, witness, and social action of your church in this city?\textsuperscript{13}

The churches in our cities bear witness to this God when we pursue today this shalom-saturated, Spirit-enlivened community, inspired by Jesus’s reconciling work of cross and resurrection, and marked by mutuality and love.

\textbf{A Diverse Faith Family}

I have contended that the response to the marginalization of people in our cities roots itself in the invitation to reconciled community at the heart of the Kingdom of God. This invitation serves as a corrective to even our well-intentioned missteps. For example, many of our urban churches are satisfied with the role of serving the poor. We see ourselves as being for the marginalized of the city. But as Greg Boyle points out, “the measure of our compassion is not found in our service to those on the margins, but in our capacity to see ourselves in kinship with them.”\textsuperscript{14} I recall the earlier story with the man in our church sharing with me that he had been discovering, and learning to repent of, the class prejudice of which he had not been aware. He saw leadership and spiritual giftedness in culturally isolated ways and was learning through relationship with others outside of his cultural and socio-economic experience that there was so much more than what he had previously known.

There is a need to equip one another to be aware of our distinct cultures and experiences, especially those who may not be readily aware that such distinct cultures

\textsuperscript{13} Linthicum, \textit{City of God, City of Satan}, 105.

\textsuperscript{14} Boyle, \textit{Tattoos on the Heart}, 71.
and experiences exist or how to navigate them. The Holy Spirit provides the desire to break down the walls that keep us separate, and in giving the church the ministry of reconciliation, the Holy Spirit has gifted some with specific knowledge and grace in how to lead others on the way towards a renewed mutuality. If a church is serious about living into God’s desire for mutual community in which all are invited to the table God has set, then the people of that church must be willing to make cross-cultural education and equipping a priority in its life together.

Along with equipping for awareness and action, churches also foster a community of kinship when making intentional space for mutual relationships. While it sounds like a tired cliché to talk about the church as being about people instead of programs, the need exists for the constant reminder. Our faith community shares a meal together every week as a part of our worship gathering time. Once a month this meal is potluck and people take turns setting up, serving, and cleaning up together. While not encompassing the fullness of relationship, and certainly not always accomplished perfectly, this time has been invaluable in serving as a symbol of and springboard toward mutual relationship amongst members of all communities in Beaver Falls, including those who are often marginalized.

We encourage mutuality when all people are able to discover and use their talents and abilities for the common purpose of the mission of God in the city. For a season we encouraged during our corporate gathering to write or draw about their own gifts and passions on index cards. They would then pin their cards on a series of cork boards that lined one wall. While this may seem like a strange exercise to some, I believe it is a
practice of healing and blessing for those who participate. People at the margins of society are often cut off from the joy of contribution, and discovering and declaring their gifts is an exercise that blesses them individually, the church as a whole, and tells the story of God’s body on earth: that all of us are image-bearers who carry within us diverse gifts, given to us by the Holy Spirit, for the common good of our community life and the flourishing of the city.

Finally, and perhaps most elusively, the church that really seeks to point toward the full participation of God’s table in the city works toward its communal formation as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, described as being “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues…crying out with a loud voice saying, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb”’’ (Rv 7:9-10). I believe that the missio Dei calls the Church, and therefore every congregation in the city, to pursue a multi-ethnic identity that reflects the ethnic make-up of its neighboring community. In the past decade, a growing number of books have been written and resources developed to help congregations understand the importance of this movement and provide practical steps toward what seems an improbable goal. While practical from an institutional-survival standpoint, our churches’ efforts toward faithfully heralding the full creativity and diversity of the Kingdom of God must remain at the center of our motivation; otherwise, we run the risk of tokenism, which actually further exacerbates the divide.

Sincere prayer and effort toward a more diverse worshiping community of people sharing the room and time and conversation together, sharing bread and wine from the
same cup, helps to move us past notions and into motion. This movement toward sincere racial reconciliation concerned with flesh-and-blood relationships is a necessary antidote for the Western cultural tendency toward abstraction Willie James Jennings speaks of intimacy and the imagined space when he writes, “If the space of joining and of communion is not first a possibility but a reality unrealized inside the identities and potential relationships between different peoples who have been convinced of the power of Jesus’s life, then this space may become a profoundly visible place on surprising spaces that give sight of a different world.” As a good friend is fond of saying to our church, “Don’t just talk about it, be about it.” Any congregation pursuing a truly contextual multi-ethnic identity for the sake of giving sight of a different world is about the reconciling power of God’s reign in Jesus Christ.

For majority-white churches, of which there are many in Beaver Falls, there are unique opportunities to grow in this way. The barriers erected by the dominant culture of the church exclude others, often unbeknownst to the members of that culture. Honoring and spending time intentionally learning in relationship from leaders of majority non-white churches cultivates a posture in which the members of the dominant culture can begin to recognize those culturally-conditioned barriers and develop the tools to dismantle them, and in so doing affirm that the table being set belongs to God, not to the majority culture.

I stated previously that there are more and more resources devoted to exploring the need and the way forward in this. Dr. Rah points out that:

---

“The call to build a multiethnic, multicultural, racially reconciled church is an extremely high calling. There are numerous obstacles in society and in our human nature that could prevent us from living into God’s calling for our church. We must recognize, however, that this calling to be a diverse community that truly represents the kingdom of God requires great sacrifice. The deeply seated demonic power of racism cannot be overthrown without great cost.\footnote{16 Rah, \textit{Many Colors}, 196.}

This great cost undoubtedly creates an uphill climb and requires a combination of prayer, theological exploration, training in cultural competency, confession and repentance, leadership development, and more. Our churches, especially majority-white churches with Western cultural roots, must make a consistent intentional effort to communicate the importance of racial reconciliation within the worshiping body; otherwise, we engage our neighboring communities with nothing more than slogans and hashtags when facing a racially-fractured reality in our city.

**Holistic Faith Formation**

The church that embodies God’s beloved community is a community of faith formation for all of its participants. The unfortunate tendency of many churches is to emphasize discipleship for some and not for others. The deepest hope for the young married mother is that she would learn how to follow Jesus more fully, while the deepest hope for the young man returning from prison is that he would get a job. But if we really make up the body of Christ together, and if all of us play a unique part in heralding the reign of God in the city, then the church cannot neglect the work of the Holy Spirit in growing our stigmatized and marginalized brothers and sisters into Christ-likeness. We need to resist the lie that socially non-marginalized church members need spiritual
formation, while church members who are socially marginalized need only sobriety, medication, housing, and employment. Furthermore, we need to resist the lie that this faith formation exists as a culturally monolithic enterprise. We all are made in God’s image and being reconciled in Jesus’s broken body together means that we are all being made more into Christ’s likeness on earth.

The task of formation in this respect is far more easily discussed than done. While there is now more formation and discipleship curriculum available to churches than ever before, much of it emerges from a particular social and cultural location and assumes certain experiences, cultural backgrounds, and intellectual abilities. Needed are highly contextualized means of spiritual formation that emerge from within each specific community and the people who make up that community. This contextualized formation, if serious about not simply catering to those who are gifted in logically organizing and processing information, will also emphasize the importance of tangible evidence of God’s work in and through the church.

The Reformed tradition today continues to struggle with this relationship between saving faith and practicing justice. A group of Reformed pastors created a statement on social justice in September of 2018. This statement gained national attention, was signed on by thousands of pastors, and highlighted the bifurcated theological categories that persist in large segments of this Christian tradition. In contrast, the gift of groups like Sojourners, the CCDA, and others lies in that they have wedded rich theological study with passionate social activism, providing space for the gifts of the head, the hands, and
the heart, and so have made room for all to participate in the formational work of God in the city.

But while national organizations can serve to inspire and impact change in their ways, it still belongs to the local church to prioritize and wisely tend to the faith formation of its people. In a happy accident, choosing the name SOMA in 2009 now provides a reminder for our faith community that we are called to pursue an embodied discipleship, believing that spiritual formation is a holistic endeavor. And while many in the North American church have spoken over the past two decades about the need for holistic discipleship, the wisdom of such an approach finds its roots in the Scriptures themselves.

I have spent a significant portion of this project drawing attention to the ways in which the dominant Western culture tends to prioritize the world of the mind, which can lead into disembodied abstraction. In order to confront and reorient this tendency, we must take seriously the world in which God chose to bring forth the Scriptures, which we in the Reformed tradition consider our only rule for faith and practice. In the Old Testament we witness God’s redemptive interaction with Israel, a people with a deeply integrated sense of the self and of the world around them. It comes as no surprise, then, that the passage of the Hebrew Scriptures most highly regarded in the Jewish community is the Shema, which begins, “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” (Dt 6:4-5). We are multi-dimensional beings. And whereas the nations surrounding Israel would worship many gods, each demanding a fidelity corresponding to
their domain, loving devotion to this one God involved the sole allegiance of their whole, integrated selves. In their individual and communal lives, God consistently moved his people toward shalom: that wholeness in which nothing is missing and nothing is broken under the reign of the one true God.

Moving into the New Testament, we find Jesus himself building our Christian identity upon this solid foundation. When asked by a teacher of the Law about which of the over six hundred commandments is the greatest, Jesus brings his audience back to that holistic allegiance when he says, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt 22:37-40). This fully integrated, wholly-devoted love for God and neighbor marks the lives of Jesus’s followers, which means it is first embodied in Jesus himself. Jesus pioneers this embodied love throughout his earthly ministry, culminating in his ultimate death and resurrection. But first, he does so in the miraculous movement of incarnation; what John calls “The Word [becoming] flesh and [dwelling] among us” (Jn 1:15). I believe that our Western churches find the antidote for our tendency toward abstraction in Jesus’s incarnation.

The theology of incarnation has catalyzed my development as a pastor serving the local church, as well as my personal faith journey, perhaps more significantly than any other specific point of Christian belief. It has informed not only the way I understand God ontologically, but also the means by which God redemptively moves through human
history, both in the biblical narrative as well as through God’s Spirit-filled Church. If it holds true that the incarnation is the method by which Christ continues to guide the work and ministry of his church, then any serious consideration of ecclesiology must wrestle considerably with the reality of context: the time and place particularities in which the good news of Jesus takes root and flourishes. As Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass insist, “Because the circumstances in which human beings live are always concrete, conflicted, and in flux, those who seek to live faithfully must necessarily wonder where and how to discern the specific shape that a way of life abundant might take in a given time and place.”

Local churches, then, are those particularly located communities of faith in which Spirit-empowered people seek to embody the gospel within those give time and place contexts. Given the present realities of life in many American cities, concrete realities which are often extremely conflicted and in flux, the need for genuinely and faithfully incarnational engagement is vital in the urban context. Therefore, equipping people within the worshiping body and in the community aligns clearly with the mission of the church in the city.

Many books, curricula, and conferences have been offered specializing in helping churches develop leaders, but many of these have taken their cue from the world of corporate America and provide a cultural one-size-fits-all approach to leadership development. As a grace of God, recent years have given more of a platform for non-Western voices to speak into the life of the urban church; I have benefited greatly from these voices and perspectives as I consider leadership development in my own faith.

---

community. SOMA’s leadership team studied together John Perkins and Wayne Gordon’s book *Leadership Revolution*, and it helped us to understand together that leadership as stewarding influence provides a more faithful and inclusive paradigm than the culturally limited view of leader as CEO.

In his book *Invitation to Lead*, Paul Tokunaga writes specifically to Asian-American men and women about the ways in which they can grow and steward their influence in the American church. Tokunaga highlights the ways in which the American church’s adoption of corporate America’s leadership culture has created a significant barrier to anyone outside the dominant culture. Tokunaga addresses this when he observes, “I have watched dynamic and assertive Asian American leaders ratchet down several notches when they’re in non-Asian American settings. They appear less confident, don’t volunteer their opinions or ideas without prompting, and give way to those more gregarious rather than fight them for air time.”

For urban American churches, particularly those with a Western cultural heritage, to seriously develop men and women of diverse cultural heritage in stewarding their God-given influence as leaders, we must develop a cross-cultural competency that recognizes God’s gospel embodied in every culture.

For churches in the Western cultural stream, faith formation easily skews toward propositional concepts disassociated from time and place. An embodied theological education takes the doctrine of the incarnation so seriously that it refuses to be satisfied only with head-knowledge; it always makes the connection between belief and practice,

---

returning us again to Eldin Villafañe’s praxis. Bridging what can often be a significant divide, the authors of Practicing Theology insist that “at a time when academic theology often neglects the actual practices of Christian communities…practices can be a generative focus for rigorous theological reflection. [But there is] an invitation to perceive both the theological quality of everyday practices and the practical importance of theology and doctrine for Christian living.”19 Churches are equipped by God’s Spirit to resist the dualistic tendency toward abstraction and instead pursue a vibrant theological education which takes seriously the role of real-time practice in the life of the community’s faith development.

Regarding Dr. Villafañe’s action-reflection cycle, the charge to institutions of theological education rings just as truly for the formational efforts of our congregations. He reminds the church that “praxis involves the doing of [the work of ministry], but it adds theological reflection upon what is being done, why it is done, how it is done, and what could be done. It marries action (doing) with reflection (being). The action must seek to transform the world, and theological reflection must be done to understand and shape the acting process.”20 In Jesus’s earthly ministry he employs this very cycle with his own disciples.

In Luke’s gospel Jesus sends out seventy-two followers ahead of him into every town he was going to visit. He gave them instructions beforehand and then sent them off. Once they returned and reported back their excitement as the miraculous things that had

---

19 Volf & Bass, Practicing Theology, location 112.

20 Villafane, Seek the Peace of the City, 129-130.
taken place, Jesus responded with a correction, saying “I have given you authority to
trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing
will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that
your names are written in heaven” (Lk 10:19-20). As he often did, Jesus was engaging
his followers in the kind of praxis that Villafañe encourages. This action-reflection cycle
takes seriously the cognitive work of the mind, but always completes the formative
process by engaging the heart and the hands as well. Whole-person, fully integrated
discipleship develops us faithfully as individuals, and it also grows the community into
maturity as a many-membered body.

In his letter to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul writes, “Now you all are the
body of Christ, and individually you are members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). He goes on to
describe the mutually beneficially and complementary ways in which different parts of
the body function. Employing Paul’s metaphor, if we understand discipleship as the
development of different body parts, we realize quickly that not every part is developed
in the same way. I exercise my core differently than I develop higher lung capacity,
which involves different practices than taking care of my eyes. But each part, growing
and healthy as tended to in the ways it needs, contributes to the overall health and well-
being of the body. So if bodies, by which I now mean local communities of faith, are
going to be healthy participants in the missio Dei in their local communities, each
member needs to be developed in ways that honor that person in regards to her/his
culture, primary learning style, and giftedness.

100
PART THREE
MINISTRY PLAN
CHAPTER 5
A MINISTRY PLAN TO ASSESS SOMA’S DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS

The first four chapters of this project attempt to describe the foundational need for diverse practices of missional discipleship in our urban churches. Examining both SOMA’s specific ministry context and the larger influence of the Reformed tradition on the church in the city, I have tried to draw attention to both the challenge of and the opportunity for discipleship in diverse communities of faith. If the church truly exists to image Jesus in our neighborhoods as his body, then that body necessarily involves many unique parts honoring and serving and building each other up in mutuality (1 Cor 12). For urban churches rooted in the Reformed tradition there exists the culturally conditioned tendency toward abstraction and cultural assimilation, both of which subvert the diversity God intends to dwell within his church. The first step toward combatting this tendency takes place when God’s spirit inspires true confession and repentance leading to a desire for genuine reconciliation within the body. All of this finds its source in the heart of God, who desires that we would be one and grows his people into that table-gathered and beloved community. Our churches participate in the missio Dei most faithfully when we
move toward a communal mutuality in which all members are equipped to follow Jesus in witnessing to the good news of God’s Kingdom in the neighborhood.

I believe that only God can create the desire for this vision within our churches. Changed hearts are required to be able to confess, lament, and repent of the sin that marginalizes sisters and brothers, and so we need to pray unceasingly for our churches and their members. As God does that heart changing work in us as individuals and faith communities, I hope that this project provides one example of a church attempting to grow in our capacity to equip a diverse worshiping body for faithful witness in our city. This chapter will describe the development of a ministry plan that results in an accurate, community-based assessment process to determine the current effectiveness of SOMA’s leadership in tending to the faith formation of its diverse membership. In preparation for this progression, a brief discussion of church as a living system will help to lay provide a foundation for the specific vision and goals of this project.

In their book *The Cat and the Toaster*, Douglas and Judy Hall apply a living systems understanding of organizations, making the case that modernity’s emphasis on linear, mechanical approaches to problem solving have made their way into how we typically engage with the challenges faced by our cities and by our churches.\(^1\) Seeing cities and congregations as living systems emphasizes the web of interconnectedness between the individuals, histories, values, symbols, and activities. A living system means one cannot simply take out a broken piece and replace it with another; in fact, every part of the system necessarily affects every other part. As I consider the implications of a

\(^1\) Hall, *The Cat and the Toaster*, 65.
living system approach to developing practices of spiritual formation in the church, it
seems clear that a monolithic method will be insufficient for the task. Simply replacing
one discipleship curriculum or strategy with another presumes a mechanically-structured
church, and while it may bear some fruit for some people, a living body needs an
approach that recognizes and engages with the whole system and all of its
interrelatedness. I have attempted to take a living system approach to assessing SOMA’s
discipleship in this project, and I hope that approach bears itself out in the project’s
vision, goals, and implementation.

Vision and Goals of this Project

In the same way that bodies benefit from regular medical check-ups, churches
benefit from regular times of assessment, especially if we understand our congregations
as living systems. This occurs in some churches as yearly retreats when leadership
reconsiders their mission and vision statements. Others more informally invite members
to offer suggestions on what they could be doing better. Regardless of the method, a
church proactively asking questions related to ministry health and effectiveness can go a
long way to heading off preventable crisis in the future. Furthermore, it speaks to a
congregation’s faith in God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work when we
attempt to honestly diagnose and treat problems when necessary. I believe this value
holds true for the church as a whole and also for the particular aspects of its ministry life
together.
With this value in mind, the goals of this discipleship assessment project are four-fold. The first goal is to create a feedback process by which an Assessment Team receives the congregation’s experience of how effectively we are equipping disciples for missional living. The second goal is to further develop a congregational commitment to cross-cultural competency in our discipleship. The third goal is to perceive a shared language with which SOMA’s members can understand and talk about their faith formation. And the fourth goal is to lay the groundwork for a longer-term initiative that SOMA’s leadership will build upon for the discipleship of our diverse membership.

**Goal #1: Creating a Congregational Feedback Process**

Over our eight years as a church, congregational feedback has become part of the regular rhythm of SOMA’s community life. While Presbyterian in ecclesial polity, we have made it a priority to solicit and incorporate input from our membership. This holds true in small decisions, such as the artwork we put on our walls, and in large decisions, such as whether to accept the gift of a church building and how to missionally steward its use in our neighborhood. More specifically to this project, the development of our first discipleship process was a congregational effort spanning three years. Encouraging participation and paying careful attention to process are deeply held values in our church body, and this value provides a well-worn pathway for us to solicit the feedback of our worshiping community for this assessment.

In order to solicit feedback of sufficient quantity and quality, I will recruit an Assessment Team (AT) made up of seven members of SOMA’s worshiping body. These
members will represent a diverse cross-section of the church community in terms of age, race, gender, education, and socio-economic status. More concretely, I will ensure that the team has members representing each of our demographic groups pertinent to this project. This includes one person in each age group spanning at least four decades, at least three people who identify as African American, at least three women, and at least two people who have lived in low-income households. Additionally, the AT will include at least one person whose formal education terminates with a high school degree, one person with a college degree, and one person with a post-graduate degree. I will work with this team over a period of six months, and during that time we will work toward determining and implementing the kinds of questions we need to ask our church body in order to receive input that will paint a clear picture of our current effectiveness in equipping a diverse church body for faithful mission in the city. Furthermore, we will establish the media through which those questions will be most accessible for our congregation to engage, be they written or online surveys, town hall forums, one-on-one conversations, or a combination of feedback opportunities.

When considering the best ways to encourage congregational feedback, the AT will ensure that the methods of solicitation are mindful of our church’s variety in technological ability, reading/writing proficiency, and mobility/availability. Additionally, cultural differences in the appropriateness of providing direct feedback to church leadership need to be weighed. All solicitation efforts will be aimed at making the input-sharing process accessible for our entire congregation, and these efforts will be identified in detail when discussing the project’s implementation in chapter six.
Goal #2: Further Developing a Congregational Commitment to Cross-cultural Competency

Much of the conceptual work in the first four chapters of this project contends with the influence of Western culture on the church, and that influence undoubtedly affects SOMA’s discipleship efforts. In order for the AT to successfully acquire congregational feedback that helps SOMA determine our current effectiveness in discipleship, the team will need to ask the right questions of a diverse worshiping body. As I shared in the section on SOMA’s narrative history, our journey toward embodying a Kingdom-witnessing diversity in our worshiping community began in earnest with our move to Beaver Falls in 2011. When we determined at the end of 2010 that we would be making that move, we recognized that our small congregation of about forty-five people needed to become much more racially and socio-economically diverse. We also recognized that we needed outside help to move toward that reality, and so we began to pray as a leadership team that God would provide people who could guide us. The answer to that prayer came in two undeniable ways: the first in our introduction to the CCDA and the second in the attendance of a new couple with expertise in helping Christian organizations develop cross-cultural competency.

This couple quickly became part of our leadership team, and in 2013 and 2014 they facilitated cultural competency trainings for our church. These trainings helped individual church members for whom this paradigm was brand new, and they also helped our leadership incorporate into our priorities a more educated value on diversity. In 2015 we started our Mosaic Team. This group has met consistently to pray and discern where
SOMA is strong and where we still need to grow in the kind of diversity that welcomes and honors God’s image in every person, race, gender, and culture.

Our current membership consists of the following demographics:

Table 4.1 SOMA’s membership demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>75% Caucasian, 17.5% African American, 5% Asian Caucasian, 2.5% African</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>2.5% 13-19, 55% 20-35, 25% 36-50, 17.5% 51-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest completed level of formal education</td>
<td>2.5% middle school, 22.5% high school/GED, 55% college, 20% post-college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>42.5% male, 57.5% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church experience prior to SOMA</td>
<td>88.5% yes, 12.5% no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding these demographics, one of the consistent reflections of the Mosaic Team is that members of SOMA share the room on Sunday morning well together, but that we have a long way to go in our shared life outside of corporate worship. Our shared life includes the practice of spiritual formation in the midst of our members’ differences, and so the AT will interact with our church’s current discipleship process to paint an accurate picture of specifically where we need to grow in cross-cultural hospitality and mutuality.

In order to be equipped for this work the AT will undergo a two-session training in cultural competency. Kevin Blue is a classmate in my Doctor of Ministry cohort with extensive experience in facilitating trainings to help churches develop cultural competency. I solicited him to help me adapt the training materials he has used with groups in his own church (see Appendix B). I am extremely grateful to him for his generosity with his wisdom and his time.
As an overview of the training, the AT will begin with a time of prayer and Scripture study, then move into an overview of Western Christianity and its influence upon the Reformed tradition. We will then discuss the history of SOMA’s three-year discipleship development process and how the church currently tends to the faith formation of its worshiping body, paying particular attention to how we feel these practices are experienced by different groups within the church. This discussion will lead us into an explicit teaching time on the social science of culture, an analysis of SOMA’s current diversity in light of that teaching, and an initial conversation of how that teaching will inform the development of our discipleship assessment methods. This training will take place over the course of two days, and I am hopeful that the diversity of the AT will encourage deep learning in the form of shared wisdom amongst members of the team. A description of the actual training sessions will be provided in chapter six.

Goal #3: Perceiving a Shared Language

Words carry power in the development of a church’s culture, and this holds uniquely true when new churches are started. Without an explicitly shared corporate history, the words used help to create a shared set of values that can then become embodied. Since SOMA began in 2010 with a particular focus on the unchurched, we were very conscious of employing language that would be both accessible for people who did not have church experience and meaningful to faithfully communicate the deep truths of God. Instead of worship services we had worship gatherings. We emphasized the identity of church as a people rather than a building. As we grew in our philosophy of
Christian community development through the CCDA we exchanged much of our outreach to/for language for neighbor/with language.

This same rhetorical intentionality has held true in how we have talked about discipleship. From our church’s beginning we have built upon the image of the body by talking about a breathing rhythm; that we want our members to have a balance of breathing in (for themselves) and breathing out (for others) in their discipleship. When we began putting together our intentional discipleship process in 2012 we talked about growing in Christ-likeness in a holistic way, which we referred to as our knowing, being, doing, and seeing.

SOMA’s culture includes a thoughtfulness about the words we use and why we use them. The goal of creating a shared language around our faith formation includes evaluating our current language and either reaffirming it, revising it, or replacing it. The AT will start with SOMA’s current definition, generated from the previously mentioned three-year discipleship development process, in which we say “disciples are friends of Jesus, becoming more like Christ as we follow him together in announcing and demonstrating God’s reign & reconciliation” (see Appendix A). If upon receiving the congregational feedback the AT determines that the language we presently use confuses more than it communicates, or if it seems inaccessible to certain groups or gives preference to a particular culture in our church body, we will seek to make changes to clarify and make equitable the words we hope to share. As the AT develops the feedback channels through which the congregation members will offer their input, we will take special care to wordsmith the surveys in ways that will be clear and accessible. The AT
will strive for clarity and consistency in requesting demographic information from survey participants, in asking qualitative questions regarding members’ experience of effectiveness, and in soliciting open-ended recommendations for improvements to our discipleship process.

Goal #4: Laying Groundwork for the Future

Due to the time parameters of the doctoral program, the scope of this project focuses exclusively on the assessment of SOMA’s current discipleship efforts. The true value of this assessment, though, will prove itself through the impact it makes on our church’s ongoing equipping work. Since our initial discipleship process was completed in 2014, we can value the timeliness and substance of this assessment; enough time has passed to give us something to assess, but not so much time has passed to render the input outdated. The report from the assessment team will come in two parts: interpretations of the feedback solicited from the congregation and recommendations for future discipleship efforts based on those interpretations.

Regarding interpretation of the feedback, the AT will spend two sessions working to sort through quantitative and qualitative individual feedback according to voluntary demographic information provided by participants. They will also try to draw out consistent themes in the group feedback channels, which will be entirely qualitative in nature. In order to effectively organize and communicate a large amount of feedback, the AT will use as a guiding template the final report of a similar project undertaken by Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in 2017 (see Appendix C). As the AT
remains mindful of the variety of input received, we intend to provide concrete interpretations that will be useful for SOMA’s leadership team moving forward.

Building upon those interpretations, the AT will also make several recommendations to SOMA’s leadership team regarding next steps for our church’s discipleship ministry. These recommendations will come in two forms: short-term adjustments to current programs or practices and long-term redevelopment of our current process. The short-term recommendations will undoubtedly be more simple and practical in nature, while the long-term recommendations will be more value-oriented and require continued prayer and nuance in implementation. But both short-term and long-term recommendations will be made with the goal of improving the inclusiveness and effectiveness of SOMA’s effort to equip our diverse body for faithful mission in our city.

Since its inception SOMA has attempted to cultivate servant leadership. Functionally this means that our leadership team has sought out the input of the congregation in decisions large and small and seriously incorporated that input into decision making on behalf of the church body. Since we value this style of leadership, I am optimistic that the same will hold true in regards to the interpretations and recommendations provided by the AT. While I do not expect that the leadership team should understand itself to be required to follow these recommendations exactly as reported, I am sure that our leadership will use them to create more meaningful and inclusive practices of spiritual formation.
Target Population and Leadership

There are three specific groups in SOMA’s worshiping body that this project is
designed to target, and each of those groups has a particular role. The first group is the
Assessment Team, which has a dual role in helping me both to oversee the
development/implementation of the project and to participate in the cultural competency
training aspect of the project. This group of seven women and men representing SOMA’s
distinct age, race, gender, formal education level, and socioeconomic situations will
spend the majority of their time in conversation with me as we work through the training
and subsequent development of the discipleship assessment plan to solicit feedback from
the congregation as a whole. At the conclusion of the AT’s six months of work together,
SOMA’s leadership team will receive their interpretations and recommendations of the
congregational feedback. An evaluation of the development of the AT will also occur
through a questionnaire that the AT will complete on two occasions: once before the
feedback is solicited by the congregation and once after the AT has made their
interpretations and recommendations to the leadership team. Those responses will be
compared to see if there are any consistent learning trends amongst the members of the
AT. That questionnaire will be discussed in more detail in chapter six, and it can be found
in its entirety in the appendices.

The second target population of this project is SOMA’s leadership team. This
group of nine individuals also represents a diverse cross-section of SOMA’s worshiping
body, and while they are not the primary developers of this discipleship assessment
process, they nonetheless take seriously their responsibility to equip the congregation for
God’s mission in our community. They will receive monthly updates on the progress of the AT throughout the project’s development and implementation, and at the conclusion will receive and consider the AT’s recommendations. The timing for this project does not allow the leadership team’s next steps to be included within the scope of the project itself. However, the leadership team is committed to stewarding well the AT’s work on their behalf. Additionally, the participation of a member of the leadership team on the AT will help to facilitate that future implementation. And in order to get a sense of the learning experienced by the leadership team as a result of commissioning this project, they will be completing the same questionnaire as the AT, both before and after receiving the AT’s report and recommendations.

Finally, this project requires the participation of as many people as possible within SOMA’s whole worshiping body. Building upon SOMA’s current definition and portrait of discipleship as our reference point, we desire a clear and thorough assessment of how effectively we are equipping a diverse church for God’s mission in the city. Members of the congregation will share their experiences of SOMA’s discipleship efforts through the individual and group feedback opportunities developed and implemented by the AT. Along with providing specific answers to specific questions, members will share additional reflections and recommendations that the AT will use to draw out consistent praise and critique of SOMA’s discipling work. Upon the completion of the AT’s work and report to the leadership team, the congregation will also receive a summary of the AT’s report and a plan of action that the leadership team will develop based on those findings and recommendations.
Due to the unique nature of this project, assessing an existing discipleship process presented both challenges and opportunities. The creation of a new discipleship program may have involved fewer and simpler steps along the way. Additionally, the work of evaluating the effectiveness of the project would have been more straightforward had I developed an entirely new program or training resource for SOMA. However, I believe the benefits of undertaking this assessment far outweighed the challenges. Discipleship lies at the heart of our church’s participation in the *missio Dei* in our city, and the thoughtful development of a means to evaluate our faithfulness in spiritual formation can only take us deeper into what it means to equip our diverse family to follow Jesus together. What follows is a description of the steps along the way to cast the vision for this project to SOMA’s leadership, to recruit and train our assessment team, to work with the assessment team to develop and implement a meaningful feedback plan from the congregation, and to interpret that feedback along with recommendations for the leadership team.
Project Launch

The work of this project officially began in October of 2017 when I presented the project proposal to SOMA’s leadership team, explained my goals and projected timeline, and solicited their feedback regarding what they hoped to see come out of this effort. They were all aware of my doctoral studies over the preceding five years, and I had been preparing them for a year leading up to this point, and so the team enthusiastically endorsed the plan and prayed for its success. After announcing the project and our hopes for its impact with the congregation on a Sunday morning and in our regular church communications media, I began recruiting the members of the assessment team.

I considered this team the most important component of the project. If we were going to achieve success in soliciting and evaluating meaningful feedback from our congregation, we needed a team that not only represented the diverse groups within the congregation but also possessed the collective capacity to listen and understand what we received from the congregation and frame it in terms of contextually faithful missional discipleship. Since so much hinged on the work of this team I made sure to take deliberate time in the recruitment and training stages of the process.

I was delighted when every person I approached about participating on the assessment team accepted the responsibility. Those members and their demographic information, shared alphabetically and with their permission, included: Jerome Cousar, a 51-year-old African American man with a high school education; Robin Fischer, a 59-year-old Italian Irish woman with some college education; Rachel Larson, a 23-year-old Caucasian woman with a college education; Anthony Regan, a 35-year-old African
American man with a college education; Dwenn Walker, an African American woman in her late 40’s with a high school degree and some college education (Dwenn had to leave the team halfway through our work together for health reasons); and Dan Williams, a 36-year-old Caucasian man with a post-graduate education.

**Training the Assessment Team**

On November 12, 2017, the AT met for the first time to review the scope of our work together for this project. We discussed the goals of this team in developing a discipleship feedback plan for the congregation and subsequently receiving, interpreting, and making recommendations to the leadership team based upon that feedback. We had preliminary discussions about the challenges we expected to face in soliciting the kind of input from the church body that would be both substantive and focused on the effectiveness of SOMA’s existing discipleship process. The team expected those challenges to include a hesitancy on the part of some members to speak critically to church authority, a sense of unfamiliarity among some members with the particulars of SOMA’s existing discipleship process, and the need to make sure the questions being asked of the congregation encouraged specific feedback about spiritual formation. Since the work ahead of the AT required a collective capacity to understand the congregation’s feedback and frame it in terms of contextually faithful missional discipleship, the team agreed that a crash course in cultural competency would serve to actualize that capacity.

On December 16, 2017, the AT met for three hours for the first part of our cultural competency training. Our team used, with his permission, an adaptation of
materials Kevin Blue had developed and used over years of cross-cultural ministry (see Appendix B for the training packet in its entirety). An outline of that training is as follows:

- A study of Acts 10 and Galatians 2:11-14, focusing on the Church’s life-long struggle with diversity
- Prayer for wisdom, grace, and unity in our church and during our training time
- A brief teaching on:
  - the history of Christianity in the Western world,
  - the Reformed tradition’s roots in Western culture,
  - the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) as part of the Reformed tradition,
  - and SOMA’s place within the EPC.
- An analysis of SOMA’s current discipleship process, including the background of how it came to be and the existing programs available to the congregation
- A sociological and theological discussion of culture, including exercises in cross-cultural interaction and culminating in the recognition that all cultures uniquely display God’s Kingdom values and in ways depart from those values. We paid particular attention to North American Anglo (Western) culture and its typical values and practices.

On January 20, 2018, the AT met again to conclude the cultural competency dimension of the training, during which time we reviewed our learning from December’s meeting and applied that learning in a cultural analysis of SOMA’s worshiping body. This involved identifying some of the specific ways that Western cultural values have shaped our practices of spiritual formation. These ways include:

- content-based, reason-focused teaching and preaching,
clock-oriented worship gatherings and events,

• written communication as our primary communication media,
• an egalitarian leadership structure,
• feedback from the congregation regularly encouraged and expected for our planning and decision-making,
• and a strong sense of individualism in how people relate to their faith.

We also tried to identify the assets SOMA possesses within its worshiping body that would allow us to effectively disciple everyone in our diverse community without the expectation of cultural assimilation. We identified those assets as:

• our stated priority on visible reconciliation as inextricable with the missio Dei,
• our existing diversity already establishing that continued growth as an expectation,
• a culture of patience with one another for God’s growing process in our lives as individuals and corporately,
• our reputation in the community as a church that welcomes everyone,
• our flexibility during our worship gatherings to adjust liturgy, music styles, service timing, and even the setup of the room,
• the variety of voices already present in our preaching and teaching ministries,
• and specific resources for faith formation resonating with distinct learning styles:
  o Head-learning: our relationship with Geneva College and our Reformed heritage;
  o Heart-learning: our recent priority on helping people discover their passions and gifts and employ them to serve the church and community;
  o Hands-learning: many opportunities to volunteer both with SOMA and with our neighboring community partners
During the second half of our January meeting we began to brainstorm the feedback solicitation methods we wanted to employ in order to gain input from the congregation. In order to hear from the broadest possible group and receive the most meaningful input, we determined that the feedback solicitation methods needed to be both written and verbal, both individual and group, and both qualitative and quantitative in the questions we asked. We ended our time together agreeing to review the draft version of a feedback plan at the next meeting, hoping to finalize that plan for a March implementation.

**Developing and Implementing the Discipleship Assessment Feedback Plan**

At the AT’s fourth meeting on February 17, 2018, the team created the discipleship feedback plan for our congregation. We started by reviewing the draft version of the plan I prepared incorporating the priorities we established at our January meeting, and after making some edits to that draft we ended up with the following plan:

- to share the AT’s feedback plan and our hopes for its congregational impact during the worship gathering on Sunday, March 4th,
- to distribute an individual written survey, both paper/pencil & online (see Appendix D),
- to host a Sunday evening community conversation on March 11th
- to hold ten minutes of facilitated table talk during the worship gathering on Sunday, March 18th,
- and to invite one-on-one feedback to the AT throughout the month of March.

On March 4 SOMA’s worshiping body was invited to participate in our discipleship feedback process. The individual surveys were distributed on the tables in
our gathering space and also sent out to the church through our weekly emails and online in a Survey Monkey format. We promoted the community conversation on Sunday evening, March 11, and informed the congregation that we would be have a time of table talk during one of our worship gatherings later in the month. Members were also encouraged to talk with me or other members of the AT to offer their experiences of SOMA’s effectiveness in discipling our community.

On March 11 we hosted an evening community conversation about SOMA’s discipleship effectiveness. These conversations are regular times in our church’s life that we create to discuss concerns related to the worshiping body and/or broader social issues, so we were optimistic that we would get a good turnout and quality input. While only eight people were in attendance, the depth of the conversation was both encouraging and meaningful for the assessment process. Using SOMA’s existing discipleship plan as our reference point, I facilitated the nearly two-hour meeting using the S.W.O.T. method, breaking down the feedback into groupings related to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The twenty-one unique points of feedback in this conversation were recorded to be sent on to the AT for their interpretation work in April and May.

We refer to table talk as the regular times during SOMA’s corporate worship for prayer, reflection, or conversation around the theme of the day. We had initially planned to hold this time on March 18 but ended up postponing it until March 25. During that worship gathering, which centered around what it means to follow Jesus in missional discipleship, I reviewed SOMA’s existing discipleship process and what we hope to accomplish in our community through it. In the subsequent time of conversation we saw
seventeen small groups in our worship space, representing between seventy and eighty individuals, discussing four open-ended questions: First, when it comes to helping people grow as friends and followers of Jesus (discipleship), what would you say SOMA is doing really well? Second, what is SOMA doing well, but could use improvement? Third, what is SOMA not doing well at all? Fourth, is there other feedback you feel would be helpful to share? As was the case with the March 11 community conversation, the feedback from these conversations was recorded at each table and given to the AT for their interpretation work in April and May.

Interpreting the Discipleship Assessment Feedback

Prior to our AT’s next meeting on April 28, 2018, I compiled all of the feedback we collected throughout March into one large document including the raw data, both quantitative and qualitative, for the individual and group input received. The demographic breakdown of the individual feedback was as follows:

Table 6.1 Individual feedback demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>85% Caucasian, 7.5% African American, 7.5% Asian Caucasian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>7.5% 13-19, 30.5% 20-35, 15% 36-50, 47% 51-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest completed level of formal education</td>
<td>7.5% middle school, 31% high school/GED, 38.5% college, 23% post-college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>38.5% male, 61.5% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church experience prior to SOMA</td>
<td>100% yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During our meeting I walked the AT through the document as we began trying to identify key themes that emerged from the feedback. Regarding the quality of the feedback we received:
• There were fewer individual responses than we expected to receive (only 13), and that feedback came almost entirely from our Caucasian members. This raised questions about our effectiveness as a team in employing soliciting techniques that did not prefer white culture (i.e. written surveys, assuming an ease in speaking to church authority, etc.).
• The individual feedback came largely from those with church experience prior to SOMA, underrepresenting our formerly unchurched population.
• The individual feedback skewed slightly toward those with higher levels of education, but educational diversity was present.
• The AT observed that the lack of consensus in the feedback speaks both to SOMA’s diversity and the open-endedness of many of our questions.

Regarding the content of the feedback we received:

• People consistently value the highly welcoming environment of SOMA.
• Most of the “needs improvement” feedback related to head-learning.
• Multiple individuals and groups indicated that our Sunday morning classes were of high quality and that they desired more of them.
• Sunday morning feedback was consistently positive, while also indicating a shared desire for more mid-week discipling opportunities.
• Accessibility/transportation to programming outside of Sunday is an issue.
• There is a consistent desire for more social/relational connections in our discipleship.
• People desire more explicit connection between discipleship and our hands-on learning opportunities.
• There is a need for awareness about our Community Groups.
• Several people and groups indicated a desire for more challenge in our preaching and teaching.
We concluded our meeting by agreeing to spend the next month in prayer and reflection on the feedback before coming back together in June. At the June meeting we would plan to synthesize the feedback into several key interpretations and several recommendations for SOMA’s leadership team for SOMA’s discipling ministry moving forward.

**Final AT Meeting on June 2, 2018**

In preparation for our June 2 meeting I recorded our quantitative feedback and codified our qualitative feedback in a set of charts in order to give our AT an opportunity to visualize the raw data we received from the discipleship input. When the AT met for the last time, we reviewed those charts and compared them with the observations we made during our April meeting. Upon affirming the charts as confirmation of what we previously observed, we set about the task of making final interpretations and recommendations for SOMA’s leadership team.

In order to make this project both actionable and meaningful, we determined that we wanted to conclude with three main interpretations and four recommendations: two of which would be short term adjustments to our current discipleship efforts and two of which would be long term goals for the faith formation of our worshiping body. Those interpretations and recommendations were as follows.

Three (3) primary interpretations of the feedback:

1. While the entry into SOMA’s community is open and inclusive, there is a lack of clarity about “what’s next” when wanting to connect & grow more deeply.  
2. There is an appreciate of the quality of SOMA’s head-learning opportunities (classes, teaching, studies, etc.) and a desire for them to be offered more regularly.
3. People are not experiencing the integration of our head/heart/hands discipleship opportunities as fully as we intend them to.

Two (2) practical, short-term adjustment recommendations:

1. To make classes/studies a regular part of SOMA’s discipleship rhythm. These could be Sunday morning or mid-week, and preferably located at The Well.
2. To improve non-written communication of discipleship opportunities to our worshiping body. This could include Sunday morning testimonies of people’s experiences of those opportunities and/or clearly designated point people to connect with for one-on-one information about what’s offered & how to engage.

Two (2) long-term recommendations:

1. To more meaningfully integrate our head/heart/hands discipleship opportunities. For example, suggestions for ‘putting into action’ what is learned at our classes and intentional teaching/reflection time during our community outreach efforts.
2. To create an on-going feedback channel for SOMA’s discipleship whereby our people offer their input, we collect the data, and we eventually have a full representation of SOMA’s worshiping body to make adjustments moving forward. This recommendation recognizes that we did not achieve full representation in the individual feedback portion of this project.

The AT concluded our final meeting by tasking me with compiling these interpretations and recommendations in a report to SOMA’s Leadership Team (see Appendix E), which will receive and discern action upon them over the upcoming months. We determined that a report of the AT’s work, and the leadership team’s intended action based upon that work, will be shared with SOMA’s worshiping body in the Fall of 2018. I ended our meeting by receiving permission from everyone to report
their names and demographic info in my project, thanking the members of the AT for their work over the last six months, and by leading us in a final prayer.

**Timeline of SOMA’s Discipleship Assessment Project**

October 2017: SOMA’s leadership team approved project proposal

November/December 2017: I recruited and trained Discipleship Assessment Team

January/February 2018: Assessment Team developed the congregational feedback plan

March 2018: The congregational feedback plan was implemented throughout the month

April 2018: The Assessment Team received and began interpreting discipleship feedback

May/June 2018: Assessment Team finished interpreting discipleship feedback and made their report, including recommendations, to SOMA’s leadership team

June/July 2018: SOMA’s leadership team received the AT’s report and began the process of creating a plan to communicate the results and future action steps with the worshiping body. We expect this work to take us through 2018.

**Evaluating the Discipleship Assessment Project**

In order to minimize confusion over terms, I will refer to this section as the evaluation of our attempt to assess the effectiveness SOMA’s current discipling efforts.

In chapter five I presented the goals of this project as: (1) to create a feedback process by which an Assessment Team receives the congregation’s experience of how effectively we are equipping disciples for missional living, (2) to further develop a congregational commitment to cross-cultural competency in our discipleship, (3) to perceive a shared language with which SOMA’s members can understand and talk about their faith formation, and (4) to lay the groundwork for a longer-term initiative that SOMA’s
leadership will build upon for the discipleship of our diverse membership. With these goals in mind I developed a questionnaire (see Appendix F) to be completed by the members of two of this project’s target populations: SOMA’s Leadership Team (LT) and the Discipleship Assessment Team (AT).

While the questionnaire included open-ended questions, I asked participants to rate statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The LT and AT members rated these same questions before we received the congregation’s discipleship feedback, then rated them again afterward. I compared the before-and-after responses to observe the learning that was accomplished as a result of this project and as the primary means for evaluating its success in meeting its four goals. The chart below includes the statements that both the LT and AT completed, the rating of each statement (calculated as the average of the individual responses from both groups) before and after receiving the congregational feedback, and my analysis of how those ratings correspond with the successful or unsuccessful accomplishment of the goals of this project.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Goals &amp; Correlating Questionnaire Statements</th>
<th>Assessment Team before / after</th>
<th>Leadership Team before / after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Goal #1: to create a feedback process by which an Assessment Team receives the congregation’s experience of how effectively we are equipping disciples for missional living</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am very confident that I know how effectively SOMA is discipling the members of our body.</td>
<td>3.4 / 3.6</td>
<td>3.8 / 4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that SOMA is effectively discipling all the members of our diverse body</td>
<td>3.8 / 3.4</td>
<td>3.8 / 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis:</strong> Both the AT and LT feel marginally more confident in knowing how effectively SOMA is equipping our members, and this awareness correlates with rating our efforts as slightly less effective than previously thought. I believe this gives us a more informed and realistic assessment, meaning the project was successful in accomplishing goal #1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Goal #2: to further develop a congregational commitment to cross-cultural competency in our discipleship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I understand what it takes to effectively disciple a diverse worshipping community.</td>
<td>3.2 / 3.4</td>
<td>3.2 / 3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipleship is basically one-size-fits-all: people’s cultural, educational, socio-economic, and other differences don’t really make a difference when it comes to how we grow in our faith.</td>
<td>1.6 / 1</td>
<td>1.4 / 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis:</strong> Both the AT and LT grew very slightly in their confidence of knowing what is required to disciple a diverse worshipping body. And while both groups began the project rejecting a one-size-fits-all philosophy, they did so even more strongly after going through this process. I would consider that growth a successful contribution to goal #2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Goal #3: to perceive a shared language with which SOMA’s members can understand and talk about their faith formation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| In encouraging the discipleship of the whole person, SOMA provides enough meaningful opportunities for:  
  - Head-learning (forming our minds)  
  - Heart-learning (shaping our distinct gifts/passions)  
  - Hands-learning (putting our faith into action) | Head: 3.4 / 3.4  
Heart: 4.2 / 4.2  
Hands: 4 / 4 | Head: 3.5 / 3.5  
Heart: 4 / 4.3  
Hands: 3.8 / 4.3 |
| **Analysis:** A comparison of before/after shows that the project largely affirmed what the AT already believed to be true of our discipling efforts, while the LT was encouraged by what they found related to heart and hands. Related to the stated purpose of goal #3, these three terms have started to become part of our church’s regular dialogue about discipleship, whether at the staff/leadership team level or simply amongst members in conversation. |                               |                               |
| **Project Goal #4: to lay the groundwork for a longer-term initiative that SOMA’s leadership will build upon for the discipleship of our diverse membership** |                                 |                               |
| I believe SOMA has a long way to go in our efforts to disciple our worshipping body. | 2.6 / 3.2                      | 2.8 / 2.5                     |
| **Analysis:** Since the LT has received the AT’s recommendations and will be acting upon them in the coming months, the project was objectively successful in accomplishing goal #4. However, I am uncertain as to the reason for the different trajectories of the AT and LT in their assessment of how close we are to faithfully discipling our church body. I would have expected both target groups to more fully agree with the statement after the project was completed, and I do not have a satisfactory explanation for the difference between the two groups. |                               |                               |
In summary, I would evaluate this project as generally successful in accomplishing its four specific goals, with one caveat. The fact that our AT was only able to solicit thirteen individual responses from members of the congregation, and only one of those from an African American member, hindered our ability to make reliable data-derived determinations regarding our effectiveness in faith formation across demographic differences within our church body. I am encouraged by the AT’s recommendation to the LT to continue receiving and tracking that feedback from our members until we have a more fully representative set of data. However, I had hoped to have that feedback for this project so as to test the contentions I put forth in chapters one through four regarding Western culture, the Reformed tradition, and the implicit marginalization that occurs in our churches as a result. In this way the project feels incomplete, though for SOMA’s sake I am grateful that our work of listening and assessing and developing will continue.

Additionally, I see two specific aspects of SOMA’s discipleship feedback that relate directly to the larger conceptual work of this project. First, the long-term recommendation from the AT regarding the need for more explicit connection between SOMA’s head, heart, and hands-learning affirms the need for praxis as the dominant paradigm for faith formation in our urban context. SOMA’s worshiping body desires not less head learning, but more; however, that same body wants the head learning connected to a more intentional cycle of prayerful action and reflection. I believe this leads individuals and community into a more fully integrated life of discipleship, and I observe SOMA’s body calling for that same integration. Second, the group feedback chart provided a window into the development of SOMA’s diversity as a worshiping body (see
Appendix E). In that feedback, a large and equal number of groups referred to our diversity as a strength and an area which needs growth as relates to our discipling ministry. I believe this dynamic provides an honest assessment of where SOMA stands as a faith community moving toward embodying God’s Kingdom diversity. There is much to celebrate about how far God has brought us, but we have not lost that sense of priority which will encourage us to pursue, even more prayerfully and hopefully, a process of missional discipleship that equips the whole body for faithful Kingdom-witness in Beaver Falls.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In order for congregations in the urban environment to participate fully in the *missio Dei*, we must take seriously the task of discipleship. This task requires an embrace of the timeless, borderless kingdom of God and the Church universal’s participation in the heralding of that Kingdom. Particularly, discipleship requires that each faith community follows the incarnational lead of Jesus in contextualizing that Kingdom heralding within its neighboring community. Ephesians 4 tells us that as God gathers people of all cultural, generational, socio-economic, and other diverse situations into one worshiping body, the Holy Spirit calls the people of God to faithfully equip one another for the work of ministry. This project has attempted to assess one church’s effectiveness in carrying out this discipling work and to determine what growth still needs to happen for us to grow toward missional maturity as a part of Christ’s body.

In chapter one of this paper I set out to explain SOMA’s community context in Beaver Falls, a small city in the post-industrial landscape of Western Pennsylvania. This city’s story is one of former manufacturing glory giving way to sharp economic decline following the collapse of the steel industry in the 1980s. Analyzing the social reality of Beaver Falls by modifying the approach used by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, I paid special attention to the marginalization of people groups in the city, particularly across racial and socio-economic distinctions.\(^1\) I also discussed that, while an under-resourced community, Beaver Falls also possesses a collective energy around employing its assets.

\(^1\) Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis*, 102.
for Christian community development. Corresponding with the goal of this project, one of those assets the local church and its role in equipping women, men, and children for faithful and tangible witness in the community.

In chapter two I discussed SOMA’s ministry context by examining its young history as a missional church plant. This discussion involved an attempt to unpack the unique cultural challenges of a diverse urban church in a Reformed denomination such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The particular challenge of SOMA’s worshiping body in this regard relates to our need to resist the culturally-conditioned tendency toward abstraction found in our theological tradition and instead encourage practices of faith formation that equip the wide variety of people in our faith community. Our awareness of this challenge in 2011 motivated the development a three-year process of developing meaningful practices of discipleship for all the people groups in our church body. This chapter shared our desire to understand how successful the results of that process have been, and that desire has inspired the focus of this entire doctoral project.

In chapter three I engaged with literature relevant to a theological exploration of the challenges and responses to the issues presented in SOMA’s community and ministry contexts. This engagement occurred in three movements: those works reflecting theologically on the problem of social and racial marginalization, those works providing an ecclesiological foundation for the church’s contextual engagement with the city, and those works encouraging the kind of discipleship that contributes to the church’s specific ministry of reconciliation. I attempted to highlight literature that takes seriously the ways in which theology both contributes to both the problem of marginalization and helps to
provide the foundation for genuine reconciliation across these lines of distance. These works also included an understanding of spiritual formation which, freeing itself from captivity to one particular cultural expression, proves meaningful to the entire body of Christ in the urban context.

In chapter four I shared my own biblical and theological reflections. I drew from Scripture to reveal God’s heart for those who have been separated from one another to become family in Him. Employing the biblical motif of the table, I posited churches as reconciling communities in which people experience the relational mutuality of faith in Christ. For this movement to take place, particularly for churches in the Reformed tradition, we need to recognize in confession and move away from in repentance a culturally conditioned tendency toward cognitive abstraction, which prefers some groups of people over others. With Jesus’s incarnation as the theological correction to this tendency, we can see discipleship as a whole-person practice that churches can learn to encourage across the many distinctive God-given qualities of our members.

In chapters five and six I described the development and implementation of this project’s ministry plan. The plan involved the creation of an assessment process used to determine the current effectiveness of SOMA’s leadership in tending to the faith formation of its increasingly diverse membership. A six-member Assessment Team was recruited from amongst the congregation and participated in a two-session training in cultural competency which focused on the ways that Western culture has influenced the practices of discipleship for the American church, particularly churches like SOMA in the Reformed tradition.
Equipped with this awareness, the AT began developing a plan to solicit feedback from our worshiping body regarding how meaningfully our current discipleship process equips them for faith and practice. This assessment plan included soliciting individual and group feedback, written and verbalized input, and both qualitative and quantitative responses. After receiving feedback from about 80 participants total (though only thirteen in the individual surveys), the AT began the process of interpreting that information in light of SOMA’s desire to improve our discipling efforts. Over the course of two sessions, the AT made the following three key interpretations leading to four recommendations, two of which were short-term and two of which were long-term. Over the course of the rest of 2018, SOMA’s leadership team will present the findings of this project to the worshiping body as a whole and begin working to implement these recommendations into the discipling life of our worshiping body.

In the final analysis this project proved to be timely and helpful in SOMA’s continuing development as a community of faith. It allowed the church to be thorough in evaluating how well the outcomes are matching the intentions regarding faith formation, and the way in which many people took part in the development and execution of the assessment process was consistent with SOMA’s value on participation. The main deficiency of the assessment is the small number of individual response to the specific survey questions, which would have given us better data to interpret across the diverse communities in our church body. In lieu of that specific individual input, we were forced to draw our conclusions primarily from the group feedback, which was much more qualitative than quantitative. It is important that we are going to continue soliciting input
from the congregation in ways that encourage a more representative cross-section of the church.

While this project focused on the work of SOMA and our ministry context in Beaver Falls, I hope it might prove helpful to Reformed churches and denominations broadly, including my own, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. At the time of writing these concluding thoughts in the summer of 2018, I am recently returned from Memphis, Tennessee and the EPC’s General Assembly, which is our annual national gathering of pastors and elders. The focus of the entire four-day gathering prioritized our denomination’s need to become a Revelation 7:9 body in which every nation, tribe, people, and language gather together as a worshiping body; a sentiment never before emphasized by our General Assembly. And while the EPC has an incredibly long way to go in realizing that Kingdom-heralding vision, I left Memphis encouraged. Furthermore, I left Memphis even more convinced that while denominational proclamations are necessary, the most meaningful work belongs to our local congregations as incarnational witnesses to the truth of Jesus’s reconciling community. To that great end, while I am grateful to God for where he has brought SOMA so far, I know that we need the Holy Spirit to inspire us to continue developing as a church that equips our increasingly diverse body for faithful life and mission in our city.
APPENDIX A

SOMA’S CURRENT DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS

A Portrait of Discipleship

Saying *we are disciples* is saying that we are friends of Jesus, becoming more like Christ as we follow him together in announcing and demonstrating God’s reign & reconciliation.

- **Knowing**
  By God’s grace & the power of his Holy Spirit, we want to help each other grow in our knowledge & understanding of the truths of our faith.

- **Being**
  By God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we want to help each other grow in Christ-like character.

- **Doing**
  By God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we want to help each other actively live out our faith.

- **Seeing**
  By God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we want to help each other to develop the ‘eyes to see’ the Kingdom of God in our midst.
Introduction

We’re calling this our Portrait of Discipleship
• It’s like describing a picture of what it looks like to follow Jesus together
• Discipleship is a dynamic process, not a formula or a way to put people in a box.
• We’ve tried to use language that makes sense for this worshiping body, even as we hope it could be helpful for all people who follow Jesus.
• We want to see this portrait in terms of journey, not destination. In other words, we’re not saying ‘disciples are those who’ve arrived at these things perfectly’ but ‘by grace we’re on the way towards these things.’

Explanation

1 God’s Redemptive Story
We’re framing this portrait in two ways. First through the lens of the God’s Redemptive Story, told through Scripture and lived through all of us. To understand God’s work in the world we can break this story down into four parts:

Create
In love God made all things and made them all exactly as they should be – nothing missing and nothing broken, everything in perfect, God-glorifying relationship with God and so in perfect, life-giving relationship with everything else.

Fall
Humanity broke that perfect relationship with God, and this broke the good relationships that tied all things together. Here into the story came evil, sin, and death.

Consummation
We await the day when Jesus comes again, this time to finalize the work of new creation, when sin and death are defeated once-and-for-all and all things are tied together in God-glorying, life-giving relationship; just the way God first made it to be.

Redemption
Ever since this Fall, God has been in pursuit of His beloved creation to reconcile all things back to Himself. We were unable to do this on our own power, always falling short. Through God in the flesh, Jesus the Christ – his life, death, and resurrection – God defeated the power of sin and death to reconcile us back to Himself. This is coming of the Kingdom of God.

2 Discipleship is Holistic
Secondly, Jesus’ Lordship over all things means that discipleship is Holistic – it affects every part of who we are (Deuteronomy 6:4 & Luke 10:27). This means that in following Jesus we are being renewed in our:

Knowing – what we believe to be true by faith
Being – our character that God is shaping into Christ-likeness
Doing – how we actively live out our faith
Seeing – how we see God’s Kingdom at work in the world
SOMA's Discipleship Process:
What We Cultivate & What We Encourage

CULTIVATING
What we spend time developing for SOMA folks to engage in together

1. **Community Groups** – groups of 6-12 people who meet regularly to share in Scripture, prayer, food, fun, and city engagement together.
2. **Intentional Relationships** – 2-3 people who meet regularly for a period of time and who figure out together what they hope to happen in that time.
3. **Learning Together** – Periodic Sunday morning classes & Saturday seminars/retreats.

ENCOURAGING
What we encourage for SOMA folks in our spiritual formation

Listening, Learning, Experiencing, Interceding, Sharing

Breathing In  Breathing Out

**Listening** to God through regular devoted time in prayer each week.

**Learning** from God through regular devoted time with Scripture each week.

**Experiencing community with:**
- SOMA’s worshiping community through participating regularly in the weekly time of corporate worship & by engaging in a meaningful, intentionally encouraging conversation with someone from SOMA each week outside of the worship gathering.
- The Beaver Falls community by spending an intentional time each week in the city. This could include shopping, eating, attending a sporting event, taking a walk, etc. In these times we’ll be open to conversations with people in which my goal will be to listen with the love of Jesus.

**Interceding for others:**
- By praying for at least one person from SOMA’s worshiping community each week.
- By praying for the people in the city of Beaver Falls each week.

**Sharing with others:**
- Of my finances at least once a month.
- Through at least one intentional time of engagement each month in the city of Beaver Falls – via SOMA’s outreach efforts or other opportunities.
Cultural Competency & SOMA’s Discipleship

Outline of our time together...

11:00am – Intro, Scripture & Prayer

11:30am – Some background...
  • Western Christianity & the Reformed tradition
  • SOMA's discipleship efforts

12:00pm - Lunch & cultural competency exercises

1:00pm - Discussion of SOMA's diversity

1:45pm - Next steps...
IN THE SCRIPTURES...

Acts 10

15 The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

34 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Then Peter said, 47 “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

Galatians 2:11-14

11 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?

Prayer for...

- Wisdom
- Grace
- Unity
A BRIEF HISTORY...

- Western Christianity
  - Hellenism & Christianity
    - The Great Schism of 1054 – East & West

- The Reformed Tradition (including the EPC)
  - The Protestant Reformation starting in 1517
    - The Enlightenment in the 1700’s
      - Scottish Common Sense Realism

- The Development of SOMA’s Discipleship Process
Understanding Culture: A Sociological Perspective (Kevin Blue, Redeemer Church in LA)

- Race (socially constructed, not genetically defined)
- Culture (values and worldview, communicated through language/practices/symbols, caught and taught but not born)

**Understanding Culture**

We get race. We need to understand culture.

- Construct two cultures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1</th>
<th>#2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>First Born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>Family Name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Talk objectively** - no reference to particular cultures

**In Small Groups:**
- What would day-to-day life look like in these cultures shaped around these values?
- What would relationships look like?
- How would different types of people be treated? How would the people be focused more as a group (future, present, history)?
- What would the leadership of the society look like? How would it be run and by whom?
- Who has power? Who’s interested in power?

**Debrief in large session**

- Answer the questions and discuss the ways these two would function
- Pose a relating scenario: Companies from either culture want to do business and decide to discuss merger. Each sends a vice president to a neutral territory restaurant to explore the possibility. What would vice presidents look like from each of these groups? Describe them?

**Some questions to ask:**

- How would they look? Married? Gender?
- What would they want to talk about?
What would their meeting be like?

Massive confusion - If both are men they can continue.

1 would be barreling on in conversation. He has more at stake, his status is not permanent.

2 is more patient, no rush, his status is permanent.

Each would seem evasive to the other because each is trying to accomplish different things. Each would not seem "serious" to the other because not willing to talk about what's important. Each frustrated because not able to seal the deal might think the real meeting would be next time. Offenses and frustration are rampant.

Ethnocentrism; Where each person took their view of a good VP as a template and impressed it on the other. Use their cultural values as a grid by which to judge another. Done very positively and fairly from their perspective because that's all that they understand.

[Note: There are kingdom values and the message of the Gospel encourages each group in some ways and condemns each culture as fallen and in need of being radically transformed to be of the kingdom.]

How does God view each of these cultures? How do they view the scriptures?

What would they like a lot? What would convict the hell out of them?

1

- What God does is important
- Eternal Life (endless time)
- God giving things (esp. peace and Sabbath – six work and one rest)
- Great Commission (business goal)
- Grace is difficult concept
- Innate worth (because God created)
- Quality of relationships (people as ends unto themselves)
- Destruction of work/leisure dichotomy

2

- Who God is, is important
- God's sovereignty rest
- Predestination
- Love the lineages (Matthew)
- House of David
- Family terminology (new name/family)
- Marriage of God and His people (John)
- Jesus treating women well
- Jesus' teaching on family
- Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac
- Jacob and Esau in birthright

Neither is more moral or immoral. Both are equally imbalanced with the word of
God/kingdom culture. Both fallen. Both need correction and to be affirmed (i.e. redeem what is of the kingdom in their culture).

We can't judge by our norms, but must let the Scriptures be the plumb line by which and value or means of behavior is judged.

But what about a person from a bicultural background (someone who has a couple of sets of values operating within them, sometimes at odds with one another)?

Understanding Culture: Values in Japanese culture

Relationship is central
The Japanese are extremely sensitive to and concerned about social interaction and relationships (Lebra; 1976). Lebra calls it “social pre-occupation”

1. “Belonging” and the concept of “bun” (portion, share)
   a. High value for feeling like they belong (whether it’s family, work, social group, town or nation)
   b. Collective, group orientation vs individual orientation
      i. Individual identity is given up to be defined by the goal of group or its orientation (identify self by stressing position in social frame rather than by personal attributes)
   c. Concept of “bun”: individuals are part of a larger whole, and must be faithful and responsible to do their part for the sake of the whole (Lebra p67)
   d. Results
      i. Pressure to conform
      ii. High commitment / loyalty to group demanded
      iii. Strong sense of obligation
      iv. Great sense of shame if you do not do what is expected or what you are responsible for (because you selfishly inconvenience others)

2. Status Orientation
   a. Sensitivity to rank order (hierarchical social system)
i. Always keenly aware of one’s position in relation to the person one is interacting with

ii. How one interacts (behavior, tone, vocabulary) is determined by this
   a. Rank order determined by:
   i. Age – associated with experience / importance of first born
   ii. Gender – male dominates
   iii. Language – how to address a person and what words are used

A. Relationship to authority
   a. Inherent trust and respect for those in authority
   b. Will not openly confront, question, challenge
   c. Trust authority’s decision making even over own at times (“omakase shimasu”)
   d. Who speaks is more important than what is spoken
   e. Truth is defined this way: “so and so said this, so it must be true”

B. Empathy (“omoiyari”)
   A virtue considered indispensable for one to be really human, morally mature, and deserving of respect (Lebra; 1976)

1. Seek to maintain consensus/agreement (deference)
   a. Very, very cautious to speak what really thinking – will not speak at all if what one thinks is not congruent with group mentality
   b. Won’t question majority
   c. Will deny own wishes / desires to maintain group consensus

2. Seek to optimize each other’s comfort:
   By providing pleasure or
By preventing displeasure

a. anticipate needs/desires of others
   i. occurs without verbal communication – assume

b. “enryo” – not imposing; non-confrontational
   i. something offered or at your disposal but you decline because you don’t want to impose (even if you really want it)
   ii. polite “no thank you” (decline x3)

c. “gaman” – not being a burden even if in dire need
   i. not being a burden, even if in dire need
   ii. you have a need, but don’t express it or ask for help
   iii. “I’m fine” – but you hope others are omoiyari and will anticipate your need

d. “on” – something for something
   i. giving or doing something for someone, expecting indebtedness or reciprocity
   ii. what is important is that the one who receives is not only expected to somehow repay, but also must never forget the “kindness” of the benefactor – creates a strong sense of obligation which will determine how you treat the person who has shown you this “kindness” in the future

3. Non-verbal communication is more important than verbal communication

   a. If you are truly an omoiyari person, you should be able to anticipate what is needed by the other person (verbal communication becomes redundant or superfluous - Lebra)

   b. Japanese consider non-verbal indirect, implicit and subtle messages as being esthetically refined and sophisticated

   c. If something has to be verbally communicated, what is implied is more important that what is actually said
Understanding Culture: ‘Western’ (North American Anglo) Culture

I. General Notes

A. Defining North American Anglo culture
   i. Now when we say North American Anglos, we are referring to the majority ethnic group here in the US, sometimes known as white Americans, or white European Americans. NAA are a people group who have descended from Europeans and have immigrated to this country in sporadic fashion over the past four centuries. As European descendants, they are shaped by the cultural, political, philosophical and religious histories of the countries from which they came. However, for a variety of historical reasons, NAA now comprise a unique culture that differs in significant ways from their European ancestors. So similar to how Japanese-American culture is different from traditional Japanese culture, NAA culture is unique and different from European cultures.

B. Other ethnic groups in the US may share some values with this culture
   i. NAA culture is the dominant culture in our country. Oftentimes we may not even be self-aware of our cultural values, because they are all around us. Even though I am going to describe NAA culture, many of us who aren’t NAA ethnically may find ourselves identifying with some things culturally. Many of us are bi-cultural.

II. Values in North American Anglo Culture

A. Individualism
   i. Individuals give meaning to the society. Every individual has inherent rights, and these rights sometimes interfere with others. So society is a contractually formed agreement amongst individuals, so that individuals can be protected and allowed to pursue their own interests without harming others.
   ii. Strong emphasis on judging a person as an individual, not because of their family, or school, or race. Everyone is an individual and has their own thoughts, feelings, dreams, skills, and plans for their lives.
   iii. What it means to be an adult is that you make your own decisions. Your parents don’t make them for you. NAA parenting styles - “What do you want to eat? Sally, you can have
carrots or green beans tonight for dinner. Which one do you want?” All about giving children choices. Teaching them how to be an individual.

iv. Even faith is an individual thing. It can range from a very relativistic view, like “Hey, whatever works for you,” where every person has her own religion or spirituality. Where every individual is his own spiritual authority. Or individuals could be part of organized religion, but people are encouraged to think for themselves. “Don’t just believe what you’re been told. You have your own thoughts and beliefs. You decide for yourself, not just because your parents told you so.”

B. Self-Reliance

i. Because people are seen as individuals - there’s a strong emphasis on personal responsibility. No one else is going to live your life - you have to live it for yourself. Common mottos - “God helps those who help themselves.” “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.”

ii. And along with self-reliance and responsibility is self-development. The army motto “Be all that you can be... in the army, individuals are encouraged to do everything it takes to reach their potential. There’s a lot of optimism about what you can do, what you can achieve.

iii. Make the most of the opportunities life gives you - risk-taking - the sky is the limit mentality

C. Reason and analytical thought. Critical thought.

i. “I think therefore I am” (Descartes). NAA culture encourages people to think and analyze. I have a really good friend who is NAA, and his discernment process when making decisions is all about analyzing the situation and coming up with the best strategy. He totally prays through his analysis, and he really wants to hear from God and to make decisions by faith. But the avenue of how he hears from God is very analytical. That’s how he connects with God.

ii. Focus on the material world - comes from scientific analysis, a scientific worldview - life is about the physical, tangible - in the here and now. Because of technological advancements and scientific research, there’s a strong emphasis on finding tangible
and logical reasons to explain the supernatural. Books like - Francis Crick’s “The Scientific Search for the Soul.”

D. Communication styles
i. This is where self-reliance and making the most of your opportunities are most obvious. In NAA culture, if you want something, you ask for it. It’s totally encouraged in the culture to have your own voice as a person. Tell people what you want. Don’t be afraid of asking. Verbal communication is assumed.

ii. When we’re talking about preaching styles - this is also where we see the reason and analysis value play out. In NAA churches - great preachers are those who explain and teach the Scriptures with sharpness and clarity. Content and clear structure to a sermon are more important than emotion. Just plain emotion without a clear point is looked down on. NAA culture encourages people to think for themselves. So preachers need to explain their own reasoning in order for people to be able to think about the issue and decide for themselves about it.

E. Non-hierarchical - very egalitarian.

i. Parents introducing themselves and having children call them by their first names. I remember being so surprised when I met my friend’s father-in-law and she introduced him by his first name to me. For the longest time growing up, I never even knew the names of my relatives. They were just auntie and uncle.

ii. Story of my first volunteer year on staff - have never really been friends with older white folks, and married at that! Even though I was young and new, and they were training me, they treated me like an equal partner

iii. Sometimes this non-hierarchical value can play out as distrust in authorities. People in authority have to earn your respect. It’s not an automatic thing. - Connected with the value on reason and analytical thinking - NAA culture is free to question authority, as well as free to disobey authority. After all, it’s your prerogative as an individual. You aren’t obligated to anyone.

F. Time oriented
i. Events are supposed to start on time and end on time. If you’re leading a meeting and it goes long, then you’re cramping so many people’s schedules. And since there’s a great respect for individuals, it’s really important to make sure that you don’t waste
people’s time. Time is very precious. Time is everything. “Time is money.”

ii. How you use time is also very important. When it’s time to work - you work hard. But when it’s time to play, then it’s time to relax and enjoy yourself. There’s a big distinction between work and leisure. Individuals are encouraged to have a life outside of work - so hobbies and sports and various pastimes are popular. People need to develop themselves in their hobbies as much as in their careers.

For conversation: What does *discipleship* look like with NAA values?

**SOMA…**

- identifying our different 'cultures'

- identifying our specific assets for discipling everyone

- identifying markers for determining our success in discipling everyone

Next steps...

- January meeting to begin developing our congregational feedback process (Jan & Feb)

**Other resources**

Books: *Disunity in Christ* by Christena Cleveland, *Divided by Faith* by Michael Emerson, *Many Colors* and *The Next Evangelicalism* by Soong-Chan Rah

Blog: www.christenacleveland.com

Video clips: Youtube Soong-Chan Rah, Vince Bantu, Willie James Jennings
June 2017

In March Redeemer conducted a church-wide survey on discipleship and spiritual habits. As Redeemer transitions into three distinct churches and seeks to fulfill the Rise pledge of increasing the number of Christians from 5% to 15% in the city, it’s more important than ever to help attendees live out their faith. We had a goal of at least 500 completed surveys per congregation, and thanks to your support, 1,549 adults participated. The results helped us to understand where congregants are in their spiritual walk and how Redeemer can improve discipleship offerings.

Among the highlights, we learned that there are three predominant groups of people at Redeemer, each with distinct needs: new attendees, those growing in their faith, and mature Christians. Not surprisingly, the more engaged attendees were in community, scripture, service, and leadership, the more spiritual growth they reported. A strong foundation in the Bible and having personal quiet times was key. For many, childhood laid the foundation for spiritual development; 75% of those being very knowledgeable in the Bible said the Bible and/or Christianity influenced their homes growing up.

Redeemer has stressed the importance of being known in a community group, and while the number of respondents who said they attend a community group (CG) was strong — 70%, the actual number of Redeemer congregants in a CG is lower at ~33% (based on CG records in our database). One of the most common reasons for not joining community groups was lack of time and scheduling, especially for people with busy work hours or parents trying to juggle family time. Some also said they have not found a community group they felt comfortable in, citing differences in age (baby boomers vs. the majority of attendees in their 20s-30s) and feeling intimidated to join a long-standing group with established friendships.

We also learned that while many felt equipped to serve the poor and marginalized, share their faith with others, practice hospitality, and integrate faith with work, relatively few did so regularly.

As we reflect on the findings, we’re working through different approaches to reach those who are struggling with spiritual growth. We’re experimenting with foundational tools for Bible reading, online learning, and smaller groups to foster spiritual growth/accountability.

In the meantime, we challenge you to consider taking one step towards living out your faith more intentionally. Perhaps you could commit to regular
scripture reading and prayer, or start a prayer/accountability group (more information about these “triads” is to come) with one to two other friends. As one participant in an earlier focus group said, “[We need] to decide if we’re a cruise ship or a battleship. Right now often times we’re a cruise ship. A cruise ship starts in one place, goes out to have some fun, and comes back to the same place. But a battleship has a mission. It goes out, and it has a purpose.”

Below are some highlights from the discipleship survey. Of the 1,549 adults who participated, 76% attend Redeemer weekly and 17% attend almost monthly. 70% of respondents led, attended, or visited community groups.

Chart 1 shows respondents who felt extremely or well-equipped in spiritual practices vs. actually participating in them very often.
Chart 2 compares spiritual growth against reading or listening to the Bible on your own daily.

Chart 3 compares spiritual growth against talking about your faith "very" or "somewhat often."

Send us your comments or questions at discipleship@redeemer.com.
APPENDIX D

SOMA’S INDIVIDUAL DISCIPLESHIP SURVEY

SOMA’s Discipleship Feedback Survey

We want to see people grow in their relationship with God as friends and followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ. In this season, we are hoping to ‘take our temperature’ as a church – how are we doing? Your input will go a long way in helping us see where we are now and how to take these next steps together. Thank you for your feedback.

Demographic info: this information is helpful as we try to identify ways in which we may be overlooking groups of people in our diverse church body. However, filling in this information is optional – only do so if you feel comfortable doing so, and in whatever ways you would describe yourself.

Age: Gender: Relationship status:

Ethnicity: Church experience:

Level of formal education (circle one):

- elementary school
- middle school
- high school/GED
- college
- post-college

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being ‘not at all’ to 5 being ‘completely’), please rate your response to each of these statements:

I am interested in growing in my faith:

Optional comments:

I know what SOMA is doing, as a church body, to help me grow in my faith:

Optional comments:

I feel that what SOMA does is what a church should be doing to encourage discipleship

Optional comments:

In encouraging the discipleship of the whole person, SOMA provides enough opportunities for:
Head-learning (using our minds)
Heart-learning (using our gifts/passions)
Hands-learning (putting our faith into action)

Optional comments:

Please circle below what you are already a part of, and rate (1-5) how effective you experience it to be in your discipleship. (If you’re not a part of something below and would like to be, put a check mark next to that opportunity.)

- Community Groups
- Intentional Relationships
- Sunday morning classes
- Saturday seminars & retreats
- Volunteering at Open Hours
- Community Garden
- Neighborhoods of Hope
- Other:

When it comes to discipleship, what would you say SOMA is doing really well?

What is SOMA doing well, but could use improvement?

What is SOMA not doing well at all?

Other feedback you feel would be helpful to share:

Please complete this survey and return by March 31st. You can put it in one of the SOMA Visitor Card/Offering boxes at The Well, or email it to info@thesomagathering.org.
APPENDIX E

ASSESSMENT TEAM’S FINAL REPORT TO SOMA’S LEADERSHIP TEAM

A Summary of SOMA’s Discipleship Feedback Project

The Process
In the Fall of 2017, SOMA’s leadership team commissioned Pastor Marc to recruit a group of people from SOMA’s worshipping body to make up an Assessment Team. This team would represent a diverse cross-section of SOMA’s community and be responsible for assessing how well our church is equipping our folks to follow Jesus. The primary work of this team was to create a process for our members to share how they are experiencing SOMA’s discipleship efforts. Over the next six months, this team developed individual surveys, group feedback channels, and a community conversation all centered around asking the question “How well is SOMA preparing our people for faithful life and mission in our city?” The results of that process are included in this summary.

The Feedback
The Assessment Team received the congregation’s feedback in March & April, and reviewed it in May & June. Their objective was to report to SOMA’s Leadership Team the following:

Three (3) primary interpretations of the feedback:
1. The entry to SOMA’s community is wide-open (good), then lack of clarity about ‘whats next’ when wanting to connect & grow
2. General desire for more head-learning opportunities while appreciating the quality of when done
3. People are not experiencing the integration of our head/heart/hands discipleship opportunities as fully as we intend

Four (4) recommendations for SOMA’s Leadership Team
Practical, short-term ‘adjustment’ recommendations:
- Make a class/teaching time a regular part of SOMA’s rhythm (Sunday AM, mid-week, etc), held at the church, preferably with fellowship built in
- Improve non-written communication of discipleship opportunities, such as Sunday AM testimonies of said opportunities and making clear who are the point people to connect for one-on-one information about what’s available.

Long-term recommendations:
- Integrate the head/heart/hands discipleship opportunities more clearly and fully
- Create an on-going feedback loop about SOMA’s discipleship whereby people give them input, we collect the data, and we eventually have a full representation of SOMA’s worshipping body (recognizing we did not achieve that in the individual feedback part of this project)
### Percentage of individual respondents by demographic (13 total respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>7.5% African American, 7.5% Asian Caucasian, 85% Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>7.5% 13-19, 30.5% 20-35, 15% 36-50, 47% 51-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Formal Education</td>
<td>7.5% middle school, 31% high school/GED, 38.5% college, 23% post-college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>38.5% male, 61.5% female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Experience prior to SOMA</td>
<td>100% yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
<td>38.5% married, 61.5% single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### OVERALL INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of OPPS</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Rating</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Group feedback (17 groups)

- Head: 6 Strength, 3 Needs Improvement
- Heart: 8 Strength, 0 Needs Improvement
- Hands: 7 Strength, 2 Needs Improvement
- Community Groups: 6 Strength, 2 Needs Improvement
- Intentional Relationships: 1 Strength, 0 Needs Improvement
- Classes/Retreats/Seminars: 3 Strength, 3 Needs Improvement
- Welcoming/hospitable ethos: 11 Strength, 1 Needs Improvement
- Diversity: 7 Strength, 7 Needs Improvement
- Awareness/communication/access:
  - Diversity: 3 Strength, 3 Needs Improvement

- Strength
- Needs Improvement
APPENDIX F

PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE

Project Effectiveness

Demographic info
Age: Gender:
Ethnicity: Church experience:
Level of formal education (circle one):
- elementary school
- middle school
- high school
- college
- post-college

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being ‘not at all’ to 5 being ‘completely’), please rate your response to each of these statements:

I feel I understand what it takes to effectively disciple a diverse worshiping community:

Discipleship is basically one-size-fits-all – people’s cultural, educational, socio-economic, and other differences don’t really make a difference when it comes to how we grow in our faith:

I am very confident that I know how effectively SOMA is discipling the members of our body:

I believe that SOMA is effectively discipling all the members of our diverse body:

In encouraging the discipleship of the whole person, SOMA provides enough meaningful opportunities for:
- Head-learning
- Heart-learning
- Hands-learning

I believe SOMA has a long way to go in our efforts to disciple our worshiping body

Please share your thoughts on the following:

I believe the #1 thing SOMA needs to do to grow in our discipleship efforts is:

Other feedback you feel would be helpful to share:
BIBLIOGRAPHY


